Haiti in Translation: Stella: A Novel of the Haitian Revolution by Émeric Bergeaud An Interview with Lesley S. Curtis & Christen Mucher

Discussion published by Nathan Dize on Friday, October 14, 2016

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It is my pleasure to welcome you the first of many posts focusing on the theme of Haiti in Translation. For Haitian studies, like many academic fields, translation is at the center of everything we do, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Whether in Haitian Kreyol, English, French, Spanish or any other language, translation helps to even the playing field - it exists as a democratizing gesture. However, too often the translator is left floating in the background, unacknowledged and unrecognized. This interview series is an attempt to highlight masterful works of translation regarding Haiti and Haitian studies by talking with the translators themselves, allowing them to explain their process, challenges, and vision.

In this inaugural issue of the Haiti in Translation interview series, I had the pleasure of talking with Lesley S. Curtis and Christen Mucher about their recent translation of Stella: A Novel of the Haitian Revolution by Émeric Bergeaud (NYU Press 2015), a book that I first discovered in translation. Stella is a perfect example of the types of projects that cause us to reevaluate important works either long out of print or trapped on microfilm in off-site storage facilities. Translation has become one of the most effective ways of recovering important works that help to illuminate Haiti’s complex past and shed light on its present. Please join Lesley S. Curtis, Christen Mucher, and me as we discuss their translation of Haiti’s first novel.

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Nathan H Dize: Perhaps the best way for us to begin would be for us to start from the beginning of your project. You do this very well in your introduction, but could you briefly introduce Émeric Bergeaud and Stella: A Novel of the Haitian Revolution?

Lesley S. Curtis: Bergeaud was an early Haitian politician and man of letters. He was born in 1818, so over a decade after his country’s independence. Yet he was very much a part of several generations of Haitians who believed that preserving the history of their country’s independence would be crucial to its success. So much of what comes out of Haiti at this time is about national history—it’s about wanting the importance of the story of the first anti-slavery postcolonial nation to be witnessed and understood. Bergeaud wrote Stella, Haiti’s first novel, in this political and historical context.

Christen Mucher: The context is both national and international: some Haitians felt that the further they moved from the “Revolutionary generation”—the generation of Bergeaud’s parents—the further they were removed from their own origins and ideals. This is why “remembrance” is such an important theme in the novel, whether in terms of the brothers’ duty to remember their responsibility to each other, the nation’s duty to remember its founders’ sacrifices, or humanity’s obligation to
remember the horrors of slavery, prejudice, and injustice. This is what Bergeaud meant when he wrote that there were “things that the heart must always remember” (183). In terms of the international context, Bergeaud and many of his contemporaries felt that the Haitian Revolution was being misremembered: works by French, British, and US authors tended to portray Haiti and the Revolution negatively at best, which is why Bergeaud felt the need to write his own version.

LSC: Stella is an odd novel because it is both history and fiction, but Bergeaud makes it clear that this was the point.

CM: Yes, Bergeaud was very direct about this formal particularity in his “Author’s Note”: he “dressed up” history as a novel to attract readers, but some of those readers did not always appreciate his method, because Stella was neither purely a novel nor a history. After Bergeaud died, his cousin the eminent Haitian historian Beaubrun Ardouin arranged to have the novel published in Paris. It is very likely that Ardouin did quite a bit of editing himself, especially in the more explicitly historical sections, and his contributions make the hybrid nature of the book even more apparent.

LSC: For this reason, and because it has taken a long time for early Haitian literature to get the respect that it deserves, the novel was not translated into English for over a century.

NHD: I’m glad you both referenced the history of Stella and its publication. I think when we talk about translation projects, most often there is a sense of urgency — perhaps even a “call” of sorts — to translate certain works. Can you talk about your motivations for translating Stella? Is its relevance as the first Haitian novel merely historical, or are there other contexts that Bergeaud’s work can help us think through?

LSC: I first found out about Stella while reading for my Ph.D. exams. It seemed odd that a novel could be so rare and that so few people had written about it. I remember going into the Duke Library basement and pulling it up on microfilm. I hated microfilm because it’s so hard to read! But that probably added to the feeling that I was making some real discovery when I read it.

CM: I’m not sure that Lesley and I have ever talked about this, but that’s how I found out about Stella, too—I read that same microfilm from Duke for my Ph.D. exams. I am particularly interested in the historical novels that came out of the nineteenth-century nationalist movements, and I was so surprised to come across one for Haiti — because I had been led to believe that there weren’t any Haitian novels until the end of the century — and was doubly surprised to learn that so few people knew about it. Getting access to the text itself was difficult, because there are only a few microfilm copies in the world, and nothing had been digitized at that point. So the novel had been extremely hard to access — for readers in Haiti, France, the US, or elsewhere — for over a century.

