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Abel Alexis Louis, *Hommes en noir, femmes en blanc? La culture des apparences à l'épreuve du système esclavagiste en Martinique (1765-1848)*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2020. 325 pp. €34.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-343-20767-4.

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Abel Alexis Louis is a prolific social and material historian of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Martinique. *Les Livres de couleur en Martinique*, his magnum opus, appeared in 2012. It spans three volumes, each corresponding to a distinct era between 1635 and 1822.[1] Seven book-length works followed. Firstly, in 2013 and 2016 respectively, came studies of two particular Martiniquan political figures: the first “coloured” French parliamentary deputy from the island, Janvier Littré (1752-1820), and the first “coloured” member of the Colonial Council and Court of Appeal in Martinique, Jean-Pierre Clavier (1810-1863).[2] These were followed in quick succession by a study of “coloured” merchants in Saint-Pierre (1777-1830): a study on the Martiniquan bourgeoisie from 1802 to 1852, an analysis of the business world during the July Monarchy (1833-1848), and a survey of books and their readers in Martinique from the end of the Directoire in 1799 up to the end of the July Monarchy, which coincided with abolition.[3] A recent book chapter in English on Cyrille Bissette, Victor Schoelcher’s “free coloured” competition as poster-boy of abolitionism, is an excellent appetiser for the book-length studies, all of which were published by L'Harmattan.[4] The 2020 study under review here is entitled *Hommes en noir, femmes en blanc?* It focuses, as its subtitle indicates, on “la culture des apparences à l'épreuve du système esclavagiste en Martinique”, in other words, on the tension that prevailed from 1765 to 1848 between Martinique’s slavery-based social system on the one hand, and the “culture of appearances” based on clothing and apparel, on the other.

It would be difficult to overestimate the value of socio-material history for the study of what preeminent Martiniquan author Patrick Chamoiseau terms a “*pays dominé*.”[5] Even in postcolonial contexts that are neither as thoroughly and enduringly dominated socio-culturally, nor as climatically challenged as the French Caribbean, the material vestiges of the lives of colonial subalterns—their dwellings, accoutrements, tools, etc.—have been largely obliterated. The documentary archive that registers their historical existence is all the more precious for being so limited and (as yet) incompletely accessible remotely. Consequently, its excavation by on-the-spot socio-material historians such as Abel Alexis Louis is invaluable, as are the publishers who make their discoveries available.

L'Harmattan was founded by Robert Ageneau and Denis Pryn in 1975. Pryn had worked for a time as a leftist Catholic missionary in Africa, which explains why this press originally

concentrated on matters African or Africa-related. However, it quickly developed a pan-continental focus on literature and history and much more besides. In its Paris bookshop-cum-publishing premises in Paris, the tottering book-towers include much material from other publishers but reflect mainly L'Harmattan's own extraordinarily extensive list. They contrast dramatically with the display-shelves of the more sedate *Présence Africaine* emporium across the road and are an objective correlative of the teeming richness of detail in Louis's works. Of these, the most micro-materially focused to date is undoubtedly the 2020 study of the optics of sartorial culture in Martinique over the final eighty years of the chattel slavery system. Certainly, the book's main title suggests a dominant focus on gender, specifically on the "black and white" putatively worn by men and women respectively. This double binary—"men in black, women in white"—is framed, however, as a question, which the book's subtitle broadens out into a far more general brief, namely, Martinique's "culture of appearances" under chattel slavery.

The absence of scare quotes around the qualification "coloured" (*de couleur*), a qualification central to so many of Louis's titles, confirms the considerable discursive and epistemic disparities between (predominantly Anglophone) postcolonial studies, on the one hand, and Francophone colonial history, on the other, particularly where the discursive constructs (or fictions?) of "race" and "colour" are concerned.[6] Regardless of its cause—and the inter-disciplinary band-width of postcolonial studies, along with the greater Anglophone than Francophone regard for so-called French Theory are obvious contenders—this disparity has produced some noteworthy translation failures between the Anglosphere and the Francosphere of Caribbean studies.[7]

