

WHY
HAITI
NEEDS NEW
NARRATIVES

A Post-Quake Chronicle

GINA ATHENA ULYSSE

TRILINGUAL EDITION

Foreword by Robin D. G. Kelley

“The sense of urgency that pervades her essays is palpable. As she does in her performances, Ulysse rings the alarm, fills the room in our head with deafening sound,

a one-woman aftershock.”

ROBIN D. G. KELLEY, *from the foreword*

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Translated by NADÈVE MÉNARD &

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***Avatar*, Voodoo, and White Spiritual Redemption**

January 11, 2010 / *Huffington Post* @ 1:13 p.m.

Avatar is not just another white-man-save-the-day movie. As a black woman and a cultural anthropologist born in Haiti, I had doubts about the depiction of race in the film. Before seeing *Avatar*, I worked on resisting the urge to categorize this film as yet another *Dances with Wolves*, *The Last Samurai*, or *Pocahontas* redux, as some critics have dubbed it. White-man-gone-native is the favored trope that mainstream Hollywood writers use when exploring (neo)colonial encounters between indigenous people and whites.

A white environmental anthropologist friend, whose judgment of representations of race I trust, loved it. So I decided to see the film, even though Haitian Listservs were buzzing about how Dr. Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver), in typical Hollywood fashion, demeaned one of the religions I grew up with. “We’re not talking about pagan voodoo but something that is real biologically: a global network of neurons.” An unapologetic lover of Vodou, I went to see for myself.

After seeing *Avatar*, I urged my younger sister to go take a look. We were both curious for different reasons. In our debriefing, we discussed the different aspects of the film that made us squirm. Blue monkey-like people played by dark actors. The noble savage narrative. The angry blue men competing with the good white guy who wins the blue girl. There were parts that we did like. It was absolutely beautiful. We were both in awe of the images of nature—a lush and glowing ecological world. The skills of animation. Then we went back to the uncomfortable moments. We spoke of the successful transferring scene when Moat (played by C. C. H. Pounder) led the ceremony that freed Jake Sully from his physically challenged white body. As high priestess, Moat called on the Na’Vi’s god Eywa for assistance. Seated, they encircled the tree with braced arms and moved in total unison.

Their repetitive chanting soon became drumming. “Sacred dance, sacred dance, sacred dance,” my sister said she kept murmuring to her-

self. She actually teaches a sacred dance class, and it was too familiar. The movements, setting, altar, offerings. Communion with nature. All beings are interconnected. The Na'Vi do not distinguish between themselves and their environment. We came back to the tree.

In Haitian Vodou ecology, trees have always been sacred. They are significant in rituals, as they are inhabited by spirits. Rapid deforestation of the island has impacted worship. In overpopulated urban settings, practitioners are living in what one scholar recently referred to as “post-tree Vodou.”¹

It should be noted that deforestation of the island has some of its origins in the U.S. occupation of 1915–34. Then my sister pointed out that during the entire film, there was no mention of the Sky People's god. It's all New Age spirituality. New Age spirituality, with its purported openness, may incorporate some African-based religious practices, especially from Latin America, but (Haitian) Vodou remains stigmatized therein, especially in interfaith circles. Although a growing number of initiates are whites, few multid denominational churches dare to acknowledge it. Cultural specificities aside, Vodou shares core features—spirits, nature, ceremonies, and offerings—with other mystical religions. *Avatar* is a reminder of the hierarchy within alternative religions.

Surprisingly, I sat through *Avatar* with disciplined patience. I am so used to epic films about indigenous people always having white heroes, whether they be historical, contemporary, or science fiction fantasies. The Hollywood blockbuster machine with its penchant for good-versus-evil won't risk financing tropes with alternative narratives. Is slavery not the worst of evils and Napoleon Bonaparte the ultimate villain? Yet a film about the Haitian Revolution—the only successful slave revolution that ousted European colonizers—still can't seem to get off the ground. And the depiction of voodoo, Walt Disney recently reminded us, is still evil: see *The Princess and the Frog*.

