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Introduction to Forum: The Hemispheric French Atlantic

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FORUM:
The Hemispheric French Atlantic

Introduction

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This forum on the hemispheric French Atlantic really began in 2012 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where some of the scholars whose essays appear here gathered on a panel at the American Studies Association meeting to think about new possibilities for an interdisciplinary and hemispheric Franco-American studies. That conversation was inspired in part by the extraordinary growth and compelling richness of recent scholarship on the French Caribbean, especially that which has focused on the region's early nineteenth-century literary and cultural productions. On the one hand, this work recognizes the West Indies as an absolutely crucial site in the formation of capitalist modernity, a location through which the movements and transactions of European maritime empires inaugurated what Walter Mignolo terms the modern/colonial world-system. At the same time, this scholarship repeatedly highlights the French Caribbean—and St. Domingue/Haiti in particular—as the site of especially powerful and sustained acts of resistance to the emergent terms of that system.

It is hard to overstate the size and significance of this relatively recent turn to Haiti. Publications tagged with the subject of Haiti have been cataloged in the MLA International Bibliography for seventy-six years, since 1939, and currently number over eight hundred. Nearly a quarter of these, however, have appeared in the past five years alone, between 2010 and 2015, while two-thirds of them appeared in the fifteen-year period from 2000 to 2015. This explosion of literary and cultural scholarship on Haiti, often focusing on the Haitian Revolution, has significantly transformed studies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular and our sense of American literary and cultural history more generally.

Yet this recent explosion of scholarship on Haiti and the Caribbean has not always taken strong account of the complex and far-reaching history of French empire in the Americas, a history that has in many ways given shape to the political and disciplinary geographies that continue to guide our ideologies, our fields of study, and our reading practices today. While scholars certainly have brought a transatlantic framework to bear on considerations of Haiti, studies of French imperialism in Atlantic context have tended to generate regional models and local histories, often centered in places—like New France, Philadelphia, Louisiana, or the Caribbean—that are seldom considered in terms of their simultaneous ties to hemispheric and transatlantic geographies. Indeed, the very model of hemispheric American studies has nearly always been imagined in terms of the history of Spanish rather than French empire in the Americas.

The essays that make up this forum begin to suture a transatlantic to a hemispheric spatiality by tracing out the movement of texts, figures, and traditions within a complex and kinetic circulatory system that moves beyond the geometric model imagined by studies of the French Atlantic triangle. The terrain suggested by such a suturing is of course enormous and far-flung, and this forum makes no pretense of surveying its expanse or of engaging with all or even most of its geographical reaches. But the essays gathered here do gesture toward—both individually and collectively—the various itineraries that characterize a hemispheric French Atlantic dominated by movement of multiple sorts: the geographic movements of figures and writers; the movements of texts as they undergo republication in different forms as well as new locations; and the linguistic movement of translation undertaken by writers, diplomats, ethnographers, and revolutionaries.

In tracking the discourses of politics, literature, and anthropology through a hemispheric French Atlantic space complicated by race and slavery, these essays focus on the legacies of violence and promise that radiate through time and space from the Haitian revolutionary moment, spiraling across and beyond the long nineteenth century while circling across and around the wider Atlantic world. The five essays gathered here under the rubric of a “hemispheric French Atlantic” collectively argue for the inclusion of an extensive and understudied archive of Francophone texts in our literary histories of the period and field, while also suggesting the need for greater flexibility in constructing the narratives through which we study literature, culture, and politics. They call especially for greater study and interrogation of the role of translation—not

just between languages but between geographical locations and political orientations—in the postrevolutionary nineteenth century.

In the wake of the revolutionary 1790s, writing in the hemispheric French Atlantic was often characterized by suddenly shifting itineraries and ideologies, as Gordon Sayre explains. Produced in large measure by refugees and exiles moving around a hemispheric French Atlantic world, this archive is imbued with often ambiguous, disguised, or rapidly shifting allegiances. Sayre brings together the examples of memoirs by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Henriette Lucie Dillon, Marquise de la Tour du Pin, and an anonymous Creole of Saint Domingue (whose unpublished memoir is held in manuscript at the Historic New Orleans Collection) as well as Leonora Sansay's fictionalized self-portrait in the novel *Secret History*. These texts pose dilemmas of interpretation and affect for readers today. They resist the neatly binary political and ethical paradigms that we tend to bring to them, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that these paradigms are themselves, as Sayre points out, a product of the revolutionary Atlantic world these texts inhabit and describe.

