

# Tè Tremblé: An Unnatural Disaster

*A trial role play probes the roots of devastation in Haiti*

By ADAM SANCHEZ

I WAS 9 YEARS OLD AND LIVING IN Los Angeles when the Northridge earthquake hit Southern California in 1994. I still remember my mother waking me in the middle of the night and rushing me under the table as books and trinkets fell from our bookshelves. Despite the lasting memory and a few shattered handicrafts, our family was not much affected. Throughout California the earthquake left only minor infrastructural damage and killed 72 people, a relatively low number for such a strong quake. So when I first heard that the earthquake of similar magnitude that hit Haiti on Jan. 12, 2010, destroyed entire Haitian cities and killed more than a quarter million people, I was shocked. For me, it was apparent that this was more than a natural disaster.

With only a little knowledge of Haitian history before the earthquake, I listened attentively to the daily reports on *Democracy Now!*. As I learned about the role the U.S. government had played in Haitian affairs—the multiple occupations, the support for dictatorships, the CIA-backed coups—it seemed to me that the “aid” effort had to be viewed in the light of this history. For example, after the U.S. government took control of the Port-au-Prince airport, several journalists reported that planes carrying French

and Cuban doctors and emergency supplies were turned away.

One year after the earthquake, more than a million Haitians were still homeless, only 5 percent of the rubble had been removed, and only 10 percent of the \$5.3 billion in aid pledged by countries and organizations around the world had been spent. In the aftermath of the failed aid effort, a deadly cholera outbreak exploded across

the country. Within a year or so of the earthquake, 5,000 Haitians had died of the disease out of 300,000 infected. The Haitian writer and activist Jean Saint-Vil told *Democracy Now!*, “One year after the earthquake, we are seeing the Haitian population being treated and seen as a threat, rather than as an asset.”

The role played by the U.S. government raises critical questions for students and teachers. How does Haiti’s history explain why it experienced such devastation as a result of the earthquake? Who or what was responsible? And why was Haiti unable to quickly rebuild and recover?

These were the questions I wanted my civics students at Lincoln High School in Portland, Oregon, to address. Lincoln is a large public school serving Portland’s predominantly white, moderately affluent Westside. A few months after the earthquake, I prepared a unit that I



Haiti earthquake, 2010.

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hoped would take my students through a learning experience similar to the one I went through in the first weeks after the disaster.

We spent the first two weeks of the unit building background information. It was important that students understood the significance of the Haitian revolution—the only successful slave rebellion in history—that became an inspiration for other revolutions across the world and ended in the creation of the first independent nation of Latin America in 1804. My students were stunned that it took nearly 60 years for the U.S. government to recognize the first black republic, that the French immediately saddled Haiti with a debt of 90 million gold francs to pay slave owners for their “stolen property,” and that in 1915 U.S. Marines invaded Haiti and occupied the country for 19 years. My students wondered why they had never before learned about the U.S. occupation of Haiti.

As Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat so eloquently explained: “Few Americans are aware their country once occupied ours, and for such a long time. This is not surprising, for as one Haitian proverb suggests, “While those who give the blows can easily forget, the ones who carry the scar have no choice but to remember.”

Through readings, film, and art, we surveyed [Haitian history](#). The more recent historical events—the U.S.-supported Duvalier regimes, the popular Lavalas movement that brought President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power, and the two U.S.-backed coups that decimated the movement and eventually exiled Aristide to South Africa—were eye-opening for students, just as they were for me. In one video students watched Kim Ives, editor of *Haiti Liberté*, explain the significance of this history as the backdrop to the 2009 earthquake:

*This earthquake was preceded by a political and economic earthquake with an epicenter 2,000 miles north of here, in Washington, D.C., over the past 24 years. We can say, first of all, there was the case of the two coups*

*d'état held in the space of 13 years, in 1991 and 2004, which were backed by the United States. They put in their own client regimes, which the Haitian people chased out of power. . . . Aristide, in both cases, was taken from Haiti, essentially by U.S. forces. [Aristide was exiled to South Africa after the 2004 coup. He returned to Haiti, over Obama's objections, in March 2011.]*

Learning some of this history helped students grasp what Danticat calls the “long and painful cycle of destruction and reconstruction, self-governance and subjugation” that Haitians have endured.

