VOLCANO VERSES

Horward A. Fergus

Analysis by Angelo Monaco

Narrative Poem, Lyric, Elegy

The poetic collection *Volcano Verses* (2003) by Howard Fergus was inspired by the impact of the 1995 Soufrière Hills volcanic eruptions in Montserrat. The poems investigate the themes of human vulnerability and volcanic agency while critiquing British colonial indifference. Fergus employs irony, oral rhythms, and apocalyptic imagery to represent community resilience and denounce neocolonial pressures.

Year of Publication	2003
Publication Place	Leeds
Editor	Peepal Tree Press
Entity	Soufrière Hills Volcano eruption

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption Soufrière Hills Volcano eruption

REAL EVENT

Time	1995-1997 [1995-1997]
Location	South Soufrière Hills Montserrat (UK)
Coordinates	16.708293, -62.179089
Impacted Areas	Montserrat island, especially the southern area
Base/Complex	Lesser Antilles Volcanic Arc

Typology

Effusive

“The Soufrière Hills is a Peléen-type volcano with andesitic magmas of relatively narrow compositional range (58—64 wt% SiO2). Lava domes and pyroclastic flows are the typical eruption products.” (Robertson, Haspinal, Herd, Norton, Sparks and Young 2000, 1621)

Explosive

“Major pyroclastic flows into Plymouth preceded a remarkable period of 12 repetitive vulcanian explosions between 3 and 12 August. These explosions generated eruption columns up to 15 km in height and column-collapse pumice flows into all the valleys radiating from the volcano. They also excavated a large vent over the Gages area, on the northwest side of the dome.” (Robertson, Haspinal, Herd, Norton, Sparks and Young 2000, 1628-29)

Volcano/Eruption Typology

Stratovolcano

See Global Volcanism Program 2023

Anthropization Level

Towns

“Phreatic explosions became larger during August, and on 21 August 1995 the first of several large explosions produced a cold base surge, which blanketed Plymouth and resulted in total darkness for ca. 15 min. This event prompted the spontaneous evacuation of Plymouth, which later became an official relocation, lasting two weeks.” (Robertson, Haspinal, Herd, Norton, Sparks and Young 2000, 1623)

Villages

"Collapse of ca. 5 X 106 m3 from the dome on 25 June 1997 led to sustained pyroclastic flows, which reached ca. 6.5 km to the east down the Mosquito Ghaut. These flows reached to within 50 m of the terminal buildings at Bramble Airport and devastated central and eastern villages, causing 19 deaths and extensive property damage." (Robertson, Haspinal, Herd, Norton, Sparks and Young 2000, 1628)

Facilities

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Ecological Impacts

Physical Landscape Changes

Landscapes changes “Deposition from pyroclastic flows entering the sea since 12 May 1996 has built a delta that extended the east coast of Montserrat about 600 m offshore from the Tar River valley. A second delta started forming in the vicinity of the White River valley in September and October of 1997 when the first pyroclastic flows reached the sea along the southwest coast of Montserrat. A large proportion of material for this delta was derived from the voluminous Boxing Day eruption of 26 December 1997, when both pyroclastic flows and debris avalanches were generated and flowed into the sea” (Hart, Carey, Sigurdsson, Sparks, and Robertson 2004, pp. 599-600)

Social Impacts

Relocation

Relocation “The Soufrière Hills volcano (SHV), located in the south of the Montserrat, became active in 1995 following a long period (estimated 400 years) of quiescence (Young et al. 1998). This prompted an evacuation of the islands’ capital city, Plymouth (located 4 km from the volcano summit; Figure 2), and several nearby towns and villages. Following another intense phase of volcanic activity in 1997, many displaced Montserratians accepted a migration package to the UK and elsewhere in the Caribbean. A population of over 10,500 was reduced to just 2,850 (the population has since risen to 4,922 [2011 census]).” (Hicks and Few 2015, 2)

Deaths

“On the 25th June 1997, a series of pyroclastic flows destroyed settlements and infrastructure (including the airport in the East) from Trants to Dyers and killed 19 people” (Hicks and Few 2015, 5)

Poverty

“Our analysis of the workshop and key informant data indicates that those most disadvantaged by the lasting impacts of the volcanic crisis were/are: evacuees in long-term shelter accommodation; poorer non-migrants who resettled in the north of Montserrat and assisted passage migrants to the UK.” (Hicks and Few 2015, 6)

Destruction Of Facilities

“Most of the administrative, commercial and industrial facilities were destroyed or rendered inaccessible, as were the airport, harbour and prime agricultural land.” (Kokelaar 2002, 1)

