

Malediksyon

(Neo)colonial Development, Disasters, and Countercapitalism in Northeastern Haiti

VINCENT JOOS

Caracol is a small coastal town of northeastern Haiti where, before the opening of a large industrial park in 2011, people fished, harvested salt, cultivated produce, and raised cattle. While the industrial park did not immediately affect fishing and salt harvesting, the coming of new factories brought an abrupt end to many farming activities in the area. People of this region often referred to Caracol as the breadbasket of northeastern Haiti. Before 2011, more than four hundred families grew produce that allowed them to be self-sufficient and even to generate income with the sale of their surpluses. As one farmer told me during my fieldwork there, “We grew plantains, peas (*gwo pwa*), corn, cassava (*maniok*). This allowed us to make a living, to have money to send our children to school, to buy an animal if we needed to. . . . We were able to get the money we needed to live.” Since the demonstrations against the high price of food in 2008, the Haitian state and its international partners made reviving the country’s agriculture one of their main priorities. Yet, after the 2010 earthquake that ravaged the Port-au-Prince region, the Haitian state and its international partners harmed the country’s agriculture by using recovery funds to create free-trade zones and industrial parks outside the disaster zone. To make room for these projects, the Haitian state evicted peasant farmers from fertile lands and thereby accentuated food insecurity in the country. Boosting the industrial sector was supposed to uplift the Haitian economy and to generate growth that, in turn, would fund the recovery. Ten years after the earthquake, it is clear that the plan to rebuild Haiti through industrial development failed spectacularly.

The story of Caracol is not unique. It follows the well-worn pattern of development through industrialization that has ravaged Indigenous

communities throughout the Americas. Pipelines destroying Native American lands, dams displacing Indigenous people in the Amazon Forest, or oil wells polluting and harming communities throughout Ecuador are just a few examples of industrial practices that lead to ecological and social crisis. However, the story of Caracol stands out as an origin story of extractive economies and sheds light on the colonial origins of current neoliberal development frameworks. It is in this region that Christopher Columbus's largest ship, the Santa Maria, sank in 1492. It is also in this region that Columbus ordered thirty-nine of his sailors to build La Navidad, the first fortified colonial village in the Americas. The sailors were tasked with exploring the region and finding gold. While archaeologists are still trying to locate both the wreck of the Santa Maria and the village of La Navidad, naval historian Samuel Morison claimed that the ship sank in Caracol Bay and that sailors used its remains to build a fortified village within an existing Taíno community located in today's town of Caracol (1940). Even if this information is perhaps not exact, many locals I talked with recall this narrative to frame the long history of industrial land grabs and violence in their region. The 2011 construction of the industrial park on the most fertile land of Caracol is anchored in such a colonial narrative. As Milostène Castin, a local activist who fights against peasant evictions and ecological devastation in northeastern Haiti, told me on 6 June 2019 during an interview, "Caracol is of the utmost historical importance. It is where Columbus and his men first settled." After a pause, with a hint of sarcasm, he added, "se tankou yon malediksyon—it is like a curse."

In this chapter, I sketch a short and simplified history of plantation and industrial ventures in the Caracol region to understand how the repetition of (neo)colonial genocide, forced labor, and resource extraction shaped and destabilized northeastern Haiti. Often times, the narrative of a curse is used by Western journalists to describe Haiti's seemingly unstoppable spiral of disasters, as if the island were subject to supernatural forces (Duval 2021). Castin does not state that the country is cursed but that a process looking "like" (*tankou*) a curse is affecting the island. The curse he is talking about is not supernatural but a recurring feature of Haiti's reality. In this sense, *malediksyon*—malediction, or curse—points to a recurring pattern of colonial violence while also entailing forms of condemnation and excommunication forged by colonial powers. *Malediksyon* means at once othering, punishing, and excluding. Its mechanisms are not occult but visible in the economic and industrial history of the island. Such a reckoning implies that these patterns can change and be reversed.

Accounts of Columbus disembarking in Caracol are not only regional folklore but also a way to point to the recurrent destructive industrial intrusions in northeastern Haiti and the narratives that keep these repeti-

tions going unabated. When Columbus first saw Indigenous people in the Caribbean on 11 October 1492, he placed them outside of civilization, and portrayed them as subhumans that could be Christianized and enslaved. As he stated in his journal, Indigenous people “appeared to me to be a race of people very poor in everything. They go as naked as when their mothers bore them. . . . Their hair is short and coarse, almost like the hairs of a horse’s tail. . . . They should be good servants and intelligent, for I observed that they quickly took in what was said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, as it appeared to me that they had no religion” (Dunn and Kelley 1989: 69). The same mechanism—the blank-slate narrative—remains a key part of the neocolonial malediksyon that plagues Haiti today. Columbus considered the Caribbean to be a virgin place and Indigenous people to be humans without history or religion. He also stated that they were “poor in everything,” hence comparing them and making them inferior to Europeans, both from a material and religious standpoint, and framing the island as a place with people in need of external help. I argue that narratives casting Caracol as a blank slate and as a poor region in need of development have formed, since the beginning of colonization in the Americas, a structural matrix that enables the repetition of man-made and “natural” disasters in northeastern Haiti.¹

