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Doris Y. Kadish and Deborah Jenson, eds., *Poetry of Haitian Independence*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015. 301p. Table, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-300-19559-0.

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Edited by Doris Y. Kadish and Deborah Jenson and prefaced by Edwidge Danticat, *Poetry of Haitian Independence* contains about forty poems written from 1804 to 1887 by more than twenty poets of the Haitian elite. From well-known poets such as Ignace Nau, Coriolan Ardouin, Pierre Faubert to lesser known or simply anonymous ones, the poems are translated from French to English by Norman R. Shapiro.

The sizable number of poets is already surprisingly interesting given that slavery did not favor any formal education on the part of the enslaved. Yet, in a period still close to slave times, the Black population of Haiti attests here to a good deal of lettered members able to produce or reproduce poetry. This may be a factor inspiring comparative studies with other Caribbean colonies to enhance knowledge of the Caribbean writing tradition.

Most of the poems celebrate the heroes of independence such as Toussaint, Dessalines, Christophe, Pétion or Boyer. As early as 1805, Grenadier Gautarel writes, “You, O great Emperor,” in which he extols the high achievements of the revolutionary leaders—especially Dessalines: “You, O great Emperor! You who laid low [...] The scurvy foe [...]” (p. 17). In 1804, C. César Télémaque had already offered a similar poem, “Let us now sing our glory!” (pp. 9-10), in which he additionally makes explicit the collective scope and value of the revolution’s accomplishments. Not unlike many others in the book, in which terms such as “sillons, marchons, armes” are used, this poem is reminiscent of a chant and a close look allows us to draw parallels with the 1792 French Marseillaise. Indeed, it is no surprise to ascertain the manifest influence of the French literary tradition and sense of poetical aesthetic in the poems.

Very meaningfully, the book starts with “What? Native race! Would you remain silent?” (pp. 2-6), an 1804 poem calling upon the Haitian people for a collective and grateful action meant to embrace historical achievements by massively celebrating their heroes. It ends with a similarly significant 1887 song, “When our ancestors” (pp. 246-50), pleading for yet another collective action crystalized in work and in resolute efforts to ensure and maintain “égalité.” Already, these poems, addressing the people of Haiti and strategically bookending the text with these pleas, are indicative of some political, ideological, social and economic situations facing Haiti at that time. It appears that at the end of the nineteenth century, freedom was fragile and its attainment had not yet borne the expected fruits of an ideal, collective social improvement and massive equality, equality being itself a recurring stance and theme in various poems, which interestingly find an echo in the 2009 documentary *Égalité for All: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution* (Patricia Aste, Noland Walker, Margaret Koval). [1]

Very importantly, through the prevalent recurrence of words such as “liberté,” “égalité,” “unité,” “fraternité,” these revolutionary poems shed light on the values and ideology at the core of the Haitian

Revolution and give credence to the position put forth by C.L.R. James in his 1938 *The Black Jacobins*, in which he asserts that French Revolution principles were embraced by the enslaved of Haiti in a way French revolutionaries themselves could not imagine. Similarly, one already finds clear traces of the critical factors that were to influence twentieth-century scholars and intellectuals in their attempts to reconstitute the spirit and meaning of the Haitian Revolution and its accomplishments. Addressing his compatriots in his 1850 “Brothers all, we have now that foul yoke broken” (pp. 218-21), Pierre Faubert reminds them that they “[...] have avenged [their] infamy” (p. 219), a stance Laurent Dubois expands in his 2005 *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. [2]

Oswald Durand’s National song “When our ancestors,” choosing as its focus a “reminding” perspective, underscores that there may have been a shift away from the Revolutionary ideal. He indeed posits at the outset, “When our ancestors smashed their serfdom’s chains/It was not so that, slothful, we might lie/In idleness!” (p. 247). He recalls that agricultural work is the key to equality and that true independence depends on the latter: “Notre fortune est là, dans nos vallons./L’indépendance est éphémère/Sans le droit a l’égalité!” (p. 246). Durand’s invitation also sheds light on one of the epistemological, political and symbolic paradoxes facing Haitian society at the time. His is an invitation to work towards achieving equality and independence through physical work, that is, via the same mode and strategy of production that had deprived the laborers of equality and freedom before. Moreover, “When our ancestors” ends on an exhortation to work by all forces, the mulattoes and Blacks, all of them being “Africa’s sons” that is, afro-descendants “in one [same] cradle bred” (p. 249). Despite the song’s being a plea for unification and unity as well, it alludes to an unaccomplished freedom reminiscent of Mila in Ardouin’s 1835 poem, “Oh! I recall that day (Mila)” (pp. 166-79), in which a young enamored girl, whose love for another enslaved has been impeded by the enslaver, repeatedly starts a Creole song that she never finishes (p. 178).