Volcanic eruption Soufrière Hills Volcano eruption

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1995-1997 [1995-1997]
Location	South Soufrière Hills Montserrat (UK)
Coordinates	16.709296, -62.179011
Impacted Areas	Montserrat island, especially the southern area
Emphasis Phase	Post-disaster (consequences)
Base/Complex	Lesser Antilles Volcanic Arc
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced

Typology	Emission Of Lava
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Stratovolcano
Anthropization Level	Towns, Villages
Ecological Impacts	Destruction Of Plants
Social Impacts	Deaths, Injuries, Poverty, Destruction Of Goods/Commodities, Relocation

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	We/us
Age	Unspecified
Gender	Male And Female
Native Place	Montserrat
Nationality	Montserrat (uk)
Reactions	Fear, Anxiety, Apprehension, Acceptance

Reactions

Name	We
Age	Unspecified
Gender	Male And Female
Native Place	Montserrat
Nationality	Montserrat (uk)

Reactions	Solidarity · Cooperation · Fight For Survival

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Humans
Reactions	Prayer · Adaptation

Affects/Reactions

Name	Humans
Reactions	Cooperation · Solidarity

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	“Calamity” (Fergus 2003, 16) · “Fear” (15; 18; 45) · Fire” (23; 44) · “Anger” (29) · “Pray” (29) · “Apocalypse” (29) · “Paradise” (27, 39, 45) · "Plight” (30) · “Evacuation” (31) · “Hell” (45)
Metaphors	"volcano resurrection" (Fergus 2003, 15) "With a puff and a blow Soufriere opened up / big craters in the economy, currency in flames / but new occupations fall out / on the volatile market" (17) "As the sun sets tonight, / Caw Hill Soufriere sends up / columns of incense / to make a tabernacle of praise; / geysers are hot for God / and crafters glorify Him / in a loud voice, grateful / for power to try Tar River / and Long Ground by fire / tamper "This once loquacious little town / is now forever silent / or on a long fast for speech; / no more hallucinatory snores / no love's loud ecstasy / no pulse. Plymouth is comatose / or dead" (22) “Will it ride on ash-grey / horses or in chariots of fire? (29) "the volcano dances to its own music" (44)
Similes	“Waiting for the spill of the anger / of the mountain is like waiting for a second / coming” (Fergus 2003, 29) “A tasty decoration / like a candle on a cake” (34)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Apocalypse · Hell · Fireworks
Syntax	Parataxis
Punctuation	No Peculiarities
Morphology	Preference For Verbs Adverbs

Postcolonial Disaster, human vulnerability and volcanic agency in *Volcano Verses* by Howard Fergus (2003)

The island of Montserrat is a British Overseas Territory in the Eastern Caribbean. Since the early seventeenth century, the island has been inhabited due to the arrival of English colonial settlers and Irish indentured servants who established a plantation economy reliant on the labour of West African slaves. The island has remained under British control and is known for its serene and understated atmosphere. Recently, it has become a desirable destination for residential tourism, particularly attracting American expatriates seeking a calm and stable place to retire in the Caribbean. On July 18, 1995, the once-dormant Soufrière Hills volcano on the southern part of the island became active, leading to eruptions that devastated Plymouth, the capital city of Montserrat. Between 1995 and 2000, approximately two-thirds of the island's population was compelled to leave, predominantly relocating to the United Kingdom, which resulted in the number of residents dropping to fewer than 1,200 by 1997. The volcanic eruptions continue to impact the area around Plymouth, including its docks, as well as the eastern side of the island, where the airport was buried by volcanic flows on February 11, 2010. Nonetheless, as Jonathan Skinner observes, the island is seeing the emergence of a new form of tourism—dark tourism—particularly in the wake of the eruptions that covered Plymouth. Tourists thus walk through the ruined streets of the former capital city, taking pictures of "the sublime nature of the abandoned and ruined urban space" (2018, 9). According to Montserratian author and historian Howard Archibald Fergus, the fascination with the impact of the volcanic eruptions has sparked a "new ferment" (Fergus 2003, 9) in the cultural representation of the disaster. In this context, Fergus's poetry exemplifies this creative imagination, highlighting how these eruptions confront human vulnerability and acknowledge nonhuman agency, all while promoting a postcolonial critical perspective.

