Thirsting to Write

*Ketty Mars’s Aux Frontières de la soif and the Haitian Postearthquake Novel*

**Martin Munro**
Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics
Florida State University
Tallahassee FL 32306-1540, U.S.A.
mmunro@fsu.edu

**Abstract**

What constitutes a Haitian postearthquake novel? Does such a work require the author to present to a greater or lesser degree people and situations that relate to the disaster and its ongoing effects? Is a work written after the earthquake but which does not mention it still a postearthquake novel? This article engages with some of the issues facing Haitian writers following the earthquake through a close discussion of a novel that does in fact write directly of the disaster and its aftermath: Ketty Mars’s *Aux frontières de la soif*.

**Keywords**

Haiti – earthquake – literature – memory

What constitutes a Haitian postearthquake novel? Does such a work require the author to present to a greater or lesser degree people and situations that relate to the disaster and its ongoing effects? Is a work written after the earthquake but which does not mention it still a postearthquake novel? Haitian novels published since 2010 in fact fall into two broad categories: those that write about the earthquake, and those that do not. In the former category are works such as Marvin Victor’s *Corps mêlés*, Makenzy Orcel’s *Les Immortelles*, and Gary Victor’s *Le Sang et la mer*, while the latter includes Lyonel Trouillot’s *La belle amour humaine*, Ketty Mars and Leslie Péan’s *Le Prince noir de Lillian Russell*, and Évelyne Trouillot’s *La mémoire aux abois*. This article engages with some
of the issues facing Haitian writers following the earthquake through a close discussion of a novel that does in fact write directly of the disaster and its aftermath: Kettly Mars’s *Aux frontières de la soif*, a work that presents a writer figure who struggles to write and who appears traumatized by the event and uncertain of his place and role in a time of disaster.

In an important postearthquake article, Junot Díaz writes on the various meanings associated with the term apocalypse: first, the real or imagined end of the world; second, the catastrophes that are said to resemble the final end time, such as Chernobyl or the Holocaust; and third, a disruptive event that leads to revelation.1 Quoting James Berger, Díaz argues that in order for the event to be truly apocalyptic, it must bring to light “the true nature of what has been brought to end.” Díaz’s interest lies in this third definition, the ways in which disasters are revelations, for if catastrophes have a value it is that in causing things to fall apart “they also give us a chance to see the aspects of our world that we as a society seek to run from, that we hide behind veils of denials.” In particular, Díaz refers to the unequal power structures, corruption, and injustice that create the conditions for a disaster to have such devastating consequences.

Apocalypse is to Díaz “a darkness that gives us light,” which invites the observer of a disaster to see in the dark and become in his terms a “ruin-reader.” The disaster, Díaz says, revealed Haiti to the world, exposing the extreme living conditions of the vast majority of the population, the damage to the natural environment, and the weaknesses of political and social institutions. As such, disasters “don’t just happen,” and are “made possible” by the social conditions in which a natural event takes place. Díaz cites the Asian tsunami of 2004 as one such “social disaster,” made possible by the destruction of coral reefs and mangrove forests, which act as natural barriers to tsunamis. Hurricane Katrina was also for Díaz a social disaster that highlighted the economic marginalization of African Americans and the Bush administration’s decision to sell to developers hundreds of square miles of wetlands, thereby devastating New Orleans’s natural defenses. Díaz places the Haitian event within this context of contemporary global disaster. Haiti is for Díaz exemplary, in that its history can be read as a “long road to ruination,” in which are complicit the French colonials, foreign capitalists, the United States, Haitian dictators, and the United Nations.

---

Díaz sees the Haitian event as, in large part, a consequence of the “capitalist experiment” that has rendered Haiti all the more vulnerable to the vagaries of financial and other markets and led to a drop in per capita GDP from around $2,100 in 1980 to $1,045 in 2009. This is, he says, a “cannibal stage” in the history of modern capitalism, in which the enrichment of the elites is achieved at the expense of all other economic and social groups: the middle classes, working classes, and the poorest sectors. Haiti is a prescient, even prophetic case in that it was the site of the plantation “big bang” that set the world on the road to its current condition, also termed by Díaz as a “zombie stage,” where entire nations are transformed by “economic alchemy into not-quite alive.”

The Haitian apocalypse is not to Díaz the end of this particular road; rather, he sees it again as a form of prophecy of a future general economic, social, and environmental breakdown. Such an outcome is the “logical conclusion” of the current course of the planet, as he puts it and would enact “the transformation of our planet into a Haiti,” for “Haiti is not only the most visible victim of our civilization—Haiti is also a sign of what is to come.”

