ABSTRACT

Transnational Trickster: Publishing, Representing, and Marketing Dany Laferrière

by

Sandie Blaise

Department of Romance Studies
Duke University

Date:____________________
Approved:

___________________________
Laurent Dubois, Supervisor

___________________________
Deborah Jenson

___________________________
Anne-Gaëlle Saliot

___________________________
Richard Rosa

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Romance Studies in the Graduate School of Duke University

2019
Abstract

This dissertation uses Haitian-Canadian writer Dany Laferrière’s transnational trajectory as a focal point for a study of the relationship between literature, marketing, power, and creative agency. It analyzes Laferrière’s literary career over the span of thirty years (1985-2018), his portrayal in the press and his work’s packaging and reception in the three places the author has been published in the original French language: Quebec, France, and Haiti. Located at the intersection of cultural studies, literary theory, and postcolonial studies, my study explores the ways in which global migration has changed literary production and consumption, and shaped ideas about nationalism. In this analysis, I argue that Laferrière contributed to reshaping national definitions of literature in all three spaces, and that his work’s marketing and reception have revealed political, social, and cultural changes as well as manifestations of identity politics in all three contexts. Through combined analysis of Laferrière’s novels, film adaptations, interviews in the press, book covers, as well as personal interviews that I conducted with his publishers, this study offers a holistic analysis of the cultural, political, and economic dimensions of literary production and circulation in the French-speaking world and contiguous languages like Haitian Creole. Drawing from Laferrière’s packaging in Quebec and France, the study sheds a new light on the way images of Haiti are constructed in the Western imaginary and how paratext mediates discourses about
Caribbean writers. Through the study of the writer’s Haitian publication and Creole translation, my work also offers critical insights into the dynamic power of the Haitian book industry, which scholars have largely overlooked. Finally, by tracing the various factors that enabled Laferrière to emerge and paying particular attention to his recent election to the French Academy, this dissertation illuminates the mechanisms of literary consecration as well as his own creative “trickster” strategy to position himself in the global marketplace. Ultimately, I argue that Laferrière’s transnational trajectory offers a unique lens into the interconnected relationships between literature, markets, postcolonial authors, and nationalism.
Dedication

In loving memory of my grandmother Lucienne Blaise who taught me how to read, nurtured my passion for learning and inspired me to dream big.
# Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iv

List of Figures .......................................................................................................................... ix

Acknowledgements ...................................................................................................................... xii

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 1

1. Publishing, Representing, and Marketing Dany Laferrière in Québec ........................ 13
   1.1 At the Nexus of Racial, Linguistic, and Political Spaces ........................................ 16
   1.2 From National to Global Through Racial and Sexist Tropes .................................. 47
   1.3 Book Packaging and Quebec’s “dual discourse” on Haiti and Haitians .................. 69

2. Publishing, Representing, and Marketing Dany Laferrière in Haiti .............................. 85
   2.1 A Literary Outcast ....................................................................................................... 87
   2.2 Dany Laferrière’s Return through Writing ................................................................. 97
   2.3 Laferrière’s Repatriation to Haiti ............................................................................... 107
   2.4 Da/L’odeur du café: A Creole Translation ................................................................. 130
   2.5 Dany Laferrière Today: “Immortal” or Traitor? ......................................................... 152

   3.1 Dany Laferrière’s Entrance in the French Literary Space ........................................ 162
   3.2 Images & Tropes of Haiti ............................................................................................ 176
   3.3 From “Francophone” to “Immortal”: The Making of a Brand .................................... 197
   3.4 Dany Laferrière’s Trickster Strategy ......................................................................... 219

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 251
Works Cited ........................................................................................................................................255

Biography ....................................................................................................................................274
List of Figures

Figure 1: Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, VLB, 1985 .....................16
Figure 2: Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, VLB, 1985 .....................17
Figure 3: Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, VLB, 1989 .....................49
Figure 4: Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, Film Poster, 1989 ...........50
Figure 5: Le Déclin de l’empire américain, 1986, Quebecois Film Poster .........................55
Figure 6: Le Déclin de l’empire américain, 1986, French Film Poster ..............................55
Figure 7: L’odeur du café, VLB, 1991 ..................................................................................70
Figure 8: Le charme des après-midi sans fin, Lanctôt, 1997 ..............................................70
Figure 9: Pays sans chapeau, Lanctôt, 1996 ........................................................................72
Figure 10: Le cri des oiseaux fous, Lanctôt, 2000 .................................................................74
Figure 11: L’odeur du café, Typo, 1999 ................................................................................75
Figure 12: Chronique de la dérive douce, VLB, 1994 ............................................................76
Figure 13: Chronique de la dérive douce, Boréal, 2012 .......................................................77
Figure 14: J’écris comme je vis, Lanctôt, 2000 .................................................................78
Figure 15: J’écris comme je vis, Boréal, 2010 .................................................................78
Figure 16: Je suis fatigué, Lanctôt, 2001 .............................................................................79
Figure 17: L’odeur du café, Zémès, 2013 ..........................................................................124
Figure 18: L’odeur du café, Zémès, 2013 ..........................................................................125
Figure 19: Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, Belfond, 1989 ..........165
Figure 20: Alléluia pour une femme-jardin, Gallimard, 1982 ..........................................167
Figure 21: Alléluia pour une femme-jardin, Gallimard (Folio), 1986..........................168
Figure 22: Le mât de cocagne, Gallimard, 1979.....................................................175
Figure 23: Le charme des après-midi sans fin, Le Serpent à Plumes, 1998.............180
Figure 24: Pays sans chapeau, Le Serpent à Plumes, 1999.................................180
Figure 25: Le cri des oiseaux fous, Le Serpent à Plumes, 2000...............................181
Figure 26: L’odeur du café, Le Serpent à Plumes, 2001........................................182
Figure 27: Le grand cri Caraïbe, Le Serpent à Plumes, 2002.................................183
Figure 28: En attendant le bonheur, Robert Laffont, 1997.....................................185
Figure 29: Eau de Café, Le Livre de Poche, 1993...................................................186
Figure 30: Solibo Magnifique, Gallimard (Folio), 1991.........................................186
Figure 31: Texaco, Gallimard (Folio), 1994..............................................................187
Figure 32: Chronique des sept misères, Gallimard (Folio), 1997.............................187
Figure 33: Biblique des derniers gestes, Gallimard (Folio), 2003.............................188
Figure 34: Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, Le Serpent à Plumes, 1999.................................................................193
Figure 35: Le goût des jeunes filles, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2005..............................199
Figure 36: Vers le sud, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2006................................................202
Figure 37: Vers le sud, Film poster........................................................................203
Figure 38: Vers le sud, Le Livre de Poche, 2012.....................................................205
Figure 39: Le gout des jeunes filles, Gallimard (Folio), 2007....................................206
Figure 40: Je suis un écrivain japonais, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2008.......................208
Figure 41: Je suis un écrivain japonais, Boréal, 2009............................................208
Figure 42: Je suis un écrivain japonais, Le Livre de Poche, 2012 ........................................... 209
Figure 43: L’énigme du retour, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2009 ...................................................... 210
Figure 44: L’énigme du retour, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2009 ...................................................... 211
Figure 45: Tout bouge autour de moi, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010 ........................................... 214
Figure 46: Chronique de la derive douce, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2012 .................................. 214
Figure 47: Journal d’un écrivain en pyjama, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2013 ...................... 216
Figure 48: L’art presque perdu de ne rien faire, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2014 .................... 216
Figure 49: Mythologies américaines, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2016 ........................................... 218
Acknowledgements

The completion of my dissertation would not have been possible without the support, guidance, and inspiration of all the persons mentioned in this section. I would like to begin by expressing my deepest appreciation to Laurent Dubois at Duke University. I am deeply indebted to his unwavering support throughout this process and beyond, his availability, as well as his understanding and advice as a mentor. His constructive comments and insightful suggestions allowed me to improve my project, go beyond the field of literature and engage in a truly interdisciplinary approach. I am also grateful to Deborah Jenson and Anne-Gaëlle Saliot for their profound belief in my abilities and continued support of my intellectual and professional trajectories. I thank Richard Rosa for his support, his kindness and enthusiasm for my work. I am grateful for the constructive comments that I received during a Caribbean Studies workshop at the National Humanities Center. In particular, I must thank Todd Ochoa, John Garrigus, and Christina Davidson for their insightful suggestions on my first chapter. I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to my friend and colleague David Dulceany, whose friendship, knowledge, and helpful advice provided a great amount of moral and intellectual support throughout the duration of this project. Special thanks to Deb Reisinger with whom I had the great pleasure to work on a separate but related research project and whose mentorship and unwavering guidance had an invaluable impact on
my success. Within the Department of Romance Studies at Duke, I also wish to thank Jacques Pierre, Christelle Gonthier, Germain Choffart, and Karine Provot for their support and helpful advice in difficult times.

In Haiti, I want to thank the book professionals who generously took the time to meet with me and answer my questions. Many thanks to Wébert Charles, Dieulermesson Petit-Frère and Mirline Pierre at Legs Editions, Charles Tardieu at Zémès, Anaïse Chavenet at Communications Plus, Fred Brutus at C3 Editions, Gérard-Marie Tardieu at Kopivit, Jocelyne Trouillot at CUC, Jean-Christophe Charles at Editions Choucouné, Ilona Armand and Vianna Stecher at Henri Deschamps, Jean-Mino Paul and Jean-Rony Cinéus at Editions Ruptures, Frantz Toussaint at Editions Toussaint, Suzy Castor at CRESFED, Hérard Jadotte at Edition de l’Université d’Etat d’Haïti, Ronald Saint Jean at Edition des Presses Nationales, Stéphanie Renauld Armand at Nota Bene, and Michel Wolley Junior at Imprimerie des Antilles. Special thanks to Lyonel Trouillot who shared many stories about his work and his publishing house l’Atelier Jeudi Soir with me at Yanvalou. I also had the great pleasure of talking to Monique and Solange Lafontant and Paul Dubois at La Pléiade, and Myriam Sylvain at Astérix. I appreciated that Pascal Médan at La Dodine accepted to answer my questions over email. I am also grateful to Laura Wagner who connected me with Jacques Bartoli and Jessica Hsu, who helped me arrange my stay. Laura also provided steadfast support throughout the years and I feel particularly lucky to have worked with her on the incredibly valuable Radio
Haiti archive project. Special thanks to my moto-taxi driver Jeno who took me safely to all of my meetings around Port-au-Prince. In Montreal, I am indebted to Rodney Saint-Eloi at Mémoire d’encrier, Jean Bernier at Boréal, and Frantz Voltaire at CIDIHCA for the information they gave me on their collaboration with Laferrière and their publishing houses. Special thanks to Frantz Voltaire who put me in touch with Dany Laferrière over email. Even though our correspondence was unfortunately short-lived, I also wish to thank Dany Laferrière for exchanging a few emails with me. Across the Atlantic, I would like to express my gratitude to Frantz Gourdet in Montpellier, France, who graciously accepted to meet me after work and answer all of my questions on his translation of Laferrière’s work, his publishing house, and his translation training program in Haiti. I must also thank Pierre Bisiou who met with me in Paris and shared stories of working at Le Serpent à Plumes and with Dany Laferrière in person and in multiple emails.

I wish to thank Duke for supporting my research and writing through several research fellowships and scholarships that allowed me to travel to France and Montreal. A fellowship from the Bibliographical Society of America enabled me to conduct research in Haiti and gather invaluable information on the national book industry and recent initiatives promoting Creole. Many thanks to the Duke Innovation & Entrepreneurship Initiative, and in particular Camil Warren, who supported me during my last year of writing and enabled me to both finish this dissertation and work on a fascinating language-related project. Thanks to Holly Ackerman and Heidi Madden.
at Duke who helped me locate book reviews and literary articles in numerous databases. Informal conversations with friends also stimulated my writing and strengthened my arguments in many ways. Special thanks to David Dulceany, Giulia Ricco, Silvia Serrano, and Laura Wagner. I am grateful for the friendship and continued support of Teresa Moore. I also wish to thank the students of French and of my seminar on Haitian Literature at Duke for engaging in such diverse and stimulating conversations and for allowing me to connect my research and my teaching in meaningful ways.

This dissertation would not have happened without unrelenting support from my family in France. I cannot begin to express my thanks to my parents Roland and Yvette Blaise who always believed in me, encouraged me every step of the way and did everything they possibly could to help me from afar. I am also deeply indebted to my beloved grandmother Lucienne Blaise who passed on her love of reading and learning to me from as early as I can remember. She influenced my personal and intellectual trajectories in more ways that she could have imagined, and I know she would have loved to see me cross the finish line. I also wish to thank my late grandparents Raymond Blaise, François and Simone Martinez, and my aunt Lucette Taboga whose loving memories accompanied me throughout this journey. Finally, I must also thank my brother Romain Blaise, my cousins Laura and Cédric Martinez, Anne and Aurore Picon, my uncle Pascal Martinez and my aunts Véronique Martinez and Claudine Picon who
often checked on me from afar and helped me remember that life also exists outside the dissertation bubble.
Introduction

On December 12th, 2013, Dany Laferrière was elected to the French Academy.

