

The Hybridity of Francophone Voices from Below.

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Many people on both sides of the Atlantic are unaware of the glaring facts of the massive French involvement in the slave trade: that more slaves were brought to the tiny island of Martinique than to all the United States; that in 1789, Saint-Domingue supplied over half of France’s overseas trade and had a slave population of half a million, more than all the other French and British West Indies combined.¹ The magnitude of the French slave trade then cannot account for its current invisibility. A more likely source lies in the fact that the French historical record contains no instances of the personal documents which in other countries have put a human face on slavery, no equivalent of such works as *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) from Britain, Juan Francisco Manzano’s *Autobiography of a Slave* (1840) from Cuba, and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1862) from the United States.² However, as I shall attempt to show in this paper, the gap in the French record is not as absolute as it seems. Decades before Prince, Manzano, or Jacobs garnered the support necessary to bring forth slave narratives, writers from the French colonial and postcolonial world had already produced written texts by blacks that, although not necessarily written by slaves or about their personal experiences as slaves, reveal a black perspective on slavery. Those texts reveal the particular circumstances under which Francophone writing about slavery began. They also serve to problematize the notion of “authentic” slave narratives. Anthony Appiah has rightly observed that everything we know about the colonial and postcolonial eras is “always already contaminated” and that no absolute line can be drawn between the oppressing “us” and the oppressed “them.”³ His observation has special relevance for the French situation. The first texts about slavery by black authors were written in the context of political and military engagement with the French. Thus, whether written by former slaves or, more commonly, by *anciens libres* having received a French education, those texts are profoundly hybrid, that is to say, characterized by an uneasy cohabitation of different and incongruous elements—both acceptance and rejection of French models of authority and hegemonic institutions; both complicity and resistance. In the principal text to be considered in this paper—the play *L’Entrée du roi en sa capitale, en janvier 1818* [*The King’s Entry in his Capital in January 1818*], by the early nineteenth-century Haitian writer, Juste Chanlatte—an oscillation between the contradictory impulses of complicity and resistance is evident at the political, linguistic, and dramatic levels. A similar process occurs as well in the other works that will be considered in the remarks that follow.⁴

Illuminating the hybridity that arose in the aftermath of the black struggles for economic and political autonomy in the French colonies helps us to understand the particular character and legacy of Francophone slavery. In its early form, black writing about slavery served to affirm black agency: it cited military successes to create a positive image of blacks in the global political arena. Only in the 1830s did the purpose of such writing begin to shift to supporting the abolitionist cause, as was the case in American slave narratives. Only with the rise of organized abolitionism in that decade did the need arise for black individuals to recount their oppression by

white masters. Such American depictions of the presumably “authentic” experience of the victimized slave are very different from Francophone black historical writing about successful revolts, which were crowned by the defeat of the French by an army of slaves and the declaration of Haiti’s independence in 1804. Haiti was a beacon of hope for blacks throughout the Atlantic world in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, the first generation of slaves and their descendants, whether black or mixed race, tended to dwell positively on the strength of Haiti’s example rather than negatively on the effects of slavery.

To support my argument that the voice of the Francophone slave has been a hybrid composite of resistance and complicity, and before turning to the example of Chanlatte’s play, I would like to offer as examples two texts by persons who were themselves enslaved. The first is *The Memoirs of General Toussaint Louverture*.⁵ Writing during the year-long imprisonment in a French jail that preceded his death in 1803, the former leader of the Haitian revolution and governor of Saint-Domingue composed a lengthy memoir, which a fellow prisoner copied and edited. It was published in 1853 with an introduction by the Haitian author Joseph Saint-Rémy. What does Toussaint have to say about himself as a slave? Very little. He states, “I was a slave, I dare to admit it” (90); and he hypothesizes that the ill treatment he received at the hands of the French military was due to the color of his skin (85). He states further, “I have acquired little learning and have received no education”(100). However, each of these statements is merely a preface to an assertion of his worth and capacities: he was a slave, but his masters were always satisfied with him; his color was wrongly held against him because it never prevented him from zealously and faithfully serving France; he compensated for his lack of instruction by his common sense and realization that fighting against the will of the government was futile. Never does he choose to dwell on his life as a slave. Instead, we hear the hybridized voice of a person who both affirms and rejects the dominance of colonial rule. He does not call French military and political authority into question; he simply claims that their procedures have been wrongly applied in his case and that French justice has not been served. At the same time, however, his black, resistant voice cannot be silenced: he denounces the abuses of white power as tenaciously as he attacked whites militarily on the field of battle.