In *Volcano Verses* (2003), Fergus addresses the ecological consequences and emotional distress resulting from the eruptions of the Soufrière Volcano Hills, which devastated Montserrat, particularly during the latter half of the 1990s. While the volcano's eruption may have created an economic opportunity through dark tourism, its literary impacts arise from the necessity to address the wounds left by the disaster. As Fergus observes in the preface to his collection of poems, the eruption of the Soufrière Volcano Hills led to a condition of "national crisis" (9), causing "mass migration scattering over half of the population of the 39.5 square mile island all around the world; the habitable place shrank by two-thirds and the economy collapsed" (9). In this respect, the poems collected in *Volcano Verses* offer a lyric meditation of the enduring impact of the eruptions that occurred between 1995 and 1997. They illuminate the psychological repercussions of the eruptions, as well as the socio-economic avenues through which the volcano, with its contrasting aspects of beauty and ugliness, impinges on the lives of the island's inhabitants. In other words, Fergus's poems resonate with what Anthony Carrigan has termed "postcolonial disaster studies" for the ways they favour a productive exchange between postcolonialism and disaster studies. Postcolonial disasters, whether social, economic or natural, as the eruptions in Montserrat, "are not simply 'problems' to be 'solved;' rather, they are compound processes that demand attention to systemic factors, colonial histories, and—no less importantly—forms of creative response" (Carrigan 2015, 133).

However, apart from the traumatic aftermath of the eruption, Fergus aims to heighten awareness of communal consciousness on the island through a creative endeavour that Skinner refers to as "literary marooning" (2011, 67). The term "maroon" is usually employed to describe the practice whereby Maroons—escaped slaves—established communities in isolated areas, such as hidden hills, mountains, and swamps, served as sanctuaries from which various efforts for their liberation were initiated. In this way, maroons fostered a celebration of nature and wilderness that echoed a poetry of resistance against the suppression of these communities' voices. Along these lines, we might argue that Fergus's poems engage with the local community in the aftermath of catastrophic events like Hurricane Hugo (1989) and the volcanic eruptions of the 1990s. They aim to foster a "sense of intersubjectivity" (82) rooted in the desire to advocate for a postcolonial Montserrat, "an island free from British rule, where its inhabitants are fully liberated in political, social, and psychological terms" (81). On the one hand, thus, Fergus's poetry pays homage to the victims of this natural disaster. By using an elegiac language, the poet laments the "human drama" (Fergus 2003, 9) that unfolds on the island. On the other hand, his poems reflect a distinct postcolonial awareness that aims to express the

perspectives of the island's residents and their responses to the disaster, presenting them in a manner that contrasts with the portrayal of traditionally oppressed individuals.

In poetic terms, Fergus's poems evoke the political satire characteristic of Caribbean poetry, reminiscent of the calypso tradition popularised by the Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite (1930-2020). As a poetic form, calypsos originated in the initial forms of oral expression brought to the plantation fields by enslaved Africans, including songs, folktales, religious chants, and ritual practices. Clearly, calypso music is part of the rich tapestry of Caribbean oral tradition, where the impact of the African diaspora has been particularly profound. As such, calypsos can be viewed as a folklore style rooted in African heritage, showcasing a unique African sensibility through the interplay of music, dance, and oral storytelling. In this respect, calypsos serve as a means of artistic resistance to exploitation and oppression, becoming tools of what Brathwaite sees as "total expression" (Brathwaite 1984, 18).

Similarly, Fergus intertwines irony with elegy, blending visuals of catastrophe with aspirations for recovery. The lyrical nature of the poems is clearly highlighted by the frequent use of the word "fear," which reflects the anxiety felt by the island's residents. In "Warning Shots", for instance, the poet explores how human vulnerability is heightened by scientists' alerts regarding the awakened volcano. Consequently, the volcano is imbued with a sense of agency. It is likened to a "thief of midnight" whose "mysterious sound" (Fergus 2003, 15) has the power to disturb the island's serene calm. The poem "Volcano Watch" evokes feelings of fear and vulnerability as it reflects on the aftermath of the eruption. Fergus uses scientific terminology, including phrases like "magma and phreatic thoughts", to illustrate the eruption's complexities, which intertwine with human anxieties as they "fly in the cloud of our fears" (18). The poem portrays local residents as "brothers and sisters in calamity" (Fergus 2003, 16). Moreover, the poet expresses sorrow over the absence of a safe haven for animals, such as cats, dogs and sheep. This narrative demonstrates how recounting disasters within a postcolonial framework reveals "responsive insights into post-disaster adaptation and community solidarity" (Carrigan 2015, 133). Thus, "Volcano Watch" offers a critical viewpoint from a postcolonial lens, emphasising the economic ramifications of the eruption and its effects on the island's economy:

With a puff and a blow Soufriere opened up

big craters in the economy, currency in flames

but new occupations fall out

on the volatile market. (Fergus 2003, 17)

This excerpt illustrates how a natural disaster leads to social turmoil, as the crater in question triggers an economic crisis characterised by inflation and devaluation. The word "fear" as an emblem of human vulnerability also appears in the poem "Update: No Significant Change". Here, Fergus underlines that the island is a "still paradise" (45), depending on the motherland for help and recovery:

[…] We lean on England's cold

shoulder to weather the rocks.

