

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# 'Around Us, History Never Stops': Interrogating Post-quake Haiti in Évelyne Trouillot's *Absences sans Frontières*

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Immediately following the 2010 earthquake, Évelyne Trouillot imbued her corpus with what Rachel Douglas refers to as 'archival impulses' (Douglas, 2016: 389), in the form of op-eds, poetry, essays and short fiction. These 'impulses' were then further documented with the publication of *Absences sans frontières* (Trouillot, 2013), a novel about post-quake Haiti. This article interrogates how Évelyne Trouillot uses *Absences sans frontières* to interpret both the aesthetics of humanitarianism and the global political responses that emerged in the wake of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

Informed by elements such as the evasive language of Trouillot's narrator when reflecting upon the earthquake and the narrator's father's observations of Haiti-related media coverage in the United States, this article adopts a dual approach to examining *Absences sans frontières*. In so doing, it identifies the narrative strategies employed by Trouillot that are used to invert the subjectivity of the earthquake victims/humanitarian workers paradigm. The novel is, in essence, a series of snapshots that provide alternative perspectives that humanise the victims of the tremor and challenge the motives of the humanitarian workers. To a lesser extent, the article equally considers the intrinsic relationship between humanitarianism and politics. It consequently analyses *Absences sans frontières*' nuanced perspective on the United States' political reactions, which affected both Haitians within Haiti and the diaspora.

**Keywords:** Évelyne Trouillot; Haiti; humanitarianism; earthquake; global media

## Introduction

Between January 2010 and May 2013, Haitian writer Évelyne Trouillot actively imbued her corpus with what Rachel Douglas refers to as 'archival impulses' (Douglas, 2016: 389). Informed by Derridean interrogations into the process of archiving, Douglas introduces the concept of '*archivisation*, through which chronicles and essays on the Haitian earthquake try to preserve what remains' (Douglas, 2016: 389). To illustrate her argument, she uses the examples of published and unpublished works by Yanick Lahens and Frankétienne, which were produced prior to and subsequent to the 2010 earthquake. Douglas also explains how the concepts of archiving and rewriting are inextricably linked as, in order to create archives, Haitian writers must write and rewrite their work.

In January 2011, Thomas Spear predicted a surge in written responses to the tremor, but hypothesised that it was 'a little too early for [the earthquake] to be generating fiction' Finnegan, Molly (2011). Whilst early publications generally favoured the testimonial, non-fiction approach to recording writers' reactions, Spear's assertion overlooks fiction contributions such as Marvin Victor's *Corps mêlés* (2011) and Danticat, Edwidge (2010). In 2010, Évelyne Trouillot herself had published a short story ('Besoins Primaires') which was preceded by two op-eds ('Aftershocks' and 'From Disaster, Emerging Life') and an article ('Eternity Lasted Less than Sixty Seconds').

Trouillot's archival impulses are further illustrated by her meticulous placement of dates on each of the aforementioned pieces, thus creating a temporal outline of her reflections inspired by the earthquake. Moreover, each of her post-quake productions represents distinct stages of her attempt to process the earthquake and a quick survey of her publications reveals each to be progressively longer than the last. As such, this article interprets Trouillot's 2013 novel, *Absences sans Frontières* as the fictionalised, extended, rewritten version of her post-quake work that preceded it. Not only does it contain echoes of the rhetorical questions posed in 'Eternity Lasted Less than Sixty Seconds,' but it also humanises victims of the earthquake as in 'Besoins Primaires.'

Of *Absences sans Frontières*, Robert McCormick posits that, 'perhaps [Trouillot] took on too much; perhaps [the novel's] conception was greater than its realization' (McCormick, 2014). The novel does initially appear to be the story of a tri-generational family and their associated struggles with exile, trauma, sexuality and other issues. Nevertheless, by integrating the earthquake into the narrative, Trouillot obliges the reader to acknowledge the specific historical context that inspired the creation of teenaged protagonist Géraldine Jean-Louis and her family. The titular phrase, 'Around us, history never stops,' is a loosely translated excerpt of one of Géraldine's many internal monologues. Relieved at not having to study contemporary history, she wonders 'comment mémoriser tous ces noms alors qu'autour de nous l'histoire n'arrêtait pas de se dérouler?'<sup>1</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 57–58). Embedded within Géraldine's question is the image of history as a cyclical entity and the collective impact of historical events on Haitian society.

