The Idea of Haiti: Rethinking Crisis and Development. Edited by Millery Polyné. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. ISBN: 978081668132

Just before five o'clock on January 12, 2010, the earth under the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince began to violently buckle and shift, causing massive loss of life and billions of dollars in property damage as structures crumbled around and on top of the city's inhabitants. The 7.0 magnitude earthquake was so strong it could be felt in the neighboring capital of Santo Domingo. In the minds of many, the earthquake could not have occurred in a worse location than the densely populated capital of a nation seemingly in constant crisis. Adding to the loss of life and property and general sense of panic, dozens of aftershocks continued to rock the country in the weeks that followed the initial event, and months later U.N. peacekeeping forces on mission in Haiti introduced cholera. International aid and volunteers poured into the country, all supposedly committed to the relief, recovery, and reconstruction efforts needed to build a "new Haiti." Yet despite the outpouring of funds and voluntary labor, little in the way of "building Haiti back better" has been completed.

In the wake of the earthquake, the contributors to *The Idea of Haiti* encourage us to re-evaluate the standard ways we have come to know and think about Haiti and the ways Haitians think about themselves – important elements of the work to rebuild Haiti. In his introductory essay, Millery Polyné notes that Haiti has been cast in a variety of roles by the international community *and* the Haitian elite as crisis-ridden, exceptional, enigmatic, deviant, progress-resistant, etc., since at least the inception of Haitian independence in 1804. However, these notions ignore the West's isolation of Haiti in the wake of the Haitian Revolution, the repeated interference and intervention in Haitian affairs by Western powers (most notably the United States), the legacy of authoritarianism, and Haiti's precarious position in the global economy. Thus, the volume aims to disrupt the common paradigms through which we view Haiti,

particularly that of a nation in perpetual crisis mode, and to stir more critical, historical, and contextual scholarship on Haiti, its affairs, and its future.

In Part I, "Revolisyon/Kriz" (Revolution/Crisis), the essayists re-examine the past and present day effects of the Haitian Revolution and the notion of Haiti as always in crisis. Nick Nesbitt examines the terror the West felt at Haitians' achievement of their independence, something that for Euro-Americans was unthinkable. The United States and Europe viewed Haiti as a monstrosity and treated the young nation as such – isolating it politically and economically and silencing its revolution. Greg Beckett's essay provides a general etymology of crisis and a historiography of how the West and Haitian elites have employed the term to argue alternately that Haiti has suffered from historical and/or political crisis since its independence. Importantly, this understanding has been used by the United States, Organization of American States, UN, and NGOs to justify intervening in Haiti. Yet Beckett also shows that because of historical circumstances and Haitians' marginal location in today's global capitalist society, Haitians live with the manifestations of crisis as a condition. In her study of Charlemagne Péralte, the leader of the resistance to the 1915 U.S. occupation, Yveline Alexis interrogates the recent deployment of Péralte as a symbol of protest against the presence of U.N. troops and in Haitians' struggles for equality, justice, and respect of its sovereignty. In doing so, she shows that his memory and use of nationalist rhetoric that challenged U.S. hegemony and upheld the Haitian Revolution still lives on today.

Part II of the volume, "Moun/Demounization" (Person/Dehumanization), raises questions about how difficult circumstances have shaped Haitians' humanity and the depiction of the Haitian majority as the *moun andeyò* – the marginalized masses. In "Fantasies of a Bare Life," Sibylle Fischer uses Giorgio Agamben's concept of *nuda vita*, or bare life, to call into question

the West's fascination with the violence that produces, and captures, photographs of bare life in Haiti. She argues that in his 1996 book of photographs entitled *Haiti*, Bruce Gilden committed a type of photographic violence by violating his subjects' personal space and that in presenting images of Haitians divorced from historical context he has helped produce a Haiti that is an incomprehensible mass of suffering. Patrick Sylvan takes up the concept of executive violence through the failure of the head of state to properly marshal his or her language in moments of national upheaval. He shows how the Haitian executive, President René Préval, like other Haitian presidents before him, victimized and disrespected the Haitian people and failed to contain violence through his deafening silence in the month that followed the earthquake. Karen Richman questions the notion that Haitians blamed their *lwa*, or Vodou spirits, for the earthquake and turned to Christianity because of their spirits' impotence and the role of Christian NGOs in the relief and recovery efforts that have been going on in Haiti since that fateful day in January 2010. In addition to highlighting the practical fluidity of Haitian religious affiliation, she shows that contrary to popular Protestant belief, Haitians did not blame the *lwa* for the earthquake and that the quake and its aftershocks in fact had resulted in a spate of what some interviewees called "bad conversions" to Protestantism that were primarily pragmatic, in the hopes that God would save them, as opposed to the result of deep religious conviction.

