The magic of guns: Scriptive technology and violence in Haiti

When urban Haitians recounted stories of gun violence, they infused the gun with transformative effects on subjectivity and agency. Touching a gun was said to magically change people and what they were capable of in the world. The magic of the gun was predicated on its ability to provide “scripts” for violent ways of being and acting in the world. These gun stories inspire a novel theorization of the gun as a scriptive technology. The gun’s technological design and how it has been used in previous scenarios of political authority and violence lead people to act and be recognized as chèfs (chiefs), a model of black masculine popular sovereignty born in the life worlds of young men on the margins of Port-au-Prince. [guns, magic, violence, technology, performativity, human-gun composite, Haiti]

Date: Sunday, 2 December 2012, in the afternoon
Place: Port-au-Prince, Ri Monseyè Giyou
Victim: The man Frantz

Explanation: An armed man in Baz 117 killed the victim with several bullets while they were at a party.

Date: Monday, 24 December 2012, in the evening

Place: Bel Air

Victim: Blablabla, a member of Baz 117, male

Explanation: The victim died in a confrontation with armed men in Bel Air while a party was underway.

Date: Wednesday, 20 February 2013

Place: Delmas 2-4

Victim: Unidentified man

Explanation: A man was surprised while carrying out a theft and was killed by men with guns.¹

Guns have become a part of everyday life in the poor neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. From 2011 to 2013, an average of 138 people died from gun violence each year in Greater Bel Air, the sprawling slum area of Port-au-Prince where about 135,000 people live in dilapidated concrete apartments or teetering wood-and-tin shacks.² Building on nearly two years of fieldwork in Bel Air from 2008 to 2010, I conducted six months of follow-up research from August 2011 to December 2013. This period’s high death rate and immeasurable social toll on residents...
prompted me to track gun violence in the area and to explore how it exhibited an “autopoetic drive” (Feldman 1995, 226), according to which one gun death led to another and another.

The three homicides listed above can be traced back to the same gun—a .38 special caliber Smith and Wesson revolver, long the standard-issue gun used by police in the United States and by US-trained police forces worldwide. This particular revolver came into the hands of Frantz after he bought it in October 2012 for US$75 from a neighbor who had ties to the army (which was disbanded in 1994). Frantz was shot and killed two months later by Blablabla, who was in turn shot and killed weeks later by Henri, the “unidentified man” noted above. Henri was then shot and killed two months later. The “.38” (trant-uit), as residents dubbed the gun, did not fire all the lethal bullets, but these men died because of the .38’s power to turn people into a chèf (chief), or one who wields power over others in the impoverished urban district. All three men were all in their 20s. Frantz and Henri were fathers.

Accounting for why these deaths occurred, neighborhood residents often attributed them primarily to acts of sorcery, mystical curses that exposed people’s hidden jealousies or malicious intents. Yet when I asked them to tell me how the deaths occurred, they told stories that tracked another kind of magic: the transformative effects of the .38. As Bel Air residents told me, “When you hold a gun, you stand up straight and turn into a chèf”; “Ever since they touched the gun, those poor young boys
were not the same”; “If you have a gun in your hands, you have one idea in your head: steal.”

What is the significance of these claims? What do they teach us about the relationship between people and guns? How, and to what extent, did the .38 not merely enable but inspire acts of killing? How did the .38 come to signify the chèf, a subjectivity empowered by a model of black masculine popular agency born in the life worlds of young men coming of age on the margins of Port-au-Prince? By taking seriously Belairians’ claims about the magical effects of guns, we can go a long way toward answering these questions and, in the process, toward understanding what this lethal technology is and how it affects people. Belairians’ gun stories demonstrate how guns—guns in general, particular models of guns, and even one specific gun, such as the ominous .38—provide potent “scripts” for violent ways of being and acting in the world.

I use the term script to follow Belairians in theorizing how guns act as material and symbolic, technological and historical objects that drive those who possess them to perform particular acts of power and violence. The term is useful because it stands at the interface of text and performance, artifact and action, technology and interpreter. Moreover, it helps us address the question of where to locate agency—in people or things—which has long characterized debates about technology in general and the gun in particular. Human-centered accounts view the gun instrumentally, as a tool that people use to effect their desired ends. While using guns may be politically or morally evaluated, the technology,
in this view, is value neutral and merely acts out previously determined human intentions, be they righteous or not—as succinctly expressed in the US-based National Rifle Association’s slogan: “Guns don’t kill people. People kill people.” On the other side of the debate are materialist accounts that foreground how guns exert control over human action. Here guns are the sole agents of violence, as in gun control advocates’ retort to the NRA: “Actually, guns kill people.”

A preferable alternative to this dichotomy is a relational model in which people and technologies coparticipate in action. In this model the gun is not an inanimate object that can be separated from its user’s intentions; instead, it figures as part of a human-technology composite that transforms what both can do in the world. As Bruno Latour (1994, 33) puts it, “You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you.” Positing the gun and human as a composite entity reveals how the source of action (and responsibility for it) is shared across people and technologies: “A bad guy becomes a worse guy; a silent gun becomes a fired gun” (Latour 1994, 33). Guns do not determine violent goals, nor do they achieve predetermined ones; rather, they establish the material conditions for imagining previously unthinkable violence.

My theorization of guns as scriptive technologies draws on Latour’s placement of agency in the human-gun composite while foregrounding
how the power of guns rests on both their technological capabilities and the historical and cultural coordinates through which generations of people have interpreted and used them. In Belairians’ accounts, the gun exhibited a power similar to the performative power often attributed to magical artifacts: the power to “create a change of state in the human actors” (Tambiah 1990, 81; see also Frazer 2002; Malinowski 1948). Belairians imbued guns with magical and transformative properties not only because guns have the technological power to kill but also because they have ideological power as totemic objects, as deeply symbolic artifacts that stand for particular violent subjectivities and that, therefore, can instill feelings of energy and power in those who wield them. Touching, holding, and wielding a gun—and a .38 in particular—was said to compel ordinary and indeed marginalized people to enact violence and to be acted on with violence, because of the way guns turned them into chèfs, symbols of sovereignty that invoke a history of state power and repression enacted by local and national leaders. Such chiefly scripts reached back to the .38-toting surrogates of the Duvalier family dictatorship and forward to today’s street leaders who draw on this legacy, as well as to models of power and masculinity rooted in contemporary diasporic urban black culture. Yet despite these precedents, novelty and variation permeated chiefly scripts. Guns are open to users’ interpretation and improvisation, and the technology’s material and symbolic properties narrow but do not determine the set of uses that can be imagined. These possibilities and limitations are accounted for in the
concept of the script. Like the script of *Hamlet*, gun scripts can inspire countless enactments, but they all tend to center on fratricide.