Born in Haiti in 1953, Laferrière left his country of origin during the Duvalier dictatorship and arrived in Montreal in 1976. In 1985, he published his first novel, *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, which propelled him to fame in Quebec. Three decades later, his election to France’s oldest cultural institution represented the coronation of his transnational trajectory. Over the span of 30 years and several continents, Laferrière’s path revealed the complex articulation of literature, marketing, and mechanisms of literary consecration. Because he was an active participant in his own emergence and exerted a particular kind of authorial agency, which I will refer to as his “trickster” strategy, Laferrière also offers a unique lens into the way postcolonial writers contribute to shaping debates about national and transnational cultural spaces.

This dissertation analyzes the way in which Laferrière has positioned himself in the French global literary marketplace. By investigating the publication, marketing, and reception of Laferrière’s work in the three places in which it was published in the original French language, this study engages with ideas of migrant literature, economics, identity politics, and creative agency in the French-speaking world. Despite his Haitian origins and adopted Quebecois citizenship, Laferrière never identified as a Haitian or Quebecois writer, but rather chose to represent himself as an American writer. Whether
his publishers and literary critics followed his lead, and why, is an entirely different question which is at the core of this work. In this project, I show that Laferrière’s portrayal and marketing changed from “migrant” to “Quebecois” writer in Quebec, “literary outcast” to “young adult author” in Haiti, and “francophone” to “immortel” in France. Ultimately, I argue that the production and circulation of his work and writer persona in Quebec, France, and Haiti have both revealed and transformed the literary, political, and linguistic contexts that Laferrière has navigated. My dissertation shows that Laferrière’s trajectory and his “trickster” strategy sharply illuminate mechanisms of power in the French literary sphere, while his work’s packaging and reception uncover ongoing practices of othering as well as cultural, social, and literary changes in all three contexts.

In order to adequately investigate Laferrière’s portrayal as well as his work’s packaging and reception in Quebec, Haiti, and France, the dissertation is divided into three sections, each focusing on how Laferrière’s work and persona have been produced, marketed, circulated, and received in these three distinct geographical regions. In each chapter, I use an interdisciplinary approach and draw on his interviews, book covers, novels, and film adaptations as well as national literary, linguistic, and racial histories in order to situate the author in the intricate landscape he navigates. Because this project engages with the production and circulation of Laferrière’s work in different literary and economic contexts, it is also a study of the world of publishing in French and contiguous
languages like Haitian Creole. In order to obtain a better understanding of the emergence of Laferrière in Quebec and France, and his literary repatriation to Haiti, I integrate interviews that I conducted with his publishers as well as fellow book professionals in Paris, Montpellier, Montreal, and Port-au-Prince. These interviews offer critical information on the conditions of production of his work and the agents that have allowed for its circulation.

Combined with the work of literary sociology scholars like Pascale Casanova and Gisèle Sapiro, who drew from Pierre Bourdieu’s theories,¹ these personal interviews with publishers also provide valuable insights into the economic and symbolic dimensions of literary production as well as the power dynamics at play in the global literary marketplace. The circulation of Laferrière’s books from Québec to France and Haiti highlights broader literary circuits and mechanisms of power that still locate France and more specifically Paris at the center of the publishing industry. Yet the author’s own strategic positioning has also questioned this hegemonic model. His emergence, creative self-marketing, and the evolution of his reception in these three spaces underscore various modes of consecration, accumulation of symbolic capital and transfer into economic one.

¹ Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of culture, concepts, and theory of literary fields in which writers, publishers, critics compete for symbolic capital strongly informed Pascale Casanova’s analysis of asymmetrical power dynamics between literary centers in The World Republic of Letters, upon which my work builds.
Through the analysis of Laferrière’s trajectory and literary consecration, which culminated in his election to the French Academy in 2013, this dissertation also studies the central role of publishers in book production and literary institutionalization. Indeed, as critics of the history of publishing Richard Giguère and Jacques Michon have demonstrated, “publishers view themselves as intermediaries, mediators, go-betweens” (56). Through the very act of selecting manuscripts, turning them into books, promoting and ultimately mediating them, these intermediaries that Alberto Cadioli also identifies as “hyper readers” (136) actively participate in the establishment and institutionalization of literature (58).

In addition to examining the role of publishers as mediators between authors, readers, and literary works, the dissertation also investigates how Laferrière’s book covers reflect debates about issues of language, race, and national identity. Laferrière’s self-marketing and his books’ packaging played a significant role in his emergence in Quebec and France. Building on Gérard Genette’s notion of paratext, scholars like Richard Watts and Nadège Veldwachter have analyzed the importance of book packaging in the mediation of literary works and representation of alterity. In Packaging Post/Coloniality (2004), Watts convincingly argued that book covers, illustrations, titles, and prefaces constituted a form of translation that framed the works of writers from Africa, the Maghreb, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia in order to be easily assimilated by a metropolitan French readership (76). In Littérature francophone et mondialisation
(2012), Veldwachter focused on French Caribbean authors’ works and showed how “francophone texts are paraded on book covers” (174).

Western publishers often rely on exoticizing tropes that represent the Caribbean as Elsewhere and non-metropolitan authors as Others. In so doing, they mediate the texts’ reception according to a stereotypical imaginary rooted in colonial history. Far from being oblivious to these reifying practices, certain authors have also engaged in self-exoticizing practices in order to make themselves more easily “digestible” and ultimately visible in the literary landscape. By doing so, they follow the rules dictated by the publishing system, but also exert their creative agency in the process of cultural production. Indeed, as Graham Huggan convincingly demonstrated in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), many Anglophone postcolonial authors have showed strategic exoticism by both resisting and complying with the center’s norms and its “alterity industry” in order to position themselves in the marketplace (vii). Both in Quebec and in France, through his acute understanding of the context of 1980s Quebec, his self-marketing attitude and his ambivalent position toward the concept of “Francophonie,” Dany Laferrière has practiced what I call a “trickster strategy.” In light of this, examining that very strategy helps us understand the broader context the author navigates, alongside many other postcolonial writers.

While many scholars have written about Dany Laferrière’s work, this dissertation is the first comprehensive study of Laferrière’s publication and marketing in
Quebec, France, and Haiti. Laferrière’s work has been the object of one monograph: *Dany Laferrière : la dérive américaine* (2003) by Ursula Mathis-Moser. The author focuses on Laferrière’s “American autobiography” – a series of ten novels that he wrote between 1985 and 2000 – through the lens of spatial and temporal displacement, and investigates the interplay between autobiography and autofiction. Most of Laferrière’s novels feature a Haitian-born narrator who fled Haiti for North America during the Duvalier dictatorship and shares multiple similarities with the author, which has prompted many scholars to focus on questions of exile, identity, and autofiction in Laferrière’s work.

Other scholars have also investigated his work and trajectory. Martin Munro, one of the leading scholars of Laferrière and Haitian diaspora literature, has read him through the lens of exile, along with fellow Haitian-born writers like René Depestre, Emile Ollivier or Edwidge Danticat. Jana Evans Braziel coined the term “alterbiographical” to describe his narrative process and argued that the author’s works create a new space questioning nation, nationality and diaspora. Lori Saint-Martin, among others, looked at the interplay between the issues of race, gender, sex and desire in Laferrière’s work, and showed that his diasporic status allowed him to disrupt American frames of black masculinity. Yet no comprehensive study of Laferrière’s path as a focal point for a broader analysis of interconnected relationships between literature, economics,

2 Another work that engages with Laferrière’s literary production is Beniamin Vasile’s *Dany Laferrière : L’autodidacte et le processus de création* (2008), which also investigates the creative process involved in all literary production and specifically focuses on neurobiology or psychoanalysis.
marketing, and creative agency also encompassing Haiti beyond France and Quebec had been undertaken before this one.

By revolving around one postcolonial author that negotiates multiple spaces and illuminates literary, linguistic, economic, and identity politics issues, this project also allows me to enter ongoing scholarly conversations on interconnected bodies of scholarship beyond the study of Dany Laferrière’s work, such as cultural studies, migration studies, literary reception studies, and postcolonial studies.

Several critical works on migrant literature in French and more particularly as it relates to questions of economics and politics have included Laferrière as one of their case studies. In The Migrant Text: Making and Marketing a Global French Literature (2016), Subha Xavier examines a corpus of migrant texts written in French, and weaves in literary, historic, postcolonial, and socio-historical theories of the 20th and 21st centuries. Focusing on authors who share a cosmopolitan view of the world and write from France or Quebec, she argues that migrant texts now belong to a new category of Global French Literature that has moved away from colonial, postcolonial or Francophone frameworks. Xavier’s critical work was influential in my understanding of the relationships between authors and literary markets. However, because Xavier’s goal is to theorize migrant literature in French at large, she only integrates Laferrière’s first novel into her study and specifically focuses on its circulation between Quebec and France, leaving Haiti out of the scope of her work.
My interdisciplinary project positions him and his work as catalysts bringing literary, cultural, visual, and book market analyses together. In addition to joining the general conversation about Dany Laferrière’s work and the significance of the writer’s election to the French Academy, my dissertation examines his trajectory in a new light. Branching out from a more traditional approach analyzing how postcolonial authors move from marginal spaces to more prominent literary centers, my dissertation explores the ways in which Laferrière’s texts and identity have circulated between three dynamic places, and how Laferrière actively exerted his creative agency in the process. Including Haiti in my analysis, I investigate the many ways in which Laferrière has contributed to reshaping national definitions of literature, and how his work’s marketing and reception have revealed political, social, and cultural changes as well as manifestations of identity politics in all three contexts.

Chapter One examines the emergence of Dany Laferrière in 1985 in Montreal and uncovers the various factors that enabled him to circulate in Quebec and beyond. It begins with an analysis of Laferrière’s first novel Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer (1985), and focuses particularly on its packaging and its critical and popular reception. Drawing from the work of postcolonial theorists Achille Mbembe, Frantz Fanon, and historian Sean Mills, this study demonstrates how Laferrière astutely positioned himself at the nexus of racial, linguistic, literary, and political spaces. I then
trace the evolution of the author’s status as a writer in critical literary articles. From “migrant writer,” Laferrière became a “Quebecois author,” which, I argue, shows how he contributed to shaping debates about Quebec’s literary tradition and national identity in the 1980s.

I move on to explore the ways in which the novel’s translation into English, adaptation for the screen, first publication in France and second edition in Quebec in the late 1980s allowed for its consumption in a broader context. Simultaneously, Laferrière’s packaging in Quebec started alternating between two paradoxical images; the urban writer versus the exoticized Other. Drawing from Sean Mills’ work on Haitians in Quebec in *A Place in the Sun: Haiti, Haitians, and the Remaking of Quebec* (2016), I argue that this ambivalent way of representing Haiti and Laferrière was rooted in Quebec’s specific dual discourse on Haiti and Haitians. By featuring images of Laferrière in urban North American cities while also picturing Haiti as a rural and exoticized place on Laferrière’s book covers, his publishers have reproduced a mid 20th-century discourse representing Haiti and Haitians as both civilization and its negation, and ultimately revealed its cultural ramifications across time.

In my second chapter, I consider the ways in which Laferrière’s texts have returned to his native Haiti, first through writing – or being set in Haiti - and then through local distribution and publishing. Through this analysis of the author’s reception in Haiti, largely overlooked by other scholars, I first show how his reputation
as a provocateur and literary outcast in the 1980s shed light on the way he broke with the traditional definition of Haitian literature as politically committed. In 1991, however, Laferrière was awarded the Prix Carbet for *L’odeur du café* (1991), which significantly changed his image as an outcast and identified him as a Caribbean writer.

Drawing from Pascale Casanova and Gisèle Sapiro’s theories in literary sociology, as well as Luc Pinhas’ work on book publishing in the French-speaking world, I show that the local reprinting and distribution of Laferrière’s books in Haiti in the early 2000s revealed both unequal mechanisms of literary consecration and Haiti’s marginal position in the French book market. Based on semi-structured interviews that I conducted with local book professionals in Port-au-Prince and the analysis of several reprintings of *L’odeur du café*, among other works, I move on to reveal how Haitian publishers altered Laferrière’s marketing and turned the writer into a young adult author. These interviews also provided invaluable insights into the conditions of production of literature in Haiti, the power dynamics between French and Haitian Creole, and the recent dynamism of the Haitian publishing industry. In 2016, *L’odeur du café* was translated into Haitian Creole. Ultimately, I argue that Laferrière’s repatriation and recent translation into Haitian Creole positioned him at the center of initiatives both resisting foreign publishing and promoting Creole as a literary language.

In my third and final chapter, I examine the development of Laferrière’s literary identity in France and focus on Laferrière’s election to the French Academy in 2013 as
his “master trick.” I first look at his difficult entrance in the French literary system and
his emergence in the late 1990s with Le Serpent à Plumes publishing house in order to
show how French publishers mostly relied on stereotypical tropes to package his works
as Caribbean or “francophone.” I argue that, by displaying images of an Exotic
Elsewhere and commodified black bodies, Laferrière’s covers reflected French
publishers’ othering practices rooted in France’s colonial past. Through this, they
revealed not only the hierarchies between French – understood as national, metropolitan
- and Francophone literature, but also between national versus foreign identity.

