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Elèna Mortara, *Writing for Justice: Victor Séjour, the Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara, and the Age of Transatlantic Emancipations*. Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2015. xxi + 330 pp. Bibliography and index. \$40.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-6116-8790-3.

Review by Aaron Freunds Schuh, Queens College, CUNY.

The past two decades have seen sustained production from authors associated, in one way or another, with the transnational turn.[1] Elèna Mortara projects this shift in sensibility onto the nineteenth century, when extraordinary writers articulated a “global vision” of justice (p. xvi). A specialist of American literature at the University of Rome Tor Vergata, Mortara trains her focus on the Francophone author Victor Séjour, following him from his childhood in New Orleans to the literary stardom he enjoyed in Paris. Though Séjour’s plays were sometimes produced in the United States, he has been ignored for most of the past 150 years in his home country, his name unmentioned in the Americans-in-Paris subgenre of popular and academic history. Yet Séjour’s life and work were groundbreaking in several respects. A short story that he published very early in his career, “Le Mulâtre” (1837), tells of a slave who kills his master. It is believed to be the first work of fiction ever published by an African American. It also prefigured a great tradition of protest writing in the United States.[2]

Professor Mortara approaches Séjour as a case study in “pluriliminality.” He was a mixed-race author whose experience of “multiple identities” informed much of his oeuvre (pp. xx-xxi).[3] The book’s title, *Writing for Justice*, evokes Séjour’s political engagement, while at the same time signaling Professor Mortara’s identification with morally driven writing that surmounts parochialism, be it geographical or disciplinary. Mortara takes aim at the “excess of specialization” in current scholarship, which has blinded literary history to “problems of emancipation across national borders” (p.vi). “Each researcher,” she contends, “sees his or her limited field of study, be it Black Emancipation, Catholic Emancipation, and so on, in splendid solitude” (p. xv). To correct this tendency, Mortara offers a chrononym, “the Age of Transatlantic Emancipations,” to mark her intention to retrace a transnational network that sprang to life in the stormy decades of the mid-nineteenth century.

During those years, “emancipation” became the rallying cry for a wide range of figures who longed to see the Enlightenment’s central promises enacted, foremost the guarantee of equal rights. Mortara maps this emancipatory discourse, which extended from central Europe to the Deep South. Heinrich Heine believed that the cause of emancipation defined his epoch—whether in Ireland, Greece, the West Indies, or, closer to home, among the Jews of Frankfurt. Harriet Beecher Stowe, looking across the Atlantic, wondered if the slaveholding United States would avoid the convulsions taking place in other nation-states that harbored “unredressed injustice” (quoted on p. xvii). Sometimes specific instances of injustice sparked global fury, as when Henry Thoreau and Victor Hugo—the latter in exile from France’s Second Empire—found common cause against the hanging of the American abolitionist John Brown.

There is a line that gets occasionally blurred, however, between the book's laudable reconstitution of intercontinental solidarity, on one the hand, and general characterizations of distinct historical context(s), on the other. Professor Mortara observes: "As in the United States, where the southern 'aristocrats' were not willing to give up their rights of 'property' represented by the slaves they owned, so in the Kingdom of the Church of Rome, and in other illiberal states, the old world of absolute power was desperately resisting change and fiercely fighting against the new, with its liberal belief in freedom of conscience and religion, basic human rights and rights of citizenship" (pp. xvii-xviii). Do these illiberal regimes—chattel slavery and reactionary monarchy, respectively—belong in the same discussion, or are their differences categorical in nature?

To wish that Professor Mortara had grappled with this issue at greater length is not to take away from this book's many insights, some of which were yielded by impressive archival discoveries. On the contrary, it is to underscore the questions that her book will hopefully provoke—sympathetic inquiries, that is, into the challenges and costs of widening our scope of analysis across the globe. Thanks to Professor Mortara's efforts, the upside is evident. *Writing for Justice* demonstrates just what a feat of imagination and rhetorical strategy it was, on the part of Séjour and likeminded authors, to think across national barriers in the service of a planetary politics *avant la lettre*.

The book is divided into three parts. The first two deal extensively with Séjour's published work, viewed primarily through the dual lens of his biography and the literary themes and devices that marked his era. He was born a "free Creole of color" to a prosperous mulatto man of Haitian parentage and a free woman of color, which permitted him to receive a fine education, and to write poetry in his youth. His departure for Paris, near his twentieth birthday, was auspiciously timed: just three years earlier, the July Monarchy had granted full citizenship rights to all *hommes de couleur libres*, "without any distinction" (p. 3). Séjour would enjoy basic living standards and rights overseas that the antebellum South would never have afforded him.

After a few years in Paris, he gained attention with the publication of a poem in the heroic mode, "Le Retour de Napoléon" (1841). There was a succession of plays, some produced on the capital's finest stages. In these pieces, Séjour consistently dealt with the motif of vengeance, as well as with the predicament of hybrid identity. By the 1850s, he was on friendly terms with the likes of Alexandre Dumas père and stood at the height of his literary renown. In 1858, news that would change the course of Séjour's career arrived from Bologna: a young Jewish boy named Edgardo Mortara had been abducted by officials of the Catholic Church in a manner that recalled prior epochs.

