Two recent books by authors who were introduced to Haiti and Haitian issues as a result of the 2010 earthquake offer unique perspectives for general audiences curious as to how best to engage the sociopolitical complexities of the small island-nation. If, on the one hand, Paul Fallon offers a very personal account of the impact on his own development while offering architectural services to two small NGOs in the wake of postearthquake rebuilding, Fran Quigley offers a more expansive survey of how human rights activism might provide an avenue, beyond individual efforts, for long-term rebuilding of the nation. All the same, both accounts are personal forays into the field more than they are academic works.

Organizing and titling the chapters of his memoir, Architecture by Moonlight, by the stages involved in rebuilding a broken building (from “demolition,” “formwork,” and “carpentry” to the final stages of “plumbing” and “paint”), Fallon reflects on his engagement with Haiti as a result of the earthquake’s devastation. Having done a ten-day stint as a volunteer in the area prior to the earthquake, he returns out of a sense of duty and soul-searching. He admits not knowing where this intuition to return will lead but confesses from the onset that he “will be compelled to document [his] experience in a quest to shape a clear narrative until [he] finally understand[s] that clear narratives about Haiti are misleading. The true spirit of the country lies in the interstices of its inconsistency, its opposition to the rest of the world” (p. 8). Fallon overcomes the compulsion to deliver a “clear narrative” about Haiti by centering the text in his knowledge as an architect, but also in coming face-to-face with his own limitations. He learns from Haitians that “happiness arises not from having things, but from having hope” (p. 20) while at the same time learning to curtail his American cultural expectations. Illuminating are Fallon’s explanations of choices made in the building of an orphanage in Grand Goave—his main purpose on behalf of a Florida-based NGO building the orphanage in the memory of a young American volunteer who died in the earthquake (p. 31):

the American approach to seismic design is inappropriate in Grand Goave and develops a structural system known as constrained concrete. Instead
of flexing with the earthquake, a constrained concrete building bucks
tremors by being heavy and rigid. Our foundation is wide and dense, with
a low center of gravity. The columns, beams and walls are tied together,
so that when the earthquake hits, the structure moves as one entity, like
a boat with heavy ballast riding out the waves.

Running through the memoir are Fallon’s attempts to grasp cultural differences
between Haitians and Americans beyond such structural details, as in the fol-
lowing reflection: “When the earth shakes and buildings fall, Americans say
let’s build our buildings better, while in a land where mysticism runs strong and
Voodoo runs deep, Haitians are just as apt to say the spirits are angry” (p. 59).
Statements such as these early in the text reveal his penchant for reducing that
which he does not understand to facile pronouncements that exhibit American
ethnocentrism. Gradually, however, through an easy, open writing style, Fallon
sheds some of this perspective as he comes to understand the place of Haiti in
geopolitics as “set apart from a world run by white men ... so racked by poverty
and corruption that it becomes their ward” (p. 161). In one of the more telling
passages later in the book (p. 213), he reveals that Haitian cultural mores he
once thought meaningless, or the product of ignorance, such as women sweep-
ing their dirt porches, have much deeper cultural and spiritual significance:

Their sweeping is a dignified act, an act of caring, an act that says, I matter
and my family matters. But it is also an act of defiance, defiance against
the trials of this land. Sweeping dirt denies the reality of natural disaster
and physical deprivation; it ignores political instability and economic
hardship; it rejects every calamity grinding down on these poor people.
Sweeping dirt asserts that these women, like mothers the world over, will
do everything in their power to create a sanctuary for their family. The will
to improve our lot in this life is an elemental aspect of being human, even
when our lot amounts to no more than a patch of dirt.

In the end, what is remarkable in Fallon’s account is how, through the rebuild-
ing of a physical structure, he demonstrates his own growing consciousness
in the understanding of a culture positioned as antithetical to his own. If he
begins his tale with pronominal opposition (“we” vs. “they”), he ends speaking
with Haitians, from the children with whom he develops personal relation-
ships that are strong enough for him to then decide to foster their education
long-term, to these anonymous sweepers, having achieved a common under-
standing through common cause: human dignity in the face of a relentless
paucity of resources.