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Haiti Three Years On: "When all else has fallen, culture remains"

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Dr Louise Hardwick, Lecturer in French Studies

“Three years after the Haitian earthquake of January 2010, which killed thousands of people and devastated the lives of millions of Haitians, it remains apparent that the reconstruction of Haiti will be a long and difficult process.

Haiti had already been recognised by the UN Human Development Index as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere well before the earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter Scale struck in the afternoon of 12th January 2010. Since that day, the country has become synonymous with sprawling tent cities, violence and foreign aid.

In December 2012, the BBC announced that the **United Nations is launching a £1.3 billion appeal (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-20686142)** to fight a cholera epidemic which has killed almost 8,000 people in Haiti. Before 2010, Cholera had not been recorded in Haiti since the mid-nineteenth century, and it has been repeatedly suggested that the disease was re-introduced to the country by infected UN peacekeepers who arrived after the earthquake.

The severity of Haiti’s current situation is horrific, and when reading contemporary media accounts of such tragic suffering, it is all too easy to equate Haiti with a stream of negative images. Yet to do this is to forget the country’s incredible, and often misunderstood, role in global history.

From 1635, France established Caribbean colonies which rapidly became reliant on an exploitative economic system of slave labour. By 1685, slavery was so entrenched that the ‘Code Noir’ (‘Black Code’) was introduced. Although this was supposedly a code which would regulate the ways that slaves were treated, the Code Noir in fact instituted systematic violence and corporeal punishment, and referred to the slaves as ‘moveable goods’, utterly dehumanizing them. Yet it was through their labour that the Caribbean colonies became extremely lucrative, supplying France with valuable commodities such as sugar, tobacco and rum.

The French Revolution of 1789 set out to change society. At the core of these changes was a belief in the value of universal human rights, as exemplified by the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. News of these declarations of liberty and equality reached the colonies, and in 1791 they inspired a slave rebellion in the Caribbean colony then known as Saint-Domingue.

In 1794, in the grip of an era of paranoia and political disarray known as ‘the Terror’, France abolished slavery in its overseas colonies. However, after the Terror had subsided, in 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte decided to cancel the abolition of 1794 and to reintroduce slavery in the French colonies.

At this, former slaves in Saint-Domingue such as Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines rose up against Napoleon’s armies. In France’s other Caribbean colonies, slave rebellions against the reintroduction of slavery were defeated, but the revolution in Saint-Domingue was successful and the French were vanquished.

Having cast off the shackles of European colonialism, Saint-Domingue symbolically returned to its original Amerindian name of ‘Haiti’, meaning ‘mountainous region’, and the Republic of Haiti declared its independence on 1st January 1804. These events are brilliantly depicted in *The Black Jacobins*, published in 1938 by the Trinidadian author C. L. R. James.

Haiti – the Inspiration for a New Black Attitude: ‘Negritude’

When Haiti became the world’s first black republic, France lost the most prosperous of her Caribbean colonies and other European colonial powers watched with dismay and fear. For this independence, won after over a decade of bloody struggles, provided slaves in other New World colonies with a long-awaited beacon of hope.

In Haiti, independence had been won by black military heroes who had achieved the impossible and defeated the might of Napoleon’s armies. This was a nation of valiant *Nèg mawon*, (‘maroons’, the name given to escaped slaves) and revolutionaries such as Louverture and Dessalines. Over one hundred years later, Louverture’s memory would be joyfully celebrated by the poet and politician Aimé Césaire, from the island of Martinique. In his famous 1939 poem ‘Notebook of a Return to my Native Land’, Césaire sees Haiti as inextricably linked with a new concept he calls ‘Negritude’ (literally, ‘black attitude’), which promoted hope, humanity, and a seismic shift in race relations:

Haiti where Negritude stood up for the first time anddeclared it believed in its own humanity

However , the fledgling nation was subjected to a series of political and economic crises. Haiti struggled to find trading partners, and eventually approached France. This came at a price – in 1825, the French agreed to trade with Haiti but they also imposed a crippling national debt of 150 million gold francs, as compensation for the loss of the jewel in their colonial empire. More recently, the twentieth-century saw the **US invasion and occupation (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/8460185.stm)** of Haiti between 1915-1934 as well as the Duvalier dictatorships, passed from ‘Papa Doc’ to son ‘Baby Doc’ and maintained by a network of vicious armed thugs, the *Tontons macoutes*.

‘When all else has fallen, culture remains’

The day after the earthquake, speaking from the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince, the author Dany Laferrière, still visibly distressed by the events he had just lived through, immediately turned his thoughts to the future and spoke of the strength of the Haitian people, observing: ‘when all else has fallen, culture remains’. It is in this spirit that a thought-provoking anthology of creative writing was created by a team of students and lecturers as part of the 2010 student-led *Birmingham Action for Haiti* initiative. The anthology included poetry and art work by Undergraduate and Postgraduate students, and aimed to promote a deeper awareness of Haitian culture.

Indeed, in the face of such devastation, Haitian artists, writers and musicians all testify to Haiti’s cultural vitality. Some, such as the author Frankétienne, still live in Haiti, while others are working in its diaspora – in New York, Canada and Miami. These diasporic figures have risen to global fame, and include the rap superstar Wyclef Jean, the late painter Basquiat and the celebrated writers Dany Laferrière and Edwige Danticat. In the political sphere, they include Michaëlle Jean, the former Canadian Governor General. Through their cultural and political work, they strive to remind us that we should, indeed we must, look beyond the rubble when we think of Haiti.

Haiti’s national motto, ‘Union creates Strength’, has never sounded more urgent. Haitian cultural figures are playing increasingly politicized roles in an effort to ensure that the fundamental values of independence, dignity, humanity and hope are once more equated with the country. They are attempting to give voice to the human stories of suffering and loss, resilience and courage, which lie behind the catastrophic headlines.

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She is currently working on a research project on Caribbean Literature funded by the European Commission: **www.caribiolit.wordpress.com (http://www.caribiolit.wordpress.com)**

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