To understand the scriptive power of guns, it is necessary to account for their material agency within the historical and cultural scripts established for gun use in urban Haiti. One of my aims in making this argument is to illustrate how guns have changed the game of violence in Bel Air in ways that are historically and culturally particular. Another, no less important aim is to provide a theoretical framework to help others explain gun violence elsewhere.

[h1]The technology of the gun

[ep]Violence, we must remember, does not depend on numbers or opinions, but on implements, and the implements of violence . . . like all other tools, increase and multiply human strength.


[ni]Violence often presupposes and entails the process of transforming people into things—things that can be devalued, demonized, and discarded. The objectification of human lives into killable things has played out along myriad axes of objectification, from race to social class to political persuasion (Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes 2002; Nordstrom and Robben 1995), and through myriad discursive frameworks, from
media representations of violence to state propaganda to historical narration (Feldman 1994; Hinton 2005; Malkki 1995). Yet the question lingers: How might violence also unfold through the process by which things transform people? An answer can be found if we construct an anthropology of violence that “turns on the prevalence and significance of the firearm”—seeing the gun as a “crucial extension of cultural embodiment and as an implement qualitatively unlike any other” (Springwood 2007, 2–3).

At least three-quarters of a billion guns circulate worldwide (Springwood 2007, 4). They proliferate not only in state militaries and security apparatuses but also among civilians who use them to cultivate forms of being, belonging, and laboring in contexts of chronic war or insecurity. Coming of age during serial civil wars or incessant gang conflicts, young men have learned to “live by the gun,” parlaying their armament into a life and livelihood as professional soldiers, road bandits, drug dealers, and small-time gangsters (Contreas 2012; Debos 2016; Roitman 1998). The gun is a central prop for embodying and enacting the violent subjectivities that have taken shape at the “urban margins,” the disempowered spaces in the urban geography of race, class, and security (Auyero, Bourgois, and Scheper-Hughes 2015). In the life worlds of young urban Haitian men, being armed can index particular forms of masculinity, racial positionality, and modernity that promise a rise in income, status, and significance. Yet the gun is more than a prop that
defines the actor; it is a character in the play, enabling the person and positionality of the chèf.

When Bel Air residents reflected on gun violence, they often infused the gun with a supernatural strength, granting it a power to change otherwise good people into agents of dominance and violence. A consistent remark was that nice young men became chèfs after “touching” a gun. Nadine, an unemployed mother of a young boy and a locally well-known singer, explained the deaths of two young friends in 2014 as a destiny that resulted from gun-induced chiefdom. She told me the story as we sat outside her one-room concrete house and looked across the paved street to the dirt hillside. There, thousands of neighbors lived in one-room shacks haphazardly built with plywood siding and tin roofs that leaked in light rains and blew off in heavy ones. Informal electrical connections pulsed through a labyrinth of cords and wires above the shacks, hanging just above a canal that lazily channeled rainwater through its trash-filled viaduct. At that time it was difficult to get to these shacks because the windy corridor that led to them had been blocked with tin doors and rocks to keep out the youthful bandi (bandits), known as “117,” who camped out down the hill. Nadine once told me that on the hillside “the misery is greater” than on the street-side block because there, “people go to sleep with the worries of floods, fires, and insecurity.” Nadine’s two deceased friends, known as Shotta and Boss Beef, lived along that hillside, helping build the barriers to keep threats out and later becoming threats themselves. Like many of the women of
this generation, Nadine lamented their turn to banditry but also identified with them as friends gone astray. A critical point in their wayward path, as she recounted, was when they acquired a gun. This compelled them to found an armed baz (base)—a kind of neighborhood group that has, since the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986, maintained political and economic control over urban territories without the clear backing of state power but with the weaponry and social effects of sovereign power (de facto policing, service delivery, and electioneering). They named their baz MOG, a moniker that, among other meanings, threatened to land foes in the mòg (morgue). The crux was that it did so to them. As Nadine put it,

[ex]So those two children, truly children, they needed money, and they don’t work. They come in contact with a gun, and now they are obliged to do wrong. Too much ambition. We all say, “Do not touch the gun. You are children.” But they touched the gun, and wham! They have force! They see themselves as chèf. Now they start an armed baz—MOG—and get into conflicts with others who police the zone. Too many crimes. Ever since they touched the gun, those young men were not the same. Now one turns against the other. And they don’t yell at each other but shoot. They had to die, after all.

Such remarks foregrounded the role material agency plays in subject formation (Barad 2003; Grosz 2004; Haraway 2007)—a role often
overlooked in performativity theory, which often focuses on the repetitive performance of social identities. In so doing, performativity theory deemphasizes how the range of possible performances is restricted by the physicality of the body or the material world in which the body acts (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Weston 2002). In contrast, a central premise of the new materialism is that material things, from technologies to infrastructures, can generate action and meaning in the world. Things are not alive, but neither are they inanimate or inert. They are theorized as “actant,” “leaky,” or “vibrant” (Bennett 2010; Ingold 2010; Latour 1994), terms that capture how things occasion an exchange of properties, competencies, and forces when they come in contact with other things and people, bringing about new and newly agentive entanglements. Timothy Ingold (2010, 3) calls these entanglements “creative” to capture the forward-moving, “improvisatory joining in of formative processes” between people and materiality. In becoming entangled with people, things bring about physical and psychological sensations in people, inciting ideas, enabling actions, and charting pathways in ways that may have been otherwise unthinkable.

