

In Haiti, August 2011

Colin Dayan

Everyone gets a piece of it. Haiti has always been there for the taking: a place to disappear into, to find what you have lost, or to make yourself new. And now that the country is in pieces, with hundreds of thousands still displaced and starving, with rubble everywhere, the taking—the turning of godforsaken remnants into ill-gotten wealth—has never been so exuberant or so blatant.

I returned to Haiti a year and a half after the earthquake. It was my mother—Haiti that I carried with me when I returned. I had to keep it in mind, since everything she knew has been destroyed. The neighborhoods of Bois Verna and Turgeau, where she was born and raised, are in ruins. Nothing remains of her school Sacré-Coeur. Walking slowly into my past, I go into the bathroom near the boarding gate in Miami. I look in the mirror and see my mother in her best, most exquisite days, though I am heavier since I do not refuse to eat as often as she did. But the stiff elegance and tense look are hers, even though with me there is always the stray hair, the unfinished face—no lipstick, no eye-shadow—and a walk that tells a story, always, no matter how many years have passed, of insecurity and fear.

I returned in homage to her beauty, to know again the place that had given her what she treasured most in a life of disappointment and slow decay. “Beautiful, it was so beautiful,” she told me as she tried hard to hold on to her memory and her mind. Haiti was always with her, in the way she ate mangoes, walked barefoot in the dirt and looked for lizards that, once found, she greeted with pleasure—“Ah,” she sighed, “it’s a zandolite.” I remember how my mother used to pray to the Virgin Mary: “Je vous salue Marie, pleine de grâce, le seigneur est avec vous.” She told me that God was expressing his love for a woman pure and without stain. Not like the *djablesse*, or “she-devil,” she explained with a smile, “who died for the sin of being a virgin.” Snakes and pigs were also part of the past that she shared with me once I knew her birthplace. When I asked about her childhood, she used to laugh and recite sayings yelled at her as she walked to Sacré-Coeur, down the hill in Turgeau, where nuns took away the girls’ mirrors and then gazed furtively at themselves.

I took with me on this trip the memory of her words, thrown out at me unexpectedly on a summer afternoon in Atlanta: “Arab maje koul v,” which in Creole means “Arabs eat snakes.” I learned that her father was Syrian, one of the merchants disdained by Haitians who did not want *blancs* or foreigners on their land. “It’s no good to be too strange in a country you love,” my mother told me. Though she was never clear about her family or her childhood, she remembered feeling that she did not seem “normal” to the children who shouted at her, “Gade kochon pwal,” which she translated as “Look at the hairy pig legs.” She later said that she grew up next door to the writer and ethnographer Jacques Roumain and his wife, Nicole. They both helped to tear down the stuffed effigy of the *Juif* left on the lawn in front of her house during Easter. The word she most relished pronouncing had to do with dirt or stink: *souspiyant*. I heard wonder and secret pleasure as she drawled out the *souuuuuspiyant*, which she defined as something like the stench of dirty water. Occasionally she

added, "It's like something down underneath, *mango de dwãt*, a rotten or unclean mango that had gone black inside.

The day before leaving Haiti, I returned to Croix-des-Missions, a short drive from Port-au-Prince. Over a bridge, looking at a goat in the dry riverbed, I went to find the *ounfã* of the painter and Vodou priest André Pierre. The Haiti I had returned to and lived in on and off for a quarter of a century since the summer of 1970, the last year of "Papa Doc" Duvalier's life, was unrecognizable: the number of *blancs* or foreigners, the absence of Vodou signs of the gods at the crossroads, no paint on the doors or sides of walls to call on the spirits of Guinea, no drums heard in the night. I decided to pay heed to what had gone, to give respect to the dead, to the painter who first greeted me in 1970. The driver and I had no trouble finding the turn, since even a very young man knew where to find Pierre's compound or *lakou*.

