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**HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: POST-QUAKE PORTRAITS OF THE  
DISENFRANCHISED  
IN THE WRITINGS OF EMMELIE PROPHÈTE AND KETTLY MARS**

**Linda S. Alcott**

In her 1989 work entitled “Habiter ce pays, la Guadeloupe,” Maryse Condé movingly describes the mask that was brutally lifted from her country’s eyes in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo. No longer able to hide behind a false image of being superior to Haitians, Dominicans and Jamaicans, now the country was forced to abandon previous misconceptions of comparative stability, seeing instead that indeed most of its citizens had been living in abject, intolerable poverty. Condé’s commentary, as cited in *Contre Courants: Les Femmes s’écrivent à travers les siècles*, describes the country’s pervasive desolation previously veiled from view:

Depuis le cyclone Hugo, le masque, l’espèce de paravent que les arbres offraient à la Guadeloupe, derrière lequel tant de misère se cachait, ce paravent est tombé. Et nous voyons des zones immenses de bidonvilles, de cases en tôle rapiécée, de cases en planches, de cases en bois de mauvaise qualité qui apparaissent. Nous voyons partout la misère [...]. Le pays est pauvre. (32)

Similarly, Junot Díaz’s essay entitled “What Disasters Reveal” describes the revelations catastrophes produce when one looks beyond the obvious physical destruction and loss of life of the event: “After all, if these types of apocalyptic catastrophes have any value it is that in the process of causing things to fall apart they also give us a chance to see the aspects of our world that we as a society seek to run from, that we hide behind in veils of denials” (47). Going further in calling for the responsibility of the citizenry to help in the aftermath of disasters, Díaz asserts:

If I know anything, it is this: we need the revelations that come from our apocalypses—and never so much as we do now. Without this knowledge how can we ever hope to take responsibility for the social practices that bring on disasters? And how can we ever hope to take responsibility for the collective response that will be needed to alleviate the misery? (50)

With similar purpose, the post-disaster narratives of two prominent Haitian women writers, Emmelie Prophète and Kettly Mars, chronicle the massively destructive January 12, 2010 earthquake in their native country with a pointed focus on exposing the disadvantaged victims and conditions of that catastrophic disaster. Calling out the misery hidden in plain sight within Haitian society, both

authors poignantly highlight the marginalized and most vulnerable in an effort to rip the veil off protected nationalistic imagery and perhaps encourage useful awareness, if not change. Focusing on geographical strictures, poor living conditions and a general lack of hope, Emmelie Prophète's *Impasse Dignité* is a riveting narrative of the persistent crisis of paucity residing in Haiti. In *Aux Frontières de la Soif*, Kettly Mars more graphically explores the aftermath of the quake by shining a light on the make-shift housing sites and the tent city sins foisted on the youngest of the female *sinistrées*. In the end, the haunting human portraits offered by both authors in their novels represent, as do the words of Condé and Díaz, a call for examination of the true definition of societal depravation and its resultant wounding of the soul in the wake of a disaster once the shelter of status quo has been removed.

As a point of entry into the subject of any 2010 Haitian quake inspired writings, it is useful to reference an authoritative text on the subject written by the noted scholar Martin Munro. In his 2014 text, *Writing on the Fault Line: Haitian Literature and the Earthquake of 2010*, Munro expressly underscores the challenges the disaster posed to Haitian authors, both female and male, and the wide range of literary expressions produced following this uniquely destructive event. Interestingly, his overarching findings conclude that the literary production based on the disaster is more than anything else quite personalized, and therefore not particularly subject, genre or even gender specific. Munro summarizes his findings by stating:

There 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 meaning of the event as it is processed through the workings of the individual text. (2)

He further underscores quite effectively the unmatched effect an unconventional narrative can have on an event's legitimized and documented legacy:

daring literary invention . . . constitutes one of the most striking and important means of communicating such a disaster, and the 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. (2-3)

Indeed, both texts I treat in this study offer the "outsider" reader that place of privilege, albeit uncomfortable, which allows him to view the dark earthquake realities in "privileged ways" due to the "close engagement with the creative imagination" of both Emmelie Prophète and Kettly Mars.

When deciding how best to approach the message of *Impasse Dignité*, how best to do justice to Prophète's intentions regarding such a dramatic and deadly event in her country, I was struck by the vast number of themes pertaining to man's basic and ongoing human condition she emphasizes throughout the text.