To avoid such a conclusion, Díaz insists that we “must stare into the ruins—bravely, resolutely—and we must see. And then we must act.” Writing a year after the earthquake, Díaz veers between hope and despair for the future prospects of Haiti and the broader world, and ends on a suitably ambiguous note, believing that the world will at some point “heed the ruins,” but not before the deaths of many millions more.

Ruins reading is an apposite term for the work this article carries out. To read ruins involves, as in Díaz’s essay, a form of divination, an attempt to read the future in the wreckage of the present. There are also risks involved in reading contemporary Haitian writing through the ruins. The term postearthquake Haitian literature may appear as an obvious and natural descriptor for writing since 2010, but it also is potentially a trap for authors and readers alike, in that it imposes a label and a category on a diverse range of works, some of which deal directly with the earthquake, while others do not at all. Authors should not be obliged to write about the earthquake or any other theme, nor should readers expect to find in every written work references to the disaster. In this sense, ruins reading risks reducing Haitian writing to a single theme and thereby, one might say, ruining the reading.

In a session at a conference at Florida State University in February 2013, Kettly Mars talked about precisely these issues. Referring to her latest novel,
Aux frontières de la soif, she expressed her displeasure that the work had been classed a postearthquake novel. She said that, following the earthquake, she had vowed to herself that she would not write a novel about the earthquake, because that is what was expected of all writers. A year after the earthquake, however, she was on a tap-tap on the way to the port to take a boat to the island of Gonave, and looked to the hills to see the makeshift camp that had been established there shortly after the earthquake. She asked about the camp, and was told it was known as Canaan, a name she had heard of, but had apparently not seen in such close proximity. “Profoundly shocked,” she subsequently became “obsessed” by the place, and the later writing of the novel “imposed itself” on her; she did not choose to write it, she says. Her interest in the novel, she said, is not the facts and figures of the disaster, nor even the dead, but the lives of those who live with the disaster, across divides of class, color, and gender. Aux frontières de la soif is thus an important work in that it incorporates into its account of the disaster the dilemmas and reservations of an author figure, and makes the question of writing one of its most pressing and contradictory themes. The novel is perhaps unique among works since 2010 in its exploration of the stakes of writing and the condition of writers in a time of disaster. As such, the work itself exists in a sense at a kind of frontier, that between the writer and the devastated reality that seems to at once render meaningless any form of art, and challenge artists to engage with it, and as Díaz suggests, read critically the ruins.

As Mars suggests, Aux frontières de la soif is something of a book of mourning, but it is primarily a work that situates itself among the living, those in the camps as well as the more privileged classes. This focus on the living is signaled in the book’s dedication to “the survivors of the earthquake of 12 January 2012.” The novel is less interested in the past than in the present and the future, in reconstruction and potential salvation, rather than revisiting the historical causes of the disaster.

That said, its themes and motifs seem to echo certain longstanding figures in Haitian writing. Most notably, the theme of drought and thirst, both literal and metaphorical, appears to recall Roumain’s Gouverneurs de la rosée, only here there is no mythical returning hero to save the community, only a flawed, self-destructive writer figure who appears powerless to stop his descent into complete dissolution. Also, more obliquely, the motif of frontiers, related to shifting identities, and the prominence of prostitution call to mind Alexis’s L’Espace d’un cillement. The events of Alexis’s novel take place in a suburb of Port-au-Prince called the Frontier, which is a kind of cultural threshold or meeting place, an indeterminate, transitional space in between national spaces, chiefly Haiti and Cuba (Munro 2007:64–65). In Mars’s novel, too, the newly created
camp Canaan is a site of crossing, an intermediate zone on the peripheries but at the same time central to the emerging reality of postearthquake Haiti. The place and its people are at the frontiers of this new reality, apparently unable to look back and yet hesitant before the future, which appears like a daunting threshold, a border beyond which seems to lie an uncertain, unknowable time to come.

