Haiti in Translation: Dance on the Volcano by Marie Vieux-Chauvet, An Interview with Kaiama L. Glover

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Welcome to another issue of Haiti in Translation! This past month, I spoke with Kaiama L. Glover about her forthcoming translation of Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s Dance on the Volcano, a text that I first read in translation many years ago. Previously translated in 1959 by Salvatore Attanasio, Dance on the Volcano (Danse sur le volcan) is Chauvet’s second novel, originally published in 1957 in French. It is curious that Dance on the Volcano is, in fact, the first of Chauvet’s works to be translated into English because it is often overshadowed by her powerful triptych Love, Anger, Madness (Amour, colère et folie), which was translated in 2010 by Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokur. Glover’s new translation of Dance on the Volcano, revives Chauvet’s early work and re-introduces an Anglophone audience to a text that has been unavailable in print for nearly 60 years. One of the most prolific writers of her time, Chauvet fled Haiti under the reign of François Duvalier in 1968, seeking exile in New York. She died of cancer in 1973 and her final book, Birds of Prey (Les Rapaces) was published posthumously in 1986.

In addition to her translation of Dance on the Volcano, Kaiama L. Glover is the translator of two other works of Haitian fiction: Frankétienne’s Ready to Burst (2014) and René Despestre’s Hadriana in All My Dreams (forthcoming with Akashic Books in 2017). She is the author of Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon (2010) and co-editor of Yale French Studies no.128 Marie Vieux Chauvet: Paradoxes of the Postcolonial Feminine (2016). Glover’s work both in translation and in literary criticism circles help to draw us to Marie Vieux-Chauvet, whose literary reputation and presence has grown monumentally in her absence.

Nathan H. Dize: As a literary critic who has worked quite extensively on the writings of Marie Vieux-Chauvet, can you talk about the importance of her work in French as well as in translation?

Kaiama L. Glover: Marie Chauvet is quite simply and without question one of the most important writers of the twentieth century – in Haiti, yes, certainly, but also in the world more broadly. A prize-winning author from the publication of her first novel in 1954, encouraged and admired by French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, and a bold participant in the politically charged literary sphere of her time, Chauvet has written work that is as significant to understanding matters of race, gender, and class in Haiti as it is to thinking about global social struggles. She set the bar in many ways for writing womanhood – as much for Haitian writers as for writers beyond the borders of the island.

Much of what I would argue is the significance of Chauvet’s work I, and others, have written about extensively in various forums. To those conversations I’d add that bringing focused attention to her work in an English-speaking context, in part through the publication of this new translation, is critical to making visible the connections that link Haiti to a world that has a lot of trouble truly seeing that...
nation. Whether we like it or not, English remains the global lingua franca and is the tool with which so many institutions – including the literary institution – have been constructed and are maintained. To the extent to which Chauvet’s francophonie renders her less accessible to Anglophone populations, often including Haitians in diaspora, I think it is critical to bring her more adamantly into transnational conversations around the issues she raises in her fiction.

NHD: Particularly as we address access to Chauvet’s work in English, I suppose the appropriate follow-up would be to ask you why you chose to re-translate Dance on the Volcano (translated in 1959 by Salvatore Attansio)? What were some of the issues you had with the previous translation?

KLG: To be honest, this was not a choice I made. My editor at Archipelago Books, Jill Schoolman, who published my very first translation (Haitian writer Frankétienne’s Ready to Burst), approached me to translate the novel in January 2015. Jill has an extraordinary instinct as far as the projects she decides to put her efforts into are concerned, and I knew that that Archipelago would produce an absolutely exquisite edition of Chauvet’s novel. All to say, I really couldn’t pass up the opportunity to take on this project, knowing that we’d be able to get out into the world in time to celebrate Chauvet’s 100th birthday and, we hoped, thereby give some renewed life to the novel.

NHD: While reading your translation, I felt like I was sitting in on an intimate conversation between the two of you, author and translator. I was quite stunned by how elegantly you translate the vivid sights, sounds, and complexities of 18th century Saint-Domingue. Was hard to enter into Chauvet’s Saint-Domingue? What were some of the challenges you faced in rendering the context of the ‘libertine colony’ from French to English?

