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"Natural" Disaster, International Solidarity, and the Representation of Others: Lessons from Haiti

Desastre "natural", solidaridad internacional y representación de otros: Lecciones de Haití

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Abstract

This essay revisits the case of the earthquake that shook Port-au-Prince, Haiti—which took place in January 2010—to discuss the enduring, and often unaccounted for, colonial links between representation and contemporary humanitarian practices that are present in different ways in both North-South (in this case, between US and Haiti), and South-South relations (Brazil-Haiti). Unlike conventional approaches to natural disasters, which tend to focus their object of study in one particular place and time, I propose an approach that instead engages multiple spaces, temporalities, and agencies. In the context of this critical approach, I invite us to reflect upon the following questions: what does international solidarity mean? How is solidarity shaped by the way we represent others? The result is a more complex lens which allows us to look at events that are likely to become more frequent and affect the socio-economically disadvantaged population in disproportional numbers in the near future due to the climate crisis.

Keywords: natural disaster; humanitarianism; Haiti; international solidarity; representation.

Resumen

Este ensayo revisa el caso del terremoto que sacudió a Puerto Príncipe, Haití, en enero de 2010, para analizar los vínculos coloniales perdurables y, a menudo desconocidos, entre la representación y las prácticas humanitarias contemporáneas que están presentes de diferentes maneras tanto en las relaciones Norte-Sur (en este caso, entre EE.UU. y Haití) como las relaciones Sur-Sur (Brasil-Haití). A diferencia de los enfoques convencionales de los desastres naturales, que tienden a enfocar su objeto de estudio en un lugar y tiempo en particular, propongo un enfoque que, en cambio, involucra múltiples espacios, temporalidades y agencias. En el contexto de este enfoque crítico, los invito a reflexionar sobre las siguientes preguntas: ¿qué significa solidaridad internacional? ¿Cómo se determina la solidaridad según la representación que hacemos de los demás? El resultado es una perspectiva más compleja que nos permite mirar los eventos que probablemente se volverán más frecuentes y afectarán a la población en desventaja socioeconómica en números desproporcionados en un futuro cercano debido a la crisis climática.

Palabras clave: desastre natural; humanitarismo; Haití; solidaridad internacional; representación.

"Natural" Disaster, International Solidarity, and the Representation of Others: Lessons from Haiti

I. Introduction

This essay starts with the following premise: natural disasters are not natural. Perhaps a self-evident maxim in critical social circles, and now more commonly embraced with the wider acknowledgment of human-induced climate change, the meaning of this assertion is, nonetheless, worth revisiting given the streak of catastrophic hurricanes and earthquakes that hit the Caribbean, Mexico, and Southern United States in the 2010s and continue to cause havoc at the start of a new decade, as we can see with the earthquakes in Puerto Rico. Having in my thoughts the thousands of people, including friends and family, who have been harshly affected by these and previous events, here I revisit some reflections I wrote in the aftermath of the earthquake that shook Port-au-Prince, Haiti, which took place in January 2010. Unlike conventional approaches to natural disasters, which tend to focus their object of study in one particular place and time, I propose an approach that instead engages multiple spaces, temporalities, and agencies. In the context of this critical approach, I invite us to reflect upon the following questions: what does international solidarity mean? How is solidarity shaped by the way we represent others? This essay seeks to discuss the enduring, and often unaccounted for, colonial links between representation and contemporary humanitarian practices that are present in different ways in both North-South (in this case, between US and Haiti) and South-South relations (Brazil-Haiti). The result will be a more complex lens which allows us to look at events that are likely to become more frequent and affect the socio-economically disadvantaged population in disproportional numbers in the near future.

II. A note on discipline and method

Instead of highlighting the contributions of this essay by pointing out the lacks in the current literature on critical humanitarianism, I see it as an opportunity to complement an already extensive corpus situated at the border between 1) structural and decolonial approaches to disaster and vulnerability (see Attalah *et al.*, 2019, Douzinas, 2007; Gros, 2011), and 2) critical studies of humanitarian intervention, both in Haiti and beyond (see Fassin, 2012; Müller and Steinke, 2018; Mullings *et al.*, 2010; Orford, 2003; Ulysse, 2015). Tending to both North-South and South-South relations, this essay proposes a set of reflections on coloniality, representation, and international intervention that draw not only from academic sources in various disciplines such as Anthropology, Geography, and International Relations, but also from non-academic sources, such as disclosed classified information, blog posts, news articles, and political cartoons. My intention is to honor voices and formats that are commonly overlooked within the social sciences, but which are often powerful sources of critical and alternative insights into politics. Moreover, given the far-reaching implications of humanitarian intervention, I find it necessary to use sources and language that avoid alienating the general audience to foster more fruitful connections between academic and non-academic audiences. It is also for this reason that I chose to write in the first person, in recognition of my positionality in the world, and to embody a voice that is relatable beyond academia.