Indigenous people, and later enslaved persons, always fought back against colonization and proposed viable countermodels of social and economic organization. It is in this overexploited region that the Haitian revolution (1791–1804) and many peasant-led rebellions started. Northeastern Haiti is one of the key places where a powerful countercolonial system enabling a majority of Haitians to live autonomously since 1804 was forged.² The Cap Haitian region writ large has long been a battlefield for colonial settlers and postcolonial developers who are not only trying to revive the plantation system but who were and are actively engaged in suppressing countercapitalist resistance and silencing a long and fruitful maroon history. As the historian Johnhenry Gonzalez argues, a majority of Haitians refused the return of the plantation economy imposed by state leaders after the 1804 independence and formed a “maroon nation” (2019). They forged small autarkic societies and created farming systems that enabled them to be self-sufficient and to engage in the global market on their own terms. Since 1804, developers of all kinds—from Haitian state leaders and business elites to US occupiers—have fought against these autonomous communities and tried to dismantle peasant farming as it was deemed to be “backwards.” Haitians living in the countryside have long been defined as second-class citizens in their own country and have been the target of many US sponsored military operations meant to suppress subsistence agriculture and Vodou religion (Castor 1978). The curse Castin talked about

is here read as a *structural* pattern that generates cycles of conflicts between Haitian peasants and so-called developers.

Following Columbus's remarks on Indigenous people's supposed lack of religion, I take the idea of malediksyon further. The people who farmed small plots of land after the revolution not only did so as a reaction against the plantation economy. Peasant farming developed around polycultural practices developed by enslaved people who cultivated small plots of land on plantations and in maroon communities. These practices are inseparable from cosmologies and epistemologies where the spiritual and physical well-being of humans is a result of respectful relations with the environments that surround them. In Vodou thought, for instance, trees can be the dwelling of *lwa* (deities) or *zansèt* (ancestors) (Bulamah 2018). Cutting a tree down, as I was told many times by Vodou practitioners and nonpractitioners alike, can bring misery and disease on humans. As Haitian novelist Jacques Stephen Alexis wrote in *Les Arbres Musiciens*, spirits and deities "live in the earth, in the rivers, under the sea, in the waters of lakes" (1957, 346). Deforesting an area to mine for gold or copper, or bulldozing farms and fields to establish an industrial park, are not just plain ecological destruction but also spiritual uprooting (*déchoukaj*). Castin noted several times, during our conversations, that social and environmental elements could not be dissociated in Haitian peasant struggles. He refers here to what Mimi Sheller calls "arboreal landscapes of power and resistance"—spaces where "social relations of power, resistance, and oppositional culture building are inscribed into living landscapes of farming, dwelling, and cultivation" (2012: 187). As such, arboreal landscapes offer a Haitian countercosmology and counterecology that could serve as an antidote to the malediksyon. Of course, from a material viewpoint, the bulldozing of farms renders people homeless. However, I argue that we can read more in Castin's words: malediksyon happens when economies treating nature as separated from human communities lead to the desecration of spiritual, human, and natural dwellings. Not surprisingly, major industrial ventures are often accompanied with anti-Vodou campaigns. What happens when an industrial park or a plantation replaces hundreds of small farms and fields is far more than the transformation of an environment: each (neo)colonial venture in northeastern Haiti is an active attempt to erase local histories, epistemologies, and cosmologies that sustain independent peasant farming. To put it bluntly, Caracol is a space where capitalists actively combat and suffocate viable countercapitalist economies. Treating Hispaniola, and later Saint Domingue and Haiti, as a blank slate where people need to be uplifted from poverty by external interventions is at the heart of the structural and spiritual curse that continues to destabilize Caracol today. And again, this is not a supernatural curse but an infrastruc-

tural and superstructural one. In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, the blank-slate mentality, to use William Easterly's concept, fosters disaster vulnerability by displacing people and preventing them from growing food (2014).

