



WRITING THROUGH TRAUMA

Nurturing Trauma: At a Teen Writing Workshop after the Earthquake in Haiti

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On January 12, 2010, Port-au-Prince, Haiti was hit with a 7.2-magnitude earthquake. Tens of thousands of people perished in mere seconds. Five months later, I was in Port-au-Prince conducting a three-day creative writing workshop for Haitian teen girls. Out of the sixty poems written by the twenty girls, not one mentioned this devastating tragedy. My mission was not for them to relive those few seconds when their world literally fell apart. I'd gathered them together to play games, to dig for words that were solely their own, and to simply express themselves with poetic language.

The girls had come from six different schools so they did not know each other for the most part. I conducted community-building activities that would get them out of their seats. This workshop took place in the yard that housed the sponsoring or-

ganization. Rickety chairs wobbled over crumbled stone—the cinderblock wall that enclosed the yard had collapsed during the earthquake. We played games where we had to hold hands and have our backs against each other. I participated too. They laughed at my efforts, of course. I ensured that there was lots of laughter and encouraged them to talk to one another as they wrote. The day was four hours long and after each activity there was a five- to ten-minute free-writing session.

I sat with them while they ate lunch, listened intently to their conversations. No one brought up the earthquake, or the fact that they had lost a parent, sibling, distant relative, or friend. I later discovered that a handful of the girls were living in tent camps. This was not evident in their poems either. Over the course of the three days, I had not asked for them to write about “Goudougoudou,” the name given to the earthquake. I'd learned from my own family that Haitians are a very proud and poetic people. Stories of relatives and friends who experienced the earthquake were always tinged with humor or became a tall tale of sorts of



Photograph by Francesco Uccelli

Ibi Zoboï's short stories and essays have been anthologized in The Caribbean Writer and Haiti Noir edited by Edwidge Danticat, among others. "The Fire in Your Sky" was named a Notable Story of 2011 by storySouth. She founded the Daughters of Anacaona Writing Project for Haitian teen girls and is studying Writing for Children & Young Adults at Vermont College of Fine Arts. She's recently been named a finalist for Tu Books' New Vision Award.

how they barely escaped death or heard a voice telling them not to enter that building moments before it collapsed. I anticipated these kinds of stories from my students, but none were written.

What I received instead were poems that spoke of an unwavering cultural and national pride. This was defiance in a way. If there was any indication in the opening lines that the writer of the poem had been a victim, the following stanzas revealed a triumphant girl who'd overcome metaphorical obstacles like climbing mountains or crossing a wide and

deep river; never an earthquake, political upheaval, violence, or disease—some of the traumas that have plagued Haiti in the past few decades.

In the workshop, I introduced the girls to terms in the English literary tradition that translated into Creole or French. Their most useful tool was the metaphor. Maybe they did write about the earthquake, but their literal truth was hidden somewhere beneath figurative language and imagery. With poetry, I found, trauma can be nurtured and soothed into quiet metaphors that both heal and empower. 🗨️

Haïti

MARIE CHRISTIE PIERRE, age 17

*Terre de laquelle je suis tirée
Terre sur laquelle je suis née
Tu es représentée par une femme, une belle
Tu ne portes aucune arme, tu es rebelle*

*Tu connais la souffrance, comme toutes les mères
Tu engendres des infirmières ainsi que des mères
Pourtant un jour ils se lèvent tous et prennent la mer
Ils n'ont point de regrets et cela est très amer*

*Haïti, tu essaies d'être une bonne maman
Bien que des fois tu ne nous fournis pas d'argent
Nous recevons des coups au flanc
Provenant de beaucoup profiteurs blancs*

*Mais ne te décourages pas maman très chère
Un jour tu gagneras toutes les ventes aux enchères
Tu ne souffriras plus car tu es fervente Tu lutteras
toujours parce que tu es vaillante*

Haiti

Earth, from whom I was torn,
Earth, on which I was born
You are a woman, une belle
You don't carry a weapon, you are a rebel

You know suffering, like all mothers,
You created nurse, and brothers,
But one day they rose up to take the oceans,
And without regret, they can't see they are rotten

Haiti, you try to be a good mommy
Even when you are low on money
We take each blow
As the white man's profits grow

But, keep your spirits up, mother dear
One day, your voice will be clear
You won't suffer much longer, because you are strong
You will fight forever against the thron