A Haiti Anthology: Libète

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Haitians marked the two-hundredth anniversary of libète (“freedom” in Haitian Creole) on January 1, 2004, commemorating the date in 1804 when Governor General for Life and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a former field slave, officially declared Saint-Domingue independent from France. Celebrating the bicentennial, A Haiti Anthology: Libète assembles excerpts from some 180 texts by artists, historians, anthropologists, journalists, activists, and fiction writers about the most important aspects of Haitian history, culture, and society. The multi-genre excerpts include vivid reports of firsthand experiences, detailed historical accounts, scholarly research articles, journalistic descriptions, and interpretive literary essays. Editors Charles Arthur and Michael Dash arrange the selections in ten thematic chapters, and their introductory essays provide instructive overviews of the themes, while commenting on the significance of the selections and specific issues that they elaborate.

Chapter 1, “Colonialism and Revolution,” rapidly surveys nearly three hundred years of history. Beginning with the Spanish discovery, conquest, and colonization of Hispaniola (1492–1519), it moves quickly to the establishment of French Saint-Domingue on the western third of the island in 1697 and the evolution of the colony’s slave-based plantation economy. The chapter closes with accounts of the 1791 slave uprising, the opening phase of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1803) that created the Western world’s first independent Black state.

Chapters 2–4 investigate the emergence and evolution of the new nation-state’s rigid class structure, which still assigns citizens to sharply divided minority and majority classes. A small, primarily urban elite engages in large-scale commerce, monopolizes high government offices, and/or practices the liberal professions. By contrast, residing in rural areas, a large peasantry engages in small-scale production of agricultural commodities and craft goods, along with related forms of trade. “The Status Quo: Elites, Soldiers and Dictators” examines mechanisms by which the elite has manipulated Haiti’s emerging economic and political systems to increase personal wealth, while defending minority class interests and social privileges. “Rural Haiti: Peasants, Land and the Environment” describes the complexity of peasant strategies to earn a living when rural livelihoods are precarious, peasant labor power is systematically exploited through unequal market relations, and ecological conditions rapidly deteriorate. The peasantry is not composed of passive victims, Arthur and Dash emphasize, but rather of poor, disenfranchised people who nonetheless actively promote change by participating in popular movements and development-oriented groups. Yet, not all of Haiti’s poor are rural, the next chapter’s authors show, although the urban poor face very different circumstances. “Poverty and Urban Life” focuses on a major consequence of rural poverty: a rural exodus, creating a population explosion in Port-au-Prince, the capital city, and tremendous population growth in Haiti’s secondary cities and towns. Examining urban livelihoods, physical infrastructure, as well as health, housing, educational,
and environmental conditions, the chapter documents the difficulties with which the urban poor must cope and highlights their political struggles to change their living and working conditions.

Clearly, the Haitian struggle for libète continues long after Haiti gained its independence. Class conflict still deeply divides the nation-state: the elite staunchly defends its political-economic power and social privileges, and diverse populist groups claiming to represent the Haitian majority make common cause to uproot the elite and to install a genuinely national government that delivers promises to feed and protect the poor, while improving their living conditions. Chapter 5, “Forces for Change,” examines change-oriented uprisings or protest movements throughout Haitian history, ending with the Lavalas Movement that brought about the landslide 1990 election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the first Haitian president democratically elected under universal suffrage and with a high voter turnout. However, as Arthur and Dash observe, the forces that brought Aristide to power “failed to coalesce into an organized movement that could enact the overthrow of the old order (p. 14).” Published in 1999, their anthology could not include texts about President Aristide’s controversial second election in 2000 or the massive demonstrations of December 2003 and the armed rebellion of January–February 2004 that led to his removal from office. Yet, this volume offers valuable background information about ongoing class struggles for control of state power, and insights into the inherent structural problems that hinder the Haitian state’s efforts to serve the poor.

Since 1960, at least one million Haitians have left their homeland to escape political repression or to search for greater personal security and economic opportunities. Selections in Chapter 6, “Refugees and the Diaspora,” review the reasons for emigration, the range of destinations, and the varied experiences of Haitians seeking better lives overseas. Arthur and Dash emphasize Haiti’s loss of skilled and educated people to the United States of America, Canada, the Dominican Republic, and the Bahamas, countries that still consider Haitians an unwanted burden, while benefiting from their labor, entrepreneurship, and tax payments.

Chapter 7, “Foreign Interventions,” assembles passages from various accounts to demonstrate that, from Haiti’s second decade of independence to the 1990s political-economic crisis, foreign governments and businessmen repeatedly constrained the Haitian state’s freedom to act in its own interest and the national interest. In 1825, for instance, France tentatively recognized Haitian sovereignty only after Haiti agreed to indemnify Saint-Domingue’s French colonists for property (including slaves) lost during the Haitian Revolution. Arthur and Dash note many subsequent episodes of foreign interference and military intervention. Several texts consider the U.S. occupation (1915–1934), a severe blow to Haitian national pride that ended, for a time, the traditional politics of government change by military uprising, without establishing sustainable foundations for economic progress or political stability, which were the occupation’s alleged objectives.

