CHAPTER 8

Marvin Victor's *Corps mêlés* and the Writing of Disaster in Haiti

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What are the effects of a catastrophic earthquake on a society, its culture, and its politics? Which of these effects are temporary, and which endure? Are the various effects immediately discernible, or do they manifest themselves over time? What is the relationship between natural disasters and social change? What roles do artists, and writers in particular, have in witnessing, bearing testimony to, and gauging the effects of natural disasters? These are some of the fundamental questions raised by the Haitian earthquake of 12 January 2010, a uniquely destructive event in the recent history of cataclysmic disasters, in Haiti and the broader world.[1] 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. While Haitian writing has arguably always had a social and political function, the sheer scale of the destruction caused by the earthquake posed an unprecedented challenge to authors, as well as to other artists. Although many authors initially expressed their feelings of helplessness and of the futility of their art, virtually all established and many new and original voices published works soon after the earthquake, some of whom wrote directly of the event, while others made no reference to it at all. There was and has been no single, unifying literary reaction to the earthquake; rather, there is a proliferation of works that share certain thematic preoccupations but which insist on the freedom to express those themes in original ways, thus making new and daring explorations of form a crucial part of the meaning of the event as it is processed through the workings of the individual text. If, as many authors initially said, art is useless in the face of catastrophe, that uselessness has a paradoxical value in that it can be used to liberate an author from the potentially restrictive expectation to act as a faithful chronicler of a social event. In many cases, this freedom,

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and this fundamental inutility, have formed the basis for stylistic innovations that are meaningful in themselves in that they suggest potential new modes of thinking and being that are some of the unexpected creative effects of the disaster. Therefore, far from treating recent Haitian writing as a straightforward extension of social reality, or as a simple *littérature de circonstance*, I would argue that daring literary invention—what Edwidge Danticat calls "dangerous creation"[2]—constitutes one of the most striking and important means of communicating the effects of such a disaster, and that close engagement with the creative imagination is one of the most privileged ways for the outsider in particular to begin to comprehend the experience of living in and through a time of catastrophe. In this chapter, I engage with a singular piece of writing: Marvin Victor's *Corps mêlés*, a quite brilliant first—and to date, only—novel that was hailed as one of the first "postearthquake novels," but which is rarely discussed by scholars and risks being forgotten, itself a kind of tragically neglected ruin.[3]

The "writing of disaster" seems an apposite term to apply to postearthquake literature from Haiti. The phrase recalls the title of Maurice Blanchot's 1980 work *L'Ecriture du désastre*, which has been used by certain critics to refer to Haitian literature, both before and after the earthquake.[4] The fragmented narrative style of many contemporary Haitian novels is often a sign of the disrupted memory of the traumatized individual and a disjointed means of communicating between the traumatizing past and the traumatized present. The trope of silence that one finds in many works is a further example of "the writing of disaster," which, in Blanchot's terms, is a "discourse [*parole*] of waiting, silent perhaps, but which does not discard silence, but makes silence a statement in itself, which says in silence the statement that is silence. For mortal silence is never silent" (1980: 98). For Blanchot, therefore, the "writing of disaster" is characterized essentially by paradox: it is a silence that is nonetheless a statement, and one can in some senses say more by remaining mute. Fragmented narratives are born out of human catastrophes for, as Blanchot says, "the need for fragmentation is related to disaster" (99). The narrative fragmentation that often characterizes the writing of disaster amounts in Blanchot's terms to "the putting into pieces (tearing apart) of that which has never existed before as a whole" (99). Many Haitian novels are structured in such a way, as a "putting into pieces" of fragmented personal and collective history, a tearing apart of a plenitude that never truly existed at all.

There is moreover to some extent a critical expectation that the "writing of disaster" should bear in formal terms the physical and stylistic marks of catastrophe: prose will be "fractured," "fragmented," or otherwise show signs of rupture and violence. Short fiction may be a genre partic-

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ularly suited to or representative of this fractured style. The sharp blasts of narrative from many different voices in, for instance, the short story collection *Haiti Noir* are suggestive of the difficulty of conceptualizing longer fiction at such a short remove from the earthquake. Also, with such a collaborative volume, one senses that no one person can own the event or its memory, and that it is something to be shared and constructed collectively. Indeed, it could be said that the short fiction mode has been the dominant genre in recent and contemporary Haitian fiction. Lyonel Trouillot writes short novels that could be categorized as long novellas, while Dany Laferrière's books are made up of episodic, fragmented narratives, and Yanick Lahens and Edwidge Danticat are accomplished short story writers whose respective novels *La Couleur de l'aube* and *The Dew Breaker* are also constructed around short, self-contained chapters that draw on the modes of short fiction.

Given the critical expectation for fragmented style and the apparent aptness of shorter fiction to the "writing of disaster," one might have expected that the great novels of the earthquake, those written on an epic, expansive scale, would take time to compose, and that they may not begin to appear for years or decades to come.

Marvin Victor's *Corps mêlés* (2011) confounds these expectations in spectacular fashion. A long, dense, fluid piece of prose fiction, it writes of disaster in a style that bears little relation to the dominant modes in contemporary Haitian writing. The book's style seems to owe more to non-Haitian writers such as Édouard Glissant, Maryse Condé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Gabriel García Márquez, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, William Faulkner, and even, in the attention paid to detailed descriptions of objects, Honoré de Balzac, than to the established Haitian authors.[5] As one of the characters says, "the novel owes everything and nothing" to Balzac, a phrase that perhaps refers at once to the general history of the literary genre and to Victor's novel, which, like Balzac's works, is rich in descriptions of characters' possessions, clothing, and living conditions (2011: 120). Moreover, Victor's first-person narrative of a country girl's experiences in a rural community recalls Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove*, while the intimate portrait of a female character's episodic madness echoes to some extent Glissant's Mycéa figure. The representation of life in the urban slums recalls Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, while the elaborate style and the *conteuse*-type storytelling mode is closer to Martinican *Créolité* than to the shorter, clipped style of many contemporary Haitian authors. The elements of the family saga are reminiscent of Márquez, while there are also traces of the influence of the European and North American masters listed above. These and other influences are hinted at in the book through various mentions of authors' names and choices of character names: there

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is, for instance, a Father Condé; the narrator's family name is Fanon; at one point she turns down rue Roumain; another character is "in search of lost time" (235). These influences say much about the book's ambitious scope and sophisticated style, which, although new in a sense to Haitian writing, owe much to established modes in other traditions and create a feeling that the new in this case is conceived with at least one eye on tradition and an ear finely attuned to the rhythms of classical prose writing.

Published in the Gallimard Blanche collection, the novel joins a very select group of Caribbean works thus recognized by Paris's most prestigious literary imprint; and for this reason Victor finds himself in the company of figures such as Glissant, Jacques-Stephen Alexis, Marie Vieux Chauvet, Saint-John Perse, and René Depestre. That this is Victor's first novel makes the work all the more impressive and unexpected. The earthquake invites the use of metaphors of rupture and seismic shifts, and it did seem that at the time of publication Haitian writing had in Victor a remarkable, new, and original author, one who was born one might say from the disaster, and whose work marked a new and distinctive mode, written as it were from the other side of the fault line.