Narratives stating that Haitians cannot govern themselves and cannot take care of their country have flooded newspapers since its independence in 1804. Political instability and lack of leadership were the main reasons given by the US government for the invasion of the island in 1915. Of course, in the larger context of the banana wars, it is clear that the US had its own strategic and economic interests in mind when it imposed military rule in Haiti. If it is true that competing economic interests and political discord destabilized the export economy of the country in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a majority of Haitians have managed to live self-sufficiently since 1804 (Barthélémy 1990; Gonzalez 2019). As the geographer Georges Anglade has shown, Haitian peasant farmers created a strong and decentralized market system that reduced their reliance on exports to generate incomes (1982). Yet, because the Haitian state had to reimburse enormous and immoral debts, the country almost never modernized its infrastructure and remained tied to foreign powers that used cannonball diplomacy to make sure the Haitian state paid what it supposedly owned them (Dubois 2012).³ Even if a majority of Haitians lived decent lives, the US invaded their country by arguing that political instability plagued the island. The US also wanted to make sure that the Haitian state paid its foreign debts: developing the industrial sector of the country while handling its budget and economic policies was supposed to be the solution to this problem. What happened was a US takeover of lands and export industries that only benefited US corporations and a handful of wealthy Haitians. The US occupation developed the centralization of all economic and administrative activities in Port-au-Prince, suffocated the province's economy, and implemented structural adjustments that created an almost tax-free environment for foreign corporations while displacing the tax burden onto the back of peasant farmers (Castor 1978). In brief, the US developed disaster vulnerability and economic instability for a majority of Haitians. These destructive probusiness policies went on, even after the US left the country in 1947 (Dupuy 1989; Fatton 2014).

Probusiness policies such as low taxes for corporations and high taxes for Haitian workers, low import tariffs, absence of budgets for provinces, and austerity when it comes to the welfare elements of the state such as health and education are the hallmarks of most governments that took control of the island after the long US occupation (1915–47). The Duvalier dictatorships (1957–86) only reinforced the patterns put in place during the occupation by continuing to deny provinces financial and adminis-

trative autonomy and by concentrating administrative and economic power in the capital. International allies along with international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund or the Inter-American Development Bank backed and funded corrupt governments and turned a blind eye to the most brutal aspects of the Duvalier dictatorships. These policies transformed Haiti into a small-scale “supplier of garments, dolls, magnetic tapes, and electronic equipment” (Trouillot 1990: 202), and the swift and violent slaughter of Haitian pigs broke the economic back of the Haitian peasantry. As Mark Schuller writes, “responding to an outbreak of swine fever, the U.S. government killed off Haitian pigs, de-facto bank accounts, replacing them with high-maintenance pink U.S. pigs, amounting to Haiti’s ‘great stock market crash’” (2007: 150). This series of man-made economic disasters, along with accrued political repression, triggered massive migration movements and led to the ousting of Jean-Claude Duvalier in February 1986. After almost thirty years of violent dictatorship and constant economic sabotage, Haitians lived in a country devoid of public services and basic infrastructure. Again, these failures are not due to a curse but to clear and simple man-made and internationally sponsored sabotage.

This history is well known, yet, after the devastating earthquake that took the lives of more than three hundred thousand people in the Port-au-Prince region on 12 January 2010, the same economic recipes made a forceful comeback. Touted by Bill Clinton and the economist Paul Collier, the “Building Back Better Plan” of the US was based on the development of the industrial sector. Developing the garment industries would generate economic growth that, in turn, would generate the funds required for the reconstruction of the country. Hence, instead of rebuilding the Port-au-Prince region after the quake, the Haitian state and its powerful international allies funded the creation of free-trade zones and industrial parks. It was not the first time that the idea of developing the garment industry and transforming Haiti into a “little Taiwan” had been implemented. From 1970 to 1980, assembly industries became a key sector in Haiti’s economy, and they employed 80 percent of the industrial workforce (Péan 1987). They functioned on an enclave model: international manufacturers in Haiti benefited from tax and tariff exemptions and paid no taxes on materials and machineries imported for goods production. The resulting sweat shops paid their workers very low salaries and often subtracted extra money from employee paychecks for unreasonable expenses. This same model is pervasive in Haiti today. We see roughly the same system of shaving salaries in industrial parks in contemporary Haiti.

Even though the assembly industry mostly generates poverty and ecological destruction, the Haitian state and its partners—in this case USAID

and the Interamerican Development Bank—argued that transforming northeastern Haiti into an industrial center would heal the wounds of the Port-au-Prince region (Lucien 2018). In 2011, this industrial center, which was intended to catalyze the creation of the Northern Economic Corridor, emerged in Caracol in the form of a 617-acre industrial park. This was the costliest postearthquake project and the centerpiece of the “new” economic plans for Haiti. Because Haitian administrators were mostly bypassed, the construction of the park was swift. Similarly to what happened in the American Wild West, developers invaded and destroyed Caracol as if it were a blank slate devoid of history and human activity. The project was well funded: Sae-A Co. Ltd. invested \$78 million to buy equipment and promised to hire twenty thousand workers (Shamsie 2019). The IDB provided \$200.5 million for the construction of buildings, roads, and a water treatment plant while the US government funded a \$98-million electrical power plant. The main garment producer that moved to Caracol at this time and created thirteen thousand jobs between 2012 and 2019 was Sae-A, a large Korea-based multinational apparel production company. When Daniel Cho, president of the Haiti subsidiary of Sae-A, arrived at the park’s construction site in early 2012, he said, “You can see. Nothing is here. This area is like a white paper, and we can draw on it” (quoted in Sontag 2012). Cho’s words crudely reflect what economist William Easterly calls the blank-slate mentality, namely the tendency to “ignore history and to see each poor society as infinitely malleable for the development expert to apply his technical solutions” (2014: 25). Sae-A supplies US retailers such as Walmart and Kohl’s and has played a major role in the industrial development of several Latin American countries.