Through the poems, therefore, one can already identify and decipher some of the ideological, psychological, political and social characteristics that were to mark Haitian society in the twentieth century. Interestingly, in the book, Gautarel’s and Télémaque’s poems, “Let us now sing our glory” and “You, O Great Emperor,” respectively, immediately follow the first one “What? Native race! Would you remain silent?”, which is an exhortation to the “Native race” (p. 3) (*peuple indigène*, p. 2) to determine their collective Self and stand in solidarity to “Live, die,” free and “indépendants” under the impulsion of Dessalines, the hero. The title here already carries the ideological and terminological terms that were to help support the subsequent Indigenism movement of the early twentieth century. The translator chose the term “race” to render the French “peuple” here, but the epistemological strength of the latter word must be underlined, as it strikingly challenges the slave vision of the African groups who were seen more as “meubles” than as a conglomerated group with shared values presenting itself as a “people.”

This is all the more interesting in that the poet asserts that this “people” bears a proper name—heroes, “vengeant [s]on nom,” testify to this name, to these people who bear a distinctive identity and who are not only “unis” but also “réunis” as “Haitiens” (p. 2). The word “Haïtien” itself is another term used abundantly to show that the singular and self-determined identity, outside of the former slave paradigm, is a fact that they need to collectively acknowledge by recognizing the great leaders and their achievements. In that, the poem advocates for a strong sense of collective apperception, self-determination and political awareness pointing to the ideological stance undergirding the minds of the elite at the time. It is clear that the enterprise undertaken here concerns the process of nation building and symbolic and political unity, unification through erecting heroic references and maybe myths as well. This notwithstanding, at the same time and quite contradictorily, the exhortation and attempt to galvanize bear the inflections of a castigation implying that the “people” is unconscious and not paying due regards and respect to the achievers and the achievement. This indicates that the poets’ high lyricism and fervor about the heroes are met with circumspect reserve on the part of the “people” they are addressing.

Two opposing attitudes and maybe interpretations are at stake here. Perhaps this casts light on a crucial reality dividing the “people” and the elite, one that may have been the most excruciating gap and drawback

in the post-revolutionary Haitian society. One cannot help but draw attention to the fact that the poets use a form—the written word—to address a people who are predominantly non-lettered, in a language—French—not as widely “mastered” as the vernacular Creole. This may be the most critical factor exacerbating a lack of true and credible communication between the two ends. It is here, then, that I have to draw attention to the fact that, although the national song, “When our ancestors” (pp. 246-50), extols the people’s contribution to the Revolution—“The slaves embraced death’s pains/So that, free, we might labor by and by./Fertile our hills, drenched by their blood [...]” (p. 247)—in most of the poems, the newly-formed afro-descended elite, made up of only a handful of members, systematically speaks to and for the masses, which comprise between 500,000 and 700,000 people. However, this elite neither highlights the masses’ positive properties and own achievements nor speaks with the “people.” As a matter of fact, one has to wait for the early years of the twentieth century for members of the elite, such as Jean-Price Mars, to pay systematic, critical attention and respect to the masses and to their high participation in the nation’s economical and cultural development. Indeed, the masses led the Revolution and through courage, resilience and determination remained unwaveringly faithful to its ideal of “égalité for all,” even at a time when the leaders themselves, including Toussaint, were envisaging negotiation with the French forces. The exhortation-castigation and crystallization of heroism by the few, who set even more distance between themselves and the masses by introducing and establishing a bewildering and exclusive European-like aristocracy, already cast light on a burgeoning ideological, political and class discrepancy between the leaders and the “people” that would but widen in the subsequent century.

