Martin Munro

Writing on the Fault Line: Haitian Literature and the Earthquake of 2010. Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2014. 254 pp. (Cloth £75.00)

Writing on the Fault Line examines the literature from Haiti and its diaspora that arose from the 2010 earthquake. It is based on the assumption that literature provides the best means to describe the ravages and traumas the quake engendered. While one may agree on the value and power of literature—and of art in general—it does not necessarily follow that post-2010 writings offer “the best insight into the Haitian mind,” nor that this book will document “perhaps the most turbulent time in Haitian social and cultural history” (p. 18).

Did Haiti change after the quake? At a human and emotional level, of course it did. But has the earthquake marked a rupture in Haitian cultural and social life? Has it changed the country’s sense of self? And has it modified the writing? It is legitimate to doubt that, as Martin Munro asserts, the quake exposed issues that were not evident or spoken of before; alas, in the case of Haiti, displacement, homelessness, poverty, hunger, prostitution, corruption, and police brutality are not new. Munro’s analysis aims to “judge the evolution of post-earthquake Haitian writing until 2014 and to lay the foundations for future studies of post-2010 Haitian literature and thought,” to reinstate the works analyzed in the context of Haitian national narrative, to “challenge the prevailing international narrative about Haiti,” and to offer “a case study of the relationship between natural disaster and human creativity” (pp. 15, 17).

Despite being constantly defined as a “failed state” or “the poorest country in the Western hemisphere,” Haiti has a vibrant literary production; and there was certainly no dearth of writing after the quake by a wide variety of writers. But for some reason the book draws the reader’s attention repeatedly to the timing of the authors’ responses: Yanick Lahens, Rodney Saint-Éloi, and Dany Laferrière who experienced the tremors, immediately took to their pens and produced their chronicles of the quake, others published fiction and poetry in its immediate aftermath, and still others, like Évelyne Trouillot and Kettly Mars, waited a year before producing “earthquake novels.”

Throughout the book Munro forces the literature into categories, genres, and subgenres, as well as subsets of human experience, even if contemporary critics (and writers) have accustomed us to reading texts in ways that defy categorizations. Munro writes about Edwidge Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light* and *The Dew Breaker* that “there is a generic confusion in both works” since their previously-published sections raise the question of whether they are a collection of stories or a novel. In like manner, Makenzy Orcel’s *Les Latrines* “exists at the limits of the novel” (p. 194) and Gary Victor’s *Collier de débris* “is classed

as a chronicle, though it is not a direct account of the author's experience [...] rather, it is the author's rendering of the experience of a female survivor" (p. 63). Observations like these should have spurred Munro to desist from genre classification and offer readers a different entry into the texts. Still, Chapter 1 is dedicated to the essay (subgenre: testimony), Chapter 2 deals with established writers, and Chapter 3 discusses new novelists such as Makenzy Orcel and Marvin Victor. Chapter 4 focuses on writers who have made no overt references to the quake, like prolific writer Lyonel Trouillot who (surprisingly, we are told) has not written an "earthquake novel." Chapter 5 returns to a grouping by genre and covers poetry, asserting that it is suitable to the expression of one's "soul," as opposed to genres that offer reflections on the body.

Non-Francophone readers will find the long descriptions of plots and themes, and the translations of many passages, useful. But they will also be frequently confronted by perplexing paradoxes. For instance the assertion that "exile has returned as a prominent theme" in poetry since the quake (p. 195) is followed later by the remark that "exile remains a prominent theme in Haitian writing" (p. 207). Also, the claim that there has been "a turn to the essay" and that the works discussed "are expressions of a new emergent post-earthquake cosmopolitanism" (p. 226) are less than convincing. Although Munro's study is built on a search for novelty in the aftermath of the quake it mentions only two new writers, Makenzy Orcel and Martin Victor, rightly defining them as impressive and original and making for the most interesting parts of the book.

Finally, more rigorous editing might have helped Munro avoid some rather hasty conclusions, such as the claim that "In its own way, the earthquake seemed likely to become as significant a historical landmark as the revolution [of 1804] itself, though the memories it would transmit to future generations would carry none of the comforting national myths of the former event" (p. 32).

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