The principle that contact with material objects transforms people reflects an inversion of the sympathetic magical law of contagion as theorized by William Frazer. The magician, according to this law, “infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact” (Frazer 2002, 26). But the reverse can also be the case: that the violent potentials associated with
the gun can spur thoughts and impulses in those who come in contact with it. The gun becomes the material catalyst for recognizing and becoming the subjectivity of the chèf, like a key character who shifts the protagonist’s course in a play. Without the gun, there is no chèf—since the gun is the chèf’s defining and constitutive double. Such reasoning was in play when Nadine explained that touching a gun delivered a jolt of force (“wham!”) and facilitated the sensations and muscle, if not the authority, to be a chèf. Echoing the prohibitions leveled on the force of totemic objects (Durkheim 1995), she suggested that guns in the hands of the immature or unauthorized set the course for illegitimate, criminal violence.

This course was partly set in the gun’s very design, in how its technical capacity afforded the potential for violence. It is possible that the MOG gun could have been used for other purposes, such as a souvenir—mounted on a wall to commemorate one’s authority in a bygone political era or as collateral for a debt owed, two uses I have seen guns put to. But these were unusual or alternative uses. Guns’ technological design—to fire many bullets with great force—has a structuring effect on the actions people pursue with them. It constrains what uses are likely to come to mind, be easy to employ, and feel suitable or correct. Furthermore, when looking through the barrel of a gun, one sees the outside world come into view in a new way. A human with a gun alters the situation from any comparable situation involving a human without a gun (Ihde 1990). When someone has a gun in hand, “the world takes on
a distinct shape,” with “a reduction in the amount and intensity of environmental features that are perceived as dangerous and a concomitant amplification in the amount and intensity of environmental features that are perceived as calling for the subject to respond with violence” (Selinger 2015, 207).

Nadine’s explanation of her neighbors’ deaths confirmed this transformation to the extent that she articulated how gun possession entailed the subject position of chèf and emboldened the “children” to violently target other people and engage in theft and abuse. But she also indicated how gun possession created new dangers and threats, just as other people, especially other armed actors, including the police, interpreted the gun as participating in the youths’ newfound claims to chiefdom. In her rendering, the gun produced and signaled powers that changed who the children were and how they acted toward others and were perceived by them. Importantly, however, Nadine’s use of the term chèf—a subject position rife with historical meaning—demonstrates totemic power beyond technical capability, one in which the thing has been infused with a scenario of particular import in this sociocultural milieu.

[h1]The symbolism of the gun

[ep]When I speak of [totemic] principles as forces, I do not use the word in a metaphorical sense; they behave like real forces. In a
sense they are even physical forces that bring about physical effects mechanically. . . . And in addition to their physical nature, they have a moral nature. When a native is asked why he follow his rites, he replies that ancestors have always done so and that he must follow their example.

Emile Durkheim (1995, 192)

When understood as both active and agentive, objects depend less on the proverbial “webs of significance” (Geertz 1973, 5) that people spin about them to acquire meaning. Indeed, the point of much new materialist scholarship has been to reconceive materials as having “thing-power,” “as lively and self-organizing, rather than as passive or mechanical means under the direction of something non-material, that is, an active soul or mind” (Bennett 2010, 35). Thing-power helps explain how the fundamental materiality of the gun structures human behavior. Yet it is misguided to completely untangle guns from webs of cultural and social signification (cf. Fennell 2012; Navaro-Yashin 2012). The gun, like other technologies, is unstable or “multistable” (Ihde 1990, 131; cf. Larkin 2008), subject to interpretation and change in the varying sociocultural contexts of its use (see also Green 2002). In Haiti, unlike in the United States, a gun will probably not be used to indiscriminately shoot people in a school or movie theater or at a concert. This is not because the gun does not afford this possibility but because the gun has
not figured in this particular cultural script. Scriptive technology, like the script of a historical play, prompts and organizes the body through scenarios of meaningful action that have been enacted before. The gun’s agentive capacities are predicted both on its material capacity and on how people have interpreted this materiality according to historical and cultural precedents.

Guns alter senses of self and agency in contemporary urban Haiti because they are totemic objects that stand for sovereign subjectivities on the local, national, and global scales. Both revered and reviled, the gun indexes popular sovereignty as well as perversions of state sovereignty. Gun possession has long symbolized the empowerment of the common people, tied to the history of former slaves turned soldiers who through force of battle gained Haiti’s independence in 1804. Legend holds that, at independence, revolutionary generals distributed 30,000 flintlock weapons among soldiers to symbolize their new status as citizens and to defend against invading forces (Muggah 2005). Similarly, the current democratic constitution, which succeeded the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship, grants citizens the right to armed self-defense.

At the same time, gun possession can invoke the history of sovereign violence against the people. The term chèf in Haitian Creole translates as “chief” or “leader,” and it can be used to refer to any person in a leadership role. Yet when referring to an armed person, it often invokes the chèf seksyon (section chief), the strongman, usually army soldier, who policed rural villages during the three decades of the Duvalier
dictatorship (1957–86). As a resident of Greater Bel Air remarked, “Chèf seksyon under the Duvaliers was someone who was a chief of their community. . . . If you wanted to do something in that zone, you have to pass him” (Smith 2012, 127). When people became a chèf seksyon or one of their militiamen known as tonton makout or makout, the dictatorship outfitted them with an identification card, uniform, a .38-caliber revolver, and impunity to do anything in the name of Duvalier. The regime recruited rank-and-file militiamen from Bel Air and other working-class neighborhoods, or katye popilè (popular quarters)—an estimated 500 makout lived and worked in Bel Air (Laguerre 1983). The makout were the only people allowed to bear arms under a law that demonstrated how, in Weberian fashion, the dictatorship’s power rested on its ability to limit and control all other forms of violence and resistance in society—which is why the reappropriation of arms in the hands of the people was widely supported in the postdictatorial constitution of 1987.