In editing the *Mémoires* a half a century later in 1853, Saint-Rémy is more interested in Toussaint’s victimization and his status as a former slave than Toussaint was in writing about his experiences. Saint-Rémy states, “Regrettably, the *Mémoires* do not begin with the birth of their author . . . The history of the slavery of blacks, told by a black slave with L’Ouverture’s intelligence, would have been the most curious and instructive book that friends of humanity could have ever hoped to open and consult” (22). In a telling indication of how the voice of the slave has been usurped by abolitionist discourse, Saint-Rémy has written a preface that includes a statement dedicating the edition to Harriet Beecher Stowe. Saint-Rémy identifies himself “as a member of the oppressed race whose cause you have so generously and gloriously championed” (5), despite the fact that he was an educated member of the mulatto elite.⁶ In addressing Stowe, moreover, he makes no mention of the actual content of Toussaint’s text. Its spirit of black military and discursive agency presumably matters less than the renown and the former slave status of its author.

The words of another slave can be found decades later in a letter written in 1846 by Marie and addressed to the queen of France. It is one of scores of such documents published by the French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher in *The History of Slavery During the Last Two Years*, a

compilation of newspaper articles calling for immediate emancipation and documenting the failure of the ineffectual reforms instituted by the Mackau law of 1845.⁷ Unlike the texts from the early nineteenth century that promote Haiti as a model of strength, writings by former slaves in Schoelcher's publications focus on women's suffering in order to garner sympathy for abolitionist causes, as is the case with Saint-Rémy's dedication to Stowe or with Anglo-American slave narratives. But these fragments of what might be called slave narratives also reveal the hybrid nature of the Francophone woman slave. Having explained to the queen how her daughter came to be imprisoned and sent off to Martinique, Marie pleads her case by playing on the coincidence of her own name with the Virgin Mary's and by casting the Queen in the exalted role of the mother of Christ: "you who are powerful in your kingdom as she is in heaven"; "you who are good as she is, who is a mother as she was, you will listen with the same indulgence to the slave mother who comes to pray for her daughter." By couching her prayer in the Europeanized discourse of Christianity, Marie reveals the extent to which her hybrid identity as a slave bears the imprint of her French religious education. At the same time, however, her direct appeal to the Queen reveals her refusal to accept the authority of either her owner or the corrupt judicial system in the colonies. It also reveals her willingness as an African woman to assert her inalienable rights as a woman and a mother, rights that neither her color nor her enslavement have erased and that are as central to her identity as to that of the Queen of France or the mother of Christ. Toussaint's challenge to French military authority in *Mémoires* finds an echo in Marie's challenge to the hegemonic forces that control the lives of slave women and their children.

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I now turn to considering *L'Entrée du roi*, a panegyric celebration of the reign of King Henry Christophe. An uneducated black and former slave from the British West Indies, Christophe became president of Haiti in 1806 following the assassination of that nation's first leader, Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Fearing a repeat of Dessalines's tyrannical rule, the revolutionary leader Alexandre Pétion and the Haitian Senate approved a constitution that curtailed Christophe's executive power. Their action set off a fourteen-year civil war that resulted in the splitting of the nation in two: a mulatto-dominated republic in the South led by Pétion; a black-dominated regime in the North led by Christophe, who declared himself its hereditary monarch in 1811. Nine years later, ailing and deserted by his former supporters, Christophe committed suicide. His death, which followed Pétion's two years earlier, left the door open to the creation of a unified Haitian republic under the leadership of the mulatto president Boyer. Christophe's monarchy was profoundly hybrid in nature, as was Pétion's republic. Christophe's choice to adopt a monarchical system of government with a full array of titled aristocrats reveals his respect for European institutions. It was not a mere act of imitation, however. Christophe's monarchy embodies the resistant, assertive side of slave identity in its will to empower the black masses, as opposed to Pétion's republic, which was controlled by a small cadre of privileged persons of color. Christophe's endorsement of monarchism was also a rejection of the French republic which, after liberating the slaves in 1794, reimposed slavery in 1802. Also, monarchy at the time carried strong associations with the British constitutional system. By choosing a form of government more closely tied to France's enemy, Christophe positioned himself as a potential ally of the British in the global wars for naval and commercial power.

