

# Introduction

This is a story. A story about how crisis feels, about what it is like to live your life in the midst of forces that seem destined to destroy you. But it's not the story that I set out to write. You might say that the story found me, that I am a part of this story that takes shape somewhere in the gap between hope and despair. And like all stories, it has to start somewhere.

Perhaps it is a long story, spanning centuries. A story full of war and revolution, the rise and fall of kings and countries, the end of empires and the birth of new nations. A story of a new world, of slavery and sugar, of the massive demographic displacement of the Middle Passage. It is an epic story of freedom and rebellion, but also a tragic one of debt and dependency. It is a story of people living and working on their own land, of families growing food and tending crops and making their way in the world. And yet it is also a story of a global economy so vast in scale and scope that it can only be rendered in abstract terms as the momentous struggle between capital and labor. It is a story of the transformation of the environment, the shaping of the landscape, the cutting down of trees and the planting of sugarcane or coffee or other crops destined to be consumed by people on the other side of the world. A story that ends in deforestation and soil erosion as the hills turn to stone and the dirt runs away, to be chased later by the peasants who once farmed those same eroding hills. A story of a city that grew into a monster, a city full of people fleeing what the experts call the crisis of the countryside, a city full of people desperately trying to make a living. There are many places along the way where we could begin, and there are many ways to tell such stories. This story starts here, but it could just as easily have begun somewhere else.

I went to Haiti for the first time in the summer of 2002. Before that, I studied Haitian history and culture for years. When I was in school in the 1990s,

I learned about the history of the Caribbean and about the crucial place the region holds in world history. When I learned about the Haitian Revolution, which was an event of world-shattering consequence, I remember thinking: How have I never heard about this before? Haiti was in the news often during those years, as the first democratic elections brought Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power, and then as a military coup quickly sent him into exile. Everyone was talking about what they called the “democratic transition.” But no one spoke of the country’s past. No one said that it was the second independent republic in the Americas and the first one to be founded by former slaves. Later I came to understand why I had not heard of the Haitian Revolution. I came to understand how the revolution had challenged the very categories and concepts of Western society, so much so that it was impossible for many people to believe that slaves had proclaimed their own freedom. I came to understand how the revolution had been “unthinkable” as it occurred and how it was later “silenced” in the historical record.<sup>1</sup>

Before I went to Haiti, I moved to Chicago to study anthropology. There, I learned to think about globalization and the world economy from a Caribbean point of view, from a standpoint that made a place like Haiti central to the sweeping arc of world history. I read Haitian history with an eye to the present. I read about the revolution and its aftermath, about the rise of the peasantry and the urban merchant elite, about how the U.S. military occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 set the stage for the economic and political crises that followed. I read about the terror and violence of the Duvalier dictatorship, about the democratic transition and the military coups that came with it, and about the many international interventions that some Haitians call a “second occupation.” I read about the many crises facing the country, about what the international community referred to as “the Haitian crisis,” as if the country were inextricably defined by that word. Later, after I went to Haiti, I came to see that the country was not as exceptional—not as *odd*—as so many people seemed to say it was. It was an ordinary place, a place where “the majority of Haitians live quite ordinary lives. They eat what is for them—and for many others—quite ordinary food. They die quite ordinary deaths from quite ordinary accidents, quite ordinary tortures, quite ordinary diseases. Accidents so ordinary that they could be prevented. Tortures so ordinary that the international press does not even mention them. Diseases so ordinary that they are easily treated almost anywhere else.”<sup>2</sup> And I came to see how the “Haitian crisis” was ordinary too, that Haiti was a place filled with ordinary crises—crises so ordinary they could easily be prevented.

And so I began to study crisis. I hadn't planned on it. You might say that crisis found me, that I was drawn into its story. I began to see how the big crises that the experts talked about were not exceptional events, nor were they located in abstract places like the economy or the state. Rather, I began to see how crisis was a very personal thing, an intimate fact of life, that it was something that happened to people, that it was ever present and everywhere. I came to see just how *ordinary* crisis could be, how it could come to reside in your body, your house, your neighborhood, in your daily routines and habits. How it could become a way of being in the world. I came to understand how people talked about crisis and how, in talking about it, they folded it into their everyday lives as something that they lived with and sometimes died from.<sup>3</sup>

But before all of that, two things happened. The first thing that happened is that I met a forest. The second thing that happened is that I met a man named Manuel.