Two aspects of *Hommes en noir* illustrate this general critical disjunction. Firstly, Louis is silent on all the main post-colonialist references, both Anglophone and Francophone, on the Caribbean-related semantics of skin colour. He draws extensively and aptly instead on the work of Michel Pastoureau, which is much more generally focussed on the historical symbolism of colours.[8] Of course, Fanon's landmark *Peau noire, masques blancs* shimmers between the lines both of Louis's interrogative title and of his exposition of Pastoureau's work.[9] Inevitably too, Roger Toumson's literary study, *La Transgression des couleurs: Littérature et langage aux Antilles XVIIIe, XIXe, XXe siècles* winks out from the title's dominant emphasis on colour.[10] And, whereas these two unreferenced works expose above all the delusions and manipulations informing the imagination and language of race and skin-colour in the French Caribbean, Louis's interpretive grid remains an apparently very simple tripartite, pre-Abolition socio-pigmented model: "white," "*libres de couleur*" and (implicitly black) slaves. The distortions, denials, ambiguities and ironies undermining the neatness of this grid are never brought into focus. Instead, the author's main interest is, as always, in the way that structure works, or is subverted, thanks to various levers of upward socio-racial mobility, in this case clothing and apparel. Readers expecting a reflective or deconstructive critique of the layers of ambiguity and irony surrounding the pre-Abolition French Caribbean imaginary of colour, particularly skin colour, may be disappointed by this approach. Others will relish being stimulated into trying themselves to bring these semantic layers into simultaneous focus.

A further illustration of the critical disjunction with postcolonial studies is the lack of reference to the considerable body of work available in English on the sartorial culture of Caribbean slavery, for example the work of Steeve O. Buckridge.[11] A very influential source is, instead, Daniel Roche's historical anthropology and semiotics of clothing in France, from which Louis takes indeed his subtitle, "la culture des apparences".[12] Of course he does also situate his approach in relation to studies of French Caribbean dress specifically, differentiating from the

outset his own approach on the basis of the range of clothing studied and of the hitherto unconsidered documentary sources that he prioritises.[13]

The simplicity of Louis's titular question on men's black clothing versus women's white clothing does rather subside under the sheer proliferation of detail and of analysis. The fact is that this study concerns much more than the colour of the clothing in question and infinitely more than a simple contrast in the putative colour-coding of men's versus women's dress. In fact, the sheer detail and variety of the "culture of [sartorial] appearances" is what Louis highlights above all. Thus, minute tabular data is provided not just on the wardrobes of the three main social categories of Martiniquan men and then women, but also on the island's clothing professions and clothing trade. The focus is emphatically not on *costume*, but on all elements of dress, including night attire and undergarments such as leggings, corsets and petticoats. It extends to accessories such as shoes, hats or jewellery, and to the provenance of the apparel as gifts, hand-me-downs or legacies, for example. And it also includes the various livelihoods constituted around dress. The weight given to all these considerations show that the book's remit far exceeds the highlighted chromatic brief.

*Hommes en noir* does present a number of original illuminations concerning the gendered codes of monochrome clothing throughout the eighty years preceding abolition. Louis notes, for example, the gender-neutral and, when possible, caste-blind preference for white undergarments for reasons of hygiene. However, it is (happily) impossible to extract any one unifying "black and white" thesis from the sheer volume and variety of his research and analysis. It is difficult, for example, to extract a clear summary of how the deployment of white and black clothing differed from that of the multi-coloured and mostly patterned clothing made from the so-called Madras material that became almost synonymous with traditional Caribbean dress. This fast-dyed cotton fabric was manufactured originally in Southeast India and was already being imported in the seventeenth century into the Caribbean. It was used not just in the traditional knotted head turban or *foulard*, including the towering *bamboche*, but also in skirts and dresses. Of course, part of the originality that Louis claims for his study inheres precisely in its particular focus on white and black clothing, since the previous studies of French Caribbean dress had tended to begin and end with Madras costume.

It is important to note that the book contains some illustrations, since Louis's sources include visual (but not, alas, literary) art, notably depictions of Martiniquan crowd scenes by Agostino Brunias and Le Masurier, along with Joseph Savart's famous 1770 gouache *Quatre femmes créoles*. The main sources are textual, however; for example, the local press with its advertisements and fashion articles highlighting the latest arrivals from London or Paris or the local business scene, including the work of tailors, haberdashers and other specialist artisans such as hat-makers, cobblers, etc. However, it is the analysis of local notarial archives that really makes this book sing, especially the tabular accounts of the wardrobes registered in marriage contracts and, even more informatively, in death inventories. These records are broken down by gender and gradations of social status for "whites" and "*libres de couleur*". The slave class is much less differentiated, although the importance of the *esclaves à talent*, especially seamstresses and tailors, is acknowledged. For both "whites" and "free coloureds", whether men or--much more rarely--women, estate owners were at the top of the pyramid with the exclusively white sugar-plantation owners at the apex. In the "free coloured" caste, the elite are the owners of coffee or other crop plantations. In both of these groups, the social ladder descends via home- and slave-owners to farmers, professionals and artisans, and finally the unskilled or unemployed. The extraordinary

detail of Louis's tables allows readers to imagine the socio-cultural texture of these Martiniquan lives in a particularly vivid way.

