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Why Noir, Why Now? Conversations on *Haiti Noir* with M.J. Fievre and Marie Ketsia Theodore-Pharel

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Dark settings, mysterious characters, moral ambiguity, a disquieting ending: the elements of noir storytelling have become so well established and perceptible that readers often discern the noir literary tradition by the unsettling way the writing makes them feel. Since the 2004 publication of *Brooklyn Noir*, the independent publisher Akashic Books has seized upon noir's affective powers and linked it closely to the nuances of place, making major international cities the settings for dark stories. In 2011, Akashic published *Haiti Noir*, its third Caribbean noir anthology, after *Havana Noir* (2007) and *Trinidad Noir* (2008). With this collection, Akashic broadened perceptions of both noir as a genre and the Caribbean as a site for storytelling. The stories in *Haiti Noir* (2011) construct an impression of Haiti that transcends geographical place and literary convention by enriching the treatment of dark themes through explorations of nuances in Haitian culture, both on the island and abroad. The spectral presence of the unforgotten past, the persistence of Afro-Caribbean spirituality, *vodou*, and questions about cultural (be)longing sparked in Haiti and the diaspora combine to create a layered backdrop for shadowy tales. While noir often spotlights criminal elements, *Haiti Noir* complicates criminality with multiply inflected motivations, implications, and repercussions. Moreover, by joining the work of writers from Haiti, the diaspora, and abroad, the collection constructs a transnational image of the nation. *Haiti Noir* locates Haiti not just in the Caribbean, but also in the collective imagination of all those looking to the island from outside, the extension of "diaspora" that editor Edwidge Danticat calls the "tenth department."

Recently, two of the collection's authors, M.J. Fievre and Marie Ketsia Theodore-Pharel, authors of *The Rainbow's End* and *Mercy at the Gate*, respectively, sat down to discuss *Haiti Noir* and the idea of locating the noir series in the Caribbean. As writers in the Haitian diaspora, they reflected on the responsibility of representing the homeland from an outside space. They also considered the ways noir has the potential to both enhance and trouble literary representations of Haiti. Our conversations repeatedly touched on the questions, Why noir? Why now? As Fievre notes, noir gives Haitian writers tools to familiarize readers with the nuances of a home-space often exoticized or "othered" in the global imagination. According to both authors, Haiti changes noir by adding social, cultural, and political dimensionality to its conventions. In *Haiti Noir*, the diversity of characters and experiences related to Haiti, as well as the complexities of their society, create an atmosphere in which, as Theodore-Pharel states, "magic is normal," and the answer to many questions can be found in a wish, curse, omen, or dream. *Haiti Noir* also helps bridge significant divides—between oral and written traditions; between personal stories and those that circulate in the community; and among those living in Haiti, those who have

left the island, and those who study the country from afar. The devastating 2010 earthquake, to which three of the collection's stories respond, has forged a stronger link between homeland and diaspora. Both Fievre and Theodore-Pharel explain how the event sparked mixed emotional reactions in them, while also strengthening their resolve to represent Haiti authentically and keep oral histories alive by transcribing them. As Danticat poignantly asserts, and these writers confirm, the contrasts created by the earthquake make Haiti a more suitable location for noir, one in which the past constantly intrudes on the present, while prayers and curses can be heard chanted in unison.

M.J. Fievre

Where in Haiti were you born and at what age did you come to the United States? Was Miami the first place you lived in the U.S.?

I was born in Port-au-Prince. I spent part of my childhood in a hot and boisterous neighborhood called Christ Roi (Christ, the King) until my family moved to the mountains of Thomassin. For me, Christ-Roi means sweat, dust, mosquitoes, colors, and lively conversations on the sidewalks. Thomassin means quiet hikes in the mountains, refreshing waterfalls, and blackberries. I left Haiti in 2002 to attend Barry University, in Miami Shores. I was 21.

How would you describe your upbringing in Haiti?