KLG: It helps, of course, that Haiti and its history figure prominently in my research, writing, and teaching. Although my scholarship focuses primarily on the twentieth century, any and everything I do in my work has necessarily looked back to Haiti’s revolutionary period. Knowing fairly well which elements of para-revolutionary Saint-Domingue would have most mattered to Chauvet as she wrote from her fraught postcolonial space, I felt compelled to pay particularly close attention to things like color/caste, dress, and the registers of relation among various characters.

As far as the challenges were concerned, I’d say the toughest aspect was trying to integrate the formality and quaintness of the 18th century context without rendering the prose too stilted and precious. There was, in fact, a tough moment in the process for me, which I discussed both with my editor and with other translators, when I found myself wanting to “fix” Chauvet’s prose. Dance had never been my favorite of her novels, and I suspect it had something to do with what I found to be the work’s stylistic “un-modernness” (I know there’s a better word out there). But I hung in there and ultimately allowed myself to trust Chauvet’s craft enough to render it faithfully.

NHD: Exactly. As a reader, I felt there were particular moments in the text that posed difficult linguistic choices like, for example, when you chose to evoke an African American dialect – reminiscent of the works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker – to translate the creolized French Chauvet employs. Was this an easy choice to make? What considerations went into this decision?

KLG: This goes back to trusting Chauvet, actually. It would have been my personal inclination (as a writer of nowhere near Chauvet’s caliber!) not to use dialect. But I made the decision to translate her
use thereof exactly because of the fact that she used it so sparingly - that is, I took this to be a clear stylistic choice she meant to make in textual moments where she found it important to highlight class/caste distinctions in a particularly marked way.

**NHD:** One of the most fascinating elements of this novel is the attention Chauvet pays to colonial dress, in particular women’s clothing like the Madras scarf. Can you talk about the process of conveying this emphasis through translation? How did your training as a literary scholar equip you to manage this task?

**KLG:** You have highlighted the item of clothing that I paid – that Chauvet obliged me to pay – the most attention to in the novel. Clearly Chauvet had done her homework about the ways in which gendered clothing in the 18th century told the stories of different bodies, just as much if not more than other external markers like skin color and hair texture, and such. Clothing in the novel is of paramount importance to assigning status – to keeping people in their place, most often – and to marking the evolution of various characters as their fortunes or attitudes change. Clothes are used as much to reveal as to hide truths, to provide literal and figurative masks that can mean the difference between life and death for their wearer. The focused attention Chauvet pays to both women and men’s clothing throughout the narrative meant that I had to spend quite a lot of time online, searching for images based on her descriptions so to give myself a better sense of what I was meant to imagine – and to translate – about the appearance of these characters and their costumes.

**NHD:** One of the subtlest aspects of your translation is the care with which you approach racial language in colonial Saint-Domingue. Scholars of Haiti have recently been calling for more nuanced, rigorous assessments of race in the Caribbean. Can you address this from the perspective of a translator? How do you convey this without the aide of a critical introduction?

**KLG:** Keeping my (desired) audience in mind - that is, readers beyond the academy looking for a “good story” that can render a decidedly foreign place and time accessible – I chose to employ terms recognizable from the US-American and Anglo-Caribbean colonial context, notably, “people of color” and “freedmen,” with the occasional “colored” thrown in whenever the context was meant to convey something more derogatory. Some more opaque terms – like “mestive” – I left intact, but subtly glossed in the text to allow the reader to encounter an unfamiliar word without being destabilized or otherwise distracted by it.

**NHD:** Continuing with this intersection of race and translation, it feels like a very timely moment to translate this novel. Chauvet’s brutal descriptions of slavery, torture, and gendered violence certainly resonate with our present moment in the United States, Haiti, and elsewhere. Did this context add a sense of urgency to this translation?