To return, however, one last time to the vexed question of colour, we should recall that the stipulations of the *Code noir* were apparently silent on the colour of clothing. The law does insist that slave-owners had a duty of care to dress their slaves. Article 25 of the 1685 code and the equivalent article in the 1724 oblige slave-owners to provide two outfits of rough hard-wearing clothing per slave per year. From 1720 to 1809 a different series of "luxury" directives, called the *lois somptuaires*, outlawed sartorial luxury both for slaves and for "*libres de couleur*". These by-laws limited not just the dress-freedom of the latter classes, but also the desire of "white" or "non-white" slave-owners to allow their subordinates to wear fine clothing, however old and worn, thus amplifying their own glory by proxy. Here again, though, we note that these laws concentrated not—or at least not explicitly—on the colour of clothing but rather on the fabric. "Non-whites" were forbidden, for example, to wear velvet, silk or lace and also gold jewellery. *Hommes en noir* is focussed with particular acuity, of course, on the flouting of these laws, most especially by the practice of donation, as when men's and women's clothing, including more or less well-worn undergarments, were gifted or bequeathed by the relatively well-to-do to the less well-to-do rightacross the "colour lines." In this context, the author not surprisingly complains about the frequent vagueness of references to the colour of clothing in the inventories: the word *colorié*, for example, could, as Louis observes, refer to any "non-white" colour or several, including black or brown or navy. His frustration on this point is deliciously ironic, however, given that the book's illustrations, which are exclusively black and white, turn the multi-colour clothing—and skin—represented in the paintings into fifty shades of grey. For this reason alone, it is safe to say that the gaps and ironies of Louis's study, just as much as the richness of the detail provided, will produce a very positive sea-change in the way that its readers will henceforth read the representation of "appearances" in the francophone Caribbean imaginary.

## NOTES

[1] Abel Alexis Louis, *Les Livres de couleur en Martinique*, vol. 1 1635-1788, vol. 2 1789-1802, vol. 3 1803-1848 (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012).

[2] Louis, *Janvier Littée* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013); and, *Jean-Pierre Eugène Clavier* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016).

[3] Louis, *Marchands et négociants de couleur à Saint-Pierre 1777-1830: Milieux socio-professionnels, fortune, et modes de vie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015); *Les Bourgeoisies en Martinique 1802-1852: Une approche comparative* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2017); *Le Monde du négoce à Saint-Pierre sous la Monarchie de Juillet (1833-1848): Essai d'histoire sociale et matérielle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2017); and, *Le Livre et ses lecteurs en Martinique, de la fin du Directoire à la Monarchie de Juillet (1799-1848): Essai d'histoire sociale et matérielle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2018).

[4] Abel Alexis Louis, "Cyrille Bisette: A Singular Voice in France," in *Unexpected Voices in Imperial Parliaments*, eds. Josep M. Fradera, José María Portillo, and Teresa Segura-García (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), pp. 97-126.

[5] Patrick Chamoiseau, *Écrire en pays dominé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

[6] See, for example, Mia L. Bagneris, *Colouring the Caribbean: Race and the Art of Agostino Brunias*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); and, Maeve McCusker, *Fictions of Whiteness: Imagining the Planter Caste in the French Caribbean Novel* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021).

[7] See Mary Gallagher, "Connection Failures: Discourse on Contemporary European and Caribbean Writing in French," *Small Axe* 14 (2010): 21-32; and, "Community in 'Global' Academies: The Critical Positioning of 'Meta-Francophone' Caribbeanists," *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Literary Theory* 37 (2014): 290-307.

[8] Michel Pastoureau, *Dictionnaire des couleurs de notre temps: Symbolique et société* (Paris: Bonneton, 2007); and, *Noir: Histoire d'une couleur*, (Paris: Seuil, 2008).

[9] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952).

[10] Roger Toumson, *La Transgression des couleurs: Littérature et langage des Antilles, XVIIIe, XIXe, XXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions caribéennes, 1989).

[11] See Buckridge's two monographs: *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1760-1890* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004); and *AfricanLace-Bark in the Caribbean: The Construction of Race, Class, and Gender* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

[12] Daniel Roche, *La Culture des apparences: Une histoire du vêtement (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

[13] For example, Lyne-Rose Beuze et Loïs Hayot, *Costumes créoles: Mode et vêtements traditionnels des Antilles françaises de 1635 à 1948* (Fort-de-France: Fabre Domergue, 1999); and, Nicole Réache and Michelle Gargar, *La Gazette du Costume Créole au fil tissé des modes et de l'histoire* (Gosier, Guadeloupe: PLB Editions, 2017).

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