Of course, Caracol was not and is not a blank slate or piece of white paper. But the blank-slate narrative is a common tool that developers of all stripes have used to transform the Caracol region many times before (Lucien 2018). In the case of the Caracol Industrial Park (CIP), in order to make room for the project, an estimated 366 families were displaced from their land (Chérestal 2015). The CIP also negatively impacted “720 agricultural workers and thousands of resellers, food processors and pastoralists, as well as rural community members who relied on the agricultural production of the land for food and livelihood or used it to access water” (3). Actually, a more recent report explains that the CIP exacerbated food insecurity in the region by actually displacing 442 families (Kolektif Péizan 2017). Although some farmers received small financial compensations for their lost land, the money did not make up for their lost livelihoods.

During the fieldwork I conducted intermittently between 2015 and 2019, I observed that the CIP failed to increase quality of life for most people who live in northeastern Haiti (Joos 2021a). The park’s employ-

ees, and Sae-A's workers in particular, receive meager wages for the hard work they perform in overheated factories. My interlocutors resented that managerial positions were given to people from Guatemala and Korea while Haitians were only offered menial, low-paid jobs. Although the park was supposed to create 60,000 jobs in five years, only about 35,000 people worked in the Haitian apparel industry as of 2018, and approximately 9,000 people worked in Caracol (Haiti Libre 2018). In 2019, fewer than 15,000 people worked in the CIP. As you will hear below from people who worked at the CIP, it destroyed not only the livelihoods of peasant farmers but also the complex cultural, social, religious, and economic systems that enabled them to thrive in their homeland. Farms and livelihoods were crushed but value systems in the area, where deep relations between humans and their environment sustain a fragile but vital social and environmental equilibrium, were also deeply disrupted.

Although evicting farmers from their land and crushing their livelihoods is not new in the region, the situation with the CIP did present a novel development: for the first time in the region's history, the Haitian state and IFIs negotiated with the people they displaced. The IDB even created a compensation plan and offered packages to displaced farmers. In addition, state officials went to Caracol to "educate" people about the benefits of the CIP; information sessions held by state representatives from Port-au-Prince took place before the park was constructed (Shamsie 2014). However, as my informants made clear, the state's compensation efforts were mostly empty promises intended to calm the local population. The promises, backed by the IDB, were not fully kept. And the compensations that did occur opened new fault lines in the Caracol community.

Alain Petit-Frère is a farmer who had a large plot of land and who employed up to twelve people during harvest season. I first met him when my friend Francis introduced us in 2015, but we reconnected during my fieldwork in 2019. When I asked him about the money he received from the IDB when he lost his land in 2011, his answer was blunt: "Compensation? They gave us a little bit of shit money. A little bit of shit money" (Yon ti kaka kob yo ban nou. Yon ti kaka kob). Farmers displaced by the CIP never received what the IDB and the Haitian government promised them. To this day, the IDB website states that "the 366 people who used to farm that state-owned land on which the industrial park is being developed have received a total \$1.2 million in compensation (about \$3,500 per household, or five times the Haitian per capita income). All were offered access to a nearby plot with similar characteristics that will be improved with irrigation. Those [who] expressed interest in learning a new trade were offered job training. In addition, the elderly and more socially vulnerable received housing assistance" (IDB 2012).

I had printed this document when I met with Alain Petit-Frère in the front yard of his house in Quartier Morin in March 2019, when I resumed my inquiries about the CIP. When I translated this part to Alain, he explained that he and the people he knew only received “yon ti kaka kob” (a little bit of shit money), and that 442 families were affected and not 366 as the IDB website claimed. He also said that, to his knowledge, no one in the area had ever received land with similar characteristics to the plots they had lost. “What they don’t understand,” he said, “is that the Tè Chabè was the best land around here. Even during times of drought, we would be able to produce food. I mainly cultivated peas. I had two harvests a year! I sold these peas to people from Cap Haitian. Not only was I able to make a living and to send my children to school, I also employed many people.” With anger in his voice, he added, “Development! Well, I know how to make development!” As he made clear, the way he produced food before his land was taken was ecologically and economically sustainable. He pulled a notebook from a backpack he had brought from his house and showed us numbers: the salaries he paid to temporary workers and the benefits he generated by selling produce were indeed impressive. He repeatedly noted that Caracol was not a poor town before the CIP; it was a place where people could make a living by fishing or by growing food. Very few people in the area actually supported the project. Alain Petit-Frère certainly did not.

