

Colonial Encounters I: Haiti à Tahiti

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Honor and Empire: The Case of Tahiti

If France's take-over of Tahiti (1842-1843) assumed an importance many times the magnitude of its causes, it is because the stakes were high, not so much diplomatically or economically as in terms of "the sentiment one has of one's moral dignity as it depends on the consideration of others" — in other words, in terms of honor (Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* [Oxford U P, 1993, p. 16). Political battles and civic life in the first half of the nineteenth century were informed by evolving and overlapping codes of honor; these codes shaped public discourse, which in transformed small events occurring half-way around the planet into an imaginary world order. Onto this invented landscape the French fastened fears and uncertainties about their identity and the place that their nation should have in a global context where empire was a growing reality.

The purpose of this of this paper is to examine the discourse of honor in the French annexation of Tahiti. My sources will include the correspondence of the high-ranking naval officer Abel Aubert Dupetit-Thouars who was responsible for claiming Tahiti for France (a military commander for whom honor was both personal and professional); reports of debates in the two Chambers (where notables espousing the ideology of public service turned honor into a national prerogative); and the *Mémoires* of François Guizot (who, as Prime Minister of King Louis-Philippe sought to elevate honor to a trans-national level). I intend to show that the July Monarchy exploited the ambiguity of the rhetoric and practice of honor to justify its ambivalence toward French imperialism in the Pacific in the mid- nineteenth century.

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"À l'origine, ce signe": Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* and the Limits of Identification

Bug-Jargal, Victor Hugo's first published work of fiction (1820, revised 1826) endeavors to confront the fundamental problems of two revolutions: the mainland French Revolution of 1789 and the Saint-Domingue slave insurrection of 1791, which resulted in the modern nation of Haiti. Dramatizing the loss of the richest colony in France's overseas empire, *Bug-Jargal* raises issues of what it means to be French: an especially fraught question for Hugo himself through the 1820s. The work continues to spark controversy among readers who search for proof of Hugo's own political convictions or social loyalties at the time(s) of the writing: is the work, or its author, monarchist or pro-revolution, *négrophile* or *négrophobe*?

Bug-Jargal questions the root causes of revolt in ways that challenge essentialist categories of identity such as black and white, master and slave, legitimate and illegitimate authority; the 1826 novel introduces the formal aesthetic opposition of the sublime and grotesque in an ambitious effort to bring the chaos of revolutionary Terror within the higher order of Romantic art. Yet multiple speakers within the novel—including a supposedly objective ethnographic science—conspire to reconfirm the existence of original categories of identity that

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the “cannibal” threat of the grotesque radically calls into question. The problem of identity and the authority of the written word are intertwined in this painfully conflicted early Hugolian novel.

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Transnational Colonial Dialogism: The Literary Empire of Toussaint Louverture

Où est-il, ce grand homme, que la nature doit à ses enfants vexés, opprimés, tourmentés? Où est-il? Il paraîtra, n'en doutons point, il se montrera, il lèvera l'étendard sacré de la liberté. Ce signal vénérable rassemblera autour de lui les compagnons de son infortune. Plus impétueux que les torrents, ils laisseront partout les traces ineffaçables de leur ressentiment.

—Abbé Raynal

Scores of colonial writers of both genders, among other creative artists, configured the rise and fall of Toussaint-Louverture, who doubled as a “saint martyr” and an “exécrable monstre” (Pamphile de Lacroix qtd. in Schoelcher xv- xvi), with pointed ideological twists and political turns. Provocative representations of the former slave turned revolutionary architect of the Haitian empire clearly shift, as J.A. Ferguson has observed, “from the hagiographical to the demonological, according to political motivation and subjective *parti pris*.” An exceptional figure ripe for identification, competition, and envy, as suggested by reconstructions of *la révolution de Saint-Domingue* we have inherited from Hugo and Lamartine, among other canonical authors, what place did Toussaint-Louverture hold in literary works by women during the colonial nineteenth century? Do women’s figurations of “le premier des Noirs” as Toussaint identified himself in a missive to Napoleon, whom he in turn addressed as “le premier des Blancs,” reflect particular cultural moments in which they are conceived? Are they politically motivated or inflected with feminist concerns? Does Toussaint-Louverture figure in a narrative process of idealization that demonstrates women’s power to think creatively about a world outside the domestic sphere? Women’s colonial-era romances that pivot on figurations of Toussaint Louverture, I shall show, expose historical imperialism to transnational colonial dialogism, productively constructing the literary empire of Toussaint Louverture between genders and races.

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Creole Encounters in 19th-Century New Orleans: Inscribing Race and Sexuality in the Forgotten Colonies

This paper will examine two areas: first a general view on how issues of “empire, identity, and exoticism” play out during the nineteenth century in the “lost American colonies” of Canada, Haiti, and Louisiana, where French culture was imported as foundations of distinct societies whose relationship to the mother culture float between assimilation and resistance. Second, and following the same line of argument will be an exploration of the inscription of race and sexuality in texts written by blacks, whites and mulattoes--who all went by the name of creole--in Louisiana during the 19th century. These authors will employ two essential and complementary strategies: “passing” and cultural miscegenation. The former implies that lines of color

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difference are at once erased and respected, as s/he who moves from one category to another, thus blurring the distinction even as it must be respected as the very reason for which passing exists—one passes as the other. Similarly, cultural miscegenation will entail the creolization of impossibly distinct cultures, principally for our purposes between black/white/mulatto, colony/metropole, exotic/domestic and finally, Anglo-American and Franco-Afro-American. In this play between the pure, the adulterated, and the hybrid at work in all (post)colonial societies, we find critical concepts to understand an at-once universal and specific Créolité-Americanité that is white and colored, visible and invisible, indigenous and foreign.