To be sure, while *Avatar* doesn't break free of Hollywood tropes, it does allow white characters to break out of dominant worldviews. The film had a range of Sky People who fought among themselves. In fact, the triumphant ones were all outcasts. A paraplegic man. A minority woman. An effeminate nerd. A masculinist white female scientist. A minority science man. There was also corporate greed. Military might. Skeptics and believers. There was a critique of science with irony. The cerebral Dr. Grace realized too late that the Na'Vi's mystical voodoo is as valid and real as

the science. She did not make the crossing, while the more visceral Jake, who went rogue, did.

The clash of cultures and races is an easy way for moviemakers to explore personal transformation. In too many films, dark bodies have systematically been the catalyst for white salvation. *Avatar* forces us to confront these contradictions as we wait for the epic film that has yet to be made—one that tells the natives-meets-white-men story from their perspective.

Half of life is figuring out which contradictions you're willing to live with.

— Savyasaachi

2

Amid the Rubble and Ruin, Our Duty to Haiti Remains

January 14, 2010 / npr.org @ 11:29 a.m.

Words are especially difficult to come by in a state of numbness. My response to the outpouring of calls and e-mails from concerned friends has become something of a mantra. No, still no news yet. We have not been able to make contact with anyone. To stay sane, I have resigned myself to accepting that my immediate family will not come out of this without loss. And even if we did, the lives of the already departed and sheer magnitude of the devastation are enough to keep me catatonic.

You see, I was just in Haiti the week before Christmas. I went to the Ghetto Biennale of the Grand Rue artists. I returned from what I boasted was my best trip ever full of hope about the future. The reason for my optimism was encounters with people from Cité Soleil. Through INURED, a research institute, I met ten students who received scholarships to study in Brazil and members of a community forum that has been actively engaged in dialogue in attempts to build a broader coalition beyond politics. Their work renewed my dedication to participating in building the

country again. I made a commitment to raise funds to make sure both of these efforts are successful.

Hope is not something that one often associates with Haiti. An anthropologist and critic of representations of the island, I have often questioned narratives that reduce Haiti to simple categories and in the process dehumanize Haitians. Yes, we may be the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, but there is *life* there, love, and an undeniable and unbeatable spirit of creative survivalism.

I have heard cries of Why Haiti? and Why now? or that this could have been avoided. Narratives of blame may be explanatory, but at this time they are not constructive. Since our inception as a sovereign state early in the nineteenth century, we have faced obstacles. We have had to build and rebuild before. I am worried about Haiti's future. In the immediate moment we need help, rescue missions of all kinds. I am concerned about weeks from now when we are no longer front-page news. Without long-term efforts, we will simply not be able to rebuild. What will happen then?

My first response to seeing post-quake pictures of the capital was to ask, How will they build factories with this devastation? In the past year, the United Nations and special envoy Bill Clinton's plans to help develop the country's economy have virtually ignored dissent on the ground that called for a more humane approach that would not re-create the same exploitive labor relations that continue to serve the wealthy. Haiti's government, with its absence of structure, cannot be ignored, as it is in desperate need of reinforcement, and civil space needs to be nurtured.

The folks I met last month had one response when I asked why, despite their personal hardships, they chose to engage in community building. In Creole or in French, they replied, "C'est mon devoir" (It is my duty). I was charmed by the phrase, its elegance and matter-of-factness. On this side of the water, I hold on to their words today as a sign that there is will in Haiti. When long-term efforts are on the way, the international community, too, must see it as its duty to not re-create the mistakes of the past.

3

Haiti Will Never Be the Same

January 21, 2010 / *Huffington Post* @ 3:09 p.m.

It is still difficult to absorb the images. Though I have now heard from my family members, I experience symptoms of trauma, mainly dissociation—my mind seeks sporadic distances from my body, as this is simply too much for my psyche to bear. Unlike those glued to their screens, I turned off the television. I have that luxury. Yet I keep thinking of those who cannot. If, with over sixteen hundred miles between us, this is my reaction, then what must it be like for people who are in the thick of it in Haiti?

Since its inception as a free black state in 1804, Haiti has been fragile. If the earthquake that devastated the capital last week has revealed anything else, it is that the country has a weak and barely functioning state and virtually no infrastructure. Of course, that is not news to those who know Haiti: it has always been the case. How it got that way tells us why efforts to rebuild Haiti must take a different course. And this simply cannot be understood without some references to the island's history.

