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## Sex and the State: Unbecoming Property in Deborah Jenson's Early Haiti

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Deborah Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative: Politics, Sex, and Manuscripts in the Haitian Revolution*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 322 pp.

Deborah Jenson's introduction to the literature of early Haiti, including the era of Revolution (1791-1803) and the era of early nationhood (1804-1806), goes beyond "the *idea* of 1804" to analyze a sampling of the "heteroclitic corpus" that actually produced 1804.<sup>1</sup> Her claim is that Haitian correspondence, political manifesto, memoir, and poetry can be charted through "sexual and political synergies" produced through the "'reversible world' of both the master-slave-dialectic and the Haitian Revolution" (9).<sup>2</sup> Both poetry and political writing express the "relationship of sexuality and desire to economies of dominion and constructions of race" (9).<sup>3</sup> And the political writings of Louverture, for example, are "literary" to the degree that he "harnessed poetics" in order to persuade and reach large audiences (9). While she addresses Haitian poetry and political writings as distinct categories, her work also relies on the reversibility of those distinctions and economies. Her greater aim is dual: to clarify and unify an exemplary corpus of textual and discursive economies that produced the Haitian Revolution and inscribe it within the Caribbean Revolutionary Era, and secondly, to map out the place of the Haitian Revolution within what Wai Chee Dimock calls a "deep time" history that relates the patterns of New World African diasporic culture and linguistics beyond the constraints of autobiographical or national narratives.<sup>4</sup> Her work fits within a boundary-breaking critical tradition attending to the politics and aesthetics of imagining community.<sup>5</sup>

By building on and engaging well-known work of Henry Louis Gates, in which the narrative of "becoming property," dominates our understandings of African experience in the Atlantic, she likewise posits the social space of early Haiti as one in which we can read individual and community accounts of "unbecoming" property.<sup>6</sup> Scholars of Caribbean studies, humanities, linguistics, and Haitian studies will place it parallel to the work historians Laurent Dubois, Carolyn Fick, Marlene Daut and others. She draws on Chris Bongie's multi-lingual literary research on the French Atlantic and Nick Nesbitt's studies of revolutionary correspondence—all of which through we now see that "concepts of freedom" for former slaves were highly contested.<sup>7</sup> Jenson also draws on the work of Francis Smith Foster, who points out that Toussaint Louverture's memoir is classified as a slave narrative though published within his activities as a state

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Nesbitt. "The Idea of 1804." *Yale French Studies*, no. 107 (2005): 6–38.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Dayan. "Haiti, History, and the Gods." In *After Colonialism*, 66–97. Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements. Princeton University Press, 1995.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7t242.7>.

<sup>3</sup> Doris L. Garraway. *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean*. Duke University Press, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Wai Chee Dimock. *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*. Princeton University Press, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Louis Gates. *The Classic Slave Narratives*. Signet Classics, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Bongie. *Friends and Enemies: The Scribal Politics of Post/colonial Literature*. Liverpool University Press, 2008. Dubois, Laurent. *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804*. UNC Press Books, 2012. Fick, Carolyn E. *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*. Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1990. Nesbitt, Nick. "Turning the Tide: The Problem of Popular Insurgency in Haitian Revolutionary Historiography." *Small Axe* 12, no. 3 (2008).15.

builder.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Jenson asks how Louverture's and other revolutionary voices exceed the autobiographical impulse or the documentation of enslavement. Her work necessarily carves out a multi-lingual and disciplinary archival path that not only goes 'beyond' the slave narrative, but goes beyond any singular critical approach (and bridges the linguistic divides necessary) for framing this revolutionary reality on its own terms, and as she acknowledges, for more effectively engaging the contemporary issues that confront Haiti.