III. The Two Cities of God

"In a slum called *Jamaika*, we found this one lady making cookies out of clay and sand, right on the ground," said MV Bill, somewhat astonished. MV Bill and Celso Athayde — respectively a rapper and a producer who

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became prominent spokespeople for social and racial justice in Brazil in the 2000s— depicted the precariousness of life in Haiti's slums as shock-provoking. After their visit to Haiti in 2009, Athayde affirmed: "The place is a natural producer of violence. It lacks sewage, food, water, jobs, that is, everything" (Basilio, 2009).[1] Their encounter with such material poverty made them question their previously critical stance on the long presence of United Nations (UN) troops in Haiti.[2] Athayde continued his testimony:

> I used to be resistant against the presence of Brazil [as the head of the UN mission] in Haiti because whenever I thought about boots and rifles, it reminded me of the Brazilian dictatorship, this [is what] sticks to our imaginary. I would prefer that the army was not here, that no other country was here, but I don't want that the world, embodied by the UN, ignore the wretchedness and misery these humans are submitted to... I have the habit of being overly critical, and if the UN did not come to do this work, I would certainly be accusing the UN of turning its back to Haiti, because there are only black people there (Basilio, 2009).

As was explained to the two visitors, the UN was asked for assistance by the Haitian government itself. Their change of opinion about the role of the mission did not go without its share of criticisms among people and social movements who generally supported their work. A few organizations had stressed the fact that they were invited to Haiti by both the Brazilian army and by Brazil's biggest media conglomerate, *Globo* (Feira, 2009). Globo is notorious for its conservative political tendencies.

[1] All translations are mine except otherwise noted.

[2] UN troops had been present in Haiti with the MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti) since 2004, when the country went through a period of political turmoil surrounding the ousting of president Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

MV Bill, however, felt mostly moved by his visit to *Cité de Dieu*, or City of God, a shanty town of Port-au-Prince with the same name of the *favela* he was raised in Rio. There, he said, "the walls of the houses are marked by bullet holes, and people relieved themselves in the streets. It gave me the chills." He could not help noticing similarities between the two Cities of God: the African descent, the adoration for soccer, and people's hope and joy for life. "Just like Brazilians," he concludes, "our Haitian siblings can go through a world of suffering, but they keep a smile in their face" (Hebreu, 2011).

IV. Atlanta, Georgia

"*You have to show destruction,*" an American journalist instructed his crew in the streets of Port-au-Prince, shortly after the catastrophic earthquake hit Haiti in January 2010. Rodrigo Charafeddine —a Brazilian student in Haiti at the time— recounts his reaction to the journalists' insistence: "the chaos that most journalists want to hear about when they approach us isn't there, people are not desperate, and there's no sign of the 'imaginary savagery' that molds our preconceptions of Haiti... There are, in fact, signs of destruction and death, which deserve to be portrayed. However, Haitians have found creative means, full of civility, to get around the situation" (Bulamah, 2010). Even though the house where Charafeddine lived had remained intact, many of his Haitian neighbors who had lost everything regularly checked if he was okay.

Upon reading Charafeddine's account, my thoughts rushed back to Atlanta International Airport, where I had arrived from Brazil on my way to start graduate school, only a few days after the earthquake had struck Port-au-Prince. As I left the border control and headed on to the next flight, I noticed that most, if not all, the TV screens spread throughout the terminal were set on

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CNN's coverage of the earthquake that had hit Port-au-Prince. *"Rescue, Relief, Rebuild!"*; *"Getting aid to people"*; *"Hope for Haiti: Telethon raises $xxx million!"*; *"Join us to show you how you can take action!"* These headlines made me feel uneasy.

