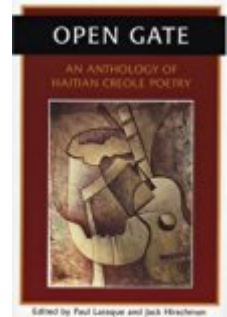


Paul Laraque, Jack Hirschman, eds.. *Open Gate: An Anthology of Haitian Creole Poetry*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 2001. 240 pp. \$15.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-880684-75-7.



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Entering the Open Gate

Paul Laraque and Jack Hirschman's bilingual anthology of Haitian Creole poetry, *Open Gate*, is a lyrical delight for lovers of modern and contemporary verse. It also represents an important contribution to Haitian literary and cultural studies. Publication of this anthology "opens the gate" to the closed linguistic world of Haitian Creole, the primary language of most Haitians but one unfamiliar to most English speakers.

Laraque and Hirschman, themselves well-regarded poets in Haiti and the United States respectively, began work on *Open Gate* in 1993, eight years before its actual publication in 2001. Their anthology is the only one to date that provides English translations for poetry originally written in Haitian Creole. It is the second major publication to feature bilingual selections of this poetry, the first being Lambert Felix Prudent's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie creole* (1984), a compilation of Creole poetry from francophone regions located in and around the Caribbean Sea and Indian Ocean. The Haitian Creole section of Prudent's text, edited by critic, Maximilien

Laroche, presents poems written between the early 1950s and the early 1980s by the first generation of writers to use Creole as the primary language of expression. Laroche translates some but not all of the selected poems into French; the pieces themselves represent Creole writing that began in Haiti with Felix Morrisseau-Leroy and a small group of like-minded writers such as Claude Innocent, Paul Laraque and Georges Castera. With exception of Innocent, who stopped writing after 1960 to pursue a career as a dentist in Port-au-Prince, these literary "founding fathers" eventually all came to North America as political exiles. As such, they became part a generalized diasporic phenomenon that would eventually see the emergence of Creole writing from Haitian communities established in both the United States and Canada over a period of 40 years.

Open Gate picks up where Laroche leaves off in Prudent's *Anthologie*. Editors Paul Laraque and Jack Hirschman cover the same chronological period, as does Laroche. At the same time, they greatly expand on the earlier critic's work by presenting four times as many poets and includ-

ing more recent poems from the late 80s and 1990s. Laraque and Hirschman divide their text into three sections. The first, entitled "Pyonye/The Pioneers," covers most of the same poets found in the *Anthologie*. The second, "Sosyete Koukouy/The Society of Fireflies," is named after a still-extant Haitian literary group formed during the Duvalier regime by Ernst Mirville in 1965. As a result of the forced migration and/or exile of its participants, however, the "Society of Fireflies" now exists primarily in the United States and Canada. Max Manigat, one of the *Open Gate* translators, is the current president of the New York chapter of this organization. In its decenteredness, this literary group thus comes to represent the cultural situation of the Haitian people generally, thousands of whom fled Haiti for North America starting in the 1950s, at first for economic reasons and then, after the election of François Duvalier in 1957, for political reasons as well. What further adds to the uniqueness of the "society" is that two of the members featured in *Open Gate*, Deita and Emmanuel Eugene, have earned special distinction in the world of Haitian letters. As Paul Laraque notes in the introduction, Deita was one of the first Haitian female poets to write in Creole. Emmanuel Eugene went back to Haiti in 1986 after the U.S. arranged for François Duvalier's successor and son, Jean-Claude, to step down from power and leave for France. Upon his return, he helped found *Libete* (Freedom), a Port-au-Prince newspaper.