André Pierre died in 2005, at ninety-one. He once told me that he could not paint were it not for God and the *lwa* (the Vodou deities). "I paint with the hand of God," he said. He never talked politics, even though we both worried about the attacks on Vodou, especially after the Duvalier regime ended. Instead, we talked about the gods. He told me about Ezili, known as the "Black Venus" or "goddess of love," but these names do not adequately identify her. We cannot know her by these analogies alone, for her presence when she visits devotees is known by her demands, her insatiable need for adoration. Not love, not romance, but a specific promise of the most intense rendezvous, one night alone with her every week or two, depending on the man or woman who serves her. I got the impression when Pierre talked about Ezili that the room set aside for their time together was off limits. I might have been wrong, but I never asked him to open the door.

Figure 1. *Ounfã* of André Pierre, Croix-des-Missions

This time, I do not find his family. An unidentified woman "I do not seek to know who she is" leads us to the peristyle or ceremonial enclosure where the gods used to come. The light shines through the windows. I remember the blue walls and I see that there is blue still painted on them, and that is all that remains except for the *poteau mitan*, the center post connecting the heavens to the earth and to the home of the gods under the water (fig. 1). No earthen jars, no *bagi* or altar, nothing else of color, only rubble. And nothing in the debris holds anything that can connect me to the past. Alfred Métraux in his monumental study of Vodou described the sanctuary or altar-room as "a veritable junk shop" [1] but he meant that it contained all kinds of things normally not thought of as sacred, a jumble of objects turned into relics through practice, through handling and holding. I knew when I first saw such a collection that it was not *junk* as we mean the word, but something else: the capacity for objects usually kept apart to mingle, for the most ordinary things to astonish. At Pierre's *ounfã*, nothing is left. Even the guinea hens and chickens are gone. I do not ask what has happened. I stand in the debris with the light still coming through the windows, and the woman whom I do not speak to looks at me and opens the door to the room. I do not want to be there, but I see the bed. It is the bed where he

slept with Ezili. It is still neatly made, the pillow at the top is white, and the room is swept clean. I thank the woman though I never asked her name and know as I leave that though the peristyle is shattered and neglected, the room set aside for the god and her man has been preserved.

I am not sure where my father bought the painting that I have kept with me for over twenty years now. Done in the early fifties, the painting reminds me of the stern simplicity of Giovanni de Paolo, its background measured and its burnished orange color applied with restraint. A white dog sits hunched toward a table. Hungry, its mouth open in a kind of grin, the dog stares into the distance. A fish so long that it covers most of the table's surface lies there dead. It is quite beautiful, lying there so still on a bed of greens. Like an offering, to the viewer, to the dog, the fish on the table is framed as if on stage, with a dull red curtain pulled clear on either side to reveal the promise of food, a meal neatly prepared and placed on a white linen tablecloth. I asked my uncle who had a gallery of Haitian art, first on Grove Street and then on Madison Avenue, about the artist whose signature, "Peterson Laurent" boldly done, appeared in black paint, after the words "St. Mac [sic], Haiti." Born in St. Marc on the coast near the Artibonite, Laurent is not usually mentioned along with other painters of the so-called Haitian Renaissance, heralded by DeWitt Peters when he founded the Centre d'art in 1944: PhilomÃ© Obin and his brother SÃ©nÃ©que, Rigaud BenoÃ®t, Castera Bazile, Wilson Bigaud, and Adam Leontus. Nor was he asked by Peters to work on the murals of Holy Trinity Cathedral, along with Obin, Bazile, Bigaud, and others, including Toussaint Auguste, Gabriel LÃ©vÃ©que, and PrÃ©fÃ©te Duffaut. Completed in 1951, Holy Trinity Cathedral, known simply as "La cathÃ©drale," was destroyed in the earthquake (fig. 2). In Ute Stebich's *Haitian Art*, her catalogue of the show at the Brooklyn Museum that opened in 1978, I search through the painters' biographies with their birth dates or birth and death dates. Only Peterson Laurent bears the strange designation after his name, "active 1940-1958." What happened to him, I wonder. "All we know about Peterson Laurent is that he was apparently a railroad blacksmith and that he lived and died in St. Marc," the entry reads.[2] I always remembered the story I heard from my uncle: "He died in the gutter. Forgotten and mad with hunger. He starved to death."

