VOLCANO

Ivonne Weekes

Analysis by Angelo Monaco

Memoir

Yvonne Weekes's *Volcano* (2006), a memoir addressing the 1995 Soufrière eruption in Montserrat, blends prose with poetic expression to explore trauma and loss. Building on material ecocriticism and postcolonial disaster studies, Weekes addresses neocolonial neglect, and represents the volcano as a sentient force. The fragmented prose establishes a transcorporeal connection between human and nonhuman, interweaving the unspeakable nature of trauma with the chronicle of the disaster.

Year of Publication	2006
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

Robertson, Richard E. A., Willy Haspinal, Richard A. Herd, G. R. Norton, Stephen Sparks and Simon Young. “The 1995–1998 Eruption of the Soufriére Hills Volcano, Montserrat, WI.” Philosophical Transactions A, vol. 358, no. 1770, 2000, pp. 1619–1637.

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)

Deaths

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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	Pre-disaster (causes / context), Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Base/Complex	Lesser Antilles Volcanic Arc
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Typology	Emission Of Lava
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Stratovolcano
Anthropization Level	Villages, Towns
Social Impacts	Forced Relocation

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Inhabitants Of The Island
Age	Undefined
Gender	Male/female
Native Place	Montserrat
Nationality	Uk
Reactions	Apprehension, Anxiety, Fatalism, Panic, Distrust In Authorities

Reactions

Name	Ivonne
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Montserrat
Nationality	Uk

Reactions	Fatalism · Cooperation · Panic

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Indigenous people
Reactions	Apprehension · Fear

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	“Chaos” (Weekes 2006, 20); · “Hellfire” (20); · “Sins” (20);
Metaphors	“[...] she puffs great columns of steam from deep within her belly” (Weekes 2006, 22) "Ash falls solidly for bout ten minutes. Then just as suddenly as it has come, the sky is sunny and bright and all seems to be well with the world. Only everywhere is as white as snow. Dust swirls around just like a snowstorm." (Weekes 2006, 51) “The mountain cracks. Crack crush. She mocks. Crack crush! She scolds. Crack crush!” (58) “Montserrat is the tree. I am a leaf. Removed and plucked from the Evergreen Tree, I could wither and die” (107).“Montserrat is the tree. I am a leaf. Removed and plucked from the Evergreen Tree, I could wither and die” (107).
Similes	“[…] there is a ghostly white sea of ash sprawling like a desert as far as the eye can see. […] It is like a waking dream” (Weekes 2006, 70) “The world was being peeled open like a huge orange and the sky was aflame with black smoke from the mountain’s rumblings” (80)
Syntax	Parataxis, Hypotaxis
Punctuation	No Peculiarities
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives, Preference For Verbs Adverbs

Volcano by Ivonne Weekes (2006): A Reading Based on Postcolonial Disaster Studies

Yvonne Weekes’s *Volcano* (2006) explores the profound social, emotional, and spiritual effects of the 1995 eruption of Soufrière on Montserrat, an island in the Caribbean. It delves deeply into how trauma and natural disasters can fracture lives, while also highlighting the resilience of the human spirit—the ability to endure under immense pressure and the lengths we will go to for survival. Central to the narrative are themes of grief and loss: the absence of family, friends, and home; the fading of faith; the loss of intimacy and cherished memories. These elements, often perceived as inseparable from our identity and worldview, prompt reflection on what happens when they are stripped away.

As the local poet Howard Fergus claims in the Introduction, *Volcano* should be regarded not as a novel, but a memoir. In this sense, Fergus explains, “the author has no obligation to sharply depict characters” (Weekes 2006, 11). These words attest Weekes’s creative freedom and her attempts at depicting the event rather than developing deep characterisation as in traditional fiction. Nevertheless,

Weekes's writing seamlessly combines prose with poetic expression. The use of the present tense, for instance, creates "a conversational tone" (11), thus fostering a sense of intimacy and immediacy with the reader. Additionally, numerous lyrical passages, especially those describing the eruption, underscore the emotional chaos associated with fear and suffering. In the concluding chapters, which illustrate the tragic aftermath of the disaster, Weekes's voice transforms into a more lyrical and instructive tone. These sections feature poems that resonate with the elegiac themes of the catastrophe while simultaneously highlighting the responsibilities of scientists and the British government.

One might read Weekes's memoir through the lens of postcolonial disaster studies, an interdisciplinary field of analysis that seeks to "shed light on how specific colonial practices produce differential forms of vulnerability" (Carrigan 2015, 117). Disaster studies emerged in the aftermath of World War II with the establishment of the Disaster Research Group under the aegis of the National Academy of Sciences in 1952. It encompasses viewpoints from disciplines such as sociology, geography, environmental science, public health, engineering, urban planning, and political science, focusing on both human-made and natural disasters. From a postcolonial perspective, disaster studies illustrate how vulnerabilities are rooted in historical processes of colonisation, resource extraction, and marginalisation. In many ways, postcolonial approaches to disaster studies tend to interrogate the ongoing imperial policies, thereby challenging "the technocratic applicability of event-based disaster modelling" (124).

