

# Apocalypse - What Disasters Reveal - *Junot Díaz*

## ONE



Matt Marek

On January 12, 2010 an earthquake struck Haiti. The epicenter of the quake, which registered a moment magnitude of 7.0, was only fifteen miles from the capital, Port-au-Prince. By the time the initial shocks subsided, Port-au-Prince and surrounding urbanizations were in ruins. Schools, hospitals, clinics, prisons collapsed. The electrical and communication grids imploded. The Presidential Palace, the Cathedral, and the National Assembly building—historic symbols of the Haitian patrimony—were severely damaged or destroyed. The headquarters of the UN aid mission was reduced to rubble, killing peacekeepers, aid workers, and the mission chief, Hédi Annabi.

The figures vary, but an estimated 220,000 people were killed in the aftermath of the quake, with hundreds of thousands injured and at least a million—one-tenth of Haiti's population—rendered homeless. According to the Red Cross, three million Haitians were affected. It was the single greatest catastrophe in Haiti's modern history. It was for all intents and purposes an apocalypse.

## TWO

Apocalypse comes to us from the Greek *apocalypsis*, meaning to uncover and unveil. Now, as James Berger reminds us in *After the End*, apocalypse has three meanings. First, it is the actual imagined end of the world, whether in *Revelations* or in Hollywood blockbusters. Second, it comprises the catastrophes, personal or historical, that are said to resemble that imagined final ending—the Chernobyl meltdown or the Holocaust or the March 11 earthquake and tsunami in Japan that killed thousands and critically damaged a nuclear power plant in Fukushima. Finally, it is a disruptive event that provokes revelation. The apocalyptic event, Berger explains, in order to be truly apocalyptic, must in its disruptive moment clarify and illuminate “the true nature of what has been brought to end.” It must be revelatory.

“The apocalypse, then,” per Berger, “is the End, or resembles the end, or explains the end.” Apocalypses of the first, second, and third kinds. The Haiti earthquake was certainly an apocalypse of the second kind, and to those who perished it may even have been an apocalypse of the first kind, but what interests me here is how the Haiti earthquake was also an apocalypse of the third kind, a revelation. This in brief is my intent: to peer into the ruins of Haiti in an attempt to describe what for me the earthquake revealed—about Haiti, our world, and even our future.

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 veils of denials.

Apocalyptic catastrophes don’t just raze cities and drown coastlines; these events, in David Brooks’s words, “wash away the surface of society, the settled way things have been done. They expose the underlying power structures, the injustices, the patterns of corruption and the unacknowledged inequalities.” And, equally important, they allow us insight into the conditions that led to the catastrophe, whether we are talking about Haiti or Japan. (I do believe the tsunami-earthquake that ravaged Sendai this past March will eventually reveal much about our

irresponsible reliance on nuclear power and the sinister collusion between local and international actors that led to the Fukushima Daiichi catastrophe.)

## **Becoming a ruin–reader might not be so bad a thing. It could in fact save your life.**

If, as Roethke writes, “in a dark time, the eye begins to see,” apocalypse is a darkness that gives us light.

But this is not an easy thing to do, this peering into darkness, this ruin-reading. It requires nuance, practice, and no small amount of heart. I cannot, however, endorse it enough. Given the state of our world—in which the very forces that place us in harm’s way often take advantage of the confusion brought by apocalyptic events to extend their power and in the process increase our vulnerability—becoming a ruin-reader might not be so bad a thing. It could in fact save your life.

### **THREE**

So the earthquake that devastated Haiti: what did it reveal?

Well I think it’s safe to say that first and foremost it revealed Haiti.

This might strike some of you as jejune but considering the colossal denial energies (the veil) that keep most third-world countries (and their problems) out of global sightlines, this is no mean feat. For most people Haiti has never been more than a blip on a map, a faint disturbance in the force so far removed that what happened there might as well have been happening on another planet. The earthquake for a while changed that, tore the veil from before planet’s eyes and put before us what we all saw firsthand or on the TV: a Haiti desperate beyond imagining.