Using an almost kaleidoscopic approach to her character creations, the author seems determined to paint with as broad a stroke as possible the innumerable, harassing realities of daily life in Haiti for many of its marginalized, indigent people. And as is the case with any fictional, yet accurate, portrait of the poorest members of a society, the offshoot subtexts running throughout the narrative are for the most part predictable and sadly universal. Motifs of shame, solitude, hunger, invisibility, silence, fear, illness, death, God, economic hardship and dreams of escape are all a part of this richly drawn character study. However, most compelling for me are the novel's depictions of identity development as well as its link to familial influence and personal space when both are influenced by dire poverty.

Among the commonly accepted definitions of identity, there are two useful baselines from which to look at the concept as it applies to the collective as well as to the individuals in the novel. First, identity can be seen as "The set of characteristics by which a thing is definitively recognized or known." In addition, identity may also be described as: "The set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group" (*The American Heritage College Dictionary* 674). Accordingly, then, and at its core, a broad definition of identity reflects certain intimate aspects of the individual and the boundary and/or interplay between those traits and the world outside. Moreover, a lack of positive identity creation has been associated with a loss of something deeply personal and essential to the individual, possibly resulting from a scarring event or circumstances which distort one's progression toward becoming fully functioning. Abraham Maslow, a key twentieth-century theoretician in the study of human identity, famously explored the loss of self in his seminal and still widely referenced text, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (1968), calling the effect "a psychic death" (51-52) for the individual. In a similar vein, as we shall now discover, the natural process by which one can be expected to develop a productive, reliable identity is beyond the reach of the characters in *Impasse Dignité*, both on individual and group levels, since the dynamic forces of life-threatening poverty and lack of psychological normalcy are simply too much to overcome.

The story of *Impasse Dignité* takes place in the waning months of 2009 in a shanty town of Port-au-Prince. Symbolically, in the opening pages of the novel, the group of youths whose intertwined lives drive the story line, courageously decides to christen their nameless street—their literal and emblematic *impasse*, as it were—in an attempt to give presence, meaning and hope to their corner of the world and, by extension, to themselves. The mere bestowing of a name and, more importantly, a name suggesting pride on a street previously considered not worth naming, sets the stage for a rich, concrete exploration of the themes of identity and illusion in the text. Scraping together 27 *gourdes* and 75 *centimes*, the ragtag group manages to buy two small pots of paint—one blue, one white—along with two brushes in order to begin the street sign naming project. After putting their school *cahiers* side by side in order to compare and judge whose handwriting would be considered worthy enough to grace the sign, the teenagers spend a half a day watching, admiring, as the fourteen letters of *Impasse Dignité*

are diligently and thoughtfully applied. And by way of her role of narrator, Prophète describes this seemingly unremarkable act of naming one's space on a battered piece of discarded sheet metal as psychologically significant on multiple levels for this group of Haitian youths: "C'était une façon, dans leurs têtes d'adolescents, de pouvoir être identifiés, d'être situés sur une carte, de se donner une adresse" (6).

As readers and observers of this simple scene at the novel's onset, we are initially buoyed by the determination and optimism of this small band of buddies led by José, the novel's twenty-year-old protagonist. And yet, it is primarily while describing José in the text that Prophète's narration most prominently reveals a darker version of this ghetto's reality, exposing the bleak physical and crippling emotional conditions which influence the entire *Impasse* group and community. José, fortunately yet not unpredictably, finds some degree of comfort in this small circle of friends he has known since his early school days. This crew includes Daniel who is burdened by the daily responsibility of caring for his dying mother without running water in their dilapidated shack, and no medical assistance for her end-stage cancer. Gaston and Jean-Philippe round out the gang, but their ultimate departure for the United States creates a sense of bittersweet nostalgia in the hearts of José and Daniel as they imagine their absent friends experiencing the ultimate escape route of the mythic *là-bas* on American soil: "José se demandait comment étaient maintenant Gaston et Jean-Philippe. Ils ne devaient plus porter les maillots délavés affichant des publicités de toutes sortes, des campagnes contre le sida à l'allaitement maternel en passant par des marques de riz importé" (9). Blending the musings of José and Daniel with her own criticisms of Haitian exploitation, Prophète takes full advantage of her narrative position to underscore the vulnerability facing all Haitians as symbolized by the victimization of the *Impasse* street gang: "Ils étaient des cobayes pour tout [...]. Ils étaient de la chair à vote, du pain béni pour les ONG, pour les journalistes à l'affût de l'image qui frappe le plus les publics du Nord souvent en mal de souffrance" (9).

