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“History, yes, / Will tell of this”: a double irony. Penned by an unknown author under the pseudonym Camille Naudin, and published in La Tribune de la Nouvelle-Orleans in July 1867, the poem “Ode to the Martyrs” (“Ode aux martyrs”) commemorates a little-remembered event in US history. The Mechanics’ Institute massacre of 1866 erupted on the first day of the Louisiana Constitutional Convention, whose stated aim was to extend suffrage to free men of African descent. White reactionaries—including police officers dressed in Confederate uniform—clashed with supporters of the convention, raided the Institute where delegates had gathered, and set off a manhunt throughout the neighborhood, ultimately killing several dozen Black New Orleanians.

However familiar other white riots—think Wilmington 1898 or Tulsa 1921—this incident remains obscure, though not moreso than the poets who memorialized its victims. Indeed, Camille Naudin was part of a cohort of Afro-Creole poets whose collected contributions to two key Louisiana periodicals, La Tribune (1864-70) and its immediate predecessor L’Union: mémorial politique, littéraire et progressiste (1862-64), Clint Bruce has edited, translated, and republished for the first time. Afro-Creole Poetry in French from Louisiana’s Radical Civil War-Era Newspapers reveals the activist politics and varied poetic practices of this unheralded community of Black artists and intellectuals, prompting a thorough reconsideration of African American literary culture in the nineteenth century.

Those familiar with Afro-Creole writing from Louisiana will likely acknowledge two landmark publications: Victor Séjour’s 1837 short story “The Mulatto” (“Le Mulâtre”), the first published by an African American writer; and Armand Lanusse’s volume Les Cenelles: Choix de poésies indigènes (1845), likewise considered the first anthology of African American literature. Séjour (1817-1874) published his story—a tale of slavery, secrecy, and vengeance in colonial Saint-Domingue—in the radical Revue des Colonies (1834-1842), founded by Martinican abolitionist Cyrille Bisette (1795-1858) and published by “une société d’hommes de couleur.” La Revue was also the first French periodical directed and produced by people of color. Given its historical primacy and thematic content, it is not surprising that “Le Mulâtre” is frequently anthologized, studied, and assigned in classrooms.

Les Cenelles not so much. The volume’s title suggests why: “cenelle” translates roughly as “holly berry” or “mayhaw,” the fruit of a shrub local to Louisiana. Though Les Cenelles
includes a poem by Séjour, the difference between “Le Mulâtère” and the anthology could not be more pronounced. In one corner, slave revolt; in the other, berries. “The recurring themes of exile and abandonment in Les Cenelles evoke the subordinate conditions of the gens de couleur [men of color], but only subtly,” Bruce notes in his extensive introduction to Afro-Creole Poetry. “An unknowing reader could certainly mistake the authors for white French writers (or white Louisiana Creoles)” (13). The tepid historical reception of Lanusse’s pioneering volume, that is, reflects how prominent writers and critics of the later twentieth century disparaged the works of early Anglo-American poets like Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley for their perceived insufficiencies—not political enough, not resistant enough, not (in effect) Black enough.

Afro-Creole Poetry is a belated antidote to that tendency. Even as we now know enough about Hammon and Wheatley not to be so cavalier about their work, the poems that Bruce assembles represent the kind of writing such critics perhaps wished someone like Wheatley could have produced. In short, what we glimpse in the pages of L’Union and La Tribune is indeed what Bruce aptly calls “poésie engagée” (28), a radical poetic practice committed to protesting political inequality and fostering racial solidarity. This aspect is clear enough in “Ode to the Martyrs,” but it also suffuses the rest of the volume—effectively splitting the difference between “Le Mulâtère” and Les Cenelles.

Afro-Creole Poetry is organized by five thematic sections, the first three of which—“Poetry as Prophecy,” “The War and Reconstruction,” and “Liberty, Racial Equality, and Fraternity”—deal explicitly with the social, political, and philosophical struggles endured by gens de couleur libres (free people of color) in Louisiana. This Afro-Creole coterie, however, was not a collective one-trick pony. Alongside poems of vengeance, protest, and martyrdom, we also find an extended treatise on kissing (“On Kisses”); communications from the dead (“Message from beyond the Grave”); elegies for dead daughters (“Berthe!...Lucie!...Marie!...”); imitations of Robert Burns (“Blacks’ Right to Vote”); and even what Bruce considers an elaborate literary hoax, in which Victor Eugène Macarty plagiarized several poems by French Romantic-era authors under the pseudonym “Antony.” (Something labeled a “hoax” should be a little more elaborate, but this is a minor quibble.)

Even this seemingly inexplicable oddity should provide ample fodder for future inquiry. Scholars of nineteenth-century African American literature have shown, for example, how authors like William and Ellen Craft, William Wells Brown, Hannah Crafts, and Pauline Hopkins compiled extended passages from other sources to construct their prose works. How might Macarty’s “hoax” fit into a larger—now multilingual—story of Black writers borrowing and repurposing texts by canonical or popular authors to suit their own projects? Plus, the field of nineteenth-century American studies has witnessed a
veritable boom in studies of print culture, bibliography, and material texts, crucially shifting focus away from the bound book—and with it, the novel and slave narrative—and onto periodicals, pamphlets, broadsides, convention proceedings, and more. The works collected in *Afro-Creole Poetry*, 79 poems by 11 authors in total, should help extend these critical conversations beyond their usual geographical and linguistic parameters.

Bruce’s stellar edition and translation is, after all, merely the poetic tip of an Afro-Creole iceberg. According to the volume’s “Biographical Notes on Known Authors,” Adolphe Duhart (1830-1908) also published a short story and prose monologue in the bilingual newspaper *The Louisianan* (1870-1882) in 1881. Jean-Sylvain Gentil (1829-1911) published approximately 750 articles, 750 poems, and 35 serial novels in *Le Louisianais* (1865-1883), another newspaper he founded in 1865. Joanni Questy (1817-69)—born in Sicily—published a novella entitled *Monsieur Paul* in *La Tribune* in 1867.

As much as *Afro-Creole Poetry* significantly enhances our knowledge of Black writing and print culture in the nineteenth-century US, it is also a call to do more. In that sense, Bruce’s book joins a slew of crucial recent publications demonstrating the vitality of Black literary production in the French Atlantic world: Chris Bongie’s edition and translation of Haitian politician Baron de Vastey’s *Système colonial dévoilé* (2014); Doris Kadish, Deborah Jenson, and Norman R. Shapiro’s anthology *The Poetry of Haitian Independence* (2015); Christen Mucher and Lesley Curtis’s edition and translation of Haitian writer Émeric Bergeaud’s 1859 novel *Stella* (2015); Tabitha McIntosh, Deirdre McIntosh, and Gregory Pierrot’s digital edition and translation of Haitian playwright Juste Chanlatte’s *Néhri, Chef des Haytiens* (1819); and Marlene Daut, Grégory Pierrot, and Marion Rohrleitner’s forthcoming *Anthology of Haitian Revolutionary Fictions*.

As grateful as we must be for *Afro-Creole Poetry*, a great deal more work—in textual criticism, translation, and literary history—remains to be done. Perhaps we should heed Duhart’s plea in his elegy for Lanusse, published in an 1868 issue of *La Tribune* and previously unknown until it was uncovered by Bruce at the Boston Athenaeum. Writing under the nom-de-plume “Lélia,” the writer appeals to his departed mentor:

> But leave for us a sign
> To believe in the future’s sound design.
> Sleep in peace, far from our eyes;
> Through a glorious drama having progressed
> And lying draped in the shroud of the just,
> Remember us from the heights of the skies. (173)