If Katrina revealed America’s third world, then the earthquake revealed the third world’s third world. Haiti is by nearly every metric one of the poorest nations on the planet—a mind-blowing 80 percent of the population live in poverty, and 54 percent live in what is called “abject poverty.” Two-thirds of

the workforce have no regular employment, and, for those who do have jobs, wages hover around two dollars a day. We're talking about a country in which half the population lack access to clean water and 60 percent lack even the most basic health-care services, such as immunizations; where malnutrition is among the leading causes of death in children, and, according to UNICEF, 24 percent of five-year-olds suffer stunted growth. As the Haiti Children Project puts it:

Lack of food, hygienic living conditions, clean water and basic healthcare combine with epidemic diarrhea, respiratory infections, malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS to give Haiti among the highest infant, under-five and maternal mortality rates in the western hemisphere.

In Haiti life expectancy hovers at around 60 years as compared to, say, 80 years, in Canada.

Hunger, overpopulation, over-cultivation, and dependence on wood for fuel have strained Haiti's natural resources to the breaking point. Deforestation has rendered vast stretches of the Haitian landscape almost lunar in their desolation. Haiti is eating itself. Fly over my island—Hispaniola, home to Haiti and my native Dominican Republic—as I do two or three times a year, and what you will see will leave you speechless. Where forests covered 60 percent of Haiti in 1923, only two percent is now covered. This relentless deforestation has led to tremendous hardships; it is both caused by and causes poverty. Without forests, 6,000 hectares of arable land erode every year, and Haiti has grown more vulnerable to hurricane-induced mudslides that wipe out farms, roads, bridges, even entire communities. In 2008 four storms caused nearly a billion dollars in damage—15 percent of the gross domestic product—and killed close to a thousand people. The mudslides were so extensive and the cleanup so underfunded that much of that damage is still visible today.

In addition to resource pressures, Haiti struggles with poor infrastructure. Political and social institutions are almost nonexistent, and a deadly confluence of political instability, pervasive corruption, massive poverty, and predation from elites on down to armed drug gangs has unraveled civic

society, leaving the majority of Haitians isolated and at risk. Even before the earthquake, Haiti was reeling—it would not have taken the slightest shove to send it into catastrophe. All this the earthquake revealed.

#### **FOUR**



Nursing school in Port-au-Prince / [AIDG](#)

When confronted with a calamity of the magnitude of the Haitian earthquake, most of us resort to all manners of evasion—averting our eyes, blaming the victim, claiming the whole thing was an act of god—in order to avoid confronting what geographer Neil Smith calls the axiomatic truth of these events: “There’s no such thing as a natural disaster.” In every phase and aspect of a disaster, Smith reminds us, the difference between who

lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus.

In other words disasters don't just happen. They are always made possible by a series of often-invisible societal choices that implicate more than just those being drowned or buried in rubble.

This is why we call them social disasters.

The Asian tsunami of 2004 was a social disaster. The waves were so lethal because the coral reefs that might have protected the vulnerable coasts had been dynamited to facilitate shipping. And the regions that suffered most were those like Nagapattinam, in India, where hotel construction and industrial shrimp farming had already systematically devastated the natural mangrove forests, which are the world's best tsunami-protectors.

## **We must refuse the old stories that tell us to interpret social disasters as natural disasters.**

Hurricane Katrina was a social disaster. Not only in the ruthless economic marginalization of poor African Americans and in the outright abandonment of same during the crisis, but in the Bush administration's decision to sell hundreds of square miles of wetlands to developers, destroying New Orleans's natural defenses. The same administration, according to Smith, gutted "the New Orleans Corps of Engineers budget by 80 percent, thus preventing pumping and levee improvements."

As with the tsunami and Katrina, so too Haiti.

But Haiti is really exemplary in this regard. From the very beginning of its history, right up to the day of the earthquake, Haiti had a lot of help on its long road to ruination. The web of complicity for its engulfment in disaster extends in both time and space.

