Susan Allen

René Maran's Batouala: Jazz-Text. Bern: Peter Lang, 2015. xli + 343 pp. (Paper US\$109.95)

Ever since his award-winning novel *Batouala* (1921), Guyanese author René Maran has been heralded as both a precursor of the Negritude movement and one of the most daring anticolonial Caribbean Francophone voices. Like his fellow poet and writer, Léon Damas from Cayenne, Maran infused his writings with a dense network of sources and traditions privileging the key role of music and the language of the beat—what Jacques Derrida, in *L'animal que donc je suis* (2006) called *dansité*. It is both useful and timely that attention be refocused on the pioneering Guyanese authors who had the courage to attack the terrible wounds—physical, mental, and psychological—of colonization and racism in the French Empire. Maran was an enormously talented author, too modern and too well read for his time, so it is a heartening development that Susan Allen rehabilitates and applauds this forerunner of postcolonial prose in which Gide, for one, found such inspiration that he travelled to the Central African Republic to judge if the situation was as bad as described ...

While the centenary of the first novel written in French Creole—*Atipa*, by Alfred Parepou (1841–1917)—will be celebrated in 2017, the first Goncourt ever awarded to a black novelist has languished in obscurity, neglected by Antillean literary critics and overlooked and/or downplayed by some of the more modern “emblematic” writers of Martinique and Guadeloupe. (See, for example, Patrick Chamoiseau's comment in Michel Peterson's 1993 interview in *Nuit Blanche*: “La littérature antillaise actuelle ne se présente plus comme une contestation de la colonisation, comme la revendication d'une humanité noire ou comme une valorisation de l'espace africain. Nous sommes très loin de René Maran.”) Maran has been labelled a decadent poet, a neurasthenic personality, even a depressive. He assumed, wrongly, that European readers would enlarge their horizons and open their minds to his Africanized narrative and its *jazzistique* dimension.

In her welcome monograph, Allen approaches *Batouala* from an original viewpoint. Herself a jazz musician, she first sheds light on the polemic generated by the controversial preface, which caused the author so much trouble. It is simultaneously Maran's expression of gratitude toward his European mentors Henri de Régnier and Jacques Boulenger, a violent denunciation of French colonialism in Africa and an appeal to fellow writers for support. European so-called “civilization,” as represented by the French colonizers, is spared no invective: it is especially castigated for applying its principles of reasoning and logic to justify the “savage vs civilized” dichotomy. As Allen shows, this racial

prejudice was (and continues to be) so strongly impregnated in the European mind that the novel failed, and still fails, to be appreciated in its entirety, and its “jazz features” remain undetected. Indeed, the most important merit of Allen’s book is to show that improvisation, call and response, and Signifyin(g) are all fundamental concepts used by the French Caribbean author to test the ability and willingness of French and Francophone readers to relate to another, different culture. Repetition and reversal are at the heart of a prose characterized by all kinds of characteristics that are “unrecognizable” (at least from a Western viewpoint): African words, strange grammatical configurations, chiasmas, as well as multiple variations on the relationships, symbolic and otherwise, between Chief Batouala (the main character), his father, his many wives, and his rival Bissibin’gui.

This book brings an overlooked author, whose sincerity and authenticity was praised highly by Frantz Fanon, André Gide, and Damas, out of the shadows. Thanks to Alain Locke and other members of the Harlem Renaissance, the novel’s total newness resonated strongly in the United States when it first appeared. They connected more easily, it seems, with Maran’s audacious approach in terms not only of language, but also of structure and “beat,” an approach that transcends dichotomies and polarities. *René Maran’s Batouala* invites scholars to bring out of oblivion an outstandingly great author who, until Allen’s insights, has too often been misread and misunderstood.

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