

Sheila Smith McKoy



Interview with Myriam Chancy

SSM: Do you see your writing—the personal, critical and creative work you produce—as being a part of the conversation of freeing Haiti from the numerous oppressions through which Haiti is always constructed?

MC: I definitely do. It's always my hope that the writing I produce in different genres contributes to demystifying a very complex, heterogeneous, layered country and culture that has been for too long demonized and misunderstood both in popular culture and, incredibly enough, even in intellectual circles despite the very long Haitian literary tradition. So, though I don't bear any illusions that my work can "liberate" Haiti from these oppressions, I do hope, yes, that I am part of a conversation of liberation.

SSM: Your work is often focused on the multiple ethnic histories and the histories of identity in Haiti. Why is this important part of Haitian history been so obscured?

MC: There are multiple reasons for the absence of an open conversation on Haiti's multiple ethnic histories. On the one hand, it is true that the largest ethnic base is African due to the fact that the Haitian Revolution brought slavery to an end in 1803 and, in the process, eliminated the majority of Europeans (who either fled, were killed, or in the case of those who remained, were absorbed into the new nation as "Black" regardless of their ethnicity); on the other hand, because of Haiti's demonization as an African nation (for example, the distortions related to Vodou spiritual beliefs) and defensive reactions against racist attitudes, there has been a push and pull around fair representations of African cultural retentions and the importance of those retentions across the social fabric of the nation.

Because of this struggle, other aspects of cultural retention and ethnic mixes, sometimes associated with the more privileged classes, especially when one speaks of mixed-race Haitians of both African and European descent, get pushed to the side. But the fact of the matter is that Haiti has important Taino remains (otherwise a sign of "whiteness" in the Spanish Caribbean when mulattoes are sometimes re-categorized as indios), in abandoned archeological sites, ethnically and in linguistic influences in Kreyol. Mulattoes or mixed-race Haitians are not necessarily only of the upper classes, there being many clandestine unions between Dominicans and Haitians over decades as well as children produced by US marines during the US Occupation of 1915-1934 (and I am sure in later periods). Germans have also had a significant history in the country, as have Syrian merchants. We know, of course, that Poles in the French army defected to take part in the Revolution and remained in the country;

at least one of the communities of Poles I know of remained quite impoverished after the Revolution but still, they stayed. Since the “noirisme” period of the Duvalier era, it’s also not always as clear-cut that skin color is synonymous with class status. Class, of course, is another complex web that is under-theorized and seemingly over-determined in a country of Haiti’s poverty that deserves further study and consideration.

SSM: Toni Cade Bambara once noted that the tools of publication industry are colonized. It seems to me that your work makes an important commentary on this concept.

MC: Well, I’m not sure how to address this question. If related to Cade Bambara’s idea that “the tools of her trade are colonized” in reference to the film adaptations of some of her written work and that readers and viewers are, by extension, colonized by publication and film industries that are biased in both what they produce and what kinds of minority representations they endorse, then I would have to concur in the sense that it is true that it is difficult to place work with larger publishing houses when one’s work is actively decolonizing and self-consciously going against the grain of the expected as I believe Toni Cade Bambara did in her own work. It’s not easy to get the work to market and to have it find its readers. If I relate Cade Bambara’s idea to my critical work, then I would say that I try to contribute there to decolonizing the mind so that readers who come across my work can either find themselves or be challenged regarding their preconceptions on the literature I address, depending on who they are; in this sense, academic writing still offers an arena within which we can combat and critique the colonial nature of other industries even though even there, there may still be no guarantee that academe (the greater institutional structures that make-up our profession, colleagues, administrators) will participate in that process, as readers, and provide a productive space for non-colonial epistemes.

SSM: Given your novel’s refusal to adhere to stereotypes about Haitian life, what is the cultural work that you envision that it will do?

MC: I hope that all of my novels, including *The Loneliness of Angels*, can open up non-Haitians to the complexity that abounds in Haitian society while offering Haitians reflections of themselves or of people they know, in their families or communities, within Haiti, and out. I’ve also been struck by the fact that among my readers are individuals who connect to the spiritual message in *LOA*, finding deeper resonances that go beyond the Haitian context; that possibility is also important to me.

SSM: You’ve often written and commented about the shifting notions of “home” for Caribbean writers in general and for Haitian writers in particular. What does home mean for you at this time?

MC: Home for me at this point in time is a place of the heart and mind. I have several geographical homes, Haiti being one among a number. Yet, the Haiti I consider home at the level of the spirit probably resides more in memory than in actuality, in my memories and those shared with family members, both present and gone.

SSM: The political landscape of Haiti is, of course, a part of the texture of *The Loneliness of Angels*. How do you feel that the political informs your work?

MC: I have yet to write anything that is apolitical; everything I write has a political dimension. I try to focus on aspects of politics in Haiti that either may be more obscure (for example, women’s issues, spiritual issues) or that we should not forget; in *LOA*, the latter would be the effects of the Duvalier regime, which we can see in recent months has largely been forgotten by a population that was not alive during the dictatorship or were too young during the second term of the Duvalier years to remember much about it. If we don’t remember