Martin Munro

Tropical Apocalypse: Haiti and the Caribbean End Times. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015. 228 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.50)

Martin Munro's challenging study takes as its point of departure the catastrophic 2010 earthquake in Haiti, which he considers "a very particular apocalypse, one that had been prepared for, indeed prophesied to some degree in religious and political discourse, the arts, and culture more generally for decades, perhaps centuries" (p. 1). While the book concentrates on Haitian creative work of the last two decades and its political and historical matrices, Munro briefly broadens his purview to encompass the region as a whole, seeing it as "born out of the apocalypse" (p. 3), reflected in the cataclysmic encounters between Europeans and the indigenous peoples and the disasters of the transatlantic slave trade and the plantation machine into which the enslaved Africans were hurled. Adapting Slavoj Žižek's typology of the "four riders of the apocalypse" galloping through the present historical conjuncture, he cites ecological devastation, slavery, entrenched and widening economic inequality, and the consequent rise in criminality as indicative that the Caribbean is "stand[ing] at the edge of an apocalyptic abyss," engendering a sensation "that in some ways it has been living its own version of the end times for centuries" (p. 7). From this avowedly apocalyptic perspective, Munro briefly considers the contributions to the issue of thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, and Édouard Glissant. He views the latter two as representatives of an anti-apocalyptic trend in Caribbean thought and thus discrepant with the perspective he is articulating here, but given the Haitian focus of the study, his engagement with them is necessarily if regrettably cursory.

In the body of the study, Munro explores a range of Haitian novelistic and cinematic works in which he discerns a response to this endemic apocalypse: revisitations of the repressive terrors of the Duvalier epoch, parodies and allegories of the failures of Jean-Bertrand Aristide's populist regime, the figure of the *chimère* as an incarnation of the "Haitian anti-hero," and the search for spiritual regeneration away from the city in the rural areas.

Munro's analyses are lucidly expounded and display a thorough command of Haitian literature. Especially welcome is his critique of Aristide's messianic ideology and its deployment for purposes all too consistent with the authoritarian regimes of Haiti's past. Praiseworthy as well is his insistence on the general marginalization of Haitian voices in the North American metropole, which accords more attention to writers *about* rather than *from* the country. However, Munro's insights are often vitiated by excessively detailed and even digressive plot summaries of his chosen texts, which detract from the thrust of

his argument and work against a more comprehensive critique of the relative success of these writings and films as aesthetic achievements.

On a deeper level, Munro's positing of a supposed permanency of life in the "end times" of apocalypse, while starkly dramatizing the misery, super-exploitation, and ecological devastation that historical forces and economic interests both outside and within the region have imposed on Caribbean life in general and Haitian life in particular, tends to downplay if not occlude the coeval movements of creativity, counterhegemonic daily-life practices, and molecular self-organization in the face of devastation that could potentially provide a way out. While Munro sees the "apocalyptic strand in Haitian and Caribbean cultures ... as the dystopian counter-narrative" (p. 198) to affirmations of a Glissantian *Tout-monde* of universal creolization, he overlooks the dialectical, revolutionary dimension of apocalyptic thought; apocalypse's Urtext—the Revelations of John of Patmos—is above all aimed at the ultimate overthrow of the world's princes and powers, and as such it remains the most subversive of all the canonical Scriptures. In singing of Revelation (which as Munro points out is the literal meaning of the Greek *apocalypsis*) and Revolution as a dynamic unity, Bob Marley recognized that when the foundations are shaken, the spiritual and material dungeons in which people are confined are shaken as well. In and against every Babylon, a New Jerusalem founded on non-apocalyptic coexistence strives every day to emerge.

Munro usefully cites Myriam J.A. Chancy and Leslie Desmangles's affirmation of the nonapocalyptic truth of Vodou as a power for ultimate recognition and reconciliation of the cosmic unity of humanity and natural forces. (The Vodou ritual climaxing the legendary assembly of delegates at Bois-Caïman that launched the Haitian Revolution exemplified the apocalyptic dialectic.) But if his conclusion is any indication, Munro appears to place little faith in this regenerative possibility, adopting a kind of Haito-pessimism which seemingly eternalizes an irremediable disaster whose "lived reality ... virtually effaces any sense of 'another world'" and finds in present-day postearthquake Haiti "a presage of a broader catastrophic collapse" (p. 199). In the face of such a grim prognosis, it is worth recalling that for Aimé Césaire, disaster had another side through which an ultimately emancipatory inspiration flowed. Munro's fine study shows us the most visible aspect of catastrophe; we must seek out and reveal its hidden, potentially liberatory aspect.

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