

Book Review

Beckett, Greg. *There is No More Haiti: Between Life and Death in Port-au-Prince*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019, 295 pages.

Carole Therrien
Carleton University

Greg Beckett makes his anthropological intentions very clear in the opening pages of *There is No More Haiti*: it is to tell “a human story, a story about how crisis feels to those who live with it every day” (5), by sharing stories carefully collected and curated over a decade of fieldwork and research, mostly in Haiti at the turn of the twenty-first century. Beckett explores in detail what was meant by one of the interlocutors who brazenly stated there is no more of Haiti, through the eyes and experiences of male interlocutors of varying ages, economic strata, and political acumen. The state of the country and its population’s future is described through a “Haitian account of crisis” (12) and its everyday nature in contemporary life. The book is a meta-narrative: it lunges from crisis to crisis to give readers the discomfort that comes from the ubiquity of crises and explains how one can become naturalized to the existence of ongoing crisis and allow it to become a routine and normative element of one’s life. This passionate, compelling read is faithful to its book jacket: it is a different way of looking at Haiti by accepting how ordinary and insidious the never-ending crisis has become to Haitians, and how economic, environmental, and political instability is persistently being socially reproduced.

In the first chapter, Beckett introduces the reader to an urban forest in the heart of Port-au-Prince, and the accompanying political dynamics in its preservation as a botanical garden, refuge, and food supply for city-dwellers; these lush descriptions of the forest are almost jarring juxtapositions to the usual narratives of the city’s chaotic and dirty neighbourhoods. Beckett describes the many political tensions amongst factions present around and in the forest space; in turn, the multiple conflicts provide an inkling to living with slow-onset and burgeoning crisis. The chapter provides thorough descriptions of the

obstacles faced by rural dwellers migrating to the city seeking better life and opportunities, while facing ongoing racism and rejections in marginalized spaces such as the urban forest. The brewing conflict between those wishing to preserve the forest, migrant squatters and armed gangs securing criminal territory become recurring flashpoints and fights over issues of inclusion versus exclusion.

Beckett continues the foray into what he refers to as “slow crisis” by following a group of urban men taking up space in the informal economy as art dealers, chauffeurs, and tourist guides, “looking for life” (76) known in Creole as *chache lavi*. As migrants from Haiti’s rural areas who thrived during Jean-Claude Duvalier’s administration and Haiti’s tourism heyday from the early 1970s; the same men have been trying to make ends meet since the mid-80s after Haiti’s tourism industry collapse from Western powers’ attestations of links between Haiti and the AIDS epidemic. The author relates stories of these participants in the resulting informal economy, their interdependencies and solidarity among Haitians, the tenuousness of continually combining social relationships with means of survival. Economic crises from currency devaluations and imposed structural changes demanded by foreign investors, along with instability from subsequent coups and changes in provisional governments compound the effects on Haitians.

This is where the ordinariness of crisis in Haiti becomes evident, with the acceptance of fate and cynicism of the future. The search for meaningfulness and value relies on the social reproduction of relations “necessary for daily survival (...) Having good relations with others and having a large network of people is a central part of looking for life in the city” (84). This reinforces the continuous lifecycle of obligations and fulfillment within a formal economy while the formal “normal” economy continues to spit and sputter. Beckett’s emotive and compelling narratives continue through the third and fourth chapters where, like the life of Haitians, the reader is unrelentingly shown what happens in continuums of crises in the first decade of the new millennium and, ironically, in 2004 which coincided with Haiti’s bicentennial.

Two main and interdependent ideas are woven through the two chapters which explain the increasing violence from both police forces and armed gangs: *dézod* (disorder) and *blakawout* (blackout). Class conflict, inequality, and dread of the inevitable 2004 political coup results in unremitting instability in poor neighbourhoods throughout Port-au-Prince. The general social and legal disorder is relentless and all pervasive, deepening social fractures and rupturing any possibility of collective action. Within this disorder are recurrent blackouts

in these communities, and they are a metaphor for the state's ineffectiveness in restoring order. For most Haitians, elite and disenfranchised, the blackouts were also symbolic of their individual lives, their lost "power to control one's body, to do things in the world" (169), requiring a perpetual negotiation between life or death. Beckett nails the figurative coffin shut in his final chapter: a succession of environmental, economic, and political disasters over well beyond the decade exacerbated the decimation from the 2010 earthquake that shook Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas to their cores. This section was the most fascinating to read. Beckett knits the multiple threads of the book's ideas, and ultimately argues that the overwhelming number of social and environmental vulnerabilities contributing to the slaughtering of Haiti were merely precipitated by the 2010 Earthquake which, inevitably, subjected Haitians to administration by international interests, reliance on humanitarian aid and pervasive cycles of disorder, instability and attempts to look for life for generations to come.

In their ethnographies, anthropologists must be true in depicting the realities of their fieldwork participants, and there is no doubt that Beckett does so impeccably. This book is cleverly written, in compelling prose and buttressed with strong contemporary theoretical ideas. Of interest to disaster scholars such as myself, it does not fall into the trope of "natural disasters" and quickly points to the congruence of factors that make naturally occurring hazards much more damaging. The political and economic commentary by his interlocutors is profound and thought-provoking, creating an attachment to the men and their search for easier lives.

There Is No More Haiti stands well in a field that writes much about Haiti and why it cannot function; Beckett successfully conveys that it cannot function the way it used to and requires a radical new approach to allow its inherent resilience in determining its fate. Political and economic scholars would benefit from its reading, as well as social anthropologists and humanitarianism researchers. There are also very interesting elements throughout the book on the role of religiosity, spirituality and Haitian voodoo.

Instructors dipping into the murky waters of disaster anthropology would serve their students well by adding this to course syllabi or reading lists. Additionally, it would be of great interest to scholars such as myself to see Greg Beckett collaborate on a tome that highlights the impact of crisis on the women of Haiti in light of the dearth of literature in this field and in a region is dominated by matriarchal cultures. One can only hope.