
 Editor's Introduction

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A year ago The Historic New Orleans Collection mounted an exhibition on the “common routes” of Louisiana and Saint-Domingue (Haiti).¹ A gem of a private museum and archive located in the heart of the French Quarter, the Collection is dedicated to the preservation and study of the history and culture of Louisiana and the Gulf South. This special issue, generously sponsored by The Historic New Orleans Collection, was inspired by last year's museum exhibition.

The eminent historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall begins by reminding us that though Louisiana owes much to Haiti, the spirit of revolt among slaves in the Age of Revolutions was home-grown, and in Louisiana as well as in Haiti reflected both the conditions of slavery and the particular ethnicities of Africans taken to these colonies. Laurent Dubois, a prominent historian of the French Atlantic, then takes up the issue of the “Sale of Louisiane” as an unintended consequence of the triumph of the Haitian revolution. In particular, Bonaparte failed to imagine how a revolutionary Saint-Domingue, and its potential army of ex-slaves under Louverture, could have served to create a French empire of liberty throughout the Americas. The loss of Louisiana reflected both the success of a liberating revolution in Saint-Domingue/Haiti and the failure of Bonaparte's imperial “Western design.”

We then shift to literary history. Dana Kress, who has been pioneering the preservation and translation of French-language texts of creole Louisiana, describes the influence of *Les Cenelles* (1845) – the first volume of poetry published by *gens de couleur* – on later writings by people of color. His essay focuses on the recently recovered manuscript ledgers of Pierre-Aristide Desdunes, a son of Haitian émigrés to Louisiana. These ledgers include not only Desdunes' own poetry and manuscript copies of the *Les Cenelles* poems, but also six of only eight surviving works of the purportedly prolific Creole of color writer, Victor Ernest Rillieux. In one of his poems, “Love and Devotion,” which Rillieux dedicated to Ida B. Wells, he opened with:

All for humanity! All for God! Nothing for ourselves!
 Such is, of devotion, the inalienable law!
 To calm the wound,

To dry the tears, to protect the orphan,
To smother injustice and brave the assassin,
We must have strong souls!

For this noble cause, oh divine harmony,
In your fires I come to chasten my song!
A glorious angel
Came into the world! And her scorned race,
Asks my feeble pen to compose
This song of praise.²

The challenge of this nineteenth-century Creole literature is to appreciate the social critiques embedded in the work, critiques which were quite radical for the time, both before and after emancipation. Thanks to the untiring efforts of A. P. Tureaud, Jr., son of the famed Louisiana civil rights lawyer, these Desdunes manuscripts have been recovered and are now in The Historic New Orleans Collection's archive, as Tureaud describes in his contribution to this issue.

Jean-Marc Duplantier offers a study of J. C. Rousseau's "Souvenirs de la Louisiane" (1862), a long serial work published in a Haitian newspaper. For Duplantier, this interesting set of descriptions is rooted in a generalized Creole identity, though one based on a "kinship of transience."

We then offer two essays on "the arts"; one on the first New Orleans Theatre, and the other on Saint-Domingue style furniture in Louisiana. The essay on the opera theater, which was founded by white émigré Saint-Dominguais in 1792, is a long excerpt from a classic but neglected little study published by René J. Le Gardeur in 1963.³ Hopefully our true-copy excerpt (with citations and bibliography brought up to current standards) will help reintroduce Le Gardeur's important work to contemporary scholars. As well, Jack D. Holden's catalogue descriptions of Saint-Domingue flush panel armoires will, we hope, encourage further research into the shared decorative arts of Louisiana and Haiti.

The modern visual artist Ulrick Jean-Pierre's portfolio of his striking paintings on Haitian history, in which he combines neo-romanticism with a vivid historical imagination, and a selection of images from the 2006 "Common Routes" exhibition, remind us that indeed a picture can be worth a thousand words.⁴ We then round out this issue with two extended review essays: one usefully critiques the Collection's current

exhibition on the French presence in Louisiana history (running through early June 2007), and the other explores a fascinating ethnographic video documentary on several Afro-Brazilian communities of descendants of runaway slaves, or quilombos, including an interview with the filmmaker, for whom the work clearly was a labor of love. The several book reviews extend the central themes offered in this special issue, not least the tangled nexus between race and revolution, between slavery and freedom, between particular cultural identities and a generalized “kinship of transience.”

In these existential voyages – these “common routes” – exiled white émigrés, enslaved black forced migrants, Creole *gens de couleur* (slave and free), and others, confronted both the tragedy and the triumph of navigating an emergent Atlantic world, chained as it was to chattel slavery and coercion, and rent as it was by revolution and displacement. Pierre-Aristide Desdunes, in one of the formerly lost manuscript poems that was pointedly excluded from the mid-twentieth century compilation of *Creole Voices*, evokes both senses of this “creative power,” that is, slavery and revolution, in a piece he wrote shortly after the U.S. Civil War and Emancipation:

“Thoughts of a Slave Soldier”

To weep while the world laughs, to weep while the world
sings;
To smother within our heart every great and noble thought;
To ceaselessly feel the biting whip at our backs,
Snapping in the hands of a heartless tyrant.

To weep, yet smother every hint of a sob
To poison the master’s joy;
Such is the destiny of the African slave
And – I remember it well – such was my own lot!

While the world echoes the song of life,
He sings death’s refrain in muffled tones;
A degraded man, neither virtue nor remorse
Cry out within his enchained soul.

May the Lord bring me forth, as he did Moses
From this impure miasma where dwell squatting slaves
And anoint my mission: to awaken virtue electrified in flame!
Within their downtrodden hearts.

Stand with me, noble sons of Africa,
And if you see our torch grow pale,
Do not fear its momentary flickering;
A brighter sun will be reborn within our teeming ranks.

In waging this battle I do not fear
Unleashing white reprisals upon black men,
Because I feel, boiling within my veins of iron,
A creative power giving birth to worlds!⁵

NOTES

¹ Common Routes: St. Domingue - Louisiana (14 March – 30 June 2006).

² Translation by Dana Kress; for the original French see the Appendix to his essay.

³ We especially thank Dr. Alfred E. Lemmon, director of the Williams Research Center of The Historic New Orleans Collection, for bringing this interesting study to our attention. Also thanks are due to Dr. Jessica Dorman, director of Publications/Marketing and her staff for general editorial assistance, including providing images and texts from the Collection's archives.

⁴ For more on Jean-Pierre and his artwork, see his website at www.ulrickjean-pierre.com. For further images from and interpretive essays on the 2006 exhibition, see the published catalogue, *Common Routes: St. Domingue - Louisiana* (New Orleans, LA: The Historic New Orleans Collection; Paris: Somogy Art Publishers, 2006).

⁵ Translation by Dana Kress; for the original French see the Appendix to his essay.