The Writing of Disaster in Haiti: Signifying Cataclysm from Slave Revolution to Earthquake

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For slaves and former slaves or descendants of slaves to take on the discourses and mentalities of revolution, as they did from the first weeks of the insurrection in Saint-Domingue (later renamed Haiti) in 1791, was already to explode out of the confined spaces of radical action by blacks: brigandage, banditry, conspiracy, even revolt, but never revolution. Revolution was for whites, who, as it happens, conventionally and without irony considered themselves slaves to feudal structures in Europe or their legacies elsewhere. Jean-Paul Marat’s bestseller, *Slavery’s Chains*, one of the most putatively radical texts of the French Revolution, used the word *slavery* to describe the citizen “slaves” of European monarchies, but not the literal slaves brought to the New World to satisfy Europeans’ economic needs. Yet no one accused the French of aping Africans when they decried their slavery to the king; whereas in Haiti, the first assumptions of secretarial eloquence and radical Enlightenment principles by these multi-generational survivors of the Middle Passage were searingly mocked as the primate-like mimeticism of European revolutionaries. Napoleon Bonaparte spoke with seething resentment of the “gilded Africans” in the military uniform in Saint-Domingue. The storming of the stage of the Public Thing, the ideal of the Republic, by Afro-diasporic communities was a disaster threatening the choreographed invisibility of white Euro-American hegemony.

Disaster and catastrophe were in fact among the most common terms found in titles of pamphlets and memoirs by former colonists of Saint-Domingue in the course of the Haitian Revolution; the emergence of a free black state in the Americas was openly qualified as catastrophe. Colonists, including planters who were free persons of color, wrote to the National Convention to denounce the disaster’s causes, authors, and narratives, often citing a terrible analogy between the destabilizations of the French Revolution and the disasters in Saint-Domingue. The Marquis François Barbé-Marbois alone used the word “disasters” more than 40 times in a
single 1796 text. One could make the argument that the twentieth-century coinage “the Haitian Revolution” quite directly translates, in the colonial discourse of the period, “the disasters of Saint-Domingue.” Remarkably, one colonist, Drouin de Bercy, in his 1814 On Saint-Domingue: Its Wars, Its Revolutions, Its Resources, overtly theorized seismological disasters on the same continuum as revolutionary quakes.

However extraordinary these disasters may be, they are not unique [...] There were, among the ancients as among the moderns, other insurrections of slaves. Surinam was ravaged, and Jamaica too, by the earthquakes that had swallowed up the cities of Saint-Domingue; in the Antilles, in the slaves’ milieu, the earth shakes literally and figuratively.

Slave insurrection as figurative earthshaking, seismological upheavals as literal earthshaking, are mixed and matched in the history of representations of Haiti.

In the first decade of the new millennium, a period marked by the bicentennial of Haiti’s independence, discourses of disaster again rise prominently to the researcher’s eye in texts about Haiti. The expressions “ecological disaster,” “humanitarian disaster,” “disaster management,” and “disaster capitalism” have all proliferated around Haiti, well prior to the 2010 disaster that has reset the bar for the meaning of disaster. A National Risk and Disaster Management system had been established in Haiti after the fall of the Aristide government, supported by the World Bank, the European Union, and other international entities, although participation by Haitian ministries was reportedly weak. In 2008, Haiti ranked highly on the UN Development Program’s Disaster Risk index of countries most vulnerable to natural disasters. Among this proliferation of discourses about Haiti’s disaster vulnerability, one can find references to “the Haitian disaster” as a kind of metonymy for the Haitian state and its history. These crop up particularly frequently in assessments of corruption in Haiti’s political economy, an approach which I find deeply worrisome, as it unintentionally closes the loop with that earlier tradition regarding the advent of a black state as disaster, and replaces a whole national tradition with a kind of apocalyptic signifier, as if nothing were there but what might replace it.

