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*A Wedding in Haiti*, a travelogue/“US-moire” is as much about Julia Álvarez, the Dominican American writer and her family as it is about her young Haitian friend, Piti, and his family in pre- and post-earthquake Haiti. As she says in the opening pages about the narrative that follows, the opportunity to travel to Haiti allowed her to discover her “neighbor country who was and still is ‘the sister [she] hardly knew’” (n.p.). The ensuing pages take the reader through the sometimes difficult and painful, often times funny, always revealing and poignant process of Álvarez getting to know and embrace her estranged sibling.

The text is comprised of a series of vignettes, perhaps taken from her journal entries during her travels that detail she and her husband, Bill’s journey from Vermont where they live to Santiago, Dominican Republic where her parents who suffer from Alzheimer’s disease live, to a town outside of Bassin Bleu in Haiti where Piti and Eseline, his fiancé, with their baby girl, Loude Sendjika, nicknamed Ludy by Álvarez, in attendance, are to be married. The reader learns that they make the journey because several years before (“circa 2001” (p.3)), Álvarez made a promise to the young man whom she and Bill had met and befriended when he was just a boy and who worked for them at the time, that when he got married she would attend the wedding. Several years later in 2009 Piti calls her home in Vermont from Haiti to invite her to his marriage ceremony.

Although the narrative is linear there is a striking and persistent tension that varies between a push and pull, backward and forward movement, paralleling or doubling throughout the text. Álvarez sets up this tension from the beginning when she calls Haiti the sister she never knew. She continues in different ways at different times both in the content and the form of the text to reinforce, but also trouble the sense of familial connection between not just the countries but their inhabitants. For example, the narrative swings between stories of her parents’ younger lives together and their current state of mental and physical decay (pp. 18-25), there are short history lessons about the complex relationship between Haiti and the D.R. sprinkled throughout the text, upon her return to the D.R. she compares the dark-skinned
people (perhaps Haitians, she wonders) doing the hard work in the back of a cassava bread-making operation to the lighter skinned workers up front (p. 124). These are just a few examples. There is also the haunting sense that the author is marking a “time before” and a “time after” in the book’s form. This is achieved partly through the division of the book into two sections that are marked by a seemingly hand-drawn map of Haiti and the D.R. that span two pages, complete with the route and stops that Álvarez and her fellow travelers made during their first journey across the border pre-earthquake and the route they take during their second trip post-earthquake. The arrows that point out different spots on the map actually look penciled in, enhancing the intimate feel of the text.

The work is painfully honest, perhaps exposing the author to criticism. For example, when she relates Bill’s comment that the passengers traveling with them are not going to protest the decision of the guy who is giving them a ride home, the reader may read into the remark evidence of all-too-familiar trope of the white male exerting his power over the indebted subaltern. While this may, indeed, be a valid reading of his words, his words and actions before and after that moment reveal a human being with his own foibles, fears and ego who goes above and beyond to protect those whom he obviously considers part of his family. This is made most clear when he insists on visiting Port-au-Prince after the earthquake so that Piti can see it because it is part of his country, but also that he and his wife be there to support him when he does. By now, the reader who has come to know Bill through his wife, understands that it is because he wants to support Piti and share the experience with him as someone who is an important part of his life (pp. 158 and 280).

Perhaps because the text is so revealing that the reader may come away wondering what Álvarez leaves out. After all she is a storyteller and the work of weaving an effective and entertaining story is deciding what to include and what to omit. But because she is such an effective storyteller the reader may forget this fact—until she reminds him or her, reflecting on the stories she and her fellow travelers will tell. She asks, “What will the rest of us edit out? How to convey what we have seen? One thing is certain. Like the Ancient Mariner we will feel compelled to tell the story, over and over. As a way to understand what happened to us” (pp. 128-129). Because the text reads like a journal or scrapbook of memories from her travels (partly because of the “hand-drawn map and the inclusion of personal photos”), with her conversations and emotions so vividly relayed, this reminder adds yet another layer to the back and forth or doubling that threads its way through the work. Whereas until now the couples involved in the exchange have been Álvarez and her husband, her parents, Piti and Eseline, the D.R. and Haiti and their populations, now the reader—presumably abroad in an English-speaking
country—is also drawn in.

The memoire is a triumph in the way that it forces those who think they know Haiti to see it through someone who is discovering it for the first time’s eyes. The text is enhanced by the abundance of photos that Álvarez snapped during both trips. But there is an added surprise for the reader who digs a little deeper. As Álvarez explains on her website, she was disappointed when she found out that the photos would be printed in black and white. Therefore, in order to allow the reader to get a better sense of what she describes (including a red dress that she spots being sold by a vendor on the street), she has posted all of the photos in color. In addition, her husband and stepdaughter produced a compilation of Piti and his band’s music, which is for sale through the site and at Álvarez’s speaking engagement with all of the proceeds going to Piti.

The title, A Wedding in Haiti, is deceptively simple, for this text is much more than a recounting of a trip across a border to a neighboring country. It is a story of transformation, mind and body, as Álvarez remarks (p. 108, p. 280). The reader comes away with the sense that Haiti will stay with Álvarez and her husband for a long time. The stories that she weaves will stay with the reader for a very long time as well.

Note

1 In an interview with Mark Kurlansky she talks about not wanting to call the book a “ME-moir…but an US-moir, a story about many of us”, but the publishers did not think that readers would recognize it as a genre. Author One-on-One: Julia Álvarez and Mark Kurlansky. Amazon.com. <http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html/?docId=1000799231>