

University of Massachusetts Boston

From the Selected Works of Marc E. Prou

Fall 2002

Book Review of Jacques S. Alexis' *General Sun, My Brother* (translated by Carroll Coates)

Marc E. Prou, *University of Massachusetts Boston*



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*This issue of the Journal of Haitian Studies
is dedicated to the memory of historian*

René Piquion

*Eminent Haitian Physician, Astute Politician,
Distinguished Author and Educator.*

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What follows is a varied sample of ritual and secular works in which Haitian artists combine the strength of their beliefs with a dynamic sense of beauty and with a political agenda. There are metal sculptures, paintings, wood sculptures and the magnificent ritual flags. Viewers accustomed to separating the secular from the divine and the sacred space from the political arena must brace themselves for a revelation. In Haiti, as in other locales of the African Diaspora, the divine and the secular areas influence each other, and artists are at the same time activists and worshipers. Heaven and the physical world are entangled in constant communication mediated by the visions of the creators and the people.

Important to note, the exhibition is not at all concerned with justifying the way in which Haitian artists combine sacred Catholic imagery with African motifs. Nor does it discuss the ideas of creolization and adaptation. This installation presents old masters with new ones and how they address their topics using Vodou as both inspiration and explanation. The works featured are at home in both the temple and the public arena, just as Vodou is. This show challenges the viewer not to define the art and culture, but to come to terms with the truths art and culture reveal. The forcefulness of such a statement is not an apology but a provocation to engage this art on its own terms.

One comes out of this show with a sense of Vodou's vitality as a religion and as a social commentary. Old and new works are mixed through the show, and the viewer can witness the evolution of topics and motifs in the hands of several generations of artists. The show is like Vodou itself, a whirlwind of ideas and concepts speaking from the icons of African deities dressed like Catholic Saints with creole names and powers. Folk characters are also reinterpreted to fit into this intimate cosmos. However, as in any diaspora tradition, if you move to the center of the issues, you will find that the contradictions are resolved at the altar where Africa and the world transform into the brilliance of Vodou.

Alexis, Jacques Stephen. *General Sun, My Brother*. Translated by Carol F. Coates. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999. ISBN: 0-8139-1890-1 (p). 352 pp. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Marc Prou, University of Massachusetts Boston.

I love our people, and I love our country.
How can you talk about leaving?
The rich are the ones who leave their country to travel to other countries
As long as they have a big hotel and an American bar.
But for the rest of us,
We're rooted to the land
Like those marvelous plants that wither and die in other climates.

What we have to do is sweep our own house, put it in order, and clean out everything, everywhere (79).

General Sun, My Brother exemplifies the artistry of the author, who has great command over imageries and their meanings. Alexis' extraordinary descriptions of Haiti paint enchanted visions of the country onto a literary canvas. He provides a strong balance between the characters and the settings. Hilarion, for example, struggles through the pitfalls of the impoverished system of Port-au-Prince, and seeks refuge in the sea, in the land, in the women, in the language, and in the drums. Alexis invites the reader to observe and appreciate Haiti's beauty by serving as a voice for the people. He points out the simplicity of the ocean and the land which help Haitians cope and survive.

Alexis reveals the strategies of the corrupt government and of police officials. By exposing the truth in a society that otherwise does not display its problems, he depicts a very modest and humble working class. The modesty of the people adds to the beauty of the country itself. For example, when leaving his prison, Hilarion exclaims: "*The sky is changing color like a giant peacock. The sea breeze keeps swirling throughout the courtyard. Pelicans are turning and circling the sky.*" (57) Alexis continues: "*Somewhere a furious drum is sounding a troubling kata rhythm: ta-ta-tum, ta-tum, ta-tum. The mountains join in the chorus. The m'on shudder at their bald summits. A lanbi utters a long wail. Fires are beginning to appear on the belly of the mountains. The peasants are going to burn wood in order to make charcoal. Hilarion puts his hands in his pockets. He is dreaming of the mountains and his childhood.*" While being held captive, Hilarion is still able to marvel at the bright light of the day. With a devout fervor for the land and its inhabitants, the book awakens the reader to socio-political issues while, at the same time, developing a peaceful story. Extraordinary as it is, Alexis captures the very essence and intricate beauty of the country, as well as that of the people.