The Port-au-Prince katye popilè, including Bel Air, have transformed over the past decades into overcrowded bidonvil (shantytowns) characterized by deepening poverty and insecurity. There, the .38-wielding makout are remembered as strong leaders who implemented law and order, as well as criminal strongmen who used their guns to intimidate, abuse, rob, and kill residents. Current appellations of “chèf” relive this history; it is alternately bestowed as an honorific to police officers and other armed security personnel or launched as an invective against those who act like bandi. These dual (and dueling) meanings are
especially at play when the term is applied to baz leaders, for whom gun possession has remade sovereign subjectivities for the street—a space of informal yet often licit manifestations of state power.

"Before, if you wanted to make an armed baz, you had to have a .38. Now it’s a .45—still the weapons of the state." This was how Boss Beef, one of MOG’s two leaders and one of the children whose death Nadine lamented, once explained to me the significance of gun possession for baz leadership. These handguns were readily available when bazes began to form in the 1990s. When the makout disbanded in 1986 and the army in 1994, thousands of .38-caliber revolvers and Enfield rifles, among other guns tied to the dictatorship, entered an underground arms market (Mobekk 2017; Muggah 2005; Richardson 1996). Possessing these guns was also socially prized, since they signaled a reclamation of power among the popular “base” of society against the dictatorship. During the dechoukaj, the postdictatorial period of “uprooting” the regime, bands of angry and vengeful citizens, mainly from impoverished urban districts like Bel Air, hunted down, killed, and disarmed former makout. They then redeployed the signature weapons in brigad vijilans (neighborhood watches) to defend against reprisals. Today, police officers who come under residents’ scrutiny are similarly at risk. MOG had obtained its .45-caliber pistol—now the standard-issue police gun—from a police officer who had been targeted by neighborhood residents after his involvement in a mass arrest that put 50 young men, many innocent of wrongdoing, in
jail for two days. This, coupled with the fact that the police officer carried his gun off duty, led residents to dub him a *bandi legal* (legal bandit).

The blurred lines between legality and illegality, security and criminality, protection and exploitation extended beyond state security agents to the workings of the bazes. In a pattern that has become common in postconflict contexts, many young men who initially formed bazes to withstand political and criminal forces of repression ended up reanimating the violent script in their own power plays and illicit exploits (James 2010; Schuller 2012; cf. Arias and Goldstein 2010). This happened during the democratic transition, though it reached its height after the coup d’état that ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004, the postdictatorial political leader most enthusiastically embraced by the urban poor. In 2005, one year after the coup, it was estimated that there were 170,000 firearms circulating in the country, primarily .38, .45, and 9 mm pistols and revolvers, as well as assault-style rifles (Muggah 2005). Most weapons were held by upper-class and middle-class homeowners, but many had also entered the bazes. The bazes had armed themselves to combat the anti-Aristide forces behind the coup and the postcoup transitional regime, but they soon began to engage in criminal activity as a way of funding their political battles, consolidating local leadership, and accumulating wealth (Kolbe and Hutson 2006; Mobekk 2017). Having familiarized themselves with acting violently, gained facility in shooting, and become habituated to the power of force, they, as a longtime Bel Air resident put it, “left the political fight and began to now *chache lavi* [make
a life/livelihood] with guns”—echoing the “use of arms as a practical occupation or a *métier*” (Debos 2016, 3) in Chad and other places where there is chronic war or insecurity (Contreas 2012; Hoffman 2011; Utas 2003; Utas and Jörgel 2008).

Imagining a livelihood through the gun reflected not only the waning political conflict in Haiti but also the increasing relevance of mass media and music that valorize models of black empowerment, masculinity, and respect rooted in gang culture. The nickname of the other MOG leader was Shotta, a moniker borrowed from Jamaica for men who have used the power of the gun to break free of their poverty, exclusion, and seeming insignificance and to accumulate illicit wealth through various means, from petty theft to big-time drug dealing (Bogues 2006; Cooper 2005; Thomas 2011). Shotta took the name from his favorite film, *Shottas*, which follows childhood friends in a poor and volatile area of Kingston who enter a life of crime by robbing a truck driver at gunpoint and who then ascend to the status of transnational drug lords, accumulating wealth, women, and travel, before the violence of gang life catches up with them. Much of the appeal of “gangsta” films and similarly themed songs of *rap kreyòl* lies in the narratives of poor, black urbanites who challenge their social marginality by subverting and using to their advantage the very pathways—crime, violence—that have been used to marginalize them (Jaffe 2012a, 2012b). The two MOG leaders aspired to embody this cultural script of class ascension and “racial respect” (Thomas 2011, 143), founding a rap group and an armed
baz, and attempting to parlay petty theft into “Lajan, pouvwa, respè” (Money, power, respect), as their slogan went. Yet, as is often the case, they fell far short of achieving the script’s promises and suffered its greatest consequences—death by the gun.

The story of the three deaths that introduced this article reveals a similar confluence of baz conflicts, criminal exploits, and neighborhood defense gone awry. In fact, when Bel Air residents explained the three killings with that singularly potent .38, their scene-setting line was usually “Well, this was the time when the vicious Baz 117 was on the soil.” Baz 117 rose to power in 2011 in the “Teleco camp,” a large makeshift settlement for hundreds of neighborhood residents displaced by the earthquake the year before. Three teenage friends living in the camp came into some money through participating in postdisaster cash-for-work programs. They used the funds from this to buy a .45-caliber semiautomatic pistol, and the leader of the group took on the name Blablaba, an onomatopoeia of rapid gunfire. The camp was located at an abandoned facility of Teleco, Haiti’s defunct public telephone utility, and the trio then began by pillaging the old facilities for copper wire, pipes, and office furniture and supplies. They also held up camp residents for small change, cell phones, motorbikes, sneakers, and basic household items, such as radios and cooking oil. After buying at least two other handguns, they precipitated, from 2011 to 2013, a crime wave throughout the city, though they largely targeted the Greater Bel Air area. These acts pitted 117 against other local bazes whose claims to authority
rested largely on their power to act as *lepolis*—de facto security forces that protect residents from the crime and other abuses that *lapolis*, the Haitian National Police and UN peacekeepers, were unable or unwilling to control.

