

Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865

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In arguably one of the more fascinating chapters of *The Equality of the Human Races*, the nineteenth-century Haitian essayist Anténor Firmin's response to the racial theorizing of Gobineau, he felt the need to deal with the question of racial hybridity in order to contest Gobineau's fatalistic view of the nightmare of racial mixing. In his chapter on metissage, Firmin contests the belief that "human races degenerate through hybridization" (204) by citing a number of gifted metis writers from Alexandre Dumas to Damesvar Delorme who attest to the highest achievement of racially hybrid individuals. Firmin lamented the prevalence of Gobineau's fears of biological degradation and noted that even a great writer like Victor Hugo in *Bug Jargal* had fallen victim to the myth of the degenerate mulatto. Hugo, Firmin argued, "shows the White man as a generous being and the Black man as a poetically noble creature, but he depicts the griffe as the most hideous character" (210). Firmin explains away this depiction of the monstrous and deformed product of racial intermixing in terms of Hugo's inexperience. While this is true to some extent since the novel was an early work by Hugo, in *Tropics of Haiti* Marlene Daut sees a deeper cause for Hugo's depiction of the 'griffe' or mulatto as monstrous. Her lengthy and impressive study of the trope of racial hybridity goes a long way towards explaining both why Firmin felt it necessary to address specifically the question of racial mixing and why a writer of the stature of Victor Hugo would fall prey to the stereotype of the mulatto's monstrous hybridity.

Daut's argument is that the capacity of "tropological, metonymic power of the word "mulatto" ... to call forth (such) ideas of vengeance" (5) was pervasive in the transatlantic print culture of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Bug Jargal* was therefore simply one of the many instances where this stereotype manifests itself. Following Edward Said's lead, Daut argues that "as with *orientalism*, not 'truth' but representations" provided a narrative for the Haitian revolution that "became infused with distinctly 'racial' meaning" (36). The "Tropics" in her title relates to such 'ready-made' racial categories as the "monstrous hybrid," the "tropical temptress," the "tragic mulatto/a" that were deployed by foreign writers in order to explain and, as Michel Rolph Trouillot would say, "silence" the Haitian Revolution. Reducing the Revolution to a quest for revenge by the parricidal, depraved mulatto dramatically diminished any sense of the Revolution's importance and ultimately has the effect of

subordinating the Haitian Revolution to the French and American Revolutions. For Daut, the source of the trope of monstrous hybridity is the pseudo-scientific racial vocabulary derived from travel writers such as Moreau de Saint-Mery who saw plantation society as characterized by racial miscegenation. Such tropes of representation as the malicious intent of the mixed-race participants in the Revolution created systems of knowledge that would assign meaning to events that took place at the time. As with Said's model of orientalist discourse, the Haitian Revolution was made more 'bearable' and 'usable' because of these pervasive discursive categories. Daut meticulously tracks down these racialized narratives in order to elaborate on the hypothesis of Michel Rolph Trouillot's widely cited essay on the silencing of the Haitian revolution, "An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-event," by showing that silencing really meant using racial categories to explain the impetus of the revolution. Daut contends that it was not that the revolution was not written about but that 'silencing' really meant discounting the impact of Enlightenment ideals and reducing the revolution to what she calls a 'mulatto vengeance narrative.'

Furthermore, Daut calls into question the continuing usage of these racial tropes in scholarship on Haiti as a whole. The racializing of the narrative of the Haitian Revolution acquires a cumulative force over time and invariably resurfaces in the way "racial thinking continues to operate in our understandings of Haiti" (26). She cites as one example of this pattern the very influential study of Haitian politics *From Dessalines to Duvalier* by David Nicholls.

In her view "Nicholls' belief that skin color could reliably reveal and predict Haitian behavior and beliefs is hardly different from the way in which the former French colonists had written about colonial Saint Domingue" (20). Nicholls' work then becomes a way of reinforcing a racial grid for explaining Haitian historical writing in the nineteenth century in terms of the mulatto mythification of the past or the noiriste legend of history. Daut notes the recurrence of these essentialist categories in the work of scholars such as Philippe Girard and Leon-Francois Hoffmann. Ultimately, she advocates the need for a renewed interest in the nineteenth century and a greater awareness of the Haitian intellectuals' "faith in universals" provoked by the fear of being ostracized, or being seen as exceptional. She cites as an example Baron de Vastey, who pleaded for the removal of racial epithets and whose writings sounded very early the need to "liberate our scholarship from such a destructive and divisive hermeneutic" (34).

The chapters that make up the body of Daut's study explore a daunting literary and historical terrain, ranging from French Enlightenment philosophers and British, French and U.S. novelists and historians, travel writers and scientific racial theorists to Haitian writers, including Baron de Vastey, Eméric Bergaud, and Pierre Faubert. In her exploration, Daut both uses and challenges postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha, Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, Mary Louise Pratt, Edward Said, Ann Laura Stoler, and Robert Young. Two of the most impressive sections of this book are firstly a chapter on

Henri Christophe's secretary Baron de Vastey whose importance as a postcolonial thinker is increasingly recognized and who saw the Haitian revolution not in racial terms but as a "triumph of humanity." Secondly Daut devotes a chapter to the 1828 story "Theresa, a Haytien Tale" published in the first African American newspaper *Freedom's Journal*. In stark contrast to other fiction on the Haitian Revolution featuring female characters, this story, which "stands as one of the most important representations of the Haitian Revolution before 1865" in the U.S. (237), portrays a woman of color as a radical revolutionary and not in racial terms. Theresa's embodiment of revolutionary ideals even stood out from the images of black femininity that could be found in the very pages of *Freedom's Journal*. Conceived in what can be described as a comparative, transatlantic, and hemispheric framework, *Tropics of Haiti* is part of a crucial wave of literary criticism that seeks to not only refocus our attention on nineteenth-century Haitian studies but expand the U.S. American literary canon and contribute to the transnational turn in American Studies by exposing cultural links across the Atlantic and the Caribbean.

Works Cited

Firmin, Anténor. *The Equality of the Human Races*. Translated by Charles Asselin. Garland, 2000.