Toni Pressley-Sanon, *Istwa Across the Water: Haitian History, Memory, and the Cultural Imagination*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017. xv + 195 pp. (Cloth US\$74.95)

During a short visit to Haiti in 1945, André Breton was struck by a painting by Hector Hyppolite hanging in the Centre d'art in Port au Prince. He was not drawn to the painter's craft but to the fact that Hyppolite "was the guardian of a secret." Breton had no way of knowing whether Hyppolite did in fact harbor secrets. His knowledge of Creole was nonexistent and he never even got to the painter's *houmfor*. What Breton projected onto Hyppolite was his own increasing interest in the esoteric and the occult. In a March 1948 interview with Aimé Patri, he claimed to be convinced of the importance of founding myths to the survival of threatened communities: "To a great extent, they thereby resist secular oppression (I think of the Hopi Indians) as well as extreme economic privation (I think of black Haitians)" (reprinted in Breton, *Entretiens [1913–52] avec André Parinaud*, 1952, p. 258). Breton's magical thinking did not get him very far in postwar France. The idea of Haiti as a land of secrets whose survival depends on returning to ancestral myth persists to this day.

Based on Haiti's "parallel 'secret' history," *Istwa Across the Water* attempts to write a new narrative for Haiti that would be different from the "Western, racist, linear, materialist one that dominates" (p. 22). From the outset, "guinea spirits" were present at Haiti's birth, Pressley-Sanon argues. Furthermore, she asserts, "Dessalines was being ridden by the lwa Ogou" when he created the Haitian flag and the spirits later manifested themselves through Dessalines's secretary, the southern Creole Boisrond Tonnerre, when he wrote Haiti's fiercely emotional declaration of independence (p. 4). Denial of the spirit world explains many of the ills that beset Haiti. Most recently the lack of "wholeness" in Haiti literally manifested itself in the catastrophic earthquake of January 2010 which was not just the result of pressure on a fault line that extends from the Dominican Republic to eastern Jamaica, but equally "the rupture both between Haiti's visible and invisible population and between the nation and its sites of origin" (p. 120). The point of this focus on the otherworldly in Haiti is therapeutic. Individual and collective healing would only result if the spirits were restored to their rightful place. Pressley-Sanon's advocacy for restored spiritual equilibrium comes with the blessing of the lwa who "have manifested themselves throughout the researching and writing of this project" (p. 143). The epilogue, unsurprisingly, ends with an incantation.

At times *Istwa* reads like a collaborative effort that is not really meant for the uninitiated. Many of those on whom fulsome praise is heaped repeatedly

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© J. MICHAEL DASH, 2018 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09203019

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the prevailing CC-BY-NC license at the time of publication.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 10:56:26AM
via free access

in the text reappear on the jacket to celebrate the book's achievements. However, it does come with almost 40 pages of notes and bibliography to establish its academic credentials. In this regard, Pressley-Sanon could have been better served by the University Press of Florida. Besides proof-reading errors, there is a real howler in the index where Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* becomes "*Poetics of Relaxation*" (p. 193). Indeed, there is a procrustean massaging of complex concepts to make them bland and compatible with the book's Afrocentrist perspective. For instance, Derek Walcott, who famously rejected history for an Adamic amnesia, is cited approvingly. History was surely for him a petrifying force, "the Medusa of the Caribbean," and he would be the last to want to activate ancestral belief systems. Similarly, rigor is replaced by conceptual "relaxation" in the treatment of Glissant's notion of the abyss. Glissant's concept of the naked migrant who was thrown into the triple abyss of the Atlantic crossing is a clear rejection of atavism. Nevertheless, we are told that Glissant promotes "a Caribbean identity that moves from African roots to rhizomes, multitudes of branching links" (p. 13). The relevant footnote actually refers to Brathwaite and not Glissant.

Istwa is at its best in suggesting that the figure of the zonbi, the marassa, the recycled art of the Atis Rezistans, and the oral tradition offer interesting insights into the popular imaginary. However, Pressley-Sanon uses the "cultural imagination" simply to make the point that healing Haiti must mean no longer denying the Vodou gods their rightful place. This sounds very much like a return to Price-Mars's outdated idea of "bovarysme" or Melville Herskovits's "socialized ambivalence." Just as the esoteric and the mythical appealed to Breton trying to understand what went catastrophically wrong during World War II, the temptation is to turn to the mythical to explain the ills of Haitian society. However, we should remember that myth is easily exploited by fascist regimes, whether in Hitler's Germany or Duvalier's Haiti. Haiti may well need new narratives but the ultimate question is how new or useful this one is.

J. Michael Dash

French Department, New York University

michael.dash@nyu.edu