The problem was not so much to dispute the call to solidarity in a moment of catastrophe, but the quick move to making the audience the main subject of the situation. Understood as a natural disaster, it was hard to question the ethics of a call to action and intervention. Given that we perceived the disaster as not induced by humans, there could be no question as to the necessity to intervene, and it became harder to interrogate the complicity of other nations in the magnitude of the disaster.

Had I not known about the earthquake, I could have assumed in the first moments watching the broadcast that the news appealed to US citizens' sense of solidarity, or pity, for any other poverty or civil war-stricken region of the so-called third world, as there is a pattern in how these are commonly portrayed. CNN professionals explained that without the help of the US, Haiti would not get through the disaster. The appeal seemed to focus on our sense of moral duty and on the type of action/solution proposed by us. Such quick move, from "disaster" to "action," from "pain" to "relief," by focusing on the actor providing a solution, removed Haitians and Haiti from the actual picture.

In *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, Didier Fassin (2012) argues that,

> humanitarian reason pays more attention to the biological life of the destitute and unfortunate, the life in the name of which they are given aid, than to their biographical life, the life through which they could, independently, give a meaning to their own existence (p.254).

One of the central paradoxes of the humanitarian discourse that Fassin analyzes is the fact that a politics of compassion, which drives this discourse, is at the same time a politics of inequality —since, without the poor, the unfortunate, and the vulnerable, it cannot exist —and also a politics of solidarity— because its other condition of possibility is the recognition of others as fellows.

The equation of human rights with a sense of morality de-links them from politics: as Costas Douzinas suggests in his book *Human Rights and Empire* (2007), "the specific political situation that led to the abuses, the colonial history and the conflicts that matured into civil war, the economics that allowed the famine to develop, all these are irrelevant from the perspective of the moralist." In this case, "moral duty is addressed first and foremost towards the actor and his rational commitment to morality and only secondarily towards the other, the target of its action" (p. 79). Since western humanitarian campaigns "are moral in essence, doubting the rightness or appropriateness of the solution cannot be done in good faith. People may be mobilized in a common cause, but the solutions to the problem are given and unchallenged," Douzinas (2007) concludes. Paradoxically, it is only possible to imagine some of us as givers. For instance, the appropriateness of Cuba's offer of aid for the victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, 2005, was put into question as politically motivated (Lake, 2005).[3] But if the sense of moral duty implied in calls for

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[3] It is worth looking at some of the comments on this issue: "In a statement on Venezuela's and Cuba's offers of assistance, a scholar at a conservative Washington-based think tank, the Heritage Foundation, Stephen Johnson, warned that offers of aid from rogue regimes in the past have served as cover for drumming up support for leftist causes. Mr. Johnson warned not to "let in political opportunists eager to sow discord or probe the coastline for weaknesses in defense." In "U.S. Rejects Cuban Aid, 20 Million Barrels of Iranian Oil," Lake, 2005. http://www.nysun.com/national/us-rejects-cuban-aid-20-million-barrels/19761/

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humanitarian action is devoid of politics, why not Cuba?

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"What alternative can you offer when the choice is either intervention or genocide?" Orford (Orford, 2003, p. 14). Writer Anne Orford was asked this question by a friend in Australia, upon having hesitated on the call to military intervention in order to stop Indonesians from massacring the East Timorese.[4] The question, Orford argues, has a particular and implicit "temporal focus" (pp. 17-18). According to Orford, the policies of the Australian government and what she calls the "international community" supported the Indonesian government and the Indonesian military's repression of the East Timorese for over twenty years. Yet even as Australians are appalled by the results of those policies on television screens, the ordering principles of the international political economy, which supported that violence, are free from interrogation (p. 30). The "temporal focus" that Orford talks about highlights the present and the moments of crisis and frames the issue in terms of either-or action/inaction. In this sense, it is blind to duration and long-term violence.