Eventually, though, the Haitian government ceased the compensations, which were supposed to be disbursed over a five-year period. At that point, communication between displaced people and the government broke down. “The government disappeared,” Alain said, “and that ti kaka kob (little bit of shit money) too!” As another displaced farmer said to me during a conversation, “In 2014, we formed a new organization named the Komite Tè Chabè (Kolektif Peyizan Viktim Tè Chabè—the Peasant Collective of the Chabè Land Eviction Victims). Since we couldn’t reach anyone, we asked Castin, one of the organization’s founders, to reach out to someone, a lawyer from the US. That way, we were able to contact the IDB. They started to investigate and investigate, and in the meantime, we didn’t receive anything. What we received before wasn’t enough, they cannot replace the land that gave us food. It’s been five years we are mobilized.”

Milostène Castin is a longtime grassroots activist who founded the Action pour la Reforestation et la Défense de l’Environnement (AREDE), an organization created in 2004 to fight deforestation, protect biodiversity, and defend people against land grabs. In 2013, Castin started meeting with peasant farmers displaced by the CIP and meticulously studying the compensation process that unfolded between 2011 and 2014. By talking

with people and comparing their compensation amounts with what was promised in state documents, he discovered a great deal of irregularities in the process. Castin’s administrative work was impressive and precise. He amassed every official document he could find and tracked public statements from key project stakeholders to describe the discrepancies between what they promised and what happened on the ground. By doing so, he was able to take the case to the Independent Consultation and Investigation Mechanism (MICI) of the IDB. I met with him again in Trou du Nord on a morning in June 2019. For two hours, we sat and talked under a tree in the backyard of a house that belonged to one of his friends. I took notes during our discussion and will reproduce excerpts of them here.

Castin first explained that he was currently fighting on two fronts—he demanded environmental and socioeconomic accountability from the IDB. He said:

The IDB has given the Haitian state some funds to compensate the peasants who were displaced from their land, but the distribution of these funds was not well organized and, at times, clearly fraudulent. I had witnessed people expelled from the land they cultivated in Limonade, when Moïse [Jovenel Moïse, the actual president of Haiti] built Agritrans. Many farmers were just chased away from the places they had lived [in] and worked for a long time. It happened in Ouanaminthe in 2002 as well, when the government built an industrial park. I saw hundreds of peasant farmers disposed from their lands. This good, fertile land is replaced by factories that produce CO₂ and that potentially pollute surrounding waters. When I started to talk with the farmers in Caracol, I felt we should organize and fight back, and we did.

Agritrans was the first banana plantation in Haiti to be located in a free-trade zone. After the quake, Moïse, a close ally to then-President Martelly, received the help of the state to displace more than a thousand farmers from the Limonade area. People lost their livelihoods without receiving any kind of compensation. As the geographer Jennifer Vansteenkiste has aptly shown through her fieldwork in Limonade, the brutal displacement of peasant farmers who were self-sufficient before the earthquake contributed to a major food crisis in the region and to social instability. As she notes, land and trees are not replaceable; they are part of people’s cosmology (2016). For many people in the Cap region, trees are sacred. Vodou deities—*Iwa*, often called *zanj* in northern Haiti—inhabit the trees and form an essential element of people’s physical and social worlds (Bulamah 2018). As Vansteenkiste notes, “the loss of large trees such as mangos through land conversions is equivalent to *dechouké*, or the uprooting, of the Haitian belief system” (2016: 22). The loss of arboreal landscapes means the loss of spaces imbued with the history and cosmology of peasant farmers, spaces that allow many Haitians to maintain social and economic stability in their communities.

The northeastern region of Haiti, as Castin explained, has a violent history of land grabs. He said, “It started in 1927 with the Dauphin Plantation in Fort-Liberté, not far from Caracol. It was during the US occupation. American businesses took over the fertile lands of the region to produce sisal [a fibrous plant used to produce textiles.] The American army displaced thousands of farmers, forced them to work for little money in the sisal fields, or forced them to migrate to Cuba or the Dominican Republic, so they would work on sugar plantations. I think the sisal plantation lasted until the early 70s.” As geographer Georges Eddy Lucien (2018) details, Andre De Coppet, a wealthy Wall Street financier, started the Dauphin Plantation in 1926 with the help of the US military. To make space for the textile factories, the settlements of American workers, and the sisal plantations, the American army violently evicted peasants from their small farms and burned down the buildings, woods, and fields that stood in their way. Indeed, according to Suzy Castor, Americans displaced fifty thousand peasants to make room for this plantation, which she called a “classic colonial enclave” (quoted in Naimou 2015: 244). As Lucien puts it, the Haitian puppet government and its military and corporate allies tore away large swaths of land from the peasantry through newly invented legal means and violent action, and, in the process, created a *de facto* mobile, homeless workforce that moves between factories and plantations in order to receive meager salaries (2018).