Since independence, most politicians have followed a simple rule: build a coalition to oust the enemy, then disband, as they had done with the French. Freedom came at a price. The young republic's sovereignty was compromised in critical ways that continue to affect it today. Early on, it was crippled by debt—an indemnity payment demanded by France of 150 million francs (borrowed from European banks) for their loss of property—and the island's economy never quite recovered. Haiti was also isolated by an international community—still trafficking in slavery—for sixty years after its successful revolution. The brutal U.S. military occupation the following century furthered Haiti's centralization in the capital, weakening regional institutions and economies. Moreover, ruler after ruler chose to concentrate power and develop the capital at the expense of the nation. In that vein, the birth certificates of those not born in the capital, until very recently, were actually labeled *mounandeyo*, people born on the outside.

As a result, over the years the escalated internal migration that overpopulated Port-au-Prince was fueled by the search for jobs, education, and other opportunities due to the absence of government presence in rural areas. This is one of many reasons that rescue efforts and resources are unable to be delivered. Léogâne, Petit-Goâve, Jacmel, for example, were out of reach to rescue workers for days. Historically, the extractive state has opposed its nation and only served a select few.

Recently, I spoke with a friend who was there during the earthquake. He sounded fully present. He politely asked how I was. “You just lived through an earthquake, how are you?” I replied. His words were a staccato of observations: “You can’t imagine how terrible it is. . . . I have taken lots of pictures . . . videos . . . this must be documented. Bodies everywhere. The smell. People need to know what is really going on there. A friend of mine has four hundred people in her yard. Her house collapsed. Everyone is outside. Some are dead. We need water. Medical assistance. Food. There is no state. No ministry in operation. No communication. Nothing. There is nothing. Haiti, I tell you, will never be the same.”

Haiti better not be the same!

The earthquake has indiscriminately shifted some of the class boundaries in Haiti, forcing everyone out in the streets because of fear of frequent aftershocks. This disaster with all its horror and tragedies actually represents an opportunity when the time arrives to rebuild a different Haiti—one with a government of politicians with national agendas, not self-interest, one that recognizes its duty to its citizens. Haiti could be a country that in its industries and labor relations ceases to exploit its workers and stops reinforcing the extreme gap between the rich and the poor.

This prospective Haiti could promote expansion of civil space that fosters both acknowledgment of dissent and genuinely supports democratic engagement. This new Haiti can be a place where education is not privatized and centralized in the capital, but available to everyone in all nine departments. And finally, it can be an island that embraces its social and cultural plurality in its myriad forms without debasing its black masses. That simply cannot occur without the constructive will of all Haitians and the international community, especially the United States and global aid agencies, because they have historically undermined local politics.

So when rebuilding is under way, we need to remain just as engaged. We are obliged to become vigilant observers and volunteers who ques-

tion, watch, and participate in reconstruction efforts on the ground to make certain that indeed Haiti, which is so close and yet so far away, will never be the same. And must not be the same.

4

Dehumanization and Fracture Trauma at Home and Abroad

January 25, 2010 / *Social Text* @ 3:00 p.m.

The Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University held a teach-in, “Haiti in Context,” on Wednesday, January 20, to which I was invited to speak. After the panelists presented their perspectives on the current situation, a young Haitian female graduate student who had been there during the earthquake took the mike at the podium. Her account of the event and its immediate aftermath required the audience to be patient. Words crept sluggishly from her mouth as she dissociated frequently between incomplete sentences.

She had solid insights: “Rescue efforts are focused on getting American citizens out first. If you are white, you are automatically U.S. citizen. Those with money make their way to the Dominican Republic to escape. Relief is not going in needed places. Most are being ignored. Efforts that work are grassroots level response that gets to communities.” And so on.

What was evident to us when she was done is that she is still in shock and is severely traumatized. Another Haitian faculty member in the audience broke into tears as soon as she began to speak. Those of us with especially deep connections to Haiti (including myself—I was born there and had been on a research trip a month prior) also showed signs of fracture.

In the immediate aftermath of the quake, I wrote the following: “Words are especially difficult to come by in a state of numbness. My response to the outpouring of calls and e-mails from concerned friends has become something of a mantra. No, still no news yet. We have not been able to

make contact with anyone. To stay sane, I have resigned myself to accepting that my immediate family will not come out of this without loss. And even if we did, the lives of the already departed and sheer magnitude of the devastation are enough to keep me catatonic.”