After the earthquake in Haiti, Jean Milus Rocheman, a Haitian social activist, explained to his fellow Brazilian students how the Haitian formerly self-sufficient production of rice, one of its national staples, succumbed to an incoming flood of both heavily subsidized US produce and USAID rice donations, as part of neoliberal structural adjustment policies known as the "American Plan" (or "Death Plan," according to locals) beginning in the 1980s and implemented by several international institutions, including the IMF and the World Bank (Gros, 2011; Hallward, 2008; Mullings,

et al., 2011; Santos, 2010). So did its national cement industry and, as a consequence, most of the poor who left the rural areas for Port-au-Prince in search of opportunities had since built their living spaces with low-quality construction material, which was less resistant to the earthquake (Santos, 2010). In "Anatomy of a Haitian Tragedy," Political scientist Jean-Germain Gros (2011) also attributes the catastrophic death toll and destruction of Port-au-Prince to the weakening of the state institutions and the crowding of the capital city of Port-au-Prince that resulted partly from the structural adjustment policies mentioned above. For instance, in the 1980s a USAID program demanded the eradication of the Haitian swine population, forcing many people to leave the countryside in search of better prospects in the capital (Gros, 2011, p.142). In addition, the rising preference of international donors for NGOs, which would occupy service roles that ordinarily belong to the state, contributed to the further weakening of Haitian state institutions, thereby making them less able to prevent and remedy crises.[5]

This is neither to argue that all forms of aid are inherently problematic, or unnecessary, nor that recognizing the

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[4] The country that is now known as East Timor was occupied by Indonesian forces during the last quarter of the twentieth century, following its independence from Portugal.

[5] For instance, Gros (2010) suggests that a stronger state would have resulted in better regulation of construction materials, armed forces that could help engender a better response to catastrophes, and more evenly distributed economy and social services throughout the country that could have prevented the exodus toward the capital. To be sure, Gros does not only attribute Haiti's crisis to an historical imbalance in foreign relations, but to a dialectic between domestic and international factors that ultimately resulted in the failure of the Haitian state. Although Gros makes a strong case as to why the presence of the state can be beneficial to the population in the case of Haiti, I would endorse this argument with a grain of salt–in no small part because I am not an expert in the history and politics of Haiti, but also because the incursion of the state in places where it had been absent is not always beneficial, as we have seen in the case of the entry of the Brazilian police and army into favelas that often results in unnecessary violence (see below).

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mutual implication of countries in each other's histories before and beyond moments of crisis will solve an ongoing crisis. Instead, I would like to suggest that the debate over humanitarian aid and interventions is often coated in a layer of morality that disconnects the discussion from political interests and power. Re-linking the debate to politics may reveal an otherwise unassumed complicity of humanitarians with the moment of crisis.

V. The epicenter

It was not until a few days after the earthquake that the UN military forces already stationed in Haiti, along with over 5,000 troops sent by the US, finally came to a consensus on issues of airspace control and distribution of food, water, and medicine coming from around the world. A photographer that accompanied a group of Brazilian students in Haiti refused to take pictures of dead bodies and destruction. She had been impressed by the sense of solidarity and pride of the *dames sara*: Haitian women in charge of intricate networks of street markets, and who quickly put back their stands, organizing the distribution and sale of food in the newly formed refugee camps (Tomaz and Jorge, 2010). However, the same foreigners, who could not agree on the distribution of donations, could not fathom leaving this task to Haitians either: chaos would ensue, they believed.

Otavio Calegari (2010b), another student living in Haiti at the time of the earthquake, shared that in the three days after Port-au-Prince was hit, "he had never been so far and so close to God." "Moments after the quake," he recounts:

> one of the things I most desired was a geologist or anyone who could appease me by saying that that had been the strongest tremor. In the moment I write these words, however, I had never felt so

close to God. The canticles sung by the women in front of our house give me bone-touching goose bumps. It is hard to understand why to be grateful facing such destruction, but it is not hard to realize that these chants are part of the solidarity of cooperation of the Haitian people, which makes any international aid, still inexistent, merely a side-player (Calegari, 2010b).

Without a doubt no camera could possibly capture the scene described by Calegari (2010b).

VI. The laboratories

"Bèl dan pa di zanmi"
(Haitian Proverb)[6]

Figure 1. "A smile doesn't mean friendship"
Autor Carlos Latuff (2015).

For several reasons, as a Brazilian citizen I had become increasingly skeptical of the Brazil's role in leading the UN mission in Haiti, which had been present in that country for about six years at the time of the

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[6] Loosely translated as "A smile doesn't mean friendship." Brazilian political cartoonist Carlos Latuff (2015) used this Haitin proverb in his drawing depicting a smiling Brazilian UN soldier holding an automatic gun in front of a Haitian child (see Figure 1). The idea that Brazil was a more suitable leader for the UN mission due to cultural proximity with Haiti had been highly criticized internationally, not the least because of the excessive use of violence by UN forces (see below).