Growing up in Haiti, particularly in the nineties, is this weird mix of a sheltered education and an everyday reality that slaps you in the face. I attended an all-girls' Catholic school up 'til 12th grade, so many subjects were taboo—such as boys and dating, sex and homosexual feelings, emotional abuse, the skin color paradox and modern-day slavery in Haiti. On the other hand, violence and death were unavoidable because of the political and economic chaos that is still part of Haiti's fabric. I lost my naiveté at a very young age, well aware of the bloodshed, the misery and striking economic disparities. Yet, at some level, because of everything that remained unsaid within Haitian society (“les non-dits”), I kept a certain innocence. I was the youngest of four daughters with remarkably different personalities—something that taught me that I should never put people in the same basket just because they share common origins. Both my parents were industrious, middle-class individuals (he, a law teacher, and she, an economist) who taught me the value of hard work and education.

How would you describe your experience migrating to the U.S.?

Exhilarating. I couldn't wait to be away from my father, who was a complicated man. Away from Haiti and her uproars. I was finally allowed to become independent, since I was migrating without my family. I didn't fit in right away—I did try to blend in, even joining the sorority at my school, but I remained for a long time the solitary soul I'd been in Haiti. Reading and writing in the language was not a problem as English was mandatory at my high school. Speaking, however, required some practice. I had to learn about personal space—in Haiti, we kiss people to greet them and the bodies are positioned very closely during a conversation. It took me a while to understand the proper use of self-deprecation in American humor.

Would you say that the experience of migration shaped your desire or interest in becoming a writer?

I published my first novel at 16, years before I moved to the United States. Writing was already a big part of my life. I can say, however, that the longing I quickly felt after leaving Haiti certainly affected my writing, which became even fiercer. All I wanted to write about was Haiti. My new friends were curious about my culture and the life I'd known in Haiti. I was faced with clichés and stereotypes. I understood that as a Haitian living abroad, I was an ambassador for Haiti.

How has living in South Florida affected your work? Is there a sense of dual identity, or nostalgia, when you are writing about Haiti from an outside space?

Well, when I was writing in Haiti, I didn't have to think about who I was and how the world saw me. I took for granted that my audience was mostly Haitian, so I could make "inside jokes," as I would call them, and everybody would get the references because, you know, we were all from Haiti. Writing in Miami really pushed me to think about my identity, not only as a person, but as a writer. I really had to address the audience and think about, if I write this, who will really care? I had to think about, not only what I consider the mainstream American reader, but also what I consider the immigrant reader, and how I could touch both of these categories—someone who, like me, comes from another place, but also someone who doesn't know anything else other than the U.S. So, thinking about

writing in these terms was new for me, because I didn't have to justify who I was before. And when I say justify, [I mean it] in the sense that some people who read my work, they've never read anything by a Haitian writer before, so I feel that I have some kind of responsibility to present Haiti in a way that is true and unbiased, because people will rely on my work to decide what to think of my country. So, definitely thinking about my identity has become a big part of my writing here.

Are there aspects of South Florida that strike you as particularly noir?

Definitely. I think whatever is considered "other" is also considered, by many, scary. And in Miami, we have so many residents who come from other countries, other cultures. And when you are reading about someone who is different than you, you are entering a universe that's different and the rules are not the same. In *Miami Noir*, which I read a while back, you have stories where some of the characters have moved to Miami from other places and that's always a good premise that can make readers uneasy. A place can look different, even darker, through the eyes or the experience of an "outsider" or newcomer.

Do you think the noir genre is appropriate for Haiti, or the Caribbean?

I think so....Normally, when we talk about the Caribbean, we have this idea of an exotic part of the world. When you go to countries in the Caribbean, there's in fact this sense that you have stepped into a different world. I wouldn't call it "otherness," because "otherness" is relative, of course. But even Caribbean people are aware that we come from a unique place. I think it works for noir because you can play on this uniqueness to add elements of surprise, which is really important in this genre. Many countries in the Caribbean share a history that is not always joyful, because we were occupied for quite some time. I think that can also play in favor of writing in the noir genre, because we still can feel the impact of all those years of colonization and mistreatment of our people.

Are there aspects of Haitian culture that are inherently noir?

I think that magical realism, often found in Caribbean literature, can be used as an asset in noir. The idea that what appears strange [or "other"] to the reader is, in fact, ordinary for the characters. I think you can play on that for a great story

because the reader is trying to figure out what is really normal and what's not normal, trying to sort out what is cultural from what is actually creepy.

How do the dark elements of noir take different forms in Haiti?

