

# Double Visions and Haitian Post-Earthquake Literature

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## 1. Introduction

What can literature do in the face of calamity? Many students of literature might have wondered about this after the disaster 3.11. Today, the question is particularly relevant since the Ministry of Education has announced the abolition of the literature department. This study reviews the Caribbean literary texts that depict natural disasters, especially Haitian literary texts on the 2010 earthquake such as “Odette” by Patrick Sylvain and “The Blue Hill” by Rodney Saint-Éloi, and *Create Dangerously* by Edwidge Danticat. I shall draw lessons from Caribbean literature in order to find a meaning to reading literature during times of disaster and survive in post-Fukushima Japan.

Disasters reveal many things – such as our frailty, the corruption in politics, our arrogance, and so forth. I observed this precisely during the last earthquake in Fukushima, which brought the hidden side to the surface.

Following the earthquake in Fukushima in 2011, due to the imposition of restrictions on TV advertisements, many of them were not aired, except for one that was broadcasted repeatedly: it comprised a poem titled “Is It an Echo? (Kodama Deshouka?)” written by Misuzu Kaneko. Misuzu Kaneko was a long forgotten poet of the Meiji Era whose fame was obscured by the sensation created by her suicide. She refused her husband legal custody of their daughter and, in addition, prevented her daughter from catching gonorrhea, which Kaneko caught from her husband. She committed suicide in protest by consuming poison.

There were conflicting views on whether the advertisement was appropriate, and some were highly irritated by the repeated advertisement. The repetition of the poem seems rather surreal and irrelevant at a time when people’s lives are drastically changed forever. However, some were indeed touched by the poem, and

the sale of her poetry collections soared after the airing of the commercial and more than 10,000 copies of her collection of poems were sold after the earthquake.

Along with “Is It an Echo?”, another poem titled “Stars and Dandelions” was also used in the TV advertisement, which was broadcasted shortly after the quake:

Deep in the blue sky,  
Like pebbles in the sea,  
The stars are waiting for the night  
Stars are not visible in the noon,  
Though not visible, they are there;  
Though not visible, they are there.  
The dandelions on the riverbed  
Have lost their petals and withered,  
Their strong roots are hidden deep in the soil  
Are waiting for the spring.  
Though not visible, they are there;  
Though we cannot see them, they are there. (Kaneko 98)

The poem implies that what we can see is not everything: anything that is visible to our eyes actually owes its existence to what is invisible. The message of the poem had a strong impact on people after the earthquake, since it reminds us of the dead, as well as the effects of the explosion of the nuclear plant in Fukushima. Furthermore, the poem epitomizes the importance of reading Caribbean literature after 3.11 and of double vision: the importance of attempting to see what is not represented.

## **2. Post–Earthquake Literature in Haiti: *Haiti Noir***

The Great East Japan earthquake occurred nearly one year after the earthquake in Haiti. These disasters seem to be unconnected, and they happened at different times at different places. Yet, if a person is formed and defined by the location of

his or her birth, the Japanese and the Caribbean people certainly have something in common, both regions being prone to natural disasters. Therefore, reading Caribbean post-earthquake literature in Haiti may give us some lessons on how literature can alleviate the pain and suffering caused by disasters.

In the remaining part of this article, I shall delineate my reading of short stories included in *Haiti Noir*, which was edited by Edwidge Danticat, especially two stories that were written after the earthquake. Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian author residing in the U.S., is known for her narratives on Haitian themes. Because she chooses English as her means of expression, her texts enjoy accessibility by many readers worldwide, and she has become a spokesperson for Haiti despite her non-residence in the country. Danticat was commissioned to complete a collection of short stories as a part of series of *Noir*, which is a popular assortment of short crime stories collected according to their country of origin.

*Haiti Noir* was published in 2011, and although the collection was planned prior to the earthquake, three of its stories deal with earthquakes and demonstrate an immediate response to the disaster. Danticat seems to take the opportunity of editing the work to archive the memories of the country that had forever been altered by the quake and encourage their literary production. In her introduction, Danticat writes as follows:

I was nearly done with the collection when the earthquake happened on January 12 2010, so I was afraid to reread the stories we had already selected, fearing that such a cataclysmic event, which has so reshaped Haiti's physical and psychological landscape, would somehow render them all irrelevant. I was very glad to discover, upon reading them again, that this was not at all true. If anything, each story is now, on top of everything else, a kind of preservation corner, a snapshot of places that in some cases have been irreparably altered. (Danticat, *Haiti Noir*14-15)

Danticat seems to confer a profound meaning to the editing of a collection of noir stories, which are often regarded as being apolitical. In fact, on examining stories in *Haiti Noir*, it becomes clear that every form of writings is political in Haiti. As explained by Danticat, *Haiti Noir* contains three stories that are written after the earthquake. They are placed at the very beginning, middle and end of the collection, as though they frame the entire collection of stories. Among them, I specifically examine “Odette” by Patrick Sylvain and “The Blue Hill” by Rodney Saint-Éloi since both of them elaborate the double visions and duality of the world in their stories.