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earthquake. Most of what the mainstream media in Brazil had broadcast in the aftermath of the disaster were accounts of the heroic role of Brazilian soldiers who lost their lives on duty for the UN peace mission in Haiti, in addition to the significant loss of Dr. Zilda Arns, a social aid worker and Nobel prize nominee whom some had called Brazil's Madre Teresa. Though I felt sympathetic to the mourning of this loss, what I took issue with was that this account was one-sided. For instance, who were the local "heroes"?

In Brazil, the mainstream media would also depict the UN mission without giving in-depth historical or political context. The usual commentaries portrayed Haiti as a place devastated by civil chaos and poverty, and therefore, a politically neutral UN peace mission was obviously welcome. However, political commentators argued that Brazil's deep involvement with the mission was explained by its aspiration to a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Though initially not widely publicized, news of scandals related to the presence of the blue helmets (how UN soldiers are known) in Haiti became more frequent over the years, and these made it increasingly difficult to sustain the case of the UN's neutrality.

Stories of suppressed protests for the return of Jean Bertrand Aristide —a democratically elected former president ousted with US support in 2004— violent raids into Port-au-Prince slums with several casualties, and alleged cases of sexual abuse involving different troops of the MINUSTAH were not uncommon, and had hit some of the international media as well (Bhatt & Keane, 2015). In addition, a Brazilian commander's declaration that Haiti served as a "laboratory" for the army to contain rebellions in Brazilian *favelas* revealed both profound disrespect for, and objectification of Haitians, and also brought to the surface unresolved socio-

economic and racial tensions in Brazil that are a legacy of colonialism (Calegari, 2010a). *Favelas* are low-income, informal urban settlements whose racial make-up is predominantly black and brown descendants of formerly enslaved Africans. For decades, the relationship between the Brazilian state and *favelas* has been marked by a discourse of security and justification of the use of police/military violence. Mullings *et al.*, (2011) describe a similar relationship between Western foreign authorities and the policing of black bodies in humanitarian intervention. With examples from the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and 2005 Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, these authors suggest that "criminalization, discipline and punishment have become a predictable part of the humanitarian response to black communities in crisis" (Mullings *et al.*, 2011, p. 285). The case of Brazil shows how this type of criminalization in international relations is not exclusive to Western nations. Moreover, Celso Athayde's (one of the artists mentioned at the beginning of this essay) fears of boots and rifles, when visiting the Haitian City of God, are not all that accidental: one of the early commanders of the UN mission was an officer involved in one of the bloodiest fights against communist guerrilla members during the twenty years of US-backed dictatorship in Brazil, from 1964 to 1985 (Blanc, Galli, and Nunes, 2006).

Tailon Ruppenthal (2007), a Brazilian lower rank soldier who participated in the first few months of the UN mission in Haiti, expressed his revolt at the mission's leadership in his memoirs: soldiers either served as private guards for the few rich of Port-au-Prince, or exchanged shots with militiamen, with the intention to "pacify" the slums (Ruppenthal, 2007). Sadly, but not coincidentally, this is the same terminology Brazilian authorities have used to explain the work they do in the *favelas* of Rio. In Rio, *favela*

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dwellers express wishes for a life without both criminals and the police, who, in many instances, have been complicit with complex criminal networks, and with violence against the population through groups known as *milícias*. A general consensus seems to be the state's need to not simply increase its presence in *favelas* through militarization and policing, but rather to address deeply rooted social and economic disparities.

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"We need international solidarity, but there needs to be dignity for us." Maryse Narcisse, ex-minister in the Jean-Bertrand Aristide's government, ousted in 2004, said shortly after the earthquake that Haitians "cannot think MINUSTAH will stay here forever," asking for a timeline for the removal of foreign troops (Zanini, 2010). We often do not hear about ongoing alternative (read: non-militarized and non-hierarchical) forms of transnational solidarity. Cuba, among few countries, has a long history of providing medical assistance and infrastructure to other countries in the global south. In Haiti, Cuban health workers had been present years before the 2004 crisis that culminated in a Franco-American occupation and subsequently to the UN mission (Manzaneda, 2010). Other forms of solidarity included exchanges between Haitian and other Latin American rural workers through the sponsorship of *Via Campesina*, an international peasant organization that focuses on supporting grassroots farming (Roselló & Fernández, 2010). As one of the protesters gathered outside the UN compound months after the earthquake pointed out, Haitians "don't need tanks...What is needed are technicians, or people who can help us" (AlterPresse, 2011). To be fair, technical interventions are no less pervious to the influence of power and politics.[7] Nevertheless, perhaps the

protestor gestured toward a desire for the ability to decide how to use the resources offered by the international community. The UN troops continued to be stationed in the country through 2017.