Originally, the definition of a noir was mostly related to crime; the genre involved thugs and femmes fatales. As we moved forward in time, noir became much more than that. It became a story with a feeling that not everything is all right. It's a feeling that creeps up on you. Don't even ask me to try and define noir, because when I read something, I know whether it's noir simply by the way I react to it and the way it makes me feel. So, was spirituality or culture a big part of the noir genre originally? No. But *Haiti Noir* introduced unique elements to the genre—magic, spirituality, a dark political background. Haiti definitely offers different elements that can keep you on the edge of your seat and that add to that definition of noir.

Some have written that the *noir* label contributes to a negative perception of Haiti as a dark or foreboding place. What is your take on that idea?

Well, I think this idea is around because some people don't really understand what the *noir* genre is. It's not about putting down a place, it's not about necessarily the gruesomeness of the place. It's about this idea that in our everyday life, no matter the place, there are things that will make you shudder and life sometimes takes turns that make you think, how is this going to end? Some places do tend to be more suitable for *noir* because of, as I said, their "otherness" or connection to the idea that people there live differently. As far as presenting those places in a negative light, not necessarily. You can find many talented writers and interesting stories in the *noir* genre that actually make you want to go and visit the place that they're talking about. A good story is mostly character-driven. Of course place plays an important role, sometimes becoming a character of its own, but in every place, you find the good, bad, and ugly. You can't just accuse a genre of showing a place in a shady light.

What was the inspiration for your story, *The Rainbow's End*?

The idea behind *The Rainbow's End* was definitely autobiographical. The story is about growing up in Haiti, an unstable country, but also about my relationship with my dad, which was very difficult. It takes place when I am in a rebellious

stage, when I am striving to be a “bad girl.” Up to that point, I’ve been known to be a pretty good kid, but I’m at the stage where I’m trying to become a bad ass. Then, I meet Ben who is having a bad influence on me. By then end of the story, I realize the danger was not worth being considered “cool.” So, I go back to being plain old me.

What made you connect the idea to the noir genre and its themes?

I remember at the time I wasn’t really familiar with what noir was, but I had some vague idea—the notion that a character who does not necessarily have bad intentions makes bad choices that put them in a situation that is less than desirable. I thought *The Rainbow’s End* would fit for that reason. At this point in my life, I am still naïve, just pretending to be flirtatious and a bad girl... As rendered in the story, I have some idea about Ben’s nature, I feel that he might not be a good person, yet I give him my phone number, I chat with him all the time. A few times I do try to distance myself but very soon I am talking to him again and letting him talk me into taking risks. I thought it all fit my idea of noir pretty well. As far as noir goes, I do have to deal with more than I bargained for.

Tell me about the choice to set the story during the ’94 embargo.

It’s important for the reader to see that it was a very difficult time for everyone in Haiti... Whatever the character was going through, she didn’t really have anyone to turn to because other people had bigger issues to deal with. All she wants is to be a kid, while the adults are dealing with far more dire aspects of life. There’s this idea that even when things are difficult, teenagers will be teenagers. Life doesn’t stop just because there’s no gas to put in the car. Ben had to spend hours in line waiting to gas up the car, but then it’s as though that wait didn’t really matter. Off they go, driving to a friend’s house quite a distance away, because life goes on.

At the beginning of *The Rainbow’s End*, the brief dialogue between Magda and her father seems to leave a lot unsaid. What is the significance of the divide between them?

I think it’s really important, when writing any story, for a writer to remember that people are multi-dimensional. It was important for me, writing about my dad (whether in non-fiction or basing a character on him), to show that nothing is all

black or all white...I did have a difficult relationship with my dad, but who ends up “saving” my friend that day? [It] was him. There’s a little bit of good and bad in everybody. There’s also a parallel between this father-daughter relationship and my relationship with Haiti. People tend to see Haiti as this very dangerous place, because of everything they see on the news. The media hasn’t been doing us any favors, because many people reporting about my birthplace forget that you have to flip the coin sometimes and show that Haiti can be a very lovable place. So, this relationship with Haiti and with my dad has always been important to my writing—showing Haiti and my dad for who they really were. They’re both difficult, but they’re both lovable as well.