### **3. Patrick Sylvain’s “Odette”**

Patrick Sylvain, who was born in Haiti in 1969, is a poet, writer, translator, and academic. In 1981, he left his country for the United States. Similar to many Haitian writers living abroad, Sylvain is highly critical of the dictatorial regime of François Duvalier and that of his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier. He claims:

... what the Duvaliers gave us was a folkloric nationalism and “order” based on fear, which in turn generated a pathological populous that is cliquish, self-centered, narrow-minded and economically non-productive, constantly looking for a way out to a foreign country. (Sylvain “Reflections”)

His short story, “Odette”, which is placed at the very beginning of *Haiti Noir*, attests to Sylvain’s accusation of the Duvaliers. “Odette” is recounted in a third person. The protagonist, Odette, is gifted with the ability of double vision, a hereditary foresight that has been passed down by her mother; although Odette can foresee the calamity that is approaching, she cannot prevent it from happening. Her ability is also passed on to her daughter, who believed she is haunted by ghosts and joins a Protestant church, leaving her daughter, Rose, behind. After joining the protestant church, Odette’s daughter dies, leaving Odette to bring up Rose. This

story opens with the scene of the earthquake:

The hum quickly gave in to the sound of a hundred tumbling oil drums. Then a morbid absence of sound. Odette lay there watching the shard and splattered chunks of house. A few second seemed like an eternity. There was no other way to say it. Could time even be measured anymore, in this new silent and fractured world? (19)

As the house collapses, Odette and her granddaughter are caught under a large cement beam, Odette sees her granddaughter dying in front of her and loses consciousness; however she is rescued later. Nonetheless, as she has lost the ability to articulate herself, Odette is mistakenly diagnosed with dementia, and no one can understand her mumbling. She is taken to a camp, where, because of the noise she makes with tapping her cane and humming before sleeping, some annoyed people start a rumour that she is a *lougallow* or witch. Although Odette is a catholic and is not a witch, the gossip spreads so avidly that she is arrested and put on trial. The short story describes the devastation wreaked on the landscape by the earthquake:

After her daughter was born twenty-five years ago, driving home from the hospital, holding the baby in her arms in the back of her husband's shiny black Peugeot, they had passed a Bidonville in the middle of the city and she had thought of Hiroshima. The city she was being driven through now was like Hiroshima, the epic destruction reminding her of the World War II films her husband loved to watch. The National Palace's collapsed domes were like crushed camel humps; the National Police Headquarters compressed onto its blue and white walls. Thousands of desperate bodies were now sleeping on the streets, on the bare concrete like stray dogs. (22)

Here, the city of Port-au-Prince, which is the capital of Haiti, is compared to the

city of Hiroshima, whereby the author links the two disasters across time and borders. The connection between the two may suggest Sylvain's negative opinion regarding the United States. As the civilians in Hiroshima were killed mercilessly by the atomic bomb, the United States, even after its ending of occupation in 1934, continued to support for the Duvalier dictatorship "due to its anti-communist policies and extra-liberal international business plans", indirectly killing the innocent and driving many away from their own country (Sylvain "Reflections").

However, it is the people's state of mind that is more devastating than the desolateness of the landscape. Because of the stressful conditions under which people live in tents, Their initially harmless gossip turns into a hatred and violence against innocent Odette. The story ends bleakly: Odette is taken by the police, and when she looks at the sky for an answer, she sees that her star has forsaken her.

The end signals Sylvain's critical view on the heritage of the Duvalier regime: a frightening consequence of "folkloric nationalism" and order based on fear (Sylvain "Reflections"). The Haitians manipulated by the Duvaliers' use of voodoo in their politics were prone to accuse their people wrongly on the basis on their beliefs. The ending of Odette is a reminder of the ending of martyrs and of Christ, himself, who sacrificed themselves to save humanity.

The story can be interpreted as a pathetic state of Haiti and its people; nevertheless, in my reading, the story has also successfully demonstrated the power of writing as well. The narrative pits the people's spoken words, the gossip, against the narrator's written words that reveal what Odette is actually thinking. The protagonist's unspoken words and her own inner voice can only be attested through the narrative. In other words, this story celebrates the power of literature to transmit unspoken words.

#### **4. Rodney Saint-Éloi's "The Blue Hill"**

Another story that centers around the earthquake in *Haiti Noir* is Rodney Saint-Éloi's "The Blue Hill". Rodney Saint-Éloi, born in 1963, went to Quebec to study at the Laval University, and he has been living in Montreal since 2001. The

story is inserted at the end of the collection of *Haiti Noir*, and it shares similar concerns as Sylvain's story: double vision and criticism on the Haitian dictatorship, as well as the policy of the United States on Haiti.

"The Blue Hill", by Rodney Saint-Éloi also delineates the concept of double vision. "The Blue Hill" is, named after its blue toxic trash dumped by demand of a 'friendly' neighbour country. The phrasing of "the 'friendly neighbour country'" evokes the Good Neighbour policy of the United States in Latin America. The policy, while ensuring the withdrawal of the U.S from Haiti, assumes U.S. control over the entire area (Ulysse 6).

The military, ministers and members of the government makes a substantial amount of money by accepting the toxic waste from the neighboring country, and impose on the people a curfew: "local men were rounded up and forced to work day and night for a whole week to burrow everything into the blue hill" (275). Because of the waste, residents are "soon covered with blue pustules, large blue stinking marks" and "Laceration invaded bodies" and "slashes marked their faces" (275). In spite of these conditions, people are "forced to remain silent" because it is "a matter of national security" and is not "mentioned in the paper or on the radio."

The protagonist, Detective Simidor, is the only person to contest the curfew; "watching the trucks full of blue chemicals being dumped on the hill by his countrymen", he wants to preach to everyone: "Our cowardice is our suicide, our silence is our coffin" (Saint-Éloi 276).

The story is evocative of an actual historical event that occurred in Haiti in 1998 when a cargo ship, the *Khian Sea* illegally dumped 4000tons of toxic ash near Gonaives, a city to the north of Haiti. This episode dates back on 31 August 1986, when an American firm loaded 14,000 tons of toxic ash from Philadelphian waste incinerators onto the ship. The original plan of dumping the toxic waste in the Bahamas was changed owing to the refusal of the Bahamian government; consequently, the vessel travelled to Gonaives and began dumping the waste there on the false premise that it was fertilizer. Upon finding the nature of the real content, the Haitian government ordered the crew of the *Khian Sea* to reload the

waste; however, the ship sailed away without following the Haitian government's request (Hall 148).

The story is an ironical account of ecological disaster caused by the ongoing neo-colonialism of the developing countries (Haiti) by the developed countries (the U.S.). Towards the end, Simidor dreams of an apocalyptic scene in which a beast with 1000 horns appears. When Simidor switches on the light for the last time, the alarm clock indicates 4:53 pm, the time that the actual earthquake occurred. This text seems to demonstrate the disastrous state of Haiti being exploited by its "neighboring countries" and deceived by its own politicians, whereby the story seems to suggest that the coming of apocalypse was a consequence of the indifference that the Haitian people had long been showing towards their own country.

Moreover, the story demonstrates the protagonists' double vision or the fact that the detective is seeing what another person cannot see: the environmental disaster and its occurrence. The depiction of nature in "The Blue Hill" is no longer generous or gentle but one of being exploited and damaged. Simidor contrasts the past and present as follows:

Before the blue hill, you could rest here in peace. There was nobody and nothing to bug you, no longing. We had named this place Ozanana, the new Promised Land. We sang the songs of the hills. Happiness was avoiding the anger of the gods. But what unites us now is the catastrophe of the blue hill, sings Simidor. (Saint-Éloi 279)

In the story, the earthquake may be interpreted as nature's vengeance on the region's residents for keeping silent and not fighting against the neocolonialism. Simidor is the only person who can see what is coming, and I think his double vision is important in connecting the story to what Rob Nixon called "postcolonial pastoral". According to Nixon, "postcolonial pastoral" is defined as follows:



At the heart of English pastoral lies the idea of the nation as garden idyll, where neither labor nor violence intrudes. To stand as a self-contained national heritage landscape, English pastoral has depended on the screening out of colonial spaces and histories, much as the America wilderness ideal has entailed an amnesiac relationship towards the Indian wars of dispossession.... But what happens when memories of colonial space intrude upon pastoralism, disturbing its pretensions to national self- definition and self-containment? The result is a kind of writing that I have called postcolonial pastoral, writing that refracts an idealized nature through memories of environmental and cultural degradation in the colonies. Postcolonial pastoral can be loosely viewed as a kind of environmental double consciousness. (Nixon 245-246)

Rob Nixon employs this term when analyzing V.S. Naipaul's text, who is another Caribbean writer from Trinidad: Nixon states that Naipaul sees the painful, dystopian shadow garden of the transatlantic plantation that made possible the wealth and tranquility of an English idyll (246). Unlike Naipaul, Rodney Saint-Éloi does not make an obvious contrast between two landscapes; however, he does contrast the landscape before the blue hill as an idyll (which may contradict with the popular image of Haiti being a poverty ridden country) and after the blue hill.

As mentioned in the quotation, Nixon's notion of postcolonial pastoral is derived from the idea of double consciousness, which was firstly elaborated by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois in his "The Strivings of the Negro People", in *The Atlantic* magazine in August, 1897 and *Souls of Black Folk*, which was published in 1903. Du Bois concept of the double conscious attempts to define the divided identity of African Americans who are forced to "look at one's self through the eyes of others":

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and

Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois )

Du Bois' notion of the double consciousness — the state of being torn apart — of African American delineates the predicaments that the African Americans have to endure; however, later, Paul Gilroy later reworks on Du Bois concept and reinterprets it to confer more positive meanings.

Paul Gilroy, in his *In The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, discusses double consciousness as a common experience shared by people after the slavery and extends the notion beyond the confines of the African American experience, such that it “animates a dream of global co-operation among people of color” (126). Nixon's postcolonial pastoral is indeed an extension of Paul Gilroy's interpretation of the double consciousness, since the ability to see what is not presented in the landscape is shared by all the people who were once colonized.

### **5. Edwidge Danticat's *Create Dangerously***

The Double vision expressed in the stories discussed above, is also present in Edwidge Danticat's post-earthquake essay, *Create Dangerously*. Her essay starts with the executions of Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, who were both Haitians and part of Jeune Haiti, a group of 13 men plotting to overthrow the Papa Doc Duvalier regime. The execution happened before her birth, and it serves as a reason why Danticat could not stay in Haiti but had to immigrate to the United States. By

linking the executions, the tortures survivors, and earthquake, Danticat also see the continuous in the history of Haiti, which is already weakened by the oppressive regime long before the earthquake.

The essay is also her response to the criticism of being a diaspora: she is often criticized for not representing the authentic image of Haiti for its residents. The essay is filled with the guilt of not experiencing the fear, misery and devastation of the people whom she draws her stories. Nonetheless, at the same time, by portraying Haitian torture survivors or her friends and relatives who were killed under the dictatorship, Danticat reveals the image of Haiti that one might not see otherwise. The essay, which is an intricate web of Haitian history, personal memories, and the author's thoughts on Haitian writers, is a firm declaration of the importance of writing, as well as reading, after the devastating earthquake:

Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I've always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them. Coming from where I come from, with the history I have — having spent the first twelve years of my life under both dictatorships of Papa Doc and his son, Jean-Claude — this is what I've always seen as the unifying principle among all writers. (Danticat, *Create Dangerously* 109)

Her affirmation on writing from the perspective of a diaspora is also echoed in the short stories of “Odette” and “The Blue Hill”. The status of diaspora may resist and modify the national and cultural homogeneity. The concept of diaspora may be linked to that of the double consciousness and Nixon's postcolonial pastoral, since it bears the hope of overcoming binaries and creating a nonviolent mutual relation between people.

## **6. Conclusion**

The double vision, articulated in both writings of “Odette” and “The Blue Hill”, is a testament to the power of Caribbean literature, similar to Misuzu Kaneko’s poem, Caribbean literature enables us to see and understand not only what is not represented in the canonical literature but also the continuing exploitation of the peripheries. Junot Diaz writes on the earthquake in Haiti as follows: “After all, apocalypses like the Haitian earthquake are not only catastrophes; they are also opportunities: chances for us to see ourselves, to take responsibility for what we see, to change” (Diaz). The Japanese living in the Post-Fukushima period has to learn from Diaz’s account of earthquake: we have to take responsibility for what we see. We have to expose the system in working that is hidden behind the visible and understand the sacrifice that has been made to expose the visible. In his essay on the Haitian Earthquake, *The World is Moving Around Me*, Dany Laferrière states as follows:

Culture is the only thing that can stand up to the earthquake. I’m not only talking about intellectual culture, the kind that comes from books, but what structures a nation. If we don’t want to turn into a victim nation, we have to keep moving. (Laferrière 170)

Laferrière affirms that culture, both literal and non-literal, is the element that shapes a nation. His affirmation is a strong statement against those who deny the significance of non-practical matters.

The Haitian writers in diaspora continue to write and continue to believe in the power of writing and culture, because they know they can reveal what has been blinded off from our sight. In contrary to the general tendency to turn every human being into an economic animal, the position of literature should be kept intact because it can tell us what has not been represented in everyday life and encourage us to understand the world better. The post-earthquake Haitian writings clarify the importance of literature in invigorating and uniting people. A Caribbean poet, Edward Kamau Brathwaite once said that “the unity is submarine” (64) to connect

the Caribbean islands separated geographically and historically. His assertion can also be extended to reflect shared experience across time and space between the Caribbean and Japan.

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