

Hadriana in Muscular Monochrome: Kwynn Johnson's Queer Dreamscape of Jacmel

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Kwynn Johnson. *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, 2011. Graphite on Vellum, 2x3 ft. Exhibition: *How the Light Enters* (2013, Trinidad & Haiti).

Kwynn Johnson's and René Depestre's dissonant dreams of Hadriana both "upend"—to use Johnson's word—notions of muscular masculinity. In fact, Depestre's Hadriana, an explicitly queer figure who has seven orgasms after a teenage lovemaking session with her classmate Lolita and desires to bite the breasts of a female dancer at her own wake,¹ refers to herself and her struggle for self-salvation as "muscular."² However, the "upending" depicted in Johnson's drawing—if it can be considered such—hinges on Eurocentric and neocolonial notions of gender roles already rejected every day by working women through public performances of homosocial labor throughout the global South. Perhaps Hadriana more rejects gendered and racial categorizations of work than she upends them.

¹ Depestre 158-59, 163.

² Depestre 186.

Depestre's *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* tells the tale of Hadriana, a wealthy white Creole³ Jacmelian with French parents who plans to marry and settle down with a Haitian man from an equally elite family, Hector Danoze. Depestre's Hadriana incarnates the beauty of a bygone era in post-occupation Jacmel,⁴ as well as the nostalgia of the novel's primary narrator, her family friend and admirer Patrick Altamont. To the shock of Patrick and the entire city of Jacmel, Hadriana collapses at the foot of the altar just as she pronounces her marriage oath, and she is declared dead. The majority of the novel traces the struggles of Patrick and others in Jacmel to come to terms with the apparent death of Hadriana as a tragic loss of beauty over the course of forty years.

Hadriana's first-person narrative assumes authority over the last fifty pages of the novel, wherein she recounts her memories of her youth in Haiti, her fateful wedding day, her zombification, her funeral, her escape, and her decision to flee to Jamaica with a group of migrants leaving Haiti in search of agricultural work. Hadriana frees herself from the confines of a society that relegates her to a decorative, domestic, and even folkloric role as the white "fée tutélaire"⁵ or "guardian fairy" of Jacmel through a strategy that Ryan Joyce eloquently analyzes elsewhere in this issue as queer marronage.⁶ Hadriana's resistant flight lands in the work of building a new life and liberation of her own. She flees the ivory tower—or manor—of her family's social, economic, and racial privilege in Jacmel to pursue new possibilities of autonomy on the outside and from below rather than perform a familiar repertoire of fragile femininity and Catholic propriety as a member of Jacmel's ruling class.

In centering the lived experience of Hadriana and her work, Kwynn Johnson picks up where the novel leaves off, reimagining the mundane and repetitive realities of Hadriana's life rather than the romanticized and monumental moment of her reunion with Patrick in the autumn of their lives.

³ In Haiti and more broadly in the Caribbean, it is difficult to pinpoint a single shared definition of creoleness. Historically it has described, with some variation in usage, to language, people of any racial background born in the islands, and elements of cultural expression and affiliation. The current usage of "Creole" in Haiti roughly applies to any native Haitian—or Caribbean—person who speaks and behaves in a "Creole" manner. The first monolingual Kreyòl dictionary defines "kreyòl" as both a language and a set of choices regarding self-fashioning and creative expression: "1. Lang tout ayisyen. [...] Gen kèk lòt peyi ki pale Kreyòl. Matiniken ak moun ki soti nan Lwizyàn pale yon lang ki rele Kreyòl ki sanble ak Kreyòl ayisyen an." (The language of all Haitians. [...] There are other Creole-speaking countries. Martinicans and some Louisianans speak Creole languages that resemble Haitian Creole.), and "2. Estil kreyòl: Gen manje kreyòl, gen kwafi kreyòl, gen zanno kreyòl tou" ("Creole style: There is Creole food, there are Creole hairstyles, and there are Creole earrings [meaning hoop earrings] too."). Vilsaint, Féquière, with Maude Heurtelou. *Diksyonè kreyòl Vilsen, 3yèm edisyon*. Temple Terrace, Florida: Educa Vision, Inc., 1997, 2003, 2007, 2009 (278). My translations. In Haiti, Creole identity may consist of a mixture of nativity, nationality, speech, and/or willful community identification through performances of "style" and other daily communal cultural work such as preparing and sharing meals.

⁴ The United States invaded and occupied Haiti by military force from 1915 to 1934 to protect and expand American imperial interests in the region. The novel's narrative begins in 1938.

⁵ Depestre 38.

⁶ It must be noted that Hadriana successfully enacts this migratory flight and liberation in large part due to the socially legible passport of her whiteness and the privilege of transnational mobility it offers, supplemented by the hefty dowry intended for her establishment of a proper household with her husband in Jacmel, which she appropriates as a personal start-up fund. Hadriana highlights the impact of her elite race and class, along with the rarity of her travel as a single woman, on her personal narrative. She wryly recognizes that her path to freedom through withdrawal is not one open to all (Depestre 189-90). Thus in some ways her individual solution stems from and perpetuates the deeper problem she seeks to counteract—her affiliation with oppressive hierarchies of race, class, and gender.

The commemorative stamp placed directly on the surface of the drawing in its lower right corner frames the work as a visual epistle, an act of writing back to Depestre's nostalgic narrative of feminine beauty lost and found in the circum-Caribbean. While Depestre offers us a vision of Hadriana as the erotic impetus of the male narrator Patrick, Johnson offers a queer dreamscape of Jacmel and its Manoir Alexandra that centers the daily habits of Hadriana and another woman, at once intimate and public. The symbol becomes subject.