Juste Chanlatte, a mulatto, educated in France, committed himself to the cause of the newly enfranchised blacks and served as secretary under Dessalines. Despite his mulatto origins, Chanlatte gave voice to the nation's commitment to the black people and to the freedom they had gained in battle against the French. Chanlatte's contemporary Hérard Dumesle wrote, "the love of Independence and the horror of European tyranny are the sentiments that he inspires."⁸ Yet serving in three successive regimes—Dessaline's, Christophe's, and Boyer's— Chanlatte assumed a chameleon-like identity that history has judged harshly.⁹ Especially reprehensible in the eyes of his critics was his denunciation of Christophe, whose virtues he had extolled for a decade, and his switching allegiance to Boyer upon Christophe's death. In a strikingly self-reflective observation, Chanlatte wrote, "Such is the fate on tyrants visited: One lauds them, living, but one mocks them, dead!"¹⁰

The inconstancy of Chanlatte's political affiliations notwithstanding, his writing displays a consistent affirmation of the Christophean commitment to the black people, as can be seen, for example, in his choice to place characters portraying former slaves on stage in the opening scene of *L'Entrée du roi*. Marguerite, broom in hand, tells Valentin of her joyful anticipation at seeing "bon maman à nous, bon Roi à nous, bel pitit Prince Royal à nous aqué toutes belles Princesses Royales à nous." [our good mother, our good king, our handsome Royal Prince as well as all our beautiful Royal Princesses]. Chanlatte's foregrounding of these lower-rank people constitutes a recognition that for Christophe they form the base of the Haitian state. That Chanlatte himself is not one of them is in one sense irrelevant. His function, as Christophe's court poet and spokesman, is to speak for the black monarch, just as the monarch speaks for the former slaves.

Significantly, their speech is in the hybrid language of Creole, which the linguist Albert Valdman calls "the language of slavery." That comedies were commonly performed in Creole in the North of Haiti indicates a degree of awareness and valorization of slave experience at the time of Christophe's regime which did not exist in the South and which had not existed in pre-revolutionary Saint-Domingue.¹¹ Valdman explains that "One distinctive feature of the plantocratic linguistic situation in the French colonies, as opposed to the English ones . . . was the acquisition and use of Creole by dominant European groups."¹² Although the only European character in *L'Entrée du roi* is an Englishman who does not possess a thorough command of French, no less Creole, Chanlatte emphasizes the wide-ranging use of the language of the lower classes by interjecting Creole phrases in conversations with characters at all ranks of Haitian society.

In addition to language, the dramatic structure of *L'Entrée du roi* functions to express the aspirations of the formerly enslaved Haitian people. The setting consists of "a column dedicated to independence," a metonymic representation of the principle guiding the play and the creation of the nation. That principle is the end of slavery and the liberation of black people from white rule. One might also see the column as a phallic stand-in for the monarch, whose appearance is deferred to the end of the play, where even then he speaks no lines. Repeatedly referred to as the "father" of the country, his patriarchal presence thoroughly permeates the theatrical space and time of the play. What is enacted in front of and in tribute to the column that represents him is an array of social classes, ages, professions, and genders whose uniform exaltation of the king attests to the presumed unity of the country. As with Toussaint Louverture, so too with Henry Christophe, it is not personal identity as a slave, a general, or a king that matters. Haiti is what counts, and its importance has to be acted out and actively constructed—not passively granted, as

a master might grant liberty to a slave. Just as Toussaint's performance on the field of battle is echoed in grievances against the French in his *Mémoires*, Christophe's blacks are called upon to prove their worth as freemen: through physical labor, in the fields or in the building of Henry's celebrated Citadel.¹³ They also demonstrate their agency and commitment to the nation through the songs and dances performed in the play. Such performances would have had special significance to the audience at Christophe's court because of their leader's creation of and active support for the country's first Academy of Music, which supplied the performers for this play. As creolist Dany Bebel-Gisler reminds us, cultural phenomena such as dancing also represented pockets of slave resistance against total acculturation.¹⁴

The drama, as a reflection of the hybrid nature of black culture at the time, is not free of Eurocentric elements; but nor does it approach them in a spirit of pure emulation. Its respect for the three unities of time, place, and action indicate the writer's education: a significant indication at a time when defenders of different political sides attacked the poetic and linguistic failings of each other's works.¹⁵ The form of *L'Entrée du roi*—dialogue interspersed with music and dance—is the French genre of the *opéra comique*; and at times the banter of the peasant characters Marguerite and Valentin is reminiscent of similar language in plays by Molière or Marivaux. But, as noted above, their use of Creole transforms the style of their French models. The scene devoted to the British character is an acknowledgment of Christophe's admiration for Britain: upon being renamed monarch, he insisted that his first name be spelled with a “y” rather than the “I” of the French name Henri; and one of the many plans he discussed with his foreign advisor, the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, was changing the language of Haiti to English.¹⁶ But the representation of the Englishman in the play is of a bumbling, albeit well-intentioned, foreigner, whose solecisms and mispronunciations of the French language produce a comic effect. Any notion of foreign domination is easily dispelled by Chanlatte's depiction of this foolish figure.