## Putting the Tragedy on Trial

For the final week we turned our class into a courtroom and put the tragedy on trial. I used the trial as the basis for a final unit essay. The assignment

for both the trial and the essay asked “Who is responsible for the tragedy in Haiti?” and began:

*In Haiti, in 2010, a 7.0 earthquake all but destroyed Port-au-Prince, the capital city, and killed more than 230,000 Haitians. In 1994, an earthquake of similar force hit Southern California with relatively minor infrastructure damage and 72 people killed. This means that*

*the tragedy in Haiti cannot be attributed solely to this natural disaster. What other factors have contributed to this catastrophe? Who or what should be held responsible?*

In small groups, students took on the role of one of five defendants: the U.S. Government, the French Government, the Duvaliers, the Haitian People, and the System of Profit. I played the prosecutor, charging each group with the murder of thousands of Haitians because of their role in exacerbating the crisis. I wanted hard-hitting indictments that, well, would make students defensive, and require them to think hard from their group's perspective. Here is an excerpt from each indictment:

**The U.S. Government:** In 1915, your Marines invaded Haiti to protect U.S. business interests. You imposed martial law and rewrote the constitution to benefit foreign companies. . . . Most U.S. presidents supported the brutal Duvalier dictatorships with massive amounts of aid, despite their terrible human rights records. . . . You opposed Aristide's government because it was looking to build the national self-sufficiency of Haiti. . . . So the natural catastrophe of the earthquake was preceded by more than 100 years of political and economic catastrophes "made in the USA." These created even worse devastation from the earthquake.

**The French Government:** When Haitians won their independence from you—their colonizers—in 1804, they would have had every right to claim reparations from the powers that had profited from three centuries of stolen slave labor. You, however, were convinced that it was Haitians who had stolen the property of slave owners. So in 1825, with warships stationed off the Haitian coast threatening to re-enslave the former colony, King Charles X of France came to collect 90 million gold francs—10 times Haiti's annual revenue at the time. . . . This callous debt has shackled the Haitian people for years and made the destruction caused by the earthquake even worse.

**"Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" Duvalier:** As dictators, father and son, you ruled Haiti with an iron fist from 1957 to 1986. Under your regime, Haiti was marked by both extreme poverty and immense wealth, as it still is today. Per capita income was only \$377 in 1985, while the Duvalier family fortune was estimated to be more than \$500 million, most of it obtained through corruption. . . . While you ran Haiti, you incurred \$844 million in debt to international banks, which Haitians have been forced to pay back for decades. . . .

Although neither of you was in Haiti during the earthquake, your legacy of poverty and debt made the effects of the earthquake much worse.

**Haitians:** Although you are the victims of this crime, you are also guilty of committing it. After a valiant struggle to win independence, you handed over the reins of the government to one tyrant after another. . . . In fact, the United States would never have involved itself in Haiti if you had been able to create a stable democratic government. . . . If you had organized your own society to build stronger infrastructure, the damage from the earthquake would not have been so great.

**The System of Profit:** You are not a person or a government, but a system. . . . True, the French and U.S. governments put their country's business interests before the Haitian people's livelihood. But what made them act the way they did? . . . Obviously, no one person, group, or government can be blamed for the tragedy in Haiti. It's a much larger process that at its root is economic.

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*"At every step along the way, foreign powers—in particular, the U.S. government—have been suppressing Haitian democracy..."*

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After reading their full roles, each group of students prepared a defense. I encouraged them to also state which other groups they thought should shoulder

the blame. (Each group had access to the indictments of all the other groups.) When the groups finished preparing, I picked one person from each to be on the jury and swore them in—getting all jury members to pledge fairness and impartiality.

Throughout the activity, students were able to bring both their knowledge of Haitian history and the aftermath of the earthquake into their defenses and accusations. I was struck by how well students performed their roles, even if they disagreed with what they were arguing.

The group representing the United States tried to minimize their involvement in Haiti and instead blamed the Duvalier dictatorships and the Haitian people. "It is true that we have intervened in Haiti many times," acknowledged Bethany, speaking

for the group, “but we have only done so with the intention of helping the Haitian people.” The group used the argument of humanitarian intervention, echoing several Fox News and ABC clips we had watched the week before. Bethany concluded, “It is the extremely corrupt government of the Duvaliers, and the Haitian people who allowed them to take power, that deserve the blame.”

But no other groups let the U.S. government off the hook. After each defense, I required the defendants to field a few questions from the prosecutor (me) and students on the jury. For example, Josh asked the U.S. defendants, “How can you blame the Duvalier dictatorships when you gave them so much aid?” I asked: “And how can you blame the Haitian people when after they overthrew the ‘corrupt government’ that you supported, you worked to undermine their first democratically elected administration?” These can be challenging questions for students to answer on the spot, so I encouraged them to consult with each other before responding.