VII. Ghosts Disregard Borders

One day I learnt
a secret art,
Invisible-Ness, it was called.
I think it worked
as even now you look
but never see me.
I was born in the Southern Hemisphere
in the early hours of the dawn
and when I die
I shall return
To a place I call my own.
Only my eyes will remain
to watch and to haunt,
and to turn your dreams
to chaos.
(Cobham and Collins 1987, pp. 125-6)[8]

In the year of 1796, in the town of Puerto Príncipe, colonial Cuba, a rebellious "French slave" (this is how enslaved Africans in Haiti were known in Cuba at the time) was brought to the local governor for having "declared 'haughtily, with various expressions typical of an ignorant person puffed up with very foolish though seditious principles and ideas, that the blacks of Cap Français all were free, because they had won their liberty'" (Fischer, 2004, p. 5). According to this account, the very next day all of the other "French slaves" in town were brought to the public square in order to watch the

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[7] For a discussion of this point in the context of

development interventions, see James Ferguson (1990), *The Anti-Politics Machine : Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*.

[8] Section of poem "*Strangers in a Hostile Landscape*" by Chinese/Guyanese poet Meiling Jin in a collection of writings by Black women in England (Cobham and Collins, 1987). Originally quoted in Lima (2001), possibly from Bhabha (1994). Lima (2001) does not provide full citation.

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'seditious' man receiving one hundred lashes, with a sign around his neck:

This is the fruit of the imaginary liberty of the French slaves: true freedom is found in virtue (p. 5)

At that time, any mention of the events surrounding the slave uprisings, and the subsequent revolution in the neighboring island that led to its independence from France, was strictly prohibited by other colonial authorities in the region. Of the death of Toussaint L'ouverture, one of the central figures of the rebellions against the French, there was only one line in a Cuban newspaper of the time (p.3). In her book *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (2005), scholar Sybille Fischer suggests that "there was a consensus in the region among settlers of European descent that Haiti was not a commendable model for emancipation. In response to the revolution, a *cordon sanitaire* was drawn around the island to interrupt the flow of information and people." The definition of *cordon sanitaire* is useful to conjure up the image of what it represents: "a guarded line preventing anyone from leaving an area infected by a disease and thus spreading it" (New Oxford American Dictionary, 2019). Nevertheless, news of the uprisings penetrated neighboring spaces, despite the somewhat strict enforcement of these rules, and the relentless effort to render the events invisible or insignificant.

Fischer challenges Haitian anthropologist Michel Rolph Trouillot's point that the Haitian revolution was unthinkable at its time. She argues, on the contrary, that it was perfectly available to the imagination, but it manifested itself in the form of fear and utopias (p. 292). The suppression of a slave revolution in the European and Euro-American imaginary, that is, the suppression of the possibility of a slave being a full human agent, is perhaps indicative of not only the acknowledgement of its possibility, but also the horror of imagining the possibility realized. In colonial Brazil, which had the largest population of enslaved Africans in the Americas, the fear of uprisings heightened after the Haitian revolution, and gained its own name: *haitianismo* (Galeano, 2009).

In 1825, twenty-one years after the end of the Haitian revolution, the French threatened to invade Haiti once again if the island did not pay a hefty indemnity fee for its independence equal to ten times its annual revenue. The debt would be paid well into the twentieth century and has sparked demand for reparations from the part of Haitians (Tharoor, 2015). Fischer argues that "[i]t is possible that were we to measure the historical significance of Haiti by its causal impact on surrounding areas and its direct effect on slave insurgency in other places, it would turn out to have been minor." Much of contemporary Caribbean historiography, according to her, has pointed out that the events in Haiti had a less direct impact on influencing other revolts than it is otherwise commonly thought. "But as phantasma and nightmare," Fischer (2004) continues, "its ubiquity can hardly be doubted" (p. 5).