Whether it was Haiti's early history as a French colony, which artificially inflated the country's black population beyond what the natural bounty of

the land could support and prevented any kind of material progress; whether it was Haiti's status as the first and only nation in the world to overthrow Western chattel slavery, for which it was blockaded (read, further impoverished) by Western powers (thank you Thomas Jefferson) and only really allowed to rejoin the world community by paying an indemnity to all whites who had lost their shirts due to the Haitian revolution, an indemnity Haiti had to borrow from French banks in order to pay, which locked the country in a cycle of debt that it never broke free from; whether it was that chronic indebtedness that left Haiti vulnerable to foreign capitalist interventions—first the French, then the Germans, and finally the Americans, who occupied the nation from 1915 until 1934, installing a puppet president and imposing upon poor Haiti a new constitution more favorable to foreign investment; whether it was the 40 percent of Haiti's income that U.S. officials siphoned away to repay French and U.S. debtors, or the string of diabolical despots who further drove Haiti into ruin and who often ruled with foreign assistance—for example, François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, who received U.S. support for his anti-communist policies; whether it was the 1994 UN embargo that whittled down Haiti's robust assembly workforce from more than 100,000 workers to 17,000, or the lifting of the embargo, which brought with it a poison-pill gift in the form of an IMF-engineered end to Haiti's protective tariffs, which conveniently enough made Haiti the least trade-restrictive nation in the Caribbean and opened the doors to a flood of U.S.-subsidized rice that accelerated the collapse of the farming sector and made a previously self-sufficient country overwhelmingly dependent on foreign rice and therefore vulnerable to increases in global food prices; whether it was the tens of thousands who lost their manufacturing jobs during the blockade and the hundreds of thousands who were thrown off the land by the rice invasion, many of whom ended up in the cities, in the marginal buildings and burgeoning slums that were hit hardest by the earthquake—the world has done its part in demolishing Haiti.

This too is important to remember, and this too the earthquake revealed.

## FIVE

The earthquake revealed our world in other ways. Look closely into the apocalypse of Haiti and you will see that Haiti's problem is not that it is poor and vulnerable—Haiti's problem is that it is poor and vulnerable at a time in our capitalist experiment when the gap between those who got grub and those who don't is not only vast but also rapidly increasing. Said another way, Haiti's nightmarish vulnerability has to be understood as part of a larger trend of *global inequality*.

We are in the age of neoliberal economic integration, of globalization, the magic process that was to deliver the world's poor out of misery and bring untold prosperity to the rest of us. Globalization, of course, did nothing of the sort. Although the Big G was supposed to lift all boats, even a cursory glance at the stats shows that the swell of globalization has had a bad habit of favoring the yachts over rafts by a whole lot. The World Bank reports that in 1960 the per capita GDP of the twenty richest countries was eighteen times greater than that of the twenty poorest. By 1995 that number had reached 37.

In this current era of neoliberal madness, sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse explains, "The least developed countries lag more and more behind and within countries the number of the poor is growing; on the other side of the split screen is the explosive growth of wealth of the hyper-rich." It would be one thing if the rich were getting richer because they are just that much more awesome than we are, but the numbers suggest that the rich may be getting richer in part by squeezing the poor and, increasingly, the middle class. This is a worldwide phenomenon. It is happening at the bottom of the market—in Haiti, for example, where per capita GDP dropped from around \$2,100 in 1980 to \$1,045 in 2009 (2005 U.S. dollars)—and at the top. In the United States, the poorest have gained much less than the wealthy: between 1993 and 2008, the top-1 percent captured 52 percent of total income growth.

# **Apocalypses are not only catastrophes; they are also opportunities: chances for us to see ourselves, to change.**

The world's goodies are basically getting gobbled up by a tiny group of gluttons while the rest of us—by which I mean billions of people—are being deprived of even the crumbs' crumbs. And yet in spite of these stark disparities, the economic powers-that-be continue to insist that what the world needs more of is—wait for it—economic freedom and market-friendly policies, which is to say more inequality!

Pieterse describes our economic moment best:

Overall discrepancies in income and wealth are now vast to the point of being grotesque. The discrepancies in livelihoods across the world are so large that they are without historical precedent and without conceivable justification—economic, moral, or otherwise.

This is what Haiti is both victim and symbol of—this new, rapacious stage of capitalism. A cannibal stage where, in order to power the explosion of the super-rich and the ultra-rich, middle classes are being forced to fail, working classes are being re-proletarianized, and the poorest are being pushed beyond the grim limits of subsistence, into a kind of sepulchral half-life, perfect targets for any “natural disaster” that just happens to wander by. It is, I suspect, not simply an accident of history that the island that gave us the plantation big bang that put our world on the road to this moment in the capitalist project would also be the first to warn us of this zombie stage of capitalism, where entire nations are being rendered through economic alchemy into not-quite alive.