Johnson radically refuses to present viewers with the familiar and expected images of eroticized, colorful belles conjured in Depestre's magical realism. Through technique, medium, content, and composition she instead insists upon the transformative power and potential of homosocial women's labor as a daily performance through which a queerly coupled pair of women publicly stake claim to the urban space of the street. The artist does not divulge to viewers who is Hadriana and who is not—only that she is one of two women who walk and work together in camaraderie. One woman follows another, gazing at her friend's backside. The women's loosely hanging garments reveal little of their figures, instead emphasizing the sturdy balance and momentum of their haunches. Johnson denies viewers access to any outline of the voluptuous female form lauded by Depestre in intimate detail. For example, in the novel's first physical portrait of Hadriana's superlative beauty, the barber Scylla Syllabaire imagines that an enchanted butterfly, Balthazar Granchiré, views her nude body through a window:

Hadriana était nue de la pointe des orteils au bout des cheveux, merveilleusement nue partout. Toutefois, au-dessous du nombril sa chair de vierge tenait du prodige! [...] Dans ses papillonnades autour des îles il n'avait jamais vu entre les cuisses d'une jeune fille une conque aussi royalement épanouie. En y collant l'ouïe, il entendrait la mer des Caraïbes!"⁷

(Hadriana was nude from the tips of her toes to the ends of her hair, marvelously nude all over. Notwithstanding, below the belly button her virgin flesh wielded a miraculous power! [...] In all his flirting and fluttering around the islands he had never seen between the thighs of a young woman a conch so royally radiant. Approaching to listen closely, he would hear the Caribbean Sea in it.)⁸

Johnson's composition invites viewers to hover above the figure of Hadriana and her friend as if gazing down from a window, adopting an aerial perspective that recalls that of Depestre's philandering butterfly without recycling the masculinist trope of exotic and virginal island beauty. Offset by surrounding negative space, the women anchor and command the foreground of the composition. Their solid verticality and steady forward motion present a sharp contrast to Depestre's Hadriana, who lies cloistered, horizontal, or gussied up on display for many scenes in the novel. In fact, the women are more firmly rooted in the frame than the cracking architectural structures, whose iron-clad balconies, wooden planks, and aging façades seem to loom or float away in a queer dreamscape that respects and highlights the corporeal integrity of the women but throws the fragmented manor into flux. To add to this effect, the artist misspells Manoir Alexandra twice, first in the homophonic heterograph "Mannoir" in the placard, and second in the masculinized "Alexandre" scrawled by the stamp in the bottom corner. With these similar yet

⁷ Depestre 24.

⁸ Translation mine.

dissimilar names she quietly marks her vision of a queerly different space that deviates from norms established and reinforced in Depestre's literary representation of the Manoir and Jacmel.

In terms of technique, Johnson mainly draws in hard line silhouettes and hatching, with little crosshatching (with the notable exception on top of the bags of coal). Unlike crosshatching, stumping, or stippling, which involve violent clashing or intersection of strokes or points, hatching relies on series of parallel lines to create variations of depth. The calm sameness of these intimate lines echoes that of the two women who walk and work together.

Further, Johnson's choice of medium—graphite on paper vellum—enriches her queer reimagining of *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* in key ways. First, paper vellum provides the graphite with a textured surface that has a myriad of micro-crevices due to its fibers. This texture is often discussed in terms of peaks and valleys, or grain. In Depestre's novel, Hadriana escapes her would-be torturer and master, as well as the society she finds constraining, by fleeing to the valleys of the mountains outside the city. The resistant and autonomous figure of Hadriana here literally rises from a landscape of paper peaks and valleys, just as she does in the novel. Further, the monochrome medium of graphite has the effect of flattening out the visual plane and emphasizing pure shape and depth. This radically egalitarian gesture stands in stark contrast to the polychrome cacophony associated with Jacmel, the partially turquoise Manoir, and tropical imaginaries of the city, of Haiti, and of Jacmelian and Haitian women both exoticized and eroticized in Depestre's mythology.

Finally, graphite is a type of crystallized carbon, akin to the coal that Hadriana and her companion carry in the drawing. In this sense the medium renders the drawing self-referential, almost as if the creative work of the artist is a response to the call of the women's work depicted in the frame, or as if the women in the drawing have delivered the artist the tools and materials needed to make their work visible by forging their image. The work in turn beckons to hovering and isolated viewers to come down from our dizzying perch, to work and walk together with Hadriana in monochrome.

References

Depestre, René. *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988.

Author Bio

K. Adele Okoli is Assistant Professor of French at University of Central Arkansas. Prior to this position she was a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities at Tulane University. She received a joint doctorate in French and African American Studies from Yale in 2014. She also holds a B.A. from Tulane in French, English, and Art History (Newcomb College, 2008). Dr. Okoli's research and teaching interests include Louisianan literature, Haitian art and literature, nineteenth-century French literature and culture, fashion, material culture, and popular music and performance in French and Creole languages. Her first book manuscript traces representations of la belle créole through the literature, visual culture, and popular music of France, Louisiana, and Haiti from the late 17th century to our contemporary moment. The project explores the deployment of this trope in the service of nationalist sentiment across time and space, arguing that gendered aesthetic and erotic ideals at once reflect and constitute political and racial ideologies.