Haiti In Translation: Savage Seasons by Kettly Mars, An Interview with Jeanine Herman

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Kettly Mars is one of the most active contemporary Haitian writers in French. Numerous presses in Haiti and France have published her works and Mars’ four most recent novels have appeared with the prestigious publisher Mercure de France. In 2010 Mars published Saisons Sauvages (Savage Seasons), a novel that delves into the era of François Duvalier’s dictatorship. Translated by Jeanine Herman in 2016 (University of Nebraska Press), Savage Seasons is Mars’ first novel to be translated into English.

The novel begins just before Duvalier declares himself president-for-life in 1964, as main character Nirvah Leroy seeks information about her missing husband Daniel. An intellectual and a journalist, Daniel has been arrested by the Duvalierist state for his seditious writings, Marxist activities, and his social milieu. His arrest prompts Nirvah to visit one of the Haitian secretaries of state, Raoul Vincent, in order to find out more information as to the whereabouts of her husband. Rather than granting Nirvah the information she desires, Raoul toys with her pain – imposing himself on Nirvah and her family as they wait for Daniel’s prison release.

Mars’ novel is an intriguing web of characters and narrators – chapters alternate between Daniel’s journal written before his arrest, and the perspectives of Nirvah, Raoul, and other characters. One of the novel’s most important voices is Solange, a manbo and prostitute who helps Nirvah cope with Daniel’s absence and the crashing weight of the Duvalier dictatorship. Because of Solange’s status as a manbo, Savage Seasons presents competing visions of vodou. There is, of course, the religious practice that serves as Solange’s guide in her precarious work as a prostitute frequented by Tonton Macoutes and François Duvalier’s use of vodou as a means of social control and manipulation. Savage Seasons is not the first novel in which Mars’ takes on representations of vodou, her novels Kasalé and Fado both play with vodouisant themes like the figure of the marasa among other aspects of the religion. Mars’ evocation of vodou is always intentional and nuanced.[1] During her presentation of Kasalé at the Alliance Française d’Haïti, Mars said that “I talked about Vodou in hope that one day Haitians will accept this part of their spiritual and cultural heritage and will be able to discuss it openly, objectively, without antagonism, outside of the context of a power dynamic, to productively level the plane and modernize our anachrosims.”[2]

An open dialogue on vodou is present throughout Mars’ œuvre in French, and represents one of the challenges in translating Mars for a United States readership that is accustomed to mainstream media outlets, films, and music portraying the religion as anything but a nuanced Haitian cultural practice. One of the greatest challenges to translating vodou begins with its spelling – “vodou” instead of “voodoo” – a cause that has been lobbied by members of the vodou community as well as scholars and academics. Thanks to these efforts the Library of Congress changed its subject heading to reflect the proper spelling, “vodou.”[3] However, many media outlets, such as The New York Times, still rely on the improper spelling citing the dictionary as the authority on Haitian religion. As
mentioned in the interview below, Herman and editors at University of Nebraska Press decided on the “US American” spelling of vodou. For a discussion of the status of vodou in English language literature and history please see the end of this interview. This is one of the key choices editors and translators have to make in translating Haitian works and, if translations are to embrace the nuances of the Haitian spelling of vodou, there needs to be serious considerations about what translation does to cultural production.

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Nathan H. Dize: After doing some research into your background, I see you have been translating for quite some time, yet this is your first translation of Haitian fiction. Can you tell us about how you got involved with the University of Nebraska Press and began translating Savage Seasons?

Jeanine Herman: I came to Savage Seasons through Sophie Schiavo, who was at the French Publishers Agency at the time. She encouraged me to take it on, so I did a sample translation of a chapter, and the book received a French Voices Award. I’d always admired Nebraska University Press (particularly Bison Books and Mary Ann Caws’ translations of the surrealist poets), and I’d also translated some writing by Kettly Mars for Bomb magazine in 2003, so I went ahead. I was not in touch with Kettly at all until the final editing process of Savage Seasons, and she was very gracious in answering all my questions. But I didn’t know much about the political situation in Haiti, I had not heard of the Haitian classics, and I didn’t even know that French was not her first language. I was not at all familiar with Haitian culture or literature, aside from having translated the excerpt of Mars’ novel in 2003, so I would say that it was a baptism by fire.

NHD: For readers of Haitian fiction, Mars’ novel feels extremely intertextual – for instance, there is a moment early on where Daniel Leroy refers to his friend Jacques Stephen Alexis who was one of the most prolific Haitian writers of the 20th century. Before translating Mars had you encountered the work of Alexis or other Haitian writers? Did you consult any of the works of Alexis or other Haitian writers of the 20th century while translating Savage Seasons?

JH: You’re right—there are so many references to Haitian classics throughout Savage Seasons, though I had not read any of them, finding out about them as I went along. For me, Kettly’s text was like the intersection of the entire canon of Haitian literature.

