

EDITORIAL

Haiti and the World: Global Effects of Haitian Tremors – 1791, 2010

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The outbreak of the 1791–1804 Haitian revolution shook the imperial powers of Europe and the U.S. Never before had the enslaved rebelled so powerfully, and in the decades to come, the name of the once-lucrative colony, Saint-Domingue, provoked anxiety and suspicion. In 2010, Western eyes again turned to Haiti as a devastating earthquake hit the island. Natural forces, together with poverty and inadequate infrastructure, caused a major humanitarian crisis.

Taking its point of departure in the intersection of politics and aesthetics, this special issue of *Karib* probes the global responses to these events and explores the repercussions within the frame of emergent and contemporary modernity.

The articles originate from a conference held in Aarhus, Denmark, in 2017, but they have since been considerably worked over. We were happy to have the opportunity to discuss the manifold roles of Haiti in a globalized world at the conference. This collection of essays presents some of the thoughts, questions, and ideas that made up the intellectual framework of the 2017 conference. As a journal, *Karib* is a platform for voices in Caribbean Studies in the Nordic region, and we hope that other Haiti scholars here and elsewhere will take this special issue as a point of departure for criticizing and further developing the ideas presented in this issue.

The conference set out to investigate the Haitian revolution as an important event in shaping the structures of a new, global world order, and the 2010 earthquake served as a focal point for discussions about the contemporary state of global interconnections. We tried to understand the role(s) and function(s) of Haiti in a globalized world through two interrelated research questions:

1. How do nations at the 'center' of the global economy act when confronted with disruptions, such as revolutions or earthquakes, in 'peripheral' regions?

The international responses to the two Haitian tremors – one of geological origin and one of political – have ranged from fear to sympathy, from military to humanitarian interventions, and from trade blockades and containment to foreign aid. As has been shown most systematically by Marlene Daut, nineteenth-century authors from the U.S. and Europe wrote extensively about the Haitian revolution. In Scandinavia, too, as demonstrated by the archival research by historian Fredrik Thomasson, newspapers from the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were filled with news from the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath (Thomasson 2018). The hundreds of texts about Haiti would at first seem to challenge the idea put forth by Michel Trouillot that the Haitian revolution was “silenced by” and “unthinkable” to European intellectuals. His argument, however, was not that Europeans had nothing to say about Haiti but, rather, that their pre-conceived mental categories were “incompatible with the idea of a slave revolution” (Trouillot 2015, 73). This incompatibility led to a U.S. and European misrepresentation of the Haitian revolution. The body of hundreds of texts or this “transatlantic print culture of the Haitian Revolution” as Daut calls it (Daut 2015, 3), is nonetheless significant, argues Daut, because it worked in tandem with the development of a pseudo-scientific theory of race differences. It thus remains an important challenge to 1) analyze the workings and functions of the early-nineteenth-century distorted visions of Haiti and 2) locate alternative representations of Haiti that may, to use the words of Gina Athena Ulysse, help to offer “new narratives of Haiti” (Ulysse 2015).

The international responses to the devastating 2010 earthquake were of an entirely different character. Rather than silence, the disaster provoked a global reaction of strong support: countries, private donors, and organizations all over the world raised huge sums to aid the Haitian people. In this context, Denmark and Sweden stand out as the third and fourth largest donors per capita (after Austria and Canada) to Haiti immediately after the earthquake. This massive response has now faded. Haiti does not make the headlines in Western news anymore, and if it does, it is in negative or even stereotypical terms. But as silence has again fallen upon Haiti, Haitian thinkers, writers, and artists have begun

to critically question the nature and the efficiency of the global humanitarian responses, and one might even ask if Trouillot's emphasis on an incompatibility between Haitian history and Western responses holds some truth in the new millennium, too.