Additional influences in José's life include his family, which, unfortunately, offers none of the solace that his friends do since each family member displays an unmistakably damaged psychological profile in a dysfunctional home atmosphere of silence and deceit. Violette, José's mother, prays regularly and desperately while secretly panhandling to be able to put any small amount of food on the table. Denis, the father, sleeps with women his daughter's age, dying his hair on Sundays to be able to compete with the town's younger male suitors, thereby presenting an overall pitiful image of the unemployed Haitian civil servant, smoking his way to an early death. Sara, José's 15-year-old sister, shuns school for which she has little talent in order to spend time in the local bars and restaurants where men and rhythmic Caribbean music create a distraction from her depressed adolescence and unfocused future. In short, José's family life offers nothing in terms of inspiration for positive identity development, nor do the disparate characters in the broader community of *Impasse* display any degree of personal or inspiring success. Ti-Blanc, the pawn broker, exploits his

neighbors with his unscrupulous usury practices; Claire, the cloistered spinster, hides from the world all the while lamenting her isolation; Jacques, the traditionally trained cobbler, is unable to make ends meet in the emerging world of imitation leather and mass-production, and finally there is Lucie, the rebellious older love interest of José, who dreams of salvaging her heretofore promiscuous life by having a child in her mid-forties. This is the frustrated cast of characters who populate and interact within the physical space known as Impasse Dignité where no real sense of reality beyond poverty and stagnation, both physical and psychological, exists. And it is indeed this literal and physical sense of everyday entrapment *prior to* the devastating earthquake that so strikingly affects each character's sense of identity and, as readers, our ultimate understanding of Prophète's interpretation of the disaster.

In a 2009 *Ile-en-île* interview with Thomas Spear, Emmelie Prophète spoke to the importance of the concept of locale in her work, underscoring her distinct attachment to the city, including its hardscape and raw setting around which so much life in Port-au-Prince revolves. As she describes her Haitian roots, she sees herself as “fondamentalement citadine et port-au-princienne” (Spear). Drawing even more specifically from her childhood memories, Prophète recalls the precariousness, yet intriguing sense of vibrancy found in the type of Haitian communities she regularly inserts into her writing:

[...] je parle beaucoup du quartier dans lequel j'ai grandi, qui était une sorte de bombe: on avait l'impression qu'il pouvait sauter à n'importe quel moment. Il y avait beaucoup de déménagements, énormément de voisins et des gens qui se chamaillaient (surtout des femmes). Il y avait des problèmes d'eau et d'électricité [...] et il y a beaucoup de béton et de maladresse dans les constructions. J'aime beaucoup être dans la ville, dans cette ville de *blackouts*, cette ville toujours trop sale, cette ville de misère, mais que j'accepte et que j'aime malgré tout. (Spear)

In keeping with Prophète's recollection of distinctly challenging urban influences, *Impasse Dignité* is made up of characters whose respective physical dwellings are never on solid ground. In fact, the descriptions of place and lodging in the novel are conceived precisely to create an underlying impression of unease, instability and a sensation of treacherousness with respect to one's sense of place and the future. Not unlike the vulnerable reality of Haiti today as it exists both geographically and economically, the small dirt passageway of Impasse Dignité seems to present itself as a microcosm of the volatility of the country as a whole. Examples of this instability are woven throughout the novel and point not only specifically to physical jeopardy, but to a larger notion of erosion of one's personal life within this fragile setting. The “maison délabrée” (5) in which José's family lives, for example, is rendered even more perilous due to its juxtaposition to a dilapidated water canal which, in effect, causes the family *maisonnette* to be constantly “menacée par la ravine” (5). Actually, never is there a moment in the text when the double threats posed by the canal, its deadly potential overflow and intolerable pollution, subside. Indeed, it is

ironically the negative trajectory of the ravine's evolution that alone offers any sense of alteration within the community.