Many bazes in Bel Air channeled the earlier postdictatorial history and created *brigad vijilans*—“vigilance brigades” that not only patrolled the streets on the lookout for would-be assailants but also acted as “vigilante brigades” that engaged in extrajudicial policing and lynching. Frantz, a 20-year-old man and father of a young son, joined the brigade associated with Baz Grand Black, the most prominent baz in Bel Air. He was armed with his .38, which he acquired from an ex-soldier and which was passed down from the *makout* ranks. The brigade patrolled the streets in hopes of deterring Baz 117, announcing, as they did, “N ap lit ak trant-ulit” (We’ll fight with the .38). Although the brigade positioned itself as waging a general defense against insecurity, 117 was the presumed target. Frantz was put in harm’s way by the pointed symbolism of this gun—pointed because the .38’s potency stemmed from its connection to state and local legacies of political violence and because wielding this .38 in particular conveyed a forceful claim to sovereignty against 117. His death led to the deaths of Blablabla and Henri.

The autopoesis of gun violence

The three deaths were predicated on possession of this fabled .38, underscoring how guns in general but also particular guns can become
endowed with the magical power to act on users in ways that perpetuate violent subjectivities and action. When Nadine’s friend and neighbor Kal, an unemployed father of two teenage daughters, recounted for me the three deaths, he corroborated the basic facts of the crime reports but foregrounded the significance of the gun. It is useful to present Kal’s story in its entirety in order to tease out how and why he explained the deaths by tracing the passage of the gun from one person to another. It is also important because the stories people told about gun violence were also scriptive; not merely descriptions of what happened but also frameworks for action that could later be told as a story. They were scripts in the making with future-shaping effects on violence; how people emplotted gun deaths with tragic expectations and violent certitude provided a repertoire of action that gunmen could draw on when thinking about how to be and what to do with a gun. Kal gave the following account in the presence of the 24-year-old Shotta, who was, at the time, using a handgun as part of MOG’s brigad vijilans as well as in robberies in the Teleco encampment likewise exploited and victimized by 117. It was a year after this conversation that Shotta was killed in a shooting carried out by his friend turned rival, Boss Beef, who would die by gunfire weeks later at the age of 21. As I listened, I wondered if this was an inspirational or cautionary tale, or both.

“You want to know the story of Henri’s death?” Kal began.
It’s a story of three deaths, maybe more. OK, here is the story.
This was the time when the vicious Baz 117 was on the soil. The guy Frantz, who sold marijuana near Baz Grand Black, he wanted to throw a party. He got a DJ and had him play in the crossroads. At the party, Frantz had his .38. The 117 guys did not want to see the .38 at the party. When they saw the .38, they wanted to ruin the party. But Frantz said that they cannot ruin his birthday. Then Blablabla shot at him. It happened quickly. Boom! He was lying on the ground. Everyone ran.

Kal went on to say that Frantz’s mother, who was a *mambo*, or Vodou priestess, collected the body, brought it home, and mystically *ranje* (arranged) it before the funeral. The arrangement was an inquisition to find the killer and avenge Frantz’s death, which proved to be the outcome. “This is why Blablabla died,” Kal confirmed. But he then explained how on Christmas Eve the principal of a community school, a private but low-cost school run by the social organization of another neighborhood baz called Baz Pale Cho (Talk Tough), wanted to throw a party for the block. The principal, as Kal explained, gave Baz 117 “a large sum of American money” so that they would not disturb the festivities. “Now,” Kal went on,

[ex]the 117 guys come to the party and are drinking beer, and they begin to shoot in the air. Boss Henri in Baz Pale Cho says you
cannot come into the baz with the .38, where we are enjoying ourselves, feeling good, and shoot. And Blablabla says, “What are you saying? We’ll shoot if we want to. If the man has the .38, it’s shooting he’ll do.” And then Boss Henri said, “If you keep shooting, I’m going to get my weapon.” And they did, and he got his weapon, and he confronted Blablabla. He shot at him, and then it was bam-bam-bam!

[ni]Kal then explained that the other three 117 guys at the party were unscathed by the gunfire because they had used some “magic to stop bullets, to make it so they don’t go on them.” The magic apparently did not work for Blablabla. Kal hypothesized that this was because Blablabla was too “mechan” (mean), but, he added, “It’s also true that bullets are stronger than magic.” The magic did appear to work for Boss Henri, which Kal rationalized in a similar manner, referring to Boss Herni’s generosity, as evidenced in his throwing the party. Boss Henri was shot in the waist, but the bullet hit his belt and was diverted to the lower spine, away from vital organs. Injured but still mobile, he hobbled through the melee in search of the weapon.

[ex]Now, after the shooting, everyone runs, everyone except Henri, who stayed there bravely. He found Blablabla on the ground, and he searched his body. He took a bunch of money, a chain, and he
found the .38, the same .38, because he sees that gun has a lot of power. [. . .]

You see, you have the .38 and you try to become a *chef* outside the law. You become a hothead. You feel force inside the body, and you think you can do anything. Now, Henri got money in his hand. He finished with the money. He sees that money is a beautiful thing. And he sees the weapon in his hand. He’ll go hustle. Rob people. Freeze [mug] them.

[Kal then recounted how shortly after acquiring the .38, Boss Henri began to frequent a major neighborhood intersection that serves as a hub for several city bus routes, where he would rob people as they navigated the hustle and bustle with their travel cash. One of those times, Kal happened to be eating spaghetti from a vendor near the station. As Kal reported,]

[ex]So, the big chief robs a woman in front of me. But she runs and finds her friend, probably, *lepolis* [. . .] the people’s security for the station. And she says, “Look, this young man, this little child, he pointed a firearm at me and stole everything.” The guy says, “Where is he? What T-shirt? What weapon does he have?” She says, “The .38.”
Kal then said that the security guard—informally employed by the bus drivers and vendors at the station—ran after and confronted Boss Henri, asking him to put both hands up in the air. The problem, however, was that Henri could not put his hands in the air because he had put the .38 in his pants; if he raised his hands, the .38 would be visible. But it was unclear whether this would have made a difference, since, as Kal explained, the security guard fired “many bullets” almost immediately—also from a .38-caliber handgun. “He does not even ask his name, but security has one job: to shoot. He gives him bullets in the head, the neck, the chest, the head. His eyes come out from all the bullets! I showed you the picture!” Kal exclaimed as we both grimaced and shook our heads in disgust.