Her sentiments are mirrored in Laurent Dubois' assertion on post-quake Haiti as he notes that, 'the tremendous difficulties of reconstruction are part of much deeper and older problems: the aftershocks of a long history of internal conflict and external pressures that has left Haiti's population vulnerable and exposed' (Dubois, 2013: 367). Évelyne Trouillot's use of the narrative voice in *Absences sans Frontières* therefore serves as the medium through which she inverts and subverts the earthquake victim/humanitarian worker paradigm propagated by the global media. Within the framework of the author's concern with revisionist notions of history, this article examines the narrative strategy of voice employed by Trouillot to interrogate the aesthetics of humanitarianism, as well as the political responses which emerged in the aftermath of the earthquake. It considers the inherent relationships among humanitarianism, politics and history and analyses how Trouillot addresses these relationships through the medium of her novel.

### Historical Silences and the Aesthetics of Humanitarianism

In a 2005 interview with fellow Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat, Évelyne Trouillot laments that, 'I think that we often tend not to face the pages of our history that upset us' Danticat, Edwidge (2005). Here, 'we' is used as a collective pronoun for Haitian writers; a group which, according to Trouillot, has scarcely explored subjects such as slavery and the successive Duvalier dictatorships. Whereas her first novel and neo-slave narrative, *Rosalie l'infâme*, does contribute to the small corpus of novels that treat with the subject of slavery in Saint-Domingue, the Duvalier dictatorships *have* appeared extensively in Haitian literature, albeit seldom in an explicit manner. Martin Munro contends that 'Duvalier was, and remains largely, an unrepresentable and unthinkable figure in [Haitian] literature and film' (Munro, 2015: 234). In addition, 'When they have addressed the Duvalier years, Haitian authors have tended to do so allegorically ... or by other indirect means' (Munro, 2015: 234).

Ultimately, Trouillot's mention of slavery and the Duvalier regimes serves to highlight her preoccupation with history and with the historical silences that result from omissions in historiographical records. The earthquake's relatively recent occurrence places it at what Michel-Rolph Trouillot considers to be the third stage of historical production – 'the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*)' (26) – before it can be categorised as history. Nevertheless, given that 'Silences enter the process of historical production' (Trouillot, 1995: 26) at any of its four stages, narratives of the earthquake are prone to historical lacunae. For Évelyne Trouillot, the historical silences surrounding invisible people – or those whom she classifies as victims of injustice or prejudice – are the specific silences which she seeks to uncover in her writing. In the case of *Absences sans Frontières*, these historical silences are enmeshed within a different type of silence; one which evokes the primary narrative strategy employed by Trouillot.

In *Absences sans Frontières*, there are three major narrative perspectives, each of which offers the reader varying viewpoints into the post-quake Haiti experience. One third of the novel is related from the viewpoint of Gérard Jean-Louis, Géraldine's father who resides illegally in New York and another third of the novel is related from the perspective of Gigi, Géraldine's maternal grandmother who lost five members of her family in the tremor. The remaining third of the novel focuses on the perspective of Géraldine, who becomes a volunteer in the post-tremor refugee camps immediately after they have been established. Despite the equitable distribution of the three characters' viewpoints, it is Géraldine's voice that claims and maintains control of the narrative from the very first line of the novel.

Of *Writing on the Fault Line: Haitian Literature and the Earthquake of 2010*, Munro asserts: 'The book argues that Haitian literature since 2010 has played a primary role in recording, bearing testimony to, and engaging with the social and psychological effects of the disaster' (Munro, 2014: 2). Indeed, Géraldine's autodiegetic position in *Absences sans frontières* is emblematic of the testimonial approach that characterises many of the fiction and non-fiction publications that emerged post-earthquake. Haitian writers who were physically present in Haiti and who survived the earthquake, used their personal experiences as inspiration and immortalised them using a first-person perspective in their work. Trouillot's *Absences sans frontières* therefore exists as a complement to publications such as *Tout bouge autour de moi* (Laferrière, 2010), *Failles* (Lahens, 2010) and *Le sang et la mer* (Victor, 2010). Having survived the earthquake herself, Trouillot articulates having felt 'an overwhelming pressure ... to express not just her own experience but that of the millions of Haitians whose voices are not usually heard' Finnegan, Molly (2011). Thus, by bestowing narratorial agency upon Géraldine, Trouillot both introduces and reinforces the post-quake Haitian perspective in the novel.

<sup>1</sup> 'How to memorise all those names when history is constantly unfurling all around us?'. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.