It is perhaps fitting then that the book opens with a birth, that of the narrator, in the coastal village of Baie-de-Henne. The birth, however, is also a kind of death in that the narrator's godmother describes to her an infernal scene in which she came into being "like others enter into hell" (13). The moment of birth is also connected with notions of sterility, as the mother is called a "mule" by others in the community, given the number of lovers she had had before falling pregnant (13). The narrator, moreover, does not seem to want to be born and was a child who "said no to life" (13), refusing to leave the mother's womb (15). The time she is born into is the mid-1960s, a period that is now seen by the narrator almost as an ancient epoch, in which the people of the community "lived like beasts"; back then, the women wore very few clothes and bathed naked in the sea and rivers, and they had still "an almost Eden-like immodesty" (14). It is in the sea that the narrator is finally born: her grandfather is "taken by an excess of trance or drunkenness" and insists that the mother be taken to the shore, for "only the sea could deliver that which it had started" (16). The land is implicitly sterile and unable to give new life, while the people's origins are related to the sea, particularly in the case of the godmother, who traces their origins to the seas off the African coastline, which explains for her "our hatred of the sea, that secular hatred that leads us all to turn our backs on its turbulent immensity, another way perhaps of letting ourselves be all the more consumed by it" (18).

Despite being born in the sea, the narrator says she is "dust, forever attached to the land" (20), and will return finally to dust (18). This attach-

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ment to the land seems to be born of her own experience in the village, rather than from the stories of her origins that her godmother passed on to her. The narrator is decidedly skeptical about the worth of such oral accounts of history, and she wonders, "what is a child whose story of birth has been changed and then erased" (20). The godmother is particularly culpable in this regard, in that she is "more used to malicious gossip and fables than to the true evocation of the heart's passions" (24). More broadly, the narrator is similarly ambivalent about the value of orally related proverbs and metaphors, which seemed to the storytellers "to administer a balm for everything," but in which she seems to see little worth (27). The narrator's sense of her being is also defined to a large extent by the words of her daughter, who sees her as "finished," old and worthless, even at the age of forty-five (25). Just as she asks what a child is whose story of birth has been altered, so she asks through her own narrative what is a woman whose life has been shaped by migration, poverty, the words of others, and now by the earthquake of 2010. The earthquake has taken the life of her daughter, who lies beneath the rubble of their home, and whose death the narrator seeks to announce through her narrative, a task that is deferred throughout the novel as her story oscillates between the past and the present, the one time period radically separated from and yet intimately connected to the other. Fascinatingly, too, the time of the earthquake is already referred to as a past time, "that period," she says, as if the event seems at once recent and to have occurred a long time previously (60). Time in this sense contracts and expands in her memory, as it seeks to record, process, and express the intense trauma that the earthquake has added to her already difficult relationship to the past.

The earthquake brings the death not only of her daughter but of the entire country: "The country is dead," she says on the doorstep of her childhood friend Simon Madère (33). Or rather, she "thinks" she said to him, thus introducing an element of doubt and self-questioning that will characterize her account of her meeting with Simon and her recollections of the past (33). Her memory is imperfect: having been struck in the head by a falling piece of concrete, she forgets already the whereabouts of her daughter's body and everything else, including time, while realizing "that it is time that forgets us, and not the other way round, devouring our flesh and our memory with a demonic hunger" (33). Death brings certainty and truth, while life is somehow false, an invented story. The dead, she says, are now "in truth, and I in falsehood" (33), while she later says that the survivors of the earthquake must feel as if they are dead, more so than the thousands of bodies being burned or thrown into communal graves (127). The state of mind she writes in is one of shock and trauma: she has fled from the scene of her daughter's death, at which she remained un-

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expectedly calm, her eyes "strangely dry," and fixed on the blood of her daughter mixing with the dust of the ruined home (34). She also loses her speech for several minutes, only to recover it with the feeling that she remembered everything, or at least, she says, "everything that a human being would decide to retell, arming oneself with the magical, the benefit of doubt [and] this gift of lying about others and oneself that I take from my village" (34). She therefore aligns herself to some extent with the storytellers of her village, while remaining mindful of the certain betrayal of truth that her story will involve. Her narration is something of a journey, marking out a paradoxical inner topography according to which she feels that despite her leaving the village thirty years previously, in a sense she has "never budged" (34). The "real journeys," she says, are "interior," undertaken in dreams in the hope, she feels, that her "phantoms" will cease to chase her (35). The earthquake has not so much killed these phantoms as made it impossible to find answers to the questions she poses herself about her past, her daughter, and her own mother. These replies are, she says, "forever buried beneath the ruins, lost, returned to their silence, to the impossibility of their formulation" (36).

Her daughter deceased, she turns to her childhood friend Simon, who came to Port-au-Prince three years after she did, at the end of the 1970s. She had seen him on a few occasions and heard pieces of information about him during that time: he was earning a good salary as a photographer but was still as fragile as he had always been, drinking and smoking as a balm for the difficulty he had in "grappling with life" (36). Simon is the only remaining link to her past, to the childhood they spent together in Baie-de-Henne. Almost instinctively, she seeks him out to "find him again," realizing however that "one never rediscovers neither others nor oneself" (44). As such, what she perhaps seeks to rediscover, or at least feel once again, is something of the phantom of their shared past, to sense the people they were and indeed the ghosts of themselves that they have become.

The narrator's dialogue with Simon is characterized by silences; indeed, the narration is closer to an interior monologue, in which Ursula records what she wanted or intended to say or what she thought she said to Simon. "I have lost my daughter," she wanted to say to him first, but all she reveals is her identity (49). Her firm intention, she says, is to bring to Simon a "truth" that no longer belongs to her alone, so much so that she would have wanted to present herself naked at his doorstep, the truth being, she says, not only a sense of reality or that which is supposed to be true but the form of a naked woman (50). She brings in her large fake-leather Hermès handbag items that relate to their past together: a Billie Holiday record and a Canon camera that she stole for Simon from Father

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Condé more than thirty years previously. As she crosses the threshold into Simon's apartment, which was built to resist earthquakes, she feels strangely liberated from her previous status as a woman alone suffering endless bad luck (52). "I was already," she says, "that woman who no longer asks for anything from life," or from the rich, whose charity, she now realizes, amounted to giving "junk" to the poor, "killing us more than doing us any good" (59). In a sense, she enters into another trajectory, one that began in the same place as hers, but which has brought a degree of professional success and material comfort to Simon. His photography has given him access to this lifestyle, but it is an ambiguous profession, and one senses that Simon's alcoholism may be related to his work, which involves tracking down "at once the ugly and beautiful poverty of people and things" in Haiti and collaborating with foreign newspapers, to which he sends images of the "eternal natural disasters, hunger riots, coups d'état" and other calamities (55). He therefore lives in a sense from the suffering of others, an activity that pays him well, but which he seems compelled to pay for too, with his own health and well-being. His certain recklessness with his health, and perhaps his ambivalence about continuing to exist in the way he does, is suggested in the way he does not leave his apartment on the evening of the earthquake to join his neighbors in the courtyard below. Apparently unconcerned about aftershocks, both Simon and Ursula remain in the building, "risking my life," she says, and "condemned" to spend the night together (57).