For Susan Gillman, Victor Hugo's 1826 *Bug-Jargal* is one of these deeply ambivalent texts produced out of a vexed and shifting political landscape of revolution. Hugo's novel is ambivalent in both content and form: it seems unable to "make up its mind" about the Haitian revolution it describes, while also telling that story as a confrontation between languages—French, Spanish, Creole, sometimes translated and sometimes not. Gillman tracks the strange history of the term "Creole" in order to suggest new ways of reading texts from the archive of the hemispheric French Atlantic. *Bug-Jargal* emerges as a translational novel working in the space of overlapping languages, engaging in a study of creolistics that reveals the ways in which language indexes the politics of race and revolution. Questions of who speaks for whom and in what language are interlaced with questions about the power and politics of slave revolution itself. Hugo's novel layers languages and times in such a way to position the Haitian revolution within a "multidirectional, nonlinear timeline" that disrupts more conventional narratives.

A literary history of the hemispheric French Atlantic may well require such a nonlinear temporality. Marlene Daut, borrowing from the work of Gillman and Kirsten Silva Gruesz, argues that we should adopt a model of "text-networks" to understand this archive and the textual relations within it. Daut foregrounds the often astonishing movements of texts between continents, languages, publication forms, and

audiences—echoing Sayre’s observation that Francophone writers often transformed or even disguised their texts, their voices, and their identities as they navigated the complex political and cultural terrain of the revolutionary Atlantic. Daut summons a remarkably vibrant and itinerant network of texts—by Victor Séjour, Phillis Wheatley, William Wells Brown, Alexandre Dumas, Maxwell Philip, Maria Stewart, Sarah Forten, Martin Delaney, and the anonymous author of “Theresa; a Haytien Tale”—to insist that the African American literary tradition belongs within a transnational and translational geography, and that we should tune our ears to the Franco-Haitian grammar of political solidarity that inhabits this diasporic body of writing.

Karen Salt turns to the figure of Ebenezer Bassett, the United States’ first black diplomat, whose facility with French, English, and *Kréyol* informed his work as a translator navigating the political networks of the black Francophone Atlantic. Salt brings critical attention to Bassett’s work on behalf of black political sovereignty within the hemispheric French Atlantic, a history that has been overlooked despite the fact that it has been located in plain sight—within the catalog of the nineteenth century’s best-known African American author, Frederick Douglass. Bassett’s project was facilitated by his multilingual diplomacy, but that very facility may have hampered his legibility and visibility both then and now. Bassett bridged locations and languages as well as political forms in ways that resist recognition within more narrowly national or monolingual models of identity, and of literary and cultural history.

Robert Fanuzzi, pointing out that American capitalism was born out of the French colonial plantation system in St. Domingue and elsewhere, argues that the hemispheric French Atlantic of the long nineteenth century produced systems of knowledge that continue to inflect and inform the politics of race in the United States. The figure of Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de St.-Méry exemplifies the role of knowledge production within the academic networks of the Francophone Atlantic, in which metropolitan centers in France and the United States engaged in intellectual exchanges that produced and traded in knowledge about the Americas. An expatriate and refugee from St. Domingue, Moreau de St.-Méry developed classificatory systems for cataloging racial identity and difference, a colonial schema of sorts for determining whose lives mattered. He brought such work to republican Philadelphia in what Fanuzzi describes as a “triangle trade in Americanist knowledge” driven by French studies of colonial sexuality, gender, race, and geography. Here, too, we require a nonlinear temporality to locate and track this legacy of Francophone

writing within narratives of American literary and cultural history. By invoking the locations of Ferguson, Staten Island, and Cleveland, Fanuzzi draws critical attention to the ways in which the archives of writing from the hemispheric French Atlantic gave shape to an American political landscape that continues to be marked by violence and resistance.

These essays alternately zoom out and then in on the space of the hemispheric French Atlantic over the course of the long nineteenth century. Some assemble a network of many texts and writers while others focus closely in on a single text or writer. Both strategies, however, reveal movements across and around the Atlantic world that most often took winding or spiraling forms, driven by flight and escape, and punctuated by sites of gathering and acts of solidarity. The publication histories of these texts were often just as winding, while their languages and grammars contain circuits and layers. The interconnections within and between these texts allow us to see the richness and complexity of the political, literary, cultural, and geographic networks that bound Haiti and the French West Indies to the continental Americas, Europe, and Africa. The essays that make up this forum offer a collective appeal to unwind these histories, to track the movements of texts, authors, and languages as they circulated around the hemispheric French Atlantic world over the course of the long nineteenth century, and to follow those routes—marked by terrible violence and by hopeful promise—toward an American studies for the twenty-first century.

Moral Testimony and Noblesse Oblige in Memoirs of the Atlantic Revolutions

Gordon M. Sayre

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The French colonial Atlantic—from Canada to the West Indies to Louisiana—consisted of a network of multilingual, transnational outposts linked by maritime trade routes. In the eighteenth century its wealth, derived mostly from sugar and coffee in Saint Domingue, was enormous, but its geography and politics were fragile. The revolutions beginning in the 1790s sundered the trade routes and turned many French Atlantic people into refugees and exiles. The writings of these displaced people reveal the complex itineraries and