*Absences sans Frontières* begins with Géraldine confiding to the reader that, 'Chacune des étapes de mon histoire s'associe à un moment précis, insignifiant ou macroscopique dans la grande marche des choses'<sup>2</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 13). Here, Géraldine's use of the words 'mon histoire' is ambiguous, as it is not immediately discernible whether she is referring to the events of the novel as her personal tale, or to the concept of history on a national scale. Through her perspective, she also betrays the characters' collective hesitancy in speaking about the earthquake by shrouding her trauma in temporal indicators such as 'le 12 janvier'<sup>3</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 112) and a brief mention of 'Titanyen' (Trouillot, 2013: 14), the post-earthquake mass graveyard which haunts her memories. Her evasive language echoes Trouillot's 2010 essay, 'Eternity Lasted Less than Sixty Seconds,' in which Trouillot explains that, 'This earthquake is still so vivid in our memories that a large part of the Haitian population hesitates to name it and speaks of it as "the incident" ... or "bagay la" as if to mentally distance themselves from it as much as possible or to emphasize its monstrous, unnameable nature' (Trouillot, 2010c: 55).

Further to the synopsis of *Absences sans Frontières* in the introduction of this article, the novel can also be summarily categorised as the retrospective tale of the 18-year-old Géraldine who, on the cusp of adulthood, is reviewing the notable events in her life, including the earthquake and its aftermath. Otherwise unremarkable, she acts as the novel's instrument in destabilising the hero/victim dichotomy which dominates reports on post-earthquake Haiti. As a refugee camp volunteer in Port-au-Prince, Géraldine foregrounds the lesser-discussed image of post-tremor Haiti which sees 'neighborhoods organizing themselves, burying the dead, making sure children are safe and fed, removing rubble, building makeshift housing, sharing whatever they had, and trying against the greatest of odds to establish some semblance of local democracy' (Ulysse, 2015: xiv).

More significantly, through her use of 'je' throughout the novel, she reminds the reader of the dominance of her perspective within the novel, while simultaneously evoking the subjective nature of her retrospective position. This subjectivity arises from the fact that her perspective is inherently biased and represents what Harold P. Maltz considers to be the '[attempt] to capture in words vanished worlds, to reproduce in the presented world of the written work a "copy" of a particular material world which existed at a particular place and time' (Maltz, 2010: 305). In Géraldine's case, this world refers specifically to Port-au-Prince in the days and weeks after the earthquake and is restricted to her perspective. Although her retrospection is not marked by any definite mention of time, it can be inferred from minor references to time that the narrative takes place no less than one month after the earthquake. The temporal gap between the tremor and her recollection is therefore significant enough for there to be inadvertent omissions in her memories.

As the medium through whom the aesthetics of humanitarianism in post-quake Haiti is highlighted and probed, Géraldine's perspective becomes a metaphor for a camera which captures the experiences of those who have been significantly impacted by the earthquake. As such, *Absences sans Frontières'* post-quake Haiti is depicted through a series of snapshots which are directly contrasted with the narrative constructed by global media outlets, as depicted in the novel. From his vantage point in New York, Gérard reflects upon the media's treatment of Haiti: 'Depuis son arrivée aux Etats-Unis, jamais il n'avait autant entendu parler d'Haïti. ... [A]vec le 12 janvier, les médias se lancèrent dans une compétition forcenée, à celui qui aurait le plus d'images, le plus d'histoires'<sup>4</sup> (Trouillot, 2013 : 176). Unfortunately for Gérard, infrastructural damage caused by the earthquake prevents him and his family from communicating with each other, thereby depriving him of any first-hand accounts of post-earthquake events in his native country.

Instead, he is forced to rely upon non-Haitian media interpretations of the disaster. His observation of 'les médias' – which presumably includes all forms of mass media – consequently evokes a series of questions concerning the subjectivity with which each media outlet will approach their selected narrative of the earthquake. Indeed, Gérard recognises a narrow range of trends emerging from foreign media reports on the earthquake: 'il s'agissait de fatalité, de malédiction ou d'une résilience défiant les catastrophes et les malheurs'<sup>5</sup> (Trouillot, 2013 : 176). Each of these elements speaks to the Haitian people being inevitable targets for a large-scale disaster due to their history, their religious beliefs and the notion that they possess an unparalleled ability to withstand even the most devastating disaster. These trends are an almost verbatim iteration of Munro's *Writing on the Fault Line* in which he remarks that 'the international media generally covered the disaster in terms of common stereotypes of Haiti as disaster prone or as a cursed land' (Munro, 2014: 17).

