



Photo: Marco Dormino/The United Nations

Leaving Port-au-Prince

Pamela Sneed

1

Seeing those dust covered ashen faces from
Haiti's earthquake today
reminds me strangely of the victims on 9/11
coming over the bridge from Manhattan
covered in soot, some traces of fresh blood
walking like zombies into downtown Brooklyn
shell shocked
all of us like night of the living dead
I refused to believe anything had happened
walked to work at the University
an hour after the towers exploded
It was only after when my students spoke
with terror so palpable
many of them Muslim from Pakistan who had
family members rounded up detained
others who'd actually known and lost someone
I realized I couldn't ignore it anymore

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No one talked about the soot from the towers
that gathered on mine & others windowsills for months after
the smell of fire that stayed in the air
not realizing we were breathing in flesh
Yes, those dust covered ashen faces in Haiti today
remind me of 2005 being in Ghana
watching television and seeing flood waters of Katrina
trap a woman in a stairwell
the horror on her face just moments before
she was gushed away
Those dust covered ashen faces remind me
of many things Ghana, Hurricane Katrina, America's economic downturn
and how victims so often are Black & poor
how in every crisis we, Black people are hit hardest
no one bothering to hear the screams until it's too late
I get angry knowing those levees could have been fixed beforehand
knowing these "natural disasters" become convenient, thinly veiled plots
for governments to take our lands
knowing that Haiti in poverty has paid a high price for her revolution
standing up to white power
and there is no neat ending
nor startling dénouement
only a prayer to and for Haiti's spirit, strength,
recovery.

2

I know leaving Port-au-Prince
is the best thing to do
get away from the rubble, ruins, rotting flesh, aftershocks,
barren, desperate cries for food, shortages of water, medicine
and more I could not know
but every time I hear reporters talking gleefully
of camps, relocation, tent cities
I start to worry
get some sensory recognition of what those words have meant
the Black citizens of New Orleans huddled in a Louisiana superdome
abandoned, evacuated and left to die there
after promises of help
I know there's good will involved

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it's the only thing left to do
Wyclef says Port-au-Prince is a morgue
it must be evacuated
but every time I hear of camps and relocation
it triggers another kind of memory
those trains and cattle cars to nowhere
imminent extermination
what is true I know
is that a lot of those people will never see
their homes again/
trees that have taken root outside
with large bulbous roots
veins pumping through the ground
carrying blood.

3

I know that when you're rebuilding every cement block,
every piece of wood
weighs a ton
everything is attached to a memory of something gone...
I know that when you're rebuilding every rain drop
has meaning
every wind holds a sign
When news of Haiti's earthquake first broke
I tried to look past the reporters on the tarmac
beneath the gore and glee in their eyes
to see the real story
I tried to peer past their goodwill and good intentions
as they stoked fears of Black rebellion
Haitian unrest
until I think they realized how racist it was
Diane Sawyer, the Blonde Blue mutation of Barbara Walters
her face widened from plastic surgery and botox
asking Black passerbys, "Do you think there will be violence?"
All I know is that Haiti needs us now more than ever
now that the cameras have stopped
real shock sets in
a pack of frayed wires ready to explode
now is when they need shoulders to cry on

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to reach loved ones long forgotten
to hear voices of cheer, of strength.
now is when they will need more than dollars
but our compassion &
and attention too.

4

We sent troops to Haiti to protect our interests
but the interests aren't people
it's land
turning it into another tourist destination
a new-fangled American colony
I still remember reading stories of Haiti under France
slaves shipped from Africa to Haiti's Sugar plantations
worked so hard
had life spans of only 4-6 years
but the story that blew my mind
was during the time of Toussaint L'Overture
where slave holders had a practice of packing a slaves asshole
full of gun powder
then setting it off by putting live flames to it---
In our new fangled modern colony because of
class discrepancies between tourists and Haitians
Haiti's poorer women and girls will become sex workers
part of the new sex trade as what's happened in Zimbabwe, Ghana,
all over Africa
Even in Poland, a white country in Europe
there's an uprising of a brand new culture called "Mall Girls,"
underage teens who exchange sex with older men for a skirt,
pocketbook, designer label
One of the older girls counsels the younger and says "Don't be fooled,
there's no love, only business, an exchange of services,"
And so as the story goes- we sent troops to Haiti
after the earthquake to protect our interests
but the interests aren't people
in one of the over-crowded interim camps called tent cities
that make asbestos laden Fema trailers after Katrina
look like luxury
women and girls live in terror

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a young girl is repeatedly raped
sees her attackers daily and
has no one to tell
says troops drive down only one road
never leave their cars
the peace-keepers sent so infighting, diseases, hunger
don't spoil our plans
of taking-over.

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Pamela Sneed is a New York based poet, performer, writer, and actress. She has been featured in the New York Times Magazine, The New Yorker, The Village Voice, The Source, Time Out, Bomb, Next, MetroSource, Blue,VIBE, HX, Karl Lagerfeld's "Off The Record," on the cover of New York Magazine, and in the PBS documentary "Black Artists Changing America." She is the author of "Imagine Being More Afraid of Freedom Than Slavery," published by Henry Holt in April 1998 and KONG & other works published by Vintage Entity Press 2008/9. She is a professor of Speech and Theater at Long Island University and received her M.F.A. in New Media Art & performance from LIU in 2008. She is the author of the forthcoming manuscripts, "Right to Return," "America Ain't Ready," and a novel, *Motherland or Chitlin Chimichanga*.