In 2004, prestigious publishing house Grasset became Laferrière’s main publisher
in France. Through the study of his book covers and their evolution over time, especially
after being awarded the Médicis literary prize for L’éénigme du retour (2009), I
demonstrate how Grasset stopped marketing Laferrière as a “Caribbean” writer in order
to turn him into a brand. Borrowing from the field of literary sociology, I also examine
the role of the Médicis prize in Laferrière’s career, which sheds light on how literary
institutions, awards, and related editorial practices consecrate authors by transferring
symbolic and economic capital.

Finally, building from Laferrière’s interviews since the early 2000s, his
contribution to the 2007 literary manifesto Pour une littérature-monde, and his recent
election to the French Academy, my study reveals the author’s ambivalent position vis-
à-vis the concept of “Francophonie.” I show that his attitude has been both critical and
opportunistic. Drawing upon theorists such as Pascale Casanova and Graham Huggan, I argue that Laferrière’s “trickster” strategy is embedded within the economic, political, and symbolic power dynamics of literary production, which prove resistant to change, but also enabled his emergence. I end my study with Laferrière’s election to France’s oldest cultural institution. Ultimately, I show that it both reinforced France as a source of literary authority and illuminated the writer’s agency in his own legitimation process. This final trick was both the most revealing in his career and the culmination of three decades of astute positioning vis-à-vis questions of literature, marketing, and national identity in the French-speaking space.
1. Publishing, Representing, and Marketing Dany Laferrière in Québec

In October 1985, Dany Laferrière became famous in Quebec overnight. His first book, *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, drew the attention of critics and readers in part because of his provocative title and innovative content. Laferrière’s success in Quebec was a result both of his evocative rendering of his experience as a black migrant in Montreal and his skillful reading of Quebec’s cultural context of the 1980s. As historian Sean Mills has shown, it was also part of a broader movement that saw Haitian migrants intervene in linguistic, political, economic, and cultural issues and, as a result, contribute to redefining Quebec society in multiple ways. Over the course of three decades, Laferrière’s status as a writer evolved as he wrote close to thirty more books, was translated into a dozen languages and published in the original French language by multiple publishing houses in Quebec, France, and Haiti.

In Quebec, critics originally classified Laferrière as a migrant writer before placing him in the same category as native-born Quebec writers such as Anne Hébert, Monique Proulx, and Michel Tremblay. This shift in his critical portrayal, which happened in the late 1980s, was not followed by his publishers, however, who instead chose to represent him and package his novels according to a different logic, and have since alternated between two ambivalent images strongly drawing from western imaginary.
First, this chapter shows that Dany Laferrière’s first novel, *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, was specifically written and packaged for consumption in 1980s Quebec. By paying particular attention to the novel’s book cover as its visual paratext, which has largely been overlooked, I show how Laferrière’s success in Quebec in the 1980s depended on the writer’s strategic positioning as a cultural figure at the intersection of local political, linguistic, and racial spaces. This was rooted in his astute understanding of the national political, historical, and linguistic context of Quebec’s conceptualization of itself vis-a-vis English Canada. This strategy enabled Dany Laferrière to be received and marketed as both a migrant writer and a Quebec writer, placing him at the center of specific changes in the national literary landscape of the 1980s.

Scholars like Pascale De Souza, Sean Mills and Subha Xavier have analyzed what enabled Laferrière’s first book to earn critical acclaim and public support in Quebec. They showed that the author’s exploitation of the national political and cultural climate played a significant part in the book’s critical and popular success in Quebec. By examining how the book’s title and content effectively contributed to launching Laferrière’s literary career, they also demonstrated that the author acknowledged the role of economics in literature. As such, he strategically exploited the themes of race, sex, and contemporary society in order to maximize his chances of turning his book into a bestseller. However, while these scholars focused on the title’s importance, they did not
examine the fundamental role that the illustration on the cover played in both securing literary and economic success and acting as a chronotopic catalyst of racial, linguistic, and identity politics of 1980s Quebec. This chapter will fill this void by showing how examining the articulation of the cover, title, and content is of central importance in understanding the significance of Laferrière as a cultural figure both navigating and bridging multiple spaces in Quebec.

Second, I explore Laferrière’s circulation across national borders in 1989 when his first novel was made into a film and also published in France, which marked the beginning of Laferrière’s transnational journey. Beyond launching him on the international stage, the novel was also re-edited in Quebec that same year and his packaging evolved to feature more easily translatable images that no longer placed Quebec on the foreground. This packaging shift also inaugurated Laferrière’s Quebec publishers’ long-lasting alternation between two seemingly paradoxical images on his book covers: at times portraying Haitians as urban intellectuals, and at other times as racialized and commodified bodies in an exoticized Elsewhere. Since that time, Quebecois publishers have relied, I argue, on a dichotomy specifically rooted in Quebec’s historical relationship with Haiti: as a Haitian, Dany Laferrière represented both (French) civilization and its radical negation. Just as migrant writers like Laferrière were being integrated into Quebec literature, and essentialized differences were being blurred, they were simultaneously being undone by paratextual representations.
Ultimately, the shift in Laferrière’s work’s packaging uncovers the cultural ramifications and practices of a double discourse that French Canadians held on Haiti and Haitians before the 1960s.

1.1 At the Nexus of Racial, Linguistic, and Political Spaces

In contrast to some of Dany Laferrière’s later minimalistic book covers (especially those published by Grasset in France), *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*’s first book covers stand out with their bright colors.

![Book Cover](image)

*Figure 1: Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, VLB, 1985*
Both released in October 1985 in Quebec, the slightly different editions featured two different illustrations in the bottom right corner of their yellow cover: one displayed a 1948 painting of a sophisticated room by Henri Matisse, *Grand Intérieur Rouge*, and the other was a photograph of the author sitting on a bench with a typewriter in his lap. In this picture, Laferrière is barefoot, wearing a striped t-shirt, and a bottle of alcohol is placed on the bench right next to him. While not much of his surroundings is visible, the reader knows he is in Montreal thanks to the city’s typical metro sign in the background, featuring a white arrow pointing downwards in a circle. The building behind the author looks like the Sherbrooke metro station - the closest one to Square Saint Louis, where both Laferrière and his narrator, Vieux, lived.

A less tightly cropped version of the same photograph also appeared in the last few pages of the book’s other edition, and perhaps more surprisingly, in Montreal.
popular cafes and restaurants in the fall of 1985 as well. Indeed, in order to advertise his novel right before its release, Laferrière put up 500 poster versions of this image all over Montreal, along with the novel’s provocative title written in bold, hoping to catch people’s attention, especially those living in the city’s richest neighborhoods (Xavier 79).

While Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer\(^1\) addresses the question of interracial sex with some pretty graphic details, it does not share any “secrets from the bedroom,” as Subha Xavier put it (80). Rather, it articulates Laferrière’s reflections on race, sex, and power in 1980s Montreal through the lens of humor and parody.

Comment’s narrator is a young black immigrant, Vieux, who lives with his roommate Bouba in “a filthy apartment on the rue St-Denis” (30) in Montreal, and wants to become a famous writer. The two friends spend their time discussing philosophy, literature, and having sex with white Anglophone women.

In part as a result of Laferrière’s proactive diffusion strategy, provocative title, and strategic topic selection, Comment became an internationally acclaimed bestseller. Within a year, the novel sold more than 10,000 copies in Quebec. It was later reedited multiple times in Canada and France, and translated into several languages, selling more than one million copies worldwide (Xavier 79). While another recent edition in 2010 showed its long-lasting significance in the French-speaking world, it seems particularly relevant to look back, over thirty years later, at what enabled its author, now

\(^1\) This novel will be subsequently referred to as Comment.
also a member of the French Academy, to launch and later solidify his career.

Ultimately, Dany Laferrière’s unique success story in Quebec is, I argue, at the same time embodied and emphasized in the way Comment was packaged.

Just like titles, illustrations on book covers play a fundamental role in literary marketing. Images, design, or pictures on the cover are selected by the publisher and, as such, they mediate the way publishers intend to package and sell a book to potential readers. Art historian Thomas Mitchell writes that: “the question to ask of pictures from the standpoint of a poetics is not just what they mean or do but what they want - what claim they make upon us, and how we are to respond. Obviously, this question also requires us to ask what it is that we want from pictures” (xv). Rather than only focusing on Comment’s provocative title, analyzing its articulation with Laferrière’s picture on the cover offers critical insight into the claim that Laferrière’s publisher “VLB éditeur” wanted the image to make upon readers. At the same time, it sheds light on the way it positioned the novel at the nexus of racial, linguistic, identity and political issues of 1980s Montreal.

Laferrière’s photographic presence on the cover was not incidental. It was the first but not the last time Laferrière appeared on the cover of his books - Chronique de la dérive douce (1994), J’écris comme je vis (2000) and Je suis fatigué (2000) later featured pictures of him as well. Yet, compared with these photographs, his posture on the cover of Comment was unique. Comment’s cover was the only one that showed him in the act of
writing or typing in the streets of Montreal. And while the same photograph that also appeared within the other edition featured a caption explicitly telling readers it was a picture of the author, nothing on the cover of the second edition alluded to that fact. As such, I contend that the photograph on Comment’s cover served a dual purpose. First, it visually signaled the book’s ambiguous genre and directed its reception accordingly. Second, it overtly portrayed Laferrière as both a migrant and a Montreal writer. In doing so, it provided Quebec society one of its first literary mirrors onto the political, linguistic, and racial context of the 1980s. Ultimately, Laferrière’s photograph on Comment’s cover is a remarkable illustration of the ingredients that enabled the novel to be a success in 1985 Montreal.

Let us now examine the cover and its components more closely in order to understand how they contributed to mediating the text’s reception. Written in a typewriter font and aligned to the right above the image, the provocative title Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer is framed by the author’s name above and, more importantly, the subtitle “novel” right below. This term clearly suggests that Comment should be read as a work of fiction. However, the way the title is phrased also gives the text a self-help character. Indeed, although it starts with “Comment” (“How”), it is not a question, as it does not feature any question mark. Moreover, by referring to the “Nègre” as a non-specific individual; “un Nègre” (“a Negro”), and positioning him as the object of the sentence, the title equates him with a sort of accessory in the sexual
act. In addition, by featuring a picture of a black man, the cover emphasized the implied ethnographic perspective of the book: the “Nègre” mentioned in the title was here, in Montreal. Through these deliberate choices, the title ultimately implies that, despite its “novel” categorization, Comment may also be some kind of voyeuristic instructional manual, one that would be specifically directed at a white female audience in 1980s white heteronormative Quebec society.

Numerous critics and scholars have showed how fiction and autobiography are mixed in Laferrière’s books, describing his texts as “autofictionnels” (Mathis-Moser 255, and De Souza 63) and “altère-autobiographiques” (Braziel 867). Laferrière himself has taken liberties with fiction and reality. Despite the fact that most of his books were categorized as novels, he has picked up on the term “American Autobiography” to refer to his first ten books. “In my books, I take myself as a character and I mix up true and false situations, with no scruples whatsoever,” he declared, adding: “I don’t try to tell the truth; I try to find the primary emotion. Who cares about truth? What truth? What is important is whether it touches us or not” (Laurin 62).

And indeed, despite Comment’s “novel” subtitle, fiction and autobiography are mixed in the narrative, just like in most of Laferrière’s other texts. Similarities between the narrator and the author are emphasized by the use of the first person: author,

---

2 Notice the difference in meaning between “faire l’amour avec” in French and “make love to” in English.
3 This tendency to assume that Laferrière and his narrator are one person has notably raised scholar Corrie Scott’s concern. See Scott, PhD dissertation, 145-150.
narrator, and main character are perceived as one. This correlation is one of the most common - although not mandatory - features of traditional autobiography, which Philippe Lejeune defined as “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the real concern is his individual life, in particular the story of his identity” (4-5). The narrator and the author also share the same name, “Vieux,” and they are both migrants struggling to become writers in Montreal. Additionally, Vieux’s first novel, Black Cruiser’s Paradise, is very similar to Laferrière’s novel Comment as this description of the fictional narrative shows: “It takes place in Carré Saint-Louis. It’s the story of two young Blacks who spend a hot summer cruising girls and complaining. One loves jazz and the other loves literature. One sleeps all day long or listens to jazz while reciting the Quran, the other writes a novel on their life together” (145). By making such a textual mise en abyme, Laferrière overtly confuses readers and encourages them to think of Comment as his own personal story.

Moreover, featuring a real picture of Laferrière on the cover advocated for an autobiographical reading of the text. By showing a Black man in the act of writing, the picture complicated the first reading of Comment as a novel. It encouraged the reader to wonder about the man’s status and whether the “Nègre” from the title and the picture were the narrator, and potentially the book’s author, ultimately turning the so-called

---

4 Paradis du dragueur nègre in French.
novel into an autobiographical narrative. This relationship between Laferrière’s picture and his book’s assumed genre lies in the power of photographs. Indeed, as physical traces of actual objects, photographs are “literally an emanation of the referent” (Barthes 80). As Susan Sontag argued, photographs are “something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask” (154). A similar relationship with the “referent” connects photographs to autobiographies. Photographs are to real subjects what autobiographies are to individual life stories: they are emanations of the referents. Because of this natural connection, displaying a portrait of the author on the cover undermined and problematized the “novel” subtitle that appeared on the cover. Ultimately, through the juxtaposition of the title and the photograph on the cover, Comment’s packaging encouraged readers to question the genre of the book even before opening it.