It is not only externally but also internally, however, that the historical genesis and survival of Haiti as an "earthshaking" nation – from the first black republic in the Western hemisphere to the current seismic ruins of a postcolonial state – often have been narrated in a mode one might describe as the writing of disaster. From the alignment of storm with divine retri-
bution in the revolutionary “Oath of the Cayman Woods,” to Jean-Jacques Dessalines’s appropriation of cataclysm as friendly to decolonization, to the existential mise-en-abyme or symbolic redoubling involved in Frankétiennne’s rehearsal of his play “The Trap” at the moment of the quake, a relationship to disaster runs through Haitian letters. In what follows I will broach comparison of the modalities of Haitian representations of disaster with the antagonistic external commentaries most recently exemplified by Pat Robertson’s motif of disaster resulting from a Haitian “pact with the devil.”

The phrase “the writing of disaster” echoes the title of a famous 1980 book by French philosopher Maurice Blanchot, *L’Ecriture du désastre*, a meditation influenced by Hegel and Lévi-Strauss and linguistic poststructuralism, and almost stunningly ill-tuned to the disaster of January 12, 2010. Blanchot’s book grapples with the limits of conscious experience, the limits of the sovereignty of self and memory, and the threatening absolutes of a reality beyond linguistic transcription. In effect, disaster serves as the mythological testing of the limits of the conceivable and the transcribable. Blanchot describes disaster as the “unexperienced,” as the limit of writing, and as something that not only eludes description, but actively de-scribes. This de-scribal mode is of precious little use to a people trying to crawl out from a disaster so overwhelmingly present tense that it acutely continues to threaten survival weeks and months after the moment of what poststructuralists might have called “rupture.” And yet we find something similar in early writings of disaster in Haiti, in the sense of the simultaneous animation of nature, the connection of that animated nature to suffering human perception, and the reversal, fragmentation, or phenomenological warping and rearrangement of both. Arguably however, suffering human perception and phenomenological warping are manifest primarily on the world stage in the Haitian imagination, despite their resonance for human subjectivity in the abstract. Disaster in Haitian letters problematizes the abstraction of human subjectivity in the first place, making reversals of experience into new landscapes, rituals and beliefs, and plans of action. There is, in effect, no reason to divide what is literally and figuratively earth shaking into distinct camps.

Disaster was of course the mode of the arrival of Africans in the New World, kidnapped and shipped blindly to a new life of subjugation and what Orlando Patterson described as social death, although survival beyond this social death is the cornerstone of Afro-diasporic history. The disaster-stricken condition of new arrivals was not lost on eighteenth-century physicians. The American physician, signer of the U.S. Constitu-
tion, and innovator in the treatment of mental health, Benjamin Rush, contributed to the consideration of slavery as a pathological state in his 1787 article “An Account of the Diseases Peculiar to the Negroes in the West-Indies, and Which are Produced by Their Slavery” in The American Museum. Rush described the “mal d’estomac” (stomach pain) common to newly arrived slaves in the French West Indies as a somatoform result of the Middle Passage itself, not a result of poisoning, as slave owners often believed. According to Rush, this painful condition generally arose soon after the arrival of Africans in the New World, with symptoms slave owners blamed on intentional self-poisoning or on assisted suicide by other slaves, and was often fatal. But the fundamental cause of the malady was not poison, in Rush’s view, but grief, in a pathological form to be laid squarely on the doorstep of the institution of slavery.

For survivors of the Middle Passage in Haiti, Guinen (or Africa), both as a place of heritage and as the space of an afterlife, was relocated symbolically, spiritually, and possibly geospatially under the water. Although this belief was associated by slave owners with the problem of slaves’ suicidal aspiration to return or pass over by drowning, the vision of lost country and afterlife under the water, anba dlo in Kreyòl, clearly also had sustaining properties. Robert Orsi writes that

[j]ince Africa is transposed to the bottom of domestic bodies of water, the ancestors (on both sides of the family) are within earshot, and also within range of prayers and supplications. As a result of the transposition of Africa into the New World, [...] the spirits also are within hailing range, hovering just below the surface of the waters.

