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Life and Literacy in Haiti: A Conversation with Jocelyne Trouillot

Just over one year ago, a devastating earthquake hit the Caribbean country of Haiti near the end of a weekday afternoon in the capital city of Port-au-Prince. Hundreds of thousands of lives are estimated to have been lost and more than one million made homeless. For Cheryl, who regularly travels to Haiti to work with teacher and educational development through the Ohio State University Haiti Empowerment Project (headed by Associate Professor Terri Bucci), and for Barbara, who traveled to Haiti with Cheryl in 2007, this news carried strong personal significance. Among the people we know there, Jocelyne Trouillot, the founder of AYIBBY (the Haitian national section of the International Board on Books for Young People [IBBY]), was at the top of our list of concerns. (Since that visit in 2007, we've met Jocelyne several more times at IBBY conferences and have worked with her on projects related to Haitian literacy development.) It was several anxious days before we received word that she was safe, but that good news brought the sobering realization that Université Caraïbe, where she is the Rectrice (Head), was destroyed, and dozens of students and professors had perished.

Jocelyne, in addition to her other roles, is also a prominent author of children's books written in



Jocelyne Trouillot. Photo provided by Jocelyne Trouillot.

Haitian Creole, the mother tongue of most Haitians, and founder of Éditions CUC Université Caraïbe, a publisher of children's books, instructional materials, and other books in Creole, French, English, and Spanish sold in their own bookshop. Before the earthquake, Jocelyne, with AYIBBY, had initiated several literacy projects with funding from IBBY and the United States section of IBBY (USBBY). For a woman whose life was already overflowing with projects, Jocelyne now finds herself immersed in even more work with rebuilding her university and the Haitian education system, while providing bibliotherapy for children traumatized by the disaster. In this article, we share some of that literacy-related work from before and after the disaster, along with extensive excerpts of Jocelyne's own comments. The discussion that emerges is directly related to the theme of this issue of *Language Arts* on globalization in the language arts.

HAITIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND LITERACY

When we first met Jocelyne almost four years ago, we sat in her cozy office at the university, and she provided us with background about Haitian children's literature. As described in the *IBBY Newsletter*, Vol. 32 (Lehman, 2007):

... she told us that the field is very recent—no more than 20 years old. At first, most children's books were published in French and only more recently in Creole, although most are still written in French and then some are translated into Creole. Most books published for children are instructional materials, with Creole juvenile literature being very new. [Jocelyne] estimated that perhaps 350–400 titles by Haitian authors are available in Haiti [in 2007], with about 10% now appearing in Creole. This situation results from the status of the French and Creole languages, with French traditionally being the language of literacy and

education. About six years ago, the first children's book fair was held in Haiti, and Éditions CUC Université Caraïbe was the only publisher that had books in Creole the first year. However, the number of such books has grown and spread to about 30 titles today. (p. 6)

A bit of historical context will help to illuminate this situation better. Historically, Haitians have been denied access to literacy and upward mobility because they were forced to learn to read and write in French (Hoffman, 2003). Creole carried a negative stigma, which caused Haitian teachers and parents to resist the use of Creole texts in school and discouraged authors from writing books in Creole. Teachers understandably feel the need to prepare students to pass standardized national tests that are taken in French, and writers want the prestige that accompanies publication in French. However, because it is not their mother tongue, few Haitians truly become literate in French. Teachers have yet to comprehend and embrace the idea that children need to learn to read and write in their first language before they can become literate in a second language. Jocelyne adds:

Language is such an important tool in the development of children, and care must be given to its use as a support for learning . . . Too many children . . . are not raised to believe in their capacities, too afraid to seize opportunities and meet challenges. Teachers need to create an atmosphere in which creativity is encouraged and not subject children to boring lessons and futile assignments.

Yet many Haitian teachers show little interest in children's books—especially those written in Creole—because their primary instructional methods are rote memorization and recitation, and it's difficult for them to grasp how the use of literature can foster language acquisition and literacy development. Thus, the status of French versus Creole and the prevalence of outdated teaching styles have depressed the demand for and production of Creole children's books.

Can this trajectory be changed? Jocelyne herself plays a key role in the development and promotion of Haitian Creole children's literature. After attending university in France from 1969 to 1971, Jocelyne states:

It was not safe for Haitians studying in France to return to Haiti. For [François] Duvalier [the president of Haiti from 1957–1971], France was considered a very subversive milieu. Most of us chose either to stay in France or migrate to the United States at the end of our studies. I migrated to New York, where many members of my family from my mother's side were living.