Gérard's observations also contain echoes of American televangelist Pat Robertson's post-earthquake indictment of 18th-century Haitians as having made a pact with the devil in order to secure their independence. According to Gina Athena Ulysse, 'Robertson's rereading of the [1791 Vodou ceremony that is said to have initiated the Haitian Revolution] was yet another example of the racialization of Haitians that so often goes unspoken in mainstream accounts' (Ulysse, 2015: 28). Whereas the linkages to Haitian history and religion were brought to the fore subsequent to the earthquake, the description of the Haitian people as 'resilient' is one that has long been normalised by the global media. In the aftermath of the earthquake, independent German journalist Ansel Herz offers a satirical guide entitled 'How to Write

<sup>2</sup> 'Every stage of my history is connected to a specific moment that is insignificant or macroscopic in the grand scheme of things.'

<sup>3</sup> 'January 12<sup>th</sup>.'

<sup>4</sup> 'Never had he heard so much talk about Haiti since his arrival in the United States ... [W]ith January 12th, the media outlets had thrown themselves into a frenzied competition to see who could get the most images or the most stories.'

<sup>5</sup> 'It was a question of destiny, a curse or a disaster-defying resilience.'

about Haiti,' based on his perception of repeated stereotypes in the media. In it, he informs foreign journalists how they will react to being in Haiti and what they can expect to discover there. He 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. A two-sentence quote about their misery fitting neatly into your story is all that's needed (Herz, 2017).

*Absences sans frontières* therefore overtly rejects what Ulysse terms 'standard-formula media representations of Haiti' (Ulysse, 2011) and portrays post-earthquake Haiti from the perspective of Haitian survivors of the disaster. In so doing, Trouillot attempts to invalidate the victim/hero dichotomy witnessed by Gérard in the foreign media; one which is skewed in favour of humanitarian workers as heroes and that portrays Haitians as victims. As the novel suggests, any effort to maintain this victim/hero dichotomy in the media introduces silences that eventually become embedded within Haitian historiography and the dichotomy itself becomes the dominant narrative.

### Narrating the Politics of Humanitarianism

In one of the most poignant and condemnatory statements in the novel, the arrival of foreign aid workers prompts Géraldine to believe that, 'L'humanitaire oubliait parfois le côté humain des choses'<sup>6</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 167). Provoking this statement is the appearance of 'un groupe d'enfants de neuf à treize ans; venus d'une petite ville du Texas, je crois'<sup>7</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 166). Their presence recalls the post-earthquake lamentations of Brazilian diplomat Ricardo Seitenfus who indicates that, 'L'âge des coopérants qui sont arrivés après le séisme est très bas; ils débarquent en Haïti sans aucune expérience'<sup>8</sup> (Robert, 2010). Although the mention of child volunteers in *Absences sans Frontières* – who are perhaps more aptly described as disaster tourists than aid workers – is an extreme and exaggerated reflection of Seitenfus' observation, they embody one of the many approaches to humanitarianism to which Géraldine is exposed. Unable to conceal their disgust upon seeing the refugee camps, the Texan children are incapable of lending any assistance to the inhabitants of the camps, either because of a lack of sensitisation to the reality of the camps or because they are obstructed by their age and privilege from doing so. The revulsion that they express and that Géraldine witnesses, also indicates their desire to return to sites of familiarity once their curiosity has been satisfied.

Equally ill-equipped in her volunteer efforts is a young Belgian girl who 'passait ses journées avec les petits enfants d'un camp, leur racontant des histoires qu'ils ne comprenaient sans doute pas'<sup>9</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 166). Like the children from Texas, she is nameless and can only be generically categorised as a foreign aid worker. Although it is unclear whether the Belgian's stories are orally disseminated or in print form, her act of introducing stories to the camps mimics the real-life actions of Évelyne Trouillot's sister, Jocelyne Trouillot-Lévy. As head of the Haiti chapter of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), she introduced bibliotherapy sessions to some of the refugee camps immediately after the earthquake. According to her, 'We have witnessed students opening to their own emotional turmoil after the reading of a simple story in a bibliotherapy session' (Lehman, 2011: 303), which assists children with dealing with trauma.

