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Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon

BY KAIAMA L. GLOVER

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How do natural forms influence abstract philosophical and poetic paradigms? In engineering and natural science environments, Haitian "spiralism" would be called a biomimetic movement: a paradigm that imitates the ingenious and complex designs of a construction found in nature. Kaiama Glover's monograph *Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon* begins with a riveting description of the symbolic identity of the spiralist movement, from the double helix to the contours of the conch shell to the designs on the central pillar of the vodou oufou or temple. What is at stake in spiralism is nothing less than navigating the painful aesthetics of cycles of misfortune.

Spiralism in Haiti began in 1965 with the attempt of three individuals--Franketienne, Jean-Claude Fignole, and Rene Philoctete--to imagine their world--or their "whirl"--within the terms of the spiral. Glover's deeply poetic work opens a myriad of portals onto this largely ignored motif in the postcolonial Caribbean, while also navigating between the aesthetic register and the cultural and historical discourses and debates with which Haiti is most deeply associated through its revolutionary history.

Spiralism has many Glissantian echoes. Glover, trained in Lesser Antillean as well as Haitian literary history, rejects the impression that Haiti's "admittedly extraordinary" past made it "incomparable or irreconcilable with its regional neighbors." Glover sees reflections and patterns, and is able to demarcate lines of contestation and mimesis, between Haiti and nearby islands that followed strikingly different destinies. Her work joins that of a select cohort including J. Michael Dash and F. Nick Nesbitt in unifying literary criticism in these different arenas.

In this compelling book, Glover charts the association of Caribbean stories with the performative interpersonal dimensions of *krik krak*, with the revisiting of epic historical memories in the present or the future, and with figures and fractured revenants like the *zonbi*, the schizophrenic, or conflictual *marasa* or twins. The spiral is a chameleon-like form: it can be conceptualized as a literary form or genre, as the hybrid African/New World cultural space of the genesis and reception of *creole*, or as the evanescence of ideological heroism into a fog of disputed memories.

Spiralism is one of several mid to late 20th-century literary movements produced in Haiti, including *Houguenikou*, *plurealism*, and *surplurealism*, all in relation to the anthropological self-study of indigenism. Despite its intertextual philosophical resonance and Caribbean translatability, spiralism has always been particularly oriented toward a Haitian public. It evokes the intricate curves, like the inner folds of an ear, of Haiti's folk culture and lived aesthetics. Glover connects this movement to the isolating experience for its authors of remaining creatively productive in Haiti during the dictatorships of Duvalier pere et fils. The "occlusion" of spiralism relates to its refusal to align freedom with migration. Yet the inward orientation of the spiral twists away from the intrusive reach of the Duvalier regimes into spiritual and fantasy life, including the duvalierist appropriation of Vodou for authoritarian purposes.

The aesthetics of spiralism are at once symmetrical, dystopian, musical, and dissonant. In its emphasis on cyclical disaster, spiralism delivers the poetic blueprint of a mythical New World morphing into a mythical Developing World. As Glover reminds us in this lyrical and important book, the Haitian revolution, or any revolution, is more associated with the spiral than with hard stop, in its identification with "revolving": and literature, even densely poetic literature, remains a key architecture of the resistance and survival of the imagination in Haitian cultural life.

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