In New York City, Jocelyne taught in an open classroom setting, from kindergarten to second grade, for two years before she was asked by the New York City school board to develop books for Haitian children coming to the US. She adds, "Developing language arts books in Creole involved writing many of the stories and texts. Only a few Creole texts were available in the US. or even in Haiti in print at that time [1977]. One had to create, invent, and it all started like that."

Jocelyne returned to Haiti in 1986 and published *Gougou* in 1990, "a classical story of the child who decided he will only eat one kind of food: peanut butter sandwich. Soon I wrote a few other stories, and since then it has been a nonstop process. This became part of my life besides my administrative duties." *Gougou* has expanded into a series of titles, along with another series growing out of *Jennjan Kontan* (1992), and biographies of important Haitian historical figures, among others. (Jocelyne publishes her books under the Creole spelling of her name: Joslin Twouyo.) When we asked Jocelyne about her writing, she described the process like this:

Most of the time, I don't really start writing a story with a clear theme or issue per se. It is often a simple idea, a singular event, or the encounter of a strange character, and from there comes a story. I wrote AM PM (2008), two years after a trip to Tokyo where I encountered a convenience store open all day and night called AM PM. From there came the story of twins who had to fight for their recognition as separate individuals.

For sure, while writing, the central theme will come out, but I usually have fun writing not putting any straightjacket on my imagination. Even when the event I start with is very serious, I found that it has to be fun. There are a few times when I had a theme from the beginning. In Five Days without Television (2009), it took me awhile to let it go.

We asked Jocelyne to explain what she meant by this, and she responded:

Put simply, it was very tempting to preach or say as an educator will say: too much TV is no good. It is one of the very rare books [in which] I was conscious of that temptation until I let the story unfold by itself. From the beginning, it was an issue: what can an 8-year-old do if the TV is not working in the house? The right thing is to move into your characters and your scenes and forget about the issue. It seems to me that no matter what, something positive will emerge. My role as a writer, I think, is to entertain the children. Consciously or unconsciously, they will discover the issues [for themselves].

When we inquired more about how Jocelyne was able to publish and print her books, she told us:

Writing in Creole is a challenge in itself in Haiti, where French is still considered the prestigious language. Writing in Creole for children brings another difficulty. Children's literature is new to many people. The university press, Éditions CUC Université Caraïbe, made it possible to open the road to children's literature in Creole for me and for other writers. It is still a very complicated issue. The parents who can afford to buy books would rather buy French books from France. Most children enjoy reading in Creole, but their parents and schools cannot afford to buy story books [as any money available is spent only on textbooks]. It would be a luxury for many of them.

Jocelyne further explained the overall status of literacy in Haiti, where the illiteracy rate is quite high:

Although the country has not yet achieved universal schooling, more than 70 percent of the children in Port-au-Prince were enrolled in schools prior to the earthquake. However, the dropout rate was alarming. Many children are not able to reach fourth grade, mainly because they face serious reading difficulties. About half of the teachers are not properly trained to teach reading. Some very traditional techniques are still in use. Besides that, children are often taught to read in French, which is a foreign language for many. Haitian literature, as well as French literature, is taught extensively at the secondary level and at the university for students going into liberal arts.

Emphasis is often given to French authors, Creole not being considered by many an important subject matter.

However, Jocelyne also told us that the legitimacy of Creole is more firmly established with the standardization of its spelling in 1982. In addition, the School of Education at Université Caraïbe is helping to update teaching methods with its certificate of reading, which is part of the Masters program. She explains:

The courses target remedial assistance, which is kind of new for many teachers. At the bachelor's level, reading courses are required for all students enrolled in education, regardless of their teaching options. Our Creole Institute aims to promote children's literacy as well as the development of Creole literature . . . [The Institute includes] many active members of the intellectual community as well as artists and others interested in defending the use of the Creole language in all writing materials, especially government publications. In doing so, the constitutional rights of the [Haitian] people on that matter will be fully respected.