Then I read a new indictment, and students in the next group began their defense. Representing the government of France, Jacob admitted responsibility for the initial debt the French demanded from newly independent Haiti but asserted, “Our involvement wasn’t anywhere close to the destruction caused by the occupations, coups, and selfish policies of the U.S. govern-

ment.” The group defending the system of profit claimed that although they set the rules of the game, it was corrupt players like the Duvaliers and the governments of France and the United States that chose to abuse those rules. Those representing the Duvaliers attempted to portray themselves as

mere puppets of the powerful U.S. government and maintained that they were merely following the rules of a broken system.

But the most damning critique came from the students representing the Haitian people. Speaking for the group, Sarah reminded us of the history of struggle in Haiti beginning with the Haitian revolution and culminating in the Lavalas movement, but stressed that “at every step along the way, foreign powers—in particular, the U.S. government—have been suppressing Haitian democracy and attempting to shape Haiti to their own interests.” Referring to the U.S. involvement in the aid effort after the earthquake, she concluded: “What is extremely disgusting is that when Haitians were most in need of help, the U.S. could only think of itself. They brought 20,000 troops into Haiti to bring stability for their corporations and prioritized their own interests over the desperate need of the Haitian people.”

## Who’s Guilty?

After all the groups had finished presenting and answering questions, I gave the jury some time out in the hall to deliberate. I told the jury to decide which group or groups were guilty and to assign percentages of blame to each group. As the jury deliberated, I asked students to step outside their roles and write about who they thought were the guilty parties and why.

Most students attributed responsibility for the tragedy to three groups: the U.S. government, the French government, and the Duvalier regime. Julie gave 30 percent of the blame to the French government: “After 15 years of rebellion and war, the Haitians should have been free



*U.S. Marines of the 1st Regiment in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 1915, the year of the U.S. invasion and occupation.*

and in control of their own country. Yet France still refused to recognize Haiti as an independent nation. They threatened to re-enslave the Haitians unless they paid 90 million gold francs—10 times Haiti’s annual revenue at the time! Unable to refuse or pay, the Haitians were left with a debt that crippled their economy for years to come.”

Jacob gave 25 percent of the blame to the Duvalier dictatorships: “Because Haiti had such terrible, selfish leaders it never economically developed and its citizens weren’t even able to express their opinions without fear of repression. The Duvaliers stole millions of dollars from the Haitian people and their policies only exacerbated the gap between rich and poor.”

Lauren pointed out that the Duvaliers were merely pawns in the economic strategy of the United States. She gave the U.S. government 50 percent of the blame: “The U.S. is mainly responsible for the extent of the tragedy in Haiti because of their support for the Duvaliers, their efforts to destabilize and remove Aristide, and their imperialist promotion of sweatshop labor in Haiti. The current aid effort is equally disastrous. It is horrific the lengths the U.S. will go to keep a country impoverished and desperate in order to increase the profits of U.S. corporations.”

There was a healthy debate about how much blame should be assigned to the system of profit. Although Lauren condemned the U.S. government, she also believed that the system of profit should not be blamed because “under any economic system people still get taken advantage of. Governments need to regulate the abuses of all systems.” Jacob disagreed. He wrote: “Although capitalism can’t be punished like a normal human being it deserves much of the blame for setting the unfair rules of the game. Without the drive for profit, would the French and U.S. have needed to exploit cheap Haitian

labor? Would the Duvaliers have been able to maintain such insatiable greed at the expense of Haitian people? Capitalism forces companies and governments to take advantage of people in order to stay alive.” Though students struggled with the concept, I think it was important to include the system of profit as one of the defendants. This role forced students to grapple with the idea that these different individuals, governments, and social groups were acting within a framework that encourages decisions that value profit over human need.

Students were also conflicted about whether the Haitian people deserved some of the blame. Although most felt it was unfair to blame the Haitians for the tragedy they were the victims of, some wondered whether they could have done more to improve their circumstances. Rebecca gave Haitians 10 percent of the blame:

“The Haitian people overthrew the French government and the Duvalier regime. They came together to get rid of unjust regimes that weren’t benefiting the people. If they did it before, why couldn’t they do it again?” But Sarah disagreed: “I don’t think the Haitian people deserve any of the blame. At every step they resisted much more powerful foreign powers. They fought

against the French to win their independence and they fought against the U.S. and the Duvalier dictatorship the U.S. supported. The Haitian people built a powerful movement that brought Aristide to power. They resisted again and again but they were up against much more powerful nations with very different interests. You can’t blame them for that.”