In addition, displaying a picture of Dany Laferrière on the cover served commercial purposes. It represented him as a struggling young writer in Montreal while also explicitly signaling his migrant status. Through this, VLB marketed the ethnographical value of the book and reproduced a common editorial practice systematically attributing cultural specificity to foreign-born authors’ writings, especially when they were received as autobiographical.

On the cover, the typewriter both symbolized Laferrière’s status as a writer and acted as a prop: readers knew the man on the bench was not just a by-passer resting in a
park but a writer, specifically because of the typewriter’s presence. Most traditional author pictures show writers in their environment or what is believed to be their working place. Perceived as well-read people, they are often shown posing in their library, surrounded by books, which symbolize and emphasize their literary knowledge and poetic skills.

It is no coincidence that Laferrière’s picture did not follow the same rules. A photograph of Laferrière holding a pen while sitting at a desk surrounded by books would have given a very traditional and serious image of the writer but, consistent with Comment’s topic choice, this is not how Laferrière was portrayed. Indeed, instead of giving off the impression of a professional and serious author inspired by the works of literature around him and able to live off his literary work, Laferrière was shown typing on a bench barefoot in a park, hereby embodying the clichéd image of the poor young writer with no office and probably no stable job. It made him look like his narrator Vieux who decided to write his first novel with an old Remington 22 in his small and dirty room. Vieux did not write in Square Saint-Louis, but his work environment, a “pigsty” room with a “work table (which is also the dining room table, the spare chair and a makeshift bed when the desire arises)” (45) and his companion, “a bottle of cheap wine at [his] feet” (45), were very similar to those of the clichéd struggling artist pictured on the cover.
The typewriter was also an explicit visual reference to both Laferrière’s writing style and that of his narrator, which he defined as “American,” used here in a broader sense including all countries of the continent – among which, Haiti and Quebec. The typewriter played an important role in Laferrière’s sense of Americanness and was mentioned in many of his books. He notably said that when he started writing fiction in Montreal, he was desperately looking for something that would be deeply connected to both the act of writing and America itself, which he found in his Remington 22 typewriter (“Entrée Libre”). According to him, the repetitive and mechanical sound of the keys created a rhythm that reflected the urgency of his writing. It also situated his style with short and fast-paced sentences in the tradition of American authors that, he claimed, influenced him like Beat generation icon Jack Kerouac or Truman Capote who famously declared that the former’s spontaneous prose was not writing but typing.

However, while the picture succeeded in distinguishing Laferrière from more classic contemporary Quebec authors and signaled his ambition to stir up the Quebec literary sphere, it did not avoid the pitfalls of other more traditional author pictures’ artificial staging. Indeed, it is hard to believe that Laferrière’s picture was spontaneous - what are the odds of running into a young man typing his first novel while drinking his loneliness away on a bench by his apartment in Montreal? Typewriters were certainly far more common in the 1980s than they are now, and people often sit outside in Montreal, especially when it is warm. But the composition, angle, and Laferrière’s pose
look a little too carefully staged to be spontaneous. According to the angle and focus, the photographer was standing right in front of Laferrière. A normal reaction to such nearby presence would be to stop typing and to look up. Yet, Laferrière was seemingly unaware of his surroundings and absorbed in his work, giving this perfect impression of a “writer at work” like self-proclaimed fellow Beat writers (*J’écris* 162).

The author’s work environment also seemed staged and carefully chosen. It was easy for Quebec readers to recognize Montreal thanks to the typical metro sign behind Laferrière. Readers familiar with Montreal’s topography could also easily picture the Saint Louis square where Laferrière was portrayed and lived, like his novel’s main characters Vieux and Bouba. With its obvious visual references to Montreal, this photograph clearly introduced the Quebecois city as one of the main characters, and announced its constant presence in the narrative. Indeed, in *Comment*, although Bouba never leaves the apartment located in the French-speaking Plateau-Mont-Royal neighborhood, Vieux roams the streets and makes constant references to Montreal’s famous landmarks, such as the Saint-Denis street, Outremont, McGill University, and Westmount. As an echo of the cover, *Comment* is filled with references to Montreal’s unique topography divided along linguistic lines, including jazz clubs, streets, bus lines, metro stations and universities.
Furthermore, while the other cover featuring Matisse’s painting\(^5\) did not explicitly present Laferrière as a black migrant writer, the cover with his photograph highlighted the author’s foreign origins and, consequently, his work’s supposed ethnographical value. This choice was not anodyne. By visually showing the white Quebec readers that the author of the narrative - set in Montreal and therefore specifically addressed to them - was black, VLB éditeur and Laferrière strategically exploited the literary sphere’s tendency to see migrant narratives as repositories of cultural specificity.

In the 1970s and 1980s, independently from migrant writers’ countries of origin, what mattered was that they were not Quebec-born. At that time, this was especially visible through their skin color. Indeed, being a black man in his thirties in 1980s Quebec often meant being an immigrant. Under British and French rules, colonists practiced slavery, but relied much less on enslaved people than their counterparts in the Caribbean or the United States. Canada’s economy was based on the fur trade and small-scale agriculture, and thus required little manual labor. Most slaves were aboriginal, and not of African origin. Although slavery was officially abolished in the

\(^5\) This painting appears in Comment’s narrative and Vieux describes it as his representation of things, and more especially sexuality: “I don’t know why I always imagined the universe like that Matisse painting. Something about it struck me. It is my essential vision of things. I’m talking about ‘Grand Intérieur Rouge’ (1948) (...) The painting is primitive, animal, gregarious, fierce, flightly, tribal fantasy. You can feel a playful kind of cannibalism verging on immediate happiness. With those loud, primary colors and violent sexuality (despite the calm that the eye feels) offering a new version of love in this modern jungle. When I ask myself hard questions about the role of color in sexuality, I remember Matisse’s answer. I have been carrying it with me ever since” (42-43).
British Empire in 1833, discriminatory immigration laws were enforced until the 1960s and allowed for minimal racial diversity in Canada and Quebec.

While Haitian-Quebec relations date back from the early 20th century, Haitian immigration in Quebec only began in the late 1960s when racist Canadian immigration policies specifically prohibiting the entry of black immigrants were repealed. This change was due to the strengthening of Canada’s political and economic ties with Caribbean governments who saw emigration as a response to unemployment, and Quebec’s need for skilled and unskilled labor force to replace the slowing flow of “traditional” migrants from Europe (Labelle 82-3). Following the repeal of the black immigration ban, the first wave of Haitians fleeing political turmoil and the rise of Duvalier’s dictatorial regime began turning to Quebec as their adoptive land. At that time, most of them were French-speaking intellectuals, journalists, and writers who chose Quebec over other North American cities like New York or Miami mostly because of linguistic reasons and resumed their work upon arrival in Montreal.

Although Haitians accounted for only a quarter of Caribbean immigrants in Quebec in 1971, an increasing number of Haitian migrants entered the province in the following decade. Dany Laferrière was one of them. In Haiti, François “Papa Doc” Duvalier had just died in 1971 and his 19-year-old son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier had become the new president-for-life. Despite easing press censorship and releasing a few political prisoners, Jean-Claude Duvalier followed in his father’s
footsteps. He made no substantive change to the authoritarian regime that kept enforcing torture, repression of dissent and assassinations of thousands of Haitians with the help of “Tontons Macoutes,” paramilitary men mostly coming from the countryside.

From 1968 to 1980, almost 25,000 Haitians arrived in Quebec and in 1978 more migrants were coming from Haiti than from any other country, largely because of the upsurge in poorer and less skilled migrants (Labelle 84 and Mills 6). While linguistic ties were still mentioned in their immigration requests, many Haitians who arrived in Quebec in the 1970s spoke only Creole. Poorer and not as educated as the previous generation of migrants, they often came from the countryside. Unlike former migrants who had easily joined the elite as doctors, professors, or writers, the new wave of Haitians faced Quebec’s accelerating economic crisis and nearly saturated job market upon arrival. As a result, they faced a lot more difficulties and had to take jobs in manufacturing, domestic service, and somewhat later, the taxi industry (Mills 6). At that time, women formed the majority of Haitians migrating to Montreal and most were recruited as domestic servants working for wealthy French-Canadians (Mills 169).

Before turning into an overnight literary sensation, Dany Laferrière, like fellow Haitian newcomers in Montreal, spent almost ten years working in manufacturing and cleaning services. Despite being fluent in French and having a solid background in journalism, Laferrière struggled when he arrived in 1976. Prior to moving to Quebec, Laferrière worked as a cultural journalist in Haiti. Although he did not openly take
position against the regime, Laferrière always worked for news media that did not support the dictatorship and advocated for freedom of speech. In his own words, “young men in Haiti usually write either poetry or political articles more or less denouncing the regime in power” (Coates 910). However, at 18, he was more interested in prose and wrote “little portraits of painters for Le Nouvelliste” (Coates 910), the oldest daily newspaper in Port-au-Prince, which “was not officially against the regime, but did not engage in publishing propaganda” (Coates 919). In addition to working for Le Nouvelliste until he left the country, Dany also worked for Radio Haïti-Inter, the first independent radio station in Haiti, and, mostly, for Le Petit Samedi Soir, “which people called the ‘Independent Press’” (Coates 919).

Unlike previous Haitian exiles in Montreal like Gérard Etienne or Anthony Phelps, Laferrière did not find a writing job upon arrival in Quebec. Instead, he took on jobs as a cleaning person at the airport and as a factory worker (“Ce livre”). The unstable and difficult life Laferrière led for almost ten years as a black migrant allowed him to take responsibility for his own life (“Ce livre”). It also served as a reference for the main characters in his first book.

Furthermore, it was to leave these difficult conditions behind that he decided to write, make money, and become famous by doing something new and daring that would catch the attention of the media and the literary world. In Laferrière’s own
words, “when I decided to write a book, I had to consider working as a writer as my last chance to get out of the factory where I was literally dying” (“Ce livre”).

The absence of Haiti from the cover and the narrative shows Laferrière’s awareness of the commercial and literary potential of a black migrant narrative set in Montreal, as opposed to a specifically Haitian one. Laferrière later declared that he wanted his first book to avoid the traditional Haitian themes of politics, class struggle, and dictatorship. The author wanted to “get rid of this haïtianité and francophonie,” and instead feature two Muslim characters living in Montreal and coming from unspecified countries (“De la Francophonie”). Indeed, in the narrative, while Vieux always self-identifies as Black and refers to “the faraway village where [he] was born” (41), he never explicitly names it nor shares his nationality. In a similar fashion, readers do not know where Bouba is from either. However, his Muslim religion is made clear from the first pages, potentially pointing at an Islamic African country, like Mali or Niger: “Between pages of the Koran, Bouba engages in sleep cures that can last up to three days” (8). Koran verses are also mentioned throughout the book, giving the impression that while Vieux may not practice Islam or read the Koran as much as Bouba, he knows it enough to recite it.

While the characters’ past is mysterious, the Montreal setting is made clear right from the beginning. Indeed, the first chapter opens with a description of the apartment, and more importantly, its exact location: “jammed in between the Fontaine de Johannie
(...) and a minuscule topless bar, at 3670 rue St-Denis, right across from Cherrier” (7). In a similar fashion, Laferrière’s picture on Comment’s book cover highlighted Montreal as the adopted land but hid the author’s roots. Indeed while Montreal appeared clearly, there was no obvious allusion to the author’s place of birth and nationality. There was no Haitian flag behind him, not even the smallest hint to Haiti in the photograph, and no mention of a “Nègre haïtien” in the title. Like his characters in text, Laferrière was shown as a black man with no specific country of origin. Readers never learn with certainty where Vieux and Bouba are from, and both the narrative and the photograph on the cover keep the characters’ and author’s backgrounds vague in order to only emphasize their black migrant status.

This strategic choice to remove Haiti in favor of a broader black migrant writer identity proved successful, and it is as a black writer that Laferrière was received in 1985. In the first four months following the novel’s publication, reviews published in Quebec newspapers did not mention Haiti but specifically highlighted Laferrière’s skin color. In La Presse, Réginald Martel entitled her review “Dany Laferrière : Montréal en noir sur rose” (“Dany Laferrière: Montreal in black on pink”). In Le Droit, Gabrielle Poulin wrote an article on “Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, de Dany Laferrière. Le roman d’un dandy noir” (“Comment…, by Dany Laferrière. A black dandy’s novel”) while Suzanne Lamy made a pun with “Enfin de l’humour noir” (“Finally some black humor”) in Spirale.
Laferrière’s authorial choices regarding his first novel, be they in relation to its content or form, were meant to distance himself from other Haitian writers. Indeed, his decision to write about sex was motivated by the fact that Haitians did not do it (“De la Francophonie”). Similarly, his choice to set his narrative in Montreal was also new compared to fellow Haitian diaspora writers who, despite having lived in exile for decades, traditionally never wrote about any country other than Haiti (“De la Francophonie”).

