

May 2014

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Recommended Citation

Villalba, Carolina (2014) "A Newer Noir: Bringing a Classic Genre to the Caribbean," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.

Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol11/iss1/15>

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A Newer Noir: Bringing a Classic Genre to the Caribbean

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Edwidge Danticat, ed. *Haiti Noir*. (Akashic, New York, 2011), 309 pp.

When Akashic Books released *Brooklyn Noir* in 2004, the independent publisher tapped into a widespread cultural fascination with mystery, suspense, and criminality. Since then, Akashic has released dozens of noir collections, set in cities spanning from Cape Cod to Copenhagen, D.C. to Delhi, and Seattle to St. Petersburg. Often major centers of intercultural exchange and social diversity, the locales underscore noir's ability to evoke a strong sense of place by seizing on the moral ambiguities of its setting. They also illustrate the genre's potential for bridging gaps among writers of different generations, cultures, and literary styles. In addition to uniting stories that spotlight the darker corners of major cities worldwide, the numerous volumes in the noir series also create a space for established and budding talents to be read in conversation with one another. However, many of these settings seem chosen not only for the diversity of literary voices who represent them, but also for the ways noir enhances their exoticism as places where ominous events occur.

Enter *Haiti Noir* (2011), which forms the third contribution in the series' Caribbean repertoire, following *Havana Noir* (2007) and *Trinidad Noir* (2008). Taking the noir series to the Caribbean might be considered problematic, since the region has all too often been exoticized in the global imaginary, alternately glamorized as paradisiacal and demonized as dangerously forbidding. Linking the Caribbean to crime or corruption through noir conventions might also contribute to the ways it has been scripted as a dark, unknowable space. Nonetheless, *Haiti Noir* complicates its genre by revealing the layers of meaning that can lurk below the surface of noir. The collection helps capture noir's potential for turning otherness into a simultaneously alluring and sinister site of fascination by locating it within a frequently othered setting. Much of the darkness in the stories emanates from complex characterizations, colluding contrasts, and larger questions about cultural (be)-longing. They also construct a broader, more transnational image of Haiti by locating its cultural identity not only within the Caribbean.

Edited by Edwidge Danticat, *Haiti Noir* consists of eighteen stories, seven of which have been translated from French by Nicole and David Ball. The collection brings together the work of reputable Haitian writers, like Kettly Mars and Louis-Philippe Dalembert, and non-Haitians who have written extensively about the country, like Madison Smartt Bell and Mark Kurlansky. The stories create a rich and complex discussion among anglophone and francophone literary voices from Haiti, the diaspora, and abroad. In addition to representing Haiti as a

transnational space, the diversity of talent included in the anthology also illuminates the complex nature of Haitian life experiences. Many of the stories derive their mystery from the innuendos, rumors, or suspicions that surround the unknowable or unspeakable. In combining noir conventions and Haitian cultural themes, this volume stretches the thematic limits of the genre, empowering it to reflect social realities and explore spiritual mysteries. The collection's emphasis on migration, diaspora, and cultural (be)-longing also suggests that Haiti consists as much of Haitians living abroad as those who remain on the island.

Published almost exactly one year after a massive earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, *Haiti Noir* holds the precarious distinction of reflecting a crucial moment in the country's history. In her introduction, *Noir Indeed*, Danticat explains that she was close to completing the collection when she learned about the earthquake. The event's timing made her question whether the stories she had already anthologized would now be rendered antiquated. In fact, Danticat reveals, rather than overwrite the significance of these pieces, the earthquake lent them a poignant plurality: "[E]ach story is now, on top of everything else, a kind of preservation corner, a snapshot of places that in some cases have become irreparably altered" (15). The stories written before the earthquake capture a country on the brink of cataclysmic rupture and renewal, painting a surviving portrait of a Haiti that will never be as it was again. What enhances the noir quality of these stories, Danticat points out, is that many of them "could still take place in the Haiti of today" (15). Therein lays their lasting literary power and value: the stories depict a country of ambiguous contrasts and thought-provoking contradictions. Read in light of the tragedy, they position Haiti as a question to be answered, a mystery yet to be solved.