Witness the words of one of the best-loved Vodou songs: “Anonse o zanj nan dlo / Bak odsu miwa …” (Announce to the angels [spirits] down in the water / the boats above the mirror ...). Offerings to these lwa, sent out on little boats or barks from rafts or boats in a zone about three miles from the shore, are only considered to have been successful in locating passage to the underwater world if the boats sink. Once the boats have disappeared from view, their delivery of offerings is assured. Where normally for migrants, the community of the ancestors becomes geographically distant, and the gods associated with the dead may fade from view, Orsi asserts that in Haiti, history became archaeology, layered in a watery subterranean realm. The space anba dlo, so prominent in the work of the Haitian painter Edouard Duval-Carrié, symbolically bridges the cultures of the New World and Africa through the waters that divide them. The Middle Passage in this sense is built into the metaphysics of traditional Haitian spiritual life.
There is a similar rearrangement of natural and celestial spaces and agents in the early Creole (Kreyòl) poetic text, transcribed decades later by the Haitian writer Hérard Dumesle, that stands in the Haitian tradition as the collective ceremonial oath that launched the Haitian Revolution in August of 1791. The “Oath of the Cayman Woods” hints at disaster on a horizon of battling European and African metaphysics.

God who makes the sun, who lights us up from above,
Who raises up the seas, who makes storms growl,
God is there, you hear? Hidden in a cloud,
And there he watches us, he sees everything the whites do!
The god of the whites orders crime, he wants nothing good for us,
But the god there who is so good, orders us to take vengeance;
He will guide our arms, he will give us assistance.
Throw down the portrait of the god of the whites who thirsts for the tears in our eyes.
Listen to liberty, it speaks in all of our hearts.

In the oath, one god – bondye, from “the good lord” (bon dieu) in French – animates nature. Bondye then splits into two gods, a division heralded by the separation of the two syllables of the compound word bondye itself into bon and dye. The god of the whites delivers crime, gives nothing good. The whites’ god is indistinctly positioned in the stormy skies in relation to the god phenomenologically centered as there, the god who can be confirmed by the speakers of the oath, the god who sees, who is a witness of the crimes, and who will guide the slaves’ vengeance. Even the material icon or portrait of the god of the whites, perhaps hanging on a wall, has a taste for the slaves’ tears. The slaves, once they have cast the portrait down, are able to hear the voice of a freedom rooted in their own bodies and hearts. The oath shows a multi-directional and multi-sensory sphere. Portraits
thirst, bodies speak, celestial gods act and are watched and split apart, and
nature heaves; not a disaster in itself, and yet reminiscent of the unhinging
of world bearings that is characteristic of disaster.

The first black leader of Saint-Domingue, Toussaint Louverture, gener-
ally avoided such cosmic descriptions of disaster, but he did forcefully
describe the personal and governmental disaster of his deportation and
imprisonment by the French. In his memoir addressed to the attention of
Napoleon Bonaparte from his cell in the Fort de Joux, he described himself
as arbitrarily arrested, pillaged, deported, and defamed. These experiences
spill pell-mell into a series of visceral metaphors of disablement: he is
naked as an earthworm, a paralytic forced to walk, a mutilated mute forced
to talk, a living cadaver. In the manuscript passage, written in Toussaint’s
own hand, readers can see his primarily verbal grasp of French; he was
perfectly able to compose and write a complex description of his experi-
ence and subjectivity, but he was unfamiliar with where words in French
began and ended. “M’envoyer nu comme un ver de terre” was thus “man
voyer nu comme ver de ter”; “couper la langue et lui dire ‘Parlez’” was
“coupé la langue et lui dire parlé.” When Napoleon Bonaparte received
Toussaint’s memoir, he was angry enough to order that all writing imple-
ments and paper be removed from Toussaint’s cell. The text below was
found wrapped in Toussaint’s headscarf after his death, his literary protest
and self-defense clinging to his body like a second skin:

Arresting me arbitrarily, without hearing me out or telling me why, taking
all my possessions, pillaging my whole family in general, seizing my papers
and keeping them, putting me on board a ship, sending me off naked as an
earth worm, spreading the most atrocious lies about me … and after that, I
am sent to the depths of this dungeon. Isn’t this like cutting off someone’s
leg and saying “walk,” isn’t this like cutting out someone’s tongue and
saying “talk,” isn’t this burying a man alive?

Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a revolutionary general and the leader of the
new nation of Haiti from 1804 to his assassination in 1806, communicated
a sense of the dangerous destabilizations inherent to states in military
crisis in his first independence proclamation. This proclamation, which
preceded the document we know as the Haitian Declaration of Independ-
ence, was co-signed by generals Christophe and Clerveaux after the final
victory against the French at Vertières in November of 1803. Dessalines,
despite his lack of formal schooling, had a compelling literary voice and
political worldview that came through consistently in his proclamations,
which were transcribed by a variety of secretaries from among the ranks of
Haiti’s highly educated mixed race elites. (Dessalines was hardly unique in
dictating his thoughts to secretaries who would render them into formal political texts; this was a standard mode of military and political correspondence in the Western world.) In the November 1803 proclamation, Dessalines came close to apologizing for the impossibility, in the “crisis” of the Haitian Revolution, of avoiding all unwarranted violence against whites. Crisis begets disorder and excess, he reflected; but after the storms of appalling war, after a world “shaken up” by civil discord, it was time for Saint-Domingue to show a new face. At the same time, he seemed able to justify apocalypse itself to prevent the restoration of slavery and colonization:

Were they [the Haitians] to cause rivers and torrents of blood to run; were they, in order to maintain their liberty, to conflagrate seven eighths of the globe, they would remain innocent before the tribunal of Providence, which has not created men to watch them groaning under a hard and shameful servitude.

After all, he reflected, “Nothing has a price, and everything is permitted, to men from whom one would steal the most fundamental of all privileges.” He was eager to reverse the category of slavery and apply it as a label precisely to those who would impose it on others, rather than those who had been its victims. Persons who might be “slaves to a criminal pretension, blind enough to believe themselves privileged and destined by heaven to be our masters and tyrants,” would only find upon arrival in Saint-Domingue “chains and deportation.”

The colonial notion of catastrophe in Saint-Domingue continued to permeate Haitian consciousness of an independent historical trajectory after Haitian independence. In 1824, Dessalines’s former secretary Juste Chanlatte (with Bouvet de Cressé) would borrow the terminology of colonial memoirs in the title of his History of the Catastrophe of Saint-Domingue. This strangely hybrid text was in effect a history of the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath, in the form of a narrative of the Haitians’ misfortunes. But the intended meaning of the term “catastrophe” is marked by continuous slippage, from the brutalities of the French, to the massacre of the remaining French by the Haitians, to the continuing and looming crisis of the commercial and social isolation of the Haitians in the postcolonial period. Despite the emphasis on disaster, the book opens with an eloquent treatise in defense of blackness and of African achievement, dating back to the “cradle of the world,” and justifying the line from the Song of Songs, “I am black, and I am beautiful.” Ultimately one might situate the “catastrophe” of Haiti in this text as precisely the signification of
African ethnicity in Western nationalist modernity. In 1824, the year before Haiti’s agreement to the payment of a disastrous indemnity to France to buy French recognition of Haiti’s independence, one cannot help but wonder if the use of the term “catastrophe” to describe this complex and troubled history does not reveal a defensive and vulnerable self-positioning of Haiti.

As Haiti’s literary and historical traditions continued to develop, description of natural disasters plaguing the Caribbean entered Haitian narratives, just as they have in the contemporary “epic” novel form in Guadeloupe and Martinique, where earthquakes, insurrections, volcanic eruptions, fires, and plagues punctuate time in novels like *Texaco* by Patrick Chamoiseau or *L’Isolé Soleil* by Daniel Maximin. Caribbean natural disasters also are featured prominently in texts published in the United States, notably in the francophone novel *Le Vieux Salomon* about the February 1843 Guadeloupean earthquake and ensuing Caribbean migration to New Orleans. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Haitian historian Thomas Madiou looked back at the devastating earthquake of June 8, 1770, an event that quite closely paralleled the area and scope of the recent quake.