In the old days, a zombie was a figure whose life and work had been captured by magical means. Old zombies were expected to work around the

clock with no relief. The new zombie cannot expect work of any kind—the new zombie just waits around to die.

And this too the earthquake revealed.

## **SIX**

I cannot contemplate the apocalypse of Haiti without asking the question: where is this all leading? Where are the patterns and forces that we have set in motion in our world—the patterns and forces that made Haiti's devastation not only possible but inevitable—delivering us? To what end, to what future, to what fate?

The answer seems to me both obvious and chilling. I suspect that once we have finished ransacking our planet's resources, once we have pushed a couple thousand more species into extinction and exhausted the water table and poisoned everything in sight and exacerbated the atmospheric warming that will finish off the icecaps and drown out our coastlines, once our market operations have parsed the world into the extremes of ultra-rich and not-quite-dead, once the famished billions that our economic systems left behind have in their insatiable hunger finished stripping the biosphere clean, what we will be left with will be a stricken, forlorn desolation, a future out of a sci-fi fever dream where the super-rich will live in walled-up plantations of impossible privilege and the rest of us will wallow in unimaginable extremity, staggering around the waste and being picked off by the hundreds of thousands by “natural disasters”—by “acts of god.” Sounds familiar, don't it?

Isn't that after all the logical conclusion of what we are wreaking? The transformation of our planet into a Haiti? Haiti, you see, is not only the most visible victim of our civilization—Haiti is also a sign of what is to come.

And this too the earthquake revealed.

## SEVEN



A neighborhood in Port-au-Prince after the earthquake / [Logan Abassi, UN Development Programme](#)

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 our disasters? And how can we ever hope to take responsibility for the collective response that will be needed to alleviate the misery? How can we ever hope to change?

Because we must change, we also must refuse the temptation to look away when confronted with disasters. We must refuse the old stories that tell us to interpret social disasters as natural disasters. We must refuse the familiar scripts of victims and rescuers that focus our energies solely on charity instead of systemic change. We must refuse the recovery measures that seek always to further polarize the people and the places they claim to mend. And we must, in all circumstances and with all our strength, resist the attempts of those who helped bring the disaster to use the chaos to their advantage—to tighten their hold on our futures.

We must stare into the ruins—bravely, resolutely—and we must see.  
And then we must act.

Our very lives depend on it.

Will it happen? Will we, despite all our limitations and cruelties, really heed our ruins and pull ourselves out of our descent into apocalypse?

## **Haiti's nightmarish vulnerability has to be understood as part of a larger trend of global inequality.**

Truth be told, I'm not very optimistic. I mean, just look at us. No, I'm not optimistic—but that doesn't mean I don't have hope. Do I contradict myself? Then I contradict myself. I'm from New Jersey: as a writer from out that way once said, "I am large, I contain multitudes."

Yes, I have hope. We humans are a fractious lot, flawed and often diabolical. But, for all our deficiencies, we are still capable of great deeds. Consider the legendary, divinely inspired endurance of the Haitian people. Consider how they have managed to survive everything the world has thrown at them—from slavery to Sarah Palin, who visited last December. Consider the Haitian people's superhuman solidarity in the weeks after the quake. Consider the outpouring of support from Haitians across the planet. Consider the impossible sacrifices the Haitian community has made and continues to make to care for those who were shattered on January 12, 2010.

Consider also my people, the Dominicans. In the modern period, few Caribbean populations have been more hostile to Haitians. We are of course neighbors, but what neighbors! In 1937 the dictator Rafael Trujillo launched a genocidal campaign against Haitians and Haitian Dominicans. Tens of thousands were massacred; tens of thousands more were wounded and driven into Haiti, and in the aftermath of that genocide the relationship between the two countries has never thawed. Contemporary Dominican society in many respects strikes me as profoundly anti-Haitian, and Haitian immigrants to my country experience widespread discrimination, abysmal

labor conditions, constant harassment, mob violence, and summary deportation without due process.

No one, and I mean no one, expected anything from Dominicans after the quake; yet look at what happened: Dominican rescue workers were the first to enter Haiti. They arrived within hours of the quake, and in the crucial first days of the crisis, while the international community was getting its act together, Dominicans shifted into Haiti vital resources that were the difference between life and death for thousands of victims.