Three stories were written about the earthquake: *Odetta*, by Patrick Sylvain; *The Harem*, by Ibi Aanu Zobo; and *The Blue Hill*, by Rodney Saint Eloi. These stories derive their sense of noir from the mysteries that mark grief and loss. They name the unspeakable by describing a geographically and psychically fragmented space where the prospect of starting anew is overwhelming. In these stories, the earthquake becomes the unknowable other, and fear results from the devastating uncertainty the event leaves in its wake. *Odetta*, which opens the collection, captures the ineffable chaos surrounding the disaster through a protagonist rendered speechless by the horrors around her. The author achingly wonders, "Could time even be measured anymore, in this new silent and fractured world?" (19). The center story, *The Harem*, captures the tragedy of suddenly losing the home that one took for granted daily. Its protagonist mourns the brokenness of the landscape as much as he laments losing his three lovers through the disaster. *The Blue Hill*, which closes the text, explores the idea that ruin bolsters resilience, linking it to Haiti's history of resistance in the face of tragedy: "Despair is the only certainty here. If it doesn't kill you, they say, it will

strengthen your veins, your muscles. Despair sticks to your skin; it's your sweat, and the air you breathe. Despair is second nature from which everyone draws the joy of laughter and resilience together..." (305). The mystery in these stories involves the hopes, doubts, and uncertainties of communities in mourning. They thus pluralize what readers might consider noir.

The remaining stories play with noir conventions while also extending the limits of the genre. As Danticat emphasizes, they leave a lasting imprint of places and experiences that can never be recovered, but this spectral aspect is just one way they expand the meaning of what constitutes noir. The term was traditionally linked to cinema after French film critics invoked it to describe a series of American crime films made during the mid-twentieth century. But these famous film noirs actually had literary roots in American detective fiction of earlier decades, like Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) or Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939). Literary noirs typically featured criminal protagonists and centered on illicit events, resulting in tragic or inconclusive endings. Curiously, many of the stories in *Haiti Noir* complicate criminality by linking it to the country's social, political, and demographic divides. Set during the 1994 embargo, M.J. Fievre's *The Rainbow's End* parallels the suspense of its plot, which involves young love turned sinister, with the uncertainty of the political climate in the country. Gossip and hearsay, heightened by generational and class divides, help give the story its dark overtones, and are also linked to both personal and political intrigue. Both Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* and Josaphat-Robert Large's *Rosanna* depict danger and death as the result of deep social schisms in Haiti, where wealth and poverty caustically co-exist. Both stories also highlight the problems faced by *restaveks*, children who have been sold into domestic servitude by parents who cannot afford to raise them. Darkness emanates from the social and political realities that belie the stories' fictional plots.

Other notable stories in the collection elicit their noir quality from nuances of character and an implied peculiarity that plays up the mysteries of otherness. Evelyne Trouillot's *Which One?* uses a deadly competition between mothers hoping to send their children to live in the U.S. as a framing device for a deep character analysis of a Haitian woman longing for a better life for her daughter. Katia D. Ulysse's *The Last Department* illustrates the tension between homeland and diaspora through the story of a mother forced to move to the U.S. with her daughter. Both Trouillot and Ulysse challenge readers' morality by letting them explore the layered motives and implications that sometimes belie criminal behavior. Both writers also locate Haiti transnationally, overlapping the spaces between homeland and diaspora. Marie Ketsia Theodore-Pharel's *Mercy at the Gate* creates mystery not just out of criminal threat, but also out of the threat of otherness that emanates from Haitian *vodou* practices. The foreign (particularly

American) fascination with *vodou* is also satirized in both Nadine Pinede's *Departure Lounge* and Mark Kurlansky's *The Leopard of Ti Morne*.

As Danticat explains in her introduction, in a Haitian context, noir not only means black, but “also refers to any Haitian citizen, regardless of race” (12). The term was intentionally designed by the republic's founders to distinguish between foreigners (“blancs”) and all those fighting for Haitian independence (“noirs”). She addresses the concern of whether it is fair to represent Haiti through an emphasis on its dark or criminal elements, when the country has been alternately overlooked or demonized in the global imagination. Danticat states that such concerns have always been part of Haitian culture, and rather than have darkness scripted onto them by foreign writers who only know Haiti from visits or lore, it is valuable for Haitian writers to gain inspiration from “Haitian life and history and folklore”—in other words, to write the stories themselves (13). Indeed, classifying a text as noir all but declares that its content and conclusion will be less than lighthearted. Nevertheless, this collection derives its noir as much from the historical, political, and social facets that comprise Haiti, as from its treatment of mystery and malfeasance. Rather than further entrenching Haiti in narratives about the Caribbean that emphasize its crime rates, social schisms, or political volatility, the stories in *Haiti Noir* portray the country as a complex, often magical place whose cultural identity transcends national borders. Of the volumes in the series, *Haiti Noir* sets itself apart by blurring the lines between what is noir and what is singularly Haitian. In many ways, the collection reimagines noir in ways that evoke Haiti's own reinventions.