#### AN ARRIVAL OF SORTS

I have sometimes felt that doing ethnographic fieldwork is a bit like finding yourself in someone else's dream. The dream has its own logic and carries you along in ways you cannot imagine and might not expect. Anthropologists often joke that their research projects chose them, rather than the other way around. It certainly can happen that way when you are open to the possibility of being invited into other peoples' lives.

Before I left for my first trip in 2002, I had been researching the history of anthropology in Haiti. During the U.S. occupation of 1915–34, more and more people began to travel to and write about the country. I found myself reading a series of letters written between two of the first American anthropologists to work in Haiti, Melville Herskovits and Katherine Dunham. Herskovits had broken new ground on the study of African diasporic cultures by challenging the assumption that the populations brought to the New World as slaves had lost their cultural heritage. Slavery and colonial rule had destroyed much, to be sure, but there remained hidden continuities or "survivals" that, in turn, had helped form the foundation of the new creole or syncretic cultures, languages, and religions that emerged on the margins of the slave plantation system. Herskovits saw Haiti as an important part of that story, since slaves had won their freedom much earlier than anywhere else in the region, a fact that he thought meant Haitian peasants had retained a deeper level of continuity with their African ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

Herskovits was a mentor to Katherine Dunham, who went to Haiti to study the role of dance in Vodou ritual. The letters between them record a

falling-out of sorts, as Dunham decided to undergo an initiation rite and become a Vodou practitioner, something that Herskovits insisted would result in an inevitable loss of her objectivity as a researcher. Dunham persisted, and she later became a Vodou *mambo* (priestess) and a figure of national importance in Haiti. Dunham did not, however, continue on as an anthropologist. Instead, she became a world-famous dancer and choreographer. She traveled the world but always returned to Haiti, where she eventually made her home and where she was later given honorary citizenship. The letters of Dunham and Herskovits were still on my mind when I went to Haiti, and it is perhaps for that reason that I mentioned reading them during a conversation with some colleagues only days after I arrived in the capital city. One of my colleagues said that I had to meet a friend of hers. We met a few days later and, as it happened, he was part of a small group of people who were working with Dunham, who was retired and living in the United States then, to transform her Haitian home into a botanic garden. They took me to see her estate and they introduced me to the property, which they simply called "the forest."<sup>5</sup>

I felt right away there was a compelling story to be told about the forest, even though the depth and complexity of that story would be clear to me only later. From that first visit to the forest I fell under its spell, and under the spell of the men and women who were working hard to turn the forest into a botanic garden. At the time, there was no comparable place in Haiti and the country was facing staggering levels of deforestation and soil erosion. I listened as those involved in the garden project told me about the extent of the environmental crisis and how they imagined the garden as a "gift to Haiti" and as a site for what they called the "rebirth of the country." It was a lot to expect from a small, forested estate of only a couple dozen acres. And yet it was a compelling vision of the future, unabashedly utopian in its striving for a restoration of the countryside and a resolution to the country's myriad crises. It helped that the forest was rather thick and lush and that it sat atop an underground aquifer that brought fresh water bubbling to the surface in small concrete basins that had been built on the property. It helped too that the forest was located in the middle of a large slum and that, when looked at from above, it appeared as a little bit of nature surrounded by the concrete anarchy of Port-au-Prince.

And so I decided to stay in the city and to study the forest and the botanic garden project, to study the history of the environmental crisis and the corresponding urban crisis, the latter propelled by the former as peasants fled their denuded fields and migrated to the growing slums in the city, in search of jobs in the tourist sector or in the newly built factories that

made t-shirts and bras and other things for export to North America. As I learned more, the story grew into something else and I was pulled in new directions as I followed its various threads. The forest was taken over by an armed gang and the neighborhood around the property became part of a national political drama. A coup in 2004 flipped the script and revealed how the environmental and urban crises were deeply entwined with the crisis of the state. Along the way, I met many people whose lives intersected in one way or another with the forest and with Dunham, and with the gangs and the garden project. The story threatened to become too big, too complex. The more I tried to gather together all its parts—to tell *the* story of crisis in Haiti—the more I felt that I was losing sight of something. I could either see the trees or the forest, the part or the whole, but not both. An older colleague of mine, who had worked in Haiti for several decades, gently reminded me of the value of humility when he told me that I would never be able to understand it all. Over time, I came to realize that the story I most wanted to tell, the story I had been tracking the whole time, was not a story about a forest or about “the Haitian crisis.” It was a story about people who lived and worked in or around the forest. It was a human story, a story about how crisis feels to those who live with it every day.

Looking back, this idea was there all along, but it has taken me a long time to come to terms with the weight of it.

#### MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

I met Manuel about the same time that I met the forest. We became fast friends after a chance meeting in a crowded downtown market. After a long conversation about Haitian art, we realized that we had a mutual friend back in the United States. We laughed at the unexpected connection. Later our chance meeting would come to seem, to me, perfectly ordinary. After all, Manuel was widely known throughout the city. As a guide and fixer, he made it his business to know people, and especially to meet foreigners staying in the country. I was less surprised when I later learned that Manuel also knew about the forest and that he was good friends with some of the people working to turn it into a botanic garden.

Manuel was a slender man in his forties, although he looked much younger. Through him I came to know a tight network of middle-aged men who worked in the informal sector as guides, artists, and drivers. These men had come of age together during the brief tourist boom in the late 1970s and early '80s. Most of them had come to Port-au-Prince from the countryside, hoping to find work in the factories and hotels. Like Manuel, these other

men had all been quite successful, making good money and becoming well respected around the city. Now, decades after the boom and bust of tourism, they helped each other get by, sharing clients, information, and even money. It was a difficult way to make a living, but they had, each of them, learned to live with the quite ordinary facts of unemployment, poverty, political violence, and instability. And I, in turn, learned from Manuel how to navigate the city of Port-au-Prince and the complexities of Haitian society.

One hot afternoon in August 2002, I was drinking beer with Manuel. We were sitting on the veranda of an aging gingerbread house that had been turned into one of Haiti's most famous hotels. A ceiling fan above us gently moved the air, but not enough to cut through the heat. Still, Manuel was energetic and upbeat, as usual. We talked about the hardships he faced daily and the many crises in his country. He knew that I was interested in the forest. I had become a convert to the botanic garden project, and I was telling him how important I thought the forest was and how urgent it was to address the ecological crisis in Haiti. He nodded along, smiling patiently at me.

"Yes," he said. "It's very bad." He took a drink from his beer and looked at me. He leaned in close to me and said, "But I have to tell you something." He leaned even closer and whispered a few words that have haunted me ever since.

"Haiti is dead," he said. "There is no more Haiti."

*Haiti is dead. There is no more Haiti.*<sup>6</sup> The words struck me and I asked him what he meant. He shrugged, smiled, drank some more of his beer, and turned the conversation to other topics. I can't say I remember what we talked about after that. My mind was still focused on his comment. In the days that followed, I would ask others about Manuel's statement. When I asked people from the Haitian elite, they scoffed at the idea and invariably replied in the same way: "A country never dies!" I felt that Manuel's comment somehow offended their sense of national pride. Yet when I asked anyone else, and especially when I asked people who, like Manuel, had to live day by day in the city, working hard just to make it, they all said a version of the same thing: "Yes, of course," they said. "We all know this is true." True or not, I wondered what it could possibly mean.

Manuel was born in Port-au-Prince, and while he maintained contact with relatives in his family's village in the countryside, he felt that the city was his real home. Living in the city, he had witnessed firsthand an ever-deepening crisis unfolding over decades. He came of age during a time when waves of new migrants flooded the city, all fleeing the collapse of the peasant economy and all hoping, mostly in vain, to make a living in the fledgling tourist sector and the garment factories. He had lived through

the terror of the Duvalier dictatorship and had survived several years in prison. He had been tortured and still carried the scars on his legs and torso. He had found a livelihood as a guide to tourists, and when there were no more tourists he worked as a fixer, taking journalists around the city as they wrote about the fall of the dictatorship, about the violence that ensued, and about the seemingly endless democratic transition. Manuel had lived through economic booms and busts, though certainly more busts than booms. He had stood in the streets protesting military coups and had voted in the country's first free and fair elections. He had lived through an international embargo, when he had nothing to eat, and through an international military intervention that had promised to restore democracy. He had come through crisis after crisis, and now he was taking stock of what had happened to him, of what was lost and what remained.

Manuel did not live to see the worst of things, to see the city that he loved reduced to rubble and dust. He lived in a world that existed before the devastating earthquake that struck the country on January 12, 2010, and he died in that world too. On the day of his funeral, the streets of the city were blocked by anti-government protesters, themselves on their way to the National Palace, where they were soon met by gunfire and tear gas from the police. I remember thinking at the time that in Haiti, even the dead find little peace.