LSC: When I read Stella, I immediately loved it and thought it was quite good despite its obscurity. To me, that so few other people had recognized this was a tragedy. I saw a parallel between the fact that it had taken so long for people to acknowledge the importance of Haiti’s revolution and the fact that people were still not really valuing the early literature of Haitians. I wanted to do something about it and I knew that translating it into English would give the novel more readers.

CM: Right. As soon as I read it, I just couldn’t understand so few people were paying attention to this
novel, and right away I started thinking that a translation into English might make a difference. But it was a project that I didn’t think I could do on my own: that’s why I was so excited when I met Lesley!

LSC: I agree with you, Nathan, that it did in a way feeling like a “call” of sorts. And then I met Christen at the Atlantic World Research Network conference in Greensboro, North Carolina. I had actually missed the deadline for that conference, but then was asked to submit something anyway. It turned out to be quite fortuitous. Christen came up to me after my talk. We had lunch to discuss it. And the plan was hatched. I don’t think either one of us thought it would take five years, but we did it! And we’re happy we did.

NHD: It’s really amazing that you two came across the novel in graduate school, and I’m glad that I asked that question! My next question is exactly about how you carried out the translation. As a translator who often collaborates, I’m really intrigued by how both of you went about the task of translation. Did you both translate separate sections of the book and fuse them together or did you translate each chapter as a team? Did the fact that you hail from slightly different academic backgrounds — English and French — change the way you two translated Stella?

LSC: I think Christen and I worked extremely well together. I love translating through collaboration. Christen and I both felt dedicated to keeping Stella as close to the original as possible. We had a similar approach in that respect. But I also felt like Christen’s English was often just “prettier” than mine. I would often move the words from French to English, then she would work her finesse to make them flow.

CM: And Lesley’s French is better than mine, so her expertise there was absolutely indispensable. Although we were both trained as “historicist” literary scholars, because of our different national and linguistic schools, we tended to focus on different things. I focused more on book history, for example, and Lesley focused more on the history of abolitionism; I tinkered with the English, and she kept an eye on the French. In that way I think we really complemented each other.

LSC: Christen could rely on me to recognize references to French texts and current events of the time. The word “philanthropist,” for example, was often shorthand for “abolitionist” in French, which is not the case in English. And I could rely on Christen to know more about the nineteenth-century American and British. “This is what Dickens or Cooper might have said,” she’d add. I think we were a fantastic team because of our complementary skills. And we became good friends, too.

CM: Also, because we are both dedicated to studying Haitian history and culture, we could bring together our respective knowledge about Haiti vis-à-vis France or the US, etc., which helped us round out our sense of Stella in context. Really, I don’t think we could have asked for a better working relationship. Or a better path to friendship.

NHD: That is a really compelling story of collaboration and friendship! I have to say, I couldn’t help but notice that this is a very lyrical text, would you talk about the process of rendering the style and tone of Stella from French into English? What were some of the more challenging passages?

LSC: Thanks for the compliment, Nathan!

CM: We spent a lot of time thinking and talking about style and tone, and as Lesley said we were
really committed to trying to preserve the feel as well as the content of Bergeaud’s writing. We made a style sheet for this issue specifically—for example, I would look for equivalently formal and contemporary samples of text in English (this is where the Dickens, for example, came in), and then I would read around to get a feel in order to match it with Bergeaud’s. After we came up with something, we would send the phrases back and forth until we got the sense that we’d done the passage justice. A lot of this was done by ear and by feel, which draws on the skills we’ve both developed through our own language acquisition work.

**LSC:** Specifically, I think the battle scenes were the most challenging. There were a ton of pronouns and it wasn’t always clear what the author was referring to. Additionally, Bergeaud (or perhaps [Beaubrun] Ardouin, his editor) was intensely dedicated to certain details that sometimes seemed to detract from the story. His desire to make the characters representative was sometimes hard to balance with the fact that he was incorporating actual historical details from the Revolution.

**CM:** I agree. In terms of style, there was the added difficulty of working with two authorial voices. We have our guesses, but since we don’t have the original manuscript, we could never really be sure when a sentence came from Bergeaud and when it had been added later by Ardouin.