After US Marines invaded and destroyed the region, it fell into a period of decay and hopelessness. Robert Pettigrew, the Dauphin Plantation manager in the 1940s, described the enterprise when he said, “This is the story of a small corner of the Republic of Haiti and the development of a truly remarkable enterprise that revived it from the decay and hopelessness into which it had sunk through neglect, strife and ineptitude over the years since it flourished as a part of France’s richest American colony” (1958, 7). Pettigrew’s words echo Christopher Columbus’s first impressions of Hispaniola as a territory peopled by indolent, areligious communities. This narrative strategy, depicting Indigenous people as inept and negligent, allows for the erasure of their world.

However, the Dauphin Plantation slowly declined. Once De Coppet passed away, American entrepreneurs bought it in 1953. The Dauphin Plantation closed in the early 1970s when the price of sisal declined. Even though US companies eventually left the region in the 1970s, state-owned companies continued to use the land in Caracol and in Fort-Liberté to grow sugar and sisal until 1986. “Moreover,” Castin continued, “the site where the CIP is built is sacred for us Haitian peasants. . . . It’s called Tè Chabè. Until 1986 and the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship, plantations of sisal and sugar occupied this land. Once the dictator was out, people reclaimed this

land, because it was ours. It is officially state-owned, but Haitian peasants have historically reclaimed state-owned land for themselves. Tè Chabè is where American occupants buried Charlemagne Pèralte, a revolutionary leader who fought against the occupation. When they bulldozed our fields, they also erased our history.” Castin paused and then said: “Pèralte is a hero, but we cannot fight like him today. We cannot afford to fight a violent struggle. I am a revolutionary, but I use pacific and legal means to reach my goals.”

Tè Chabè was a concentration camp during the American occupation. In 1918, Charlemagne Pèralte led a rebellion against the American occupiers who had maintained a forced-labor system called the *corvée* in the north (Bellegarde 1937: 270; Anglade 1977, 29). Moreover, peasant farmers protested the massive displacements caused by the US corporate invasion of their land (Castor 1978). Pèralte led an army of more than five thousand peasant farmers (*les Cacos*) in guerilla warfare against the American occupiers. According to the scholar Jerry Philogène, “After years of resisting the U.S. occupying forces, Pèralte was captured and killed on October 31, 1919, by two U.S. marines, Herman Henry Hanneken and William Robert Button, who infiltrated his camp disguised in blackface” (2015: 109). Caco rebels and displaced farmers were then imprisoned and sent to the Cap Haitian prison or to the Tè Chabè concentration camp. Haitian historian Dantès Bellegarde has written that 5,475 prisoners died in the Tè Chabè camp. American authorities dismissed this massacre and stated that repressing Haitian “brigandage” evidently entailed the loss of Haitian lives (1937: 56–57). Pèralte’s body was buried in a concrete cast to prevent his followers from exhuming the body or resurrecting it (Philogène 2015: 112).

Before that point, however, the US army publicly displayed Pèralte’s body in Grand Rivière, so local Haitian officials and people who knew Pèralte could verify his death. An anonymous US Marine photographed Pèralte’s body, which was tied to a door and partly covered in white cloth. The US army then disseminated the image by airplane throughout the countryside as a warning to Caco rebels. However, this image, which unintentionally evokes a crucifixion, became a symbol of resistance for the Haitian peasantry. The Cacos refused to back down and led a second war against the US army that ended in 1920. Across the country, Pèralte became a symbol of resistance, a symbol of the Haitian peasants’ willingness to fight to preserve their autonomy, their lands, and their livelihoods. As Yveline Alexis recently showed, the struggles of Pèralte and of the Cacos remain an important symbol and provide a crucial framework for activists who are currently fighting for Haiti’s sovereignty (2021).

When they built the CIP on a site deemed sacred by many people who live in Caracol and who worked the fertile lands of Tè Chabè, the Haitian

government and the Clinton Foundation–USAID assemblage may not have intended to erase this history. However, they bulldozed one of the last strongholds of the Haitian peasantry and built factories on land where people had fought against the brutal return of the plantation system, and local Haitians considered these acts an affront. In 2015, as I sat with my friends Pierre and Tony Valcin in front of their home in Bodmè Limonade, they explained why land and trees were dear to them. “Bodmè is a pilgrimage site for Vodouyzan,” Pierre said. “Here trees are very important. When you cut a big tree, like a mapou tree, it makes you sick. Gods live in trees (gen zanj nan chak pyebwa).” Farmers in other parts of Haiti told me the same thing, and ample scholarship has shown the spiritual and historical importance of trees to Vodou practitioners (Bellande 2015; Bulamah 2018). Many of the zanj or lwa with which people interact are ancestors who have returned in spiritual form. Bulldozing Tè Chabè is, in the words of Jennifer Vansteenkiste, a *déchoukaj*—an uprooting of the peasants’ cosmology, value systems, and social cohesion. It is also an indirect form of silencing history that has long been practiced by the Haitian Creole state (2016).