[ex]Now, that .38 is with someone else, maybe the zenglendo [crooked] army, because it was from them it appeared here. Anyway, whoever touches that gun, he’ll die at some point . . . because it acts on you.

To conclude that the .38 “acts on you” (aji sou ou) was to drive home the point that possessing the gun bestowed a fatal destiny. In the first two cases, this had much to do with how the gun enabled and epitomized a claim to sovereign control of the block. As Kal explained in the story, “the 117 guys” perceived the .38 that Frantz had displayed at the street party as an attack on them. In turn, when Blablabla acquired
the weapon after Frantz’s death, it transformed into a symbol of 117’s increasing dominance in the neighborhood. After Frantz died, Baz Grand Black formed an alliance with 117, presumably to restrict their criminality to areas outside Bel Air. “They have weapons in their hands now,” explained Grand Black’s leader, Ti Snap. “I see them as an armed force that we must control if we cannot eliminate them.” Many other groups, however, condemned the alliance and sought to limit 117’s power, as Baz Pale Cho did at the next big street party.

It is significant that these killings took place at street parties, where displays of local leadership proceed through orchestrating a good time and keeping violence at bay (Kivland 2014). To wield a weapon at a party is a potent threat to the authority of the hosting baz. As at the first party, displaying the .38 instigated a lethal gunfight not only because it was an implement of violence but also because it was a sign of the power and prestige afforded by violence (and control over it). The gun, in other words, signaled a claim to as well as a contestation over street sovereignty.

By the time Henri found the .38 on Blablabla’s body, it was not any gun but a particular gun “with power.” Endowed with the acts of its former wielders, the gun, as Kal explained, enrolled its wielder into an established narrative sequence of criminal aspiration and action that could end only one way. He knew “one thing to do with a weapon,” as Kal said. Another friend likewise explained how the weapon charted an illicit future, “He saw the weapon, and he saw the road before him: ‘I can get a little
something’ [money] with this in my hand,’ he thought.” Yet another said, “Before, he was a nice young man. But the .38 showed him another way. He wanted to carry a name like Blablabla.” What is significant about these claims is that the gun figured not merely as a medium through which one could pursue one’s goals but as a catalyst for developing previously inconceivable goals. As Kal traced the changes the .38 incited in Henri, he stressed how the totemic powers and technological affordances made available by the gun incited ambitions of wealth and feelings of boldness. Goals and affects interacted in this scenario such that the sense of “hotness” made theft appear possible and the theft amplified the sense of strength and impudence. Shortly after picking up the gun, Henri adopted the name Dwèt Cho (Hot Fingers) and the MOG motto of “Lajan, pouvwa, respè” (Money, power, respect), which I once heard him repeat when a neighbor playfully chastised him for “thinking he’s a chèf.” To be sure, these chiefly ambitions stemmed from Henri’s lot in life, the condition of being stuck on the margins of society without work, influence, or fulfillment at a time when the poor were supposed to be benefiting from democratization and development. It was not that the gun invented his desire to overcome this structural marginality, but it did—in promising money and notoriety—activate this desire, making it newly thinkable and possible.

Kal knew this well; he was not a neutral raconteur. He held a prominent role in a Bel Air group linked to MOG, which had also formed a brigad vijilans against 117. During this time, Kal expressed to me his own
desire to own a gun. “They walk over me because I don’t have a weapon,” he once said. “If you have a weapon, you can make the state”—meaning one can exert the power and violence of a sovereign authority (Kivland 2017). Although he did not see this as enabling criminal exploits, he did see it as facilitating his work to defend the block and become a more powerful political leader. He hoped this would give him more respect, though he also knew this was an ambition that carried much risk with it. When I told him that gun possession might make him more vulnerable to violence, he replied, “You make a good point. For the way I do politics,” he told me, “I am already a mò pale [talking dead]. If I were to touch a gun, I could not see tomorrow.” In fact, when he did “touch a gun”—a .38 pistol—while doing security work for candidates in the 2016 elections, his house was broken into and his motorbike vandalized, two events he interpreted as part of his elevated status as an armed political actor. “They come after me because now everyone calls me chèf. They think I want power now,” he said. Even if he had not adopted a new goal as a result of having a gun, others had already attributed one to him.

[h1]Magic versus/via technology

[ep]Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

One could infer from this spate of gun deaths that Haiti is a particularly or endemically violent country. This is not the case. When assessed nationally and longitudinally, Haiti’s homicide and crime rates have long been lower than those of its Caribbean and Latin American neighbors, although lately the difference is less pronounced in the capital city. A line of thought—well established in anthropology—attributes this low rate to the weapon people have customarily used to right wrongs and settle disputes in Haiti: sorcery. “Better cast a spell on someone than stab him,” wrote Alfred Métraux (1959, 271) in the 1950s. “I am disposed to believe that sorcery explains the low percentage of murders committed in Haiti. A person who casts a spell on his enemy already satisfies his hatred—and avoids the kind of action which, if actually executed, would be much more serious.”

When I asked people about this, many disagreed, arguing that maji (magic) was to blame for why people died no matter how they died. Frantz’s mother, as Kal said, “arranged [the body] mystically before the funeral so that she could find the person who did this. This is why Blablabla died.” But my observations of sorcery accusations in Bel Air led me to a conclusion closer to Métraux’s. Although I observed that sorcery accusations manifested in social division, enmity, and antipathy, precipitating violent conflicts, I never witnessed someone die from casting or receiving a spell alone—physical violence was a necessary accompaniment. Of course, the logic of sorcery accounts for multicausality, for spiritual and worldly weapons to deliver the “two
spears” that together cause death, as E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1976, 26) long ago recognized in Azande witchcraft: “If a man spears another in war the slayer is the first spear and witchcraft is the second spear and together they killed him.” A modification I observed in how people spoke of gun deaths in Haiti concerned the order of operations. As Kal made clear in discussing how Frantz’s death was avenged, sorcerous divination directed the first spear, targeting who was to be killed and therefore answering why this person died, but firearms provided the second spear, directing how the person died. In this scenario the method delivered the final blow.

