

One Lost Year:

Photography, Haiti, and Recomposing a Few Memories

by Christopher Garland

1. It's now more than a year after the earthquake—the catastrophe that transformed Haiti from just another “failed state” to a country worth international attention—and I am looking back over the photos I took when I visited Port-au-Prince.

2. I went to Haiti to write two stories: one for a newspaper in New Zealand, one for a magazine in New York. I had pitched a story about Cite Soleil, the largest slum in Western Hemisphere. I told the editors that it was about seeing the slum; this was before the earthquake, so the “unknown” element of Haiti may have been the reason it garnered interest from the two publications.

3. The thing is this: The people of Cite Soleil have seen people like me before. When I say people like me, I include a range of people who were, in my opinion, nothing like me. However, I now know that people like me could include any of the following: a filmmaker from Paris; a sociologist from a large public university in the Midwest of the United States; a print journalist from a big news outlet in Britain; an expert on sanitation from South Florida; a humanitarian from New York City. These people (of which I am one) go to Haiti and they take notes “on the ground.” We try to talk to the locals: Interview time! We take photos of the bullet-holes in the walls and the rivers of trash and the kids with no clothes. But most of all we look at the people of Cite Soleil and the spaces where they live. We take more photos.

4. The taking of photos is compulsive because I've stopped trusting my memory. The taking of photos is necessary because I've spent money to get to Haiti; moreover, the

editor in New York told me the quality of the photos determines whether or not the article gets published.

5. Many of the people in Cite Soleil do not like this looking (understandably enough), so they will cover their faces before a camera is raised. They will shout—“No photo!”—before we clamber out of a truck. They will stare back, meeting the outsider’s gaze with their own. They will act as if we are not there, because soon we won’t be there. □

6. In using the term “they,” I am identifying a subject; this is written into the design of a sentence. They being the “others”: the subjects in the photos whose images sit in a folder on the desktop of my computer.

7. The residents of Cite Soleil know that these photos and the film footage are worth money. They know that they fit an expectation of the worst of slum living. They know that the images are sometimes designed to evoke pity. They know that there is a “They.” They know that the photos are tied into the economy where “they” are sold: words and photos describing “them” between ads for cut-price furniture, perfume, and car rentals.

8. After reviewing a short piece I wrote about Cite Soleil, an editor tried to insert the phrase “inherently impoverished” into one of the opening paragraphs. It was an interesting suggestion because what I was trying to convey in the piece was the exact opposite. I felt really good about myself for knowing how wrong that was — “inherently”! — but I also knew I would compromise on other issues. Why? Because I had spent a lot of money and time getting to Haiti to take photographs of what the UN once called “the most dangerous place on earth.” I thought (think?) that I deserved to.

9. Another editor asked for more “blood and dust.” Even now I’m not sure that I know what that means. In the end the article was stripped down a bit, but it was published.

Some money (not much) went into my bank account in New Zealand.

10. On my first night in Port-au-Prince the loud pops ringing out through the night are gunshots. My camera, which is a cheap thing, is in my backpack next to me. I think about trying to record the sounds.

11. I wake to the sound of a group of men, young and old, playing dominoes in the shade of a big tree that reaches over the wall by the street. Shortly after a group of kids will come and play basketball or run around. I take photos of them, no problem.

12. I write this sentence and watch as a storm is brewing not far away from the international airport in Brisbane, Australia. A couple of hours earlier I got a few pictures of my aunt; I hadn't seen her since I was a kid. Other travelers are at the window, using their cellphones to take photos of the blackened sky. I take a photo of the people taking photos.

13. We found the darkest corner of the room. There were benches that one would see in a poorer church anywhere in the world. She was from Texas and studied nursing. A few nights later we went to the Wyclef Jean concert in downtown Port-au-Prince. Even though we were amongst the very few white people in attendance, she just wanted to dance and not talk about what it meant to be the only white people there. I didn't take a photo of her: I very much wish I had.

14. Before that: "Let's stay in touch." She writes her email addresses on a crumpled receipt, I write mine on a napkin.

15. One night, back home in Florida where it is colder during the winter than one would ever think, I dream of alligators. In one of them I have to walk a path down by a newly discovered river. I have hounds in my service—very good dogs for this purpose—but

they have no respect for my authority. I hear the barks through a hearing aid that for the most part offers nothing but dull feedback. I skip over the “beasts”; I hear my heels clipping mid-jump.

16. For the next day, the night dreams infest my daydreams. The yellow light splitting through the limp clouds reminds me of the first part of the dream: a concert in a church with no roof.

17. I look back over my photos and I think about my friend, Barry. He was one of the first people I met when I moved to Florida. Barry’s family came from Port-au-Prince. Barry works at a popular retail store and everyone who knows him smiles when his name comes up and he’s not there. That is to say everyone loves him.

18. I’m away from home again a year or so after my trip to Haiti. I have spent the day doing interviews and taking photos. That night a good friend emails me several times and leaves a voicemail on my phone. Barry drowned at St. Augustine, a beach town that is the oldest European settlement in the United States. Barry, not a great swimmer, was body boarding with another friend. I hadn’t seen him in the days before I left, but a couple of weeks earlier we’d taken some photos together at a bar where a bunch of us would down cheap beers (and regularly get herded out at closing time). I looked back over the photos that night, moving them from one folder to another and back again.

19. For some people, the onset of rain gives them an ache deep in a broken bone, even if it has been healed for years. This skill of forecasting by bone is magic because the indicator lies beneath flesh and skin. For me it’s beyond reason or logic. It’s as magical as photography itself. The ability to know the future through a dull pain is an underrated gift.

20. A man in West Palm, Florida lost two fingers saving his pet dog from an alligator.

The man says that it was a small price to pay, so great is his love for his dog. During his television interview, the man was calm and understated, as if this was a normal occurrence: to put one's hands in the jaws of a seven-foot-long gator to retrieve a pet.

The man patted his dog and smiled at the camera. When he did look down, he didn't look at his hand for very long.

21. Those who have lost parts of the body sometimes talk about 'phantom pain,' wherein they feel the uncomfortable and indeed distressing sensation of the severed limb still being somehow present. This is the worst thing, they say, the way in which the mind and body lie; the way you might feel like something is still there when it's truly gone. Do photos help the amputee? The ability to look back at the whole body? Or does that just make it worse?

22. The streets of Port-au-Prince are filled with people. The local hero, Wyclef Jean, who is also a global superstar, is playing a free concert. The air is sweet with the smell of sausage and spicy chicken. The air is filled with Haitian, that beautiful language. I leave my camera at home.

23. There is a Haitian songwriter in Miami, Dadou Pasquet, who wrote a song about Haitians who left the homeland for the United States. The words are gorgeous, but only if you don't speak Creole. Or maybe they are beautiful words, either way.

24. *Se zantray mwen fe mwen mal jisten m kriye...* (My insides ache until I cry...).

25. The summer when Barry died didn't feel very hot. The heat isn't gone forever—not like that poor man's fingers—but it's somehow weaker, as if Florida has sunk a little bit, moving the flat land away from the sun. Today I took photos of the Spanish moss on the

trees outside my apartment, and I thought about trying to catch the same light tomorrow.

26. *Fok nou chita, pou n reflechi bagay sa yo...* (We must sit down, and mull these things over...)