In the text's final segment, "Ed" (Aid), the eight contributors consider how national and international institutions go about helping Haitians in need. Wien Weibert Arthus explores the Kennedy administration's failure (or refusal) to disperse aid to Haiti through the Alliance for Progress during the Duvalier regime to gain insight into the structural and ideological impediments to NGOs' dispersal of pledge funds. As Kennedy looked to distance the U.S. from dictators, Duvalier's refusal to stem violence and corruption, hold elections, or agree to U.S.

oversight through what Arthus terms "selective nationalism" brought the Kennedy administration and Duvalier regime to an impasse that left many Haitians in the lurch. The author argues that conditions placed on the release of funds during the 1960s resonates today as much of the humanitarian earthquake aid comes with conditions that many Haitians construe as an impingement on national sovereignty. In his piece on urban planning, Harley Etienne describes both the internal and international factors that are shaping rebuilding efforts in Port-au-Prince and its suburbs. He shows that Western colonialism and imperialism forestalled the development of the Haitian capital into a sustainable urban center in the first place and that presently an ineffective national government, Haiti's old cadastre system, and the people's lack of confidence in officials have hampered reconstruction. He argues that to see effective planning in Port-au-Prince, we must adopt a holistic approach that considers the political and economic factors that influence the rebuilding of the entire city. Mark Schuller's "Cholera and the Camps" explores why, despite the pledge of billions of dollars in aid, Haiti was unprepared for the deadly outbreak of cholera brought to Haiti by UN troops that killed 6,500 people. Using a series of surveys, Schuller documents the general lack of sanitation and access to healthcare and clean water in the tent camps that facilitated the disease's spread. He asserts that the highly centralized and exclusionary (of Haitians at the local and national level) nature of NGOs and their results-based management structures meant that these organizations had little incentive to invest in the public capacity to provide necessary services to camps that could have curbed the cholera outbreak. Elizabeth McAlister, like Richman, takes up questions of spirituality, exploring the beliefs that produced, and led some Haitians to endorse, televangelist Pat Robertson's explanation of the earthquake as the natural consequence of Haitians' spiritual pact with the devil made during the Vodou ceremony held at Bois Caïman in 1791. The Spiritual Mapping movement, an off shoot

of evangelicalism, teaches the doctrine of spiritual warfare and holds that Christians, as prayer warriors, are taking part in the battle between God and evil. This movement and the idea of the Bois Caïman pact as the root of a myriad of Haitian problems has been adopted by some Haitian evangelicals, who, with the assistance of international evangelical organizations, pastors, and scholars, have gone to war for their country through prayer. While those who find pride and identity in Haiti's revolutionary legacy and black (African) culture find this viewpoint offensive and imperialistic, for Haitian prayer warriors it is essential that they recast the history of their nation to overthrow the imperialism of the devil.

Finally, Alex Dupuy, Robert Fatton Jr., Évelyne Trouillot, and Tatiana Wah conclude the volume with an engaging discussion of the meaning of a "new Haiti," the ineffectiveness of Haitian leadership and the nation's lack of sovereignty, the role of the Haitian diaspora, and the connection between the cultural and political in the wake of the 2010 earthquake. From the conversation, we see that the idea of a "new Haiti" is in reality quite old, highlighting an interesting problem in Haitian society wherein the Haitian majority seems to have mis-remembered, forgotten, or does not know about the old Haiti, while the nation's political and economic elite who are perpetuating old patterns and behaviors of self-aggrandizement, inefficiency, and capitulation to neo-liberal powers and NGOs seem to remember the old Haiti all too well. The discussion also draws our attention to the interplay between the internal and external in Haitian politics and recovery in the wake of the earthquake. Although the Haitian majority continues to struggle on in the face of extremely difficult circumstances, Haitian leaderships lacks a vision for the national welfare, which has allowed other nations and aid organizations to set up shop in Haiti with little accountability to the Haitian people. Finally, we see that the Haitian diaspora, as distant political citizens and important economic contributors, is

divided in its thoughts about Haiti, yet as a whole faces challenges from those living in Haiti who see the diaspora as out of touch and/or as potential competition for the few economic opportunities available in Haiti. Despite these and other problems, this group of scholars still sees glimmers of hope, perhaps best seen in the courage of the Haitian people, for a better Haiti.

The collected essays in the volume represent a critical contribution to Haitian Studies and scholarship in international aid and natural disasters. In pushing scholars and those interested in Haiti and its future to think beyond the paradigm of crisis and disabuse themselves of the notion that all aid is benevolent, the contributors have called for an adjustment to how people approach Haiti and other underdeveloped or catastrophe-struck nations. While Polyné notes that the volume does not touch on gender and sexuality, an analysis of how the earthquake has disproportionately affected women and children would have been a wonderful addition to the work. The work pays a significant amount of attention to the role of the United States in Haiti, and rightly so. Yet the book would have also benefited from a contribution that has explored Latin America's, and particularly the Dominican Republic's, engagement with Haiti since the earthquake. Overall, the volume is a must-read for Latin American and Caribbean Studies scholars, aid workers, and those who hope for a better future of Haiti.