In the early nineteenth century, Haiti was portrayed as a place of horror and violence. After 2010, journalists have routinely emphasized the lack of Haitian development, the extreme poverty of the country, and her vulnerability to natural disasters. While these latter geo-political facts can be important to acknowledge, there are other factors to consider when U.S. celebrities posed before cameras in post-quake Port-au-Prince. Are they helping to raise awareness about a people in need of aid? Are they trying to develop a promotable humanitarian and activist image? What happens to the anonymous Haitians outside of the camera frame – when the celebrities are there and when they are gone? What, to re-invoke Trouillot's question, is the relationship between the present international humanitarian discourse about Haiti and the very real challenges of the country? Many of the articles presented here study how literature, film, and academic debates deal with the different international responses to the 2010 earthquake. As a whole, we hope the articles offer ways of questioning and interpreting the consequences of the global responses to the tremors at the two ends of modernity.

2. How did the two events create or invigorate new relational and cultural networks across the Atlantic, in the Americas, and throughout the Global South?

The Haitian revolution was a pivotal event both in global history and in Black Atlantic and Caribbean intellectual cultures. Susan Buck-Morss has famously argued for the possibility of using the revolution as a vantage point for a new "Universal History". Through the acknowledgement of the radicality of this event outside of Western historical thought, it will be possible, Buck-Morss argues, to think history anew, thus "expanding the porosity of a global social field" (Buck-Morss 2009, 149). Against such an abstract understanding of the importance of the Haitian revolution, many scholars have worked to describe the concrete impact of the event across the globe and over the centuries. Through history, this long lasting impact has often negative forms, as tales of Haiti have been used as detrimental counter-images in the formulation of national identity and in racial discussions in the United States (Dash 1997, White 2010). But the revolution has also been a crucial point of reference for the formation of political communities in other places and in regional and global communities, ranging from Little Haiti of Miami to literary examples of what J. Michael Dash, borrowing from Édouard Glissant, terms "The Other America" (Dash 1998). The Haitian Revolution is certainly a central point of reference in Caribbean literature across languages, with Derek Walcott's drama *Henri Christophe* (1951), Aimé Césaire's drama *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* (1963), and Cuban Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (1949) as just a few examples of texts written outside of Haiti that use this event (Kaisary 2014). Finally, Daut, in her most recent book, emphasizes Baron de Vastey as an ideological forerunner of later forms of black transatlantic communities (Daut 2017).

There are, of course, significant differences between the 2010 earthquake and the revolution. Denying that would be both inappropriate and imply a flawed understanding of the importance of agency in historical developments. However, in the unparalleled international humanitarian response to the earthquake, old patterns of international recognition and disavowal have resurfaced. In his acclaimed 2012 documentary on the earthquake and the humanitarian aftermath *Assistance Mortelle*, Raoul Peck lets Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive address the global context of the catastrophe and the help made available to the Haitian people: "We cannot fail. Because if we fail, the consequences will affect all poor countries" (Peck 2013). Towards the end of the film Bellerive turns the same logic against the west: "If you cannot solve Haiti, what can you solve elsewhere?" (Peck 2013). Bellerive's remarks draw on a tradition of Haitian exceptionalism founded in the historical use of the revolution both inside and outside Haiti and highlights the importance of historical reflection on present-day events. In this light, the moment of catastrophe may be as relevant a time to discuss transnational communities as any. The Haitian diaspora has played a significant role in both invigorating and criticizing international intervention and humanitarianism in the wake of the earthquake. The humanitarian industry that responded is best understood within a global economy and media landscape. Further, as Matthew Smith shows, even the fault lines responsible for the quake imply an international background to the tragedy, as they stretch beneath the Caribbean archipelago, creating communities of destruction. The articles collected in this issue examine some of these multiple ways in which Haitian history is entangled with global history.

At the conference, various scholars approached these complex questions through analyses of texts and images that crossed traditional disciplinary boundaries. We would like to thank everyone from near and far who contributed to the conference and everyone who has submitted articles to this issue. Articles will be published on an on-going basis, making this special issue of *Karib* a work in progress.

Happy reading!

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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