Jocelyne describes the evolution of the university's involvement this way:

We had for more than 10 years housed the Vendredis Littéraires (Literary Fridays) open to writers, young or mature, nationals or foreigners, who come to read poems, novels, or essays for students and the general public every Friday evening. Those readings are usually diffused to the general public by the national television. Our staff had offered various inservice training [sessions] in reading to many teachers in schools in Port-au-Prince as well as in other parts of the country. The School of Education, in partnership with Code, a Canadian-based agency engaged in promoting literacy in many countries, has developed a new project to help teachers to develop reading materials for their classes.

AYIBBY'S WORK

This same goal drives the aims of Haiti's national section (AYIBBY) of IBBY, founded by a group of authors, illustrators, university professors, and a commercial book publisher in 2007. Since then, this organization has developed a national project known as "Li pou plezi, Karavan lekti" (The Joy



Jocelyne and Barbara in Jocelyne's office at Université Caraïbe. Photographer: Cheryl Logan

of Reading, Caravan of Books) with support from IBBY and USBBY and, as Jocelyne explains, “directed toward children who never or rarely had the chance to read a book at school or at home.” AYIBBY also offered “training programs for parents, teachers, and community members in writing stories directly related to their cultural heritage.”

In support of this effort came Anne Pellowski, USBBY member and internationally renowned storyteller, author, and former librarian, who conducts writing workshops around the world to promote the development of indigenous literature. In 2008, Pellowski, along with Professor William Teale (University of Illinois, Chicago) and Professor Gail Bush (National-Louis University, Skokie, Illinois), traveled to Haiti to work with AYIBBY's projects in Port-au-Prince and Montrouis. In an email, Pellowski writes:

I worked in Haiti for 9 days with Jocelyne Trouillot during which time we had two workshops [to teach story writing and illustrating]. There were 23 primary school teachers and aides in the first and 22 pre-school teachers and aides in the second. They were well-organized and the participants worked hard, with each creating 3 picture books. The great majority of the participants were well selected and enthusiastic about making books in Creole and French. This is often difficult because many Haitians speak Creole well, but have trouble writing it with correct orthography. I was pleased to see that Jocelyne insisted the texts be correct before the participants wrote them out. I felt she was holding them to a high standard. All in all, it was a very good experience.

Bush added in an email response:

Bill Teale and I were a tag-team serving as Anne Pellowski's assistants in Haiti. Bill assisted with the first workshop that was held at the Université Caraïbe in Delmas, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and when he left Haiti, I arrived and assisted at the Montrouis—Cadenette Campus a few hours along the coast from Port-au-Prince. The students at the Montrouis Campus entered quietly on the first day and started working tentatively as soon as Anne directed their attention to the book models and materials that she prepared for the workshop. Over the next three days, Anne scaffolded directions, told stories, and encouraged students to help each other complete their tasks. Anne fostered a community within the workshop and each day saw more lively engagement and accomplishments. Jocelyne spent individual time correcting each text for the students' final books. Students readily shared their books with each other and demonstrated their techniques with pride. Students received certificates of achievement from Anne and Jocelyne that they warmly welcomed.

Jocelyne also describes the students' work and their reactions to the workshop:

The final production was a book made of cut pieces of fabric. The project generated a lot of enthusiasm. Many of the participants discovered that they have something to say and that they can write a children's story.

Thus, the particular accomplishment of the project was that the participants became aware of the existing potentialities to write more books in Creole for children. The joyous, “I can write, I can write,” exclaimed by the participants themselves was a testimony to the success of the workshops. As a result of this, many of the participants continue to write and even enroll in other writing workshops.

The workshops have been replicated in La Gonave and other parts of the country. Altogether, these projects have reached 200 children and about 100 adults in five locations. Jocelyne also reports that one of the stories has already been published (*Krapo ak papiyon [The Frog and the Butterfly]*, St. Fort-Vereus, 2008), and three others will be published soon by Éditions CUC Université Caraïbe. “As of this writing, we have a workshop for writers of children's books scheduled for



Jocelyne in front of her bookshop at Université Caraïbe.
Photographer: Cheryl Logan

the end of January 2011. It is open to new writers, teachers, parents, and community leaders. The goal is to help the participants to develop their inner writing potentialities and, at the same time, increase the number of quality children publications in Haitian Creole.”