The night becomes a kind of wake, during which the two sit behind their "wall of silence," which to Ursula is "worth more than words" (57). They communicate through gestures and sharing cigarettes and rum—Ursula says she lights a cigarette as others light a candle "to invoke the gods, the saints, and the angels" (145), and that the rum is "the only connection" between Simon and her (184). The two are literally lost for words as their trajectories cross once again, and they can no longer ignore each other or deny the other's existence, as they had done for the thirty years when they had lived in the city, seeing each other intermittently but never acknowledging that they knew each other. This refusal to acknowledge each other amounts, for Ursula, to a "betrayal," as much of time (their shared childhood), and place (their native village), as of each other (62).

There is a real tension in the novel between the need for silence between Ursula and Simon and her equally pressing desire to bear testimony. Time and again her attempts to testify are frustrated or else murmured in a half voice that speaks to no one but herself. It seems more important to her to tell the story of her past than face the reality of the postearthquake present. She suggests as much when she writes of how her memory is "in shreds," with the "heavy shadows of the past triumphing over those of

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the present" (67). Indeed, it seems like she cannot engage fully with the present without telling her story and that of her family and the village of Baie-de-Hennes. Her own story, or at least her own torment, seems to relate to her mother, a troubled figure who had, the narrator recalls, a deep sadness, a "soft gravity" in her eyes, the result of a long psychological illness that led to her abandoning her daughter for long periods (70). The mother was later found dead, her body naked, covered with ants and maggots, her hair cut off by a broken bottle (87). A key scene recalled by the narrator relates a discussion between the mother and grandmother, where the former says she is leaving once again and that she has already "one foot in the grave" (71). As she does at other moments of crisis, Ursula immediately runs away from the scene, and crucially, this time she becomes aware for the first time of her breasts, which impede her running and which "hurt" her (71). This is significant as her awareness of her own changing body comes at the moment when her mother announces a further traumatizing departure. The narrator seems to relate motherhood and indeed womanhood to trauma and death, and to view her changing body as a foreshadowing of her own fated suffering as a mother. She sees in her body the sexual traumas of her mother, who quite publicly took her own virginity with a pestle at the age of thirty-three, the "age of Christ," the mother said to her father (73). As the narrator writes, the mother's departure and intimation of her death marked the beginning of Ursula's own "Way of the Cross" (71).

The intricate mixing of sex, love, bodies, and death is further suggested in Ursula's recollection of her first kiss with Simon, which took place at the graveside of one of their friends called Fanfan, and which led to them making love by the grave, before they had interred the body (75). Pushed by Ursula to duel with Fanfan, Simon had killed their friend with a punch that led Fanfan to fall and crack his head on a stone, which was, Ursula notes, to take the place of her heart for a long time (76). The lovemaking is recalled by Ursula as an "obscene and execrable" act that even as it was happening brought visions to her of their souls being consumed "by the fires of hell" (75). She says that she buried her love for Simon with the body of Fanfan, whose ghost visits her at night (75). The episode marked the end of her love for Simon, but it also created a bond between them, "a pact sealed forever in the silence and blood of that child" (76). The pact connects their destinies, however long they have been apart, and specifically links them bodily to the corpse of their friend: their own stories are entangled in a morbid relationship of sex, death, and silence, as their bodies were by the graveside.

This instance of connected, entangled bodies, or *corps mêlés*, seems to create in her an enduring revulsion about physical intimacy: "The idea of

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bodies entangled with each other has always horrified me," she says (183). It also functions in the novel and in their lives as a form of original sin, and this key aspect of the novel constitutes a further link to some of the classics of Caribbean and broader American fiction, namely those of Faulkner, Glissant, and Condé. Glissant, for example, sees in Faulkner's work a preoccupation with the origin of Southern society, which is damned or cursed by history, by the existence at its origin of a crime, or original sin. Glissant offers three possible sources of this original sin: miscegenation, the theft of the land, and slavery. These three crimes are related and intertwined in that miscegenation is the product of slavery—"the damnation and miscegenation born of the rape of slavery" (1999: 88)—while the appropriation of the land—a "perversion" according to Glissant—is "tied (secretly and nebulously) to injustice and oppression—namely, slavery" (122).

The theme of ancestral crime also appears in Glissant's own work, notably *Le Quatrième siècle*, an epic historical work that bears relation in terms of style and scope to Victor's *Corps mêlés*. In Glissant's novel, the Béluse family is descended from an African who betrayed his friend by selling him into slavery. This is the ancestral crime and original sin that haunts *Le Quatrième siècle*, and which complicates the question of lineage, all the more so because the crime is secret and known only to the storyteller, much like in *Corps mêlés*. Victor's novel can also be compared in this regard to Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove*, most directly in both works' presentation of closed, restrictive communities that are fixed to a large extent by their own histories, which limit individuals' capacity for self-determination and create a sense that each generation is condemned to live out the consequences of previous crimes and wrongdoings. In Condé's novel, the theme of ancestral crime is explored most extensively through the figure of Sancher, the enigmatic outsider and descendant of a male lineage that is characterized by premature deaths, which are ultimately related to a massacre of slaves committed by one of his ancestors. Sancher comes to Guadeloupe, where he has come to die, leaving no heirs, and thus to "terminer une race maudite" (put an end to a cursed race) (1990: 87). In Victor's novel, the murder of Fanfan and the morbid lovemaking of Ursula and Simon function in similar ways, as moments that in a sense fix the essence of the characters, condemning them to live forever the consequences of their crimes and their associated guilt. The sense of history and lineage as phenomena charged with inherited guilt is compounded in the case of Ursula, who refers regularly to the damnation of the Fanon family, "the cursed blood" that each generation shares (80). She feels she is born to suffer, "condemned to be naked," given her ample Fanon family chest: "A girl naked," as she says, "standing before her cross, on which she was ready to climb, to be ridiculed, crowned with thorns, and sprinkled with

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vinegar and spit" (157). In a more muted sense, one also feels that Simon is living not his own discrete existence, but a continuation of that of his father, who abandoned his family to live in the Dominican Republic, leaving Simon fatherless and apparently condemned to live a rootless, isolated life.

In Ursula's case, the family curse is more of a matrilineal affair, in that she seems to inherit from her mother a degree of emotional instability that she in turn appears to pass on to her daughter. Ursula foresees that her death will be like her mother's: she will die, she says, in "the most absolute deprivation, and in shame," as her mother did (110). The two women share the same great disappointment, expressed by the mother as being unable to "follow a trajectory, to move forward, instead of turning round on myself, like a top" (110). As an adolescent, Ursula "was not so different" from her own daughter (109). Ursula recalls wanting to bring her mother's life to an end (110), while she mutters to Simon, "My daughter killed me, devoured me" (103). She recounts to herself her daughter's decision to leave school early to become a prostitute on a night they had no food. Ursula recalls how her daughter burst into laughter then into tears just before she left to go to the streets, and how she took back to her a meal, which Ursula refused to eat, imagining that her first client had left in it "a few drops of his sperm" (104). The daughter's body is also a kind of family legacy in that she has inherited her mother's chest, "the well-known chest of the Fanon girls" (103). Bodies in this sense are not so much discrete objects or indices of one's individuality; rather, they are, as in the book's title, entangled, passed from one generation to the next as a curse, literally embodying the unfinished past.