Being a Haitian writer or a migrant writer in Quebec, for that matter, was not that unique in the 1980s. However, writing about sex and the Quebec society from the perspective of a black migrant had great marketing potential. In the 1980s, non-native Quebec writers were already pretty well established on the Quebec literary scene. This was especially true for Haitians, whose diaspora community in Montreal was and still is one of the largest in North America (Laguerre 9), and who already counted about thirty writers among them in Montreal in the 1960s. However, contrary to Laferrière, Haitian-born writers such as Gérard Etienne, Emile Ollivier, and Anthony Phelps, who arrived in Quebec in the 1960s, had traditionally rooted their writings in social and political issues connected to their homeland. For most of them, being in Quebec was only temporary. They often maintained very close ties with Haiti, and wished to return once the dictatorship would be over. Many of them like Emile Ollivier and Gérard Etienne were also published or co-published in France, which further removed them from the
Quebec literary scene. Having a French readership indicated that their involvement with Montreal was more circumstantial than purposeful. At the other end of the spectrum, Laferrière stood out by setting his narrative in Montreal, choosing the city as his publishing hub, and ultimately writing directly for Quebeckers by addressing contemporary and local issues to which they could relate.

In 1985, Laferrière broke with the literary tradition of migrant authors in Quebec. It was one of the first times that foreign-born authors did not write about issues related to their country of origin, but rather completely anchored their work into their adopted city and society. Indeed, as Sherry Simon declared, “Laferrière gave Quebec one of its first looks at itself through the eyes of the postcolonial Other” (“Geopolitics” 45). With its focus on Montreal, Comment was significant because it not only responded to readers’ exotic curiosity for the migrant experience, but also fulfilled their narcissism. Indeed, Comment’s eager reception and lasting impact on the Quebec literary sphere can be explained by the novelty of what it offered Quebec readers: “an engaging but potentially bitter view of the culture of exiled blacks in a colonial city” (“Geopolitics” 45). By featuring the life of two young black characters in Montreal, Comment’s narrative acted as a mirror handed by a migrant to Quebeckers. The novel allowed for a double ethnological value: it gave Quebec readers the opportunity to fulfill their curiosity about exiled black migrants’ everyday life in Montreal, while also allowing them to know what migrants thought of them.
In the context of 1980s Quebec, Laferrière’s use of the term “Nègre” in the title was a testament to the author’s wish to address his Quebec readers directly and wasn’t chosen randomly. This title had strong marketing power. Not only did it tease readers’ curiosity through its provocative and racist play on white heteronormative Quebec society, but it also created a sense of complicity with the Quebec reader. Understood in the Quebec context, the term “Nègre” was a reference to famous separatist and intellectual leader of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) Pierre Vallières’s controversial *Nègres blancs d’Amérique* (1968) which successfully mirrored the complex political turmoil of 1960s Quebec and the local adaptation of anticolonial theory. Vallières’ autobiographical text conceptualized French-Canadians’ subordination to English-Canadians in racial terms and called for armed revolution. In addition to being implicitly referred to in the title of *Comment*, Pierre Vallières also appears as a character in the narrative and praises Vieux’s *Paradis du draguer nègre* by saying “Finally, the true *Black Niggers of America!*” (142). This explicit reference makes the connection with Laferrière’s “Nègre” even more obvious, and shows the author’s awareness of the local significance of the term.

As Xavier shows in *The Migrant Text*, Laferrière’s double reference to such a famous nationalist leader is a way for him to inscribe his work within Quebecois literary history and politics. She bases her argument on Pascale de Souza’s claim that the narrator’s quest for identity through sex involves “screwing” white Anglophone
women, who were, compared to their French-speaking counterparts, the most powerful women in Quebec (65). In her study, Xavier demonstrates that the political implications of this act and Laferrière’s reference to Vallières who equates the plight of the Québécois with that of the African Americans allow Laferrière to “ally himself by default with the nationalist lower classes of Quebec” and to create a sense of intimacy with his readers (107). What Xavier overlooks, however, is the interconnected linguistic and racial reasons that make this alliance possible in Quebec. While she acknowledges the connection between Laferrière and the Quebec nationalists through his reference to Vallières, she does not explain why Québecois understood their condition as comparable to blackness, and the role it played in Quebec readers’ sense of complicity with Laferrière.

Not only were Laferrière’s characters comparable to Québecois because, just like them vis a vis Anglophone Canadians, they were discriminated against in terms of social, economic, and cultural opportunities, but also because one of the very reasons for their discrimination was the language they spoke: French. Central to the connection between Laferrière, his black narrators, and Quebecer readers, was a specifically Canadian and Québecois’ historical conception of language through the prism of race, which the writer and his publisher ingeniously exploited. Not only was that connection present in the narrative through the consistent use of the term “Nègre” and the explicit references to Vallières, but it was also carefully used in the title, and also appeared,
visually, in the photograph on the cover. Laferrière’s understanding of how class and language were tied with racial concepts in Canada allowed him to create a sense of complicity with his readers, and ultimately to position his novel in the Quebec literary tradition.

Such a parallel between language and race was specific to Quebec’s history and identity. In Canada, writing in French was already a political act, and Laferrière knew it. While the postcolonial linguistic and cultural power dynamic in Haiti placed French as the language of the colonizer, the situation was reversed in Canada, and Laferrière realized it right away: “I arrive in Montreal and find myself caught in the national debate: the one of language (...) This time, French represents the victim, the colonized, the one calling for justice vis-à-vis almighty English” (“Ce livre”).

Indeed, language has been one of the key conflicts in Canada since the Conquest of New France by the British in 1760 and the Treaty of Paris in 1763 that saw France cede all of its North American colonies east of the Mississippi to Britain. Sean Mills’s study of the contribution of Haitians to Quebec society demonstrates how the language conflict in Canada is embedded in the country’s overlapping history of empire and conquest, which highly influenced Quebec’s development and conceptualization of itself. Despite controversial debates on its role and legacy in Quebec development,⁶ the Conquest is

---

⁶ The economic and political legacy of the Conquest has been a controversial debate among historians: the Laval and the Montreal schools of thought have held two opposing views on its impact on Quebec development and nationalism.
“seen to mark the beginning of the subordination of French Canadians within a broader British-dominated political structure” and “remembered as one of the key moments enshrining linguistic inequality in Canada” (Fyson, qtd. in Mills 25). First as a new minority colony of the British Empire, and later as a province of Canada, French Canada and its people were subjected to an anglicization process and highly disadvantaged economically, linguistically and culturally, which carried over to the 20th century. Before World War II, Francophones still held “subordinate positions in the economy and in the federal civil service, earned less than their anglophone counterparts and needed to learn English if they were to advance in the public or private sectors” (Mills 27).

The “Quiet Revolution” in the 1960s marked a period of political, linguistic and cultural changes in Quebec and Canada. It corresponded to a new definition of Quebecois identity shaped by both national and global movements and crystalized around the French language. Simultaneously with the repeal of racist immigration policies in Canada, Quebec further asserted its national conceptualization of itself vis à vis English Canada by setting in motion its “Quiet Revolution” (“Révolution tranquille” in French). Quebeckers also turned to anti colonial theories to define the power relations they experienced, and more particularly in Montreal, where language, class and race were deeply interconnected.

As a period of change marked by reform and nationalism, the Quiet Revolution happened shortly before Laferrière left Port-au-Prince for Montreal. It started in 1960
when Liberal Party candidate Jean Lesage was elected as the new Premier and undertook a series of political, institutional, and social reforms that profoundly changed many aspects of Quebec society, image and self-conception. Following the “Masters in our own house” (“Maîtres chez nous”) slogan in French that Liberals used in the 1960 election campaign, nationalism became more and more centered on the territory of Quebec rather than on the ethnically based French-Canadian nation (Mills 68).7

In this new configuration, French was given more power and seen as central to Quebec’s identity. The Liberal government reformed language policies and strongly promoted French by making it the language of work in the sector of recently nationalized private energy companies. It also carried out a deep process of francization in the fields of education, social welfare, and health services, as well as in all levels and departments of government bureaucracy (Durocher). During that time, Quebec nationalism was also exacerbated by tensions between the province and the Federal government. The Canadian administration did not look favorably on Quebec’s rapid changes and attempts to stake out its own relations with foreign countries, ultimately questioning the status of Quebec and French Canadians.8

---

8 In 1965, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism notably designated Quebec as the source of Canada’s “greatest crisis in history.”
Simultaneously with the Quiet Revolution and the revalorization of French in the nationalist project, Quebeckers started adapting anti-colonial theories in the 1960s to their subjugated status in Canada, rooted in their French language and ancestry. Ideas of Négritude and black identity as articulated by French-speaking intellectuals like Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi as well as members of the Black Power movement in the United States became a powerful theoretical source of resistance and empowerment. They strongly influenced French Canadian intellectuals and informed the movement they created to conceptualize Quebec decolonization.

Despite constituting the vast majority of the population in Quebec, French Canadians “controlled only 20 per cent of the economy and had far higher rates of unemployment and lower levels of income than English-speaking Quebeckers” (Mills 197). In addition to being subjected to structures of unequal political and economic power, Francophones had also been racialized for decades by their use of French. This specific link between language and race started as early as 1839 when Lord Durham was commissioned by the Crown to report on the political crisis in British North America. In his report, he defined the English and French languages in racial terms for the first time, and established a hierarchy between them, much like the colonial rhetoric of that time that stigmatized Blacks as inferior and used it to justify colonization. He wrote:

is this French Canadian nationality one which, for the good merely of that people, we ought to strive to perpetuate, even if it were possible? I know of no national distinctions marking and continuing a more hopeless inferiority. The language, the laws, the character of the North American Continent are English; and every race but the English (I apply this to all who speak the English
language) appears there in a condition of inferiority. It is to elevate them from that inferiority that I desire to give to the Canadians our English character. ("Report of Lord Durham")

Lord Durham also used traditional colonial discourses to portray French Canadians as backwards Others with no historical nor literary background, in the same way that European colonial rhetoric belittled and misrepresented black populations:

“There can hardly be conceived a nationality more destitute of all that can invigorate and elevate a people, than that which is exhibited by the descendants of the French in Lower Canada, owing to their retaining their peculiar language and manners. They are a people with no history, and no literature” ("Report of Lord Durham").

The ways in which language, class, and race overlapped in the power dynamics between English and French Canadians was even more visible in Montreal. In the city, topography and socio-economic demography were divided along clear linguistic lines. As Mills stated, “unlike in many other cities, in Montreal language had been racialized, and the division of the city between its English- and French-speaking populations had become one of the defining features of its political climate” (195). In downtown Montreal, English-speaking Quebeckers demanded that French Canadians “speak white” in their presence (Mills 198). Politicians also carried out such racializing of French, as exemplified by the use of the same words by an English-Canadian parliamentary to insult French-speaking Henri Bourassa (Scott 178). Feminist activist Marjolaine Péloquin states that, in the 1960s, “the French language was dirty, was the colour of the soot that covered our village. The white language, the language of the boss,
was English” (qtd. in Mills 198). Because race and language had been closely tied for a long time in Canada, it seemed only natural for many Quebec intellectuals like André Langevin and Michèle Lalonde to draw a parallel between their condition as French speakers in Quebec and that of African-Americans. They identified with the subjugated condition of black people, equated their French language with blackness, and inscribed their liberation movement within a broader movement of anticolonialism.

Quebec’s nationalist movement launched in the 1960s continued to grow in the 1970s with former Liberal cabinet member René Lévesque’s creation of a new political party: the Parti Québécois (PQ), and culminated in its most radical attempt to effectively decolonize the province. Laferrière’s arrival in Montreal in 1976 coincided with the arrival in power of the Parti Québécois and, as a new resident of Montreal, it undoubtedly marked his first years as an exile. Despite the Parti Quebecois’ failure to convince a majority of Quebecois to vote in favor of independence in the referendum on Quebec’s secession from Canada in 1980, nationalist ideas were still prevalent in the 1980s, and undeniably colored Laferrière’s writings in the 1980s.

Laferrière’s work environment was also highly involved in Quebec’s nationalist project. Indeed, Jacques Lanctôt, his first publisher at VLB éditeur, had been an active member in an event often described as one the darkest times in 20th century Canadian

---

9 Lalonde notably declared: “la langue ici est l’équivalent de la couleur pour le Noir américain. La langue française, c’est notre couleur noire” in Le Jour, 1 June 1974, p. 3.
history; the 1970 October crisis. During the Quiet Revolution, several revolutionary movements emerged following the nationalistic turn. Some were more radical than others and preached violence as a way to achieve political ends. One of them was the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ), founded by two radical sovereignists in 1963, which counted Jacques Lanctôt and Pierre Vallières as two of its active members. In 1970, FLQ members, including Lanctôt, engaged in acts of terrorism that culminated in the kidnapping of two officials and the death of one of them, Minister of Immigration and Labor Pierre Laporte. Lanctôt participated in the kidnapping of the other official; British diplomat James Cross, on October 5, 1970, which triggered the crisis. He also contributed to writing the FLQ manifesto that was read and broadcasted on Radio-Canada. In December of the same year, along with the other kidnappers, Lanctôt agreed to release Cross in return for a safe passage to Cuba, where he stayed for eight years. He returned from exile in 1979, spent three years in prison, and then joined the VLB publishing house and started working with Laferrière in 1985.