Chapter 8, “Popular Religion and Culture,” introduces the reader to the institutions, beliefs, and values of everyday Haitian life. Countering common misconceptions and stereotypes concerning Vodou, Haiti’s “popular religion” (as contrasted with Catholicism and Protestantism), Arthur and Dash describe some of its tenets and ceremonies in historical perspective. Several selections offer entertaining glimpses of Haitian culture through stories and proverbs. Their authors suggest that these elements of the oral tradition reflect deeper social, political, and economic struggles between Haiti’s elite minority and poor majority. Although one may question this narrow interpretation, stories and proverbs have offered many generations of Haitians hope during difficult times, and they show how Haitians find humor in even the most serious situations.

Chapter 9, “Literature and Language,” includes significant contributions to Haitian literature, among them examples of the development of Haitian Creole as a literary language. It begins with the editors’ translation of a powerful excerpt from Anténor Firmin’s De l’Égalité des Races Humaines rejecting notions of racial supremacy and speaking out against the injustices of colonialism. (Firmin’s magnum opus, originally published in 1885 to refute Count Arthur de Gobineau’s Essai sur l’Inégalité des Races Humaines [1853–1855], is now available in English [Firmin 2000].) Other selections illustrate literary efforts to forge a positive Haitian identity from interpretations of the everyday lives of rural people at home and the experiences of Haitians abroad.

The final chapter, “The View from Abroad,” presents interpretations from an outsider’s perspective. Non-Haitians, Arthur and Dash remark, are frequently fascinated to the point of distortion by Vodou or the fact that Haiti was the world’s first Black state to free itself from colonial domination. Superficial observations, wild interpretations, or dubious ulterior motives mar many of this chapter’s selections, perpetuating a foreign gaze that distorts Haitian realities. Fortunately, some authors utilize the outsider’s vantage point to illuminate features of Haitian culture or society so commonplace for most Haitians that they go unnoticed.

Five years after its publication, A Haiti Anthology: Libète still encourages serious reflection about the complexity of Haiti’s current crisis, challenging us to
think historically, comparatively, and synthetically by reading across writing genres, themes, and contrasting perspectives. Teachers will find the anthology’s contents and organization particularly useful for undergraduate courses about Haiti, the Caribbean region, or the Americas. Scholars and researchers may question aspects of the anthology’s conceptual framework and empirical data (e.g., the recycled bimodal class structure). Yet, they, too, will benefit from the selections, some difficult to find and others translated for the first time. Readers who prefer full texts to excerpts may consult the “Acknowledgment and Permissions” annex, whose bibliography lists complete citations.

REFERENCE

Firmin, Anténor


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There has been an explosion of interest in “Whiteness” during the last two decades, and anthropologists have added their voices to the ever-larger chorus calling for a critical reexamination of privileged White racial “invisibility” in the United States. Yet, despite many provocative theoretical expositions, historically informed ethnographies of Whiteness have been few. Furthermore, scholars of White privilege have largely turned a blind eye to the ways in which Whiteness is differentially granted to individuals and groups according to not only ethnic origin but also class position and gender. Anthropologist Pem Davidson Buck responds to both omissions in a powerful new historical ethnography and compelling call to arms for scholars and citizens alike. Systematically drawing on a complex assortment of subaltern sources and renderings of history, Worked to the Bone presents a devastating critique of “business as usual” in the negotiation of class, gender, and race in the United States.

Buck establishes as her mission an “alternative anthropology and history” of the two rural Kentucky counties, fictitiously named North County and South County, where she lives and works. In the pursuit of such a revealing corrective to the official record, she employs revisionist histories, analyzes primary documents unearthed in courthouses and archives, and engages county residents in formal and informal interviews. Buck’s data and interpretations are also grounded in and contextualized by thirty years of intimate, highly personal “participant observation.”

Situating Kentucky’s history within the historical economic development of the United States, Buck turns a discerning eye to the details of legal, labor, and legislative practices. Careful scrutiny of connections among national, regional, and local conditions allows her to identify the political-economic and ideological forces that shaped current distributions of wealth and power in North and South Counties. The book’s engaging main lens and rhetorical device, meanwhile, derives from Buck’s years working as a plumber’s apprentice and is known as the “view from under the sink”—or, the subaltern account of events. Buck draws an analogy between U.S. capitalism and a plumbing system in which small pipes drain individual homes, feed into larger neighborhood pipes, and finally merge with citywide pipe systems, effectively draining large areas. Like these “trickle-up” systems, Buck argues, White elites have established and maintained their elite status by draining the labor of huge numbers of non-elites, including a disproportionate number of people of color, women, youth, and poor Whites. Chapters 1–14 trace the history of settlement and political-economic development in the United States, from the establishment of the British colonies through the 1970s. In Chapters 15–17, Buck draws her analysis to the present and sounds a warning against the ever-increasing concentration of capital that is central to the globalization of industry and trade.

Attempting to cover concisely almost four hundred years of multidimensional history, the text at times becomes dense with facts, figures, and theories, and some social trends and historical periods inevitably receive greater attention than others. Yet the thread with which Buck ties together historical processes and their implications—a loosely Marxist theorization articulated through the “view from under the sink” construct—serves very effectively to weave a coherent and persuasive narrative. It is curious that Buck, while candid about her personal biases and subjectivities, does not devote more space to a discussion of her theoretical influences. But her stated desire to reach a broad audience (including the general public) with Worked to the Bone may account for the omission. Indeed, in this regard, the “view from under the sink” rhetorical device works well to demystify Marxist formulations of the opposition between labor and capital.