Manuel's words have stayed with me since that summer day in 2002, and I realized, only much later, that I have been trying to come to terms with what he said, with what he meant, ever since. Some might think that Manuel was giving voice to a fatal resignation, but that seems at odds with how he lived his life. No one who knew him would characterize him as someone who had given up. He worked hard; he was a loving father and husband; he was a well-respected person who had many friends; he laughed and joked and smiled. He lived what he felt was a good life, despite the obvious challenges that he, and so many others like him, faced every day. Yet, if he was not saying that he had given up hope or that he felt resigned to the harsh dictates of fate, what was he saying? Part of the answer lies in acknowledging that Manuel's comment that "Haiti is dead" was deeply personal. He was talking about his own life experience and, especially, about his relation to the world around him. But his comment was not *only* a personal one. If it had been, others would have responded to it as such: his friends might have said that he was entitled to his feelings, that his statement was true for him, that it told us something about his state of mind. But that was not the case, and to treat his words as idiosyncratic would be to ignore the startling frequency of such expressions, and the underlying sentiments they carry, in Port-au-Prince. I heard many others say the same

thing, or, if they didn't say it, they seemed to agree with it when they heard others say it. His comment was thus both an expression of his own experience and a widely shared structure of feeling.

I heard such comments most frequently when talking to men who shared a common experience with Manuel, men in their forties or fifties who had come of age in the city during a time of unending crisis.<sup>7</sup> Much of this book is an attempt to capture their experience, an experience very much shaped by their gender and their age. When they describe their situation as a never-ending crisis or as the end of the world, these men are recounting the end of a particular world—that of the political generation that emerged during the democratic transition. These men had sought refuge from crisis by migrating to the city and seeking out opportunities to make their own lives within informal artistic or service sectors in which they maintained some degree of control over their work. These men lived through one of the region's most notorious dictatorships, watched the dictatorship fall, and took part in the popular movements that followed. They had believed, strongly, in the millenarian dream of hope, of the promise of a sweeping transformation of Haitian society, which had propelled Jean-Bertrand Aristide to victory in the first democratic elections. Some of these men had achieved a level of social mobility and success, becoming key players in the city's tourist and art markets. The city had brought them into contact with foreigners and with quick cash. It had brought them prestige and respect. Yet these men were also struggling to come to terms with something profound. They knew they could no longer go back to the countryside. They felt that the vision of a good life tied to the peasant family homestead was no longer viable, that land ownership and farming were things of the past. Many had come to the city as migrants, but they had come to see themselves as urban residents. The space of the city reminded them every day of the precariousness of urban life. They lived in slums and shantytowns, they moved through the margins of official city life, they were part of the vast informal world of the global economy, working all day but rarely getting paid. Whatever successes they had had in the past were just that: in the past. They remembered fondly the days when there were tourists, when their pockets were filled with cash. But they knew, too, that those days were gone, even when acting as if they might one day return. They lived in a present that was cut off from the futures they had once dreamed of, from the futures they had once hoped to inhabit. Men like Manuel knew that in Haiti the future was already filled with more crisis, more disaster, and more intervention. This book is an attempt to recount how crisis felt as it happened to them.



Shortly before he died, Manuel told me that he thought that crisis would last forever in Haiti. He said that to me in January 2004, just before President Aristide was removed from power for the second time, just before another wave of terror and violence engulfed the city, before another military intervention and the disasters that followed. When he died, I thought back to his comment about the death of Haiti. It was hard not to project the intimate fact of his own death backward in time, hard not to see his earlier comment as a prescient warning of what came later. I thought that perhaps Manuel had said Haiti was dead because he felt that the world around him, his world, no longer had any place for him in it. Perhaps, for him, it was as if Haiti itself were gone—or whatever version of Haiti he associated with a good life, a life worth living, a life he wanted to live, was no longer available to him. In retrospect, I thought he might have been telling me that he no longer felt it was possible to be the kind of person he had been and wanted to be.

Manuel said that Haiti is dead, there is no more Haiti. It is easy to think that he was talking about the end, about his own experience with a looming death, an all-encompassing finitude. Yet so much depends on how we listen to Manuel, and on what the idea of death and the idea of Haiti meant *to him*. Death can be understood as an end, as the end of experience for a person. But it doesn't have to be that way. In the Vodou cosmology and in much of Haitian culture (Manuel was a Vodou practitioner), death is a transformation of the self, not the end of the self. At death, the body goes away but the invisible elements of the self, the parts of what we might call the soul, go through a series of ritual changes. Part of the soul returns to Bondye, the supreme being who created the universe, but the essence of the person goes to a place under the water and then, later, when the surviving members of the family call the soul back, it goes to rest forever in Ginen, the mythical home of the *lwa* (spirits; pronounced "loa"). In Ginen, the dead are reborn as spirits and death is but a moment in a vast cosmological cycle. It is not the end of the world but rather a part of the world's remaking.<sup>8</sup>

