

# H-Net Reviews

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**Greg Beckett.** *There Is No More Haiti: Between Life and Death in Port-au-Prince.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. 312 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-30024-8.

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In *There is No More Haiti: Life and Death in Port-au-Prince*, Greg Beckett combines a decade of ethnographic research with a novelist's sensitivity to style to create a deeply empathetic and theoretically expansive portrait of urban life in Haiti between 2002 and 2006. This was a volatile era. At the center is the 2004 coup, when armed gangs, elites, and paramilitaries ended president Jean-Bertrand Aristide's second term by forcing him into exile aboard a US plane. This window also includes the unwinding and repression of democratic organizing, a UN military intervention, explosive unplanned urban growth, and a freefalling economy. Beckett renarrates this period through the lens of the lived realities and intellectual worlds of ordinary people obligated making their way through a seemingly endless succession of extraordinary societal ruptures.

Given that his field work was punctuated by such turbulent events, it is no surprise that Beckett takes crisis very seriously. His choice to make it the organizing concept risks veering into familiar clichés about the inevitability of violence and chaos in Haiti. But Beckett approaches this concept not as a totalizing social explanation but as a "widely shared structure of feeling" that emerged from the specific historical context and worldviews of his interlocutors (p. 8). The motif of crisis reflected the existential claustrophobia of a particular political generation that lived through the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship 1986 and the unsuccessful democratic transition in the 1990s. Beckett's research shows that by the mid-2000s, this generation saw their lives constrained by "never-ending crisis or the end of the world"—which reflected their profound disappointment with the fore-

closure of social and political possibilities that Aristide and the democratic transition had represented (p. 8). He focuses on how his interlocutors experienced crisis intimately as "a kind of ontological insecurity in which people lose autonomy and control over the practices that anchor social life" (p. 170).

The book follows the trajectories of a handful of friends and acquaintances as they navigate ordinary life across this dramatic period. The main interlocutors come from different sides of Haiti's polarized socioeconomic spectrum. The narrative focuses primarily on Beckett's friendship with Manuel. Through Manuel and his colleagues, a circle of guides and fixers connected to Haiti's tourist economy, Beckett illuminates the experience of twentieth-century migrants who left rural life and forged new identities and communities in the urban context. It is Manuel who claims "there is no more Haiti" to voice his experience of social loss and disenfranchisement (p. 6). This storyline is contrasted with a secondary one about a network of elite professionals and intellectuals whose investments in building Haiti's democratic future were hamstrung by their deep distrust of the urban poor. Beckett writes that his outsider status as a white foreign anthropologist somehow facilitated crossing social boundaries and allowed him to construct a narrative juxtaposing the voices of people who cannot, or will not, engage with one another.

These two storylines are woven together thematically across the chapters to compare elites' and non-elites' understandings of core concepts like city, community, democracy, and death. This approach illuminates a vast

gulf in understanding and compassion separating elites from the poor majority they rule over. Across the book, Beckett builds a rather damning argument about how political and economic turmoil is constructed and maintained by various constellations of elite and foreign interests dedicated to protecting existing structures of power. Thankfully, he presents this argument with moral clarity rather than sanctimoniousness, which attests to the empathy and respect he shows for his interlocutors and the problems they face, regardless of their class position.

*There is No More Haiti* takes as its point of departure how rapid urbanization reorganized Haitian society geographically and created new forms of community and identity. The first chapter analyzes the spatial and social dynamics around a forest restoration project in the Martissant neighborhood of Port-au-Prince. There, Beckett establishes Port-au-Prince as both the setting for his narrative and a central dynamic he is analyzing. As rural-to-urban migration in the late twentieth century collapsed the spatial divides that traditionally separated elites and non-elites, the city became a theater where old social tensions were rearticulated through new struggles over urban space. One of his elite friends succinctly describes this relationship: “In the countryside, there is the rural crisis. In Port-au-Prince, there is the political crisis. They are the same thing. They meet here, in the city” (p. 28). Beckett shows how increasing demographic pressure produced land conflicts that mirrored conflicts over the increased political participation of Haiti’s marginalized classes. He demonstrates that in the 1990s and 2000s, anxiety about unchecked urbanization and anxiety about Aristide were twin expressions of traditional elites’ underlying fear of losing status, power, and privilege.