Furthermore, Elizabeth Page, executive director of IBBY indicates a long-term benefit of bibliotherapy in situations of crisis around the world to be 'the provision of books in children's mother tongue' (Page, 2010: 52). According to Trouillot-Lévy's and Page's statements on the efficacy of and strategies associated with bibliotherapy, the benevolence of the Belgian girl appears to be misguided. Consequently, the children's inability to comprehend her is indicative of her disconnection from the cultural and linguistic milieu within which she purports to help. Armed with stories to which the Haitian children cannot relate and which are not written in Creole, her sole intention is to make the children laugh. Laughter, however, is not sufficient to assist them with their trauma and the girl discreetly disappears from the camps after only one week (Trouillot, 2013: 166).

Géraldine concludes her anecdotes about the humanitarian volunteers with the remark that, 'j'en avais vu des comportements choquants, au nom de la bonne volonté et de la charité'<sup>10</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 166–167). Her statement serves as a reminder that the stories about humanitarian workers are all communicated to the reader from Géraldine's perspective. As such, Géraldine's narrative voice elects to highlight the inefficiency of some foreign aid volunteers, even while she is simultaneously obscuring the positive efforts of others. Évelyne Trouillot herself bemoans the 'schematic and reductionist quality of certain foreign news reports' (Trouillot, 2010c: 56), with respect to their portrayal of victims of the earthquake. The 'lack of nuance' (Trouillot, 2010c: 56) prevalent in their reports, did not consider that 'even though all Haitians were effectively victims of the earthquake, the consequences were entirely different depending on one's original economic status' (Trouillot, 2010c: 57). Géraldine's point-of-view therefore evaluates the absence of

<sup>6</sup> 'Humanitarianism sometimes forgets the human side of things.'

<sup>7</sup> 'A group of children, ages nine to thirteen from a small town in Texas, I think.'

<sup>8</sup> 'The volunteers who arrived after the earthquake are extremely young; they're coming to Haiti with zero experience.'

<sup>9</sup> 'Spent her days with the little children from one of the camps, telling them stories that they certainly could not understand.'

<sup>10</sup> 'I have seen some appalling behaviour in the name of goodwill and charity.'

nuances from discussions surrounding the tremor, as her description of the foreign aid volunteers rejects the heroic tropes depicted in the international media.

Conversely, the biased perspective intrinsic to the dominant position of Géraldine's voice within the narrative, is not entirely dissimilar from the biased perspective of the international media. Her roles as witness and as narrator are also further burdened by the retrospective approach of the novel and by the subsequent subjectivity of her memories. As Maltz notes, 'the appeal to memory operates on the principle that to appeal to memory is to imply that one is speaking the truth: one cannot remember what has not happened' (Maltz, 2010: 310). Consequently, Géraldine's 'je'<sup>11</sup> in *Absences sans Frontières* systematically overshadows the voices of the invisible people within the post-quake environment and puts forth Géraldine's experiences as the truth. In the novel, these invisible people assume the form of two small children – a boy and a girl – neither of whom undergoes any significant character development. Diverging from the previous perspective which highlights the experiences of the foreign aid volunteers, the presence of both children obliges the reader to consider the complexities that arise from abruptly transplanting individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds onto a site of mass trauma.

Through an anecdote about 'une fillette au camp de la rue voisine'<sup>12</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 167), Géraldine illustrates what she considers to be 'la manifestation la plus concrète du racisme,'<sup>13</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 167). The inability to discern one individual's traits from another is demonstrated by the little girl (Mariette) who is unable to identify the man who has delivered 'les sachets d'eau potable'<sup>14</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 167). She nonchalantly declares, '*Les blancs, ils sont tous pareils à mes yeux*'<sup>15</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 167), thus verbalising the sentiments of her neighbours. Put forth by Géraldine as an amusing anecdote, Mariette's reaction to the white foreigner initially appears to be demonstrative of the 'other-race effect' (Vizioli, Rousselet and Caldara, 2010: 81). However, it cannot solely be recognised as a consequence of her potential lack of exposure to white foreigners for, within its subtext, is a subtle yet subversive message.

'Fear and Loathing in Haiti' speaks to the 'discourses [that] generate racialized forms of fear that not only construct poor black bodies as a threat to the Eurocentric notions of civilization and progress, but also to the social, economic and political order of global neoliberalism' (Mullings, Werner and Peake, 2010: 283). Perpetuated by the media in the wake of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, this fear has persisted since the eighteenth century, at the genesis of the Haitian Revolution (Mullings, Werner and Peake, 2010: 285). By converting the white, foreign humanitarian workers into a monolithic entity, Mariette is protesting against centuries of racialised fear directed towards Haitians. She is, moreover, addressing the NGO-isation of Haiti and the proliferation of foreign workers whose very presence is destabilising to the social, economic and political well-being of Haiti.