According to publisher Hérard Jadotte, VLB éditeur and Jacques Lanctôt were not Laferrière’s first choice. Indeed, at that time, like fellow Haitians in exile, Jadotte directed a magazine and publishing house in Montreal called Nouvelle Optique. In his own words, like a few other publishers, he turned down Dany Laferrière when he approached him with his first novel (personal interview). While it is unclear whether Lanctôt’s political stances played any role in Laferrière’s decision to choose him as his
publisher at VLB and to follow him later when he created his own publishing house, the writer undoubtedly knew of Lanctôt’s nationalist involvement before working with him, and must have discussed the implications of featuring the term “Nègre” in the title of his first book. In 2007, despite no longer working together, the two men were still in touch. They exchanged regular emails and often met in Montreal, Laferrière even calling Lanctôt his “brother” and saying “toi et moi c’est à la vie à la mort” (Laferrière “Re: coucou”).

Going back to Comment’s packaging and the ways in which it reflected Laferrière’s position at the nexus of literary, racial, and linguistic spaces, the photograph on the book cover was very symbolic. By positioning Laferrière in Square Saint-Louis, it situated him firmly in one of Montreal’s most central neighborhoods vis-à-vis Quebec’s cultural history. Beyond being right next to Laferrière’s apartment on Rue Cherrier, the square was also a significant reference to Quebec’s emblematic intellectual scene of the 20th century. Before Laferrière, famous Quebec intellectuals and writers like poet Emile Nelligan and playwright Michel Tremblay had lived there, as well as poet Gaston Miron, one of the most influential architects of the Quiet Revolution.

On a symbolic level, the photograph on Comment’s cover visually represented one of the most pressing issues of 1980s in Quebec: the place of migrant writers in Quebec society and literature. Laferrière not only set his narrative in this emblematic place but he also physically and figuratively situated himself in the same spot on the
cover. In doing so, Laferrière inscribed himself and *Comment* within Quebec’s political and literary history. Ultimately, the cover embodies Laferrière’s entrance as a migrant writer into the Quebec political sphere and literary tradition, and acts as a visual representation of the author’s redefinition of Quebec identity and literature.

Indeed, the success of Laferrière’s first novel not only attracted attention to its author but also contributed to changing the way literary critics and scholars approached migrant literature or “écriture migrante” in Quebec. While *Comment*’s cover reflected the publisher’s choice to market the book as a migrant novel, the author’s focus on Montreal society enabled the narrative to integrate Quebec literature and, as a result, “must also be said to be a significant Quebec novel” (“Geopolitics” 45). Perceived as some kind of double-faced mirror of Quebec society and migrant experience, *Comment* played a significant role in blurring categorizations between Quebec and migrant literatures at a time when they were still traditionally divided along ethnic and topical lines.

In the 1980s, “migrant literature” or “écritures migrantes” was a literary movement of cultural hybridity unique to Quebec. First coined by Haitian poet, linguist and theorist Robert Berrouët-Oriol in 1987, two years after *Comment* was published, “écritures migrantes” referred to the increasing literary production of foreign-born writers who chose French over English to express themselves. Central to the definition of “migrant literature” was its inclusiveness of authors whose native language was not French, like Chinese-born Ying Chen or Italian-born Marco Micone, who nevertheless
contributed to the national literary landscape. By consisting of multiple bodies of knowledge and discourses,10 “écritures migrantes” actively questioned Quebec’s traditional understanding of its identity as singular and unified.

In the late 1980s, while various critical voices had found their home in young Quebec journals and magazines like Dérives (created in 1975 and directed by Haitian-born writer Jean Jonassaint), Moebius (founded in 1977), Spirale (created in 1979), and more especially in transcultural magazine Vice versa (1983-1996) (Chartier “Les origines”), literary scholars and critics had increasing trouble positioning foreign-born writers’ works in relation to traditional Quebec literature.

In their review of two novels written by Haitian-born writers, Jean Jonassaint and Anne Racette questioned the future of the Quebecois novel and the role of foreign-born writers, including Laferrière, in the emergence of a new national literary tradition that they called “littérature métisse.” By describing Laferrière’s first novel as both being a “Quebec novel” and exhibiting “uncommon characteristics in the Quebec literature” (79), the two critics showed the significant role that Comment played in inscribing migrant writers within Quebec literature as well as turning them into active agents of Quebec literary modernism. In a similar fashion, VLB’s choice to display a photograph of Laferrière on the cover showed that the publishing house, as one of the actors of the

Quebec book industry, partook in portraying Laferrière as both a migrant and a writer creating his narratives in the local space.

Ultimately, the winning combination for fame was Laferrière’s decision to let go of the Haitian tradition in order to write specifically for Quebeckers and fulfill their interest in reading about themselves through the eyes of a black migrant. Moved by an individualistic endeavor, Laferrière undoubtedly did not think of the broader impact his novel might have on other writers. Yet, as a side effect, his strategy also contributed to integrating fellow migrant writers more firmly into Quebec literature.

1.2 From National to Global Through Racial and Sexist Tropes

In 1987, two years after its resounding success in Quebec, Laferrière’s first novel was translated into English. In 1989, it was adapted for the screen and was simultaneously republished in Quebec and published in France for the first time. While the primary readers were still Quebeckers, Comment’s audience had expanded, and crossed national and generic borders. Simultaneously, VLB’s packaging of Laferrière’s text changed. The publisher adapted the cover and paratext to the new situation, turning them into a kind of chronotope of that time; one that responded to more global contexts and engaged the novel in a conversation with the film adaptation. By downplaying any specific reference to Quebec on the cover, VLB’s marketing also toned down its initial targeting of Quebec readers and allowed the novel to be received in a broader
postcolonial context. This showed Laferrière and VLB’s ambition to expand the author’s readership and capitalize on it in order to turn him into a more global writer.

In 1987, while Laferrière had just published his second novel, Eroshima, Quebec critic Jean-Roch Boivin declared that “Laferrière is made for export” (27). Boivin set Laferrière apart by praising the writer’s creativity and uniqueness, and emphasized his commercial ambitions: “He sells well and his books, too. He has created his own style. This is significant” (27). He also questioned his writing process, suspecting him of “finding the title first and then writing the novel according to it” (27), thereby highlighting Laferrière’s strategy to create a marketing buzz. Future events showed Boivin was right: Laferrière’s work did not stay confined to Quebec boundaries. His transnational success started in 1987 with Comment’s translation into English, and continued growing two years later when it was simultaneously published in France and made into a film.

Comment’s translation into English marked Laferrière’s first crossing of national geographic borders. While discussing his translation, Laferrière famously declared that the process should be easy because, according to him, “the book is already written in English, only the words are in French” (“Ce livre”). His translator, David Homel, proved him wrong in his preface to the book, which he translated as How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired, by notably commenting on the difficult process of translating the word “Nègre” (How to Make Love 8). Laferrière of course did not actually believe the
two languages were interchangeable, but he saw the English version of *Comment* as a form of return to its “original” language, that of his self-proclaimed “direct style, stripped down of any flourishes, where emotion is almost invisible to the naked eye” (“Ce livre”). Most importantly, *Comment*’s English translation represented the first step of the novel’s journey across national spaces, and Laferrière’s own first step towards becoming a global writer, as opposed to a specifically Quebec one.

In 1989, *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, based on the novel, was released in Quebec and French theaters. Simultaneously, VLB published a second edition of *Comment* featuring the film poster on the cover.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 3: *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, VLB, 1989
Figure 4: Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, Film Poster, 1989

One only needs to glance at Comment’s second edition to see how the new context brought a dramatic change in the way Laferrière’s texts were packaged in Quebec, and how sex, as a selling tool, became even more central to his marketing strategy. A provocative picture of a black man lying in bed with an out-of-proportion erection and a half-naked woman by his side on the floor replaced Laferrière’s casual pose sitting on a bench in and typing Square Saint Louis. Laferrière never shied away from admitting he had carefully chosen his first novel’s title in order to maximize its sales. In 2000, reflecting on the reason why he had not given his narrative a title that referred to the national language conflict, he admitted that he had chosen to emphasize sex because he needed “something that got more attention than language” (“Ce livre”). Comment’s commercial success certainly proved how effective sex is in driving sales. However, while it was originally present only in the title on the cover, sex became the advertising focal point of the second edition.
By featuring the same image and font as on the film poster, the publisher aimed to turn film viewers into potential readers and vice versa, and hoped to attract a broader audience. It made it easier for film viewers to find the original written version, and therefore, allowed VLB to also benefit from the economic impact and media coverage of the film.

Twenty years later, the Cinéma Québécois website presented the film as such:

“Critics noted with regret that this comedy lacked a bit of depth, but this celebration of Négritude touched a broad audience. After the novel’s warm reception in Quebec and Haiti, the film allowed the title to be known, which allowed Dany Laferrière to be known throughout francophonie” (“Comment faire l’amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer”). Despite its debatable statement about the novel’s enthusiastic reception in Haiti and the film’s productive contribution to Négritude, this comment, written in 2008, emphasizes the film’s role in making Laferrière and its novel more globally known, and the mutual beneficial relationship between film and novel.

Comment’s back cover text, as another important element of the paratext, further emphasized that complementary relationship. It underscored the tension about the controversial place of foreign-born writers in Quebec literature while also highlighting the novel’s international success:

Acclaimed by critics and an enthusiastic audience, this first novel by a young writer of Haitian origin, propelled its author to the status of one of most important modern writers in Quebec. Critics praised his new perspective, jazzy style and revolutionary sensibility. In English Canada where the novel, published with Coach House Press, was tremendously successful, Laferrière is
compared to Bukovski and Miller. Film producer Richard Sadler (Stock International) soon got interested in How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired. The novel was adapted into a daring film that is about to stir up passions. Lead roles are played by Isaach de Bankolé (1986 most promising French Cinema Actor), friendly Maka Kotto and young actress from Toronto Roberta Bizeau, who all thrive in incisive dialogues. This film was directed by Jacques W. Benoit. Music by Manu Dibango.

While the first sentence reflected the ambivalent position of Laferrière in Quebec literature by describing him as both a migrant and a Quebec writer carving a name for himself inside national borders and beyond, the second half was devoted to the upcoming film, and highlighted its connection with the original novel.

The paratext also replicated Laferrière’s desire to break down barriers between genres and audience, and to become a more global cultural figure through Comment’s international cast, production team, and music choices. Quebec and French companies co-produced the $2.5 million budget film (Marshall 274) and Laferrière and Richard Sadler co-wrote its screenplay (“Comment faire l’amour…”). Conforming “to the mandate of an 80 per cent Canadian and 20 percent French coproduction and to the necessity of assuring an international impact” (Martin 8), Canadian artists shared the spotlight with African and French-acclaimed ones. While Toronto-born Roberta Bizeau played Vieux’s main female love interest Miz Literature, Ivorian Isaach de Bankolé got the lead role of Vieux after starring in highly bankable roles in Thomas Gilou’s 1986 Black Mic-Mac, Claire Denis’ 1988 Chocolat, and winning a César in France. Described in several Canadian newspapers as a “30-year-old (...) tall, athletically handsome native of
Ivoiry Coast who moved to France as a teenager,” de Bankolé was “France’s hottest black star” (Dabby).

Isaach de Bankolé landed his role in Comment after meeting Dany Laferrière at a party in Montreal for the 1986 World Film Festival. After reading Laferrière’s book on the plane, he sent him a telegram offering to play the lead role if the novel was ever turned into a film (Dabby). In Comment, De Bankolé starred alongside Cameroon-born actor Maka Kotto who, at that time, had just arrived in Quebec after studying and working in France for more than ten years. Interestingly enough, Kotto later started a politician career and server as the Quebec Minister for Culture and Communications from 2012 to 2014. Several critics also noted that Cameroun-born Manu Dibango contributed to “making the film enjoyable and authentic” thanks to his background rhythms (Heaver). Based in Paris at that time, Dibango was already successful and known as a talented composer, lyricist and instrumentalist “who over the years [had] mastered funk, reggae, soul, gospel. jazz, salsa, blues, et al” (Heaver). And last but not least, Montreal-native Jacques W. Benoit completed this eclectic team. Deemed a “rookie director” (Heaver), Benoit had nevertheless just worked as the primary assistant director to famous Quebec filmmaker Denys Arcand for highly popular and iconic Quebec film The Decline of the American Empire.