Rien n'avait changé ces vingt dernières années, rien n'évoluait à part l'érosion de la ravine qui atteindrait bientôt les fragiles maisonnettes et les emporterait. Il n'était question que de quelques pluies ou d'un cyclone, comme il en passe souvent ici à la fin d'été. José était tenaillé par cette échéance, l'évidence du péril et par son impuissance à le conter. (9)

In essence, the ravine of Impasse taunts its inhabitants with a constant foreshadowing of disaster, creating a personified element of potential danger to their physical and psychological well-being:

La ravine était pour José un témoin de l'érosion généralisée de Dignité et de ses habitants. Quelquefois la nuit, il était réveillé par des éboulements. Ce qui était, il n'y avait pas si longtemps, un simple canal était devenu un monstre qui n'arrêtait pas de grossir et accueillait généreusement tous les déchets des familles des environs y compris de la sienne. (130-31)

Equally handicapping within the space descriptions in the novel are the putrid and nauseating smells emanating from the ravine. Yet another marker of societal neglect and increasingly uninhabitable surroundings, the filthy stench renders any personal contact with the ravine repulsive at best and risky at worst. Sara dreams "d'un souteneur riche qui la ferait sortir de cette impasse, de cette ville, de ce pays. Un homme riche avec lequel elle oublierait jusqu'à l'existence de cette ravine qui dégageait nuit et jour une odeur pestilentielle et où se promenaient des porcs en pleine journée" (38). To be sure, throughout the text, forced interaction with the foul water creates a sensation of potential harm leading to a "sentiment d'irréversibilité que tous commençaient à ressentir" (38). Any movement, even a short walk within Impasse's boundaries, is accompanied by the presence of the foul smells which mingle with the more sinister and permanent threat of hunger. José decides one evening during a blackout to venture outside:

Il fut accueilli par la mauvaise odeur de la ravine transportée par le vent de décembre plus frais que d'habitude, il cracha de dégoût et se rendit compte qu'il avait faim. Il s'était habitué à cet état de faim permanent, mais son ventre s'était mis à produire des gargouillis depuis quelque temps, ce qui le gênait beaucoup quand il avait du monde à côté de lui. (72)

Further in the text, the foul sensations become overwhelmingly menacing, with the conditions of Impasse mirroring once again many of the country's universal crippling living conditions:

José eut le sentiment d'être enfermé. Agressé. Toute la misère humaine s'était engouffrée dans cette courte impasse prise dans les serres d'une capitale incontrôlable qui érodait ses habitants corps et âme. Dignité s'agitait à sa façon,

entre le bruit et le silence. C'était un monde flou, un enfer renouvelé tous les matins pour l'un comme pour l'autre, pour chacun d'une manière différente. (89)

Noteworthy and poignantly connected to the bleak physical environmental setting is the single tender familial scene in the novel which takes place between Violette and José. During this moment of interaction, there is no verbal communication, only acknowledgement of the changes of smell for the better in the room. Upon entering the kitchen where his mother is preparing a meager amount of powdered coffee, José takes a seat on a cement block and watches as she prepares the warm liquid: "Le café coulait du tamis en toile et tombait en faisant un bruit mat dans une cafetière en aluminium que José avait toujours connue. L'odeur du café embaumait maintenant la cour" (112). The tragic mantle of silence under which the entire family operates in the novel remains intensely palpable in this particular passage. As José sits with his mother, indeed no words are spoken, with the only break in their psychological separation being provided by the wafting and welcome aroma of the now brewed coffee which "embaumait la cour" (112):

Ils étaient l'un en face de l'autre. Les tasses fumaient. José l'observait. Elle baissait les yeux. Il était en train de réaliser qu'elle avait bien vieilli. Ils ne se disaient rien. Elle était maigre. Il lui ressemblait en tout point. Elle portait toujours son alliance en or de plus en plus déformé, de plus en plus fine. José avala une gorgée de café. Violette aussi. Leur arrivaient l'odeur des latrines et celle de la ravine. Ils ne se levèrent pas pour autant. José avait envie de toucher son visage, de lui dire qu'il l'aimait. Le geste ne vint pas. Les mots ne vinrent pas [...] Le silence leur faisait du bien. Ils savaient tous les deux qu'ils étaient en train de vivre un moment rare, un moment où tout était important, même les odeurs. (113)

Condemned as they are to tolerate a sense of squalor and stench and to a personal identity equal to the negative sense of place/person in which they reside, toward the end of the novel the residents of Impasse nonetheless make optimistic plans for a positive future, for the New Year in 2010 which they believe will bring hope and change to their lives. Jacques promises to set up his cobbler's stand in a more vibrant and economically viable area of the city; Ti Blanc continues the construction of an additional level of his home, all the while dreaming of travel to the States; Violette promises to provide better food for Sara to keep her from roaming the streets at night in a state of constant hunger; Denis makes a vow to save money, smoke less and to try somehow to repair the broken relationship with his children. Clearly then, or so it seems, the New Year will provide many in this corner of Haiti with an opportunity to increase one's sense of self-worth: "C'était une année pour tout recentrer" (184).