The significance of Mariette's experience is almost subsumed by Géraldine's narrative voice, as the anecdote is prefaced by another anecdote about Géraldine's own experience with racial profiling. She asserts *her* first-person vantage point before providing Mariette with short-lived agency to share her account. Mariette's statement is italicised – a stylistic technique employed by Trouillot to denote all minor characters – and she is allowed to use the first-person 'mes,'<sup>16</sup> to express her opinion. However, it can be argued that Mariette is bestowed with false agency by the author, as the anecdote is embedded within Géraldine's memories and is unlikely to be a reliable or complete account of Mariette's first-hand experience.

Géraldine adopts a similar approach in reminiscing about a little boy who perceives foreign aid workers as a source of fear. To him, 'une rousse à la crinière épaisse et longue'<sup>17</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 168) is perceived to be 'une créature diabolique, sortie droit des récits fantasmagoriques qu'il avait l'habitude d'entendre'<sup>18</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 168). Deprived of the vocabulary and experience to interpret his distressing interaction with the aid worker, the nameless little boy can only react by screaming. His screams disrupt the narrative as they introduce the element of sound in what would otherwise have been a noiseless scenario – one which maintains the dichotomy of the benevolent foreign hero and the silent Haitian victim. Nevertheless, his screams are ineffective as they are misinterpreted as a symptom of post-earthquake trauma and it is the boy's sister who eventually discerns the source of his fear.

The red-headed woman considers herself to be benevolent by providing the boy with 'un paquet de biscuits vitaminés'<sup>19</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 168), yet no one attempts to understand his hysteria. The foreigners suggest psychological help or assistance from an NGO (Trouillot, 2013: 168) to address his post-earthquake trauma. Implicit within their suggestions and the offer of edible items, is the belief that all survivors of the earthquake require uniform treatment. There is a fundamental connection to be made between this anecdote and Colum Lynch's analysis of the humanitarian responses to the earthquake which illustrates that 'generosity can ... clog the vital humanitarian supply chain with useless goods'

<sup>11</sup> 'I' or first-person perspective.

<sup>12</sup> 'A little girl from the camp on the neighbouring street.'

<sup>13</sup> 'The most explicit manifestation of racism.'

<sup>14</sup> 'The sachets of drinking water.'

<sup>15</sup> 'White people all look the same to me.'

<sup>16</sup> 'My.'

<sup>17</sup> 'A redhead with a long, thick mane.'

<sup>18</sup> 'A diabolical creature, straight out of the fantastic tales that he was used to hearing.'

<sup>19</sup> 'A packet of vitamin-enriched biscuits.'

(Lynch, 2010). In both cases, there is an inappropriate use of resources – human and material – due to a lack of communication with the necessary parties. Ultimately, the little boy's second traumatic experience – in the form of the redheaded woman – is easily solved when the woman places a bandana over her hair.

Due to Géraldine's dominance of the earthquake-related narrative, the other Haitian victims of the tremor are otherwise silent. From a practical perspective, Géraldine-as-narrative-voice can only bear witness to the experiences of a limited number of individuals. As 'the media and other actors engaged with Haiti more as an image than a place' (Cruse, 2013: 469), the characters' collective silence is representative of the silence imposed upon them by the international media in their post-earthquake coverage. Within *Absences sans Frontières*, the Haitian people react in wondrous silence at the humanitarian workers who 'envahi[ssent] notre paysage'<sup>20</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 170); an image fraught with allusions to invasions by the United States. Not only does the presence of the 'invaders' transform the psychoemotional landscape of Haiti's inhabitants, but it also transforms its physical landscape, as evidenced by the rapid gentrification which Géraldine notices. Present in Haiti with the primary objective of assisting earthquake victims, the humanitarian workers attempt to emulate the lifestyle that they enjoyed in their countries of origin. Thus, Géraldine notices that, 'Les contacts rapprochés avec la population n'avaient pas trop duré après le séisme'<sup>21</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 171) as the humanitarian workers quickly isolate themselves in the 'climatisation aseptisée d'un bureau gardé par les forces internationales'<sup>22</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 171).