**KLG:** I can’t say that I translated this work with any more urgency than that which I have brought to all the translation work I’ve done. In each instance, I’m motivated primarily by my desire to see Haiti itself “resonate” more insistently – and differently – in the United States’ cultural consciousness. Frustrated as all we Haitianists are by the limited ways Haiti is represented in spaces of the global North, translating such a literary masterpiece is my small effort to offer – or to serve as conduit for – alternative narratives to enter circulation (that being said, I did just urgently translate René Depestre’s Hadriana dans tous mes rêves, fully aware of the fact that Monsieur Depestre celebrated...
his 90th birthday this year and hoping he’d enjoy this particular birthday gift!

NHD: In her other works, but especially in Dance on the Volcano, Chauvet is concerned with the concept of justice. In what ways does the novel’s interpretation of justice intervene into multiple historical contexts? How might this novel comment on our present historical moment?

KLG: Something that comes across with incredible clarity in this novel is Chauvet’s sustained preoccupation with the matter of social justice and the struggle for common human being. More than that, it is clear that Chauvet means to illustrate the absurdity and the perversity of race prejudice – the lengths to which racists must go and the extraordinary measures they must take to deny the common humanity of those who differ from them only by the color of their skin. The word “justice” and its variants are peppered throughout the narrative, most often when Minette finds herself at a social impasse that defies logical or moral explanation. I dare say that the feeling of bafflement she experiences so acutely in 18th century Saint-Domingue is currently strong in a great number of us in this terrifying contemporary political moment in the US.

NHD: Something that I noticed from the very first page is that women are everywhere in this text. What was it like to work with such a novel? It is also remarkable how different the two sisters, Minette and Lise, are; can you talk about the different roles they play in the text?

KLG: What is fascinating about Chauvet’s portrayal of women and girls in this novel and throughout her corpus, really, is the complexity with which she renders individual female characters such that they fall well outside predetermined modes of the feminine. Never virginal innocents, ruthless femmes fatales, self-sacrificing mothers, or any other of the classic feminine tropes, Chauvet’s characters draw from all of these aspects. As such, they are unpredictable and, yes, often frustrating. They make decisions that are decidedly unheroic or unwise, but Chauvet presents her reader with enough substantive development of each character to make her moral, intellectual, maternal, or other idiosyncrasies fully believable – reasonable, even.

Her configuration of Minette and Lise manages to hold on to the ambivalence of each of the characters although, perhaps more so than in other of her novels, she channels clear political positions through each of the sisters. Minette, of course, is evolving toward revolution – she is aware of the contradictions and injustices that undergird the racialist infrastructure of colonial Saint-Domingue. She struggles throughout the novel with a desire for individual happiness that seems incompatible with what she realizes to be the crucial goal of collective liberation. Lise, on the other hand, is the cipher through which Chauvet makes more evident the depth of Minette’s moral character and the extent of her sacrifice. Frivolous and politically tone-deaf, Lise seems largely unaware of the suffering of others and is most concerned with the advantages afforded to her as a beautiful, talented, and very fair-skinned free woman of color. She dreams, that is, of living the very life that Minette would give up in order to fight for a more just world order.

NHD: Just as a final question, this is now the third Haitian novel that you have translated and you have written extensively about translation in the Caribbean (see the bibliography below) and in the French-speaking world, in general. What are some of the challenges you’ve faced as a translator in academia? How might we begin to reframe translation so that it is no longer a logistical consideration, but an intellectual activity as profound and multivalent as literary criticism or
“traditional” scholarship?

KLG: That is a hard question – one I am not sure I can answer. I suppose the fact that I only began translating after earning tenure speaks volumes because, frankly, I never would have considered putting as much time and energy as I have into a translation project prior to having some measure of professional security. This being said, there is no question in my mind but that translating makes one a better scholar. With all of the works I translated, I also wrote and thought about them as part of my scholarship – and in each instance, the intimate process of translating the work gave me insight I don’t think I ever would have gotten had I not had the experience of so rigorously querying it in its finest detail. Many of my greatest research “Aha!” moments emerged directly from my intense grappling with these texts as a translator. Recognizing the immense value to be garnered from this sort of relationship with a text is crucial, I think, to giving translation its due as a scholarly praxis.

Selected Bibliography:


