

## HAITIAN EXCEPTIONALISM IN THE CARIBBEAN AND THE PROJECT OF REBUILDING HAITI

***Nadège T. Clitandre***

*University of California, Santa Barbara*

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There has been much discussion since the January 12 earthquake in Haiti on the media's representation of the nation. On television, in print, and online Haiti is portrayed, once again, as "a grotesquely unique" place.<sup>1</sup> Immediately after the quake, we were inundated with negative responses to Haiti, its people, and its culture. From reducing the Haitian Revolution to a "pact with the devil," to calling for an intrusive paternalism that combats so called progress-resistant cultural influences, to describing the survivors of the quake as looters inciting violence, to blaming the natural disaster on the victims and their inability to use birth control, the unimaginable, unprecedented catastrophe in Haiti was being made legible through a recognizable long-standing master narrative of degradation. Haiti, as Sibylle Fischer states, was also made legible by the media through the very production of Haiti as a place "beyond comprehension."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, those of us who consider ourselves scholars of Haitian Studies and have been working on Haiti from various disciplines and fields recognize this narrative and responded quickly to a problematic representation of Haiti that ironically played a major role in unprecedented international donor support. While the media maintained its focus on the narrative of Haiti as impoverished country through images of naked and wounded black bodies, Haitian scholars and scholars of Haitian Studies were quick to intervene to expose the ways in which this narrative of degradation presented by the media effaces a long history. That is, the history of enslavement, involuntary migration and displacement; the history of colonialism, foreign intervention, forced isolation, and economic exploitation. It also effaces the complexities of Haiti's culture and religious beliefs. As we watched the images on screen, we were becoming more concerned with the possibility that Haiti is becoming what Jean Michael Dash describes as a "disappearing island," an island that disappears under complex symbols. These symbols are further amplified by the physical destruction in Port-au-Prince that makes even the urban

landscape unrecognizable. The island now disappears under apocalyptic images: massive rubble, lacerated dead bodies, diseased living bodies, and makeshift tents ironically make Haiti even more visible in the global stage. Understanding this crisis of representing Haiti and the vacillating flow between its visibility and invisibility necessitates an awareness of the workings of Haitian exceptionalism. My aim here is to think through Haitian exceptionalism and its function in post-earthquake media representations. I argue that the paradigm of Haitian exceptionalism has reemerged in ways that push us to make distinctions between the negative exceptionalism that causes Haiti to disappear and reinforces problematic stereotypes, and the positive exceptionalism that centers Haiti in history and promotes regional, African diasporic, and global affiliations.

In her piece “What is a Metaphor a Metaphor for?”, published just a few months after the quake in *The Immanent Frame*, Colin Dayan writes:

Showing images when dealing with a country alternately sentimentalized and brutalized is a dangerous business. It risks succumbing to what Michel-Rolph Trouillot called the language of Haitian exceptionalism. That is, Haiti as radically unlike any other place, as grotesquely unique. But we must remember that both processes, whether idealization or degradation, displace the human element. We face a process of sublimation, up or down. Amid evocations of a desperate people and festering landscape, the media and the “humanitarian” community continue to ignore the history and culture of Haiti.<sup>3</sup>

What does this idea of Haitian exceptionalism tell us about this ongoing struggle to speak about Haiti in a way that does not fall into the trap of two poles of representation: idealization and degradation? How does it reemerge in language post-earthquake? In other words, what are the current buzzwords that evoke this language of Haitian exceptionalism? And finally, what is the danger now?

Haiti is consumed and haunted by forgotten, disavowed, and silenced histories, including the silenced and yet ever-present history of the Haitian Revolution. The language of Haitian Exceptionalism developed as a result of the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804 that made Haiti the only successful slave revolt and the first independent black nation in the New World. The struggle to decipher the Haitian Revolution and its impact in grand historical narratives has not been an easy task. Asserting that strategies of silencing and processes of exclusion are effects of power in the production of historical knowledge, in his work, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production*

*of History*, Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, discusses the ways in which the Haitian Revolution has indeed been written and silenced in history through formulas of erasure and formulas of banalization in eighteenth-century European and North American discourses and Western historiography. Trouillot argues that these formulas entered historical production and made the Haitian Revolution a non-event. Because the Haitian Revolution was an unthinkable event, when history must come to terms with the reality of the revolution, the event can only be recognized as an essentially negative exception. In “The Odd and the Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean and the World,” Trouillot argues that in the nineteenth century, an exceptionalist paradigm was being developed to make Haiti recognizable to the world. The exceptionalist paradigm as negative recognition used to study Haiti is inherent in racist nineteenth-century literature that overemphasizes Haiti’s singularity. Trouillot views articulations of Haitian exceptionalism as fiction and spectacular trajectory that make it impossible to apply Haiti in academic and discursive modes of investigation. He states: “When we are being told over and over again that Haiti is unique, bizarre, unnatural, odd, queer, freakish, or grotesque, we are also being told in varying degrees that it is unnatural, erratic, and therefore unexplainable. We are being told that Haiti is so special that modes of investigation applicable to other societies are not relevant here.”<sup>4</sup> Trouillot further argues that Haitian scholars and writers themselves, from Louis-Joseph Janvier and Antenor Firmin to Jean Price-Mars and Dantès Bellegarde also overemphasized Haiti’s singularity. As Trouillot astutely states, this emphasis on Haiti’s singularity is a methodological and political move to counter this negation of Haiti through a positive recognition of Haitian identity, history, and culture.

Trouillot concludes this piece by asserting that Haitian Studies ought to make a “theoretical leap” to move beyond the fiction of Haitian exceptionalism.<sup>5</sup> J. Michael Dash, who views this exceptionalism as mythmaking facilitated by neo-colonial dependency, argues in his essay “Haiti: Seismic Shock or Paradigm Shift,” that the way out of repeating this paradigm in post-earthquake rebuilding efforts is to insist that the history of dependency is the real cause of this Haitian “difference.”<sup>6</sup> However, the task should not be to move beyond the fiction of Haitian exceptionalism, but to theorize the structure of Haitian exceptionalism. We need to make a distinction between the negative Haitian exceptionalism grounded in nineteenth-century racist thought and Haitian exceptionalism as counter-discourse, one that is fundamental to Haitian Studies. There has certainly been a shift in Haitian scholarship since January 12, 2010 that pushes us to think about the theoretical steps we must make moving forward, and yet

we find ourselves having to counter, like Firmin, Price-Mars, and others, this continuous negation of Haiti. But if we are to think seriously about Haitian Studies post-earthquake, we must think seriously about the status of Haitian scholars whom are themselves disappearing. With all respect to Laurent Dubois and his formidable contribution to Haitian Studies, what does it mean for Dubois to now have the moniker, Dean of Haitian studies, and not just Dean of Haitian Studies, but “Veritable” Dean? What does it say about the direction and future of Haitian Studies, and the recognition of its Haitian scholars? Theorizing Haitian exceptionalism and its negative and positive delineations will foreground not only the scholars who are foundational to Haitian Studies, but also more recent Haitian scholars who take on the task of countering the negative complex symbols that continue to reemerge in media representations of Haiti.

Yet Haitian exceptionalism is not just about Haitian Studies and its evolution. The critique to Trouillot’s Haitian exceptionalism is that it is limited to the contours of Haiti, Haitian mentality, and Haitian nationality. In “Haitian Exceptionalism and Caribbean Consciousness,” another foundational essay on Haitian exceptionalism, Asselin Charles defines Haitian exceptionalism as an intrinsic worldview and sense of identity that exposes the tensions between regional and national identity. For Charles, this ethos, as ideologically determined reading of national history, has only been weakened by migration, globalization, and regional integration. Both Trouillot and Charles limit Haitian exceptionalism as positive recognition to national identity formation. If we accept Haitian exceptionalism as “isolationist ethos,” in Haitian national history we make the mistake of displacing the intentions, consequences, and implications of the Haitian Revolution as radical universalism.<sup>7</sup> We also displace it from the collective Caribbean consciousness and broader African diaspora consciousness. For Dash, Haiti has never been fully understood in the Caribbean imagination as radical universalism and as a result disappears under symbols and this isolationist ethos. Dash asks if Haiti is no more mystical or extraordinary than places like Jamaica or Barbados.<sup>8</sup> I do wonder why it has been so challenging to position Haiti as a catastrophe in the Caribbean, as a Caribbean catastrophe. The Caribbean is actively engaged in post-earthquake relief efforts. Rarely do we hear about these affiliations in the media. Nonetheless, it is not the case that Haitians (and young Haitian writers today) are only now increasingly realizing “their common ties with the rest of the Caribbean” as a result of internationalizing forces to “develop a pan-Caribbean consciousness” and an ideology “defined within the universe of the Black Atlantic.”<sup>9</sup> The Haitian Revolution did not develop out of an isolationist ethos, nor was the vision and actuality of