Prophète's emphasis on the negative ordinariness of life leading up to the quake's actual strike moment is paramount to understanding her overall intention when crafting the text. Devoting a mere three pages of the two hundred and three-page novel to the actual physicality of the disaster itself, she leaves the

focus where she intended: on the pre-quake realities of Impasse. Purposely truncated, the novel's final passages describing the quake are briefly sketched beginning with José regaining consciousness after the earth has given way under his feet, then looking around to discover something resembling an apocalypse. He makes his way to Daniel's hut to find him and his mother buried by the block wall of their home and no longer alive. Blinding dust and cadavers are everywhere, along with the screams of injured, disoriented people running aimlessly amid the rubble. José finds Lucie alive and together they manage to locate the bodies of Sara and Denis, but not that of José's mother. With José and Lucie slumped together in a state of silence and shock, it is here the novel abruptly ends.

Up to this point, the well-established routines of burden in the narrative have practically lulled the reader into an expectancy of unrelenting negativity, despite the dreams of a few for a better New Year. As such, the unimaginable compounding effect of a cataclysmic disaster from this perspective seems inconceivable. And yet, as I believe Prophète intended, the reader as an outside observer of the novel accepts the catastrophe as just one more episode on the continuum of adversity amid the miserable normalcy for the residents of Impasse.

Pivoting now to the explicit themes put forth in *Aux Frontières de la Soif*, the sexual victimization of young Haitian girls together with the examination of one man's conflicted sexual desires, we see that Kettly Mars's take on the earthquake involves exposing hidden sides of the human persona, including the unacceptable and the unseemly as they collide head on with a tragic disaster. This narrative, like Prophète's, uses the event as a backdrop but does not concentrate on the physicality of the event itself. In so doing, Mars is able to explore and expose broader associative and psychological reverberations of the earthquake in both content and style. Indeed, Mars's choice to describe the edges of the tragedy rather than crafting a novel based solely on the actual physical event is deceptively powerful. As John Walsh notes in an article in the *Journal of Haitian Studies*: "For Mars, literature does not make political use of disaster; as opposed to mediated representations that seek to commemorate events, or make them readable for public consumption; her writings recreate a world that requires a deeper, more intimate reading" (78). Adding to Walsh's thoughts, I propose in this study that by specifically choosing to target underground or peripheral circumstances of the Haitian earthquake disaster, Mars ensures that the reader, the "outsider," is pulled into a very personalized version of the catastrophe on an even more impactful, relatable level.

The timeline for *Aux Frontières de la Soif* is January 2011, exactly one year after the earthquake. Fito Belmar, an architect and writer, currently earns his living by taking on reconstruction consulting projects which bring him in contact with the numerous tent city slums in Port-au-Prince. No longer producing any new writing following the huge success of his first novel, he leads a fairly rhythmic existence, combining a busy Monday through Friday work schedule and nights filled with drinking alongside his middle class,

accomplished friends. He lives, however, a secret life which includes visits to the largest of the Port-au-Prince tent cities, Canaan, which houses over 80,000 people living in utter destitution, with little, if any, disaster aid from the state. Fito's Friday night visits are set up by one of the numerous tent city pimps, Golème Gédéon, himself a victim of abuse as a child who now, at age 37, has created a successful sex trade business in which the financial desperation of Haitian families merges with an underground network of regularly paying clients, including workers from the United Nations, various NGO's, multinational corporations, and government ministers. For Golème, his successful efforts represent :

Un patient travail de maillage qui s'étendait sous l'effet de la demande. Il vendait des services, repérait des clients, faisait son marketing, gardait à jour son carnet d'adresse et de rendez-vous, était persuasif et discret. Il avait même des clients qui venaient de l'étranger. Il se méfiait aussi et avait le nez pour les emmerdes policières. Il vendait des plaisirs spécifiques à des gens particuliers. Un réseau de la déviance au cœur de la cité. A Canaan la chair tendre se vendait au prix de la faim et de la soif. (94)