The earthquake brings to the fore another of Ursula's family legacies: her madness. "I am going mad," she was going to say to Simon as an aftershock shakes her glass of rum and the apocalyptic scene of the devastated city unfolds outside the apartment window (107). The view stretches to the Champ de Mars, where thousands of survivors, among the corpses that litter the streets, wait desperately for water, food, and aid, and further to the destroyed National Palace, whose lawns are transformed into an "immense slum," the sight of which leads some to swear they would fight to the death to save the remains of the palace, and of the republic (107–8). The death that the earthquake brings now permeates life. As Ursula notes, "That death which, surged forth from the depths of the earth, had however already impregnated all of us." As she drinks the rum, she tries not to forget the event, but to "go along with it" (faire avec), which, she says, amount to the same thing (108). Both forgetting and accepting the event seem to lead to madness; folly appears in this sense to be the only possible psychological reaction to the earthquake.

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Madness is also something she shares with Simon. "We were running," she says to him, "toward nothing, and madness caught up with us, no doubt the folly of running toward something" (111). One of their favorite activities as adolescents was to run endlessly until they were completely out of breath. When they did this, Ursula felt she was no longer in control of herself and had "fallen resolutely out of time" (114). They run in this sense to escape themselves and the lives they seem destined to live, carrying the curses of the past. They are drawn to traveling figures, notably Father Condé, the village priest who has traveled the world, and who introduces them to Billie Holiday, to reading, and less felicitously, to alcohol. Ursula finds in Condé's library worlds beyond those presented in the closed nationalist stories that she had been taught at school. After discovering the priest's library, she "no longer wanted to hear anything about our heroes murdered while in power or on the battlefield" (119). Likewise, reading the Bible only gave her migraines (148). National education, she says, did nothing but "return us to our ignorance, to our secular metaphors and proverbs—thus even closer to beasts" (129). Simon promised to go with her to Port-au-Prince, but he failed to appear at their meeting place. She was left alone, thus creating the rupture in their relationship, which she revisits on the night of the earthquake, time having only exacerbated her sense of betrayal (130).

Ursula associates her native village with ignorance, gossip, entrapment, and the various curses that limit her ability to define herself in terms other than those dictated by the closed traditions of Baie-de-Henne. On arrival in the city, she is surprised how quickly she forgets the village and finds the city streets to be "beautiful and numerous, irrigated by a dense, anarchic circulation" (134). When she hears of the death in the earthquake of a prominent feminist, Ursula recalls having heard a speech in which the woman spoke of leaving the city to live by the sea, and of the broader importance of a general "return to the sources, to the land" (146). As Ursula remarks, the feminist's speech contradicted her own movement and aspirations: "I wanted only to leave it, that land . . . for Miami, Florida, or anywhere else" (146). The city, however, reveals to her its own complex social relations when she arrives in the convent arranged and paid for by Father Condé, who was desperate for her to leave the village after a local scandal broke over Ursula staying overnight at his residence. The convent is a "golden prison," where the city's elite throws its "black sheep," girls involved in arson attacks, incestuous relationships, murder, and other episodes that brought shame to their "excellent families" (147). Tellingly, too, Ursula is unable to create any bond with her fellow boarder Adeline, who comes from a similar background, but with whom Ursula can only communicate in silence, and in "the complicity of glances and looks" (147). Their

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common social class offers no grounds for mutual support or empathy, for as Ursula states, "It is well known, the poor don't like the poor" (147).

Unable to form any friendships with either the middle-class or the poor girls, Ursula finds a kind of empathy and freedom in the city itself. "I was not made for the country," she says, "but for the capital, however crooked and stinking it is" (233). It is in the city that she finds a degree of liberty and the anonymity in which she can to some extent begin to define herself in relation to a space with which she has had no pre-existing relationship. Slipping out of the convent in the afternoons, she "surveys Port-au-Prince," discovering its dimensions, its tree-lined streets, especially rue Pavée, which she calls "my street," and where she feels "not in the least bit lost" (223). She walks the streets slowly, like a flaneur, visiting the seafront, the cathedral, and rubbing shoulders with the beggars, visitors, and pilgrims to the basilica, destroyed later by the earthquake (152). She finds beauty in the "frenetic fauna" (155) of the city, in the sun hanging over the bay down the Grand Rue, and says to herself, "How happy I am, how happy I am!" (153). The city by night takes on a different allure: on the street corners Dominican prostitutes vie for trade with the local women, while on the rue Ennery she mingles with the crowd surrounding a group of troubadours playing "soft and melancholic" music (159). However vivid these recollections of her earliest encounters are, her memory of many of these places is irreversibly changed by the earthquake, and she says she will from now see them only in dreams and "forever in ruins" (153).

The city is in another way unforgiving and consumes her identity. She is "tearing" herself, she says, from her own being and from others, so that she wants to invent "a different life," one that is worthwhile, in which she would wear a flower behind her ear, like in the picture of Billie Holiday on her album cover, her head thrown back, laughing freely and showing her white teeth (167). She becomes instead a "phantom" in the city, which "offers no gifts," and which she feels is ready to let her die as it did its own hungry children, "claiming without mercy its dues in flesh and blood" (168). The question of "phantom" identity is related obliquely in the novel to photography, through Simon's profession and the camera she stole from Father Condé and brings to Simon on the night of the earthquake. Her daughter is another phantom, in life and in death. Ursula recalls the student demonstrations of December 2003, a key moment in the eventual downfall of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and how her daughter asked her to be taken to see the students. Ursula imagines that her daughter had a "secret plan": to be hit by a stray bullet, die as a martyr, and be photographed by Simon. Ursula pictures her daughter lying in blood, agonizing, but then "moved by a sudden desire for eternity, representation, *photogénie*"—the latter being the meeting of the photographic subject with the camera

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and the photographer, a process that defamiliarizes the subject, revealing in this case qualities and perhaps an identity that are imperceptible or unattainable in reality. In other words, the daughter, Ursula imagines, no doubt thinking of herself, seeks in death and photography an existence transformed and fixed to "make her beautiful, here and now[,] . . . claiming her own instant of fiction of herself, forever desiring that after her death the photos would speak of her, of her legend[,] . . . for time passes, dies" (173). The photograph would allow a transformation denied to her in life; it would be false in a sense (a "fiction," Ursula says), but would also express a truth in fixing in time an image of what she aspired to be—both memorable and remembered, an unforgotten phantom (173).

Ursula is herself a "revenant" (212), a ghost that returns through her narrative as much to her own previous self as to Simon, who remains in more or less complete silence, which seems to her like a "challenge," a way of forgetting oneself, and above all "a refusal of any and all act of memory" (192). Their encounter leads her to reflect that "to remember is perhaps a waste of time and the most horrible crime that one commits on oneself and on others" (200). Indeed, the past seems bound to play itself out again in commuted form in this new encounter, notably in a scene in which Simon takes a shower and she, for all her horror of entangled bodies, touches and masturbates him, "making him ashamed." (204). Following the act, she runs to the kitchen to light a cigarette, "ashamed in my own turn." From the window she watches a woman dying under a tree, says to herself that she cannot "fall any lower," and wishes for a new tremor to come to "swallow her up to the deepest parts of the earth" (204). The act, carried out with so many bodies lying unburied on the streets outside, seems to recall their lovemaking by the dead body of their friend Fanfan, and suggests something of the way that they are condemned to re-enact their past, particularly its most shameful and irredeemable moments. The past is not something to be saved or changed but a phenomenon that repeats itself almost inevitably, reminding them of the impossibility of redemption.

