

Notes on Juste Chanlatte's *L'Entrée du roi en sa capitale, en janvier 1818* (by Doris Y. Kadish)

Chanlatte's onistent striving to construct a non-white racial and national identity can be seen in a play written during the Christophean phase of his career, *L'Entrée du roi en sa capitale, en janvier 1818*. The most striking feature of the play and its strongest affirmation of the Christophean commitment to the black people is the playwright's choice to place former slaves on stage. *L'Entrée du roi* opens with two characters, Marguerite and Valentin, who stand at the lowest rung of the ladder of social classes depicted in the eight scenes of the play. Marguerite, broom in hand, tells Valentin of her joyful anticipation at seeing "bon papa à nous, bon maman à nous, bon Roi à nous, bel pitit Prince Royal à nous aqué toutes belles Princesses Royales à nous io." Chanlatte's foregrounding of the people in the play constitutes a recognition that for Christophe, the monarchical trappings of his regime notwithstanding, black people 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" and which Aimé Césaire has reportedly described as having a French body and an African soul.<sup>1</sup> By highlighting the language of former slaves at the beginning of the play, Chanlatte infuses the play as a whole with the presence of that African soul. In another play performed on January 1, 1820 before the king and queen, *La Partie de chasse du roi*, Chanlatte similarly begins the work in creole—in this case a chorus of young girls singing to "papa Henri"—before continuing the play in French. 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.<sup>2</sup> In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, revalorizing creole language and, concomitantly, acknowledging the legacy of slavery, has become the rallying cry for a whole generation of writers and theorists associated with the "créolité" movement. Their efforts have special relevance at all levels of society in the French Caribbean, as Valdman explains: "One distinctive feature of the plantocratic linguistic situation in the French colonies, as opposed to the English ones, for example, was the acquisition and use of Creole by dominant European groups." (Valdman 156) Although the only European character is an Englishman who does not possess 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 "une Colonne consacrée à l'indépendance," 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 actual words. Repeatedly referred to throughout the play as the "father" of the country, his paternalistic and 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. It is not personal identity as 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. Christophe's blacks are called upon to prove their worth as freemen: through physical labor, in the fields or in the building of his celebrated Citadel.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 slavishly adhere to them or 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 sides political sides attacked the poetic and linguistic failings of the other's works.<sup>5</sup> 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. An entire scene is devoted to the British character, an acknowledgment of Christophe's awareness that the identity of his black nation inevitably would be formed in relation to that white nation's hegemony in international politics and trade. The introduction of that British character is also an acknowledgment of the close ties that Christophe maintained with France's enemy. Indeed, 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.<sup>6</sup> But the representation of the Englishman in the play is of a bumbling, albeit well-intentioned, foreigner, whose sollicisms 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.

Revealingly, Chanlatte 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 his introduction to the play, which was published in the Haitian newspaper *Le Nouveau Monde* in 1979, Roger Gaillard states, "it is important to note the almost constant vigor of expression in the play's patriotic and 'independantist' themes . . . Its violent tone, its outrageous images, its energetic adjectives, its showy metaphors: all of these traits, which bear the mark of excess and stand in opposition to neoclassicism, derive directly from the exacerbated sensibilities of the era."<sup>7</sup> The examples that Gaillard cites are from Scene VII where various individuals assert their will to fight to the death against 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. This is the language of hatred that finds a place more than a century and a half later in Maximin's slaves who give voice to the experience of their enslavement. For Chanlatte, language and literature have the *engagé* function of furthering the cause of the nation.

Significantly, Chanlatte's writing after Christophe's death displays a remarkable degree of consistency in what he had to say about slavery and the importance of Haitian nationhood during and after Christophe's reign. To note this consistency is not, I hasten to add, 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." (Trouillot 19) But whether serving Christophe or his successor, Chanlatte adhered to a certain number of ideological and aesthetic principles. Consider his "Ode to Independence," a poetic tribute to Boyer that lavishes the same ingratiating praise on the leader of the republic as he formerly showered on the head of the monarchy. 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 which, during the civil war, became synonymous with the word "liberté." 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. (Trouillot 28, 65)

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Valdman, "Creole, the Language of Slavery," in *Slavery in the Francophone Caribbean World*, ed. Doris Y. Kadish (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 144, 153.

<sup>2</sup> Léon-François Hoffmann, *Littérature d'Haïti* (Vanves: EDICEF, 1995), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003). Chapter 5, devoted to an analysis of Aimé Césaire's play *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*, elaborates on the Christophean notion of the slaves acquiring consciousness as free beings through the building of the citadelle.

<sup>4</sup> Dany Bebel-Gisler, *La Langue créole, force jugulée* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1976), 66-69.

<sup>5</sup> Henock Trouillot, *Les Origines sociales de la littérature haïtienne* (Port-au-Prince: Edition Fardin, 1986), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Christophe, *Henry Christophe & Thomas Clarkson; a Correspondence*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs and Clifford H. Prator (New York, Greenwood Press, 1968), 142.

<sup>7</sup> Gaillard, "Chanlatte, auteur dramatique," *Le Nouveau Monde* (1979), 6-7.