The third section, "Lamadel/The New Generation," focuses on the younger voices to have emerged out of the Haitian diaspora -- or "dyaspora" as novelist Edwidge Danticat calls it in *The Butterfly's Way* (2001), her collection of prose and poetry by North American Haitians. A number of the writers featured here, like Lenous Surprice and Patrick Sylvain (whose prose writing appears in Danticat's book) are young and Haitian-born. However, unlike the poets featured in "The Pioneers" or in "The Society of the Fireflies," these writers spent their childhood or a sig-

nificant portion of their adolescence away from Haiti's shores: Surprice grew up in Montreal and Sylvain came to the U.S. at age 15. Others, like Jacqueline Scott and Suze Baron, are mature writers who have published poetry within the last 15 years and who, like Surprice and Sylvain, represent the wide-ranging nature of the Haitian diaspora (Scott is based in Africa and Baron in New York).

Within each of the three textual divisions in *Open Gate*, it is the poetry that takes precedence over more academic concerns related to dates of production, influence, and the literary movements. This is perhaps a weakness in a text seeking to educate English-speaking/North American audiences about the culture of a tiny, independent Caribbean nation--the second in the Americas after the United States--that became a virtual colony of the U.S. during the 19-year military occupation of the island that began in 1915; and that thereafter became inextricably bound both socially and politically to its giant neighbor to the north. Indeed, critic Michael Dash suggests that the American take-over of the Haiti was the event that galvanized Haitian thinkers and artists in a way that no other past event did, spurring them on to a search for identity that until the occupation was largely seen as French in origin.[1] At the same time, however, the de-emphasis on historical issues allows readers to focus more on the poems themselves and what they alone have to communicate about the Haitian experience in the last half of the 20th century.

Laraque and Hirschman organize most of the pieces in their anthology--with the exception of those produced by the Society of Fireflies--by literary groupings they have created. Within each of those groupings are poems that clearly articulate revolutionary positions. As Laraque himself notes in his introduction, such a selection was deliberate: "We...put the emphasis on militant poetry because of our background and our publisher's progressive readership..." (p. xiii). Yet at the same

time, each section also communicates concerns that could be seen as specific to the particular poets included. In "The Pioneers," the themes emerge directly from the social, economic and political realities of ordinary Haitian men and women during the approximately 30-year period the section covers. The nightmare of Duvalierism; the plight of the poor; the hope beyond hope of a Haiti liberated from misery and corruption where "all will be beautiful" (p. 51) are just some of the concerns that emerge here. While the second section, "The Society of the Fireflies," also addresses similar issues, it differs from the first section in that many of the poems are much more self-consciously literary, either in terms of themes (speech, communication, poetry-writing) or in terms of form. For example, the editors include several wongol poems by Ernst Mirville: that is, poems that are two to six lines in length and convey a brief message that often expresses deep discontent with the status quo. This haiku-like form developed in Haiti during the 1960s and has been adapted by other poets such as Emmanuel Eugene, who, in "Wongol Poem" (pp. 91-95), uses wongol form to define stanza length within a longer work. In the final section, "The New Generation," many poems reveal Haitian sensibilities that have been deeply influenced/shaped by experiences far from Haiti's shores. Daniel Simidor's "Spring" (pp. 203-205) draws an implicit comparison between the poor and infirm denizens of Harlem and the people of Haiti: both are forgotten by most of the world and struggle for "a piece of the star, a bit of justice" (205). And Tontongi's "How?" (pp. 223-225) critiques the soullessness of the North, in particular, its power to take over countries and destroy the eco-systems of the world. Resistance, especially against the powers that once colonized or attempted/attempt to colonize Haiti thus emerges as a particular powerful theme in this section.