In essence, this self-imposed segregation separates the earthquake victims from the humanitarian workers. If 'Humanitarian assistance has always been a highly political activity' (Duffield, Macrae and Curtis, 2011: 269), then nowhere is humanitarianism and politics more succinctly linked than through the concept of borders which persists throughout *Absences sans Frontières*. In addition to the emotional border present between Géraldine and Gérard – the father whom she has never met – the narrator highlights political borders which have been introduced by humanitarian responses to the earthquake. Following the tremor, Géraldine notices the paradoxically-named non-governmental organisations such as 'Médecins sans frontières'<sup>23</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 167), 'Artistes sans frontières'<sup>24</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 168) and 'Clowns sans frontières'<sup>25</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 168) which are active in Haiti. Whereas her great-aunt Cynthia explains that the organisations are a reminder that 'le monde était ouvert, que les frontières ne devaient pas et ne pouvaient pas arrêter les actions humanitaires ou la défense des droits humains'<sup>26</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 206), Géraldine perceives the notion of borderlessness to be an affront to her own situation, as political and legal borders have impeded her from meeting her father.

Throughout the novel, it is apparent that she rarely provides specific information on the nationalities of the humanitarian workers. It remains unclear whether this is because she is not privy to this information or whether it is because she perceives them to be a monolithic entity. Nevertheless, the relationship between politico-humanitarian responses to the earthquake and nationality are certainly more evident. Using a shift in narrative perspective, Évelyne Trouillot bestows the New York-based Gérard with the responsibility of critiquing the political responses to the disaster. From Brooklyn, Gérard observes that, 'Le monde entier, tous pays confondus, semblait vouloir rattraper le temps perdu. ... Nous voulons aider. *Are you sure?* Depuis quand? Et pour combien de temps?'<sup>27</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 177).

Although Gérard initially believes the world to be eager to assist earthquake victims in Haiti, his reflections on the political facet of humanitarian responses to the tremor are primarily concerned with the reaction of the United States. His position in his adopted country offers him a strategic, narrative vantage point from which he can critique the 'long and entangled history of relations' (Sepinwall, 2012: 1) between his country of origin and his adopted country. Gérard recalls the glaring absence of media interest in Haiti when he migrated to the United States in the 1990s and, given Haiti's history with the United States, he doubts the sincerity of the latter's desire to help. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall laments that, 'Within months after the earthquake, Haiti was forgotten again, displaced from the headlines by newer tragedies' (Sepinwall, 2012: 1). Thus, by asking, '*Are you sure?*' Gérard appropriates the question posed to him by Americans since his arrival and mimics their mistrust of him as he believes they should have helped before there were 'près de trois-cent mille morts'<sup>28</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 173).

As the country with the largest Haitian diaspora population, the United States is constantly referenced and critiqued in *Absences sans Frontières*: it is Gérard's adopted country and it is mirrored in the novel's cover image of the Statue of Liberty. Visible as a silhouette, this particular image of the Statue of Liberty contradicts the messages of Emma Lazarus' 1883 poem and of sculptor Fredric-Auguste Bartholdi's concept. The monument's back faces the reader as it rejects

<sup>20</sup> 'Are invad[ing] our land.'

<sup>21</sup> 'Close contact with the locals did not really last for long after the earthquake.'

<sup>22</sup> 'Sterilised, air-conditioned office guarded by international troops.'

<sup>23</sup> 'Doctors Without Borders.'

<sup>24</sup> 'Artists Without Borders.'

<sup>25</sup> 'Clowns Without Borders.'

<sup>26</sup> 'The world was open – borders should not and could not stop humanitarian action or the defence of human rights.'

<sup>27</sup> 'Every single country in the world seemed to want to make up for lost time ... We want to help. *Are you sure?* Since when? And for how long?'

<sup>28</sup> 'Almost three hundred thousand deaths.'

the notion of being a symbol of freedom for newly-arrived immigrants or a message of 'liberty spreading outward from America' (McNamara, 2018). The concept of borderlessness is therefore deceptive as, following the earthquake, Haitians resident in the United States were allowed to apply for Temporary Protective Status (TPS) but Haitians in Haiti were essentially prevented from leaving the country.

During her first visit to Haiti after the earthquake, Edwidge Danticat observes that 'the Americans have set up a Customs and Border Protection operation at the airport. Whose borders are they protecting? I wonder. I soon get my answer. People with Haitian passports are not being allowed to enter the airport' (Danticat, 2010b: 163). Her experience is further highlighted in reports by foreign researchers who examine the focus of the United States on containment: 'One of the early functions of the U.S. military was to ensure that Haitian citizens remained on the island, minimizing the possibility of the displaced reaching the shores of the United States' (Mullings, Werner and Peake, 2010: 290).