The book is set in January 2011, one year after the disaster, and opens with the protagonist Fito Belmar traveling by car to a rendezvous with two men. It is a journey into darkness, which is, again, both literal and metaphorical: when the two men board Fito’s Jeep, “the night engulfs the vehicle’s cabin” (Mars 2013:13). Indeed, it is a voyage to what may be termed the contemporary heart of darkness: the makeshift camps that sprang up following the earthquakes. As he drives, the “vegetation progressively disappeared” (Mars 2013:13), which suggests that this is a journey not only from (muted) light to darkness, but also from (damaged, diminished) nature to an arid, de-natured place and existence. The men pass first Corail, a relatively ordered camp, set up by foreign soldiers. Their destination is however Canaan, which is by contrast, “perfect anarchy,” a sprawling encampment high up on the hillside (Mars 2013:14). Canaan is largely a creation of the earthquake, a site near Cité Soleil to which thousands of the city’s displaced population fled following the disaster, despite there being no infrastructure, running water or sanitation. The biblical connotations of the name suggest a displaced people, driven out of its home territory, and into a form of exile. The arid, barren landscape reinforces the sense that this is a kind of desert, populated by a people cast out from the city. A “dry and lonely place,” it was claimed as a “promised land” on the day following the earthquake by a few hundred displaced people (Mars 2013:15). To Fito, it is a name associated with ideas of “exodus and desert, of milk and honey, but above all of bile and malediction” (Mars 2013:156). It is moreover to him a “country lost at the frontiers of thirst” (Mars 2013:157), a reference to the book’s title and to the idea that individuals and communities are living at the limits, and that everyone “thirsts” in different ways. A year later, there are 80,000 living in the camp, and it has its own economy, with everything for sale from water to bread, to security service, drugs, and sex.

It is for sex that Fito travels to Canaan, which to him is a “heaven in hell,” which offers “an unspeakable joy,” in the form of young girls forced to pros-

---

stitute themselves (Mars 2013:17). In Canaan, he “is no one ... nowhere,” lost and escaped from his own world and his concerns over his work in disaster reconstruction, his writer’s block, and his failing personal relationships (Mars 2013:17). This is his sixth visit; each one is a “beginning and an end” for him, an experience that leaves him “exalted, but uneasy” (Mars 2013:18). In the body of the pre-adolescent girl he finds a form of salvation, and a means of satiating his thirst; her flesh is likened to “the head of a spring,” a reference that further recalls the idea of drought, and more indirectly the themes and motifs of *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, only here the wholesome lovemaking of Manuel and Annaïse becomes a tragic episode of abuse and despair (Mars 2013:21).

For all that his visits to Canaan render him by definition a pedophile, the novel does not set up a straightforward moral context in which to judge the protagonist. Rather, it creates a kind of intimacy with Fito, through narrative techniques such as free indirect discourse, and through presenting some of the factors that seem to have pushed him to his own frontiers, the very limits of himself as a person. Perhaps most significantly, he is in mourning for friends lost during the earthquake: he wonders how he will replace his friend Jacques, and asks himself, in free indirect discourse “When would he be able to mourn?” (Mars 2013:25). Also, when asked by his friend Franck about his visits to Canaan, he does not know how to respond, but thinks immediately of the cracks left by the earthquake in his ceiling, that he knows “by heart,” and wonders why he has not repaired the cracks a year after they appeared (Mars 2013:78). He feels a degree of survivor guilt, and wonders why his ceiling held out while Jacques’s did not (Mars 2013:78). This is significant as it suggests he has not yet begun to properly mourn the dead, and that he is still, a year after the earthquake, in a kind of shock.

One of Mars’s strengths as an author is that she considers in great depth and with great acuity some of the underlying issues that surface in times of crisis, most notably the sexual relations that are often distorted by such events, or indeed further distorted, as she is careful to suggest that the crises largely emphasize already existing patterns of sexuality and social relations. Thus, Fito’s sorties to Canaan are presented as part of a broader tendency on behalf of “those bourgeois gentlemen of a certain age to quench their nostalgia, their frustrations and their anxiety over aging in the nubile bodies of young so-called orphan girls. Who liked to get up close to the people, to balance themselves with the smell, the words, the vibrations of the children of the people.”[^4] The sexual relations thus indicate something of the uneven social

---

[^4]: Mars 2013:26. Fito’s friends are later described as being fundamentally similar to him, “loving
and cultural relations between the middle class and the poor. The latter, for all their marginalization, are still implicitly considered the “heart” of the nation, while Canaan is to Fito a place of birth and belonging, a “womb” as he puts it (Mars 2013:26). In a sense, Mars explores in this novel the reverse side of the sexual relations that she presents in *Saisons sauvages*: the lower-classes’ apparent fascination for the light-skinned bourgeois woman (Mars 2010). In this case, it is the bourgeois male’s desire for the poor young female that is presented. In both cases, one senses that history creates social tensions and unequal living relations that are played out though not ultimately resolved through sexuality. Times of crisis—the Duvalier period in *Saisons sauvages* or the postearthquake moment in this novel—accentuate these underlying relations and indeed push them and those caught up in them to the limits, opening up in Fito in particular the “fault line at the center of his being” (Mars 2013:28).

