(Re)Writing Home: Unimagining and Reimagining Haitian Identity in Diasporic Literature from the United States

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**Post-earthquake Literature by Haitian Authors in the United States**

**American Street by Ibi Zoboi**

American Street is a coming-of-age story about a Haitian girl in high school, Fabiola, who migrates to the U.S. with her mother. Despite having had her visa approved, Fabiola’s mother is detained upon their arrival to the U.S. Fabiola is thus forced to navigate her new world and unfamiliar extended family without her mother’s guidance. Zoboi skillfully weaves a story of intersecting identities and traditions in her novel to speak to a poignant narrative of self-discovery and self-invention.

**Mouths Don’t Speak by Katia D. Ulysse**

Mouths Don’t Speak is a narrative of return and remembering. After 25 years of living in the U.S., Jacqueline feels called to return to Haiti following the 2010 earthquake to reconnect with her birth country and estranged parents. Throughout this journey, Jacqueline is forced to confront new and old traumas of her own in the midst of Haiti’s national trauma. In her novel, Ulysse thus depicts a woman’s return to her roots and her process of rediscovery.

**The Current Historical Moment: TPS for Haitians Set to End July of 2019**

Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is a U.S. immigration designation which “provides humanitarian protection to noncitizens who are unable to safely return to their country of origin due to an ongoing armed conflict, environmental disaster, or ‘other extraordinary and temporary conditions’” (Happel and Yaffe 2017, 4). TPS for Haitians was initially instated following the 7.0 magnitude earthquake which devastated the nation’s capital of Port-au-Prince on January 12, 2010, leaving no fewer than 330,000 dead and displacing over 2.3 million individuals (Hall 2017, 4-5).

In addition to the earthquake, Haiti faced a cholera epidemic later in 2010 which was sparked by irresponsible waste management practices by the UN Peacekeeping Mission; the outbreak killed 9,000 Haitians and infected 800,000 more (Chan 2013, 8, Alston 2018, 94). Then, in 2016, Haiti’s southern peninsula was devastated by the nation’s strongest hurricane in over half a century – Hurricane Matthew (Ferreria 2016, 1). This Category 4 storm constituted a major setback to Haiti’s recovery efforts since 2010 and has exacerbated the long-term effects of food insecurity and a severe housing crisis brought on by the earthquake and cholera outbreak (Happel and Yaffe 2017, 10-18).

Although TPS is only extended to Haitians affected by the earthquake, it has been renewed by the DHS four times on the grounds of new and continuing “extraordinary conditions” (i.e. the cholera outbreak, hurricane, food insecurity, and housing crisis). While great strides have been made in recovery efforts, the latest review of Haiti’s TPS conducted by the DHS reported that conditions warranting the extension of TPS remain (Happel and Yaffe 2017, 6). Despite this finding, Trump has made the decision to terminate TPS for Haitians in July of 2019, resulting in the voluntary return or deportation of 59,000 TPS holders to Haiti (Happel and Yaffe 2017, 8). If these TPS holders are accompanied back by their families, Haiti may face the return of up to 200,000 individuals (Happel and Yaffe 2017, 8). An influx of this size is likely to further hinder recovery efforts as well as endanger the security of those forced to return.

**A History of Haiti’s International Relations**

Haiti constitutes the first independent Black Republic in history founded in 1804 with the conclusion of the Haitian Revolution (Payton 2017, 1-2). The nation was formerly France’s most profitable colony of Saint Domingue, which owed its wealth to the labor of enslaved Africans. In 1791, however, these enslaved peoples sparked a revolution which would result in Haiti becoming the only “case of an enslaved people breaking its own chains and using military might to defeat a powerful colonizer” (Farmer 2016, 17).

Although the young nation had won its independence, it would suffer economic and diplomatic ostracism from the international community, much of which was still largely dependent upon the use of slave labor in its industries (Farmer 2006, 69). In fact, France charged Haiti the equivalent of a $21 billion indemnity to cover its financial loss of “efficiency” over Haitian bodies, drowning the new nation in debt (Farmer 2006, 67 & 386). Haiti paid this “debt” to France which, despite numerous calls to do so – has not repaid the staggering sum to Haiti (Chomsky 2004, 19).

France’s influence over Haitian affairs waned, however, as the U.S. increasingly began to exercise control over the nation. Although U.S. interference in Haiti has often been mis/presented with great positivism, its presence there has largely been of the interest of the U.S. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, the U.S. has continually interfered in Haiti’s political and economic systems. The U.S. has on many occasions supported military coups which destabilize the nation, particularly the coup which led to the exile of Haiti’s first democratically elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide (Farmer 2006, 144-145).

**What is Literary Anthropology?**

Literary anthropology constitutes a relatively young subfield of the discipline, which presents a productive lens through which to analyze literature and the realm of social science, especially anthropology. This field of study draws on a long tradition of fiction as anthropological subjects in their own right, artifacts of the social and cultural contexts which influence works of fiction in their creation to cultivate a holistic understanding of their themes and messages. The goal of this research has thus been to develop an understanding of the social and cultural contexts which led to the construction of these novels and the transnational social systems in which they are embedded as well as their role in amplifying voices from Haiti and the Haitian diaspora in the U.S.