Their bodies carry the memory of their pasts and contain historical narratives that link them to the past and to each other. Ursula suggests this when she talks of her daughter and how her lips were like Ursula's own, her laughter was that of Ursula's aunt, her eyes were her grandfather's, and her hips were like Ursula's mother. Thus, she says, her daughter was nothing but "the sum of the multiple echoes of my dead, the result of a sort of puzzle of blood and flesh, and had nothing that belonged to her alone" (242). Identity is not in this sense a discrete, singular phenomenon but a complex amalgam of different parts, inherited from the past and communicated principally through the body. Any individual is a kind of

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revenant, a repetition of lives that have come before. In a sense, this is why Ursula finds it difficult to mourn her daughter, or even to announce her death. What is distinctive about and what is the value of a single death, she seems to wonder, when there are so many other people lying dead, their stories and bodies entangled and apparently undifferentiated?

In fact, Ursula begins to mourn only when she realizes the limits of this entangled, bodily identity. This happens during a fundraising event held in the courtyard below the apartment two days after the earthquake, when Ursula sees a woman that she at first thinks resembles her and her daughter. However, when she dances with the woman, she realizes that she was mistaken. "You don't look like her at all, in fact," she says to the woman (246). Following this realization, Ursula leaves the dance and begins to run away from the scene, tears of sorrow finally filling her eyes, as she reveals through the narrative that Simon was the father of her daughter. It is only when she becomes aware of her daughter's individuality that she can in a sense extricate her body from the hundreds of thousands of others and begin to mourn her as an individual. Her great fear—and no doubt that of many other grieving Haitians—was that her daughter's body be taken away in a truck to a communal grave, "mixing your body with the others," she says to her daughter (247). As Ursula runs away from the apartment, she imagines her daughter already returned to Baie-de-Henne, and herself running to join her there, to the house of the daughter's grandparents, who had only known the daughter through photographs. As Ursula imagines herself reunited with her daughter at the family home, she begins to tell her the story of her family through the photographs that hang there. The first photograph is of the grandparents posing formally in their garden; the second is of the aunt, Ursula's godmother, "majestic" in her Sunday clothing; the third is of Ursula's mother, barefoot on a beach, smiling, but in her eyes the "mark of sadness" that was always there; the fourth and final photograph is of Ursula herself, looking "very unassuming," against a background of green plants with, in her arms, her daughter, naked, she says, like a winged cherub in an Italian Renaissance painting (248–49). Ursula's final wish as she addresses and names her daughter, Marie-Carmen Fanon, for the first time in the novel, is that the wings grow not for her, who remains "in falsehood," but for the daughter, who is "in truth," and whom Ursula will now only see, she says, "in the fires of a January sunset," in the echo of that day of which the novel stands as a remarkable, lyrical, and finally beautiful testimony (249).

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Tropical Apocalypse: Haiti and the Caribbean End Times (Virginia, 2015); and *Listening to the Caribbean: Sounds of Slavery, Revolt, and Race* (Liverpool, 2022).

Notes

1. Among the effects of the Haitian earthquake listed by the Disasters Emergency Committee are that 3.5 million people were affected by the quake, there were 220,000 estimated deaths, 300,000 were injured, and nearly 300,000 homes were destroyed or badly damaged. See "2010 Haiti Earthquake Facts and Figures," Disasters Emergency Committee website, accessed 9 November 2021, http://www.dec.org.uk/haiti-earthquake-facts-and-figures.
2. See *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.
3. According to the website *Ile en île*, Marvin Victor "lives and works between England, Belgium, and France, whither he withdrew in a movement of voluntary exile in 2014." "Marvin Victor," accessed 8 November 2021, https://ile-en-ile.org/victor_marvin/. Gallimard offered him a contract for three or four novels, but Victor reported feeling unsupported by the publisher and has yet to produce a second novel. There is a short interview with him on the website *Small Axe*, published on 8 February 2012, http://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/interviews/marvin-victor. This article compares Victor to the Haitian poet Villard Denis-Davertige, both of whom were apparently hampered by early successes. See also Wébert N. Charles, "Le dernier Prix Goncourt n'est peut-être pas une bonne nouvelle pour Mohamed Mbougar Sarr," 8 November 2021, https://ayibopost.com/le-dernier-prix-goncourt-nest-peut-etre-pas-une-bonne-nouvelle-pour-mohamed-mbougar-sarr/.
4. See, for example, Martin Munro, *Exile and Post-1946 Haitian Literature: Alexis, Depestre, Ollivier, Laferrière, Danticat* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 244–48; and Deborah Jenson, "The Writing of Disaster in Haiti: Signifying Cataclysm from Slave Revolution to Earthquake," in Martin Munro (ed.), *Haiti Rising: Haitian History, Culture and the Earthquake of 2010* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2010): 104–5. This chapter largely adapts analysis from my book, *Writing on the Fault Line: Haitian Literature and the Earthquake of 2010* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2014).
5. There are also echoes in Victor's novel of Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Fonds des nègres* in the issue of migration between the city and the hinterland, and in the tensions inherent to such movements.

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CHAPTER 9

Beyond Malediction and Prophecy

Melovivi or the Trap

ALEX LENOBLE

Haitian playwright Frankétienne's *Melovivi or the Trap* may be the only work considered to belong to the Haitian earthquake literary archive to have been written *before* the event. The anecdote, reported by Dany Laferrière (2011) in *Tout bouge autour de moi*, by Rodney Saint-Éloi, and by the author himself is well known: on the very day of the cataclysm, on 12 January 2010, minutes before the earth started to shake, Frankétienne was rehearsing *Melovivi*. Stunned, disoriented, and struck by the enormity of the coincidence, his first reaction was to vow to never perform this play, almost as if he thought he was partly responsible for the catastrophe and that his words somehow materialized in the devastated Haitian landscape: "[The play] speaks of a Port-au-Prince that cracks, is torn apart. Frankétienne makes the seism with his words. His prophetic solo. . . . Frankétienne feels that he will never be able to perform this play that brings bad luck" (Laferrière 2011: 46-47).[1] After the cataclysm, he assumed and proclaimed the prophetic status of his writing, stating in an interview:

> I had a form of vision, a feeling of premonition that my land and the planet were threatened. And it turned out to be true when a voice spoke to me. . . . A voice spoke to me at dawn, at this time when the sun comes to earth full of energy, bearer of antennas that allow you to catch the passing messages, the inner music to which we do not pay attention, connected to the music of the world, of the cosmos. This voice told me: your country is threatened as well as the planet. Write a play about global ecology. (Guy 2010).

In this chapter, I question the characterization of the play as prophetic and examine how it led to the play's *misreception*. I contend that the earthquake of 2010 disrupted and threw off course the reception of the play, trapping Haiti and its people in a closed time and space. Instead, I want to

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propose a reading of the play that reinscribes *Melovivi* in Frankétienne's overall disaster aesthetics and that actually accounts for the originality of the play: for the first time Frankétienne addresses our environmental crisis and "global ecology." In fact, the problems with the reception of *Melovivi* reveal the "representational challenges" (Nixon 2011: 2) posed by the "relative invisibility" (2) of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" (2). In opposition to the violence of an event, such as a disaster, "immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space," "erupting into instant sensational visibility," the slow violence of environmental degradation is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. . . . [It] is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (2). My claim is that Frankétienne's intention was to design a performance that would expose the "slow violence" of our global ecological crisis, make it perceptible, especially for a public that is not in a vulnerable zone. What happened on 12 January 2010 disrupted this plan and obscured the play. In the aftermaths of the earthquake, it was impossible to see anything else or to think about anything else other than the actual disaster. *Melovivi* became a play about the 2010 Haitian earthquake.