In highlighting the “how,” Kal was, therefore, close to Métraux. He and others routinely told me that “guns have changed everything,” meaning that they had raised the stakes of social enmity, usurped established remedies for social strife and injury, disturbed the moral principles of conflict, and enabled killing on a scale previously unknown. On one level, guns were set apart from magic, as a human technology rather than as a spiritual practice. Yet on another level, people attributed to guns the same transformative properties of magic but endowed them with greater intensity.

Guns took magical power to new heights in two ways. First and foremost, Belairians distinguished guns from sorcery according to who used them: guns belonged to ti moun (children) and sorcery to gran moun (grown people). The difference highlighted how guns were perceived as simple, easy, and accessible to anyone. To be a practitioner
of sorcery, especially a respected one, requires *konesans*—literally “cognizance” but more akin to spiritual and social wisdom. Vodou practitioners are said to have *konesans* if they are not only adept at the spells, charms, and practices that heal their clients, but are also grounded in a deep “knowledge of people” (K. M. Brown 1991, 356), for it is this knowledge that empowers their healing practice. Unlike the technology of the gun, which can be grasped in minutes, *konesans* is attained after a lifetime of living and relating to others. For magic to work, the practitioner must intimately know the parties involved—their names, addresses, relations, and possessions. In contrast, people claimed that guns could be used by “anyone at all” (*nenpòt ki*); one did not need generational wisdom or social maturity to master the technology.

The distinction between the magic of elders and the guns of youth also reflected a social and political divide. For many, the proliferation of guns among bazes in the popular quarters evidenced the postdictatorial breakdown of the state’s monopoly on violence and the democratic order’s authorization of power and violence among *pèp la*, or “the people,” meaning the poor and downtrodden but also evoking, when voiced in the context of Aristide’s democratic movement, poor urban youth in particular. Elderly residents often reflected on young people with guns as a problem of “too much democracy,” underscoring how a long-standing discourse about the “illegitimacy of mass politics” (Beckett 2008, 287) intersected with emergent anxieties about youth-driven protest, disorder, and violence. Whereas the dictatorship drew on cultural and
spiritual elders—notably Vodou priests—to form the hierarchy of makout, Aristide empowered urban youth and their bazes as the basis of his democratic movement. The move challenged customary age and status restrictions on involvement in politics and the use of force. In this respect, gun-toting youths’ power symbolized the breakdown of and resistance to elders’ control over lethal technologies and the state. The belief that gun users and their technology expressed naïveté augmented the gun’s scriptive power, its ability to direct impressionable minds, and its violent power, its ability to kill.

A second way that the technology of the gun trumped the practice of sorcery was in its lethality. The immediacy and certitude of death from bullet wounds contrasted sharply with the teleology of sorcery. Unlike in sorcerous conflicts, in which there is the time and possibility for spiritual remediation or finding a retaliatory cure, the gunshot proved resistant to social intervention. Bullets, once unleashed, charted a fatal course, unimpeded by a discerning, mindful konesans to redirect or mitigate their impact.7 As Rémy, a Vodou priest, told me, “Before a firearm shoots, magic [majji] can try to redirect the bullet, but if it has entered the body, the magic is finished. The person will die. Nothing we can do about that. The gun is a stronger magic. It changes people in a way magic, at times, cannot correct.” Of course, people could, and did, take gunshot victims to the hospital, though the lack of advanced trauma care usually confirmed Rémy’s dire prognosis. Rémy’s comment, however, went beyond assessing the mortality of bullet wounds to comment on the way gun
possession can precipitate immoral ways of being and acting that expose one to social antipathies and antagonisms that lead to death. The scripts that guns emplotted, in other words, opened up their users to quick and certain retaliation.

Kal seconded this belief when he said magic failed to protect people from gunfire. While I saw many people, including Kal, seek spiritual protections from gunfire, it was widely accepted that there were limits on these protections—which included herbal baths of the body and gun, gunpowder-infused capsules implanted below the gunmen’s skin, and repetitive incantations recited before shooting. One reason these protections faltered was that the gun was seen to change people in ways that incited social conflict and inequity. When Nadine spoke of gunmen’s “ambition,” she was referring to how gun possession roused desires that led people to pursue the personal gains that made them vulnerable to attacks from others, sorcerous or otherwise. Stealing from others, for example, exacerbated wealth disparities and jealousies, created an unrequited debt, and constituted an attack on someone’s life and livelihood—three key motivating factors for mystical or worldly retaliation in Haiti (Farmer 1992).

The result was that the magical protections from violence that ambition-fueled gunmen needed were so expensive that they ended up consuming their clients. Unlike rituals in honor of family spirits, which are inherited and celebrated collectively, magical armor is manufactured and sold by sorcerers for individual use—a difference that made the former
moral and the latter immoral (J. N. Brown 2005; Richman 2005). In effect, magical protection and the exigencies of violence produced a vicious cycle in which costly protections demanded lucrative violence, which in turn necessitated costlier protections (cf. Hoffman 2011). When Kal spoke of Blablabla’s “meanness”—meaning both cruelty and greed—he was suggesting that because Blablabla had not sufficiently compensated his protective spirit, the spirit abandoned him. “For the work it does,” Rémy told me, “a bullet gad [guard or protective charm] is dear. It’ll eat you.” Gun-induced selfishness further complicated the compensation of spiritual armor, since people seeking personal aggrandizement were unlikely to pay back the debt they owed for the charm. In this way, the talk of failed magic, of ineffective gad, underscored beliefs about sorcery as a violent “manifestation of the moral code in action” (Taussig 1980, 117) and guns as an immoral manifestation of violence. This narrative frame imbued guns with lethal scriptive power, situating them as forceful catalysts for corrupting people, destabilizing social relations, and, in short, unleashing excessive violence.