Roughly two centuries later, a similar type of *cordon sanitaire* continues to make a strong presence (the scene of George W. Bush caught on camera wiping his hands on Bill Clinton's shirt after shaking the hands of a Haitian man in 2010, whether intentionally or not, makes up for quite a literal and tragicomic image of this *cordon sanitaire*) (Bloxham, 2010). Former Brazilian minister of foreign affairs, Celso Amorim, affirmed in 2004 that the internal division the UN mission faced between South American and Western nations, who largely financed the UN, had to do with different conceptions of what the work of the UN was about. "For them," Amorim said,

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the mission was "an issue of security, an issue of [preventing] migration and drug trafficking" (Krakovics, 2004).[9] In other words, the priority of Western nations was to keep Haitians in Haiti and drugs is South America, thus reinforcing a barrier between the north and the south. The minister reiterated that the South American nations understood the issue of "security" as inseparable from social and political ones. He illustrated his point with a 'serious joke' former president Lula used to make: "you go to the interior of Brazil, [where Lula is from], and you see poor people adopting children, whereas the middle and rich classes are more hesitant."

Cables leaked from the US embassy in Brazil confirmed an old suspicion: on several occasions, the US government demanded Brazilians, who headed MINUSTAH at the start, for more violence —or what Americans called 'robust' or 'firm action'— from the part of UN forces, to crack down on gangs and militia that might support the return of former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide (Folha de S. Paulo, 2011).[10] Sadly, these demands were not so secret to the soldiers who had to follow them or to Haitians at their receiving end. It seems to be common knowledge by now that democratically elected-Aristide was forced into exile on a plane owned by the US government (Hallward, 2008).[11] In the cables, American diplomats seemed obsessively concerned that Brazilians did not perceive the matter "with the same urgency." The cables also noted that Brazilians would welcome US troops to MINUSTAH, as a response to then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's hint, but only "under UN authorities" (Folha de S. Paulo, 2011).

Perhaps these requests reveal the anxiety of US authorities, much like the authorities of colonial Cuba, to contain a feared rebellion against the (neo)colonial structure, while attempting, at the same time, not to make this panic-like fear too transparent to the public. I am unable to comment on the complexity of Haitian internal politics, but ex-president Aristide still seemed to be supported among large sectors of the population in the years following the fall of his government, despite having lost some popularity among former allies (Hallward, 2008; Ruppenthal, 2007). A few months before the leaked exchange between US and Brazilian diplomats, General Augusto Heleno Ribeiro (military chief of MINUSTAH between 2004 and 2005) declared inadvertently in the Brazilian congress that he had been pressured by the US, France, and Canada to use more force in the mission (Bragon, 2004). Ruppenthal, the Brazilian soldier who published a memoir of his time in Haiti, suggested that the neutrality of the mission became clearly questionable to many of the soldiers after its first three months, when the high command of the UN asked Brazilian officers "why they were saving on ammunition" (Ruppenthal, 2007). In 2005, less than a month after American and Brazilian diplomats met, a major assault led by the blue helmets at Cité Soleil, an impoverished sector of Port-au-Prince, killed nearly thirty people.[12]

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[9] As documented in Mullings et al (2010), before transporting aid, helicopters of the American armed forces brought to Port-au-Prince after the earthquake were used to patrol the Haitian coast to warn Haitians that their attempts to migrate via sea into the US would be intercepted.

[10] For a series of leaked cables from the US embassy in Brazil concerning Haiti, see: http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/858818-leia-os-ultimos-telegramas-sobre-o-brasil-obtidos-pela-folha.shtml. The Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* was chosen by Wikileaks as one of the first media outlets to receive the series of cables leaked in 2010. Here I am referring to the cables from the years of 2004 (when Aristide was ousted), through the first year of the UN mission.

[11] See Hallward, op.cit., specially the appended

interviews with Aristide in his book.

[12] See Müller and Steinke (2018) for an in-depth analysis of the relationship between MINUSTAH and the use of violence, published after the end of the mission in 2017.

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VIII. "Get the narrative right!"