Figure 2. Holy Trinity Cathedral, Port-au-Prince

Peterson Laurent's dog stayed on my mind when I returned to Haiti. Dogs were everywhere. In the streets or rummaging in the ravines turned into dumps strewn with garbage, running along with the chickens, the pigs, and the goats. The chickens scratch at the dirt, the pigs root in the refuse, the goats look on in a kind of wonder. The dogs alone seem fierce with concentration and purpose. On Isle de la GonÃ©ve, the dogs look like Australian dingoes (fig. 3). They guard us as we sleep, barking through the night as donkeys bray and roosters crow, announcing the dawn long before it comes. One morning out in the countryside, I see a dog and cannot tell whether it is living or dead. I give it a kernel of corn. "Caught up in the mange," as we used to say in the South, starved, nearly dead, only his eyes remain alive. What a face: its resignation becomes

an assurance of peace. I am shaken by such gentleness. Dogs form the backdrop to my return. They are the only things that are constant, that I feel as if I still know. I lie down on the floor with Denise, the dog they call the "dumb one." I realize that everywhere I go I am on the lookout for dogs. Awful as it sounds, I know that the dogs will determine how I think about what I once loved.

Figure 3. The dogs of La Gonâve

In town, on the road to the airport, amid the rubble, among the rocks in a gully filled with garbage, I see again the goats, chickens, and, now, even a cow. A couple of dogs run past the animals, as if they know where they are going. All the animals seem still to be in the countryside, somewhere far away from the earthquake debris. Perhaps they remember in their bodies the bush, the shrubs and flowers, and it no longer matters if they eat the dust. Memory is so strong that it fills their hearts. Then I see something that reminds me that there is no escaping what has been manmade, what casts a long shadow over everything else. It is unnatural. The giant hybrid pig I had heard about saunters toward the road. It carries a history of outrage in its body. In 1982, allegedly concerned about the threat of swine fever, US AID ordered the extermination of the hearty, black creole pigs"over one million. These pigs served not only as food for peasants but as money in the bank. White Iowa pigs, known as *cochons blancs*, arrived but were too delicate to be raised on the hard soil and in the heat. Some died and some ended up in the Protestant missions, cared for and turned into booty for those Haitians who turned their backs on Vodou and took Christ into their hearts. One farmer had complained to me that white pigs were "prize pigs": the only way you'd get one of these "four-legged kings" was to walk away from your land and crawl into a white world. But now, as if in some strange reminder of the curse of color"the misalliance so feared by racist historians in colonial Saint-Domingue and after"a monster pig of faded black and darkened white survives. This dappled gray thing has been born out of extinction. As we pass, I see a baby walking alongside it. So the creole pigs are not gone, just changed. They have adapted to the new Haiti that always bears traces of the old.

In 1949 Edmund Wilson observed that Vodou would never disappear from Haiti unless Protestantism took hold.[3] I awaken on Isle de la Gonâve, the island that claimed the marine Faustin Wirkus for itself as king. *The White King of La Gonâve*, published in 1931, was one of the many popular stories written during the occupation to remind American readers how much Haiti needed the marines of the Southern Command.[4] It is around 6:15 on Sunday morning, and blaring out of a loudspeaker is a preacher shouting in Creole words of fire and brimstone. The service begins at 7:00 and continues for three hours. Prayer and song, as well as the preacher's warnings about the evils of black magic, leaf doctors, and women who wear pants, resonate in the hills. Not only is there no sign of Vodou here but no one even wants to talk about the *lwa*, the ceremonies, or the dances. I find myself trying out the *yanvalou*, as if a dancing clown, in front of a couple of women I meet. I dance in honor of my *met tet* Danbala, the

snake of the fresh waters who is “master of my head.” But they just smile and say nothing. Perhaps attacks on practitioners have increased with the numerous missionaries swarming the country with food, water, and blessings. Or maybe some believe, along with Pat Robertson, that the earthquake was punishment for dealing with the “devil.” Or perhaps I cannot be trusted.

What terms, I wonder, can be used to frame, or even express, the shameful reality of the internally displaced people (IDP) camps, where hundreds of thousands of quake survivors still live. They help each other pull through in tents, in hand-made shelters made out of gray and blue plastic tarps, pieces of wood, and scraps of tin. Some of the tarps, though faded and torn, still bear the US AID brand: “A gift from the American people.” Even on the walls, sometimes the only walls left standing in the remains of a neighborhood, I see plastered “US AID: ED PEP AMERIKEN,” with its familiar seal of stars and stripes and clasped hands (fig. 4). Colonialism always works best under the guise of care.