In a shocking reversal of decades of toxic enmity, it seemed as if the entire Dominican society mobilized for the relief effort. Dominican hospitals were emptied to receive the wounded, and all elective surgeries were canceled for months. (Imagine if the United States canceled all elective surgeries for a single month in order to help Haiti, what a difference that would have made.) Schools across the political and economic spectrums organized relief drives, and individual citizens delivered caravans of essential materials and personnel in their own vehicles, even as international organizations were claiming that the roads to Port-au-Prince were impassable. The Dominican government transported generators and mobile kitchens and established a field hospital. The Dominican Red Cross was up and running long before anyone else. Dominican communities in New York City, Boston, Providence, and Miami sent supplies and money. This historic shift must have Trujillo rolling in his grave. Sonia Marmolejos, a humble Dominican woman, left her own infant babies at home in order to breastfeed more than twenty Haitian babies whose mothers had either been seriously injured or killed in the earthquake.

Consider Sonia Marmolejos and understand why, despite everything, I still have hope.

## **EIGHT**

“These are dark times, there is no denying.” Thus spake Bill Nighy’s character in the penultimate Harry Potter movie. Sometimes we have to look in our entertainment for truths. And sometimes we have to look in the ruins for hope.

More than a year has passed since the earthquake toppled Haiti, and little on the material front has changed. Port-au-Prince is still in ruins, rubble has not been cleared, and the port is still crippled. More than a million people are still in tent cities, vulnerable to the elements and disease and predatory gangs, and there is no sign that they will be moving out soon. The rebuilding has made many U.S. companies buckets of cash, but so far has done very little for Haitian contractors or laborers. Cholera is spreading through the relief camps, killing more than 4,500 so far, according to the United Nations. In December 2010 Paul Farmer reported that nearly a year after the disaster Haiti had received only 38 percent, or \$732.5 million, of promised donations, excluding debt relief. In the Dominican Republic, threats of violence caused thousands of Haitian immigrants to abandon the Santiago area just weeks before the earthquake's first anniversary. More than a year later, we can say safely that the world has looked away. It has failed to learn the lesson of the apocalypse of Haiti.

## **If anything is certain it is this: there will be more Haitis.**

Never fear though—if anything is certain it is this: there will be more Haitis. Some new catastrophe will strike our poor planet. And for a short while the Eye of Sauron that is the globe's fickle attention span will fall upon this novel misery. More hand wringing will ensue, more obfuscatory narratives will be trotted out, more people will die. Those of us who are committed will help all we can, but most people will turn away. There will be a few, however, who, steeling themselves, will peer into the ruins for the news that we will all eventually need.

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. One day somewhere in the world something terrible will happen, and for once we won't look away. We will reject what Jane Anna and Lewis R. Gordon have described in *Of Divine Warning* as that strange moment following a catastrophe where “in our

aversion to addressing disasters as signs” we refuse “to interpret and take responsibility for the kinds of collective responses that may be needed to alleviate human misery.” One day somewhere in the world something terrible will happen and for once we will heed the ruins. We will begin collectively to take responsibility for the world we’re creating. Call me foolishly utopian, but I sincerely believe this will happen. I do. I just wonder how many millions of people will perish before it does.

### **POSTSCRIPT**

*March 15:* As I revise this essay, I am watching the harrowing images being beamed in from post-earthquake-post-tsunami Japan. Another apocalypse beyond the imagination—but one that might affect us all. The news is reporting that a third explosion has rocked the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant and that there might be a fire in the fourth reactor. The worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl, a nicely combed man is saying. Even if the reactor cores do not melt down, radioactive “releases” into the environment will continue for weeks, perhaps even months. My friends in Tokyo report that the convenience stores that I so love have been emptied and that there are signs that the radiation has already begun to reach that metropolis of 13 million. And finally this, a perfunctory statement from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission: “NRC’s rigorous safety regulations ensure that U.S. nuclear facilities are designed to withstand tsunamis, earthquakes and other hazards.” When pressed for details, NRC spokesman David McIntyre was reported to have said that the commission is not taking reporters’ questions at this point.