Ti Amos

by J. Christopher Kovats-Bernat

From Sleeping Rough in Port-au-Prince: An Ethnography of Street Children and Violence in Haiti, by J. Christopher Kovats-Bernat

He wears a filthy, ripped, red t-shirt and a torn pair of dirty, oversized shorts that he has to continuously hitch up when he isn’t sitting. His name is Ti Amos and he looks to be not one day over five years old. He wears no shoes, and when I ask him if he finds it difficult to walk about the city in his bare feet, he tells me that he used to have a pair of sandals but they were stolen from him by older street boys as he slept and he never bought a new pair. He said that when he has money, he does not want to spend it on shoes, but prefers to spend it on food.

Ti Amos keeps a plastic juice bottle fill of siment — a vaporous cobbler’s glue to which he is thoroughly addicted — tucked into the neck of his shirt and he sniffs from it every few minutes. He does this all day, every day. Though his eyes are red and bloodshot and his breath is heavy with the vapour of the glue, he is an exception to the general rule about the sniffer-zombi. He is thoughtful and lucid, and at times almost philosophical.

He left his natal home in Les Cayes when he was around three (“I could walk very good by then,” he says), eventually making his way to Port-au-Prince, where he has lived ever since. Like most street children he maintains contact with his kin throughout Haiti, including an aunt, a godfather, and cousins in Jacmel. He also has an aunt who lives in the La Saline slum in Port-au-Prince, but he tells me that he has never really known her. His mother and father live together in Les Cayes with his brother and two sisters. His older brother and eldest sister are both enrolled in school, while his youngest sister is too young for school. He said that this sister is a "ti bebe", an infant still at the breast.

He says he left his home because his father beat him and forced him to “vi lavi mizè”, live a life of misery. Since his brothers and sisters were already enrolled in school when he was born, he had to work on the street as soon as he was physically able to help feed the family and pay for his siblings’ school supplies. He spent increasing amounts of time on the street until he finally moved from Les Cayes to Port-au-Prince, seeking better opportunities for work.

Ti Amos sleeps in Portail Léogâne, near the entrance to the National Cemetery. He tells me that he lives there with his “sister”, gesturing to a fifteen-year-old street girl named Bèl Marie who sits quietly beside him. She explains to me that she is not Ti Amos’s real sister, but that they have been like brother and sister since they met on the street about two years earlier. Ti Amos says that he sleeps alongside Bèl Marie to protect her from being raped by other street boys. He has watched street girls raped before and he worries about Bèl Marie. He believes that he can protect her by sleeping with her, though Bèl Marie whispers in my ear that Ti Amos is afraid to sleep with the bigger street boys and sleeps with her for his own protection.

Ti Amos often awakens in the middle of the night and is unable to return to sleep. At these times he is apt to vakabonde — literally, to wander or stray. While the term can imply a more sinister kind of prowling, Ti Amos uses it here in an innocent sense, meaning that he walks around the city at night looking for friends or opportunities to make money. Sometimes he awakens because he has nightmares. He says that he sometimes dreams that he is picking pockets, even though he claims never to have stolen from anyone. The dream frightens him because he does not want to be arrested and put into prison.
He understands that his dreams are not real, but they scare him awake so easily because he always sleeps "with one eye open" and is never fully asleep, a defence against the real threats of other street children who might want to hurt him. He is always on his guard against children who want to drop a cinder block on his head or beat him with sticks while he is sleeping.

He once surprised me by regaling me with the tale of a trip he had taken to the neighbouring Dominican Republic. About a year ago, he says, he jumped into a street fight to help his friend James, a teenage street boy of whom he speaks very fondly. Ever since that fight, the two have been good friends. Not long after the scuffle, James invited Ti Amos to accompany him on a vakans, a vacation. James had been to the Dominican Republic before and had told Ti Amos wonderful stories about his trip. The two hitched a ride on a public bus that runs a cross-island route directly across the border and on to Santo Domingo, avoiding border checkpoints. Though James adapted well to the Dominican Republic and decided to stay permanently, Ti Amos found life in Santo Domingo too much like his life in Port-au-Prince, only far more alien. He was hungry, couldn’t understand Spanish, didn’t have his friends to protect him while he slept (though he did meet many other Haitian children on the street there), and found that he was treated even more harshly by the adult community there than he was in his native Haiti.

But this is not why he returned to Port-au-Prince. "So what made you leave?" I ask him as we sit in the gutter in Portail Léogâne, sharing a tin of kippered fish. He pulls me in close by tugging on the sleeve of my shirt. "Sann Domingo se pa peyi'm. M’te pa vle se trèt Ayiti cheri’m," he says — "The Dominican Republic is not my country. I didn’t want to be a traitor to my sweet Haiti."

From Sleeping Rough in Port-au-Prince: An Ethnography of Street Children and Violence in Haiti, by J. Christopher Kovats-Bernat (University Press of Florida, ISBN 0-8130-3009-9, 233 pp), a study of homeless children in Haiti’s capital, based on ten years of brave and frequently harrowing fieldwork. Kovats-Bernat introduces each chapter with the life-history of one of the children he interviewed during his time in Port-au-Prince. These stories are full of hunger, violence, loneliness, and fear, but the author does not wish merely to present a litany of horrors. These are also stories of resilience, creativity, community, and survival in some of the most desperate circumstances imaginable. And Kovats-Bernat argues that "to simply regard Haiti’s street children as the tragic victims of economic crisis and dissolute political circumstances is to ignore the profound impact that they have had on the developing course of Haitian democratisation." But his conclusion is unequivocal and indisputable. "They are suffering . . . In the words of one street boy, ‘fòk sa chanje.’ Things must change.”

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