There’s definitely a [generational] divide [in the story], because the generation before mine grew up during the Duvalier era....Back then, there was always this feeling that you couldn’t trust many people. You could be reported as being an agitator if you expressed even a slight disapproval of the government; many people were actually accused of treason and killed simply for mentioning their misgivings about the government to a friend or neighbor. For the generation before mine, there’s always this feeling that you’re not allowed to freely express who you are, that you cannot be really opinionated about anything. People of my generation, however, are more “Americanized.” We want to be hip, we want to exercise our First Amendment rights even though we are not in the U.S. There’s this feeling that we want to be individuals and that is not always seen as a positive by the older generations. Talking about what you went through at home or even in your country is not always acceptable. Even though *The Rainbow’s End* is fictionalized, the very fact that I’m writing about my dad and the kind of relationship we had and that I’m being as frank as I can about Haiti, can be considered an act of defiance—being able to put it out there for the world to see.

You could say that Magda comes of age in this story. What made you link the coming-of-age theme to noir?

In a noir story, characters are forced to grow up. They come face-to-face with their biggest fears, they face the results of their bad decisions. So, I think the noir genre is a great frame for the coming-of-age story....What’s compelling about both a noir story and a coming-of-age story is that there’s no turning back. In noir, you have to clean up your mess. In the coming-of-age story, it’s the same—no matter how much you may want to go back to that stage where you were innocent and unknowing, you can’t, because you’ve reached a point of no return.

Noir often evokes a strong sense of place, since the darker themes usually result from the moral ambiguities specific to its setting. Do you think your story reflects that idea?

Haiti is so present in my piece...that she's almost a character in it. She [Haiti] makes all the events possible. The story takes place during the embargo in Haiti and ends when the army has been replaced by a police force. Everything that happens can only occur because the story takes place in Haiti. During the embargo, we, teenagers, could only go to school a few times a week, but our parents still had to go to work, so we had a lot of free time and unsupervised time. I could spend a lot of time on the phone with Ben and get in trouble with him....I also mention how he had spent a long time waiting in line to get gas so he could come see me, yet I have no guilty feeling at all taking his car for a ride, and actually ruining the car. Later on, [Ben] becomes a police officer and there's this idea in Haiti that whenever you're involved in politics or anything government-related, there's kind of this feeling that you're corrupted. At least that's the way it was when I was growing up in Haiti—corruption and government kind of meant the same thing. So, the fact that he became a police officer added this aura of trouble and this noir aspect to his personality. And it's definitely linked to his being Haitian and us being in Haiti. There were all these rumors that he had killed someone and dumped their body in a truck, and that he hadn't been arrested for it. And we do get in Haiti this sense that so many things are going unpunished, so I did [believe] that this story was true when I heard about it. It was actually my dad who told me all the rumors, and later on, other people confirmed—they did not confirm the story, but the rumors. And somehow, we just knew it was true. Just because. It did seem to fit. If the setting had been the U.S., it would probably have been a different story—you could have justice, you know. But in Haiti, it wasn't even a matter of whether it was true or not. There was a certainty that even if it were true, nothing was going to be done about it. In Haiti, we get that feeling a lot—that nothing is being done about injustice. The meaning of a word like “justice” is quite complicated.

How did the 2010 earthquake in Haiti affect you as a Haitian woman and as a writer?

All eyes were on Haiti after the earthquake. As a writer, I started receiving all kinds of emails asking if I had a story to share. People were Googling “Haitian writers” and finding the website of the Women Writers of Haitian Descent, an organization I'm part of. I was contacted by many people, and this new focus on Haiti made me feel, as I said before, a responsibility to represent Haiti [in my

writing] in a way that was truthful, and in a way that others could understand. It started of course with earthquake stories—everybody wanted earthquake stories, so I wrote stories others had shared with me. Ten days after the earthquake, I traveled to Haiti to help out a little bit and I wrote about my experience. I wanted to be as accurate as possible, so there was this sense of responsibility. Ever since I've moved here [to Miami], I've had this feeling that I have to be an ambassador for Haiti; after the earthquake, it became even more pronounced, that feeling that I can't afford to be trivial about what I say, even if I'm writing a very easygoing, "chick lit." story, I do have some responsibility, because [readers] will see me not only as a "chick lit." writer, but a Haitian "chick lit." writer.