A week later, I penned that it was “still difficult to absorb the images. Though I have now heard from family members, I experience symptoms of trauma, mainly dissociation—my mind seeks sporadic distances from my body, as this is simply too much for my psyche to bear. Unlike those glued to their screens, I turned off the television. I have that luxury. Yet I keep thinking of those who cannot. If, with over sixteen hundred miles between us, this is my reaction, then what must it be like for people who are in the thick of it in Haiti?”

Isolated in Middletown, Connecticut, and desperate for any information, I turned on the major news outlets the morning after the earthquake. One of the first reporters on the scene (a white female whose identity is truly insignificant here) was clearly overwhelmed by what she saw on the ground. She commented on the indifference of those roaming the streets, many of them still covered in dust. Her explanation for their distressed and expressionless state was that perhaps it is because they are so used to hardship that they are nonresponsive.

This observation—an additional blow to the psyche—discursively reinforced the routine dehumanization of Haitians. As subjects of research and representation, Haitians have often been portrayed as fractures, as fragments—bodies without minds, heads without bodies, or roving spirits. These disembodied beings or visceral fanatics have always been in need of an intermediary. They hardly ever spoke for themselves. In the academy, they are represented by the social scientist. And on January 12 after the quake, enter the uninformed, socioculturally limited journalist.

In media coverage of the quake and its aftermath, some nuances of the dehumanization narrative have emerged that are particularly dangerous, especially given their implications. In these, Haitians are either sub-human or superhuman. The subhumanity stems from the dominant idea in popular imagination that Haitians are irrational-devil-worshipping-progress-resistant-uneducated-accursed-black-natives overpopulating this godforsaken land. The superhuman characteristic is usually framed in terms of our resilience. The miraculous discoveries of those found still alive deep in the rubble nine to ten days after being trapped there are framed in such terms. No ordinary human being could withstand so

much, but for some reason, those Haitians can. There is an underlying subtext here about race. For Haitians are blackness in its worst form, because, simply put, the *enfant terrible* of the Americas who defied all European odds had to become its *bête noire*.

Some hours after the Hope for Haiti fund-raiser held on Friday, January 22 (which I could not bear to watch), Anderson Cooper was on the air speaking with a British reporter who was perturbed by the fact that people were not crying. The reporter then told a story of a woman who survived the quake but lost family members, including a young child. The reporter was surprised that this woman was forcing her way onto a bus to get out of Port-au-Prince. When he asked her what she had done with the recovered body of her child, she said “*Jete*.” His interpretation was that *she* threw him out. The only word he understood was *jete* (throw, fling, hurl). There was no mention of the prepositions that came before or words that came after. “Why don’t you Haitians cry?” the reporter asked those he encountered, stunned. Cooper tried to spark a conversation about trauma and mentioned the word “shock.” That angle did not gain any traction.

Yet another rhetorical blow to the psyche.

As I have written elsewhere, the body—a reservoir of discursive, physiological, psychological, and social memories—functions as an archive. Deposits were made on January 12 just before 5 p.m. that will have impacts for years to come. Those who have experienced this moment at home or abroad will need to be tended to, psychologically nurtured and supported, because we have been fractured differently in so many brutal ways.

An Update of Sorts

Two days ago, my nineteen-year-old cousin who lives on Route de Frères, which as of the writing has seen no relief efforts because of security concerns, cited the rapper Nas on his first Facebook post since the quake, which read:

Heart of a king, blood of a slave!!!!

Thu at 7:11 p.m. A· Comment A· Like

His friends responded:

thank god ur ok ma dude . . . stay up and stay in contact

Thu at 7:55 p.m.

Blessed be the Lord!

Thu at 8:27 p.m.

great to see you again. take care and keep in touch!!!!

Thu at 10:33 p.m.

Really glad 2 know u r still standing brave heart never get away in vain!!!

Peace & luv bro !! keep praying

Yesterday at 2:15 a.m.

still standing as this famous slave, we're gonna do it again "BWA
KAIMAN"

Yesterday at 4:22 p.m.

5

Haiti's Future A Requiem for the Dying

February 4, 2010 / *Huffington Post* @ 12:19 p.m.

The earthquake's devastation in Haiti is no longer front-page news. Most cameras shifted their lenses when the morbid and grueling work began—massive discard of the dead and what to do with the displaced living. As bulldozers clear rubble intermingled with bodies and other remains, top officials meet in global cities to decide Haiti's fate. Private organizations and companies are positioning themselves for the expected economic windfall, recruiting foreign workers and organizing conferences in the diaspora on how best to rebuild the fractured republic.

Post-quake Haiti is up for grabs, and the key players remain the same.

As nameless, undocumented, uncounted bodies are dumped in mass graves, President René Préval and his government refuse to address this or any other substantive issue. Haitians at home and abroad wonder who is truly running the country. Although this silence may smack of barbarity, it is in fact a structural one that has historical roots and dangerous implications for Haiti's future.

Haitian officials are not alone in this disregard for the dead and the living. Initial rescue efforts prioritized citizenship and privilege. The valu-

able foreigners were saved first. Rescue teams ignored overpopulated slums coded as “red zones” or high-security-risk areas. Young children labeled “orphans” were whisked off to foreign lands. Disputed overpayment for those treated in the United States suspended medical airlifts and endangered lives. The United Nations approach to managing the desperate and hungry who lined up for food was to teargas them into submission. People are dying not because of the earthquake but because of neglect.

We are bearing witness to human rights violations in the name of expediency. This need not be the case. Haiti, once more, is being called upon to lead changes in the world. Two centuries ago, the island caused a disorder in things colonial that ultimately ended slavery and France's hope of enlarging its empire in the New World. Yet, this time, the situation in Haiti is challenging the international community to rethink its concepts and applications of aid and to discern these from racist ideologies that impede sustainable reconstruction efforts from taking hold.

Well-meaning advocates and hateful critics alike focus on Haiti as a failed state, citing its pervasive corruption as they simultaneously dismiss references to the past. Unless they think historically and explore these interconnections to find new solutions, all efforts to get Haiti right are simply doomed. This moment is especially critical because the Haitian state is being called upon to do something it has never done—have and show a responsibility to the entire nation. Historically, which lives matter in Haiti has always been determined by socioeconomic status. And nothing makes this more apparent than the mass graves; the state treats the dead as they do the living.

To get Haiti on another, more democratic course, concrete steps are necessary to ensure that the poor and nameless have advocates in discussions of rebuilding plans. They cannot continue to be casualties of nonrepresentation. Their opposition to the UN special envoy's plan for Haiti must be revisited. January 12, 2010, should not be used as a pretext to go back to business as usual. In spite of the narrative pervasive in the mainstream media, Haiti only seemed stable. The Collier solution to build sweatshops and export mangoes being touted again this week as the answer to poverty is an archaic development model detrimental to Haiti's future precisely because it reinforces the concentration of wealth and exploits the masses.

If you are concerned, keep asking questions. External pressure affected

the World Bank days after the quake. So make calls, text, Tweet, send letters to local, national, and foreign officials, as well as international funding agencies to demand the following:

- Forgiveness of Haiti's debt.
- Greater transparency on the part of both Haiti and the United States regarding the terms of current relationship between the two nations.
- Public debates (at home and abroad) concerning Haiti's future that actually include real oppositional voices and not the usual suspects who claim to represent the nameless.
- Recognition of and partnership with local grassroots organizations to ensure expedient delivery of relief.

Indeed, nothing would be a more fitting requiem for the dying than a sustainable Haiti that will not crumble in the future from the man-made disasters that are currently under way.

6

Not-So-Random Thoughts on Words, Art, and Creativity

Haiti Art Naïf / Denkmalschmiede Höfgen /
March 7 exhibition opens (print)

Years ago, as a translator for Haitian refugees, I found myself getting attached to certain words spoken by men and women seeking asylum in the United States. These words took me into unfamiliar places. Uncomfortable places. Dangerous places. The paintings in this collection, like those morsels of words, also took me on a journey. They took me to a different place. A beautiful place. A regenerative paradise. A place that I did not want to leave. They gave me breath, exposed me to a limitless imagination and reminded me, once again at a very crucial moment, of Haiti's undeniable and unbeatable spirit of creative survivalism. And because of their location—in a village four kilometers from Grimma, in Germany,