**NHD:** Exactly, I could not help but think when I was reading *Stella*, and correct me if I’m wrong, that there seem to be two particular voices that emerge, a narrative voice and a historical voice, which emanate from the tension Bergeaud creates between fiction and history. Are we meant to feel this both discursively as well as linguistically?

**CM:** That sense of two voices you detected, Nathan, is one of the things that has long been held against the novel as a flaw of its composition. But I think it’s much more interesting to approach it in the way that you have—as a formal embodiment of generic tension. Exploring that tension can help outline some of Bergeaud’s constraints as well as highlight his moments of innovation. I think it also emphasizes just how important, and complicated, the project of legibility—and by this I mean the international recognition of Haitian humanity and genius—was to Bergeaud.

**LSC:** I think our guide for this challenge was our desire to keep the work as close as possible to the original. This is why we kept the original footnotes and added our own, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible, but realizing that modern readers might need more information. We also wanted to preserve a few of the Kreyòl and French words, which is why we included a glossary which doesn’t exist in the original.

**CM:** Something else that we did to preserve the “original” composition was to note, where we could, passages that were taken directly from published historical texts, including Ardouin’s *Études sur l’histoire d’Haiti*. In the 1859 edition of *Stella* (but not in more recent reproductions), citations were announced through the use of italics. While this wasn’t a convention we could follow here, it was still important to us that the current-day reader have a sense of just how often these passages appeared, and where they had originated. Examining Bergeaud’s historical sources themselves reveals a lot.

**NHD:** You both make great points about the composition of the novel in terms of voice, but also in terms of the literary references that Bergeaud employs. By all accounts *Stella* is a rather erudite work of fiction: could you talk about the research that went into preparing the explanatory notes and
editors’ notes that operate as companions to the text?

**LSC:** For me, the research was really my dissertation. I was already writing on French-language texts about the Haitian Revolution. I combined this knowledge with Christen’s historical expertise about the time period and the region. The introduction actually came together quite easily.

**CM:** Initially we had thought about co-authoring a journal article on the piece, which is also where some of the research originates, but I agree with Lesley—overall, the introduction just came together out of much of the work and thinking we were already doing. I think it helped that we had a shared sense of priorities in terms of what we hoped readers would know when approaching Stella for the first time.

**NHD:** That actually sounds like useful advice for organizing one’s research in general, thanks for that! While reading *Stella*, it was remarkable how one could follow the chronology of the Haitian Revolution even though we are caught up in Bergeaud’s fictional battle between Romulus and Remus and the Colonist. However, for readers who might not be as knowledgeable about the Haitian Revolution does the historical specificity of the novel make *Stella* inaccessible? What advice would you offer readers for navigating their way through the history of the Haitian Revolution as it pertains to *Stella*?

**LSC:** This is a good point. It’s an unconventional novel in many respects. It can get caught up in its own historical details. But that’s also what makes it so unique and important. It’s why I think that our introduction is important. Having that context can help. And it’s also a learning opportunity for students, educators, and anyone who wants to know more about the remarkable story of how Haiti came to be and the impressive way that Haitians have been telling that story for centuries.

**CM:** We recognize that providing a chronology of the Haitian Revolution or more details on Haitian history could have been helpful to some readers, but our choice not to provide these was partly due to space concerns. There are really brilliant secondary sources that we hope students (and all readers) will consult. We listed a few in the “Recommended Reading” section at the end of our introduction, and there are also really great, accessible sources online, such as the Louverture Project and the Haiti Digital Library. We wanted to use the pages we had to really focus on the novel, its author, and their specific context because that’s not information a reader can easily find elsewhere.

**NHD:** Lastly, do you have any advice for aspiring translators hoping to undertake literary translation or critical editions of translated works?

**LSC:** You have to love it. That sounds simple, but it’s the way it works. You live with the text so intensely for such a long time. And sometimes that can be hard. Sometimes it’s actually hard to separate yourself from the work. There were many dark, unfair, and disturbing passages in Stella. Sometimes I dreaded going back to work on those because it made me personally sad. And then sometimes there were just beautiful passages—occasionally ones that I didn’t want to translate from the French because they were just so beautiful in the original. Translating is an intense, beautiful, intellectual, fun, and lengthy process. And I’m not sure anyone does it without emotional investment. You have to love the work that you are translating and you have to love the process.
CM: I completely agree. I feel like I spent five years constantly inside this text, and many times I really felt like Bergeaud’s amanuensis. We were writing the words, but we weren’t alone. It’s a really odd, but ultimately comforting, feeling. I guess I’d encourage other translators to embrace the experiences of immersion and collaboration.