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Scott Henkel. *Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2017. 209p.

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At a time when the current, collective conscience of the United States has been confronted with rhetoric and ongoing challenges that create heavy emotional burdens, Scott Henkel offers insight into significant events and literatures that identify the power of witness and social activism amid strife, contention, tragedy, and division. His review and contextualization of past, key political actions in the Americas serve to theorize the radicle (not *radical* but *root*) potentials of direct democracy that people from different backgrounds drew upon during the nineteenth century in order to successfully alter governing, rule, and authority. Henkel carefully illustrates a literary history of the concept he calls “direct democracy” and then analyzes that concept in a comparative light.

Direct democracy is “the power of ability when multiplied by cooperation” (151). The author defines his view by focusing on certain situations where cooperative power and the literary conversations and histories that accompanied them proved how people increased their power to act when they cooperated, and when, under certain conditions, a “swarm” of group power came to be greater than the sum of its parts. According to his interpretation, this metaphorical “swarm” of collective grassroots action was successful—and even flourished—in confronting and overcoming repression and oppression, and functioned as a “signpost pointing to the presence of the power” of direct democracy (152).

Thus, in order for democratic action and resistance to generate from the ground up and to be sustained by local activists who truly care about national and international change for the public good, this study is an inspiring call to writers, readers, philosophers, and even cynics to think about democracy as a type of power that challenges the traditions of both bureaucratic and limited interpretations of the term. Henkel’s best example of the power he labels direct democracy is of the history of the 2,000 local revolutionary leaders in the Haitian Revolution who emerged after Napoleon Bonaparte ordered French colonial forces in 1802 to “deport all of the Black generals” and manipulate any remaining black officers loyal to the French and fighting against the insurgents. This history has been heavily portrayed in stories and scholarship and has been articulated best by C. L. R. James who wrote *The Black Jacobins* and who researched, wrote, revised and lectured about his

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book between 1938 and 1972. Henkel seizes upon the implications from James in order to advance the trajectory of thinking about collective action involving the Haitian early resisters as possessors of a particular type of collective power and representation of physical manifestation best described as a swarm.

However, these 2,000 local leaders in the Haitian Revolution are not the only examples that Henkel provides for reasoning about the power of direct democracy. He analyzes the literary perspectives put forth by Thomas Carlyle, Walt Whitman, and Lucy Parsons. Each writer picked up and re-worked ideas in order to satisfy goals and address the situations of authority that were dominant in their own times, respectively. Their works adhere to a spectrum of power ranging between aristocratic and democratic, or in the special case of Parsons, who advocated for the eight-hour workday, a sincere propensity to advance the notion of no authority altogether – what we might recognize today as a determined reaction to the status quo and affinities to anyone and anything not aligned with “The Establishment.”

Another event which Henkel analyzes is the 1831 Southampton Slave Rebellion, which led one participant, Nat Turner, to evade capture for nearly nine and one half weeks. This raised Turner’s reputation considerably among slaves, free blacks, and slaveholders. Afterwards, Turner’s name became a positive and negative symbol of the whole rebellion, and was liberated to infamy.

Hence, each of these selected writers and persons recognized the latent power of direct democracy. Their intellect and historical narratives complicate previously overlooked complexities about histories and literatures that have been suppressed by too-easily accepted condensations of fuller understandings about movements and community. Collective reassessment of these literary works and others lies at the heart of Henkel’s claim that there are ideas that made real contributions to bettering the human condition. Intelligence and cooperation demand awareness of how the issues of power, the problems of democracy, slavery, and labor, and the dynamics of racial oppression and injustice can indeed spur cooperative resistance. This is the theoretical swarm that can respond practically to domination without being a different type of domination.

*Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas* is provocative and a new catalyst that reminds us there are literatures that motivate movements and communities. They offer models of experimentation and alternative approaches to the injustices and inequalities of the world in which we live. We simply need to research and rethink these literatures and their accompanying histories – today!