An obvious sense of kinship can be established between Comment and The Decline of the American Empire. Released in 1986, The Decline focused on the sexual revelations of
Université de Montréal History professors and friends during a dinner retreat, and worked along the same - loose - line as Comment. In The Decline, one of the characters explains that she sees contemporary society’s obsession with self-indulgence as a sign of its decline, and, by extension, the decline of the “American empire” that also encompassed Quebec. Tremendously successful by Quebec standards, The Decline was praised for its cast and wittiness as a sex comedy. It featured twice in the Top Ten Canadian Films of All Time by the Toronto International and was the first Canadian film to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. By focusing on the interconnectedness of sex, knowledge, and power in 1980s Quebec society, The Decline of the American Empire is reminiscent of Laferrière’s fiction narrative. Both works also became commercial and critical successes that now act as Quebec cultural landmarks of the second part of the 1980s.

Analyzed in the context of late 1980s, Comment’s film adaptation inscribes itself in a broader trend whose ambition was to question traditional frames of thought. In the film industry, this was also marked by the end of censorship in advertising. Indeed, in 1985, the “Régie du Cinéma,” created two years earlier to replace the “Bureau de surveillance,” put an end to fifty years of monitoring advertisement in film. In Yves Lever’s words, this monitoring process had not had a very strong impact but had nevertheless managed to limit the false promises of often vulgar and misleading
advertising (554). Openly vulgar, Comment’s and The Decline’s sexually provocative film posters were among the most controversial ones created in the following years.

Figure 5: Le Déclin de l’empire américain, 1986, Quebecois Film Poster

Figure 6: Le Déclin de l’empire américain, 1986, French Film Poster
It is no coincidence that Comment’s poster borrowed directly from The Decline by showcasing the film’s sexual aspect despite its limited presence on camera. Indeed, both posters were created by the same person, Yvan Adam.11 In both films, sex is only mentioned and never shown. Hal Weaver even wrote in his review of Comment that: “seductive title aside, this controversial Canada-France coproduction is not a visual manual for love-making. Nor is it primarily about sex. It is a buddy film” (“Jacques Benoit’s Comment faire…”). Yet, because sex sells in most - if not all - industries, the provocative posters were highly effective in creating controversies, and therefore, ultimately drawing people to theaters.

Following the original narrative’s as well as The Decline’s commercial and critical success, Laferrière hoped Comment’s film adaptation would be just as successful (Martin 8). In November 1988, the production team was also very optimistic and was planning to launch the film at the 1989 Cannes Festival. Producer and co-scripter Richard Sadler considered the film had “all the elements of a giant hit along the lines of Denys Arcand’s sex-satire, The Decline of the American Empire” (Dabby) and was ready to campaign for the film at the festival (Martin 8). Its critical reception, however, proved them wrong.

Commercially speaking, Comment can hardly be deemed a failure considering that it earned 130,000 Canadian dollars in its first week in Quebec theaters in March

---

11 It is interesting to note however that in both posters, the male sex is given all the attention: what is controversial and provocative on Comment’s poster is the narrator’s exaggerated erection, and the penis drawing on The Decline’s poster. The female sex, on the other hand, is, it seems, too shameful or vulgar to be drawn or explicitly imagined under a sheet.
1989, reaching 300,000 CND after three weeks (“Holding Steady”). The team also managed to sell it to international film companies. Indeed, its Montreal-based distribution rights company Aska-Films reported sales of 1 million Canadian dollars to Israel, Spain, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany and Holland (“Cannes Market depressed”). However, while Sadler was optimistic the film would have the same impact as The Decline, it did not quite reach the same success. With only 62,000 tickets sold in Quebec, Comment trailed far behind The Decline’s 600,000 tickets (Ramond). In 2001, while Comment ranked 10th in the top 10 most successful Quebec films in France with 128,000 tickets sold, it paled in comparison to The Decline’s sales of over 1 million tickets (Marshall 85). Moreover, with the tremendous international success of Quebec films in recent years, like Xavier Dolan’s Mommy (2014) that sold over one million tickets in France in less than two months (CBO Box Office), Comment has long left the top 10 list.

Furthermore, while Comment undeniably helped Laferrière to expand his readership and launched his - short-lived and rather unsuccessful - career in film by demonstrating the author’s “capability to be a future force in the film industry, if given the opportunity” (Weaver), the film did not reach heights in critical and public ratings. Despite Sadler’s ambition to see it nominated in Director’s Fortnight or even the official competition (Martin), it did not make the cut of the most prestigious categories of the Cannes Festival. And Laferrière’s hope that it would be “a film that lasts” (Martin) did
not materialize as it is not remembered nowadays as one of the most emblematic Quebec films, contrary to his narrative that is considered one of the most iconic novels of 1980s Quebec literature. What it is remembered for, however, is its censorship in several countries, including the United States, because of its title and poster.

In addition to the differing impact of Comment and The Decline, an important element that contrasted the two films was the place from which they addressed and sought to challenge Quebec’s traditional frames of thought, and, even more significantly, the message they sent. “The central theme of the book is universal: consciousness,” declared Laferrière in 1988 while promoting the film adaptation of his book. “One can apply it to one’s self whatever race, color, prejudices, attractions” (Martin 7). Yet it is not the theme of consciousness that was exploited as universal in order to launch Laferrière’s international career. The film poster and book cover overtly positioned race and sex as the central themes and presented Comment as a story addressing debates on such issues.

By using an image explicitly showcasing interracial sex as its main topic, the new cover sought to draw people’s attention while also reproducing the narrator’s satirical take on constructed racial myths. While the cover certainly caused controversy and succeeded in reflecting the narrative’s sexist representation of women, I argue that it most definitely failed at challenging racial stereotypes, and ultimately achieved quite the opposite. Indeed, rather than successfully taking “fatal and uproarious aim at all manner
of sacred cows” (Homel, How to Make Love 7), the cover’s depiction of a hyper sexualized black man and a half naked woman reinforced traditional frames of thought and reproduced the dominant stereotypes framing gender, race and sexuality in 1980s white heteronormative Quebec.

Going back to the novel’s cover, it is impossible to ignore the controversial way in which the new illustration represented the text and the problematic message it sent to potential readers. At first sight, an untrained eye could see the image as a provocative yet playful - through rather uncreative - attempt to represent Laferrière’s narrative. Indeed, the book cover’s multicolored and perky font is a clear reference to the comical aspect of the story. The black and white colors of the photograph visually reinforces the interracial component of the story while the composition of the image, with the black man on the bed and the white woman on the floor - literally at his feet - showcases the narrative’s central thesis that “the only true sexual relation is between unequals” (41). Indeed, Vieux believes that “because in the scale of Western values, white woman is inferior to white man, but superior to black man,” she can’t go as far as she wants with white men. As a result, “she can’t get off except with a Negro” (41). In a similar way, the image alludes to the interconnectedness of gender, race and sex in power structures, which is at the core of the narrative.

At first sight, the same untrained eye could see the ten-foot-tall penis as an echo of what the text exposes: an exaggerated and clichéd representation of black sexuality.
On the cover, the black man is lying in bed, with his hands locked behind his head in a relaxed position. His face is also hidden under a book and a white sheet is covering his towering penis. Obviously exaggerated, the image of the black man’s gigantic penis is meant to reflect what Vieux calls the “myth of the Black Stud” (41) in the novel. As such, it should be seen as both shocking and thought-provoking, and, most importantly, ultimately perceived as a construction and a satirical assault on stereotypes. And this is precisely where comes the rub. While the narrative challenges such representations by calling on their statuses as western constructs, the image does not give any kind of information that would allow the reader to understand it must be seen as a myth, and as such, rejected. The image does not deconstruct the myth it is supposed to denounce and does not want to. Indeed, the cover does not present the reader with a satirical representation, but rather with a simple reflection of a racist white male and heteronormative gaze. For that matter, the illustration, created by a white man and put up in theaters in western societies, could easily fit in a far-right magazine without looking out of place.

In the novel, the narrator regularly attacks stereotypical images of blackness and denounces them as such through parody. Vieux explicitly calls black hypersexuality a myth: “the myth of the Black stud” (41) and shows how it is connected with racial dehumanization: “I’d like to be one hundred percent sure whether the myth of the animalistic, primitive, barbarous black who thinks only of fucking is true or not.
Evidence. Show me evidence. Definitely, once and for all. No one can. The world has grown rotten with ideologies” (44). His use of parody demonstrates how this myth was constructed by the white gaze, and notably denounces classic French writers and famous so-called ethnographic travel magazines: “a real bushman, homo primitivus, the Negro according to National Geographic, Rousseau and Company” (147).

Commenting on this strategy, Quebec critic Anthony Purdy declared that Comment’s effectiveness lied in the writer’s lack of explicit political engagement in favor of “a playful, postmodern négritude, one that is based on the deconstruction of stereotypes through parody rather than advocacy” (54). Although Corrie Scott successfully demonstrated that the narrator’s casual use of stereotypes and Laferrière’s personal beliefs on the matter12 have ambiguous consequences and somewhat undermine antiracist discourses (Une race), all scholars ultimately acknowledge the author’s overt parody and ironical tone as the most successful and thought-provoking stylistic devices of the novel. Not as much can be said of the cover, however, which, unlike the narrative, proves dramatically mono-dimensional.

By breaking down clichés through satire and exposing these myths, Laferrière makes obvious references to seminal anti-colonial writer and theorist Frantz Fanon. The

---

12 See Laferrière’s interview in Lamontagne, André. « On ne naît pas Nègre, on le devient : la représentation de l’autre dans Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer de Dany Laferrière », Québec Studies, vol. 23, printemps-été, p. 29-42, in which he declared: “J’aime beaucoup les clichés. C’est un lieu commun. Un lieu commun, c’est un lieu que tout le monde partage, et c’est important. Et ce qui est extraordinairement terrible dans les clichés, c’est que la plupart sont vrais” (32).
anti-colonial Martinican intellectual and psychiatrist demonstrated in *Black Skin, White Masks* how the image of the Black Man and his imaginary hypersexuality were created and fixed by Europeans. Although the narrator does not explicitly mention Fanon’s name, Laferrière’s questioning of “the myth of the Black stud” obviously draws from Fanon’s critical denunciation of blacks’ stereotypical hyper sexualization. “As for the Negroes, they have tremendous sexual powers,” wrote Fanon, before ironically adding: “What do you expect, with all the freedom they have in their jungles! They copulate at all times and in all places. They are really genital” (121).

Myths of the Black Man’s deviant sexuality were part of the process of dehumanizing black people whom Europeans constructed as “Nègres,” inferior beings, Others. As Achille Mbembe shows in *Critique of Black Reason*, the term “Black Man” was an imaginary object conjured by Europe to describe and imagine African difference (72). During that time, Europeans argued that the Black Man’s difference was biologically, intellectually, and culturally predetermined (73). First imagined inhuman, and then barely human, the Black Man was fundamental to the European construction of the African difference (72-73). The Black Man’s difference could be recognized in his skin color, hair, smell, limited intellect, and hypersexuality (73). Quoting Olfert Dapper and Michel Cournot, Mbembe shows that, in the European imaginary, the penis of the Black Man was not described as a human body part but rather compared to a plant or a weapon. It is “a palm or a breadfruit tree that will never grow limp,” or a “sword” (73).
In a fairly similar fashion, the penis of the black man on the cover is not shown as humanly-sized but depicted as some kind of tree, clearly echoing Dapper’s and Cournot’s racist descriptions.

Laferrière’s narrative also shows how race, sex, and power are interconnected, and how white domination creates a racialized desire for black bodies. Indeed, just as it created a fantasy of Blackness, the European imagination also created a fantasy of Whiteness to legitimize the white race’s so-called superiority (Mbembe 72). Rooted in Frantz Fanon’s theory, Laferrière demonstrates how the white gaze both constructed the myth of black hypersexuality and, as Mill put it, “created in black men a desire to have sex with white women, as they are seen to represent civilization” (215). By resorting to such a colonial representation of black sexuality without rebutting it as such, the image becomes extremely problematic and marks a departure from the text. Ultimately, it does not challenge any myths on Black animality and hypersexuality as much as it reinforces them and dehumanizes the character on the cover.

Several other elements further dehumanize him. First, in the image, the man is a faceless entity. Faces are symbols of identity and humanity, thus destroying someone’s face is to erase what is human in a human being (Le Breton 285). By hiding the black man’s face behind a book, the image denies him his face, and as a result, his humanity. He is further dehumanized as he is shown in full erection, deprived of all agency and control over himself. While Vieux’s wish is to become a writer and the narrative often
refers to his superior literary knowledge, the image ends up reducing him to his hypersexualized and uncontrollable body.

Rooted in colonial discourse, the image shows how racist myths, constructed by Europeans to justify slave trade, colonization, exploitation and so-called civilizing missions in Africa, survived in time and are still present today in western imaginaries, resurfacing in 1989 in the form of a book cover - and film poster. Ultimately, its advertising strategy relied on blatant racism disguised as satire. Indeed, while, in the text, the narrator as a black migrant drew attention to and deconstructed the specific stereotypes he suffered from whites - and especially white English-speaking Canadians - , the potential reader merely looking at the cover faced an image he might already have internalized. With no supplemental indication of the way in which the image reflects racial constructs through parody - like a caption, for instance, or a reference to anti-colonial theorists - the cover does not challenge any colonial myths it supposedly uncovers. What readers face is a racist representation of a dehumanized and hypersexualized black man; this “white gaze [that] constructs the myth of black sexuality with all of its disastrous consequences” (Mills 235), and that, ultimately, might already be theirs.