This book is, then, a meditation on life and death, on living and dying in Haiti. It is my attempt to think with Manuel and the many others who shared their lives and stories with me, to think about what it means to struggle, to strive, and to try to live in a world that feels like it has already ended. While it is a sad story, filled with terrible things that happened to people, it is not a tragic story. Life goes on, even after death. Indeed, I would insist—and I think Manuel would insist too—that we should not see the stories that make up this book as expressions of fatalistic resignation, that we should not hear them as proof that Haiti is doomed. Stories matter, and how we tell them matters too, and for that reason I want to make clear that

I resist the dominant trope of tragedy in stories about Haiti. Why does this matter, the difference between a sad story and a tragic one? It matters because in tragedy the end is always preordained. The essence of tragedy is that we can never escape our fate, try as we might. The saddest part of the story told here is the realization that things could have been otherwise, should have been otherwise, that what happened did not have to happen and does not have to happen again. And so, even though there is sadness and despair in what follows, there is also hope—fleeting, perhaps. No sweeping transformations, no revolution. But a persistent dream, a dream that those who have died will be remembered, that those who are hungry will be fed, that those who are homeless will be cared for; that the world can be remade again. It is a dream in which the future can be imagined as good and just. A dream that the future remains open, that the end has not yet come, not just yet. That even if death has come for some of us, for some it has not. In the time that remains, we can hope. And we can live.

#### WRITING CRISIS

In writing about crisis, my aim is to give an account of what anthropologist Michael Jackson calls “life as lived.” Jackson, who has been a leading figure in the application of existentialist and phenomenological approaches to anthropology, urges us to focus on the intimacies of lived experience and the many ways that people encounter the world. Phenomenological approaches have gained considerable ground in anthropology, where they merge well with the discipline’s commitment to what Clifford Geertz, himself inspired by phenomenology, called “thick description.” What unites the various kinds of phenomenological approaches in anthropology is a concern to dwell in the lived experience of others as they encounter the world, to pay attention to “the indeterminate and ambiguous character of everyday life,” and to give priority “to embodied, intersubjective, temporally informed engagements in the world.”<sup>9</sup>

To do that requires what Ruth Behar calls a “vulnerable” ethnography, one that is radically open to how people live in the world. Ethnography, she says, has an emancipatory potential because it can make other ways of living present for us—present in ways that are richly nuanced, in ways that are, to use the metaphors most commonly adopted by anthropologists, thick, deep, and intimate.<sup>10</sup> Ethnographic intimacy shares something in common with the best literary fiction and nonfiction; each of these genres seeks to move beyond mere description to something more like empathy and imaginative solidarity. Yet the power of ethnography comes from more than empathic writing. It

comes, too, from the anthropological commitment to understanding other ways of living *on their own terms*. To do that takes time. Ethnography is slow, patient, curious, and strange. It helps us question our most taken-for-granted assumptions and embrace other ways of knowing. At its best, ethnography makes us vulnerable by exposing us to a world of difference.

I have chosen to write this book as a series of stories because I think that intimate ethnography accomplishes two things. First, it helps us understand the lived experience of others in all its complexity and ambiguity. Second, it helps us get away from the common understanding of crisis as a discrete event, to be reported only in the news, and to focus instead on how crisis can be an everyday experience.<sup>11</sup> My aim in writing about crisis is to make present for readers how people think and talk about something profound that has happened to them. To do that, I have tried to listen to what people say about themselves and about the world, to treat these people not as data for my own theories, but rather as theorists of their own experiences. It would be too simple to say that the stories told here speak for themselves. But in putting them together, in writing about how crisis feels, I hope to show how these stories are both intimately personal and irreducibly social, private and public, individual and collective. In them, we glimpse what Raymond Williams called a “structure of feeling”—that is, the “affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought.”<sup>12</sup>

This book is based on over a decade’s worth of research, done primarily in Port-au-Prince but also in other parts of Haiti and in the United States and Canada. Over that time, my thinking on the material presented here has changed dramatically, in part because the world described here has also changed, perhaps irrevocably. When I first went to Haiti to begin the research that would result in this book, it seemed to me that the city of Port-au-Prince brought together the many crises facing the country. The environmental crisis in the countryside had brought hundreds of thousands of migrants to the capital and had shaped the very space of the city, as people built their own homes and their own neighborhoods in the abandoned zones and marginal spaces left by an urban elite that retreated, ever more, to gated communities in the hills above. And so the crisis of the countryside gave birth, in a way, to the urban crisis, to the problems of slums and a lack of services, to the anarchic urbanism that began to take shape in the city as the state, too, retreated from public life, opting instead to govern through its persistent absence. City and country were bound together, as they always are, but they were expressions of the even deeper problems of poverty and dictatorship.<sup>13</sup>

