Review Article

When Outsiders Tell the Tale *Narrating Haiti's Earthquake Catastrophe*

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Jonathan M. Katz, *The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 306 pp. (Paper US\$18.00)

Amy Wilentz, *Farewell, Fred Voodoo: A Letter from Haiti*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013. 352 pp. (Cloth US\$27.00)

Beyond the attention-grabbing of early texts that were slapped together before the dust of the debris could even settle in the wake of the 2010 earthquake which shook Haiti to its core, more thoughtful treatments have, of late, begun to emerge. Among untranslated texts by Haitian writers themselves, such as Yanick Lahens's metafictional text *Failles* (2011), which both recounts Lahens's eyewitness account of living through the earthquake and interweaves it with a fictional account of lost love among the ruins, or Kettly Mars's novel *Aux frontières de la soif* (2013),¹ a fictional account of life, death, and horror in a sprawling IDP (internally displaced persons) camp patterned against real-life accounts, are texts penned by American journalists like Jonathan Katz, who lived through the earthquake, and others who did not, like Amy Wilentz and

1 See Munro Martin's article, "Thirsting to Write" in *NWIG* 88(1&2).

activist Beverly Bell. Although this review focuses primarily on contrasting the work of Katz and Wilentz, readers of Bell's *Other Worlds* on-line blog, "Another Haiti is Possible," will recognize in her new book, *Fault Lines* (2013),² revised and extended versions of columns that appeared there, periodically, after the January 12, 2010 earthquake that locals, as Bell informs us, summarily call "douze" or "the event."

Bell's original pieces had the force of providing readers with both a lifeline to the ongoing events on the ground in the period of "reconstruction" shortly after the earthquake and accurate information as to what the average Haitian sought, hoped, and was fighting for, from the right to decent emergency health care, to housing, to the right to plant the seeds of their choice in their own soil. *Fault Lines*, then, does us another service, that is, to insist on providing as accurately detailed an account as possible of the effects of the earthquake and of foreign interference in the lives of Haitian women and peasants, the least heard from groups in the society. As such, her account is disquieting, forceful, and above all, a work of unrelenting integrity that is dedicated to the vision of the women and men who are given voice, directly, and often in their own words, within the pages of the text. And although Katz's eyewitness, researched, thoughtful account is worth a close reading, neither his nor Wilentz's text achieves this giving over of narrative authority to local Haitians that Bell attempts, and performs, in her work. We might well wonder, given the stalled "development" of Haiti reconstruction in the present, what outsider accounts achieve. At the same time as they seek to inform, they may also create a wall between those whose lives we seek to know better; they may, in the end, only reflect the writer's perspective, or, if we share their culture, our own, giving me pause in considering the degree to which such narratives will be useful in assisting average Haitians in being understood, or heard, beyond the confines of their nation.

Within this context, Amy Wilentz's book is troubling. This might be expected from a book whose title reminds us of American journalists' tendency to refer to native Haitians as "Fred Voodoo" (a pejorative term that Wilentz makes liberal use of throughout her text). Wilentz claims that "this book is about Haiti and its relation to the rest of the world, about Haiti's relationship with *us*" (p. 24, my emphasis). It becomes clear that the presumed audience for the book is privileged white Americans who may never have set foot outside of the United States, and even less in their own inner cities. Wilentz is giving us a tour of *her* Haiti, from earthquake-torn areas in Port-au-Prince to the wrap-around porch

