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Walking On Fire: Haitian Women's Stories Of Survival And Resistance



Synopsis

Haiti, long noted for poverty and repression, has a powerful and too-often-overlooked history of resistance. Women in Haiti have played a large role in changing the balance of political and social power, even as they have endured rampant and devastating state-sponsored violence, including torture, rape, abuse, illegal arrest, disappearance, and assassination. In *Walking on Fire*, Beverly Bell, an activist and an expert on Haitian social movements, brings together thirty-eight oral histories from a diverse group of Haitian women. The interviewees include, for example, a former prime minister, an illiterate poet, a leading feminist theologian, and a vodou dancer. Defying victim status despite gender- and state-based repression, they tell how Haiti's poor and dispossessed women have fought for their personal and collective survival. The women's powerfully moving accounts of horror and heroism can best be characterized by the Creole word *istwa*, which means both "story" and "history." They combine theory with case studies concerning resistance, gender, and alternative models of power. Photographs of the women who have lived through Haiti's recent past accompany their words to further personalize the interviews in *Walking on Fire*.

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Customer Reviews

Beverly Bells *Walking on Fire* is extraordinary in that it brings to print first-person narratives of excruciating and harrowing violence, which are at once narratives of survival, resistance and overcoming. Bells book is effectively an edited volume of (mostly poor, mostly non-literate) Haitian women's testimonies about life in Haiti during and after the coup-etat against Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991-1994), framed by Bells contextualizing analysis. Entering the anthropological conversations about everyday acts of resistance generated by James C. Scott (1990) Bells central argument is that Haitian women engage in resistance, or "the negotiation of power by the weaker against the strong," in many ways that are usually overlooked, and that "the definition of resistance is expanded to include any act that keeps the margins of power from being further encroached upon, even where the protagonist cannot expand those margins." Trapped at the bottom of a system of structured inequality, "if [a woman] does no more than maintain her resources and rights in the face of attempts by other people, institutions, or systems to deny her them then she practices resistance." (p. 5) Most of the women featured in the volume are members of one of the loosely organized coalitions of grassroots groups known as the "popular movement." Each woman, then, is engaged in some aspect of political organizing, collective action or cooperative living. A central theme in the women's narratives is that it is through collective efforts that meaning-making analysis is forged and dignity is recovered. In Bell's book, poor Haitian women come to an understanding of their situation, their victimization and themselves, that allows them to recover the selves that have been traumatized.

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