As a Haitian woman, I've always had the sense that one of our roles is to be nurturing. The reason why I joined the Women Writers of Haitian Descent is because it's an organization that nurtures, not only female writers, but writers in general—because we see ourselves as motherly, as having to support writers, not only in the diaspora, but also writers in Haiti who reach out to us and want to tell their stories. After the earthquake, this nurturing role became particularly important, because the doors of communication were opened, and the world was awaiting our stories...and our role became to create a bridge between writers who had stories to tell about Haiti and the people who wanted to hear those stories. So it made me think a lot about my role as a woman, that nurturing role, that is not only applicable in a family setting or work setting, but in a writers' setting as well, where I consider myself to be nurturing and guiding new writers, helping to show them what opportunities are out there.

Is there a way that the aftermath of the earthquake has (or will) shape the way you write going forward?

Immediately after the earthquake, people wanted to know more about the earthquake. The idea that I needed to be 100% true in my description of Haiti was reinforced. What if my portrayal of life in Haiti was the only one someone ever got to read? I never forget it: there are many Haitis within Haiti, and my writing should translate this fact.

What are you working on these days?

Oh, several things—I have no discipline [laughs]. I'm working on a longer piece, which is just in its beginning stages. And I have a couple of stories in the works. I have to work on a lot of pieces at once, or I get bored. And sometimes

characters jump out of my stories and need longer narratives of their own. I'm working through that very thing right now.

Marie Ketsia Theodore-Pharel

Where in Haiti were you born and at what age did you come to the United States? Was Miami the first place you lived in the U.S?

I was born in Port-Au-Prince. I moved to the US when I was 10, in December 1984. I lived in Boston when I first came. I lived there until 1999.

How would you describe your upbringing in Haiti versus the U.S.?

In retrospect, I had a sheltered upbringing. I went to school and church, came home and did my chores, and then, I got lost in my books. I even read in church. The only place I was allowed to go without a question, other than church, was the library. I would go to Copley Library and get lost in the stacks.

Would you say that the experience of migration shaped your desire or interest in becoming a writer?

Yes, having migrated to the US, specifically, has afforded me the freedom and interest to become a writer.

Where do you consider home?

That is complicated [laughs]. Home is not [any one] particular space. I lived in Boston for a long time. When I first came from Haiti, I went to Boston. So also, when I write, I tend to want to set my stories in Boston or in Haiti. It's only now I'm making a [more] conscious effort to write about Miami and include Miami more as part of my settings. But it's so funny, if I say, "I'm going home," [even though] I'm an adult, I still think of my mom's home in Boston...I don't say, "I'm going to Boston," I say, "I'm going home."

In her introduction to *Haiti Noir*, Edwidge Danticat writes that places of exile, diaspora, and migration form Haiti’s “tenth department.” Do you share this perspective?

I agree with her. Definitely the diaspora is a very strong voice. First, because especially for middle-class, working-class, and lower-class Haitians, the tenth department is their financial source. Secondly, as the children of those who left, we are able to stay connected; we’re coming back home with our stories. Trying to see what changed, what didn’t change...

The responsibility of representing the homeland from a diasporic space is complicated. For those of us in the lower classes, I think: if I had grown up in Haiti, would I have had the opportunities that I have had in the U.S.? Probably not. So I can be better and do the best writing from here, whereas [it might be different for] somebody else who may have had a better financial upbringing, like M.J. Fievre. We come from a very different upbringing. [For instance,] I didn’t have a book to read for pleasure until I came to America. I remember my fifth grade teacher giving me *Charlotte’s Web*, which was the first book I owned for pleasure. I had textbooks of course, because that’s mandatory [if] you go to school, like how you have a uniform. It wasn’t something that I loved or connected to. And in fact, I didn’t really discover words or my love for words until I came to America....The weird part is that [in Haiti] we would spend hours telling stories, but of course that’s not the same.

How does writing from South Florida affect your work, and particularly the way you approach Haiti in your writing?

...I have a story set in Coral Gables, right on this street to be exact—Sunset Drive. It’s being published by the University of California’s literary journal, *Faultline*, and it’s coming out in the spring, called “How to Get Up When Your Man’s Been on the Down Low”....It’s about this woman named Maradona, and she’s a nurse at South Miami Hospital. I don’t really name the hospital, but you know it is, because I name all the streets around it. On a rainy day, she comes across her husband in bed with another man. And the story unfolds from there. It’s told through second-person narration, sort of Junot Diaz-esque.