Still, the slave narrative is the book's point of departure, since by virtue of its centrality to Anglo-colonial history, it has become the "gold standard" for understanding the position of the "socially voiceless" and the privileged particularization for framing modes of "diasporan expression" in the early Caribbean (2-3). She attributes the perception of lack regarding authorial presence in the French Caribbean to the hegemony of the Anglophone slave narrative, and her project necessarily goes beyond the autobiographical structuring of experience to examine the letters, poetry, and state documents important to the early Francophone nation's political and social spheres; however, Jenson shows that the slave narrative's dominant influence is matched with a complexity of politics that functioned to dismiss other texts as non-writing. The reasons for the marginalization of these texts include the politics of scribal technologies such as the role of secretaries, the lack of formal education, and questions of editorial intervention. Other forms of censorship on social and state levels included the marginalization of Kreyol as a viable expression. Issues that would never destabilize historical legibility regarding other revolutionary voices plague critical thought about Haiti. As she explains, we would never base George Washington's authorial reliability on whether he physically wrote all his work in the same way that questions like this attend the alphabetic abilities of Louverture or Dessalines. The voices of this revolution must be legitimated according to a more complex notion of scribal technology, and in so doing, Jenson investigates the period / space as one comprised of multiple linguistic, cultural, and communicative lines.

From this juncture, she divides her book into two halves that illustrate the "reversible" world of sex and politics in Haiti: "Authoring the Political Sphere" and "Authoring the Libertine Sphere." At first glance, the division and generic divide between state documents and poetry seems disorienting, but the book's logical alignment with the "reversible world" of socio-sexual relations and political relations is a smartly-drawn demarcation for gathering together the literatures of a pre-and-post colonial domain made complicated by the politics of race and cultural legibility.

Together, the two sections balance an otherwise uneven distribution of materials available for analysis. (Jenson explains that while there are hundreds of examples of the political texts, correspondence, and memoir from the likes of Toussaint Louverture and Louis-Félix Boisrond-Tonnerreto, there are comparatively only a "couple dozen" examples of poetry [39]). Some of the poetry is published in New Orleans, but nonetheless they are pieces that began in Haiti, and Jenson follows their path into publication through colonial refugee transmission. The first part includes images of Toussaint Louverture's handwritten correspondence from the French Archives, and these show fascinating signs of intercultural material production in the early nation. His words are handwritten, fairly legible, and the stationery printing marks the period as a formidable moment in the articulation of French-Afro-American identity on individual and community scales. The state letterhead says, "To France, one and indivisible, the sixth year of the Republic, Toussaint Louverture, . . ." The top

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<sup>8</sup> Frances Smith Foster. *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives*. Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1979.

corners are framed by twin words “Liberté. . . Égalité.”<sup>9</sup> There are no images of artifacts in the comparatively small section on poetry, but there are hybrid language poems in French and Kreyol, some of which she reprints and translates in their entirety.

One example of Jenson’s approach in “Authoring the Political Sphere” is her claim that Toussaint Louverture “pioneered” the field of “Afro-diasporic media” (45). Despite the increasingly tight control that Napoleon had on communications between Haitian leaders and French newspapers, Toussaint attained, first through correspondence and later through newspapers, the “status of legitimate interlocutor,” and as the person most responsible and associated with what Nick Nesbitt has called ‘the idea of 1804,’ she traces his legacies “primarily in texts in the *Ancien moniteur* and the *Gazette de France* between 1797 and 1802 (47-8). As a master of “spin” or the art of “counter negative popular perception,” Louverture managed “damage control” during the era in which he worked with French consuls to mediate relations between the two countries (48). In her assessment, Toussaint’s work relies on “repeated figures of speech,” and expresses “righteous outrage and personalized conflict” in framing the communal struggle (56). On one occasion, when France sent a representative with no colonial experience and a “racist entourage” who ordered him around, his characteristic “metaphor(s) of pain and healing” function as a “quasi-medical spiritual discourse” to the French consulate on the future of his nation (56, 60). He writes, “It is painful for men of honor to be treated in this way . . . Palliative remedies only flatter the pathology, and one must get to the source to heal it. . . .” (60). But the beauty of Jenson’s reading is the way in which she shows that handwritten letters work in counterpoint to Louverture’s participation in news media. His “damage control” in newspapers were what “counterbalanced the subversive aspects of his pursuit of political autonomy in letters” (49). As a spin doctor for the revolution, he essentially put a “positive spin” on his military and political triumphs over French powers for “an Enlightenment audience” (49).

As a testament to the implications of her research’s aim in building a recognizable corpus of diasporic thought through/in Haitian culture, she also tackles the long-controversial subject of Louverture’s “level of comfort with the technology of writing” (55). These letters sometimes written “while coming and going” (perhaps without a secretary and on the road), include those that are “transcribed . . . signed by secretaries, . . . those transcribed by secretaries but signed by Toussaint personally, . . . occasional letters . . . entirely in his own hand” which despite “phonetic orthography,” she asserts, read aloud as “close to conventional French” (56).

