



Interview with Marie Lily Cerat

Educator and writer; French doctoral student, City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center.

Following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Teaching for Change asked Marie Lily Cerat some questions to update the interview which appears in the 1994 booklet, Teaching About Haiti. Here are her responses, dated January 29, 2010.

Have you heard from family members in Haiti? Is everyone safe?

It took me four days before I heard from my folks in Haiti. The waiting was nightmarish. When I

finally heard from my family: my aunt and cousins, my brother, his wife and children, I couldn't stop crying. I was happy that they had made it alive, but saddened by the magnitude of the disaster that claimed so many lives, and so many friends who were not as lucky. Having heard from my immediate family has not stopped the myriads of images of my people helpless, buried and dying under the rubble, following the devastating earthquake.

My sister, daughter and I are thankful that we did not lose any close family members, but we are distressed, deeply saddened and affected by what happened to our homeland and our Haitian compatriots. Every Haitian and their descendants all over the world are grieving and mourning the terrible disaster and lost of lives that befell our homeland.

While there is this focus on Haiti – what do you recommend teachers do to heighten children's knowledge about Haiti – particularly in elementary, middle and high school classrooms?

Indeed, the whole world is focusing on Haiti at this time. Educators at all levels (K-16): elementary, middle school, high school and college can take this opportunity to teach about Haiti: its past, present, and future. In the midst of this tragedy, I would like teachers to bring into discussions in their classrooms the reasons why Haiti, who was the richest colony in the Antilles, the most prosperous French colony became so poor. It is important for students to learn why Haiti became and remained the poorest nation in the Hemisphere today. Haiti is never described without these ominous words "the poorest in the western hemisphere."

It is my hope that teachers will explain and teach their students that contrarily to Haiti getting any benefits for winning the war for independence against France, the country paid an indemnity to France in the amount of 150 million franc, valued today at about 21 billion dollars. And the resistance from the United States, France and other countries in the international community to establish diplomatic and commerce relations with the new nation for about 100 years, is at the root of what crippled Haiti. In war vocabulary, the Louisiana territory purchased by the United States in 1803 from France, and which doubled the size of the United States, should have gone to Haiti, “spoils of war,” they call it.

Teachers and their students should investigate and dig into history to understand the isolation Haiti suffered from the western world. The alienation and embargo placed on the new nation for nearly a century after its independence had a crippling effect that the country and its people are still enduring. After Haiti liberated itself from the grip of the French slavers, the rest of the world such as the United States that still was a slave holding country did not recognize and establish relations with Haiti. Fearing that befriending a nation created by former slaves would threaten their society and economy that relied on the free labor of slaves, the exploitation, harsh physical and mental treatments of enslaved Africans and their descendants.

There is a lot to learn about Haiti and Haitians, and I hope that conscientious educators seize the moment to take Haitian history from the footnote status it has been relegated to in our history books over the years, to more in depth learning and experiences in their classrooms. Few students in American schools are aware that a Haitian legion, 800 men strong, fought in the American revolutionary war for independence. In fact a monument honoring the Haitian fighters was erected in Franklin Square in Savannah, Georgia in 2007 and completed in 2009. Many do not know that the founder of Chicago, Jean-Baptiste Point du Sable was Haitian, to mention only those two examples. Haiti and Haitians have long been contributing to American society. Why this long-time partner of the United States is the poorest while its friend and neighbor the US is the richest in the Hemisphere, are questions that teachers and students ought to explore. We should also inform, discuss and research with our students the first US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, lasting 19 years. There are many questions that such a discussion can bring about: what did the US accomplished economically and socially during its time of occupation? What democratic institutions they helped us establish? What stories do the historical documents of that period reveal?

In our 1994 interview, you were teaching. What are you doing now?

In 1998, I left the classroom to become a Resource Specialist, a staff developer, working with Haitian teachers and teachers of Haitian students and sharing innovative methods of teachings, practices that work with students, and conducting informational sessions on the laws and regulations that impact the education of students who speak a language other than English in New York State.