When analyzing Mars's narrative, it is useful to ask why the author chooses to give such emblematic status in her post quake novel to condoned prostitution, or survival sex, involving children of destitute families who view their offspring as transactional. To be sure, other French women writers have used graphic depictions of cruelty or inhumanity toward children specifically as a defining indication of humanity's ultimate downslide. As a prime example, one need only recall the vividly described images Marguerite Duras gives us throughout her novel, *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, in which she describes children dying from hunger or disease at such a furious rate that they merit only a casual burial in shallow holes in front of the family hut. And even though the plight of the children is not the primary focus of Duras's text, it is nonetheless an effective and telling backdrop which shows the lack of value placed on children's lives and the precariousness of life itself in dire living conditions:

[...] les enfants, eux, naissaient toujours avec acharnement. Il fallait bien qu'il en meure. Car si pendant quelques années seulement, les enfants de la plaine avaient cessé de mourir, la plaine en eût été à ce point infestée que sans doute, faute de pouvoir les nourrir, on les aurait donnés aux chiens, ou peut-être les aurait-on exposés aux abords de la forêt, mais même alors, qui sait, les tigres eux-mêmes auraient peut-être fini par ne plus en vouloir. (118-19)

This rather eerily reasoned description of the status quo, the disregard and callousness on the part of the indigents for their offspring is, of course, Duras's attempt to paint the complete horror and utter hopelessness of the societal situation in 1930's French Indochina. Who, after all, would hand their children over to animals, to predators of any sort, except those trapped within a cycle of desperation, futility and resignation?

Similarly, when imagining Kettly Mars's primary intentions in writing *Aux Frontières de la Soif*, I was struck by the comparable Durasien images with respect to the sacrifice of children. Like Duras, Mars is seemingly propelled by a need to signal to the reader that *all* is terribly wrong in the lives of these people, so much so that their children are expendable, disposable and often sexually sacrificed. I was equally stuck by the borderline pornographic exposure to the problem that the novel's perspective presents. Granted, there is not a fully graphic description of each sexual act in the text, but the burden of the act is keenly prominent and, to my way of thinking, immensely purposeful. By juxtaposing rather ordinary chapters describing Fito's socially acceptable life to those detailing his visits *sous la tente*, the commonly understood code reference term for forced sexual activity, Mars creates a distinct sensation of tension for the reader, a most unwelcome invasion of one's senses, not unlike the act of imposed sexual abuse itself. Consequently, as a reader-voyeur, one therefore wishes for cessation. One wishes for there *not* to be subsequent chapters with new first names of young girls that make up the list of Fito's victims.

One detailed trip to the camp in the early pages of the novel is important for the information it provides on the dialectic of good and evil at play within Fito:

Il venait pour la sixième fois ce soir, il venait toujours un vendredi. Chacune de ses visites était son commencement et sa fin. Après, il émergeait de Canaan exalté, mais inquiet. La poussière blanche du camp couvrant ses chaussures. Brûlant des stigmates de son propre dégoût. Déjà solitaire. Déjà luttant contre ses démons. Déjà sachant la fatalité du retour. (18)

In front of the tent—a flimsy structure of sticks and canvas—we witness just how simply the child barter transaction takes place in this squalid labyrinth orchestrated by Golème, the pimp, and completed by the complicit female adult, often the mother, in charge of the child:

A quelques pas, une femme assise sur un minuscule banc faisait bouillir des spaghettis dans une casserole. La fumée des tisons les enveloppa et épaissit la nuit. L'homme lui glissa quelques mots et elle hocha la tête, sans regarder dans la direction du visiteur. Le guide se tourna vers Fito et lui montra d'un signe de la main le rideau barrant la porte. Fito évita aussi de regarder la femme et, le front moite, se faufila sous le tissu. (19-20)