For the people of Caracol, the fact that the CIP was built on a former concentration camp was a catalyst for action. The farmers I met were related to people who had died in the not-so-distant Caco wars. As Roger Gaillard has shown in his brilliant oral history of the American occupation, narratives pertaining to the ruthless reimposition of the plantation system by the United States never left the Haitian collective memory (1982). Most of the people I met in Caracol were angered by the loss of their sacred land, their history, and their livelihoods.

Caracol, and Haiti, are not blank slates ripe for modern development. As the people I met in Caracol made clear, a strong and viable agricultural economy existed right where the site of the CIP stands today. People know full well that the *malediksyon* Castin mentioned is not a supernatural curse triggered, as televangelist Pat Robertson famously said after the 2010 quake, by people practicing “voodoo” and engaging in a “pact with the devil.” Such narratives exist in secular form as well, even though disguised as expertly written economic studies (Lundahl 2013).⁴ However, there is a dire need to value true Vodou economics, and more broadly, peasant environmental and social practices. Exchanges based on reciprocity, collectively organized work, and subsistence farming in rural Haiti are anchored in a larger relational frame where nature is not a backdrop to human activity but a fully agentic force that shapes people’s ties to human and nonhuman communities. As Alex Bellande demonstrated in his brilliant study of the Haitian environment (2015), peasant farmers are not responsible for the environmental foes of the country, nor do they push its

economy backwards. To the contrary, listening to peasant leaders would reinforce sustainable fishing and agricultural practices and reinforce food security. It would generate economic growth, this time not for foreign corporation but for families like the one of Alain Petit-Frère. Haiti is not a cursed country. The malediksyon plaguing it today has nothing to do with some devilish pact or so-called backwards economic practices. To the contrary, the blank-slate narrative of industrial developers and the policies, destruction, and uprooting it generates is the central mechanism that forms a structure enabling the repetition of disasters. Hence, the curse can be stopped if we uproot (neo)colonial development practices from Haiti and if the needs, desires, and savoir faire of Haitians form the basis for new political horizons.

Vincent Joos is an assistant professor of anthropology and global French studies at Florida State University. His work has appeared in *Economic Anthropology*, *Transforming Anthropology*, *Vibrant*, and *World Politics Review*. His work focuses on postdisaster reconstruction in the Caribbean. He recently published his first book, *Urban Dwellings, Haitian Citizenships: Housing, Memory, and Daily Life in Haiti* (Rutgers University Press, 2021).

Notes

1. Fuller historical accounts of these repetitions can be found in Alex Dupuy (1989), Georges Eddy Lucien (2018), and Vincent Joos (2021b).
2. The Bois-Caïman ceremony led by Dutty Boukman and Cecile Fatiman on 14 August 1791 stands as the beginning of the revolution. In this political and religious meeting, Vodou practices brought together various ethnic groups into one common struggle. It was during this ceremony that Dutty Boukman called for a general insurrection. The Indigenous Army made of formerly enslaved people liberated Haiti from French colonialism. The country became independent on 1 January 1804.
3. In 1825, France imposed a debt on Haiti in exchange for its recognition of Haiti as a nation. The debt was meant to reimburse the planters who had lost properties during the revolution. The payment of this debt was a major burden and represented an enormous part of the Haitian state's budget until it was fully paid in 1947. For a fuller account, see Dubois 2012.
4. The Swedish economist Mats Lundahl, who wrote extensively about the Haitian economy, relentlessly vilifies what he calls “voodoo” and depicts it as a force that impedes social and economic change. Spelling Vodou as “voodoo” is in itself a mark of disdain, since “voodoo,” when applied to Haiti, is a mock term for Vodou religious practices.