## After the Trial

In the trial role play, I’d had to make tough choices in narrowing the defendants to a manageable number, but now I wanted students to question my choices. After the role play, I asked students to reflect on other possible “defendants”

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that I may have left out. Lauren pointed out: “U.S. corporations took advantage of Haiti’s low-cost labor, the mainstream media has been complicit in reporting only the U.S. government’s side of the story, and the IMF and the World Bank played just as big a role as the French government in saddling Haiti with debt.” Another student commented: “It was difficult to think of the Haitian people as one singular group. We could have split the Haitian people into several different categories.”

When I originally conceived of the trial I had split up the Haitian people into Aristide and the Lavalas movement, poor farmers, factory workers, and the Haitian elite; but ultimately I decided I did not have a big enough classroom for that many groups. Lumping all Haitians into one category made it difficult for students to discuss the complexities of Haitian society, and led some students to more confidently assign blame to Haitians and overlook the rich history of resistance against the ruling elite.

Despite these weaknesses, the role play was a wonderful primer for their unit essay. Students were able to first articulate their ideas in class discussions and then put them in writing during the

post-trial reflection. The trial was a perfect pre-writing activity since it allowed students to collect and present evidence that they would later use in their essays. The essays were thoughtful, in-depth, and comprehensive, despite no previous engagement with Haitian history and politics before this unit.

Most students expressed despair about the situation in Haiti. In the future, I would like to spend more time covering how Haitians have organized in the aftermath of the earthquake. In particular, I would teach about the mothers and grandmothers in [KOFIVIV](#), who have set up their own security in several refugee camps to protect each other from sexual assault. This is a heart-wrenching yet important example of Haitian self-organization in the face of the most disastrous conditions. I also plan to provide more examples of organizations doing positive work in Haiti, like [Partners in Health](#). Founded by Dr. Paul Farmer, Partners in Health runs the Zanmi Lasante Medical Center, which delivers health care through a network of clinics throughout Haiti’s central plateau and advocates for social and economic rights for their patients.



*Haitian leader and former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide greets supporters after his return from exile, March 18, 2011.*

Yet, even without these examples, a few students were able to find hope in the shadow of the tragedy. Sarah concluded her essay with a call to action: “Haiti is an impoverished, unstable nation, living under the thumb of first world countries. But the earthquake is a wake-up call and potential for a new beginning. Though the American reconstruction plan centers on low-wage assembly line jobs, Haiti has fertile soil that could be used for the benefit of the Haitian people. Haitians have shown again and again that they can organize together against oppressive regimes and meddling foreign governments.

We need to learn from them and demand that our own government step back and let Haiti govern itself and choose its own path.”

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# “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc” Duvalier

## The Indictment:

*You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of hundreds of thousands of Haitians.*

FROM 1957 TO 1986, you ruled Haiti with an iron fist. Under your regime, Haiti was marked by extreme poverty and wealth, as it still is today. Per capita income was only \$377 in 1985, while the Duvalier family fortune was estimated to be more than \$500 million, most of it obtained through corruption.

Through an elaborate network of Swiss bank accounts and lavish properties, you stole desperately needed money from the Haitian people. In 1988, Aristide’s former lawyer, Ira Kurzban, won a landmark suit when a U.S. District Court in Miami found that Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier had “misappropriated more than \$504 million from public monies.”

Haitians, of course, are still waiting for their payback—but that was only the beginning of their losses. While dictator of Haiti you incurred about \$844 million in debt to the IMF and the World Bank, which Haitians have been forced to pay back for decades. In debt service alone, Haitians have paid out tens of millions every year. These debts have crippled the Haitian economy and have contributed greatly to the mass poverty that exists in Haiti. Although neither of you was in Haiti during the earthquake, your legacy of



poverty and debt made the toll from the earthquake much worse.



# The French Government

## The Indictment:

*You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of hundreds of thousands of Haitians.*

WHEN HAITIANS WON their independence from you, their colonizers, in 1804, they would have had every right to claim reparations from the powers that had profited from three centuries of stolen labor. You, however, were convinced that it was Haitians who had stolen the property of slave owners by refusing to work for free. So in 1825, with a flotilla of warships stationed off the Haitian coast threatening to re-enslave the former colony, King Charles X came to collect: 90 million gold francs—10 times Haiti's annual revenue at the time. With no way to refuse, and no way to pay, the young nation was shackled to a debt that would take 122 years to pay off.