The portrayal of Fito's victims is, without question, the most powerfully evocative aspect of the novel. Waving a stem of basil leaves with which her mother must have rubbed her to protect her from "des malheurs visibles et invisibles" (21), Mirlène, the sixth victim, "plus ou moins onze ans" (20), is forced to endure Fito's paid visit for a precisely monitored one-hour limit, since, "A Canaan aussi, le temps c'est de l'argent" (21). And while we don't have much of the reaction of the child to the abuse in this particular passage, we do have a short two-page response to what has just occurred in the form of an incantation-like prayer put forth by the mother whose remorseful consent hangs

heavy in the dense, Haitian air. Indeed, the mother's dire needs and her capitulation play perfectly into the strategic plans of Golème "...qui trouvait toujours un père ou une mère aux abois et prêts à sacrifier un enfant ou deux pour nourrir le reste d'une longue famille" (88). The following is just a portion of the mother's sorrowful regret:

Je vais le dire ce soir à Golème quand il reviendra avec l'argent. Je n'en veux plus de son argent. C'est l'argent du diable [...]. J'ai peur qu'il ne me blesse avec son couteau, mais je remets ma vie à Jésus. Lui seul peut me sauver. Personne ne prendra ma défense, Golème leur fait peur aussi. Mais je ne veux plus envoyer Mirline sous la tente. C'est un péché que je commets. Un péché mortel. Je n'en peux plus. Cet argent me brûle les mains [...]. Il me dit que Mirline c'est rien que du business. Qu'elle n'en mourra pas. Il dit qu'il y a des pays où l'on marie les petites filles de dix ans, qu'il a vu ça dans un film. Il me dit plein de choses qui me brouillent la tête. Il fait fuir mon bon ange. Mais ma vérité c'est le regard de Mirline qui m'obsède, ses yeux trop grands qui me regardent jusqu'à l'intérieur. Je le dirai ce soir à Golème. Cette fois je suis décidée. (22-23)

An equally poignant passage curiously placed later in the novel concerns Fito's first sexual foray into the camp, this time with the thoughts of the victim, Ketia, fully exposed as she questions yet another of the carnal encounters she is forced to endure: "Pourquoi tu me touches? Pourquoi tu m'embrasses sur la bouche? Ne me fais pas mal, papy. Tu ne me feras pas mal, dis" (113)? Ketia, we learn, along with her sister, inherited the responsibility of caring for her siblings following what seems to be a fairly common family scenario in the aftermath of the 2010 quake in which parents either died or were injured thus requiring the young girls to prostitute themselves following the quake:

Ketia avait douze ans mais en paraissait moins. Elle n'allait plus à l'école depuis le séisme. Elle ne connaissait pas son père. Sa mère, qui, avant, vendait du manger-cuit au marché Tête-Bœuf, avait perdu sa jambe droite et quatre doigts de la main droite quand un pan de mur s'était effondré sur elle et ses chaudières qu'elle lavait [...]. Ketia et Nadège, son aînée d'un an, mettaient le pain dans la bouche de leurs quatre frères et sœurs. Ketia allait sous la tente depuis deux mois environ. Elle n'avait plus mal dans son corps mais ne comprenait toujours pas un tas de choses. (114)

Ketia fortunately is able to mentally escape her forced sexual sessions by recalling a story told to her by her grandmother in which Viola, her guardian angel, protectively intervenes:

La voix basse et râpée de la vieille loup-garou (sic) s'infiltrait sous la tente et l'entraîna loin de Canaan, dans un voyage d'ombres et de lumières. Elle n'avait plus peur. Viola était son ange gardien et ses petits yeux brillants dans la nuit la guidaient. Quand la main d'un homme se faisait plus lourde sur sa peau, la voix de Viola entraînait dans sa tête et lui contait une histoire étrange, à la mesure de sa soif. (117)