Professor Mortara is Edgardo Mortara's great-grand-niece. Young Edgardo had supposedly been baptized without his parents' knowledge, and on that basis removed from the family's home. Since Bologna was part of the Papal States, the logic and procedures of the Inquisition still held sway. The Church dug in its heels, and Pope Pius IX's guards took Edgardo to Rome, where he was indoctrinated for the better part of two decades. During those years, his mother and father made significant sacrifices in an effort to recover him. For his part, Pius made a show of taking the boy under his wing.

Edgardo Mortara's ordeal, in conjunction with Victor Séjour's courageous response to it, form the hinge of this book. Like other luminaries, Séjour was scandalized by the brutal facts of the case. As a Catholic, he spoke out against the Church in unrelenting terms. He produced a play of protest, *La Tireuse de cartes* (1860), which recasts the Mortara affair by setting it in another century, with a female as the victim. As Professor Mortara explains, the piece is a problem play. Then a new theatre genre that placed conflicting perspectives in the foreground, the problem play had its characters clash in debates. By making the abducted child in the play female, he likely calculated that the victim's suffering would provoke more sympathy among audiences—this, in accordance with contemporary representations of gender. There was notable resonance in the burden carried by mulatto or black mothers who, in abolitionist literature, suffer separation from their children. There was no mistaking Séjour's message,

and he found himself under fierce attack in the Catholic press. Professor Mortara shows great command of the international reception of the play and of the wider condemnation of the kidnapping. Readers will come away with a deeply enriched understanding of the French and American literary contexts in which *La Tireuse de cartes* was forged, as well as of the remarkable afterlife of the play on both sides of the Atlantic.

The sole chapter of part three, “Family Recollections: A Personal Note,” could stand alone as a meditation on the passage of historical and generational time. It is here that we learn the choppy backstory to *Writing for Justice*, though close observers of the Catholic Church will probably have some inkling of these controversies already.

In 2005, the Italian journalist Vittorio Messori signed a memoir, *Io, il bambino ebreo rapito da Pio IX: il memoriale inedito del protagonista del caso Mortara* [I, *The Jewish Child Kidnapped by Pius IX*], based on the posthumously discovered papers of Edgardo Mortara.[4] Messori is a high-profile Catholic journalist with intimate access to the Vatican (he was granted interviews by Pope John Paul II on at least two occasions). Upon the volume’s release, Professor Mortara came forward publicly to criticize its “obscurantist vision” of the abduction, telling the *Times Higher Education Supplement* that the Mortara family had believed it long since “buried.”[5] Instead, they were dismayed to find that the kidnapping, the anachronism of which had been clear to Victor Séjour way back in the 1850s, was still being justified with reference to Canon law. Not even the past’s past was past.

The Messori volume appeared on the heels of another notable event. In 2000, the Vatican announced the beatification of Pope Pius IX, who had ceremoniously adopted Edgardo Mortara as his “spiritual son.” Beatification is a form of posthumous advancement that brings one a step closer to canonization. But in fact, writes Professor Mortara, Pius was “an enemy of freedom of religion, at a time when liberal culture was triumphing in Europe.” He not only opposed Italy’s national independence movement, but was the “last Pope to keep the Jews of Rome by law in the ghetto” (p. 177).

There are more twists in the Mortara family’s saga—a Steven Spielberg film is in the works—that Professor Mortara mentions to bring the complex legacies of injustice more fully into view. During his time in Rome, Edgardo Mortara’s Jewish identity was effectively effaced by his captors. He later moved to France, entered the priesthood, and thereafter cleaved to his adopted Catholicism. He lived long enough to permit his lost family to reestablish contact with him. (He died in Belgium, in 1940.)

In her concluding remarks, Professor Mortara sets her family’s recollections against the backdrop of modernity’s supposed ruptures. Although the kidnapping occurred more than 150 years ago, Professor Mortara’s own father, and the latter’s cousins, got to know Edgardo well—*lo zio prete*, they called him, “our uncle the priest.” The aftermath of his abduction was a visceral burden until well into the twentieth century. Perhaps this shouldn’t come as a surprise: “the whole history of the last 2000 years is summed up in about eighty generations, and each of us can usually go back to three or four of them. It is only when something historically important happens, when our personal or family life is crossed by ‘history,’ that we can fully appreciate that” (p. 176). Unavoidably, *Writing for Justice* will remind readers of the crimes more recently perpetrated against children by the Church.

NOTES

[1] For an overview of the transnational turn in literary studies, see Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010).

[2] Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 165; quoted by Mortara (p. 7).

[3] Scholarly research on Séjour, by no means voluminous, has had to reckon with the matters of race and intercultural identity. See Charles Edwards O'Neill, *Séjour: Parisian Playwright from Louisiana* (Lafayette, La.: The Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1995).

[4] Vittorio Messori, *Io, il bambino ebreo rapito da Pio IX: il memoriale inedito del protagonista del caso Mortara* (Milano: Mondadori, 2005).

[5] "It is disturbing that Messori explains that today's Canon Law confirms the principle of Mortara's abduction, and considers legitimate the forced conversions of infants in danger of death against the parents' will, be they Catholic or not," said Professor Mortara at the time. The *Times Higher Education Supplement* is now the *Times Higher Education*. For the story, see *Times Higher Education*, Aug. 12, 2005: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/anger-at-scholars-book-on-abduction/197855.article> (accessed Oct. 3, 2017).

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