References

- Alexis, Jacques Stephen. 1957. *Les Arbres Musiciens*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Alexis, Yveline. 2021. *Haiti Fights Back: The Life and Legacy of Charlemagne Péralte*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Anglade, Georges. 1977. *Mon Pays d'Haïti*. Québec : Presses de l'Université du Québec, Editions de l'Action Sociale.
1982. *Atlas critique d'Haïti*. Montreal: Groupe d'études et de recherches critiques d'espace, Département de géographie, Université du Québec à Montréal; Centre de recherches caraïbes de l'Université de Montréal.
- Barthélémy, Gerard. 1990. *L'univers rural haïtien: le pays en dehors*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Bellande, Alex. 2015. *Haiti Déforestée, Paysages Remodelés*. Montreal: CIDIHCA.
- Bellegarde, Dantès. 1937. *L'Occupation américaine d'Haïti*. Montreal: Editions Beauchemin.
- Bulamah, Rodrigo. 2018. "Ruínas circulares: Vida e história no norte do Haiti." Tese (doutorado)—Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, <https://www.ifch.unicamp.br/ifch/ruinas-circulares-vida-historia-norte-haiti>
- Castor, Suzy. 1978. *La Ocupación Norteamericana de Haití y sus Consecuencias, 1915–1934*. Havana, Cuba: Casa de las Americas.
- Chérestal, Kysseline Jean-Mary. 2015. "Building Back Better? The Caracol Industrial Park and Post-earthquake Aid to Haiti." Washington, DC: ActionAid, <https://www.actionaidusa.org/publications/building-back-better-caracol-industrial-park-post-earthquake-aid-haiti/>
- Dubois, Laurent. 2012. *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*. New York: Macmillan.
- Dupuy, Alex. 1989. *Haiti in the World Economy: Class, Race, and Underdevelopment since 1700*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Dunn, Oliver, and James Kelley. 1989. *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492–1493*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Duval, Frantz. 2021. "Haïti n'est pas un pays maudit!" *Courrier International*, 20 August, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/interview-non-haiti-nest-pas-un-pays-maudit>
- Easterly, William 2014. *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fatton, Robert. 2014. *Haiti: Trapped in the Outer Periphery*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Gaillard, Roger. 1982. *Charlemagne Péralte Le Caco*. Port-au-Prince, Haiti: R. Gaillard.
- Gonzalez, Johnhenry. 2019. *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Haiti Libre. 2018. "Summary, challenges and perspectives of the textile sector." <https://www.haitilibre.com/en/news-26479-haiti-economy-summary-challenges-and-perspectives-of-the-textile-sector.html>
- IDB. 2012. "Fact Sheet: The IDB and Haiti's Caracol Industrial Park." <https://www.iadb.org/en/news/background-papers/2012-07-06/caracol-industrial-park-key-facts-percent2C10054.html>
- Joos, Vincent A. 2021a. *Urban Dwellings, Haitian Citizenships: Housing, Memory, and Daily Life in Haiti*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

- . 2021b. “Developing Disasters: Industrialization, Austerity, and Violence in Haiti since 1915.” In *The Struggle of Non-Sovereign Caribbean Territories*, ed. Adlai Murdoch. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Katz, Jonathan. 2013. *The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kolektif Peyizan Viktim Tè Chabè. 2017. “Haiti: Caracol Industrial Park.” Accountability Counsel website, <https://www.accountabilitycounsel.org/client-case/haiti-caracol-industrial-park/#timeline>.
- Lucien, Georges Eddy. 2018. *Le Nord-Est d’Haïti: La perle d’un monde fini; entre illusions et réalités (Open for Business)*. Paris: L’Harmattan.
- Lundahl, Mats. 2013. *The Political Economy of Disaster: Destitution, Plunder and Earthquake in Haiti*. New York: Routledge.
- Morison, Samuel E. 1940. “The Route of Columbus along the North Coast of Haiti, and the Site of Navidad.” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 31(4): 239–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1005582>.
- Naimou, Angela. 2015. *Salvage Work: U.S. and Caribbean Literatures amid the Debris of Legal Personhood*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Péan, Leslie. 1987. “Trade in Manufactures: Haiti 1970-79.” IESCARIBE Study for Inter-american Development Bank.
- Pettigrew, Robert. 1958. *The Story of Fort Liberty and the Dauphin Plantation*. Richmond, VA: Cavalier Press.
- Philogène, Jerry. 2015. “‘Dead Citizen’ and the Abject Nation: Social Death, Haiti, and the Strategic Power of the Image.” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 21(1): 100–26.
- Schuller, Mark. 2007. “Haiti’s 200-Year Menage-a-Trois: Globalization, the State, and Civil Society.” *Caribbean Studies* 35(1): 141–79.
- . 2009. “Gluing Globalization: NGOs as Intermediaries in Haiti.” *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 32: 84–104.
- Shamsie, Yasmine. 2014. “La construction d’un parc industriel dans l’arrière-pays rural d’Haïti. Quelques observations sur le partenariat état-société et les capacités de l’état.” *Cahiers des Amériques latines* 75: 79–96.
- . 2019. “Reflections on Haitian Democracy: Zooming in on a Megaproject in the Hinterland.” *Latin American Research Review*, 54(1): 35–49.
- Sheller, Mimi. 2012. *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sontag, Susan. 2012. “Earthquake Relief Where Haiti Wasn’t Broken.” *New York Times*, 6 July, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/06/world/americas/earthquake-relief-where-haiti-wasnt-broken.html>.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1990. *Haiti, State against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Vansteenkiste, Jennifer. 2017. “Haiti’s Peasantry as Poto Mitan: Refocusing the Foundations of Prosperity and Development.” *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*. Volume 38, 2017 - Issue 4, 523-541.