

Mark D. Anderson *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America*, Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2011. Pp. X + 241. \$22.50 paperback ISBN 978-0-8139-3197-5

In *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America*, Mark D. Anderson, a professor at the University of Georgia, investigates the ways in which disasters are discussed, interpreted, understood and, eventually infused within the metanarrative of the nation. In a thesis that derives creatively from Michel Foucault, Doris Sommer, and Àngel Rama, among others, Anderson argues that the natural forces unleashed by disasters create spaces where people understand the catastrophic events in a way that fits within the preexisting – and also constantly changing – metanarrative of the affected nation-state. The intellectual class (he refers to them as the *ciudad letrada* or simply as the *letrados* in clear reference to Rama) engages in a struggle over control of discourse surrounding the remembrance of the disaster by imbuing the memory of it with a symbology that most closely relates the goals of their particular political projects. Critical to the construction of this discourse is the ways in which vulnerability and risk are discussed by these *letrados* and who is discursively assigned blame for the unequal distribution of risk that left people in danger. In short order, the reader understands how politically charged this process of remembrance is, as it can be used to legitimize either the ruling government or the opposition.

The book's logical division is between disasters as either single (chapters one and four) or recurring events (chapters two and three). Single events tend to be portrayed more often as turning points in the history of the nation as, for example, the Dominican Republic and the San Zenón hurricane of 1930. Anderson argues that the *letrados* who supported Trujillo used the hurricane to mold a metanarrative of the nation as weak and disaster-ridden and whose only salvation was the strong arm of Trujillo, thus, justifying the repression of the regime, by arguing that it was a necessary effort to minimize the risk and vulnerability of the nation by modernization. Trujillo's *ciudad letrada* was so successful that, even after his assassination, Dominican history is still viewed as part of this succession of disasters. However, perception over Trujillo himself has changed, with him now seen not as a savior, but rather as yet another disaster to befall the country. The other major single event discussed in this book is the 1985 earthquake that struck Mexico City, the focus of chapter four. Contrary to what occurred in the Dominican Republic, Anderson argues that the opponents of the ruling party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), constructed a narrative that juxtaposed the failed response to the catastrophe of the government, with the response of an awakened civil society; thereby denigrating the government. Further, Anderson argues that this reemergent civil society acted and was viewed as the unstoppable culmination of various moments in Mexican history that were usurped – especially 1910 Mexican Revolution- or repressed – the Student Protests of 1968- by the PRI.

Anderson proposes that unlike single disasters, which are moments of climax in the narrative of the nation-state, recurring disasters themselves become markers of identity through repetition. In chapter two, the author focuses on Brazil and on the droughts of the northeast region, arguing that the creation of identity of the northeasterner is based upon the repetition by the *letrados* of the discourse of the causes and effects of regularly occurring droughts. Through constant repetition, these visions of droughts reflected a discourse that perpetually labeled the region as a dangerous disaster zone and its residents as dangerous themselves. According to Anderson the *sertanejo* became a symbol of potential threats because mass migration created chaos and conditions for criminality, banditry, and racial degeneracy. This trope became so strong that, as he points out, “[t]he only real points of divergence are where the governmental response went wrong and what role the church played in the disaster” (78). Like the single disasters described in chapters one and four, the drought and, more specifically, the underdevelopment that left individuals vulnerable to the risk of drought, became potent fodder for political construction of blame upon a previous regime, thereby creating legitimacy for the current regimes. Chapter three also relates the experiences of recurring natural disasters as a marker of identity: that of volcanos in Central America (focusing on Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador). Yet, unlike his other chapters, disaster does not play a direct role in this chapter, rather, he explores the symbolism of the active volcano that has not erupted but has the potential to do so. Nonetheless, as with all symbols, Anderson suggests that the meaning behind these volcanic threats was not inherent. That is, symbolic interpretations varied; through the years the volcano became a symbol of potential disaster of the nation-building project from the point of view of the wealthy, but also as a symbol of potential revolution and re-conquest by the colonized.

This book is fundamentally a study of cultural responses to disasters, thus, although Anderson privileges literary works, he also uses a wide variety of other archival sources to demonstrate the power of these disastrous tropes. Consequently, his study makes use of *crônicas*, political manifestos and iconography of the nation-state such as the coat of arms, and even urban planning to demonstrate the prominence of these catastrophic tropes amongst the *letrados*. The breadth of sources used creates a broader sense of the power of the deployment of canonized discourse. Therefore along with literature, these archival/historical sources influenced and were influenced by the works of other *letrados* who engaged in a debate over risk and assignment of blame in their respective situations.

Critically, Anderson exposes the political debates inherent in the creation and legitimation of political projects within the national metanarrative, which makes his book beneficial for scholars seeking a complementary text to analyze either the ways in which crisis are established and discussed, or to critically view how history is a creation of intellectual interpretation and discourse. As each chapter is a case study, they can be read apart or as a complement with other texts. The chapter on Brazil in particular is effective in showcasing how crisis may at times be an effect of tautology that influences people's conceptions of their national/regional identity. In this way this book joins the current discussions in cultural studies of the relationship between the local vs. global for the construction of national identities.

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