One might assume that rural-to-urban migration means the breakdown of social ties, but in his second chapter, Beckett follows Manuel and his friends in their professional pursuits to show that identity and community in the city are created through a web of mundane social and economic interactions. Repeated transactions as ordinary as buying food from the same vendor or bringing tourists by the same art galleries reflect a form of conduct essential to urban social fabric, what Beckett’s friends describe as *pratik*. This term refers to the moral and ethical world that shapes how people see themselves and locate themselves spatially and socially. Beckett also recounts the fallout that can occur when people fail to recognize or respect these relationships of obligation, and how tapping into this web was a strategy for surviving the era’s reoccurring crises.

The third chapter revisits the theme of class conflict and inequality by following braided threads of dread and anticipation in the run-up to the 2004 coup. Beckett explores how the urban poor’s claims to city land and their claims to political participation represented a dual threat to the country’s traditional elite. He traces this materially—through struggles over access to the Martissant forest—as well as symbolically—through the stories that people tell about history and politics. Across the chapter, he argues that the biggest obstacle to democracy in Haiti is obstinate elites who resist greater political inclusion because it might jeopardize their monopoly over material and social resources. He analyzes how political instability, or *dezòd*, is a game played by competing elites in their quest to acquire or maintain power. Beckett reveals how elites legitimate their continued stranglehold on political power by falling back on thinly veiled racist ideas about a “Haitian mentality” fundamentally incompatible with democracy, or the importance of rule by the most “competent.”

Following the 2004 coup, Port-au-Prince became a theater of extraordinary violence. Assassinations, kidnappings, foreign military attacks on poor neighborhoods, and random shootings all became quotidian. In the fourth chapter, Beckett examines how his friends narrated what it felt like to live in a city haunted by death. Their stories carried different assumptions about who were the true victims and the true perpetrators of violence. For officials and the elites, the agent of chaos was armed gangs from the slums terrorizing decent citizens. For non-elites, it was the repressive arm of the state, which, aided by a UN military intervention, used violence to eliminate popular organizing and reassert elite hegemony. From his friends’ meditations on death and politics in Port-au-Prince, Beckett draws out the concept of *blakawout*, or blackout. The term refers most commonly to the regular loss of electricity that punctuates daily urban life, but Beckett shows how it symbolized broader loss of power. It refers to non-elites’ loss of political power and of the ability to make a living amid chronic instability. *Blakawout* also links together the state’s uneven distribution of resources like electricity with the state’s authority to kill or let live. Beckett argues that the darkness and absence it represents “is how crisis feels like when it happens to you” (p. 170).

In the final chapter, he follows these threads through the ruined landscape of post-earthquake Port-au-Prince. This chapter covers disaster, relief, and the troubled world of international development, themes that have been well documented by earlier accounts of the earth-

quake and its aftermath. But Beckett contextualizes the earthquake within a longer history of disasters in Haiti, including hurricanes and catastrophic flooding. Drawing on critical disaster studies, he argues that all of these seemingly natural disasters are physical manifestations of historically constructed social vulnerabilities.

*There is No More Haiti* offers new intellectual tools for reckoning with the social and political turmoil of the past two decades in Haiti. Beckett joins Erica James and others in building a body of scholarship that illuminates the Aristide period beyond the polarizing figure of Aristide himself. Most importantly, the book provides one of the first studies to emphasize the connection between Haiti's

demographic and spatial reorganization and its twenty-first-century political dynamics. Decades of migration and urbanization have turned local dynamics in Port-au-Prince into a microcosm for enduring social tensions around class, race, and belonging. Their experience of urban transformation gives ordinary people in Port-au-Prince particular insight into the modern Haitian experience. Several critical concepts emerge out of this framework: *pratik*, *dezòd*, *blakawout*, among others. These are valuable for those who want to prioritize Haitian theoretical frameworks when assessing Haitian realities. Overall, the book is a remarkable contribution to Haitian studies, presented with such accessible and beautiful prose that it is suitable both for experts and undergraduates.

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