I just see Miami totally differently [than Haiti]. I get different stories. I don’t know if it’s because I left Haiti as a child of ten years, so all of my memories of Haiti are magical in a way. But Miami—it’s the city that I chose as an adult to come live in, so it’s more contemporary for me. I don’t even see it as an

extension of Haiti. I see it as its own space, and it calls to my American side more than my Haitian side....I find that anything that I write about Miami tends to be very contemporary, very controversial. I want to write about what my American friends are experiencing....

I have heard you mention that you participated in a writer's institute that really turned things around for you. I believe it was the University of Miami's Caribbean Writers Summer Institute (CWSI)? How did this experience shape your vantage point on writing and Caribbean literature on the whole?

Yes, I attended the Caribbean Writers Summer Institute in 1995. It was one of the best experiences of my life. At that point, I knew definitely that I wanted to be a writer. It was great to be around all these important writers—Earl Lovelace, George Lamming, and [Sandra Pouchet] Paquet—they gave us so much support. It was an amazing group of writers to be working with and getting advice from. [Perhaps it was a little intimidating] at first, but they were so relaxed and they went out with us, we went to the beach, one time we all went to Key Biscayne, I remember we went to Key West. We had so many excursions, and it was really nice. They were relaxed, down-to-earth people—Lorna Goodison was another, Fred D'Aguiar was there at the time, too, I think.... There was always someone there to tantalize your mind in some way.

I had been writing up to then, but before [the CWSI] it was more like, "I don't know if I'm good at this," "I don't know if I want to do this," "I don't know if I've got what it takes." And I have to say, Earl Lovelace said to me [that summer], "You're gonna make it." It was the most wonderful thing, so encouraging, because of course I love his writing. The program changed something for me. It clarified for me that there is a tradition of writing in the Caribbean that is not just one person here, one person there at random and you have to go digging for their books. There is a body of amazing work, not just tokens. You always hear about these huge names, and I'm not taking anything away from their brilliance—they're brilliant—but to see that much brilliance in one place was really...it really changed me.

M.J. Fievre and I spoke about the important role that Haitian women have as nurturers in the culture. What is your take on that idea and what effect (if any) does it have on your writing?

I think we're too nurturing, it's always at the expense of our writing. It's important to nurture, like the whole organization we have [Women Writers of Haitian Descent] is to nurture young writers. Edwidge nurtures us, she's the biggest nurturer I know. She really nurtures us, those who are not younger in age, but younger in experience. In Haiti, we have this really important concept called *kombit*, where everybody comes together and puts in a little bit to cook the soup or to do the work. And I always see our culture—because our culture is like that, we like to lend a helping hand, we always want to do things communal[ly], it's easy to be nurturing. And having grown up here, the American part of me wants to separate from that...but it's in me, I can't, I feel that I am pulled to nurture and collaborate. Communal and collaborative work, it comes easy to us. It's not because we're weak individually, it's because, like our motto, *L'Union Fait La Force*, Together We Are Stronger. And I think our ancestors got that right when they said that. They really did.

In America you're an individual, you have to shine by yourself. [For instance,] people might be ashamed of [having a story published in] a collection. They'd say, "Well, it's a collection, what really have you done?" But for me, if I die today, I'm a success to myself, especially having my work published in an anthology with so many great writers. That's how I see it, but a lot of American people don't see it like that. You have to have your own individual work in order to have weight. [That definition of success] changes culturally and according to the space you're in.

How would you say that noir helps a Haitian fiction writer emphasize important facets of their country and culture?

I think [noir] makes it easier, for me at least. As I said, I grew up around so much mystery, so much—not taboo, but [this sense that] *magic is normal*. And there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, a lot of times when you can't explain something, magic is the answer. And that's perfectly fine. So the mystery component of the noir criteria is easy to incorporate, because that's already in the culture. And I think Haiti is so rich with so many stories that people have not heard yet....For me, it was very easy to go there.

In what ways do you think noir is appropriate for Haiti, or the Caribbean?

It's very appropriate for Haiti, because...there's always this mystery in everything we do. Even something so simple, we make it so mysterious. Noir allows us to

tell new stories, too, because it is a very contemporary genre. A genre like sci-fi, arguably, may have an easier incubation space in industrialized minds. However, noir is a perfect bridge to allow Caribbean fiction writers to move forward.