One step further, a postcolonial approach to disaster studies seeks to disclose the ecological implications of various forms of vulnerability, and how these phenomena are intertwined with cultural, political and economic forms of colonialism. Narratives of postcolonial disaster prompt us to reflect on feelings of empathy, urgency, and solidarity. According to Pallavi Rastogi, narratives of postcolonial disaster not only tackle questions of emotional and ecological crisis but also focus the reader's attention on "the need to disseminate information about, as well as manage, catastrophe through narration" (2020, 5). As Rastogi observes, these narratives rely on the tension between "Story" and "Event". While the "Event" represents the actual catastrophe, the "Story" plays a crucial role in shaping the disaster by providing form, style, and motifs, thus creating "a constant dance with each other" (8). Therefore, attempting to understand disasters from a single, time-bound, and location-specific perspective is both symbolically and socially inadequate. For Rastogi, "Story" and "Event" are interconnected in a dialectical manner. In this sense, disasters have enduring effects on societies that extend across both space and time, seeking to transform ethical and empathetic responses into pedagogical and ideological ones.

Against this backdrop, *Volcano* weaves together aesthetic and pedagogical themes. On one hand, Weekes's memoir mourns a place and its people, ravaged by the volcanic eruption and its dire repercussions for the environment, economy, and safety. On another hand, Weekes uses the narrative of personal and collective grief as a moment of reflection on the shortcomings in crisis management, offering a postcolonial critique of neoliberal Western policies that have overlooked former colonial territories. The narrative establishes a conversation between the catastrophic event of the 1995 eruption and its stylistic contours, thereby evoking Rastogi's combination of the "Event" and the "Story". In this context, Weekes interweaves the unspeakable nature of trauma with the chronicle of the disaster, the material ecocritical representations of the place, and a postcolonial critique of crisis management.

As a narrative addressing disaster, *Volcano* negotiates with gaps, slippages, and omissions. On various occasions, the reader is confronted with the lack of words to convey the real meaning of the disastrous event. While mud and ashes are everywhere, Weekes remarks, "[t]here are no words from any of us, no words at least for an eternity" (Weekes 2006, 59). The aftermath of the disaster is marked by a profound feeling of loss—loss of friends, familiar places, and cherished traditions. In another passage, this sense of loss is rendered with images of suspension and lack of stability. Weekes poignantly captures this sentiment by underscoring that: "There are days when I feel suspended like a balloon, drifting in the upper atmosphere. The world seems to have stopped. There are days when I feel faceless. Even when I look in the mirror I can't see myself" (62).

Paradoxically, although the mountain has wreaked havoc and destruction, it has not erased the stories that remain embedded in the land. Happy memories clash with stark reminders of death and sorrow. As Weekes expresses, a stillness permeates her heart, "deeper than grief" (72). This fragmented prose,

marked by a lack of words and a palpable sense of pain, resists verbal expression, highlighting the unspeakable nature of trauma. These efforts to grapple with trauma echo Laurie Vickroy's assertion that contemporary writers employ a variety of textual strategies, including "textual gaps (both in the page layout and content,) repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and a focus on visual images and affective states" (Vickroy 2002, 29) to represent traumatic experiences. Although the volcano has claimed lives and destroyed communities, it cannot rob the author of their stories. In this regard, the narrative serves as a means to come to terms with grief, offering a sense of healing and comfort. Consequently, the memoir turns into a testimony, a survival narrative that ultimately fosters a sense of "rebirth out of those ashes" (Weekes 2006, 59).

Despite the volcano's destructive force, Weekes expresses a profound connection to the land and Soufrière Hill itself. As Anthony Carrigan highlights, Weekes frequently employs anthropomorphic traits to depict the mountain, emphasising its "malign presence" (Carrigan 2011, 116). The focus on the volcano's material composition underscores its significance, as it is seen as a vital resource that the island's inhabitants rely on. Weeks employs personification to illustrate the volcano's sentient qualities. The mountain is referred to with third-person feminine pronouns, depicting it as having human-like characteristics, particularly during eruptions when "she puffs great columns of steam from deep within her belly" (Weekes 2006, 22), covering the island with ashes. From a material ecocritical perspective, the pervasive presence of ash is a significant feature of the narrative. Ash is everywhere, on the buildings, "seeping into the upholstery" (60) and on the riverbed. This persistent presence of the ash emphasises the agential power of the mountain in ways that remind us of the sentient qualities of the nonhuman.

