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Mark D. Anderson's book *Disaster Writing* is an incisive study of the interaction between natural disasters, literature and political discourse in Latin America from the late nineteenth century through the nineteen eighties. In an interdisciplinary tour de force, Anderson establishes a dialogue across literature, geography, environmental studies, the social sciences and history in his analysis of the political and cultural appropriations of the experience of catastrophe through literature in Mexico, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. Anderson cogently argues that disasters are not merely natural occurrences that can be summarized in simple "factual" accounts because the aftermath and assimilation of the event are inextricably linked to political, social and cultural factors; the natural catastrophe becomes a political disaster through the process of assessing risk and disputing blame and causality. In this way, Anderson's approach is in consonance with the postmodern contention that historical narratives are, despite an appearance of objectivity lodged in evidence, verbal fictions that seek to validate a particular philosophy or ideology of history through a comprehensible story.

Disaster Writing examines instances in which the literary interpretations and definitions of natural disasters acquire political significance: ongoing drought in Brazil's sertão; cyclone San Zenón during Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic; volcanic eruptions and political upheaval in Central America; and Mexico's devastating 1985 earthquake. These four cases reveal the way in which the elaboration of a "disaster narrative" validates or delegitimizes political discourse and serves as the ideological basis for political action.

Anderson's point of departure in his introduction is a historical overview of the symbolic language of man's relationship with nature and the cultural constructs of "disaster" and "nature", from the mythic worldview of pre-Colombian civilizations to Catholic explanations of disaster during the colonial period. Writings about disasters were intended to shore up the authority of those in power, leaving only the oral tradition (for example, that of African slaves) as a space to contest the official textual interpretations of the Spanish and Portuguese. Following independence, however, literature became a platform for voicing a critical perspective, and the experience of disaster

spurred narratives that contextualized catastrophe within specific historical frameworks in order to redefine political discourse.

According to Anderson, disaster is conceived in literature as a rupture with historical progression or as the culmination of historical processes, depending on their nature and the political meaning they are given. Disaster is assigned metaphorical value in order to reshape national identities, redefine concepts of citizenship and construct an understanding of marginalization. He studies two kinds of disasters: long-term, for which the narratives tend to legitimate authority and through repetition become institutionalized (though still subject to revision); and single, sudden events, whose narratives tend to disrupt established orders or define an emergent authority. Anderson posits that literature serves as mediator and it is through narrative that interpretations of disasters become canonized.

Indeed, Anderson's work is at its most compelling when his examples show how disaster literature acts as a catalyst for political transformations, whether through specific policies or discursive formations. Herein lies the innovative aspect of his work, as he establishes that disaster narratives are used to construct the nation, polity or community and support one or another type of political action or policy, not just reflect its culture and society. This is a bold feature of the book and one that makes an interesting contribution to the broader issue of whether representation can ever be more than reflection, whether it can constitute and not simply mirror. In this way, the book calls to mind Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), which maps how the nation is imagined through print culture and then constituted by autochthonous intellectuals along those imagined lines.

The chapter on Brazil is the strongest because it is a clear exposition of the constitutive role of disaster writing. Not only is Anderson's argument convincing for the way in which fiction novels about drought in the northeast and texts such as Euclides Da Cunha's *Os Sertões* (1902) were essential to the conceptualization and articulation of an integrated modern Brazil; he also conveys to the reader that the literary works he cites make up a substantial body of drought narratives. In the late nineteenth century, intellectuals from southern metropolises writing in the traditions of naturalism and environmental determinism, favored literary tropes that represented the northeastern sertão as a security risk to the nascent modern nation. These works, together with the drought narratives of the thirties that shifted away from earlier racialized, moralistic, religious and determinist interpretations, called for government intervention in the region, making disaster an issue of national integration. Indeed, as Anderson demonstrates, these narratives played a crucial role in the official recognition of the vulnerability of the region and in prompting the federal government to solve the problem of drought through development and relief programs. Following a rich analysis of the novels' structure, plot and language, Anderson concludes with an interesting explanation of the way

in which the professionalization of the social sciences in Brazil ultimately displaced literature as a means of assessing risk and guiding political policy.

