Review Article

When Outsiders Tell the Tale
Narrating Haiti’s Earthquake Catastrophe

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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

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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), 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

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