We slip and slide sometimes fall

Through the cracks but it is still paradise

And our mother is nice. (45)

While Montserrat is hot for the effects of the eruption, the adjective “cold” related to the motherland implies indifference and emotional distance to help in times of danger and uncertainty. As we can infer from these lines, irony and elegiac language abound in the poems. In terms of style, the lack of proper punctuation, especially commas, and the frequent enjambments can be said to reproduce and reflect the oral traditions of Caribbean culture that try to resist forms of colonial assimilation. While Fergus avoids using jargon, the poems are intended for a local audience in order to shape a kind of cultural memory. The mentions of England may indicate concerns about potential new colonial pressures on the island. As Skinner argues, the objective of maroon poems, such as those written by Fergus, is to establish a sense of distance and satire to counter any future efforts “to negotiate greater influence over the internal economy and to restrict off-shore banking practices” (2011, 69).

For these reasons, the poems collected in *Volcano Verses* serve as an elegiac and lyrical contemplation of a “beloved island” that symbolically oscillates between life and death, water and fire, heaven and hell. The poems feature vivid natural imagery that portrays the volcanic landscape as a dynamic force, sharply contrasting with the fear that drives human emotion. In the poem “Beloved Island”, for instance, Fergus relies on God’s sense of care and the “granite authority” of the mountain to depict a place beset by death, “a heady mix of joy and discomfort” (Fergus 2003, 36). Fergus’s poems are rich with oxymorons, reflecting what we identify as a postcolonial awareness that seeks to amplify the voices of marginalised individuals and highlight the empowering role of nature in resisting colonial oppression and human attempts to dominate the natural world. The poem also evokes Brathwaite’s conceptualisation of calypsos as the mixture of hell and haven contributes to the sense of totality. As Fergus writes,

Montserrat nice

Still paradise

In the imagination

Of poets and calypsonians

In search of life

In painless rhymes (39; original emphasis)

The image of a “still paradise” inevitably recalls the noise of the eruption, its sound creating chaos and disaster. In another poem, “Sideshow”, Fergus draws a parallel between a TW show and the dramatic performance of the volcano:

It was a moving picture

in the waning light,

a bid to steal the focus

from the fires of Soufriere

misting like a Ganja sacrifice

and the smoking of a prayer (34)

These lines appear to capture a deep moment of natural and spiritual intersection—volcanic activity from Soufrière intertwining with ritualistic or meditative imagery, particularly influenced by Caribbean cultural elements such as ganja and sacrificial smoke.

References to the spiritual force of the volcano are clear in “Second Coming”. Here, Fergus clearly draws on William Butler Yeats’s famous “The Second Coming” (1920). The poem encapsulates Yeats’s profound concerns regarding the social and political turmoil that followed World War I and the 1917 Russian Revolution. It is characterised by its mystical, apocalyptic, and symbolic nature, delving into themes of historical cycles, the disintegration of civilisation, and spiritual evolution. In a similar vein, Fergus captures the sense of unease before the image of a mountain looming ominously before its collapse:

Waiting for the spill of the anger

of the mountain is like waiting for a second

coming. Come it must, but no one, not the mountain

knows the hour of dome collapse, the magic moment

of apocalypse. (29)

Similar to Yeats’s poem, a nightmarish apocalyptic vision unfolds, where humanity has relinquished control over reality and finds itself at the mercy of nature’s power with its unpredictability. This sense of sacred agency is associated with noise and sound since “the volcano dances to its own music” (44). In contrast, the tranquil scenery of the island bears witness to the devastating impact of the eruption:

This once loquacious little town

is now forever silent

or on a long fast for speech;

no more hallucinatory snores

no love’s loud ecstasy

yno pulse. Plymouth is comatose

or dead (22)

These lines are from “A Minute Silence”, a poem dated May 24, 1999. The poet captures the sound of the sea, with its “neurotic waves” (22), almost like a diary entry. This auditory landscape contrasts sharply with the silence that defines the capital city, which was once lively. The lack of activity underscores the town’s death, both biologically and symbolically.

In sum, *Volcanic Verses* articulate several key issues that are integral to the developing understanding of postcolonial disaster, human vulnerability and volcanic agency. These issues include: the ongoing repercussions of colonialism as a form of catastrophe in connection with various seemingly unrelated social and natural disasters; the close interplay between power, exploitation, violence, and disaster; and complex notion of “nature” as both a material and spiritual entity, which underscores its historical significance and aligns with the sense of postcolonial disaster to convey the cultural, psychological, and metaphysical aspects of disaster as a physical occurrence. While conveying a poetics of

vulnerability, Fergus’s poems shed light on the force of nature, turning the disaster into a moment of resistance against neocolonial pressures.

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