Likewise, Anderson's chapter on the 1985 earthquake in Mexico makes a convincing case for the way in which intellectuals created what he terms "democracy narratives": testimonial works that celebrated the emergence of civil society during the earthquake's aftermath, challenged the hegemony of the PRI and implicitly supported the opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the 1988 elections. Following the government's negligent handling of the earthquake (whose victims were largely lower income residents of Mexico City) and the spontaneous organization of civilian rescue brigades, official versions of the disaster ceded legitimacy to testimonial narratives that celebrated popular activism and divested the PRI of its validating discourse of the Revolution. It did so not only by revealing failures in the PRI's rescue effort but also by linking the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre and the 1985 earthquake. Here Anderson engages Elena Poniatowska's *Nada, nadie* (1988) with an insightful literary analysis of the language and the recurring popular vocabulary that formed a new symbolic order. By heralding the collective popular subject that emerged from 1985 as the true bearer of the revolutionary ideals, these democracy narratives contributed to the gradual political shift against the PRI while at the same time gaining some concessions (even during the neoliberal, priista presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari) in the form of social programs and aid. By contextualizing the disaster within a broad historical framework and by addressing Mexico's entrenched concept of the "crisis paradigm," Anderson adds to recent studies of the 1985 earthquake, such as Claire Brewster's book *Responding to Crisis in Contemporary Mexico* (2005).

The link between literary representation and political transformation is not underscored to the same extent in the chapters on the Dominican cyclone and volcanic imagery in Central America. In the chapter on the Dominican Republic, Anderson investigates the way in which Trujillo used the 1930 cyclone that hit two weeks into his presidency to rewrite history, casting himself as the remedy for the country's disastrous past and as the founder of a new modern society. The devastation wreaked by the cyclone enabled Trujillo to fashion the country in his vision, renaming cities and streets and embarking on urbanization and reconstruction projects. Moreover, the rhetoric of the persistent state of emergency, perceived "threats" to the nation, the culture of disaster and the metaphor of "cleaning house" expressed through political discourse were used to justify Trujillo's authoritarian regime. Anderson's sources in this chapter are primarily journalistic materials that document Trujillo's use of the hurricane to legitimate his new order.

In contrast to the tightly focused analysis in the preceding cases, the thesis that disaster writing functions as a foundational political narrative for the nation faces a more complicated set of circumstances for volcanoes in Central

America. Here the volcanic eruptions had only a circumscribed physical impact and were geographically scattered across countries with markedly different societies and cultures. Anderson indeed notes that the uses of volcano imagery are inconsistent; for example, it is used to affirm indigenous identity in Guatemala, in El Salvador the FMLN deployed it as an expression of “explosive identities of resistance,” and in Nicaragua the Sandinistas avoided it because it had been utilized by the nationalist oligarchy and Somoza. He does not include, however, the devastating 1972 Managua earthquake, which precipitated the fall of the Somoza regime. Anderson adds a new dimension in this chapter by exploring narratives of psychological trauma of the “disastered subject” living under a repressive regime (“under the volcano”). Instead of centering on disaster writing as an agent of political change, this chapter offers examples of imaginaries, myth-making and competing uses of the metaphor of the volcano in political literature. The overall impression of the chapter is thought-provoking but the multiplicity of literary genres, political orientations and countries makes it somewhat more diffuse than the other cases.

Overall, the comparative approach is simultaneously the book’s strength and a potential challenge. Anderson explores different political uses of disaster writing, as deployed by distinct and even antagonistic social actors, because it allows him to see the constitutive uses of disaster narratives across countries, types of natural catastrophes, political ideologies, historical contexts and literary genres. Thus, the book documents forcefully the import and centrality of disaster writing to national and political discourse, nation-building and movement ideologies. Beyond the broad conclusions, the forte of the work are the local specificities of the disasters that Anderson has thoroughly researched. It is also noteworthy that Anderson expertly bridges the academic gap between Latin American literature in Spanish and Portuguese by integrating his fresh study of an influential body of Brazilian works. Without a doubt, *Disaster Writing* makes invaluable contributions to the burgeoning study of the intersection of literature and the environment, a field that has produced analytic approaches such as ecocriticism and new perspectives on the impact of natural disasters on culture.

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