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[h1]Humans and guns as coparticipants in action

When I asked young men in Bel Air why so many of their peers had succumbed to violent deaths, I often heard answers such as “misery,” “mystical things,” and “mentality” (mantalite). For much of my fieldwork, I focused on these socioeconomic, spiritual, and psychological factors and their mutual interactions. I tried to tease out how economic deprivation...
and social marginalization engendered violent pursuits of wealth, power, and respect; how accusations of sorcery did not restore social equality but rather deepened feelings of envy and mistrust; and how conditions of scarcity drove jealousies, petty conflicts, and an antagonistic frame of mind. I still believe these factors collude in taking the lives of many young Haitians. But when I began to read the curt explanations in homicide reports—“with several bullets,” “armed men,” “men with guns”—I realized I had missed an obvious factor. The reports, in fact, reminded me of how Belairians responded to the question of how, rather than why, people died: “They shot him,” they would say. This simple and direct response registered a new frame of explanation, one that complemented but also challenged Belairians’ and my search for causality.

My effort to reframe the gun as a scriptive technology takes inspiration from Stanley Tambiah’s (1990) performative theory of magic, which accounts for the “participation” of human and nonhuman entities in shaping who people are and what they can do in the world (see also Mosko 2014). Tambiah (1990, 105) suggested that there are “at least two orientations to the cosmos, two orderings of reality that men and women everywhere are capable of experiencing.” One is causation. Primarily expressed in positivist science, causation explains phenomena by progressively atomizing entities into variables until x variable can be said to cause y variable. Although causal thinking can account for multiple dynamics (so-called intermediary and proximate causes), the goal and the method favor the isolation of ultimate causes, the why factor. The hunt

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for ultimate causality is at work in the first set of explanations for gun violence—all of which come down to locating intentions, or, more specifically, individuals’ goal-oriented action for wealth, power, or revenge.

The other orientation Tambiah (1990) calls “participation.” The purview of aesthetics and religion, participation favors a consubstantial rather than a causal relationship between entities. Instead of separating variables and their independent effects, participation stresses the dependent connections among people, things, spirits, and the environment, together with their collective effects. Although Tambiah was principally concerned with the law of participation’s applicability in mystical reasoning, the principle—that action results from an ensemble of human, spiritual, and material relationships—inform all manner of events, including gun violence. Indeed, when Belairians explained how firearm deaths occurred, guns and people, including their ancestors, emerged as coparticipants in violence.

This coparticipation is best captured through a model of scriptive technology that combines the power of agentive materiality with performative theories of subject formation and transformation. My notion of scriptive technology is a way of tying together how previous scenarios of violence shaped guns’ technological agency, how guns signaled claims to localized sovereignty, and how guns operated with a degree of transformative potential that resembled but also overwhelmed other forms of magic. The script problematizes the separation between causal
and participatory analysis, capturing the way human intention and technological capacity interact, such that intentions are shaped by available capacities and capacities shaped by conceivable intentions. The gun is scripted and scripting, both containing a script for human action in its technological design and scripting as it is taken up through scenarios of action that people project onto it. Put differently, the gun understood as a scriptive technology allows for mindful actors, historical precedents, and constitutive props to come together to bring about subjectivities and scenarios of violence. As with stage directions, the gun’s scriptive force leaves room for novel human interpretations or improvisations of the technology, but it nonetheless provides an orienting map for what to do with it. In positing the human-gun composite as the protagonist of gun stories in Haiti, I am not suggesting that guns determined people’s actions but rather that they directed gunmen toward scenarios of action and reaction that may not have been otherwise conceivable. These scenarios reflected the material potentials of gun technology as well as the way these potentials have been deployed in narratives with cultural and historical meaning.

Most of the time, the question of why gun violence occurs is elusive. The deceased can no longer explain their intentions, and even if they could, motives are usually emergent, volatile, and ineffable. While challenged to isolate the why, we might instead turn our attention to the how. “Don’t ask why,” as Jason Antrosio (2012, 1) argued after the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut. Rather,
“describe the conditions of possibility.” In the process, there will perhaps materialize a different and broader why.

[h1]Notes

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1. The first two quotations come from reports by the investigation team of the Commission épiscopale nationale justice et paix (JILAP); the third is from Viva Rio’s Biwo Analyiz Kominotè (Office of Community Analysis). All are my translation. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.
2. Greater Bel Air, as defined by the NGO Viva Rio, includes the neighborhoods of Bel Air proper and its surrounding environs. The homicide statistics were provided by JILAP (2014). During this period, I volunteered with Viva Rio’s Biwo Analyiz Kominotè, which also tracked homicides in the area. As a part of this work, I cross-referenced Viva Rio’s and JILAP’s accounting of homicides.

3. The acronym MOG was variously defined to fit the youth’s many endeavors, including a youth social development organization (Kivland 2017).

4. The urban equivalent was chèf katye, or neighborhood chiefs, although the title chèf seksyon was and still is resonant among urbanites.

5. Fears of insecurity, especially kidnapping, extended to upper-class civilians (James 2010; Minn 2016). Many of them purchased weapons or hired security guards to protect their downtown businesses and uptown households.

6. Nearly 80 percent of Haiti’s homicides take place in Port-au-Prince, giving the city a homicide rate in 2011 of 40 per 100,000—a rate midway between that of Santo Domingo (29 per 100,000 in 2012) and of Kingston (50 per 100,000 in 2012) (UNODC 2013). In 2007, UN officials estimated that 90 percent of Port-au-Prince’s homicides occurred in or around three districts: Martissant, Cité Soleil, and Bel Air (Dade 2007; see also Fernandez and Nascimento 2007).
7. The question of the right target also set guns apart from another common weapon, the machete, which, because it requires close contact, was said to mitigate collateral killings.

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