Her “Authoring the Libertine Sphere” documents the formation of Creole literary culture. Citing Alexandre Bonneau and other French writers, she frames how European authority brought to bear a combination of lethal “prescriptions” on Haitian poetry in rendering it illegible as the product of “Big Children” (227). In Richard Handler’s terms, “having a culture” was defined as a “possessive individualism” indivisible from the “liberty of an adult,” and former slaves had not “been gifted with the liberty of Western adulthood” (228-9). A “local Creole and black literature” was impossible and at best “imitative” given its racial and geographic origins (228). Haiti would need a literary identity representative of an “authentic collective property” in order to “have a culture.”<sup>10</sup> In comparison to the slave narrative, these literatures have fallen though the cracks of modern print, so she asks how they qualify as modes of anti-colonial production, especially in comparison to the slave narrative’s “indispensable: role in forming “the court of

<sup>9</sup> “Handwritten letter from Toussaint Louverture to Hédouville. Archives nationales de Paris. AF III 209.57.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Handler. *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*. Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1988.

public opinion.”<sup>11</sup> The anticolonial production of literature reveals the “mimetic politics of literary culture—the issues involved,” in Rosemary Coombe’s words, with “managing mimesis,” through “its emergent identity in the community of exiles,” as well as in Haiti (234).

For example, her engagement with anticolonial political and literary production is to trace “diasporan dislocation” from textual spaces and voices as diverse as the (Emperor) Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Michel-Etienne Descourtilz (a French naturalist and botanist). By aligning texts with diasporan dislocation, Haitian poetry includes both “familial histories of kidnapping and forcible relocation” as well as the “displacements” of “European colonial migration” (232). Both form attachment to indigeneity as a “painful collective memory of displacement” (234). On one hand, Dessalines’ *Declaration of Independence* (1804) draws on a “cultural poetics of a paradoxical indigeneity” (232)—Dessalines self and national “fashioning” “was constructed” she says “one the oblique memory of the destruction of native status at the intersection of the extinction of local inhabitants and their replacement by kidnapped Africans” (233).<sup>12</sup> By the same token, Descourtilz’ scientific literature presents collecting as a means of negotiating exile and displacement. Descourtilz’ three volume *Voyage d’un naturaliste* reproduces what “he identified as a Creole love song by two slaves, who are featured by name as the narrators within the song” (238). According to Descourtilz, a slave named Aza “was an Ibo” who was “melancholic” at having been “kidnapping from his beloved, Evahim,” and when the master buys another group of slaves including Evahim, the two lovers are reunited to their “great joy and amazement” (238). Aza composed a song and dance that Descourtilz “transcribed and edited,” and then set to music of his own composition. Aza’s voice oscillates between “diasporan lament” and “diasporan rejoicing” (238). Jenson explores the problems of reliability inherent to this mediation of supposedly original expression on the part of enslaved Africans translated through a scientist, but by outlining both the support of other sources confirming encounters with “creative autonomy” and “poetic activity” on the part of the “unempowered,” she theorizes that the “collecting tendencies” of refugee colonists present another opportunity to unify a corpus of texts through the common ground of diasporan dislocation (241).

The vision of her work requires and accomplishes a merging of issues and awarenesses constitutive to African diaspora studies, Caribbean studies, humanities, linguistics, and Haitian Studies, which are all circumscribed by the limitations of national and linguistic boundaries that have historically prevented a more connected approach to African diasporic cultural history. And while the book fits several “niches” of inquiry categorized as the “black Atlantic” or “New World African Diaspora” studies, she notes, it also reiterates “the problem of conceptualizing such liminal categories as the Franco African-American, or the Afro-Creole” (322). Her collection shows that the French Revolution functioned as a “crucial discursive model” for “print culture mediation” in Haiti, perhaps in parallel to the effect of English abolition in the U.S., but the collection of varied materials makes clear that writing from the period exceeded and challenged those national models, like the revolution itself, from spaces, voices, and with ideas never before imagined (7-8).

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<sup>11</sup> Jeannine Marie DeLombard. *Slavery on Trial: Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2009. Handler, Richard. *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*. Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1988. Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1988.217.

<sup>12</sup> Michael J. Dash. “Haitian Revolutionary Studies (review).” *Research in African Literatures* 35, no. 2 (2004): 197–98.