Looking back now, the decades-long democratic transition and the popular movements that have arisen have all been responses to this constellation of crises. The dream of democracy that animated those movements was a kind of radical hope, a hope for what was once called “another Haiti” (*yon lòt Ayiti*). A hope that the violence and death of the past would give way to new life, to a world reborn, a future world in which the many crises shaking the country would be resolved. A future in which people would be able to farm, grow food, eat, and be fed. A world in which there would be electricity and water and houses. A world in which the people would have a voice, a world free of the threat of coups. A future in which Haiti would not be the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, in which there would be jobs, in which people would be able to live and not merely survive. A future world in which people would not die “stupid deaths” or be crushed by structural violence. Where people would not have to make a choice “between death and death.”<sup>14</sup>

Those dreams are still dreams for some, but for many of the people whose stories I tell here, the future that once seemed possible now seems largely closed. Looking back on the past couple of decades, looking back after the disasters that have killed so many and destroyed so much, it has become harder and harder for them to imagine anything but future disaster, a disastrous future full of more crises, more suffering, more death. How does it feel when the future seems impossible? Where does hope go when disaster swallows the horizon of possibility?

When I began to work on this book, I had to confront the problem of how to write about crisis in Haiti. There has been so much written and said about the country that it has become commonplace to hear people talk about “the Haitian crisis” as if it were an objective fact, as if it were intrinsic to the country, as if you could account for it by simply pointing to the litany of economic, political, or developmental indicators and assessments. Political scientists call Haiti a weak or failed state. Economists say it is underdeveloped and that it needs to be more tightly integrated into the global economy. Some say the crisis is due wholly to international interference, while others blame Haitians themselves. A few even boldly assert that the crisis is due to a pathological culture and mentality, that the Haitian people are themselves to blame for anything and everything that has happened to them.<sup>15</sup> My goal here is to change the very terms of the question. Others have sought to give an account of the Haitian crisis. My goal here is to give a *Haitian* account of crisis.

The concept of crisis has a long history, but in the most general terms it is used to name a decisive turning point, a disruption in the normal order of things. Experts of various kinds regularly use the concept to name

things that require our urgent attention or perhaps even some kind of intervention—economic collapse, political upheaval, disaster, humanitarian emergency. Common to all these uses is the tendency to treat crisis as an objective condition that can be named and described in the dispassionate terms of social scientific jargon. When we use the word *crisis* this way, we forget that it comes to us from the ancient Greek medical tradition—that is, from a context in which the stakes were immediate and life-threatening for someone. Recalling this deep history of the term is a good way to remind us that, as the philosopher Jürgen Habermas noted, there would be no thing called *crisis* if there were not people experiencing it. In medicine, the crisis is the turning point in the course of a disease after which the patient either lives or dies. The doctor, as expert, sees the crisis in abstract terms, as an abnormality that has blocked the normal functions of a human body. The patient, by contrast, feels the illness in a direct way—as something that is happening to him or her. As Habermas puts it, “the crisis cannot be separated from the viewpoint of the one who is undergoing it—the patient experiences his powerlessness *vis-à-vis* the objectivity of the illness only because he is a subject condemned to passivity and temporarily deprived of the possibility of being a subject in full possession of his powers.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet people are never as powerless as this quote might suggest. Even in the midst of terrible circumstances, people strive to act in ways they find meaningful. They also strive to make sense of the world around them and to understand, in critically insightful ways, what exactly has happened and is happening to them.<sup>17</sup> As Karen Richman shows in her richly nuanced ethnography of Haitian migrants, sickness and death can become occasions for profound statements about the experience of crisis and about the ways in which the exploitation and alienation of a global capitalist system can take shape in the intimacies of everyday life. Richman describes one Haitian migrant, Ti Chini, who on his deathbed proclaimed, “The nation of Haiti will never be right. It will never be right.” As Richman recounts it, Ti Chini came to understand the illness that would kill him, and the broader global forces that had propelled him from his village in Haiti to a life as a migrant worker in the United States, as an evil force that had invaded his body, as “a vast, sorcerous system that turns poor Haitian neighbors against one another” and that routinely exposes the most vulnerable among us to harm and possible death.<sup>18</sup>