the revolution produced in isolation. The revolution was never *just* about the freedom of enslaved Haitians in Saint-Domingue.<sup>10</sup> Limiting Haitian exceptionalism to a Haitian ethos without acknowledging this paradigm as a political and methodological move with broader implications beyond a nationalist agenda only results in a displacement of Haiti from global, international, and transnational exchanges and linkages

I would like to raise a larger question that not only pushes us to think about Caribbean affiliation, but also African diasporic connections. If the myth of Haitian exceptionalism authorizes both the production of Haiti in the media and the articulation of Haitian identity, history, and culture in Haitian Studies, how then have the narratives and rhetoric of the Haitian Revolution made the leap beyond Haiti's singularity and placed the revolution as symbol in collective consciousness of the Caribbean, or African diaspora in general? The paradigm of Haitian exceptionalism tells us that the theoretical leap from viewing the Haitian Revolution as singular event to a collective and universal event in many ways has not been organic either, but an ongoing structural political and methodological process. Ignoring the political and methodological uses of Haitian exceptionalism by Haitian intellectuals and writers is a displacement that further marginalizes Haiti from global affiliation and coalition.

But if the foundation of Haitian exceptionalism is framed by the historic event of 1804, how do we deal with the notion of Haitian exceptionalism when we move beyond the glorious revolution? Post-earthquake, we are also witnessing a shift in grand historical narratives of Haiti. There is now the Haiti before the earthquake and the Haiti after the earthquake. The language of Haitian exceptionalism reemerges in post-earthquake narratives, marking the unprecedented catastrophe in national, transnational and global consciousness. I argue that there is a more recent manifestation of positive Haitian exceptionalism as that takes center stage post-earthquake and is not just about how Haitians perceive themselves, but also how they are being perceived by others. I further argue that the buzzword for this new articulation of Haitian exceptionalism, as I have seen it in the myriad responses to the earthquake, is *resilience*. But this positive language of Haitian exceptionalism, which recognizes Haiti's history of resistance, has been co-opted by the media in problematic ways. Resilience is the post-earthquake (re)production of Haiti by the media that makes Haiti legible to the world and fixes Haiti in the discourse of global poverty. We now talk of the resilience of Haitians living in exceptional circumstances, so much so that they can live in a state of degradation for some time, and are able to do so because of a never ending history of struggle and resistance that now gets foregrounded to recognize their

exceptional ability to suffer.

Some writers have critiqued the media's narrative of Haitian resiliency after the earthquake. In "How to Write About Haiti," which was written six months after the earthquake, independent multimedia journalist Ansel Herz points to the repetitive images and phrases that journalists use to make Haiti legible to an audience. The first two things that get mentioned are Haiti's exceptional poverty and resilience. She states, "For starters, always use the phrase 'The poorest country in the Western hemisphere.' Your audience must be reminded again of Haiti's exceptional poverty." She further states: "You are struck by the resilience of the Haitian people. They will survive no matter how poor they are. They are stoic, they rarely complain, and so they are admirable. The best poor person is one who suffers quietly."<sup>11</sup> Another critique of this resiliency language comes from Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat. On the one-year anniversary of the earthquake, *Democracy Now* spoke to Edwidge Danticat via phone while she was in Carrefour to participate in the commemoration. In that phone interview, Danticat states, "Haitians are very resilient, but it doesn't mean they can suffer more than other people."<sup>12</sup> Danticat reflects on this notion of resiliency in her essay "Lot bo Dlo: The Other Side of the Water." In this essay, Danticat states:

After three post-earthquake visits to Haiti, I began to ask myself if this much-admired resilience would not in the end hurt the affected Haitians. It would not be an active hurt, like the pounding rain and menacing winds from the hurricane season, the brutal rapes of women and girls in the camps, or the deaths from cholera. Instead, it would be a passive hurt, as in a lack of urgency or neglect.<sup>13</sup>

Two years later, the neglect is ever-present and the media no longer sees Haiti's recovery as an urgent matter, but only the reality of Haiti's present and near future. Nonetheless the representation and reproduction of Haiti in the media persists. But how do we manifest what Danticat calls the passive hurt, the hurt that everyone comprehends and in some way be accountable for on a human level? How do we foreground this space of hurt between bloody bodies of revolution and degraded bodies of natural catastrophe? But when will we be resilient enough to make the time to understand it? Perhaps this is the theoretical leap that foundational Haitian scholars did not have the privilege to make, but aspired to in their work. Attending to the passive hurt I believe is the key challenge in both the project of rebuilding Haiti, and developing Haitian Studies. Another linked challenge has everything to do with creating alliances

and exposing commonalities. As we take on the overwhelming project of rebuilding Haiti, we must be able to imagine better futures collectively, to reproduce Haiti in ways that highlight linkages. If the representation of Haiti continues to be beyond comprehension, it is also beyond imagination. As scholars of Haitian Studies, part of our job is to foreground the Haitian intellectuals, writers, scholars, and artists who have dared to imagine Haiti bravely and link such imaginings to our own. How can we rebuild Haiti if we cannot imagine an empowering future for/with Haitians, one that can also be shared with the rest of the world?

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Dayan, Colin. (2010, March 24) "What is a metaphor a metaphor for?," *The Immanent Frame*, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/03/24/a-metaphor-for/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Fischer, Sybille. (2010, January 26) "Beyond comprehension," *Social Text*, <http://www.socialtextjournal.org/periscope/2010/01/beyond-comprehension.php>.
- <sup>3</sup> Dayan, "What is a metaphor a metaphor for?."
- <sup>4</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph (1990) "The odd and the ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean and the world," *Cimarron* 2.3, p. 6.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>6</sup> Dash, Jean Michael (2010, January 26) "Haiti: seismic shift or paradigm shift," *Social Text*, <http://www.socialtextjournal.org/periscope/2010/01/haiti-seismic-shock-or-paradigm-shift.php>.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles, Asselin. (1999) "Haitian exceptionalism and the Caribbean consciousness," *Journal of Caribbean Literature*, 3.2.
- <sup>8</sup> Dash, "Haiti: Seismic Shift or Paradigm Shift."
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.
- <sup>10</sup> Alexandre Petion, for example, as president of the young Haitian nation from 1806, assisted Simon Bolivar in the struggle to liberate Venezuela from Spain by giving Bolivar ammunitions, weapons, and money. In return, Petion only asked Bolivar to abolish slavery in the Latin American countries Bolivar would help to liberate.
- <sup>11</sup> Herz, Ansel. (2010, July 23) "How to write about Haiti," *Huffington Post*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/crossover-dreams/a-guide-for-american-jour\\_b\\_656689.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/crossover-dreams/a-guide-for-american-jour_b_656689.html).
- <sup>12</sup> *Democracy Now*. (2011, January 12) "Novelist Edwidge Danticat: 'Haitians are very resilient, but it doesn't mean they can suffer more than other people,'" [video file]. Retrieved from [http://www.democracynow.org/2011/1/12/novelist\\_edwidge\\_danticat\\_haitians\\_are\\_very](http://www.democracynow.org/2011/1/12/novelist_edwidge_danticat_haitians_are_very).

- <sup>13</sup> Danticat, Edwidge, “Lot bo Dlo: The Other Side of the Water,” in Paul Farmer (ed) (2011). *Haiti after the Earthquake*. New York: PublicAffairs, p. 257.

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