AFTERMATH OF THE EARTHQUAKE

In order for one to grasp the tragedy of the January 2010 earthquake, an understanding of the university’s pre-earthquake existence helps. Jocelyne narrates:

Université Caraïbe and its university school, Collège Universitaire Caraïbe (CUC), started in 1988. At that time, the country was just emerging from 30 years of Duvalier’s dictatorial regime. Many Haitian professionals who were living abroad, mostly in Canada and the US, returned to their native land to offer their services—[a challenge] for the exiles, eager to return home. The laboratory school offered a trilingual option, and this was quite new in Haiti. Creole was the main language, French was the second language, but the children also started English in the primary grades.

The University opened with only two faculties: Education and Administration. . . . The School of Education had also developed a free community school program for the children in Montrouis.

Most of the families there are fishermen and farmers living on meager resources. Université Caraïbe has also developed some other off-campus programs in La Gonave, which is the biggest island belonging to Haiti.

We asked Jocelyne what is there now, and she replied:

The buildings of the university in Port-au-Prince collapsed and 42 of our students and professors perished under the debris. Many of the students who survived the death of parents and fellow students face serious economic problems, having lost their homes and their jobs.

As for the university publisher, Éditions CUC Université Caraïbe, and its bookshop, Jocelyne says:

The building is seriously damaged; the books were destroyed under the debris. Some of the personnel perished on the premises or at home. The materials are lost and many archives were affected. The future for the Éditions, as for the university, is not too bright for now. In Haiti, many of us are trying to rebuild. The task looks enormous. We just have to start.

Jocelyne describes destruction in Port-au-Prince as including “90 percent of the schools and universities and the loss of thousands of teachers and students.” (According to DesRoches, Ergun, and Swann [2010], “Twenty million to 25 million cubic yards of debris fill the streets, yards, sidewalks and canals of Port-au-Prince” [p. G6].) Amid the devastation, however, Jocelyne also envisions opportunity to reinvent the Haitian educational system.

The future now is to rebuild everything from physical structures to more appropriate programs focusing on education, environmental problems, health care, and other important needs. Some months after the earthquake, the priorities consist of the removal of debris from the sites, the comfort of students and parents, and the installation of temporary shelters in order for classes to restart [at the university]. Planning for the mid and long term includes the building of new university and school campuses and the training of a number of professors to replace the ones who perished . . .

With the help of nationals and foreigners, we need to prepare more teachers and other profes-

sionals. *Université Caraïbe, among other universities, is involved in efforts to reconstruct the higher education system. . . . As the men and women in charge, we are forced to rethink, reorient the educational system. It is now the time to leave the ineffective, the irrelevant programs and approaches under the debris and construct better schools and universities.*

In addition to the physical destruction, many Haitians have experienced emotional trauma, as Jocelyne has through the loss of close colleagues and others whose fate is still unknown. She shares:

To put it simply, the earthquake changed almost everybody's life in Port-au-Prince. Everything is different: our lives, our jobs, our homes. Institutions and individuals had to readjust to new situations, relocating, rebuilding, and reorienting.

Personally, I will continue to write. . . . I just finished my latest story, Goudou Goudou (2010), which relates the tale of two children who lose their parents on January 12. This book is dedicated to the children of two staff members who perished during the quake.

Haitian children have been especially hard hit, and with funding from IBBY's Children in Crisis program, AYIBBY initiated a bibliotherapy program in the temporary camps, where thousands of children are still living after the earthquake. Jocelyne describes these sessions:

We have witnessed students opening to their own emotional turmoil after the reading of a simple story in a bibliotherapy session. For example, one of the books that we used after the earthquake is Gougou pè chyen (Gougou is scared of dogs, Twouyo, 1994). The main character is afraid of all dogs, even when he sees them on television. However, his friendship with his cousin, who at the end gives him a puppy that he learns to love, changes his attitude. After the reading, the children are asked to talk about what they are scared of. Usually, they start talking about animals, such as snakes, rats . . . until someone will say for instance: I was really scared during the earthquake. This is the opening for all of them to talk about their feelings, their emotions about the quake.

Jocelyne sums up the current situation on an optimistic note:

Our engagement to restart programs, our determination to unite our forces with other active members of the higher education community will certainly enrich our actions. Personally, I still have administrative duties to pursue as well as my responsibilities in AYIBBY, and of course, I will continue to write.

In the end, Jocelyne's theme might be: "Lavi ak lekti ap kontinye vanse"—Life and literacy go on.

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