NHD: In my introduction I talk about Solange, who is a manbo and a fascinating character in the novel. I was struck by the way the Vodou scenes, a large part of which include Solange, play out in your translation, particularly due to your use of the spelling “Voodoo.” I’m curious why you chose this spelling, which harkens to a representational legacy of Haitian Vodou as sorcery, witchcraft, and dark magic, rather than the “Vodou” spelling that Haitians, Vodou practitioners, and scholars fought to for years to have accepted by institutions such as the Library of Congress. Could a spelling of “Vodou” as “Voodoo” in your translation shift a reader’s impressions of Solange’s character?

JH: We thought long and hard about voodoo vs. vodou. The editor at the press, Sabrina Stellrecht, and I went back and forth, until we finally decided voodoo seemed more accessible. And I thought voodoo priestess had a nice ring to it, something almost Baudelairean about it. Rimbaud has a line in “Alchemy of the Word” that some translate as witchcraft and some translate as magic, but it’s still an
amazing poem. Solange is a vivid character, and Nirvah has her hard, glinting edges. My approach in translating both was based on what was written on the page, and I tried to do them justice by staying close to the text.

While my undergraduate and graduate degrees are both in French, I also studied Portuguese for three years and went to Brazil on a grant from Columbia to study women in film. There I became interested in candomblé (and found out my goddess is Iemanjá). I came back and wrote my master’s thesis in French on trance state in Bataille’s Blue of Noon. So there was no resistance to vodou as a practice or any attempt to reduce it to sorcery.

NHD: In previous interviews, Siobhan and I have discussed the foreignization and domestication of texts in translation, and we have noticed that many translators have differing views on each practice. For instance, I thought it was interesting that you chose to leave certain words like restavèk, (Tonton) Macoutes, and onomatopoetic words like takwèt in Kreyòl while you translate others like manbo and oungan into “priestess” and “priest” respectively. You also retain phrases like jolie laide in the French. Can you explain why you chose to translate some words and not others?

JH: Certain things were left in French like jolie laide, which is just a great term and common enough to be understood in English. Those things are decided on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration rhythm or musicality as well as meaning. I asked Kettly about takwèt and she wanted to leave it as is. So there is no set formula.

NHD: Because the cultural aspects of this novel are rather foreign to the average North American reader, I see that you chose to footnote marronnage, but instead of writing a more discursive footnote you offered the following definitions for the concept “runaway, escape.” Scholars have written entire books on the idea and practice of marronnage, and clearly translators need to maintain a certain level of engagement with the actual text instead of glossing every word, but could you talk about why you chose to define marronnage the way you did and why you decided, as a translator, to avoid the genre of the deeply discursive footnote?

JH: I noticed that publishers and editors prefer not to have footnotes, in novels and even in nonfiction books at times. I learned this with my translation of Gracq’s Reading Writing, which is not a novel but a book about novels, among other things. I translated it using the Pléiade edition so there were millions of footnotes, which I painstakingly translated but which my editor deleted from the final manuscript. I thought it was because he found them distracting, but it may have been because the rights to the José Corti edition, which the publisher had, did not include rights to the footnotes from the Pléiade edition. I felt they were essential, but they were deleted—that is publishing.

In Savage Seasons, there were a few footnotes in the original French, but I didn’t want to add too many of my own.

NHD: As a means of closing the interview, I wanted to ask a question relating to translation as a profession. You have been working as a translator for quite some time, could you tell us one thing that you would change about the profession at large and why?

JH: The one thing I would change about translation is: I would increase funding for it on a national
level. To translate anything in the United States is to accept that you will not be paid much for it. It’s like being a poet. It will involve blood, sweat, tears, and love, but not much gold. So it would be nice to have support the way there is support for literature in France: not just symbolic capital but actual capital. For example, expanding the NEA translation grants rather than eliminating them, since even these grants are a kind of brass ring (by which I mean highly competitive). So it would be nice to see more support of literary translation, and the arts in general, on a national level.

I will say I was fortunate enough to receive a residency from the Lannan Foundation to work on Savage Seasons, and that was extremely helpful. As a freelancer, it can be difficult. I once gave a translation workshop at the École Normale Supérieure in Lyon (two classes on Ponge and Gracq) and felt the support of the arts in France in a way that seems harder to come by here.

On writing in general: “ideas come to us as the successor to griefs.” This quote from Proust seems to apply to all literature, especially this novel by Kettly Mars: dredging something up from the emotional silt and turning it into literature, a kind of alchemy and sublimation—a process which, as a translator, I try to respect.

Bibliography


Print.


[1] *Marasa* refers to twins in Haitian Creole a number of literary translations of Haitian writing have rich glossaries of *vodouisant* terms like Kaiama L. Glover's recent translation of *Hadriana in All of My Dreams* (Akashic 2017).


[3] See Kate Ramsey’s “From ‘Voodooism’ to ‘Vodou’: Changing a US Library of Congress Subject Heading” for more on this particular instance of activism regarding *vodou* in the US.