Are there aspects of Haitian culture that are inherently noir?

Yes, I would say that the way that we go about solving crimes, it fits so well with noir. You'll notice that [many times,] a criminal gets away in noir. In Haiti, too, they'll think, well, it's *grey*. You don't really go after the person, it's more like public justice. For example, everybody knows that Moab killed that woman [Lamercie], but they also knew she had it coming, so they covered it up. So that aspect I find occurs a lot in Haiti. You'll ask, "What happened to this person?" It seems like the person meets with public justice and [beyond that,] nothing is done. But here in America, it wouldn't be like that. It would be [seen as] vigilante justice. You're prosecuted, you're going to jail, but in Haiti people make peace with that and they seem to see that it's not noir—it's *grey*.

Do you think Haiti changes or complicates what we think of as noir?

I think it complicates it. [If you think about a story like Marvin Victor's *The Finger*,] something like that could never take place in London....In Haiti, it is perfectly acceptable, if I tell you, "I see a ghost over there." Most people [might] ask, "What color is the ghost wearing? What's the ghost saying?" And nobody would think I was crazy. Here in America, I'd get Baker Acted. So we've allowed ourselves to live with the supernatural. Even if you may not be a practitioner of *vodou*, it seeps into your everyday thinking and you accept other explanations for things that happen in nature.

Your story, *Mercy at the Gate*, is set in a town named Croix-des-Bouquet, correct? What was the inspiration for this story and is this the name of an actual town in Haiti?

Well, I was always fascinated with that name, [Croix-des-Bouquet]. It's such a weird name. If you look at all of Haiti, I think it's the most unique named town. It's really different, like an incomplete phrase. I always thought there was something more to it. So I began to do research to find out where [the name came from]. I couldn't find anything. [I asked] my parents, my grandparents, I asked everyone, [even] my uncles. [They all said,] "We don't know why it's called that."

Why bother? It's just called that." So I made up a story. I said, "Well, everything starts with love." I imagined a path that had a cross, the *croix*, and it had a bouquet of flowers. So that's why people called this place *croix* and *bouquet*. And over time, the bouquet never dies, because it was...being kept alive by this love....That's really what [*Mercy at the Gate*] was all about....Then I found out about how during the Haitian Revolution, a lot of runaway slaves would end up in Croix-des-Bouquet, because of its proximity to Port-au-Prince. So then I added that element in to it.

Folklore and oral tradition in Haiti seem to be important elements in your story. Is this part of your craft as a writer, or is this more of a reflection of these traditions in Haitian culture?

Growing up, it was very important, probably the most important thing to family life, because when you got together, stories were rehashed. Different people had their take on [them] and the version that survived really was a testament to your popularity, your standing in the family, or how much people loved you, maybe how much they trusted your version. So oral tradition and folklore [are] very important, also because [many in Haiti] are not literate, they don't write, they don't keep accounts of things, so through stories, you find out a lot of traditions that have died or [been] overlooked.

Tell me about the principal characters, Moah and Haba, —in the story, they really only interact at the beginning, but they are closely linked throughout.

They are mother and daughter, and it's so funny how they were much closer in the beginning [before Moah finds out Haba is her mother, not her aunt], but once Moah knows that Haba is her mother, it's almost like, she's been birthed. There's a clearer separation, and she has to find her own way outside of Haba....So I think the separation is a metaphorical birth. She realizes that, she's not my aunt, she's been lying to me. She's my mother. So it's like...she has to make a life and an identity for herself, because until that point, she's been lied to and accepted it at face value.

How did you come to create Lamerchie? She is such an interesting character because she is linked to *vodou* and black magic, and she is not afraid to use them to achieve her objectives, particularly revenge.

Well, of course, it's a play on words. Her name means "mercy" in French, and she's buried at the gate, so that's where the title comes from....In another story I have, I [also] have a *mambo* figure and she's really mean. And I think this is because when I was growing up, there was a woman who didn't live too far from us and she was the town *mambo*. She was fierce. I remember as a child, hearing stories about her and I was afraid to even look at her. I was afraid she would turn into this big monster or something. And I think that still lives in me, I think that's where that came from. That *mambo* never left me, my perception of her. So [Lamercie] comes from that.

Does your decision to make the character Colin Didier a political prisoner reflect the political climate in Haiti during the time in which the story is set?

There is no time period specified in the story. I left it that way on purpose, because the political story repeats in Haiti and you can place [these characters] in the Duvalier regime, in the post-Duvalier regime, and it's sort of like a question, too: What's going on? Why are we still in the same position? It's the same thing over and over again, let's get our act together kind of a commentary.

A sense of repeating temporalities structures your story whereby the past manages to creep into the present to create a very haunting presence. What do you want this repetition of temporalities to evoke for your reader?

[It's a big part of my writing,] and it sometimes makes people crazy....I feel that [the idea that the past is ever-present] is important in [Haitian] culture. It's the reason why we have not made any real progress, because we have this huge past, our ancestors were bigger than life and they did insurmountable things. We're trying to push them away...like, I'm not a *vodou* practitioner, but I have to admit that it's part of my culture and I respect it. I'm not going to say anything negative about it. But we often want to push away from it, because we don't always see the beauty in our past. The past has a valid seat at our dinner tables...

Why do you think love and violence are in such close proximity in the story?

It's... shall we say, impetus for the historical story that I started to write. We can imagine that there was a violent act and all you see is what remains of it, the surviving name of this town....I want to say that [the proximity of these themes] is part of our colonial heritage—the risk you had to take if you were a slave and

you fell in love with another slave. There would be violence in the end either way, either to separate you or else [it would end in tragedy]. [Love] had to be secretive, it had to be hidden, closely guarded. There was a lot of risk involved in that. So I'm wondering, you know going back to Fred D'Aguiar [and the concept of] ancestral memory, how much [of that aspect of the story] is ancestral memory.

How did the 2010 earthquake in Haiti affect you as a Haitian woman and as a writer?

I was sad, but I also felt guilty, because my life is here in Miami. It takes me away from Haiti, rather than being an extension of Haiti. And I moved here to be closer to Haiti, and that's the ironic part of it. A lot of times I want to be in Haiti, but I can't. So I remember [Edwidge Danticat's] book, *Create Dangerously*, allowed me to grieve. I remember when I started reading the book, I had to call in sick from work, just to be able to [read]. I read the book and cried and cried. It was the first time I was able to cry for the victims, because before that, [since] I didn't have anyone [close to me] affected by the earthquake, I was just helping people. I kept busy...because I felt so guilty. I'm not a nurse, I'm not a doctor—I can't go to Haiti and really help. But since it's happened, reading what other writers have had to say about it, reading the news, listening to stories, I have to make peace with it. At first, I felt like I wasn't Haitian, because I wasn't affected that much by it. I was almost embarrassed when people asked me, "Did you have family who died?" I felt really bad[ly], because I had people I loved who died, but they weren't family. I didn't know how to answer that. But it hurt. I grieved a lot. I tried to help as much as I could. But for the first time, I'm writing a short story about it. I have a character sketch—the character came to me, and that's all I have, and I'm leaving it. When she comes back to me again one day, I'll sit down and write a little bit more.

Is there a way that the aftermath of the earthquake has (or will) shape the way you write going forward?

I don't always get time to read, but I remember I bought [*Create Dangerously*] on a Thursday, and I started reading it and I thought, I can't put this down, I can't go to work [laughs]. It was so good, you know. It validated for me a lot of things that I had not been able to put into words. It was like a connection that I can't really explain. It allowed me, especially when she talked about her cousin dying, to grieve for the victims. For the first time, I allowed myself really to cry and cry for what happened....I didn't experience the trauma, but I experienced it in a

different way, kind of the way we here in Miami experienced 9/11. I was scared out of my mind. We were still victims. Yes, New Yorkers felt the physical brunt of it, but the psychological trauma resonated throughout the world.

What are you working on these days?

I'm working on a novel. I wrote it, I submitted it, I got some good feedback, so I'm reworking it. I was inspired by a quote that I got from Jean Toomer, whom I love: "You learn the ropes of life by untying the knot." And this character came to me, this woman who's holding a rope, and the rope is bloody. That image was in my head for a long time, and I saw this character, so I said, "I've got to write this story." So it became a novel, and [my editors] told me, "You have a lot going on, You've got historical and contemporary. So I said to my friend, "Who knew? I'm having twin novels!" [laughs] So I broke it up. I've got a historical novel and a contemporary novel. I'm still editing the first one.