2 Reviewed by Colin Dayan in *NWIG* 89(1&2).

of the Hotel Oloffson filled with its foreign dilettantes. As a journalist with an all-access pass to the upper echelons of Haitian society as the Duvalier regime fell to pieces and the Lavalas movement came to the fore, Wilentz covered Haiti off and on for roughly a decade and a half, until she fell from grace by exposing troubling aspects of Aristide's second term in a 2000 *New York Times Magazine* piece. The article made her *persona non grata* to the Aristide government and though she continued to write about Haiti (usually in hindsight) between 2000 and 2010, she did not spend any length of time in Haiti during that decade. When her first pieces in the wake of the earthquake started to appear (some of which reappear in the book), they were written with the jaded eye of a former consort, watching the fallen beloved from afar. There are jarring moments of self-indulgence, as when Wilentz describes her visit to IDP camps: "Just to be clear, I have never been frightened for a minute or even a second in the camps, and I've gone in alone, *I've gone in with my own Haitians*, I've gone in at night" (p. 55, my emphasis). Wilentz appears to be on a quest to reclaim her former position; she tells us a story of her visit to President Préval during the election of 2011, revealing that she had on her person a USB stick containing the OAS report regarding the outcome of the run-off elections, a report that had not yet been provided to Préval. She writes about having been "used to disseminate a report on Haitian elections before the president of the country had even seen it; to have been played like that in the white man's game, to be a white man party to the deception of a Haitian president, to trick the president, as if I were a player in Haiti's history, and he were not" (p. 251). Wilentz seems almost smug in this admission, as smug as when she boldly declares that she has no desire or intent to provide profits from the book to reconstruction efforts though she proclaims to have made an eighth of her income since then by profiting from the tragedy (p. 202).

Farewell is not so much a letter to Haiti as a letter from an aggrieved party to an unspecified foe. Other than Wilentz herself, the main protagonists are Sean Penn and Dr. Megan Coffee (who re-appears in Katz's work as well). Without taking away from Coffee's good works and devotion, it is still telling that such "outsider" narratives cannot speak of Haitian professionals who have similarly committed their lives and efforts to the cause of their fellow citizens despite a lack of resources and attention for decades upon decades; it is as if there are no Haitian doctors worth our attention. Although both Penn and Coffee have no doubt done great good in Haiti, one wonders why Haitians themselves don't figure more largely in Wilentz's plot—that is, until one remembers that this is a book about "us," not "Fred Voodoo." When Haitians appear, they are utilitarian, signposts indicating the degree to which Wilentz is lost or finds herself again. If anything, the passages in which she refers to the impact of the

Haitian Revolution on the (re)formation of the United States (pp. 107–12) and on the disparities between rich and poor within Haiti, and a chapter entitled “Building Back Better,” on Camp Corail, the camp to which many inhabitants of the camp run by Penn were relocated while waiting to be employed in Korean-funded sweatshops yet to be built, are perhaps the only parts of the book worth recommending. In the end, *Farewell, Fred Voodoo* is less about Haiti and its postearthquake struggles, and more about Haiti as an imagined space, an invention of its viewer. It is not surprising, then, that it won in the category of “best memoir,” in the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Awards.

Jonathan Katz’s *The Big Truck That Went By* is, on the other hand, a thoughtfully written and revealing journalistic account from the point of view of the only American correspondent on the ground at the time that the earthquake erupted. Katz explores the event deftly, from his first-hand account of the earthquake to tracing the effects of the trauma on individual lives (including the PTSD he suffers himself). He also achieves a more measured balance between the stories he tells of individual Haitians—which include his driver and fixer, Evens Sanon, Sanon’s go-to replacement, Evens Bruno, and members of the Chery family (Billy, Jean-Paul, Prince, Rosemide, and Twenty) as the latter move from a makeshift camp in Delmas 33 to resettlement in the Trazelie camp close to the airport road—and those of Haiti’s leadership under Préval or the questionable reconstruction efforts led by Bill Clinton. Sanon, Bruno, the Cherys, and Katz, among others, become representative of the large-scale tragedy that both natural and man-made disasters have conspired to create. Remarkable are Katz’s self-critiques, as when he considers that his coverage of the earthquake had a human cost, noting that a freelance photographer friend “left his cameras for a pickax.” “That night,” Katz writes, “I believed that my greatest responsibility was to report the news, so the outside world might comprehend the scale and urgency of the crisis and send help. It was a duty I thought important, maybe noble, even if fulfilling it meant my career would advance too. I thought I would be of more use that way to the people around me. In hindsight, I’m not sure” (p. 27).

