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The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature: volumes 1 & 2. F. Abiola and Simon Gikandi, eds. Cambridge University Press, 2004. ISBN 0521594340. 906pp. \$180.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Roberto Strongman, University of California, Santa Barbara

The 1960s and 70s produced the first wave of critical anthologies of African Diaspora Literature. During those two decades, literary scholars such as Lilyan Kesteloot, Jahn Janheinz, Rowland Smith and Houston Baker provided canons of global Black literature that served as cultural counterpoints to the various Black Nationalist movements re-shaping the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean. Their transnational approaches removed the critical boundaries that had prevented important comparisons between Black literatures and redressed the earlier chauvinism present in commentaries of Black literatures compiled by 19th-century European writers such as Abbé Henri Grégoire.

Sharing in the 1990s zeitgeist of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), the work of F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi marks a second wave of critical commentaries on African Diaspora literatures. After Gikandi published *Writing in Limbo* (1992) and Abiola *The African Imagination* (2001), both scholars joined forces to produce the monumental co-edited volumes that comprise the *Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*. This work makes a significant advance from its 1960s and 70s predecessors by being the first work to examine the Afro-Diasporan literary production in a truly multi-lingual scope that encompasses the entirety of the African continent and the Caribbean. The two volumes provide 40 in-depth articles on a vast range of topics by leading scholars from universities around the world. Crafting an anthology in which works by Kwesi Yankah from Ghana, Maureen Warner-Lewis from Jamaica, and Alain Ricard from France can find a common forum emblemizes the editors' intent to record the breadth of the Afro-Diaspora experience through the international nature of its contributing scholars. Among the wide range of topics covered, some salient linguistic themes become discernible in oppositional pairs: orality vs. writing and literature in the African languages vs. literature in the European languages. One might similarly be able to trace a progression along the axis of political economy by seeing clusters of articles on slavery, emancipation, colonialism, and independence. The parallel progression of linguistic and political-economic themes ensures that the volumes present literature and criticism in their proper contexts. The concern for such a balance between culture and history is also evidenced in the helpful chronological chart in which significant cultural works are paired alongside historical events. Nevertheless, one must point out that despite

the natural thematic progression of its chapters, the immensity of the work does not lend itself to cover-to-cover continuous reading. Instead, the work purports to be a reference tool to established scholars and students of African and Caribbean Studies.

As expected in such an extensive anthology, the specificities of the works discussed are sometimes drowned by the ambitious breadth of the *Cambridge History*. It might strike us with a note of disappointment to find that the *Cambridge History* does not contain a chapter devoted exclusively to Haiti, a nation whose centrality to the history of the Black Atlantic we know to be indisputable. However, the scattered references to Haiti throughout both volumes articulate and emblemize the diffusion of Haitian literature in the cultural production of the region. Just when the tangential treatment that Haiti receives in the volumes begins to appear like a gigantic editorial blind spot, the extraordinary number of brief comments on Haiti is sufficient to relieve some of our worst fears. Therefore, even if Haiti is not studied as an independent historical, national, and cultural formation, it is presented as auxiliary to a series of important thematic currents addressed by the contributors to the volumes.

The chapter with the largest number of references to Haiti is Nick Nesbitt's "Caribbean literature in French: origins and development." Even though Nesbitt addresses the importance of the Indigenist and Realist Haitian writers, as a whole Haiti is merely presented as simply one of many cultural sites in the Francophone world. In fact, references to Haiti are only used to illustrate its connections and contributions to the literatures of Guadeloupe and Martinique, territories that receive a much more favorable treatment in his chapter. One can notice this lack of balance in his discussion of the Code Noir: "Though this literature disappeared in Haiti following the elimination of the white planter class upon independence, in Martinique and to a lesser extent Guadeloupe, such economic concerns survived even the abolition of slavery in 1848 to live on until the final collapse of the plantation after 1946" (646-7). The author misses here the most convenient opportunity to discuss the literary origins and effects of the Haitian Revolution. Instead, he illustrates his statement with verses from béké Guadeloupean poet Saint-John Perse.

However, the requisite addressing of the Haitian revolution is contained within a larger discussion of the Anglophone Caribbean as it attempts to understand C.L.R. James's monumental work *The Black Jacobins*. Elaine Savory's chapter "Anglophone Caribbean literature" elaborates on the intellectual influence of this important Caribbean writer but stops short of any elaboration of the actual national uprising that his work records.

Similarly, Haiti is presented as auxiliary to discussions of the Hispanophone Caribbean. Lisabeth Paravisini-Gebert's very interesting chapter "Caribbean Literature in Spanish" presents a rich schematic outline of the literary production of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. Within her

insightful discussion of the Dominican Republic, Paravisini-Gebert notes that the Dominican discourse which "sought to cement the roots of the nation in the distant indigenous past rested in part on the elaboration of a mestizo identity that could erase the nation's black and mulatto roots. Needing a historical past as removed as possible from the history of the black rebellion that had made of Haiti the region's first independent republic. . ." (684). Even as her exposure of the racialized national construction of Haiti and the Dominican Republic is helpful, the fact that Haiti remains a perspective rather than an object of primary study is a troubling trait that this essay shares with the *Cambridge History* as a whole.

F. Abiola Irele concedes that Haiti plays a role in the Harlem Renaissance, but this role is that of a consumer of Black U.S. literature: "For the American occupation brought with it an acquaintance with the literature of the Harlem Renaissance that soon developed into a determining influence on the expression of the younger generation of Haitian writers" (769). Similarly, there is an acknowledgement of Haitian Diasporic writers, but these only serve to foreground their assimilation to their new homelands rather than to emphasize their Haitian origins. The half-a-dozen references to Danny Laferrière and Edwidge Danticat do not serve so much as points of departure for discussions of Haiti as they become opportunities to articulate the alienation that the First World enforces upon the diasporic Caribbean writer. Along the same lines, Maureen Warner-Lewis' "The oral tradition in the African diaspora" contains the volumes' single reference to Vodou, contained in just one line of her article.

Ironically, the diffusion of Haiti throughout the volumes demonstrates the pioneering and revolutionary editorial approach of F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi. Clearly, the editors of the *Cambridge History* sought to bridge an oceanic lacuna of literary criticism by commissioning scholars to emphasize transatlantic connections rather than offer country-specific chapters. With *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, these two scholars invite Haitianists who may have been seeing the wood for the trees to adjust their focus and begin contemplating the splendor of their surroundings among the myriad literary branches stemming from the common trunk of ancestral African orality.