In 2003, Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, facing a crippling economic embargo, announced that Haiti would sue you, the French government, over that long-ago heist. "Our argument," Aristide's former lawyer Ira Kurzban said, "was that the contract was an invalid agreement because it was based on the threat of re-enslavement at a time when the international community regarded slavery as an evil." You sent a mediator to Port-au-Prince to keep the case out of court and while trial



preparations were under way, Aristide was toppled from power. The lawsuit disappeared, but for many Haitians the reparations claim lives on.

This callous debt has hurt the Haitian people for years and has made the destruction caused by the earthquake much worse.

# Haitians

## The Indictment:

*You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of hundreds of thousands of Haitians.*

ALTHOUGH YOU ARE THE VICTIMS of this crime, you are also guilty of committing it. After a valiant struggle to win independence, you handed over the reins of the government to one tyrant after another. You allowed the Duvalier regime to stay in power until the mid-1980s and failed to adequately fight back against multiple U.S. invasions of your country.

In fact, the United States would never have involved itself in Haiti if you had been able to create a stable democratic government.

We can blame all kinds of outside influences, but ultimately it was you, the Haitian people, who went to work for U.S. corporations, who moved from the countryside into the cities where most of the earthquake's devastation occurred.

When you elected Aristide as the first democratically elected president of Haiti, you hoped for change. But when a coup overthrew Aristide just eight months after he was sworn in, where were you? How could a few hundred armed rebels take over your government? Couldn't you have done more to defend it?



In addition, if you had organized your own society to build stronger infrastructure, the damage would not have been so great. For example, an earthquake of similar force hit Southern California in 1994 but only 72 people were killed. You should have seen what was happening. Instead, you accepted a cycle of poverty that has now made the toll of the earthquake much worse. It is you who is responsible for the earthquake's devastation.

# Capitalism: System of Profit

## The Indictment:

*You are charged with the mistreatment and murder  
of hundreds of thousands of Haitians.*

THIS GETS COMPLICATED. You are not a person or a government, but a system. We like to blame crimes on people or their representatives. But in this case, the real criminal is not human.

True, the French and U.S. governments have put their country's business interests in front of the Haitian people's livelihood. But what made them act the way they did? The real blame lies with a system that values property over people.

Obviously, no one person, group, or government can be blamed for the tragedy in Haiti. It's a much larger process that is rooted in economics. Capitalism is an economic system where the sole aim is to make a profit. The nature of capitalism is to grow, to expand. Capitalists in one country will naturally try to make a profit in other countries.

In the case of Haiti, capitalists came into Haiti to exploit cheap labor and are now returning to profit from reconstruction. There are no evil people who are consciously trying to murder and mistreat Haitians. What made Haiti so poor, and the earthquake so devastating, was simply the natural workings of the capitalist economic system that looks all around the world in order to ask, "How can a profit be made here?"



As a final test to see who is guilty for the terrible toll the earthquake took in Haiti, ask yourself these questions:

- Would the U.S. government have been so involved in Haitian affairs if U.S. corporations weren't forced to compete for profit? Would other corporations and governments act any differently if put in the same position?
- Could the Duvalier regime have imposed a society of such unequal wealth distribution in Haiti without a global economic system based on extreme wealth inequality?

You know the answer. Individuals and their representatives aren't to blame, it's the system that is rotten to the core.

# U.S. Government

## The Indictment:

*You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of hundreds of thousands of Haitians.*

ALTHOUGH THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION, like the American Revolution, stemmed from concepts of liberty and equality, you, the U.S. government, refused to recognize Haiti until 1862, after the slaveholding states seceded from the Union.

In 1915, your Marines invaded Haiti to protect U.S. business interests. You imposed martial law and rewrote the Haitian constitution to benefit foreign companies. In 1934, the United States left Haiti, leaving behind a U.S.-trained military force that involved itself in politics and held virtual veto power over election results.

Most U.S. presidents supported the brutal Duvalier dictatorships with huge amounts of aid, despite their horrific human rights record.

When Haiti elected Aristide president, he declared the second independence of Haiti, implying that Haiti would become independent of your imperial domination. But you quickly responded by orchestrating a coup d'état eight months later. And when Aristide was elected for the second time, in 2004, you immediately pushed him out of office.

You opposed Aristide's government because it was committed to becoming self-sufficient. You wanted to privatize the nine main publicly



owned industries, so that they could be sold to U.S. and foreign investors. So the natural catastrophe was preceded by more than 100 years of political and economic catastrophes that were Made in the USA. Your role in Haiti made the devastation of the earthquake much worse than it should have been.



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