Figure 4: On the Wall of Grace Children’s Hospital, Port-au-Prince

In thinking now about the presence of MINUSTAH—the United Nations Stabilization Mission—the sight of men in combat gear with large guns riding in the backs of the ever-present white trucks, I recall their arrival in 2004, after Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted for the second and final time. They arrived in Cité-Soleil, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince, an Aristide stronghold, and killed and maimed young and old, leaving their bodies, the dying and the dead, in the streets. Now I see them in the countryside, on the roads of Logane, in the quiet of the hills, masses of men and materials. The majority of Haitians have no illusions about their presence and the message they are there to convey. A friend assures me, “This is not help. They ride through the ruins and they ignore the hungry. This is an occupation.” And stories that first sounded like fabulous rumors always turn out to be true. Cholera caused by Nepalese “peacekeepers,” dumping their shit in the Artibonite River, the longest and most important river in Haiti. Signs appear along the streets of Carrefour: “MINUSTA AK CHOLERA MARASSA” (“Minusta and Cholera Twins”).

There is always money to be made from the misery of others. On a hill outside the Petionville camp I see for the first time a HabiHut. The *New York Times* reported over a year ago how Eldon and Bruce Leep, high-end contractors in affluent ski villages in Montana, near Yellowstone Park, solved the problem of the economic slowdown. Instead of building luxury condominiums, they turned to recession-free housing, a quick-fix shelter “for people in need,” as their website announced (fig. 5). “The HabiHut,” the *Times* reported, “weighs about 400 pounds, packs down to a 4-foot-by-8-foot crate, and costs \$2,500, which includes shipping with bulk orders. It can be assembled in an hour or two with just a screwdriver, [and] will last up to 15 years.” Those who have lost “the safety and security of home” after the earthquake in

Haiti can live in a one-room honeycomb-shaped hut built out of polypropylene plastic panels with an aluminum frame.[5]

Figure 5. The HabiHut, PÃ©tionville

After the departure of “Baby Doc” in a United States Air Force C-141 cargo plane to a five-star hotel at Talloires in the French Alps, US AID and the World Bank promoted plans to displace farmers in the countryside to provide cheap labor in the cities. Lawrence E. Harrison (director of the AID Mission to Haiti from 1977 to 1979) proposed a version of the American Dream for Haiti: “The establishment of assembly industries employing tens of thousands in the capital city of Port-au-Prince.” Displaced from the countryside, people lived in the shantytowns on the hillsides, only to become victims of a natural disaster made worse by programs ostensibly promoting “democracy.” The workers in these factories, he predicted at the time, will “learn that a combination of organization, cooperation, technology and work can vault them into the middle class” something the voodoo houngans (priests) have failed to achieve.” [6]

And if they will not work, they can be locked up. During the American Occupation of Haiti (1915–1934), a program of forced labor, known as the *corvÃ©e*, built roads throughout the countryside. When peasants refused to work—even after their land was seized—the marines of the Southern Command imposed martial law. But they also used somewhat heavy-handed methods to turn independent individuals into enslaved workers: punishment, imprisonment, and death.

What has happened to all the money pledged to Haiti? Why has nothing been done to help those who live in IDP camps with a dignity and generosity that boggles the imagination? Our new global order distrusts large groups of people who have been displaced, violated, or depersonalized by disasters both natural and man-made. Perhaps *distrust* is not the right word. But certainly the treatment of the dispossessed, usually dark-skinned folks, asks us to think hard about proper terminology. The words that most capture the neglect of what Gordon Lewis once thought of as the future of the Caribbean, the gist of culture there, those he called “the black-brown masses,” are *disposal* and *disregard*. [7] For some elites in the hills and most of the *blancs* or foreigners who have infiltrated the country, the Haitians in the tent cities don’t matter much. Or maybe they matter too much, as both of Aristide’s elections demonstrated. *Titid se nous* (Aristide is us). Whatever we think of Aristide or the reasons for his ouster, one thing is certain: he enlivened, gave hope to, made visible the majority of Haitians.