Fito’s sexual impotence—he says he can only “be a man” with the young girls from Canaan (Mars 2013:26)—is related to his other major issue: his inability to write. The author of one highly successful novel, he has not written anything for five years, and suffers from a case of writer’s block that leads him to drink to excess (Mars 2013:30). Alcohol is more generally used in the novel to block out memory and to escape from the present; in a later restaurant scene, the narrator describes how “ice cubes clinked in glasses of forgetting” (Mars 2013:50). By its nature, however, alcohol does little to satisfy the various forms of thirst that the novel explores. In Fito’s case, it does not help him to rediscover the “obsession” that led him to write his first novel, and he “was dying slowly” from that unsatisfied need (Mars 2013:33). It appears that his obsession with the young girls of Canaan is related to the unfulfilled need to write, that the former are means of satiating the latter. This is quite a provocative idea, that writing can be in some senses a substitute for sex, and vice versa. Also, it seems to raise the issue of the writer figure’s relationship to the people, and to suggest that writing may itself be a form of exploitation, especially when one writes of a people in such a desperate condition. This issue is raised directly when Fito argues with his partner and she accuses him of exploiting the people’s suffering. “Because now you have found a juicy contract thanks to the earthquake,” she says, “and are making money on the backs of those poor people who have lost everything, you think you are something” (Mars 2013:70). The novel in effect

---

fresh flesh, and saving their last illusions between the thighs of the false school kids or the semi-virgins that one found a dime a dozen on the streets of Port-au-Prince” (Mars 2013:7).
explores the ambivalent situation of the writer and writing in an extreme social situation. What is the worth of writers and writing in postearthquake Haiti, the novel seems to ask.

This question is further explored through the character Tatsumi, a female Japanese scholar of Francophone Caribbean literature, who arrives in Haiti to write a story on the country a year after the earthquake. A writer herself, she makes her living from working on the Caribbean, and in this case her work is given more prominence through the disaster, and as such her position is somewhat similar to Fito’s. Just as one is led to reflect on the worth of creative writing in postearthquake Haiti, so scholarly work is presented as a fundamentally ambivalent activity, feeding off and in a sense thirsting for the increased attention and prominence that the earthquake brings to Haiti, and by extension to scholars working on Haiti. She is immediately related to the book’s central metaphor through the statement that “Beneath her little innocent air, she was without a doubt thirsting for strong sensations” (Mars 2013:32). Her thirst is related to Fito, who she thinks is a “wonderful writer,” and to Haiti itself, a year after the earthquake. There is a form of doubled or reversed exoticism at play, in that the “Oriental” woman considers Haiti to be something of an exotic other, and a place of possible sexual encounter (with Fito), while in Haiti she stands out as different and other, an “exotic bird,” as one of Fito’s friend describes her (Mars 2013:40). To Fito, she is difficult to fully comprehend; she retains an inscrutability that unsettles him, and makes him wonder “where he stood” with her (Mars 2013:44). Perhaps more disconcertingly, she is obliquely related to the young girls that Fito desires, in that she is described as “without age,” and with the body of a child, a “woman child” as she is described (Mars 2013:34).

Despite the misery and suffering that exist there, Canaan is also something of an exotic escape for Fito. When he goes there, he finds himself speaking the language of the people, in “a world with different codes from his own, which assaulted and fascinated him” (Mars 2013:82). In Canaan, he “let his masks slip, he was like them, he was them, without protocols or falseness” (Mars 2013:82). He seeks there a cure for the “illness of the soul” that he suffers from, a refuge in the “innocence” of the young girls, even if he has to “profane” that innocence to satisfy his own thirst (Mars 2013:82). On his seventh visit to Canaan he has a kind of revelation that seems to shake him out of his obsession with the place and the young girls. He pulls his car into a gas station and is struck by the everyday activities that go on there: the attendants selling gas, people buying water and ice, the music coming from the snack bar (Mars 2013:83). “There was light and life” in the gas station, and he “marvels” at it, taking deep breaths “as if he was emerging from a long apnea” (Mars 2013:84). Shaken from his previous
condition, he calls an old friend to set up a trip to his beach house, and invites Tatsumi to accompany him.

In contrast to Fito, Tatsumi is able to write, and her article is “taking shape” following her visits to Léogâne and Jacmel (Mars 2013:99). She will not however complete the article before returning to Tokyo, for she feels that she needs “distance between her and the reality that she had touched with her own hands” (Mars 2013:99). While she needs physical space between her and her subjects in order to write, Fito, it appears, requires time before he can write of the earthquake. Also, her ability to leave Haiti allows her to write, while Fito, and by extension other Haitian authors live the consequences of the event every day, and have no physical distance between them and the buildings and lives destroyed by it. Through Tatsumi, one also gains an outsider’s perspective on Haiti a year after the earthquake. To her, Haiti is a “fascinating country that could bewitch a foreigner for good or bad reasons. A country that could also shock and cause one to retreat away from it indefinitely” (Mars 2013:100). The best approach, the narrator suggests, was to “take it as you find it and above all not let oneself be overtaken by pity or shame, which creates a distance with others” and to “look the people in the eyes, be wary but speak to them, touch their humanity, and decode their priceless smiles” (Mars 2013:100). It is only however through leaving the city that Tatsumi begins to understand Fito, and that their relationship starts to develop.

The journey they undertake is more than a simple trip to the sea; it is a means for Fito of reconnecting with the Haitian countryside and nature, and of affirming that the places of memory are still there, following the disaster. There is a precision in the description of the places they pass, just as there is throughout the novel in recording the specific time that certain events happen, which suggests that the earthquake has changed the characters’ relationship to time and space: it is as if, despite or because of all the death and destruction, they are living and seeing the place anew. On their journey to the sea, each place they pass is named: the place names are detailed in an apparent affirmation of their continued existence, and again, as if they are being seen for the first time. Passing Léogâne, Fito chooses not to think about the many who died there during the earthquake, and thus he takes “a break from that pain for a moment” (Mars 2013:104). As the small towns and communities pass—Grand Goave, Petit-Goave, Miragoâne, Les Cayes—Fito realizes that he had been “obsessed by Port-au-Prince and its despondency,” and considers the trip to be like “escaping from prison” (Mars 2013:105).

The journey is a reaffirmation of place, and a reconnection with nature, and with the land, whose rich humus odor they breathe in as they cross the plain of Les Cayes (Mars 2013:105). In the dry season, rivers run “soft and clear”
The blue sea guides them to their destination; and coconut and banana trees, oaks, and flowers line the route, while the “dense vegetation” of the hillsides “seemed to open up to let them pass” (Mars 2013:106). The visual images of nature are accompanied by the “song of the sea,” a rhythmic sound that rises and falls with the movements of the waves and the wind (Mars 2013:107). Their destination is Abricots, the small town at the end of the southwestern peninsula of the country, and a kind of hidden haven, “the secret” as the narrator describes it (Mars 2013:106).

The destination is in fact the same as that of the narrator of Dany Laferrière’s pre-earthquake work, L’Énigme du retour. In Laferrière’s book, the narrator travels to Abricots as part of his process of mourning for his dead father. To Laferrière’s narrator, Abricots is also something of a secret, the place thought of as “paradise” by the Arawaks (Laferrière 2009:297). As in Mars’s novel, Abricots is a place to which the protagonist escapes the city, and renews his connection with a forgotten Haiti, and the natural world, the trees touching the sea, the red fish wriggling in the fishermen’s boats, the children devouring sweet mangoes, the “languorous life of the time before Columbus” (Laferrière 2009:297). In both cases, too, Abricots seems to exist in another time. Mars’s narrator describes the colonial cemetery, and the “sense of peaceful eternity” that existed there (Mars 2013:108). Significantly, the precise recording of time that occurs when writing of the city is replaced by more vague, impressionistic mentions of time that draw on the position of the sun and the changing effects of the light. For instance, when they arrive at Abricots, Mars’s narrator writes of the sun “tilting already toward the horizon,” and how it was a “moment of warm and golden light” that signaled the “first quivers of the shadows” (Mars 2013:109). Unsure of whether he is in a “real time” in Abricots, Laferrière’s narrator steps into this world he has long dreamed of, reposing in this pre-Columbian haven for three months to cure himself of the rhythms of urban life, to no longer think of his existence as a constant alternation between polar opposites, winter and summer, north and south, and to discover at last “spherical life,” as he puts it (Laferrière 2009:297, 298). Cradled by the “old Caribbean wind,” he sleeps with a smile on his face, like he did when he was a child living with his grandmother, a time that “has finally come back” (Laferrière 2009:299, 300). Thus returned by and through nature to this previous sense of himself and his place in the world, he pronounces finally the phrase that expresses the secret wish—or fear—of every traveler or exile: “It is the end of the journey” (Laferrière 2009:300).

For all that it situates itself among the living, Mars’s novel is also in a sense a work of mourning, though not so much for one individual as for the many thousands who died during the earthquake. In both cases, it is suggested that nature has a restorative quality, both for individuals and the entire population,
and that the natural world has been largely forgotten and neglected in the mass urbanization that has characterized recent Haitian history. While in Laferrière’s work Abricots marks the end of the physical and emotional journey, in Mars’s novel it signals only the beginning of the process of mourning and reflection that the character Fito undergoes. There is no easy movement from urban confusion to pastoral serenity. Instead, the “sudden freedom and abrupt solitude frightened Fito” (Mars 2013:111). He suffers from not having things to do or deadlines to meet, and cannot immediately “escape from the world” (Mars 2013:111). The city, and more specifically Canaan, “was calling him” (Mars 2013:111). The “euphoria” of arriving at Abricots dissipates quickly, and the natural elements, the sea and the sky, are respectively “too vast” and “too close to his head,” while the wind “imprisons” him, and two vultures, “sinister and majestic” circle above, apparent signals of the troubles that continue to surround him (Mars 2013:112).

The presence of Tatsumi seems to prevent him from fully retreating into the “other Fito” (Mars 2013:115), the part of him that is fixated on Canaan and the young girls there. The laughter of some young children she meets on the beach “drilled into his eardrums,” and their carefree nature “hurt him,” leading him to wonder where the insouciance of the Canaan children had gone: “Did they not have the same cries of happiness hidden in their bodies? How can a single land create so many frontiers?” (Mars 2013:123). As such, Tatsumi moves between and across these frontiers, making Fito aware of their presence, and giving him an outsider’s perspective on social boundaries that seem to him fixed elements that imprison him, apparently compelling him to act as he does. Tatsumi also unknowingly disrupts and challenges his fixation with young girls. Again, her body is to him like that of a “very young child,” a reminder of the girls in Canaan, but without the aura of taboo and danger that seems to attract him to that place (Mars 2013:131). It is perhaps this missing element that renders him impotent in his initial sexual encounter with Tatsumi, during which he feels that “a part of himself, the essential part of his being, would abandon him en route” (Mars 2013:131). While in Canaan he feels like a “demi-god,” anywhere else his virility fails and he is impotent in virtually every area of his life (Mars 2013:133).

Prompted by Tatsumi, Fito speaks of the effects of living from day to day with the reality of the camps, and indicates some of the contradictory effects of doing so. “Either you immerse yourself in it to help in one way or another,” he says to her, “or you make out you see nothing, through cynicism or being crushed by powerlessness” (Mars 2013:156). The general desolation, he continues, “engenders a violence and a corruption that always catch up with us and strike us in unexpected ways” (Mars 2013:156).

His lost virility is one of the “unexpected” effects of the earthquake, and is related to his inability to write. As a means of curing his obsession with Canaan
he considers writing about it, and thinks of “vomiting over white pages all that pain, all those emotions that lacerated his skin, that immense human misery” (Mars 2013:135). The implied relationship between sex and writing in this case further suggests that his forays into Canaan are motivated by a mix of anger, helplessness, and pity that he feels he can only assuage by abusing the very objects of his pity, that because he feels powerless to preserve the innocence of the young girls he feels compelled to destroy it himself. The frontier between compassion and cruelty is thus far less clear than one might imagine, and it is suggested that both emotions may be provoked by extreme human misery and the degree to which one feels able to assuage that suffering. If one feels unable to help the object of pity, the novel seems to suggest, one may feel a need to destroy it completely.

Similarly, the desire to destroy is closely related to the impulse to create; and it is through writing that Fito finds finally a form of salvation. In a sequence that seems to finally affirm the ways in which readers, and outsiders, are important to writers in postearthquake Haiti, Tatsumi encourages him to “write all that pain ... let it run through your hands,” for it is through writing, she says to him, “that you will purge yourself of the anguish that I feel in you” (Mars 2013:158). As a reader, she has a kind of endless thirst, and she urges him to bring to life the people of the camps, to “speak Canaan” in order to take them out of misery and into “the community of men” (Mars 2013:158). The implied relationship between his sexual encounters with the young girls of Canaan and writing is further suggested through her idea that to write of the people is to “really enter into their skin,” a bodily metaphor that links his taking physical possession of the girls to taking possession of their stories through writing. The return to writing is also something of a return to nature, an idea that is suggested when Fito feels a sudden need to go to the sea, to “be alone” with it (Mars 2013:159). Swimming alone for hours, he feels that the “warm caress of the sea gave him an enormous sense of wellbeing” (Mars 2013:161). It is in the sea that he resolves to begin writing again, to be the “voice of those unknown, anonymous, lost lives, grains of sand thirsting for the ocean and eternity” (Mars 2013:162). It is this resolution that “finally frees him,” and which in turn cures his impotence, as he makes love to Tatsumi, an act narrated in metaphors of the sea: “he was still in the water, he was the water ... the waves carried him far ... he lost all notion of time and space and with her fell into an abyss” (Mars 2013:162). When he returns to the city, he is obsessed, no longer with going to Canaan, but with being at home, alone in his office and being able to write again. Sitting at his desk, he writes first, as he did with his first book, the title of the novel, which he types in bold letters: Aux frontières de la soif (Mars 2013:166). That his novel has the same title as Mars’s seems finally to suggest a degree of identification
between Mars and her fictional author: while the details of the Fito’s obsessions are part of the fictional narrative, his anguish over writing, powerlessness, and confusion over how to react to so much despair seem to resonate with Mars herself, and by extension to other Haitian authors, whose questioning of their own craft in the postearthquake period becomes the very heart of the work, a self-reflexive movement that is at turns dubious about the worth of writing (and writers) and certain of its essential function as a means of personal and collective salvation.

Although it was in many ways an “unthinkable” event, the 2010 earthquake has been followed by an explosion in writing about Haiti, by both Haitian and non-Haitian authors. In this regard, the earthquake is quite different from the revolution, which in Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s well-known phrase, “entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened” (Trouillot 1995:73). This was so, Trouillot says, as it was not generally believed by Europeans that enslaved Africans and their descendants could envision freedom, “let alone formulate strategies for gaining and securing such freedom” (Trouillot 1995:73). Foreign commentators read the news of the revolution “only with their ready-made categories,” which were “incompatible with the idea of a slave revolution” (Trouillot 1995:73). The key element for Trouillot is the “discursive context” in which the revolution took place, and the questions it raises for Haitian historiography: “If some events cannot be accepted even as they occur, how can they be assessed later? In other words, can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world within which these narratives take place? How does one write a history of the impossible?”

The sheer magnitude of the destruction and human suffering wreaked by the 2010 earthquake is perhaps in some regards even more “unthinkable” than the prospect of slaves rising against their masters in the late eighteenth century. And yet, in contrast to the revolution, there has been no scholarly, journalistic, or other narrative silence on the earthquake; on the contrary the number of works published by foreign authors in particular has led Matthew J. Smith to note that it is a “peculiar feature” of Haitian historiography that production of new works often increases following a national crisis (Smith 2013:203). It has also led the journalist Jonathan Katz to question his motivations for writing on postearthquake Haiti and to wonder “whether the world really needs another American’s personal account of living in Haiti” (Katz 2013:4). It is

---

5 Trouillot 1995:73. Nick Nesbitt (2013:274) challenges Trouillot’s claim that the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable and argues that “Kant’s defense of the French Revolution and Jacobinism renders the Haitian sequence eminently thinkable, if one only considers the slaves of Saint-Domingue as a priori human.”
not only Americans who have written on postearthquake Haiti, and not only academics and journalists; the French novelist and poet Lionel-Édouard Martin published one of the earliest postearthquake testimonies, *Le Tremblement*, while the Guadeloupean author Ernest Pépin set his 2011 novel *Le Soleil pleurait* in Haiti, and the Radio Canada costume designer Diane Lavoie published in 2013 an autobiographical account of her adoption of a Haitian orphan, entitled *Tremblement de mère*.6

In Haiti, too, where one might have expected authorial silence before the unthinkable reality of the earthquake, there has been a virtual cacophony of voices, some of them established (Ketty Mars, Lyonel Trouillot, and Évelyne Trouillot), others relatively new and enjoying unprecedented prominence since 2010 (Marvin Victor, James Noël, and Makenzy Orcel). The reason for such a proliferation of writing, compared to the long silence around the revolution, lies in the different discursive contexts: while the notion of a successful slave revolt was inconceivable for many two centuries ago, the reality of endless disaster in Haiti has in a sense prepared contemporary authors for the task of writing about a large-scale cataclysm.7

The experience of living with repeated disasters is termed a condition of “permanent catastrophe” by the Haitian sociologist Laënnec Hurbon. Recognizing the apparent contradiction in the term, Hurbon writes that if every disaster supposes a rupture in time and experience, one should also be aware of the “before and after of the catastrophe” (Hurbon 2012b:8). Disasters strike so often in Haiti—from the floods in Gonaïves in 2004 to the 2010 earthquake to the cholera epidemic to hurricanes Sandy and Isaac in 2012—that the population “risks taking as natural every calamity” (Hurbon 2012b:9). One effect of living in permanent catastrophe is that the memory of the most deadly of these events, the 2010 earthquake, fades quickly and the event loses its distinctiveness. One has the impression, Hurbon writes in 2012, that nothing happened on January 12, 2010, and that a “leap has been skillfully made beyond that date” (Hurbon 2012b:8). The constant denial and annulment of the disaster leads to the general “permanent installation in catastrophe” (Hurbon 2012b:9).