There is now evidence that the US deployed 22,000 troops to Haiti, shortly after the earthquake, without previous authorization or request by the Haitian government (Herz, 2011). Cables leaked subsequently show that the American embassy in Port-au-Prince advised Washington that reports of violence and looting, despite fears amplified by American media, were isolated, and that residents of Port-au-Prince remained "civil, calm, polite, solemn and seemed to be well-organized while they were searching for belongings in the ruins of their homes" (Herz, 2011). Criticized by the UN, NGOs, and both local and international media for the excessive deployment of military resources, US secretary of state at the time, Hillary Clinton, issued a request to embassies worldwide to "get the narrative right" (Herz, 2011). Expressing deep concerns for "instances of inaccurate and unfavorable international media coverage of America's role and intentions in Haiti," Clinton demanded US ambassadors worldwide to "personally contact media organizations at the highest possible level... to push back and insist on informed and responsible coverage of our actions and intentions, and to underscore the U.S. partnership with the government of Haiti, the United Nations, and the world community" (WikiLeaks, 2010). Clinton highlighted that this was a matter of personal priority to her, and that chiefs of consular missions were to report back to cite "specific examples of irresponsible journalism in your host countries, and what action you have taken in response." Consequently, American diplomats proceeded to pressure local media outlets to consider rectifying unfavorable accounts of US intervention in Haiti.

It is also now common knowledge that most of the money raised to help Haiti's reconstruction did not go either to Haitian authorities, nor to Haitian organizations. According to UN official statistics, as much as 90% of the US$ 9 billion raised between 2010 and 2012 for relief efforts went to UN agencies, international aid groups, private contractors, and donor countries' own civilian and military agencies (Sheerin, 2016; Lessons from Haiti, 2012). This is not to say that Haitian authorities should be exempt from critical scrutiny. Instead, the issue is more profound than a simple question of domestic mismanagement as it is often assumed in academic circles and mainstream media.

Perhaps in a classic example of disaster capitalism, Clinton's family foundation was itself involved in the construction of a controversial industrial park budgeted in the amount of $300 million US dollars (Klein, 2008). Expected to create over 100,000 jobs —though it delivered only 8,000— the park, in addition, displaced hundreds of farmers to be built, and is operated by a large Korean garment corporation (Sheerin, 2016). By usually banking on tax-exemptions and cheap labor, this type of business does little to contribute to the long-term strengthening of the local economy and institutions.

XI. Conclusion

This essay approaches the 2010 catastrophic earthquake in Haiti and ensuing humanitarian intervention from a multitemporal, multispatial angle to show that the way we choose to represent others shapes the forms that intervention can take. First, I elucidate how international media misleading focus on the scenes of disaster is more preoccupied with appeasing the morality of donor countries and citizens than with reality on the ground, while it paints a picture of locals as helpless and unable to administer foreign aid. Second, I suggest that a limited temporal focus on the moment of disaster can diverge

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attention from the complicity of aiding countries and citizens in the proportion that disaster takes. Third, I show that the asymmetrical relations between northern donors and southern receivers can be replicated by countries in the south, as in the case of Brazil toward Haiti. The logic of intervention represented in these asymmetrical relations also reflects the legacies of colonialism in both the global north and global south: the way the use of violence against black and brown people is justified in international humanitarian intervention parallels violent intervention on predominately black communities domestically. Lastly, I clarify how classified documents from the diplomatic missions in charge of foreign intervention corroborate the points above and demonstrate concerted efforts to sustain a narrative in favor of Western nations' financial and political interests.

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Rather than a rectified narrative, as Clinton demanded, Haiti "needs new ones," as urges Haitian American author Gina Athena Ulysse (2015), new narratives which Haitians are in command of. Narrative is as much about the past and present as it is about the future. The loss of life and destruction brought by Hurricane Matthew in 2016 to Haiti's southern peninsula, and the series of dreadful hurricanes that crossed the Caribbean in the last few years, should urge us to scrutinize not only the "natural" of "natural disaster" —particularly now that we grapple with the fact that humans have become recognized in Western science as geological agents— but, more importantly, also the familiar myopic representation of others, as these tend to be more injurious to peoples and spaces who are often spoken-for in international relations. When considering the role of international solidarity in disaster relief

efforts, we should relentlessly ask: How do the ways we imagine others inform our attitudes in a moment of disaster? How is this imagination created in the first place? What are our complicities with disasters, both much before and much after disasters take place? And ultimately: what does solidarity mean? And for whom?

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