While *Open Gate* is a celebration of Haitian Creole poetry written in the last 50 years, it is also one dedicated to honoring the memory of Felix

Morrisseau-Leroy, the father of the Creole literature in Haiti, who died in 1998. As a young man during the 1930s, Morrisseau-Leroy became a spokesperson for the Griot movement the primary aim of which was, as he put it, "revive the rhythm of black music" [2] by seeking poetic expression through African-derived forms and techniques. In his view as well as in that of his contemporaries, Haitian poetry had for too long followed literary trends--such as Classicism, Romanticism and Symbolism--that had emerged from European and more specifically, French contexts. The Griot movement represented a racial and ethnic militancy phase in the evolution of modern Haitian poetry and developed from certain tendencies already extant in the Indigenous arts movement of the 1920s, which itself emphasized the need to look within Haitian cultural boundaries rather than without for artistic forms and themes. Morrisseau-Leroy eventually moved away from the aesthetically authoritarian stance of the Griot movement. By the time he began writing in Creole during the 1950s, he had moved towards a position that not only suggested a desire to seek an aggregate personal, national and social identity that touched upon the French and African parts of the whole. It also recalled the experimental eclecticism of the Indigenous movement and incorporated the Marxism writer Jacques Roumain would bring to bear on the Haitian literary scene during the 1940s.

This last influence, which first manifested as a desire to seek literary solidarity with the peasant and laboring masses, later developed into a desire to seek violent social and political change and would coalesce artistically into what would become known as the generation of 1946. Morrisseau-Leroy seems to echo the revolutionary sentiments of this movement in his poem, "Sometimes I'm Not Myself":

There's a loa of revolution boiling in my blood / My horse is saddled / I'm set to go / A lambi of revolution is sounding / If you've the

courage take my hand / My horse is saddled / Lets go. (p. 9)

The poet not only sings about the struggles of the masses against inequities of race and class. Through the divine inspiration of his loa (gods), he also becomes an instrument--much like the lambi or conch shell he hears--that in turn inspires others to action while he himself is moved to heed the call for change and justice. That Morriseau-Leroy uses the Creole language to communicate this profound desire for social transformation renders those sentiments even more powerful. Through him and his followers, an experience defined in words born of the forced mingling of French, African and Amerindian cultures and refined over nearly three centuries of history at last finds expression. The revolution, of which he speaks, then, is not just one that is social; it is also one that is literary and artistic. French, the former language of expression of a socially and educationally elite fraction of the Haitian population (about 10%), gives way to the language of "all" Haitian people.

By virtue of having been written in the language of the masses, then, all the poems in *Open Gate* are illuminated by the rebellious fire that Morriseau-Leroy first ignited in 1951 with *Diakoute*, his first collection of verses written in Creole. Whether these pieces speak of Haitian life, spirituality and culture; of love and desire; of the violence and losses suffered by the people under the oppressive political regimes that have been part of Haitian history, they all represent a continuation of the Morriseau-Leroy's initial breakthrough. Seen in this way, then, Morriseau-Leroy is not only a kind of Promethean father to all those who have come after him; he is also the builder of a gateway leading to greater creative freedom for all Haitian writers. His spirit, like that of Legba, the Haitian loa of gateways, paths and crossroads, presides over the literary and artistic opening he initially forged. Jean R. Desire seems to remember that spirit particularly well in the

poem, "Dream" (pp. 115-117), which describes a nocturnal vision where the "bloody battle" between life and "General Death" finally ends. The space of peace and plenty just beyond the "open gate" Death once guarded becomes freely accessible to all. No man, woman or child ever remains completely imprisoned by poverty, violence, and despair as long as dreams can still exist. Liberation, while not yet a reality for Haiti and the Haitian people, is one that may still be momentarily achieved in the realm of the imagination. *Open Gate*, then, is a kind of chronicle of visions first articulated in the Haitian mother tongue. Through its publication to a wider audience, it serves as a testimony to the endurance of Haiti's "grand dream" of individual and national dignity, autonomy and wholeness.

Notes

[1]. In chapter 2 of *Literature and Ideology in Haiti, 1915-1961*, Dash suggests that the often brutal and authoritarian nature of the American Occupation eventually gave rise to an anti-Americanism that forced Haitian intellectuals into a position of having to define themselves against northern anglo-saxonism.

[2]. Quoted in Dash, 106.

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