This condition of permanent disaster has important political dimensions, for as Hurbon argues at the heart of the situation “the leaders of the state seem to worry only about how to stay in power” (Hurbon 2012b:9). Disasters are moreover “godsends” for those in power in that they give the politicians a source of

---

6 For two excellent reviews of scholarly work on Haiti since 2010, see Smith 2013 and Forsdick 2013.

legitimacy, which otherwise they would not have. There is even a “desire for disasters” in government, as these events allow the leaders to present themselves as victims to the international community, and to discharge their responsibilities in the economic, social, cultural, and political life of Haiti (Hurbon 2012b:9). To live in a state of permanent disaster means that individual events are not memorialized in a way that would consign them to the past and allow a sense of time other than that characterized by catastrophe: people live, Hurbon says, “without a perceptible future” and “in the condition of being superfluous (floating between life and death)” (Hurbon 2012b:10). Hurbon points out that the government has no interest in a memorial for the 2010 earthquake, and as such the disaster is not considered past, but part of the catastrophic present (Hurbon 2012b:9). This in turn has serious consequences for notions of reconstruction, as to be in a permanent state of catastrophe is to forget any time in which disaster was not a daily reality, and to lose awareness of what was there before to be reconstructed. As Hurbon puts it, the causes of permanent disaster are as much political as environmental (Hurbon 2012b:10). Indeed, the various signs of environmental degradation—deforestation, pollution, and so on—can be read as “the expression of the failure of the Haitian state” (Hurbon 2012b:10).

In the absence of a functioning state and a coherent state discourse Haitian intellectuals such as Hurbon and authors such as Kettly Mars have a particular prominence, and bear a particular responsibility. Indeed, intellectual discourse to a large extent compensates for the virtual lack of state leadership and what Patrick Sylvain terms the “executive silence” on issues of citizenship, politics, and human rights (Sylvain 2013:90). Haitian literature in particular has tradi-

---

8 Hurbon 2012b: 9. Jonathan Katz (2013:207) suggests that disasters are also godsend for donors, who by late March 2012 had delivered less than half of the long-term funding pledged for 2010 and 2011. Donor countries, he argues, let President René Préval carry the blame for the lack of reconstruction. He also says that with the huge logistical costs of the relief operation, “much of the money was a stimulus program for the donor countries themselves” (Katz 2013:206). He further critiques the overall achievements of the foreign relief programs: “Having sought above all to prevent riots, ensure stability, and prevent disease, the responders helped spark the first, undermine the second, and by all evidence caused the third” (Katz 2013:278).

9 See in this regard the excellent “Haiti Memory Project,” an online archive of testimonies about the earthquake. The project, somewhat unlike Hurbon assumes that earthquake is a point-zero in the lives of individual Haitians and in Haitian history; it is a moment that divided time into ‘before’ and ‘after;” http://haitimemoryproject.org (accessed October 24, 2013).

10 See also Hurbon’s critique of the “privatization of the state” (Hurbon 2012a).
tionally been a site in which are debated and explored many of the issues that the state ignores and appears unable to act upon. As J. Michael Dash writes, this is not a new phenomenon, as “literature served the function of critical consciousness in nineteenth-century Haiti” (Dash 1998:49). Furthermore, as Mark D. Anderson argues, natural disasters involve “human interaction with the environment and as such must be mediated through culture” (Anderson 2011:1). In Haiti literature has often been a privileged mediator in registering and memorializing natural and other disasters.

As such, Mars’s novel and those of other authors such as Lyonel Trouillot, Évelyne Trouillot, and Marvin Victor memorialize not only the earthquake of 2010, but the experience of ongoing catastrophe that has characterized recent Haitian history. The apocalyptic thread in much pre-earthquake writing in effect foresaw and at times forewarned of a future catastrophe, and as such served as a pretext for the present, preparing author and reader alike for the all-encompassing disaster to come. Apocalyptic events may well, as in Mars’s novel, unveil hidden elements in society, but in a state of permanent catastrophe that constant unveiling can have the effect of making the unveiled factors—social divisions, economic disparities, historical injustice—appear as natural and unpreventable as the storms, hurricanes, and earthquakes that have become both causes of and metaphors for the unending upheaval of an entire nation.

References