The poets’ ideological orientation points to their being astutely aware of the critical importance of the historical moment as it relates to the political and philosophical achievement of self-liberation from an atrophying system. Theirs seems to be a determined project of symbolic construction through the figures of heroes whose general embracement by the people would constitute the solid cement of Haiti, the “patrie” and “femme aux yeux noirs” (“Oh, the delight of your days freedom-spent!” [pp. 188, 195]) one now has to love, be faithful to, and strive to develop. This anchor to Haiti as the “patrie” does not mean that the ties with their ancestors and motherland are severed, as reflected in Hérard-Dumesle’s “About the lightning-flaring furrows” (pp. 93-98); this poem refers explicitly to the *Bwa Kayman langaj*, the *Lapriyè Djinen* uttered as the first step to massive emancipation, as in Ardouin’s “O! I recall that day (Mila),” where the protagonist affirms: “I love you, Africa, just as before!” (p. 175).

However, notwithstanding the project, this profound and unquestionable achievement is also met with limitations and ambivalence via the trend of poetic imitation. Poetry comes from the depths of the inner self and it is the depth of the inner French self that shows through these poems, as exemplified for instance by the 1839 poem of an anonymous poet, “Father Dear, how I love to cast my glance over these hills and fields” (pp. 196-209). The poem celebrates the “charmed isle,” “the West’s beautiful and vaunted daughter!”, “cradle of independence” whose incessant progress no one could limit. But as shown by the lexicon and the perspective, this is accomplished through a gaze that seems extraneous and highly idealizing, exoticizing and bucolic—a gaze that does not seem to capture the reality of a landscape that must have retained physical signs and traces of the most recent Revolution and one hundred eighty years of slavery. The “fields” the eyes and gaze seem to pinpoint may well be wheat or rye fields, instead of the sugar cane fields that the country is still replete with and that the poets are exhorting the newly liberated “people” to base their productivity on. This may well be understood as a fact of the times, Haiti having as a literary production model indeed only the one furnished by France. However, it also signals what, a century later, Fanon was to analyze and term “alienation.” It is certainly the expression of a lack of vision that would consecrate invention as its motor. This also points to the fact that while the praised achievement is grand in its *forme* (for indeed one passes from slavery to freedom), in its *fond* it has not been able to propose an intrinsic, different and new political and social paradigm escaping the already established French particularities.

Finally, among all of these highly interesting poems, one is worthy of singling out, as it is likely to contribute to Gender and Women’s studies analysis and provide insights into gender relations as they

relate to race. Coriolan Ardouin's poem, "Oh! I recall that day (Mila)" (pp. 166-78), was written in 1835 and recounts the ill action of the enslaver--le démon du séjour infernal [...] ne pensant que mal (p. 170)--coveting the African woman and therefore mortally compromising the latter's relationship with the African male or African-descendant counterpart--"le beau créole." Angered by the shared love between Mila, the Angole girl, and Osala, the Creole, the enamored slave owner Elbreuil sells Osala and thus provokes Mila's death.

The significance of this book lies partly in its being the first of its kind offering an unprecedented compilation of texts, in French and English, which can contribute critically to furthering knowledge about Haitian literary tradition and history in particular, and the history of Black Caribbean writing more generally. The poems' translation allows for a non-negligible visibility and seriously expanded access to the English-speaking world. This translation is likely to make possible more scholarly enquiries, in both French and English, into Haitian early literature and society. Apart from confirming what has already been established concerning the tendency to imitate French literary modes from the very first nineteenth-century texts produced by Caribbean people of African descent, the book comes as a necessary resource for investigating new literary, ideological, cultural, historical, political and sociological facts about Haiti during that period, which could shed light on today's society. It is also a tool thanks to which one could come to trace some of the most singular stylistic, discursive, political and ideological specificities of nineteenth-century Haitian poetry. As the editors state, "The poems included in the volume shed light on Haiti, the Caribbean, the Enlightenment, postcolonialism, poetry, and the history of culture and identity" (p. xxii). It is also striking how the authors engage with posterity; in their introduction they insistently urge further research on this particular period of the Haitian literary heritage, showing thus the potential for their book to support more knowledge and understanding of the Caribbean.

We can only imagine the work it has taken the editors of this book to assemble this scattered poetic resource and should be indebted to them for undertaking this much-needed task. May this reinforce critical studies allowing better comprehension of Haiti and the Caribbean and its peoples.

Notes

[1] Public Broadcasting Service, Films for the Humanities & Sciences, and Films Media Group, *Égalité for All Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution* (New York, N.Y.: Films Media Group, 2009).

[2] Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).

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