Outside of Haiti, Gérard is fortunate to have been granted TPS after the earthquake as it allows him to travel to Haiti to meet Géraldine. Instead of focusing solely on Gérard's freedom to return to his native country, his narrative perspective allows the reader to access a nuanced view of TPS and how it is perceived by expatriate Haitians. Whilst Gérard does not hesitate to apply for TPS – which effectively divests him of his precarious status as an illegal immigrant – 'les Haïtiens ne s'étaient pas précipités en masse pour bénéficier de ladite aubaine'<sup>29</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 174). Gérard's neighbour's pessimistic reaction further emphasises the reluctance within the Haitian community as his neighbour exclaims that he will not apply for TPS: 'Pas question ... de dévoiler mon adresse. Lorsque je n'aurai plus ce fichu TPS, ils viendront sans gêne me cueillir comme ces chiens perdus ... que les camions de ramassage raflent dans leurs filets'<sup>30</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 173).

For Gérard, the precarity of a temporary status means the absence of any guarantee of his return to his adopted country. For Gérard's neighbour, the precarity of a temporary status convinces him that his continued status as an illegal immigrant is comparatively more secure. At the time of the novel's publication, approximately ten percent of the Haitian immigrant population in the United States benefitted from TPS and Gérard's narrative perspective emphasises this mistrust in the efficacy of TPS as a political response to the earthquake. However, Gérard is presented as a somewhat idealistic case and an anomaly among the many Haitians who could not 'access TPS because of its high fee and administrative barriers' (Mullings, Werner and Peake, 2010: 291). Indeed, *Absences sans frontières* only hints at the economically prohibitive nature of the TPS by stating that several of its recipients were 'des gosses de riches ou d'aspirants riches'<sup>31</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 174) – those capable of exploiting their privilege and the system in order to regularise their residency status.

## Conclusion

Sepinwall hails 'Eternity Lasted Less than Sixty Seconds' as 'one of the most insightful and moving set of reflections written after the earthquake' (Sepinwall 2012: 225) and notes that, 'Even while focusing on the human dimensions of the quake's monstrosity, [Trouillot] cannot help but raise the issue of whether historical factors worsened the tragedy's effects' (Sepinwall 2012: 225). As the longer, conceptual subsidiary of 'Eternity Lasted Less than Sixty Seconds,' *Absences sans Frontières* also interrogates the role played by history in the aftermath of the earthquake. Moreover, its fictional approach lends itself to a more objective analysis of how the author treats with the subject of humanitarianism as well as related political reactions emerging from the earthquake. Despite using the perspective of a character cognizant of her own privilege, the novel does offer a nuanced portrait of various individuals associated with post-earthquake Haiti and its diaspora.

Géraldine is obliged to reflect on '[les] familles comme la mienne ... qui possédaient voiture et fréquentaient les supermarchés, buvaient du jus chaque jour, mangeaient trois repas régulièrement'<sup>32</sup> (Trouillot, 2013: 207) – a stark contrast with the refugees she aids in the post-earthquake camps. Hers is only one example of the many social and economic dichotomies that Évelyne Trouillot endeavours to address, even as her primary focus is on humanising some of the most vulnerable victims of the earthquake. Alluded to from the first page of the novel, the earthquake impacts upon the narrative on a microcosmic level – through Géraldine and her family – and on a macrocosmic level – through the presence of humanitarian workers in Haiti and the introduction of Temporary Protected Status to Haitians in the United States. In utilising the perspective of the microcosmic to critique the macrocosmic, Évelyne Trouillot effectively challenges the dominant media narratives surrounding humanitarianism. Placing particular emphasis on its aesthetics and on its political components, she puts forward an alternative narrative that creates nuances that have been historically absent.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

<sup>29</sup> 'Haitians did not come forward in droves to take advantage of the aforesaid godsend.'

<sup>30</sup> 'It's out of the question for me to ... reveal my address. As soon as I no longer have that blasted TPS, they will brazenly come and pick me up like those lost dogs ... that the trucks round up with their nets.'

<sup>31</sup> 'Rich kids or the aspiring rich.'

<sup>32</sup> 'Families like mine ... who owned a car and patronised supermarkets, drank juice every day and regularly ate three meals a day.'

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**How to cite this article:** Bascombe, C 2018 'Around Us, History Never Stops': Interrogating Post-quake Haiti in Évelyne Trouillot's *Absences sans Frontières*. *Karib – Nordic Journal for Caribbean Studies*, 4(1): 4, pp. 1–9, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/karib.44>

**Submitted:** 26 February 2018    **Accepted:** 24 August 2018    **Published:** 20 September 2018

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