The Big Truck That Went By, may, in the end, do more than Katz’s pieces from the field, as it provides aspects of Haitian history that American (and other) readers may not know. For instance, Chapter 2 provides a short history of Haiti from its beginnings as a Taíno nation, through to the colonial period, recounting tales about earthquakes that rattled its mountains from the mid-1700s to the 1800s, and ends with a rumination on the disruptive periods of the early twentieth century, that is, the U.S. occupation of Haiti for an almost thirty-year period, and the Duvaliers’ thirty-year reign from the 1950s to 1986. “Duvalier’s victory,” Katz writes, “would in many ways be a triumph of peasants over the

growing capital. It also ensured that that triumph would be their last" (p. 43). Katz shows how Port-au-Prince came to be the densely overpopulated urban environment where despair and megalomania coexist. He concludes the chapter by showing the intimate links drawn between Duvalier fils's leadership and Washington, leading to the "free trade" arrangement that eventually wiped out Haiti's rice industry: "The subsidized U.S. rice, much of it grown in Clinton's home state of Arkansas, took over the Haitian market" (p. 47). From there, Katz shows how, while the U.S. government undercut Haiti's economic sovereignty, it was the Haitian government that was accused of corruption so that, over time, NGOs would systematically refuse to deal directly with the Haitian government, even after Duvalier had been ousted. In Chapter 6, Katz turns his analytic eye to the intricacies of the reconstruction in his discussion of tools such as the "World Corruption Index," shedding light on the ways in which global economic hegemonies are maintained. This is best represented in testimonials provided to the U.N. Trusteeship Council of March 31, 2010, when, with Ban Ki-Moon presiding, Michèle Montas (a Haitian journalist who was then Ban's press secretary) presented the findings of grassroots focus groups who presented one over-arching desire: "that the nation as a whole benefit from reconstruction and that this reconstruction reinforce self-sufficiency and sovereignty." One participant reportedly stated, quite simply: "For us to be adults, we must be able to feed ourselves. If they really want to help us, they need to invest in agriculture" (p. 146). Given what we already know about the devastation of the Haitian rice industry, to say nothing of all the others, it becomes clear that the U.S./Clinton-led reconstruction efforts have had little if anything to do with assisting Haiti in regaining its sovereignty or preserving the hope and dignity of individual Haitians such as those Katz allows to speak through his text.

Addressed primarily to a U.S. audience that may know little about Haiti, the book nonetheless manages to speak also to Haitians in and out of Haiti, to veterans of Haitian realities, to aid workers, and to individuals concerned about North/South exchanges. Written with conviction and elegance, well-researched, and almost novelistic in its construction, it is a work that takes an unflinching look at the lived realities on the ground for average Haitians as well as among the elite power brokers in sweaty back rooms. As such, it is essential reading for anyone seeking to better understand Haiti's current-day situation.

In the end, however, it is my hope that works by Haitian writers on their experience of the earthquake, works like those by Lahens and Mars, will be translated for a wider, non-Francophone audience so that close neighbors, including readers in the United States, will have access to narratives by Haitians themselves rather than individuals, well-meaning or not, who have had limited investment in Haitian lives. By this, I do not mean to say that those whose

works I've reviewed here "do not care" about Haiti or Haitians, but rather that the texts reveal the limitedness of their insights. Nor is this to say that a Haitian-penned text will be more "true," but rather that stories by Haitians themselves need to have equal footing. Until such time, I refer readers back to my earlier comments regarding Beverly Bell's text, which takes seriously the notion of allowing Haitian voices to be heard so that we, the readers, remember that behind every catastrophe and its ensuing world politics are real people, with real names and stories, that only they can tell, in their own words.