Why Haiti Needs New Narratives: Panel Round Up from the 41st Caribbean Studies Association Meeting, Port-au-Prince, Haiti (June 5-11, 2016)-- by Nathan Dize

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By Nathan Dize

On June 5th, 2016 about 800 researchers, professors, librarians and graduate students arrived at the Marriott Hotel in Port-au-Prince, Haiti for the 41st installment of the Caribbean Studies Association meeting. Being my first CSA meeting as well as my first trip to Haiti, I was very excited to participate in the conference as well as take in the sounds and sights of the Haitian capital. However, I’ll save my thoughts on my visit to the Champs-de-Mars, the MUPANAH, and the Place Boyer for another time. In this post, I will give a detailed report of one of the more recent – and influential – movements featured at the CSA: New Narratives of Haiti. Before recapping the panel, I provide a brief summary of the movement below.

In 2013, the 25th annual Haitian Studies Association meeting held at the Hotel Karibe in Pétionville took on the theme of “Representations, Revisions, Responsibilities: Towards New Narratives for Haiti in 2013 and Beyond.” The goal of the conference was to shift negative perceptions of Haiti by revisiting the past and looking deeper for more nuanced narratives and representations of the Caribbean nation. Later in 2013, an issue of Transition appeared with the same focus on narratives of Haiti, embracing the provocative call-to-arms best articulated by anthropologist, poet, and performance artist Gina Athena Ulysse. In her 2015 trilingual tour-de-force Why Haiti Needs New Narratives: A Post-Quake Chronicle, Ulysse argues that, in the public domain, Haiti has been “rhetorically and symbolically incarcerated” and is rarely characterized by more than clichés or stereotypes.[1] As such, New Narratives of Haiti aims to reframe depictions of Haiti by focusing on the ways in which Haitians have historically fought against colonial and neocolonial representations of their history, culture, religion, and society.

Organized by Regine O. Jackson (Agnes Scott College), the panel on New Narratives of Haiti sought to contextualize Ulysse’s Why Haiti Needs New Narratives by considering its contributions to translation and black feminist praxis as well as the intervention it stages in the realm of representation.

Nadève Ménard (École Normale Supérieure de l’Université d’État d’Haïti) spoke about the process of...
rendering Ulysse’s English manuscript into Kreyòl – Évelyne Trouillot (The Infamous Rosalie + link) performed the French translation. Ménard framed her talk through the lens of translation as community service, arguing that it is crucial to engage with the Haitian (i.e. the language) in Haitian Studies while also stressing the need to cite scholars writing in Kreyòl. Part of what makes Ulysse’s text so important is the fact that it was printed as a trilingual edition, granting it to inclusive academic practice that reflects the many linguistic layers of Haitian studies as a field. Reflecting on her experience as a translator, Ménard noted that there was often a lack of tools for the Kreyòl translator. The absence of ample thesauruses and dictionaries make the work of shifting the perception of Kreyòl as a quotidian language to a scholarly tongue an increasingly difficult task.

Next, Régine Jean-Charles (Boston College) examined Ulysse’s work as an example of black feminist praxis, illustrating five key aspects of the text that align it with the likes of Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw.

(1) Ulysse’s book takes an intersectional approach to the post-quake narratives of Haiti, analyzing race, class, gender, religion, and nationality as intersecting layers of personhood that cannot be reduced to one single element. Jean-Charles spoke of Ulysse’s use of “ubiquitous images of women in tent camps” after the quake to acknowledge the myriad issues facing women in the aftermath of the goudougoudou.

(2) Ulysse positions herself as a black female Haitian anthropologist, performance artist, and poet as the book’s point of departure. Thereby performing black feminist praxis.

(3) Why Haiti Needs New Narratives is a blend of public scholarship and activism. To take this element further, it is worth pointing out that Ulysse’s public writings after the book’s publication continue to comment on issues of pedagogy, racism, neocolonialism, and Black Lives Matter through various online media outlets.

(4) Ulysse’s work as a performer embraces the need for black feminism to change and evolve in order to respond to shifting narratives that oppress and dominate black bodies.

(5) Ulysse falls into a long line of Haitian feminist intellectuals like Paulette Poujol-Oriol who have sought to reverse the vilification of vodou and support its cultural importance for Haiti.

After Jean-Charles, Camille Chalmers (PAPDA, Plateform Haïtienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif) addressed the ways in which Why Haiti Needs New Narratives stages an intervention in the realm of representation, history, and ideology. For Chalmers, the work stands as a deconstruction of the image of Haiti as seen from the West (particularly the United States and France) that serves to recuperate negative portrayals of the country, its history, its culture, and its people. Ulysse does this, Chalmers insists, without victimizing Haiti. Ulysse contemplates the implications of thrusting Haiti into the image of the “bête noire,” a country lead by so-called brutes incapable of self-governance. By deconstructing these narratives of Haiti, Ulysse is able to, as Chalmers puts it, address issues of historical silence, isolation, and the danger of singular narratives to Haitian people in Haiti and its diaspora.

The final speaker on the panel was Gina Athena Ulysse herself, who responded to and addressed
comments brought forth by Ménard, Jean-Charles, and Chalmers. Perhaps the most important question Ulysse spoke to was in regards to language and the trilingual version of Why Haiti Needs New Narratives. “English is my language of power,” Ulysse said when responding to why she wrote her manuscript in English. While her chosen language of scholarly publication is English, she was quick to note the ways in which language, particularly French, has been part of an exclusive practice in Haiti dating back to colonialism. For this reason, it was important that the work also be translated into Kreyòl. Admitting that English, French, and Kreyòl are products of her experience, they constitute distinct and separate parts but they each have a purpose and an origin. Speaking about Kreyòl access, Ulysse alluded to having brought copies of her book to Haiti to distribute to local institutions as a way to increase access to the book in Haiti. In this sense, Ulysse quite literally told us what it means to carry all three languages of Haiti with her as an act of black feminist praxis.

Ultimately, New Narratives of Haiti is here to stay with anthropological, literary, and historical criticism, among other disciplines, embracing the need for more nuanced representations of Haiti’s past, present, and potential futures.


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