Chanlatte also imbues the play with a certain fierceness of poetic language that seems intended precisely to counterbalance the French elocutionary style that the play displays. In Scene VII, for example, various individuals assert their will to fight to the death in the face of threats to their freedom and independence. Soldiers evoke their bones enriching the soil on which their avengers will fight; mothers describe themselves dying on the bed of national honor and in the arms of the country; a father warns his enemies that they will fertilize his fields; a woman warrior warns her son that if he fails to defend the nation his heart will be fed to the enemy.

Significantly, Chanlatte's writing subsequent to *L'Entrée du roi* shows a remarkable degree of consistency with what he had to say about slavery and the importance of Haitian nationhood in this play. To note this consistency is not to excuse or justify Chanlatte's lack of loyalty to the memory and achievement of Henry Christophe. Rather, it is to acknowledge how highly contextual the construction of non-white identity was in the early decades of the nineteenth century. As Haitian critic Henock Trouillot writes, early Haitian literature was a literature of combat: “In those times of civil war and fiery polemics, a poem was a sort of pamphlet integrated into the internecine battles between Christophe and Pétion.”¹⁷ Whether serving Christophe or his successor, Chanlatte adhered to a certain number of ideological and aesthetic principles. His “Ode to Independence,” a poetic tribute to Boyer, lavishes the same ingratiating praise on the leader of the republic as he formerly showered on the head of the monarch. Like *L'Entrée du roi*, this work is in dialogue with music. It also contains the same

central symbol of Haitian freedom, the column to Independence. Moreover, the structure in the Ode and the play are the same: a series of people of different ages, sexes, and military ranks speak, each singing the praises of the champion of the republic, Pétion.¹⁸

What we can conclude from looking at a sample of texts in French by non-white writers from the early years of the nineteenth century is that they wrote for a purpose linked to their own or their society's experiences as slaves. But that is not to say that they told the kind of "authentic" slave stories that would satisfy our desire to know what the experience of slavery "really" was like. Instead, they used language in hybrid ways, strategically taking aim at the targets of their oppression or bolstering the cause of freedom and independence. These non-white authors need to be viewed as complex, dynamic individuals, not stereotypical victims frozen in time at the time of their victimization. We do a disservice to them by assuming that their voices could only be heard through the amplifying agency of white abolitionists. By acknowledging the wide range of military, political, and artistic acts that slaves and their descendants performed, we honor their diversity and their legacy.

NOTES

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1. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 17; Yves Bénot, *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies* (Paris: La Découverte, 1989), 60.

 2. Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave in Classic Slave Narratives* (NY: Mentor, 1987); Juan Francisco Manzano, *Autobiography of a Slave*, Trans. Evelyn Picon Garfield (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1996); Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (NY: Oxford UP, 1988)

 3. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (NY: Oxford UP, 1992), 155.

 4. Juste Chanlatte, *L'Entrée du roi en sa capitale, en janvier 1818, Le Nouveau Monde* (August 19, 1979), 7-12.

 5. Joseph Saint-Rémy, *Mémoires du général Toussaint-L'Ouverture, écrits par lui-même* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1853).

 6. Pétion et Haïti

 7. Victor Schoelcher, *Histoire de l'esclavage pendant le deux dernières années* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1847), I, 313-14.

 8. Duraciné Vaval, *Histoire de la littérature haïtienne, ou l'âme noire, II* (Port-au-Prince: Editions Fardin, 1986), 244.

9. Roger Gaillard, "Chanlatte, auteur dramatique," *Le Nouveau Monde* (August 19, 1979), 6-7.

10. Chanlatte poem

11. Léon-François Hoffmann, *Littérature d'Haïti* (Vanves: EDICEF, 1995), 83.

12. Valdman, op. cit., 156.

13. Nick Nesbitt, *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003). In Chapter 5 of Nesbitt's work is devoted to analysis of Aimé Césaire's play *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*, which develops the Christophean notion of the slaves acquiring consciousness as free beings through the building of the citadel.

14. Dany Bebel-Gisler, *La Langue créole, force jugulée* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1976), 66-69.

15. Henock Trouillot, *Les Origines sociales de la littérature haïtienne* (Port-au-Prince: Edition Fardin, 1986), 26. Give example.

16. Henry Christophe, *Henry Christophe & Thomas Clarkson; a Correspondence*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs and Clifford H. Prator (New York, Greenwood Press, 1968), 142.

17. Trouillot, *Les Origines sociales de la littérature haïtienne*, 19.

18. Ibid, 28, 65.