So what to do with those who resist, who remember the long tradition of resistance and rebellion that made Haiti the first Black Republic in the New World, the only place in the world where

slaves successfully broke free of their chains? While reconstruction lags, old prisons in Haiti are being refurbished and new, private prisons are being built. The United States has promised more than \$30 million to train corrections officers. Building places to put criminals has always been a lucrative business. Vagrancy is not the problem but the continued containment of those deemed unfit or disposable. The move from the camps to the prisons will be easy, and unavoidable. It took about a month after the earthquake for GEO Group Inc. (formerly known as Wackenhut Corrections Corporation) to receive a contract in Haiti. It was awarded by the US Department of Homeland Security through the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (popularly known as ICE) "for "guard services." [8]

It is difficult to know how to speak about the current outrages being committed in Haiti. Looking back over the years since the removal of "Baby Doc" Duvalier, I realize that the dispossession I feared would be the result of what was then called "operation democracy" in Haiti has come to pass with a vengeance. Less than a decade after the United States pronounced the restoration of democracy in Haiti in 1994, with the return of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, accompanied by the Marines, the international community financially repudiated the nation. Dr. Paul Farmer, then Harvard medical professor and director of Haiti's celebrated Zanmi Lasante clinic, lamented the continued US blocking of international loans: "The blocked \$146 million in IDB [Inter-American Development Bank] loans are for health, water, and education. It's insane for the richest country in the world to hold up financing of these projects in one of the poorest." [9] In August 2009, Farmer was named by Bill Clinton as United Nations Special Envoy to Haiti. Neutralization has not often been disguised in such illustrious garb.

Cynics or those more jaded than I say that Haiti has always been corrupt, savage, or, for some, "more West than the rest." The anthropologist and historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot early on described Haiti as "the first testing ground of neocolonialism." [10] Its excesses have always forced imagination high and low "the "pearl of the Antilles" or the sewer of the Western world. The streets of Port-au-Prince are packed with people, tap-taps, shops and markets along with ruins, tarps, and refuse. There is no doubt that the energy on the streets is infectious, the courage and ingenuity striking. It is only when I glance off to the side and see the blue and white tarps of yet another tent city that I realize that these locales of the displaced shadow the radiant illusion. They are invisible in plain sight.

What is to be done? Where can one go to find the proper history that can help to correct the present? History does not repeat itself. That is too simple. For what is happening now in Haiti is not repetition but a deepening, an intensification, as if Walter Benjamin's epiphany, or flash out of time, was so powerful that memory itself had to fail. There is nothing to compare to this Haiti, the Haiti after the earthquake, nor can I claim now that I have returned or that any return has been or will be possible for me.

Colin Dayan is the author of *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (1995, 1998) and, most recently, *The Story of Cruel and Unusual* (2007) and *The Law is a White Dog* (2011).

- [1] Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken, 1972), 80.
- [2] Ute Stebich, *Haitian Art* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, distributed by H. N. Abrams, 1978), 164.
- [3] See Edmund Wilson, "Haiti, 1949," in *Red, Black, Blond, and Olive: Studies in Four Civilizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).
- [4] Faustin Wirkus and Taney Keplinger Dudley, *The White King of La Gonâve* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1931).
- [5] www.thehabihut.com; Jim Robbins, "Scaling Down, to \$2 a Square Foot," *New York Times*, 12 August 2010.
- [6] Lawrence E. Harrison, "Haitian History Fosters Pessimism," *Times Union* (Albany, NY), 29 November 1987.
- [7] Gordon K. Lewis, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2004), 201.
- [8] Center for Economic and Policy Research, "Private Prison Company Gets Haiti Contract," *Haiti: Relief and Reconstruction Watch* (blog), 19 February 2010, www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs/relief-and-reconstruction-watch/private-prison-company-gets-haiti-contract.
- [9] Paul Farmer, quoted in "Haiti," statement of Hon. Edolphus Towns of New York, in the House of Representatives, 9 July 2002, *Congressional Record*, V. 148, Pt. 9., June 27, 2002, to July 15, 2002 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2002), 12406 (brackets in original).
- [10] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), 57.