How, then, to write about crisis? How to capture the way that it feels to those who live with it every day? My approach in this book has been to take up a distinction made by Kirin Narayan between situations and stories. Situations are like plots. They can be described in general terms and are the contexts in which people act. In the chapters that follow, the constellation of

crises described above would be the situation in which people find themselves. Stories, however, are narratives that seek to capture the emotional experiences people have as they live their lives in those contexts.<sup>19</sup> To that end, I have written the book not as a description of crisis in objective terms but rather as a series of stories within stories, stories told to me by people as they struggled to make sense of what is happening to them. In telling those stories, I have chosen to foreground moments of dialogue and debate—conversations—in which I am sometimes a participant and sometimes merely an observer, though often both. By retelling these conversations, I hope to give the people with whom I worked a direct voice, to let them speak for and about themselves in words of their own choosing. Writing these interactions as exchanges also highlights how I came to record and recount this story: it was told to me.

Stories matter, to the people who tell them and to the people who listen to them. People everywhere put their experiences into some kind of form, and they do so by thinking, by reflecting, and above all by talking about their experiences. Narrative is key to how we make sense of our lives. We use stories to “arrange and transform our experiences,” to give an account of what happened and why, to tell people about ourselves, and to make our most intimate and personal experiences into accounts that are publicly sharable, into stories that we can exchange with others as we try to make our way in the world. Stories are always social and often political. They can also be therapeutic, a way of restoring meaning to the world around us, a way of talking and telling about what has happened so that we remain subjects—authors—of our own stories.<sup>20</sup>

The most common form of storytelling is ordinary conversation, which, as Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps put it, “is the most likely medium for airing unresolved life events.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, conversation is not just a mode of presentation used in this book; it was also the primary method I used while conducting research. Anthropology is something like a study of the ordinary. When anthropologists carry out research, they usually spend most of their time accompanying people as they go about the ordinary business of their lives—waiting, talking, eating, working, and all the other things that people do everywhere around the world. As I did these things too, I often felt that my presence afforded people an occasion to talk not just to me but also to others in ways that allowed them to work out their own ideas, to explore and give shape to their thoughts and feelings, to articulate their own theories about what was happening in Haiti.

This book is a record of the many conversations, stories, accounts, and theories that I heard. It is a collection of stories, stitched together by me in

a deliberate way. My hope is that in bringing them together I have accomplished more than mere addition. I was able to move across borders, both literal and figurative, in ways that few others could. I traversed social divisions and national borders as well as the subtler demarcations of neighborhoods, social relationships, and political affiliations. While I make no claims to totality here, I do feel that a larger whole emerges as these various stories are brought together. That larger whole, though, is inherently incomplete. In writing this book, I was pulled in two directions. On one hand, I had an impulse to tell an overarching story that would tie all the events together coherently. On the other hand, the very aspects of the world being described here resisted such narrative closure. In the end, I have tried to capture the complexities and contradictions of the experiences recounted here, to stay close to the feeling of uncertainty in the moment. At the same time, I have used two narrative devices to organize the book that give it a measure of coherence not always visible in the moments being recounted. First, while I have organized the book roughly chronologically, I also move forward and backward in time to better capture the differences between the uncertainty of an event as it happened and the retrospective significance of the event as it was folded into other events, into longer narratives, and into a person's life story. In so doing, I hope to show my own and others' later evaluations and explanations as well as our shifting experience of the temporal order of things. Second, I have organized the chapters thematically in such a way that each chapter discusses a specific set of issues and experiences. At the same time, I have arranged the chapters so that they move from an abstract experience of loss, which some describe as the death of the ideal peasant homestead, to the much more concrete experience of alienation from one's place in the world that came with the inability to feel secure in one's body or home during moments of intense violence and terror, and finally to accounts of what it was like to live through the destruction of one's world and to dwell in the aftermath of disaster.

#### PLAN OF THE BOOK

Each chapter tells a different story, but they all explore how national and global political and economic forces take shape in people's daily lives. Chapter 1 ("The Forest and the City") explores the environmental and urban crises through the story of a forest in the middle of a seaside slum. The forest was once a colonial estate, and then a private residence, and, from the 1990s to the early years of the twenty-first century, the site of a proposed botanic garden. The garden was imagined as a symbol for the rebirth

of the country, but the property was taken over by squatters and an armed gang, and the garden project was eventually caught up in a national political crisis as people began to debate the limits of inclusion and exclusion and the very possibility of democracy in Haiti. The story of the forest is thus also an account of how crisis shapes the spaces in which people live and, in the process, shapes their experiences and expectations too.