At that time, the Haitian Bilingual/ESL Technical Assistance Center (HABETAC) was housed at City College, a City University of New York school. I left in 2001 to return to the New York City Public school system and worked for three years as an English and Social Studies teacher at the middle school level. I rejoined HABETAC in 2004 when the center moved to Brooklyn College, and has been there since. The truth is that I love the classroom. I enjoy seeing growth in my students, seeing the desire to learn in their eyes, and moving them to wherever they are to a greater state of knowing.

I continue to be very active in the community. Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees (HWHR), the community-based, grassroots organization I co-founded with Ninaj Raoul in 1992 is still providing much needed services to our Brooklyn Haitian community. From offering ESL, Haitian literacy services and cultural programs to our patrons, we have extended our reach to doing community organizing and media production to fight worker exploitation and anti-immigrant policy. Currently HWHR is very involved in relief efforts. The organization partnered with a local group in New York, Lakou New York, and Movimiento de Mujeres Dominicano-Haitianas (MUDHA) in the Dominican Republic to coordinate relief efforts in the aftermath of the earthquake.

How are the people of Haiti responding to the recent disaster? How do you see them coping in the long term?

I have always known that Haitians are some of the most resilient people. We are sure demonstrating that resiliency right now. Haitians are not only resilient, they are very creative and entrepreneurial; I am confident we will rise from the unfortunate devastation that has befallen our nation and people. We do cry, we wail, but we never lose hope; we know our day will come. The truth is the magnitude of the disaster, over 100,000 people dead and more than a million people homeless, is heart-wrenching and hard to grapple with. Haiti needs help at the moment and a lot of it. I am pleased at the outpouring of support from the international community. I just hope that the humanitarian efforts do not take a backseat to the politicization of the situation and that aid monies that are flowing in are not mismanaged and do not end up in the hands of the few and corrupt like before.

What do the people of Haiti need most right now?

At the moment the need for medicine and medical assistance cannot be over-emphasized. Money is also very, very important. Organizations, big and small, need money to buy supplies and operate relief efforts on the ground. But I urge donors, schools that are fundraising not to forget small organizations that are reaching many people in areas that do not receive as much media coverage as Port-au-Prince, and most importantly relief aid.

Let me emphasize that donating to small, credible and reputable organizations with a history of doing work on the ground in Haiti. Haitian Women

for Haitian Refugees (HWHR), the Lambi Fund, Beyond Borders, the Max Cadet Dental Foundation are great organizations that have long history of helping and working in Haiti. We encourage people to donate to organizations such as UNICEF, Partners in Health, Red Cross, and so on, but do not forget the small ones. Keeping the spotlight on Haiti in the media is equally important.

What do the people of Haiti need for the long term?

The Haitian-American community must play a major role in the rebuilding or building of Haiti. Right now, giving to relief organizations with experience with dealing with disaster is a top priority. Over the years, the Haitian Diaspora remittance, money sent to family and friends, has been what sustained Haiti. Also true was the fact that because of persecution, exiled and the dire economic situation, many Haitians had to leave their homeland. During the dictatorship of Duvalier era, we used to talk about the “brain drain” Haitian intellectuals and professionals forced out by the dictatorship and the unbearable conditions the country in search of a better life. Over the years, many had gone back, but today many are no longer with us. We have lost doctors, teachers, engineers, educators, and so on. So there’s a huge burden on Haitian academicians and professionals in the Haitian Diaspora around the world to come to the aid of Haiti. Many did leave with dreams of returning and contributing in making Haiti a true “pearl of the Antilles.” Today more than ever, we need to think of ways of actualizing that promise made to our Haiti.

We, in the Haitian communities around the US, are very grateful for the generosity of the American people. The response was immediate and everyone wants to help. Americans, young and old, rich and poor are contributing to relief efforts. We are very, very thankful. They give money and whatever they can. We know that support for Haiti and the Haitian people cannot be a one-shot deal, so we ask all our American friends to go the distance with us in order to make a real difference in the years to come. It is going to take a long time before we get back on our feet and we cannot do it alone. If the assistance of the International community is well coordinated and goes to the benefit of the people, coupled with and our resiliency and optimism, we are sure can do it.