

2014

Mark D. Anderson. Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2011. 241 pp.

Nicasio Urbina
University of Cincinnati, nicasio.urbina@uc.edu

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Recommended Citation

Urbina, Nicasio (2014) "Mark D. Anderson. Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2011. 241 pp.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, Article 18. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1009>

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Abstract

Review of Mark D. Anderson. *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2011. 241 pp.

Keywords

Latin American literature, natural disasters

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It is not very common to organize a body of literature by a number of natural disasters taking place in a particular area of the world. We are more accustomed to using genre, themes, periods or styles as organizing principles in literary studies. A historical event such as the Mexican revolution, for example, has proven to be an enduring way to organize a group of texts that somehow deal with that phenomenon. The original contribution of Mark D. Anderson's book *Disaster Writing. The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America* is to read literature of a particular region and time around a natural disaster and/or natural phenomenon that took place or that takes place often in an area of Latin America. As any other method, this one has advantages and disadvantages. We could argue that any geographical phenomena triggers different sorts of cultural reactions, whether it is painting or writing, music or architecture; and that the texts or artifacts produced under those conditions will represent some elements of the problem in question. Literary historiography reminds us that in the past we have organized the literature of Central America around the American interventions in the area, or around the banana plantations or the inter-oceanic canal. But what Anderson has done is extremely clever because he not only managed to organize the texts, but more importantly, has been able to explain how these texts have been used for particular purposes, whether they are political, social, or ideological. Disaster writing deals more with the uses of texts than with the production or generation of texts. It is not only that volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, or drought will generate texts and will encourage people to write, but also how these texts are used by the authorities at the center of power to organize and dominate the people in question. As he says in his "Introduction," "I am particularly interested in the political implications of the process of defining disaster and how textualization is used to negotiate political power" (2).

This first chapter is devoted to the Dominican Republic and cyclone San Zenón, which struck the island on September 2, 1930. It is fascinating to see, as Anderson demonstrates, how Rafael Trujillo and his collaborators used his response to the hurricane as a key troupe in the narrative legitimizing his rule, which lasted from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. Chapter two deals with the drought in northeastern Brazil, and how the repetition of such dire circumstances over generations could not fail to stimulate cultural production, creating narratives to explain the disaster and its social and political consequences. Chapter 3, "Volcanic identities," analyzes the influence of volcanic eruptions in the national imaginary of Central Americans. "Explosive nationalism and the disaster subject in Central American literature" starts by analyzing the presence of volcanoes in Nicaragua's history and literature, and it ends with a brilliant comment on José Coronel Urtecho's playful "Oda al Mombacho." Chapter four

deals with the Mexican earthquake of 1985 and the inadequate government response to the catastrophe. “Fault lines” is a very interesting discussion of the role of the chronicle in the communication between victims, first responders, and administrators.

One particular objection one can raise to Anderson’s book is the fact that almost every single area of the world is marked by geographical or natural disasters. One would be hard pressed to find one area of the world that at one point or another did not suffer a natural disaster that can somehow be translated into a narrative that becomes part of its national identity. We could think of the United States and its long list of fires, earthquakes, floods, and many other naturally occurring phenomena. According to Anderson, “Latin America is a landscape largely inscribed by disaster: it is a geography molded by violent geological cataclysm inlaid with the cultural interpretation of its human inhabitants” (7). This statement implies that there is something inherently different in Latin America that makes natural disaster part of the ideology and the system of beliefs of these people. Although he provides a number of reasons, it is an over-generalization to think that a group of people is more likely to consider natural disasters as part of their ideological or teleological system. In his conclusion, Anderson articulates better this point, finding a balance between the multiple uses of disaster narratives. One important point to consider is the reception of these narratives by the different audiences involved. Usually the victims themselves are not the readers or the intended audience of these texts, and when they happen to read these narratives their response is different from the one intellectuals or experts may have. Even further, the readings Anderson is performing of these texts may be diametrically different from the authorial intention or the traditional interpretation usually accepted. That does not mean, of course, that we are dealing here with misreading of these chronicles, poems or novels, but it is something we need to keep in mind when we read these texts critically.

Nicasio Urbina
University of Cincinnati