In this respect, *Volcano* opens with a vivid depiction of the Soufrière Hill, brimming with multisensory imagery. The reader is immediately immersed in the mountain's lush and fertile vegetation. The depiction goes beyond just visual elements; the sensory experience also includes the "dark fragrances" (15) that fill the air. Additionally, the volcano introduces an auditory layer, as its "loud rambling" and "persisting cries" (15) echo throughout the landscape. Naturally, this sonic aspect notably defines the eruptive activity, as illustrated in the following quote: "The mountain cracks. Crack crush. She mocks. Crack crush! She scolds. Crack crush" (58). The cracks the mountain produces are both mental and physical, thus leaving signs on both the land and the mind of the author. The mountain is hence perceived as a more-than-human entity that can mock people and defy their norms. In other words, Weekes' portrayal of the sensory forces of the Soufrière Hill reverberates with a material perspective that reminds us that we live "a knotted world of vibrant matter" (Bennett 2010, 13). This vibrant interconnected web of relations between human and nonhuman is further addressed in one of the poems included in the memoir. In an autobiographical fashion, Weekes describes a woman who "carries the smell of sulphur in her mouth" (Weekes 2006, 104), while flames, destruction and isolation surround her. In literary contexts, sulphur often evokes associations with hell, thereby infusing her words with a darker undertone.

Engaging with trauma and material ecocriticism offers an opportunity to explore the formal and aesthetic elements of *Volcano*. And yet, the memoir serves as a social document that highlights inequalities and the enduring effects of colonialism, illuminating the mistrust toward white scientists in Montserrat and colonial policies from the United Kingdom, particularly in terms of crisis management. Throughout the various analeptic incursions that take us back to Weekes's sojourn in London, several passages highlight the sense of alienation while living in the United Kingdom. Though Montserrat is an unsafe place, the memories of England feel "dry" as we can read in the following passage: "[…] I remember the cold. I remember four guys spitting on me from a car. I remember the cold summers. […] I remember the damp cold. […]. I remember fighting to be seen and heard. I remember that there is no sun" (75).

Hatred and animosity towards the English are major themes in *Volcano*. As the observatory on the island employs only white scientists, Weekes voices her scepticism regarding the decision-making process: "I find it very strange that a whole heap of British scientists are talking about 'we here' in Montserrat. I wonder what they mean by 'we'" (69). These words express sorrow over the absence of an internal perspective that considers the needs of local communities. The financial support from the British government was inadequate for the residents. Instead of facilitating a resettlement of the

population to the northern part of the island, which experienced less impact from the eruption, the British government encouraged migration either to the UK or to neighbouring Caribbean islands.

In this sense, a significant focus in Weekes' memoir is the theme of forced relocation. The second chapter, titled "My First Relocation," addresses the shelters built on the island while scientists were conducting their research and formulating hypotheses. This sense of vulnerability is further connected to the prevailing atmosphere of resignation that permeates the island. The eruption is viewed as a result of the sins committed by the island's inhabitants, a reminder of "the need to repent" (20). However, what may initially be perceived as the result of a natural disaster ultimately reveals the shortcomings of crisis management: "The present managers have failed, and many of them are now sitting comfortably – ash free – back in Britain, aided and abetted by a handful of your own people" (85). The disregard for the requirements of local communities, coupled with the challenge of striking a delicate balance between natural hazards and sustainable living, has resulted in this turmoil. As Carrigan notes, *Volcano*, in one respect, "creates conceptual grounds for re-establishing sustainable community life" (2011, 124). Conversely, it illustrates how inherent vulnerability can "be negotiated in other disaster-conditioned postcolonial contexts" (124).

In other words, *Volcano* brings the significance of autonomy for Montserrat to the fore. It argues that sustainable reconstruction can be accomplished by honouring the ecological integrity of this delicate environment, fostering a deeper ecological awareness. This traumatic episode on a Caribbean island stands as a prominent example of postcolonial disasters. The shared recognition of this experience is encapsulated in the final imagery that illustrates the metaphorical connection between the writer and the volcano: "Montserrat is the tree. I am a leaf. Removed and plucked from the Evergreen Tree, I could wither and die" (Weekes 2006, 107). By evoking the evergreen tree of her childhood, Weekes becomes part of the volcano herself, thus establishing a transcorporeal connection between human and nonhuman.

To conclude, the memoir acts as a poignant reminder of the crisis that poses a serious threat to the reassuring elements of our lives. Furthermore, systemic racism and ongoing colonialism emerge starkly, alongside the authorities' utter failure to manage crises. The manipulations of a sensationalist media come to light, as do the unintended insensitivity of well-meaning gestures from acquaintances and friends. Amidst the chaos, these realities are brought to the forefront. Yet, *Volcano* resonates not only with the particularities of that moment but also with broader universal themes that can connect with all of us. This shared human experience may provide solace and potential for healing to those grappling with their own individual traumas in ways that reconnect us to the natural world.

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