A first version of this article was presented at the occasion of the conference organized by the Winthrop-King Institute at Florida State University to mark the ten-year anniversary of the Haitian earthquake. Ten years on, it is probably time to confront the play for what it is, without searching for the signs of a "future past" in the written traces of a prophetic text. It is probably time to consider the play in Frankétienne's literary trajectory and to redirect our attention to aspects crucial to the reception of any work of art, yet widely ignored by the commentaries: its content, its literary strategies, and its intent. The play then appears in a different, more complex, spatiotemporal frame. It is not a representation of the aftermath of 12 January 2010, it is not even about Haiti—Haiti is never mentioned—and it does not foretell the earthquake or its consequences. Rather, it is a play about the planet—or even the cosmos—whose effects are meant to address at once the present and the deep time of our global ecological crisis. *Melovivi* is set out of time "in the wake of a disaster," in a "dilapidated, devastated space" (Frankétienne 2010: 17). Two characters only designated by the letters A and B are trapped, with no way out, in this "place of confinement," which is also a space of nothingness. They talk and ramble (or "parlent et déparlent" (17) in Frankétienne's parlance), seemingly without rhyme or reason, in Frankétienne's unique language. In this postapocalyptic vision of a world in peril, the characters ponder

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the global ecological situation. They condemn the pseudoexperts of international institutions who do little more than utter verbiage and empty words. The world they inhabit, our world, goes round in circles and language reveals its vanity. In sum, *Melovivi* is a play about human-made disasters that are progressively ruining the planet, it is a play that questions the power of language in the face of disasters past and to come, and it is a play that proposes to turn our attention to the planet as our common embedded environment.

The twelfth of January 2010. The magnitude 7.2 earthquake that shattered the lives of hundreds of thousands of Haitians will mark this date in history. Incidentally, it also attracted the attention of critics and journalists to Frankétienne's theater play. The analysis was unanimous: Frankétienne had been a prophet and *Melovivi* had predicted the devastation of Port-au-Prince and its surroundings. A journalist, François Busnel, wrote in *L'Express* in June 2010, "Do you believe in the prophetic power of literature? Frankétienne, one of the best living poets, felt it on January 12th when the earth shook in Haiti, his native island. . . . Today, we say that there are 400,000 or 500,000 dead or missing. A disaster. A disaster that the Haitian writer had envisioned a few weeks ago." In the preface to the 2010 edition of the play, Fabrice Hadjadj affirmed Frankétienne's prescience: "The poet has been prophet. His text was the sole clairvoyant seismogram" (9). Rachel Douglas (2016), in her article about the necessity of reimagining the archive as a live process rather than a depository of inert ancient artifacts, introduced Frankétienne's manuscript as his "premonitory play" (388). Prophecy, according to Martin Munro, is a recurrent motif in Haitian Literature. In a section titled "Prophets of the Past," he connects this predilection to a nonlinear apprehension of time in tune with Vodou and a Haitian history that seems to stutter and repeat itself rather than fulfilling the promises of its heroic origin as the first black independent nation. Quoting Paul Ricoeur, he affirms that "prophecy amounts to extrapolating from the configurations and concatenations of the past in the direction of what is still to come," and consists of speaking about the future "in terms appropriate to the past." For Munro, prophecy is a means of "'emplotting' time, and of clarifying poetically something of the nature of time, without offering a final theoretical resolution" (Munro 2014: 144).[2] It is indeed not surprising that one of the functions of Haitian literary narratives is indeed prophetic. Yet, is it reasonable to interpret Frankétienne's play as literally prophetic? Is the play really (fore)telling the catastrophic event of 12 January 2010?

During the same period, reactions to the earthquake in newspapers and social media were turning to the idea of malediction: if this happened to Haiti, a country already plagued with poverty and political instability,

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rather than somewhere else, it must be because of a malediction. Televangelist Pat Robertson infamously accused Haiti of having made a pact with the devil. Referring to the Vodou ceremony of Bois Caiman, prelude to the slave revolt that led to the Haitian Revolution, he proclaimed on a radio show that "ever since, the Haitians have been cursed by one thing after the other" (James 2010). This anecdote would not be worth mentioning if this idea of a curse did not become mainstream in the way the media reported the event. In reputable newspapers, journalists considered trustworthy used the exact same rhetoric. On 14 January, the newspaper *Le Monde*—one example out of many—published an article entitled "Haiti, la malédiction" (Gautheret 2010). Though the content of such articles could be nuanced and critical in their analyses (for instance, evaluating the impact of colonization, US imperialism, and corruption as primary factors for the scope of the catastrophe), few resisted the sensationalist headlines. "Tragedy" was another common designator for the earthquake in the first few days following the catastrophe.

Interestingly enough, "tragedy," "malediction," and "prophecy" all have something in common: they reorder time in the same way, that is by conflating past, present, and future. The three terms evoke the same worldview of human lives directed by fate and deprived of agency. "Prophecy," from the Greek *prophemi*, to foretell, refers to something that is told before it happens. "Malediction" implies that a wish of misfortune uttered in the past will necessarily befall its target in the future. And one of the defining characteristics of tragedy as a genre is the impossibility for the hero to escape *fatum* (fate), literally what has already been spoken. If *Melovivi* at the time of its performance exposes what has already happened, then it has nothing to tell us. In other words, deeming *Melovivi* as a prophecy traps Haiti once again in a closed space and time while sealing the gap between text and meaning, where the possibility of interpretation resides. Moreover, if the earthquake is the result of a malediction, there is neither historical, political, nor human responsibility behind the disaster. If *Melovivi* recounts the events of 12 January, then its purpose vanishes with the fulfillment of the oracle.

In the context of the aftermath of the earthquake, viewing the play as premonitory was perhaps a natural response. Because of their scope—by definition beyond the human capacity to cope—and because of their unexpectedness, disasters challenge rational or logic explanations. Of course, we know the scientific explanation: earthquakes occur at fault lines, when the pressure caused by the friction of two tectonic plaques is suddenly released. This scientific explanation, however, does little to quench our thirst for meaning when the explosion and its violent tremors cause death and devastation. Because they disrupt life as we know it, be-

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cause they dislocate the flux of time, disasters interrupt our capacity for making meaning. And yet, at the same time, they demand an immediate cause, an ultimate justification. One of the only ways to reorder time in this context is to accept that what happened happened because it ought to have happened. As the etymology of the word suggests, every disaster (from the Latin *astrum*) must have been already written in the stars.

