Haiti in Translation Blog Series

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Haiti in Translation

By Nathan H Dize

H-Haiti began in June 2016 with the expressed purpose of existing as a virtual kalfou, or crossroads, where activists, artists, and scholars can meet to discuss Haitian art, culture, history, and society. Operating as an extension of H-Haiti, the blog series “Haiti in Translation” will provide a space where translators of Haitian primary texts, as well as other studies pertaining to Haiti, can discuss their craft and the significance of their work. “Haiti in Translation” will feature interviews with translators and editors of recently published works of history, literature, and, sociology, among others.

In terms of translation, the metaphor of the crossroads perfectly describes the state of the field of Haitian Studies - it inevitably requires a crossing from one language to the next. At conferences such as the Haitian Studies Association and the Caribbean Studies Association, organizers are constantly tasked with providing translation services as well as seeking for equitable ways of including Kreyòl, English, French, and Spanish presentations as part of their programming. Forces such as colonialism, slavery, and diaspora have created the linguistic panorama that characterizes the study of Haiti and its diaspora. While there are people who possess a certain command of all four of these languages, practical problems often make it so access to instruction in one or more of these languages is beyond the means of the individual. This is the need that translators are tasked with addressing.

In May 2015, Wesleyan University Press released a tri-lingual edition of Gina Athena Ulysse’s Why Haiti Needs New Narratives: A Post-Quake Chronicle. By featuring Kreyòl and French translations by Nadèве Ménard and Évelyne Trouillot, alongside the original English-language version, Ulysse’s text makes a linguistic push for new narratives of Haiti, highlighting the need to create linguistically inclusive debates that, as Ménard recently called for, “engage with the Haitian in Haitian Studies.” Other recent translations such as the first Haitian novel Émeric Bergeaud’s Stella: A Novel of the Haitian Revolution (trans. Lesley S. Curtis & Christen Mucher, 2015) and Frankétienne’s lyrically complex Ready to Burst (trans. Kaiama Glover, 2014) have provided access to Haitian literary texts that have either been historically denigrated or perceived as inaccessible by a wide sphere of readers.
“Haiti in Translation” seeks to highlight masterful works of translation and in doing so, it will engage with the translators as well as the text. This is a deliberate attempt to foreground the work of translators who are often tasked with working in the shadows of the text and the source author. The reason for this is two-fold. First, by interviewing translators, “Haiti in Translation” will provide readers access to the intellectual labor of translation. This is a crucial step in promoting translation as a viable intellectual activity in a tenure-track academic world that can be less receptive to translation projects in the realm of academic publishing. Second, by allowing translators to candidly
discuss their craft, “Haiti in translation” will provide aspiring translators with a sounding board for some of their own personal challenges of translation.

(A translation and critical edition of Émeric Bergeaud’s Stella originally published in French in 1859, courtesy of NYU Press)

“Haiti in Translation” will exist, at least for now, in a blog-style format rather than recorded interviews, in contrast to other influential academic podcasts like New Books in Caribbean Studies and Ben Franklin’s World. Another important aspect of “Haiti in Translation” is that the blog will feature reviews of select works in translation, to be found on H-Haiti’s main review page. “Haiti in Translation” is, therefore, delighted to join an already rich panorama of digital scholarship on the Caribbean such as SX Salon, Anthurium, and SX Archipelagos. These monumental efforts have increased access to literary, critical, and digital scholarship on the Caribbean in precisely the way that Haiti in Translation seeks to shed light on our field’s least talked about necessity — translation.

With all of that said, stay tuned for the first issue of Haiti in Translation as I interview Lesley S. Curtis and Christen Mucher about their masterful work on Stella: A Novel of the Haitian Revolution (NYU Press, 2015).

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