Alexis weaves the issues of politics, poverty and education into a folktale. He makes *General Sun, My Brother* easy to read, enjoyable and accessible to all readers. Although dealing with a complex political reality, Alexis makes this book comprehensible to all through a magical literary *tour de force*. Alexis explores the people's confusion and the Haitian communist ideologies. The powerful speech given by Pierre Roumel adds value to the literary deployment of the story "*We shall see an army that will rise from the very excesses of repression. Maintain your unshakable faith in our people and remember that we are not alone...Educate yourself unceasingly. Love your land, love its people. Go to bed, sleep and rise once more as revolutionaries and patriots. Keep your hearts as pure as clear mornings and thrust back the tides of lies and calumnies that unleash on us. Reply with an immense love for humankind and life.*" (184) This constitutes the core of what Alexis wants the reader to understand about revolutionary life, but few are willing to follow this sacrificial path.

Alexis does an incredible job of portraying the voice of the working class. He shows much empathy for the plight of those who work hard, as can be seen in this description. "*Men and women, they were held together by the same bonds in this accused factory- the heat, the sweat running down their backs, and the same splinters of fatigue tearing at their muscles.*" (74) The work is "scarred on their bones" as

described by Hilarion. "Those hands were no longer things of flesh, but great mitts made of calluses and bone. Those workers' hands, protruding from the wrists with crisscrossed veins, are tools that are continually deformed, deadened, and thickened when they no longer had those hands or when they would not function anymore. life was no longer livable." (171) This graphic description portrays well the vicissitudes of the Haitian peasant's every day life.

The difficult problems that the peasant child routinely confronts are depicted with great accuracy and nuance in the section of the book describing Claire-Heureuse. For example Alexis writes: "The street had been her school, her university, her books. She had succeeded in over coming all those things with a kind innocence of soul and love for life that surprised even her when she thought about it. She had paid ransom for it without realizing it. Where others were hardened by misery, Claire-Heureuse had gained a sense of struggle worthy of a wild beast, but also an enormous capacity for resignation and unlimited ability to take it." (166). Alexis pinpoints how Claire-Heureuse manages to transcend the pains and the suffering of every day life. The greatest struggle that she faces is not to become immunized to pain. This state of affairs manifests itself when Hilarion hits her and she fails to react. Claire shares with her readers her life experiences and fears about growing up in rural Haiti. She explains: "Life crams rebuffs and bitterness down the throats of Haiti's children! There that noise in the street is almost certainly kids fighting. Maybe they're competing for something other than a dead rat or an old can of food found in the trash can!" (176) This image of children being forced to fight for food and the battle for survival creates levels of competition and violence. She is afraid of not being able to protect her own child.

Alexis unravels a story in which the characters function with a Haitian-centered world-view. Through the protagonists, he recommends to the youth to revisit the indigenous culture of Haiti, instead of mimicking European exotic romanticism. This Haitian classical "peasant novel" has been made available in English through Carrol Coates' translation. Coates once again proves his expertise and skills translating the linguistic subtleties used in French and Haitian literary works. The outstanding qualities of his translation are shown by his successful attempts at inter-systemic poetry which aims at translating literally and figuratively, and identifying political and ideological determinants behind the languages in question. Thanks to Coates, we now have this magnificent translation of J. S. Alexis' novel!

Alexis is astonishing! He blends history and its splendor, creates, from page to page, animated imagery and takes the reader back to a time discovered but never lost. He takes the reader on a bewildering journey through the eyes of various characters. The book has much to offer and is indispensable for those involved in development activities within Haiti and with problems of peasant exploitation. Hooray for Alexis!

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