Gina Athena Ulysse

Why Haiti Needs New Narratives: A Post-Quake Chronicle. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015. xxxvi + 401 pp. (Paper US\$ 27.95)

This heartfelt work is a collection of writings by Gina Ulysse from the years following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Originally published in various non-academic venues, they are divided into three broad categories: “Responding to the Call,” “Re-assessing My Response,” and “A Spiritual Imperative,” and are presented in English, French, and Creole. Ulysse asserts that her motivation to tell a “different story” came from a “moral imperative driven by sentiment and several points of recognition,” which include the idea that Haiti’s public image was “rhetorically and symbolically incarcerated” and that it was trapped in “singular narratives and clichés that ... hardly moved beyond stereotypes” (p. xxii). Thus, she sets out “as a black woman, an anthropologist, bent on issuing a counter-narrative in the public sphere in the post-quake period” (p. xxv). The title in this regard is perhaps misleading, as the text does not offer in a sustained way any particularly “new narratives” of Haiti. Also, it may be less a chronicle in the strictest sense, than a collection of disparate, though related writings from a particular period on a set of themes, which include the representation of Haiti in the foreign media, the particular status of women in postearthquake Haiti, the workings of Haitian politics, the failures of international aid, and the fate of Vodou.

It is useful as a chronicle in the sense that one can trace changes in the evolution of Ulysse’s thinking, from the early postquake feeling that things were changed forever to the later realization that certain political and social structures had survived and indeed been strengthened by the event and its aftermath. One might say that her difficulty in imagining “new narratives” reflects the very real sense that the old narratives have shown remarkable resilience and determine still the outsider’s view of Haiti. It is also possible that she could have squeezed a bit more mileage from her questioning of these narratives if she had treated them more theoretically, in the way that David Scott, for example, explores how notions of Caribbean history and time have been understood in terms of Romantic and tragic narratives. The individual texts in the book bear out some of the advantages and drawbacks of writing in blogs, magazines, and other widely-accessed venues: one senses the immediacy of Ulysse’s profound and visceral reactions to events and circumstances, while the reflections are rarely allowed to go too far beyond the immediate and the visceral. Also, there is a degree of repetition between the writings, again perhaps inevitably, as Ulysse gradually, and convincingly, assumes the responsibilities of the public intellectual. It is no coincidence therefore that the strongest parts are also the

longest, notably where she engages with questions of rape and representation, in which an urgent and underreported issue is illuminated with sensitivity, acuity, and a justified sense of anger.

One of the fascinating aspects of the book is the way that it stands as a testimony to the particular position of the exiled or diasporic intellectual—emotionally, politically, and intellectually engaged, but physically elsewhere for most of the time. Ulysse battles heroically with the contradictions and paradoxes of this in-between position, though it also raises finally an issue that the book only implicitly acknowledges: that Haiti does not in fact lack for “narratives,” new or otherwise, and that this might be considered, despite everything, something of a golden age for Haitian and Haitianist writing, in which, for example, the exemplary historiography of Matthew Smith, the theoretically informed literary criticism of Michael Dash, the inspired, engaged fiction and poetry of writers such as Lyonel Trouillot, Kettly Mars, Yanick Lahens, James Noël, and countless others, and the work of the similarly numerous and various Haitian activists, scholars, and musicians, stand as new and alternative narratives of Haiti, so that there exists now (and has existed for a long time) a dizzying array of stories about Haiti. It appears ultimately that the idea of a clichéd, one-dimensional Haiti is itself a cliché, and that what Haiti “needs”—to the extent that one can say what a place needs—in this regard is less new narratives than new listeners and readers ready to engage with it on its own terms.

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