Chapter 2 (“Looking for Life”) explores how working men seek to build meaningful lives in the midst of the informal economy of Port-au-Prince. The chapter follows a group of urban men as they *chache lavi*, or “look for life”—that is, as they struggle to make a living by working as artisans, guides, and taxi drivers. Most of these men migrated to the city years ago, and as with so many other urban migrants, their attempt to look for life in the city was a response to the crisis of the countryside, as they fled the collapse of the rural peasant economy. Now, in the city, they must confront a whole new world of crisis. In order to get by, they have sought to build networks of support and solidarity that extend throughout the city. But such networks are fragile and rely on the constant reproduction of relations of respect and reputation. This chapter explores how these men think about crisis and how they talk about what it feels like to be caught up in the increasingly impossible project of looking for life in Port-au-Prince.

Chapter 3 (“Making Disorder”) tells the story of the making of a political crisis that sent President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile for the second time and that ushered in an unconstitutional provisional government and an international military intervention, all during the bicentennial year of Haitian independence in 2004. Returning to the botanic garden project, the gangs and squatters, and the urban migrants discussed in the preceding two chapters, I explore how these various groups used the Haitian concept of disorder (*dezòd*) to make sense of the political crisis that precipitated the coup. The chapter moves across both social classes and social spaces to follow how people talked about the political crisis in the period leading up to the coup. By putting vastly different accounts of disorder together, I show how the coup came to seem inevitable even before it happened, and how the political crisis gave way to a prevailing sense of the impossibility of a vision of democracy long associated with the figure of President Aristide.

Chapter 4 (“Between Life and Death”) explores the aftermath of the coup, as Port-au-Prince was engulfed in a wave of violence that pitted gangs, the national police, and United Nations peacekeepers against one another. Drawing on extensive interviews with people around the city, I show how residents talked about the everyday violence of the provisional period using the metaphor of the blackout (*blakawout*)—a term that means



not only loss of electricity but also a more pervasive loss of power, a loss of power that was felt to be at once individual (the inability to do anything) and collective (the loss of political power of Aristide's party and his supporters). The metaphor of the blackout is an especially apt one for urban men, for whom power outages in the city are both anticipated and expected features of everyday life and, at the same time, sudden and shocking occurrences when they happen. As men talked about "living in a blackout," they also found a way to give voice to the experience of a kind of political violence that was pervasive but often intangible, that was at once intimate and general, that was felt in their bodies and in the houses, streets, and neighborhoods where they lived and worked. Amid the violence of the provisional period, I show how these men tried to make sense of the uncertainty that swirled around them and how they struggled to navigate the fine line between living and dying.

Chapter 5 ("Aftermath") weaves together several stories of disaster and displacement, placing the 2010 earthquake that destroyed over a third of Port-au-Prince into the broader context of recurring natural hazards such as hurricanes and floods that, combined with the long history of social vulnerability, regularly produce catastrophic disasters in Haiti. Drawing on research before and after the earthquake, this chapter explores the social and emotional dimensions of disasters as they unfold over time and across space. I focus, in particular, on how disasters, as both sudden ruptures and anticipated events, lead to various kinds of displacement, as people are pushed out of their villages and their homes. Returning to the themes of environmental and urban crises discussed in earlier chapters, I reframe the 2010 earthquake not as a singular event but rather as part of a long process of displacement. In so doing, my aim is to capture what it feels like to live in the aftermath of a disaster that has not really ended and what it feels like to face a future in which the only certainty seems to be that there will be yet more disaster.

Some of the people who shared their stories and their lives with me are no longer with us. Others are alive and still struggling to make a living. In both cases, I have used pseudonyms for everyone except public figures in order to ensure anonymity and protect people's privacy.<sup>22</sup> Although Port-au-Prince is a large city, the social worlds people inhabit in it are quite intimate, and at times I have had to alter some details of the stories told here so as to further ensure confidentiality and to protect people's identities. I have also left out some details of people's lives when they asked me to do so. Like all accounts, the one presented here is partial. I make no claim to speak for all Haitians.

On a personal note, it has been difficult at times to carry the weight of these stories with me, even though I know full well that my own difficulties pale in comparison to those suffered by so many others. Still, years ago, amid the violence and terror that followed the coup in 2004, I felt my spirit break. I felt as though I could not go on, that I should not go on, that it didn't make any sense to be asking people to tell me about their lives when they were so caught up in trying to survive, to get by, to find a way to make it through difficult, oppressive, and damaging circumstances. I shared these feelings with my friend Paul, who has lived in Port-au-Prince all his life. He told me not to worry so much. "It's important," he told me. "You can tell people what has happened here." I hope that I have been able, in some small way, to do just that.