However, it should be noted here that the text's intent is not focused entirely on the tent city victims. On the contrary, a key story line in the novel is woven around the perpetrator himself whose descent into pedophilia and his subsequent change of behavior for the better offer readers a welcome respite from the storm, a bittersweet touch of optimism at the novel's close. Fito's transformation, which leads from his state of degeneration to deliverance, from occasional sexual predator to redeemed, productive citizen, sees him once again set upon the right path. A key figure in this positive progression and the one individual who offers Fito the impetus to change is Tatsumi, a Japanese woman who has recently been given an assignment to cover the rebuilding efforts in Haiti for a newspaper back home. Familiar with each other's professional lives due to regular e-mail correspondence, the two now find themselves charting unknown waters together. Indeed, Tatsumi's arrival in Haiti forces an analysis of their divergent life styles and personal values, as well as sexual compatibility between the two writers. And although Tatsumi never learns of Fito's illicit behavior even as she gets to know him on an intimate level, the end of the novel reveals Fito's personal and reasoned justification for his heretofore aberrant actions. When asked directly by Tatsumi regarding the earthquake, "Quel effet cela te fait de côtoyer tant de...détresse?" (155), Fito responds by including himself among the unwitting and therefore justifiably legitimate victims of the quake's psychological aftermath: "On s'habitue. Soit on s'immerge là-dedans pour aider d'une façon ou d'une autre, soit on fait semblant de ne rien voir, par cynisme ou bien parce qu'on est écrasé par l'impuissance. Mais dans les deux cas, on n'est à l'abri de rien. *Toute la désolation engendre une violence et une corruption qui finissent toujours par nous rattraper et nous frapper de façon inattendue*" (156, emphasis added). As such, from Fito's internal perspective, his deviant actions seem to him an unforeseen, yet natural byproduct of having been exposed to the disaster's violence in the aggregate. Interestingly in this same probing conversation, the specific subject of the Canaan tent city comes up as Tatsumi expresses that she has never visited the famed earthquake refuge, but is curious about its seedy reputation. Hoping that Tatsumi is unaware of his prior visits to the camp for purely carnal reasons, Fito rather uncomfortably attempts to describe the tent city reality for her in the most graphic, yet earnest terms:

Oui, je connais Canaan. J'y suis allé plusieurs fois même. C'est un autre monde, là-bas, Tatsumi, un pays maudit aux frontières de la soif. On y trouve des estropiés, des vieillards à la limite de la déshydratation, des adolescents qui tuent pour du crack, des gens qui prient à longueur de journée, des escrocs qui revendent la même terre spoliée. On vend des enfants à Canaan [...] le corps des petites filles [...] pour une bouchée de pain. (157)

Ironically, Tatsumi is so touched by the wretchedness Fito described at Canaan, that she suggests that he write his comeback novel based on what he witnessed, a work which brings the tent city secrets to the fore and ensures "qu'il pouvait défaire les liens qui le retenaient prisonnier de lui-même" (158):

Tu devrais écrire toute cette douleur, Fito, en faire un livre. La laisser couler de tes mains. C'est par l'écriture que tu te purgeras de l'angoisse que je sens en toi. Dis Canaan, faire vivre ces hommes, ces femmes et ces enfants. Raconte ces petites filles que l'on vend, la prostitution des enfants. Raconte l'innocence violée et l'espoir qui ne veut pas mourir. Sors-les de l'anonymat de leur misère et fais-les entrer dans l'humanité, dans la communauté des hommes [...] tu peux le faire. (158)

As the novel ends, Fito does indeed decide to write the novel of Canaan, entitling it *Aux frontières de la soif*. By deciding to bring forth the camp's hidden miseries into "l'humanité, dans la communauté des hommes," Fito obtains an ultimate level of redemption by putting in to play the personal and societal payback necessary to try and right his previous wrongs. To again reference Junot Díaz, Fito seemingly symbolically has come full circle by linking his personal change to the existential duality of the event and the need to bring the hidden backstory of the disaster to the fore for the community of man to face and resolve: "After all, apocalypses like the Haitian earthquake are not only catastrophes; they are also opportunities: chances for us to see ourselves, to take responsibility for what we see, to change" (51-52).

In conclusion, the subsequent chronicling of a disastrous event is indeed essential once immediate rescue and emergency care needs have been met. As victims and outsiders alike attempt to understand the inexplicable through various means including written interpretation, the telling of the disaster story is paramount. To that end, writers who chronicle disasters in fictional form must decide what constitutes the most effective way to summarize and highlight their version of such a tragic event. Should it be with a focus on the pre, post or the actual occurrence? As this essay has shown, Emmelie Prophète and Kettly Mars specifically chose to describe the before and after earthquake conditions in their native Haiti, stressing them as equally ruinous, or perhaps even more ruinous, than the physical disaster itself. As a result, their personalized accounts of the tragedy succeed in pulling back the curtain on tent city sins and pandemic despair, backstories of seismic proportions on their own that were there all along for everyone to see. Desperate societal conditions in need of exposure are the disaster truths that *Impasse Dignité* and *Aux Frontières de la soif* represent; they are the hidden earthquake realities their authors understood.

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