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Abstract

Review of Martin Munro. *Writing on the Fault Line: Haitian Literature and the Earthquake of 2010*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014.

Keywords

Haiti, Haitian, earthquake, literature

Martin Munro. *Writing on the Fault Line: Haitian Literature and the Earthquake of 2010*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014. 254 pp.

In addition to his already impressive contributions to the study of Haitian literature—including authoring *Exile and Post-1946 Haitian Literature: Alexis, Depestre, Ollivier, Laferrière, Danticat*; editing *Haiti Rising: Haitian History, Culture and the Earthquake of 2010*; and co-editing *American Creoles: The Francophone Caribbean and the American South*—Martin Munro has compiled in his latest work a full accounting of the wide range of literary expressions now firmly associated with Haiti’s 2010 earthquake. Logically and appreciatively structured in such a way as to cover the initial reporting and personal testimonies of the disaster by several well-known authors before transitioning to the more purely fictionalized interpretations of the event, this densely packed volume brims with cogently written analyses of situational, historical, literary, and personalized background material on the chosen authors, their texts, Haiti, disasters in general, and the earthquake itself.

The book’s introduction, entitled “Reading the Ruins,” immediately provides the reader with thought-provoking, fundamental questions regarding the overall explicit effects of a seismic disaster on its most visible victims and, more broadly, on the victimized society at large. They are cited here since they form the very foundation of Munro’s text and because he is true to address each of the inquiries throughout the volume: “What are the effects of a catastrophic earthquake on a society, its culture and politics? Which of these effects are temporary and which endure? Are the various effects immediately discernible, or do they manifest themselves over time? What is the relationship between natural disasters and social change? What roles do artists, and writers in particular, have in witnessing, bearing testimony to, and gauging the effects of natural disasters” (2)? These are at once preliminary and soul-searching questions that not only scholars of Haitian culture and literature like Munro have been pondering since January 12, 2010, but they also are representative of broader inquiries put forth by the world community as it tries to adequately evaluate “the most destructive and deadly” disaster in Haiti’s history, which killed over two hundred thousand and left more than one million homeless (5). The book’s introduction also provides an informative review of the litany of disasters the island of Hispaniola has endured since its colonization by Spain five centuries ago. Additionally, in this section there is a noteworthy discussion of the notion of a permanent state of catastrophe put forth by Haitian sociologist Laënnec Hurbon and is a provocative counter to the well-worn but still actively circulating Haitian curse theory.

Of immense interest for many readers will be the firsthand personal accounts presented in Chapter 1: “Going Public: The Post-earthquake Essay” of the minutes, days, weeks, and months immediately following the quake. These entries,

accompanied by the author's salient commentary, include studies of post-quake works by such notables as Dany Laferrière, Rodney Saint-Eloi, Yanick Lahens, Gary Victor, and Edwidge Danticat. Particularly conscious of the diasporic author's unique position with respect to the event, Munro rightfully digs deep into the potentially confused perspective of an immigrant writer such as Danticat, whose struggle to comment on a catastrophe as an absent observer while being made simultaneously its spokesperson puts into perspective the challenges brought on by the duality of her cultural heritage and authorial obligations. Additionally, there is an interesting analysis of the two published versions of Laferrière's text, *Tout bouge autour de moi* (*The World is Moving Around Me*), highlighting not only the author's penchant for rewriting his work in general, but underscoring the possible interpretive effects that distance and time have had on the writer.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus contrastively on the earliest post-quake works of well-established writers and new-to-the-scene Haitian authors who bring unique themes and forms of narration to quake texts. Specifically, Munro sees the contributions of Makenzy Orcel and Marvin Victor, two authors who came of age at the time of the quake's strike, as works of "the new frontier" (120). By comparison, Munro's reading of the post-quake novel *Aux Frontières de la Soif* (*At the Frontiers of Thirst*), written by one of Haiti's most prominent authors, Kettly Mars, is a key contrast since the novel perfectly illustrates the decision by many established authors not to write specifically about the catastrophic elements of the event itself. Instead Mars preferred to probe post-quake child sexual exploitation which regularly took place in the hastily built, lawless tent city of Canaan, ruthlessly facilitated by local pimps preying on economically desperate families.

Another of Mars's creation, *Le Prince noir de Lillian Russell* ('The Black Prince of Lillian Russell'), co-authored with Leslie Péan, is described in Chapter 4 along with other "non-event" works from authors such as Lyonnel Trouillot and Emmelie Prophète (143). This chapter aims to underscore the reasons and possible motivations for authors deciding not to write in any way about the quake and yet puts forth ideas about how these works tellingly compare with the authors' previous writings. Finally, in Chapter 5, Munro tackles the question of the soul as it appears in post-quake poetry. It offers analysis of the poetic creations of Saint-Eloi, Raymond Chassagne, James Noël, Georges Castera, and Makenzy Orcel, demonstrating the renaissance of the genre that post-quake poetry represents. The book's conclusion reflects broadly on the theme of the land in Haitian writings and notes quite optimistically the establishment of a promising new literary journal, *IntranQu'ïllités*, which will no doubt usher in innovative literary creations while respectfully continuing to "speak the language of the earthquake" (227).

Those interested in Haitian culture and its rich literature will not be disappointed with Munro's gathering and assessment of post-quake writings. With his meticulous, thoughtful analysis, he delivers on the level he so frequently equates

with mastery in the very works he analyzes: that of writers who bond (*faire corps*) with the people and moments they hope to describe (44). Indeed this volume serves to demonstrate just how close of a rapport Munro has with the effort to narrate one of the most devastating natural disasters of our era. It is a scholarly *tour de force* for our times.

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