It is difficult to know how to speak about the ongoing outrages committed in Haiti, especially when disregard and disaster come under cover of humanitarian care. We are fortunate to have a book that helps us to know the limits of aid—a network of racism, corruption, and incompetence that sustains indignity and dependence instead of strengthening and empowering Haiti from within.

More than two hundred years after the first successful slave revolution in history freed Haiti from the colonialist yoke of France, the country remains subject to neocolonialist finance, political domination, and exploitation. Ever since independence in 1804, it has been the object of continued double-dealing and impediments from the outside. A brutal U.S. occupation (1915–1934) and a series of U.S.-sponsored dictatorships since then have created an endless cycle of political instability. Not to mention the backing of an elite dedicated to preserving its wealth at the expense of any real economic development or political progress in the country.

In Fault Lines, Beverly Bell finds the possibility of political progress in the places and with the persons most ignored. A number of us have asked: What went wrong with the postearthquake effort? Where did all the money go? But Bell asks instead: How can we “track the devastation”? She does more than lament the familiar though all-too-true tags of “disaster capital” and “global neo-colonialism,” giving the long history of the bungled reconstruction and tracing it to policies “that play out in very stark and gritty ways in the lives of the poor” (p. 27). And she clears the theoretical decks so that we hear again the individuals who have been successfully silenced, those last heard during the days when a young priest named Jean-Bertrand Aristide first turned to the Haitian majority, spoke to them, and made them count in the international arena.

Over three years after the earthquake, hundreds of thousands of Haitians remain homeless. The massive financial aid promised (some of it actually delivered) has built homes for fewer than ten thousand. Instead, economic development aid has benefited two sectors: foreign companies like the U.S.-sponsored Korean Sae-A and the globe-trotting elite of international aid workers, moving from one crisis to the next armed as always with their SUVs, luxury accommodation, inoculations against disease, and bottled water.

After working and living in Haiti for over thirty years, Bell bears witness to a shattered country. She introduces herself as a “linguistic and cultural
translator,” but adds: “As a middle-class, white, U.S. American woman, I have had the literacy, passport, funding, time, and many other resources to write this book, so that the truths of people who have none of those things could find the world” (p. 11). As we know from her numerous articles following the earthquake, the history that matters to her is that of the Haitian majority, many of whom do not write, who speak Creole, who work for just over three dollars a day in the factories of Port-au-Prince or live in the countryside, and who are still known as moun andeyo, “people outside,” meaning outside social value and outside the reach of economic benefits (p. 67).

Fault Lines (with a foreword by Edwidge Danticat) is a gift for recovery. Though I miss a fuller discussion of vodou and the latest governmental attempts to eradicate it, the book gives us the history that counts most in Haiti, in other so-called “under-developed” countries in the world, and, as Bell shows, in our own country—in her hometown of New Orleans after Katrina. Through her interviews and stories, we learn the details of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot called “the somber implications” of Haiti’s role “as the first testing ground of neocolonialism” (1990:57). We confront the staggering failure of the global relief effort and learn what that failure means to Haitians who suffer most from it.

We read of the plans of Haitian women, as well as of the Haitian majority, especially those who live on and through the land of their ancestors. We are introduced to the executive director of the Peasant Movement of Papaye and the executive secretary of the Haitian Platform to Advocate Alternative Development who fought to shift the rebuilding effort to the countryside, to consider sustainable peasant agriculture and food sovereignty. We read about the devastation caused by the dumping of white rice by U.S. agribusiness in Haiti. We hear the words of a farmer in the Artibonite Valley: “Since foreign rice has invaded Haiti, we plant our rice but we can’t sell it” (p. 128). He tells the American government, “Help us produce, don’t give us food. We have to be able to work. We’re not lazy” (p. 129). We read again about the massacre of the entire black or Creole pig population which deprived the rural majority of their only means of saving and survival. Instead of hardy black pigs, the United States exported to Haiti Iowa pigs whose elaborate care no peasant could afford.

Haiti’s future and that of its peasantry remain inseparable. As Bell writes, “Somewhere between 66 percent to 80 percent depend on small-scale agriculture” (p. 65). Trouillot has reflected on how peasants supported the lives and wealth of others both local and foreign: “It is not too much to suggest that the peasantry, almost alone, was subsidizing the Haitian state” (1985:12–13). If only the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank had taken seriously his analyses. Instead, their projects in the 1980s displaced farmers from the countryside and created a captive labor force in the
capital—development Taiwan-style. Living in the shantytowns on the hillsides, they became victims first of the multinational sweatshops there and, later, of the earthquake.

Local grassroots organizations were active right after what Haitians call goudougoudou, evenman (the event), or simply douz (twelve). They promised the meaningful development that numerous international aid institutions and projects have repeatedly failed to produce over the past two centuries. But the grassroots, as Bell painstakingly demonstrates, were shut out, silenced, and ignored.

Finally, her account of what was happening on the ground before Clinton’s Interim Haiti Recovery Commission (IHRC) and other foreign interest groups took reconstruction away from the Haitian majority is painful but necessary reading. We learn how management (and control) ultimately mattered more than helping Haitians to rebuild their country themselves. Bell asks us to re-interpret the “human” in terms like “human treatment” or “humanitarian.”

Reading Fault Lines, we learn a harsh lesson. U.N. peacekeeping forces in Haiti and other welfare bodies, nongovernmental organizations, and other charities provide the minimum conditions to keep alive the humanitarian crisis they confront. They preserve the status of Haitian citizens as somehow defective, powerless, and needy. The people themselves cease to exist except as abandoned individuals, ruled according to the ways and means of their abandonment. What Bell has accomplished in her remarkable book is nothing less than the reclamation of this majority who instruct us in a solidarity sorely lacking in our consumption-sated society. Though still in thrall to the greed of outsiders and a wealthy elite who regard them as savages or subhumans, they come before us in all their vitality and strength. They are tough, smart, and capable, and, of course, supremely—if perhaps, given their history, a little surprisingly—political. It is that politics that Bell understands, and she knows that it can in the end save Haiti from the experts.

Colin Dayan
Department of English, Vanderbilt University, Nashville TN 37235, U.S.A.
colin.dayan@vanderbilt.edu

References