It entirely flattened Port-au-Prince from end to end, as well as the towns of the western province, he wrote. Throughout the whole night, the earth floated. Residents traced that inability to find their footing or safe ground to a fault or source quite similar to the epicenter of the January 12 earthquake. Madiou referred to it as the place we call the abyss (*Le Gouffre*), at the mouth of the rivers of Cul-de-Sac and Léogâne. He noted that several times before the day in question, subterranean detonations had issued from this site. Madiou also described water-related seismic sequellae with almost Old Testament or mythological intensity: Grande Rivière went dry for about 16 hours, and then exploded back with violent floods. Similar floods – not tsunamis but river-based events moving from inland outward, and from mountains to valleys – had been observed after the 1692 earthquake in Jamaica. After the 1842 Haitian earthquake, many explosive water events were described, including the release of torrents from mountain springs onto lower plains and the division into two separate parts of the Yaque river, one of which suddenly rolled back to flood into the other. Interestingly, Madiou noted that in that in the aftermath of the 1770 quake, after several months of living in tents, the inhabitants rebuilt the capital in safer wooden rather than mortar structures, and within a year the visible traces of catastrophe had been erased. Cycles of devastation by catastrophe and erasure of catastrophe are evident throughout Haitian historiography.

Journalistic accounts state that when the earthquake struck in Haiti on January 12 the writer Frankétienne was rehearsing his play “The Trap,”
which (like several of his other texts) represents ecological Armageddon. The play featured two characters trapped in a crumbled and devastated space with no exit. “No outside, no inside,” says one. “No day, no night,” replies the other. “No black, no white,” the first rejoins. “Wherever I am, I Babylon and reimbabylon myself terribly. From the depths of the abyss, to the kingdom of nothing. The hegemony of nothing.” More collapse and catastrophe ensues, until crushed bodies are everywhere, and pain finds a home in the viscera of the speakers, who outline dialogically: “The planet oscillates…. No light in the collapse of the cities, the slums, the palaces and castles all in one cacophonic hecatomb.” In a shared refrain, the characters shout, “The opera of gangrene! The rats’ opera macabre!”

The conditions for the literary staging of this devastation in precise coordination with its realization in life have been in place since the early descriptions of the former slaves’ national life as the colonial death of the French, and since the earth first began to lurch and float through dire nights in Port-au-Prince and Léogâne and Petit Goâve. It was easy in the colonial era for Haitians to associate disasters such as the yellow fever that decimated the French army or earthquakes that ruined colonial cities with an animated omnipotent force of anger over slavery; Madiou noted that in the devastation of Port-au-Prince the anger of a Supreme Being, like celestial fire, had passed over the face of the tyrant and had struck it with a long agony. Such correlations now sometimes recur in the form of angst over karmic imbalance in Haiti, unfortunately often associated in the Protestant tradition with Vodou and with condemnations of founding cultural scenes and texts such as the oath of the Cayman woods. Even aside from the distribution of blame that can be a part of the strategic claims of organized religion, a fundamental psychological interrogation of misfortune, as in Marie Chauvet’s narrator’s exclamation in Love, Anger, Madness, haunts Haitian letters: “So then we are cursed! Hurricanes, earthquakes, drought, nothing spares us.”

The task now is precisely to recognize how the sekous, the quake in the Haitian world, has rearranged not only heaven and earth but Haiti and its geopolitical neighbors in shattered slabs of international relations, how it has repositioned the faithful, Vodouisant and/or Christian, with regard to “god who is there,” how to claw the future out from the debris, all without wrongly and prejudicially consigning Haiti, its state and its history, to disaster. In the midst of crisis, we need to repeat and repeat to ourselves something simple: that Haiti, dear Haiti, no matter how tested and remapped by disaster, is not, in itself, disaster…. Haiti is not disaster.
Further Reading

Cressé, Auguste Jean Baptiste Bouvet de, Juste Chanlatte, and Henri Christophe (King of Haiti). Histoire de la catastrophe de Saint-Domingue. Librairie de Peytieux, 1824.

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Haiti, born of slavery and revolution, has struggled with centuries of crippling debt, exploitation, corruption and violence. But what has really left Haiti in such a state today, what makes the country a constant and heart-rending site of recurring catastrophe, is its history. In Haiti, the last five centuries have combined to produce a people so poor, an infrastructure so nonexistent and a state so hopelessly ineffectual that whatever natural disaster chooses to strike next, its impact on the population will be magnified many, many times over. And that was before the earthquake. It sounds a terrible cliche, but it really is a perfect storm. This is a catastrophe beyond our worst imagination.” It needn’t, though, have been like this.