The Colonial System Unveiled by Baron de Vastey (review)

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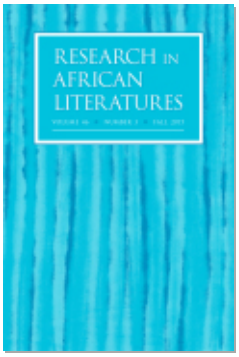

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The Colonial System Unveiled

BY BARON DE VASTEY, TRANS. AND ED. CHRIS BONGIE
Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2014.
x + 329 pp. ISBN 9781781380314 cloth.

It took two hundred years for *The Colonial System Unveiled*, an essay written by Baron de Vastey, King Henry I of Haiti's foremost publicist, to be translated into English. This may suggest how unsettling this author and text have long been—and, for the most part, remain—to readers and critics in the West. For Chris Bongie, this lack of scrutiny also has much to do with a certain unease with the realities of independent Haiti. The liberatory promises of the revolution gave way to institutional and cultural endeavors scholars have often found discouraging. Bongie proposes to look at what he calls the "post/revolutionary" period "not (simply) in terms of a rupture or 'fall' from grace, but (also) as a frustratingly yet productively ambiguous continuation of the revolutionary project" (3). This double perspective allows Bongie to retain previous analyses of Vastey as scribe of the Haitian state, but also complicate them by looking at him as a full-fledged author. In the process, Vastey's essay is revealed as a foundational Atlantic text.

Vastey's original essay is divided in two parts, the first offering a history of the European colonization of Hispaniola and the origins and development of the Atlantic slave trade. The second section of the book describes "the Colonial Regime, or the Horrors of Slavery" and consists mostly of a harrowing catalogue of atrocities perpetrated by French colonists in Saint Domingue, topped by a spirited call to arms against the French colonists against whom "we are sharpening the bayonets that are going to pierce their bellies!!!" (145). There is precious little in English-speaking literature of the period that compares to Vastey's blend of outrage, lyricism, and sarcasm in debunking pro-slavery arguments, including early examples of scientific racism, and Bongie's translation does the original justice. Vastey's text makes for a fascinating, if disorienting, read; it evokes a variety of styles and genres, beginning as history to wax polemical, appealing to readers' sentimentality only to deliver its most efficient blow in cold, judicial language. Bongie's edition echoes its central text's polyvalence both in structure and content, with admirable results.

Vastey's text is bracketed by an introduction presenting the author, his text, and the historical and cultural contexts in which it was produced and an analytical section composed of four essays by Bongie, Marlene Daut, Doris Garraway, and Nick Nesbitt. Each contribution recognizes Vastey's as a complex, "protean text" and sheds light on its connections to specific literary traditions of the Atlantic world. Daut's piece is an impressive, two-fold study of Vastey's biography, his texts, and the troubling effect his mixed-race heritage has had on past and present critics. Unable to race Vastey satisfactorily, critics long avoided his writings altogether. Daut finds in this very "monstrous hybridity" that once ostracized Vastey the prism that allows her to read his text as "an important precursor to the Latin American *testimonio*," a twentieth-century genre of authentic narrative used "as a tool against colonial oppression" (176, 191).

Garraway and Bongie focus on the ways in which Vastey's text interacts with abolitionist literature; Garraway discusses how it plays with "the prevalence of

a literary modality—sentimentality" in abolitionist arguments. Designed to be read by European and Haitian audiences alike, it "may be read as a form of public diplomacy"—a direct intervention from the black state into international debates on slavery (241). Bongie in turn discusses the double nature of *The Colonial System Unveiled* as a state-sponsored work of propaganda and a bildungsroman-inspired, literary text about Vastey's development as a reader. In his concluding essay, Nesbitt positions Vastey as a forefather to anticolonialist writers Césaire, Sartre, and Fanon, whose analysis of colonialism as a system and belief in the "absolute *necessity* and rightfulness of anticolonial violence" echo Vastey's. My one regret is that, although he repeatedly mentions him, Nesbitt ultimately remains vague about the potential relevance of Vastey's thinking to Fanon's.

This is an ambitious book—pedagogical and critical in scope and intent. It will introduce Vastey to those who might not know him and deliver a wealth of information to those who already do. As more English-language scholars become interested in post-revolutionary Haiti and its role in early nineteenth-century international affairs and culture, Bongie's edition of Vastey's landmark book should become a reference in its own right.

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Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from Twilight Zones

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Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2013.
x + 215 pp. ISBN 9780252079535 paper.

In a recent interview, Maryse Condé, attempting to show how difficult it was not to pander to the taste for exoticism among readers of Caribbean literature, likened herself to a "cook who doesn't add any salt, who doesn't add any spices or pepper" (Britton 173). Ever wary of the stereotypes of eroticism and magic that are associated with Caribbean literature, she felt the need to lessen the oral pleasure of consuming her novels. This is definitely not the case with Carole Boyce Davies's eminently readable and often entertaining *Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from the Twilight Zone*. Instead of going easy on the spices, Boyce Davies provides us with a savory feast of experiences, memories, and reflections on her personal and professional life. Evidence of a highly spiced narrative can be seen as much in reports of her mother's dalliances to declarations that "polygamy is as natural as breathing air for Caribbean men" (54). As much as anything else she is quite literally interested in food and sees cooking as an essential ingredient in a Caribbean identity. Who else remembers Claude McKay's "poetic uses of food" or that Austin Clarke's autobiography was entitled *Pig Tails 'n Breadfruit: A Culinary Memoir*. We have no doubt that when she says she "was always making a pot of rice and peas" when she lived in Washington, DC, she was not just improvising a dish known throughout the Caribbean but performing as much as anything else a ritual that reconnected her to home.