Since it became impossible to even mention *Melovivi* without referring to the earthquake that confirmed its alleged premonitory quality, most critics would ponder the eerie coincidence and would stop there. Very few actually grappled with the content of the play, its language, or its staging. It is as if the 2010 earthquake on top of the damage it caused and the lives it took also interrupted the regular order of critical reception, resulting in an incapacity for critics to apprehend the originality of the work. Believing Frankétienne's claim to prophecy was probably, again, a psychologically protective response. The prediction and its fulfillment re-inscribe the event in a linear temporality where the future is not totally unknown and the present not totally unexpected. Confirming the prophetic power of Frankétienne, one of the most celebrated voices in Haiti, could also have been an unconscious attempt on the part of scholars to reinstate some degree of agency to the Haitian victims, beyond their (in)famous resiliency. As I have shown, however, it might lead to the opposite effect: the Haitian people become powerless victims of a fate against which nothing could have been done since the "natural" disaster appears to be inscribed in a linear teleology. It is true that lines such as "collapse of cities, palaces, slums and castles in cacophonic hecatomb" (Frankétienne 2010: 50) and "Don't you feel the tremors transporting us, lifting us?" (30) are troubling in light of the earthquake. However, disasters of all kinds are omnipresent throughout the works of Frankétienne: earthquakes, cyclones, tornadoes and fires, shattered cities and collapsed palaces, ruins and dilapidation are common place in Frankétienne's devastated landscapes.[3] *Melovivi* is the exception in the sense it does not refer, even implicitly, to Haiti or Port-au-Prince.[4]

To understand the originality of the play, it is necessary to read the text with Frankétienne's other works. In fact, all his work can be—and has been—characterized as an aesthetics of "disaster" (Chancé 2004), a "writing of chaos" (2009), an "aesthetics of degradation" (Lucas 2004), or a "poetics of shock and explosion" (Douaire 2001). There is nothing new in these characterizations and this should come as no surprise to Frankétienne's readers since his creative process is grounded, as Rachel Douglas has established, in the constant rewriting of his own texts: he keeps "returning to his own texts and transforming them by superimposing swathes of new additions" (Douglas 2009: 7). It is a way of privileging

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"the process of writing over what is written . . . production over the finished product . . . the dynamic over the static" (160). This strategy prevents any fixation of meaning and allows the whole project to be always in movement in the manner of the spiral, Frankétienne's favorite figure. Each text not only repeats previous themes and motives but also fragments of sentences, or even at times full paragraphs. *Melovivi* has also a lot in common with Frankétienne's previous theater plays in which the influence of Samuel Beckett[5] and Antonin Artaud has been noted (Ruprecht 2018). "Rewriting in this senses feeds on repetition" (Douglas 2009: 7), and repetition is a distinctive feature in Frankétienne's aesthetics. But it is also through the process of repetition that difference comes to life and transformation takes place. If we want to appreciate the innovative character of this play, we have to situate it in Frankétienne's literary production. The spatiotemporal indetermination is here absolute. Rachel Douglas (2016) observes: "Everything remains anonymous and unspecific. There are no specific references in this play to a particular natural disaster; it could easily refer to *any* of the natural disasters which regularly attack Haiti, including hurricanes, landslides and floods" (394). Haiti—or any other place on the planet since, again, Haiti is never mentioned. In the manner of Beckett's characters, those of Melovivi are literally caught in a no-man's-land.

> A and B—We are everywhere. And we are nowhere.
> B—Without any identity. Totally cut off from the rest of the world. Absolutely lost.
> A—Space is no more.
> B—Time is no more. (Frankétienne: 17–20)

In this space of nothingness, as in Blanchot's (1995) essay, the disaster is literal, it separates the characters from the stars.[6] "No light! Absolutely no light! No brightness! No glimmer on the horizon!" Frankétienne writes (2010: 43). Without stars signaling the existence of a cosmic order, the characters lose their bearings, they are totally disoriented: "We are adrift. We are completely adrift. We are lost. We are on the edge of the abyss, on the borders of nonsense" (31). There is no meaning and no direction, and *Melovivi* echoes Blanchot (1995) for whom "the disaster disorients the absolute" (4). Everything vanishes in nothingness, except for the characters' words, which spiral and swirl in the void. *Melovivi*'s disaster aesthetic runs into the same aporetic logic as Blanchot's *Writing of the Disaster*: there is no language apt to express the experience of the disaster. According to Deborah Jenson, "Blanchot describes disaster as the 'unexperienced,' as the limit of writing, and as something that not only eludes description, but actively de-scribes" (Jenson 2010: 104). The writing of the disaster avoids making concrete references to any historical disaster. Rather, it seeks a form of expression that would resist the closure of meaning; hence it is a

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fragmented writing that repeats, contradicts itself, and vanishes in its own abstraction. As Marie-Hélène Huet writes, "Thinking through disasters is best exemplified in our incapacity to reassemble fragments into a reassuring whole" (2012: 12). Eventually, the disaster is present in its absence; it can only be read in the silence that the text bears into existence.

Melovivi never was the representation of the Haitian earthquake. In fact, it was never a representation or a narrative. It does not provide meaning, intellectual knowledge or a political analysis. The text is only a support for a performance where living bodies express and transmit affects to other living bodies. At the beginning of the third sequence, the tension between A and B is rising. They raise their voices at each other. B rebels against A, vociferating: "There is no order! There is no more logic! And I am not the slave of your text. I will not repeat your text. I will not memorize your text! I will not memorize anybody's text! I, myself, will not memorize anybody's text!" B responds with growing anger: "But what text are you talking about? I have never talked to you about a text. I never demanded that you memorize a text. There is no text!" (Frankétienne 2010: 30). There are several ways to interpret this short exchange between the two characters. In French the verb *répéter* is ambiguous, it means both "repeating" and "rehearsing." B seems to imply that A, the playwright, demanded that he memorize the text of the play and rehearse the dialogue. However, he refused vehemently to play by the established rules. What does this refusal signal? Frankétienne, when performing, likes to accommodate spontaneity and improvisation. It has to be a live performance after all, and allowing some space for the unexpected is what will make the experience unique to the spectators as well as to the actors. In this sense, *Melovivi,* even if the creole word means "trap," is the opposite of tragedy: if there is no pre-existing written text, there is no *fatum*, no destiny. If there is no text, there is no beginning, no end, everything is up in the air. Everything can still happen.

At another level, this revolt against the text, followed by the denial of its existence, indicates a defiance toward language and its power. The linguistic inflation at work in environmental and global politics is exposed and ridiculed: after A mentions the "problematic of global modernity," B enjoins him to "shut up" (31). The term "problematic" is then repeated more than twenty-five times, picked up in turn by A and B, until this "shitty repetitive formula" (31) becomes pure noise. When words are worn out by excessive meaningless repetition, the very own tools of the author become useless. It becomes impossible to believe that language might resolve anything. This kind of defiance toward language and its capacity to construct meaning is manifest in the dialogue. A and B are not real characters; they are interchangeable and lack individualized personalities.

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This split dialogue is another literary strategy familiar to Frankétienne. It is as if his own consciousness were split into two voices that intertwine and clash with each other to finally sound together in what the author calls "schizophonie."[7] As soon as one character affirms something with the appearance of confidence, the second ridicules the first. The only moments of consensus evoke generalized destruction or nihilism, and as if these moments were still too meaningful, they quickly turn into singing and gesticulating bouts in the style of a farce. In all these instances, it is finally, as in Blanchot, the closure of meaning that is refused: ultimately, "there is nothing to understand" (21). Against the "carcass of words" (21) of the dictionaries and lexicons, Frankétienne proposes a living language full of "particles of sensual energy."[8]

> A—Set up your own personal lexicon. Modulate your own dictionary in step with the tempo of your body.
> Tempo of your hips
> Tempo of your dreams
> Tempo of your sex
> Tempo of your guts
> Tempo of your blood!
> As for semantic, it is nothing but bluff; it assassinates the imaginary and kills all life. (26)

If there is no text, what remains? In Frankétienne's theater, language is affect. Reading the sentence "Il n'y a pas de texte" (There is no text) is very different from hearing the actor's speech. When you listen to the actor's speech, you are surprised by the sudden rise in the tone of the voice, you can feel the impatience and the exasperation; your body reacts to the vibration of the sounds before your brain tries to decipher the signification of the message. In other words, you are experiencing an affective response.[9] The truths to be found in *Melovivi* are not meant to be grasped by our reason, they are not intellectual. They reach us directly through our senses and thus resembles the more profound truths that Marcel Proust, inspiring Deleuze's affect theory, seeks to recover in his writing:

> The truths which intelligence grasps directly in the open light of day have something less profound, less necessary about them than those which life has communicated to us in spite of ourselves in an impression, a material impression because it has reached us through our senses. (Proust cited in Deleuze 2000: 95–96)

The purpose of Frankétienne's performance is not to convey meaning (especially a closed meaning), information, or knowledge. As Claire Colebrook suggests, "what makes it art is not content but its affect, the sensible force or style through which it produces content. Why, for example, would we

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spend two hours in the cinema watching a film if all we wanted were the story or the moral message?" (2002: 24–25). And indeed, Frankétienne seeks to breathe life into language but also into space and time. This is one of the questions that constantly worries him: "Through breath and momentum how to re-fecundate time as well as a space caribbeanized with evil gold and painful cries?" (Frankétienne 2002: 155). His answer is to focus on the materiality of the voice, its bodily aspects, "the voice, the tongue, the mouth . . . in the art of saying what happens. Especially the lungs! And the intensity of the breath! The fury of the cry!" (2010: 29). What matters in *Melovivi* is the linguistic energy produced by the collision of words, neologisms, repetitions, code-switching, singing, laughter. It is language in its materiality, its sensuality, when the words become body parts. Frankétienne's metaphors make everything bleed: body parts, holes, and stars become blended in the bloody matrix of an aborted cosmos.

> A—Stars bleed!
> B—All the stars bleed!
> A—Our legs and our arms bleed.
> B—Our chests bleed.
> A—Our eyes and our lips bleed.
> B—There are difficult holes who bleed.
> A—There are impossible holes who bleed.
> B—There are imaginary holes who bleed.
> A—The sun vomited blood.
> B—The earth bursts with blood. (2010: 52)

Against discourses of globalization, Frankétienne (2010) deploys an affective poetics of the planetary. *Melovivi* recounts the conflict between the forces of globalization, the "predators of the planet," the international institutions, their ridiculous summits, and their empty discourses against the vital forces of the cosmos. He writes: "Our marvelous little planet, earth-blue, sea-blue, moon-blue, as blue as the poet's metaphoric orange, our little fabulous planet sinks in shipwreck, in the malouque waters and in the turbulence of savagely voracious flames" (50).

Here, it is useful to remember Gayatri Spivak's (2005) distinction between globalization and planetarity. Spivak calls for an epistemic shift from the global conceived as "a financially, economically, and technologically homogenizing force" (Elias and Moraru 2015: xvii) in the abstract to the planet as "world-ecology" (xii) where interdependency and relationality prevail over competition, nationalisms, and individualisms.

> I propose the planet to overwrite the globe. Globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. In the gridwork of electronic capital, we achieve that abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines,

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> once the equator and the tropics and so on, now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Information Systems. To talk planet-talk by way of an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided "natural" space rather than a differentiated political space, can work in the interest of this globalization in the mode of the abstract as such. The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. (Spivak 2005: 72)

Epistemic shifts cannot occur without imaginary projections, especially on this scale. Thinking the world as the planet and the human as a species is a challenge. The world "escapes us as comprehension and as concept," affirms Edouard Glissant, "it is through the imaginary that one can attempt to grasp it" (Rosemberg 2016: 2). Changing our vision of the world is necessary to making the world change. Theater, because it is a living art and because it relies on the audience's and actors' direct interaction, is probably more than any others "the art of affects more than representation, a system of dynamized and impacting forces rather than a system of unique images that function under a regime of signs," to quote Elisabeth Grosz (2020: 3). If it seems already too late for the characters trapped in a nonplace in a world irremediably damaged, perhaps the effects of the performance can contribute to awakening our awareness of the present. The specific temporality of *Melovivi* is not the "future past" of the prophecy. In so far as the art of performance is the art of the present, *Melovivi* accomplishes the tour de force of bringing together the deep time of the planet and our very present, making the unseen "slow violence" of climate change tangible to the audience. The capacity to be affected is what separates immobility from action, passivity from resistance, and fate from agency.

Do we have to wait for more disasters to come to gain awareness of the present ecological situations? Do people outside of Haiti have to experience them firsthand before they understand that ecological catastrophes are not only taking place in "shithole countries"?[10] Frankétienne's clairvoyance comes from his continuing presence in Haiti; his play is a gift to its global audience. It links Haiti and the rest of the world, us and them, in a call for awareness, to overcome immobility and passivity in the face of the environmental apocalypse that threatens us all.

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journals. He is working on a book project entitled "Postcolonial Literatures beyond Representation." It addresses the ways in which postcolonial literary works respond to a historical exclusion of certain subjectivities from the symbolic. Experimenting with literary forms is one of the strategies authors use to powerfully express traumatic postcolonial experiences.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are my own.
2. While Munro mentions *Melovivi* in the book, his analysis does not include a detailed reading of the play.
3. See for instance in Frankétienne, *Voix Marassas*: "L'inconcevable échec/L'insupportable désastre/L'intolérable catastrophe" (Frankétienne 1998: 75).
4. See, for example, his *Brêche ardente*, which Frankétienne explicitly devoted to the description of a dilapidated Port-au-Prince.
5. See Jean Jonassaint, "Frankétienne," Île en île (website), updated 28 June 2021, http://ile-en-ile.org/franketienne/.
6. "If disaster means being separated from the star (if it means the decline that characterize disorientation when the link from fortune from on high is cut), then it indicates a fall beneath disastrous necessity." (Blanchot 1995: 2)
7. The term "schizophonie" comes from *L'Oiseau schizophone*, published in 1998 and has been used by the author since then.
8. This expression appears on many back covers of Frankétienne's works.
9. "Brian Massumi defines affect in terms of bodily responses, autonomic responses, which are in excess of conscious states of perception and point instead to a "visceral perception" preceding perception." (Clough 2008: 3) This is exactly what Frankétienne seeks in his work in general and in Melovivi in particular.
10. President Trump allegedly used this expression at a White House meeting. The anecdote was reported in *The New York Times* as follows: "President Trump on Thursday balked at an immigration deal that would include protections for people from Haiti and some nations in Africa, demanding to know at a White House meeting why he should accept immigrants from "shithole countries" rather than from places like Norway, according to people with direct knowledge of the conversation" (Davis: 2018).

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