Using the poster from the film, which is a photograph, encourages readers’ identification with the white gaze. Indeed, it places the reader in a voyeuristic position that naturally objectifies the characters in the picture. In her study of the relation
between photography and autobiography, Linda Haverty Rugg examines the objectifying nature of photography and declares that

photographs are potentially dangerous; this point has been brought home repeatedly by writers who have contemplated the voyeuristic nature of photography, its objectification of and alienation from the subjects and time pictured within its frames, its capacity for deception, its untoward power in institutional settings, its presentation of the individual as ideal or as degraded type (…) Most intimately, photographs are the fixation of the gaze of the unseen other. (231)

In Visual Consumption, Jonathan Schroeder based his analysis on Mary Louise Pratt’s work on the connection between the gaze and colonialism to show that power and gaze are intimately linked: “to gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze” (58). By representing the black man as a faceless character and positioning him at the center of the image as the primary object of the gaze, the cover simultaneously objectifies him and positions the reader as the unseen subject of the gaze.

Because this second edition came out in Quebec, the primary unseen other at whom the image and text are directed is the imagined Quebec reader, mostly white, and placed in a position of power, like photographers who have power over their subject. In this respect, the word “Nègre” in the title is significant. Its grammar function as the object in the clause strongly emphasizes the racially-based power dynamics of the colonizer gaze and discourse.13 Associated with the image, its meaning also shifts from

13 See Corrie Scott, p. 136.
that of the first cover that invited Quebec readers to identify with him. As we saw, by using a racial term, Laferrière meant to shock readers and draw attention to his book, but also to create a sense of complicity with French-speaking Canadians who had been linguistically racialized and saw French as their Blackness. However, while this was possible on the first cover, the second does not allow such association. With its visual association with the racialized black man and without featuring Montreal in the background, the term “Nègre” in Laferrière’s title no longer evokes Vallières’ “white Niggers of America” but falls back to its original meaning as a racially prejudiced synonym for “black,” now banned from use.

Contrary to the first cover that did not impose stereotyped and racialized images on readers’ mind, this edition did. Going back to Mitchell’s statement that “the question to ask of pictures from the standpoint of a poetics is not just what they mean or do but what they want” (xv), it becomes clear that with this cover, Laferrière’s publisher wanted readers to objectify the black character twice: first by positioning him as the object of readers’ gaze and then by automatically racializing him through that prejudiced gaze.

While the image fails to accurately represent the ways in which the narrative challenged racial stereotypes, it partially succeeds however in replicating Vieux’s sexist depiction of women. Indeed, critics agreed that Comment sparked a debate on race, power and language in 1980s Montreal, but many also acknowledged that the narrative -
and the film\textsuperscript{14} - problematically silenced women, and more specifically black women, as well as members of the LGBT community. In doing so, Laferrière’s narrative ambiguously subverted the white gaze while, at the same time, also reproducing contemporary male heteronormative social constructs.

In the image, in a similar fashion to the black man, the woman’s face is hidden, which demeans her individuality, agency and humanity. Like the man, by being faceless, her unique identity as an individual is erased, and she is reduced to her body as a commodity. Her position in the lower part of the image, physically below the man in bed as well as her representation as a sexual object echo the gender-based power hierarchies at play in the narrative. In \textit{Comment}, women merely act as foils to the main male characters and do not have real names but are referred to as Miz Snob, Miz Sophistication, Miz Literature and Miz Covergirl. However, since women’s commodification is rooted in broader patriarchal norms, she not only embodies the perception of white women as objects of black men’s, but also more generally of all men’s desire.

Another element is significant in the picture: in addition to striking a \textit{Sports Illustrated} bikini model pose on the floor, the woman is also shown reading a book. She is probably “Miz Literature,” although it is hard to tell since only her body, and

\footnotesize
\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{14} Hal Weaver notably wrote: “Black women are invisible, and white women play various (stereo)types in the sub-plots.”
\end{quote}
especially her naked right hip and leg are visible. Through this, she represents both
civilization and sexual commodification. By juxtaposing sex and civilization, this image
simultaneously refers to two well-established patriarchal and colonial myths. The first,
directly connected to her gender, is that women’s worth is dictated by her looks and
validated by men, and consequently, that her sole purpose is to please and be used by men. The second, referring to her whiteness, is, the western construction of Whiteness as
culture and civilization, in direct opposition with blacks’ so-called primitiveness.

However, while Laferrière’s sexism in the narrative was specifically directed at
Anglophone women in order to further ally with French-speaking Quebeckers through
language, this is not replicated on the cover. No element tells readers she is Anglophone,
so she becomes a representation of all women. Although the linguistic complicity
between author and audience is no longer obvious, the cover still reflects the way
women are represented in the text as well as the Quebec context of that time. Ultimately,
by stereotyping white women, silencing black women and the LGBT community, both
Comment and its cover are rooted in Quebec’s “profoundly heterosexual vision of
masculinity and nationalism” (Mills 196).

Just like the film adaptation itself, the cover’s attempt to humorously and
provocatively echo the narrative’s satirical take on white gaze falls short because it does
not clearly challenge racial constructs, but rather reinforces them, along with sexist ones.
By doing so, it sheds light on late 1980s white heteronormative Quebec’s dominant
discourse, one that objectified women and racialized blacks, turning inward in order to resist new ways of defining Quebec identity along nontraditional gendered and racial lines. The cover also downplayed Montreal’s role in the narrative, which reveals how VLB wished to facilitate its circulation beyond national borders. Through this, the book cover enabled Laferrière’s work to signify in a broader postcolonial context, one in which global movements of people were contributing to reshaping western societies from the margins.

1.3 Book Packaging and Quebec’s “dual discourse” on Haiti and Haitians

With the first cover of *Comment*, VLB chose to market Laferrière as a migrant writer in Quebec. The second edition of *Comment*, however, which featured the film poster, showed how VLB changed its packaging strategy in order to tentatively echo the narrative’s provocateur and satirical content and launch the novel on the international stage through the use of racializing stereotypes and less Quebec-specific references. This also marked the beginning of an alternation between very different images on Laferrière’s covers from 1989 on. On some of these covers, publishers relied on exoticized and racialized Caribbean tropes, while they portrayed Laferrière as an urban intellectual on others. This contradictory packaging produced two seemingly paradoxical images of Laferrière’s narratives, and by extension, Haiti, and Laferrière’s literary persona.
In the 1990s, several books published by VLB, Lanctôt, and Typo differentiated themselves from Laferrière’s previous works by displaying exoticized images of Haiti. *L’odeur du café* (1991 and 1999), *Le charme des après-midi sans fin* (1997), and *Pays sans chapeau* (1996), whose narratives all took place in Haiti, featured varied representations of the island nation on their covers.

Figure 7: L’odeur du café, VLB, 1991

Figure 8: Le charme des après-midi sans fin, Lanctôt, 1997
Highly clichéd images were present on both *L’odeur du café* and *Le charme des après-midi sans fin*. With its palm-trees softly moving in the breeze and its deep blue sea and skies in the background, *Le charme’s* cover represented Haiti as a paradisiac place. The slightly faded colors, which added an old photographic aspect to the illustration, also gave it a nostalgic feel, firmly inscribing the image in the western imaginary of Haiti as an exotic Elsewhere rooted in the past.

On *L’odeur du café’s* cover, whose narrative focuses on Vieux’s childhood with his grandmother Da in Petit-Goâve during the dictatorship, some elements alluded to the plot: the hand-drawn bike and the many ants in the foreground were direct references to the narrator’s youth as well as his hobbies. Yet, just like *Le charme des après-midi sans fin*, the rest of the cover offered critical insights into Quebec’s imaginary of the country. By featuring a deep blue sea, a white sandy beach, and green mountains in the background, VLB overtly signaled potential readers that the narrative took place in the Caribbean, much like *Le charme des après-midi sans fin*’s cover did. This time, however, an important additional element emphasized its specific location in Haiti. Although it takes place during the Duvalier dictatorship, the narrative does not mention the brutal regime. Yet, pictured almost out of frame, a mysterious black car with an invisible driver is in the background of the cover, parked on the beach. This was a clear reference to the Tontons Macoutes – a special unit in Duvalier’s paramilitary force that tortured and killed thousands of opponents to the regime – which visually located Laferrière’s narrative in
Haiti. Despite their minor – or even nonexistent – roles in the narratives, both the car and the stereotyped depiction of a paradisiac island show that, for Quebeckers in the 1990s, Haiti was simultaneously associated with the dictatorship and an exotic Elsewhere.

Most significantly, the covers of Pays sans chapeau (1996) and Typo’s pocketbook edition of L’odeur du café (1999) specifically represented scenes of the Haitian countryside.

Figure 9: Pays sans chapeau, Lanctôt, 1996

Pays sans chapeau’s cover, which displayed a painting by JR Chéry, “Enterrement à la campagne” (“Funeral in the countryside”) shed light on Lanctôt’s marketing strategy to highlight Haiti’s rurality and difference from Montreal. In the painting, two men are carrying a casket on a dirt road and are followed by dozens of people, some of them barefoot, who are seemingly imploring God with their arms up in the air. In the
background, next to a row of palm trees, a woman dressed in white in a colorful thatched roof house is throwing water out of the window. While the narrative mostly takes place in Port-au-Prince, Lanctôt’s decision to display this painting representing a funeral in the countryside was significant. It illuminated his wish to emphasize Haiti’s rural practices and customs and to represent the country as a traditional, rural, and fundamentally different place in order to catch the attention of Quebecois readers eager to know more about this unfamiliar “country with no hat.”

These tropes were also reminiscent of a stereotype about the Black Man as the “African peasant,” which Achille Mbembe denounced in Critique de la raison nègre. During the colonial period, the “African peasant” was “held as the prototype of child-humanity and of the simple life, joyous and without artifice. In his noble savagery, the child-human, draped in the innocent night of primitive times, lived in harmony with nature and with the spirits who lived in the forest or sang in the springs,” writes the scholar (75). This was also visible on the cover of Le cri des oiseaux fous, released by Lanctôt in 2000, which displayed Wifredo Lam’s surrealist masterpiece The Jungle featuring figures recalling African masks and addressing the history of slavery in his native Cuba.
Figure 10: Le cri des oiseaux fous, Lanctôt, 2000

*L’odeur du café*’s pocketbook version also offers a cropped version of a Haitian painting by Inatace Alphonse. Painted in the colorful and flat naïve style, it features a typical scene of the Haitian countryside: farmers harvesting their crops, women walking with baskets on their heads, small houses, mango trees, cattle, and mountains in the background. For Quebeckers unfamiliar with Haitian art, the version published by Typo featured a bucolic representation of the countryside, even more so than the book’s first edition. From an average westerner point of view more accustomed to western artistic canons, it also infantilizes the narrative, mediating its reception as a children’s book.
These images used by Quebecois publishers on Laferrière’s books represented Haiti as a traditional, agrarian, and foreign place. Simultaneously, however, other covers, and especially those which displayed photographs of Laferrière, featured the author as an urban man. In 1994, *Chronique de la dérive douce*, published by VLB and which focused on Vieux’s arrival and new life in Montreal, featured a photograph of Laferrière leaning on a brick wall.
While it is unclear where he is, exactly, it does not appeal to any imaginary of the Caribbean but instead overtly positions the writer in a city, most likely Montreal. In the picture, Laferrière is wearing jeans and a jacket, and looking the reader in the eye; he is a man of his time and very comfortable in his urban environment. Although the second edition published 18 years later by Boréal no longer pictured Laferrière, it still emphasized the relationship between man and city. The dust jacket exhibited part of a painting featuring the silhouette of a lonely man leaning against a building.
Figure 13: Chronique de la dérive douce, Boréal, 2012

Created by American artist Brett Amory and based on a photograph he took, this painting was part of a series entitled “Waiting” which focused on anonymous commuters in urban settings and represented contemporary alienation and isolation.

Meanwhile, Laferrière also appeared on several other covers of his Quebec-published books, and always in urban settings. On J’écris comme je vis (2000), a collage of two pictures firmly set Laferrière in the city. Mixing elements from the image featured on Comment’s cover - Laferrière sitting on a bench with his typewriter in his lap – with a bird’s eye view of a street running between blocks of buildings, the cover visually represented Laferrière as sitting and writing above the city.
Boréal’s reprinting of the long interview that Laferrière gave to Bernard Magnier featured a close-up of Laferrière drinking coffee.

Several other works like Lanctôt’s *Je suis fatigué* (2001), also featured close-ups of Laferrière’s face on their covers, clearly indicating that he was the author of the books. This practice mediated his reception as that of a literary man, an intellectual “brother” connected with Quebeckers through language and culture.
In the 1990s and 2000s, Laferrière’s Quebecois publishers thus relied on two types of representation of his texts and his writer persona. By offering contrasting images of Haiti as a rural and traditional place, and of Laferrière as an urban intellectual, they effectively reproduced a dual discourse that Quebecois held on Haiti and Haitians before the 1960s.

Haiti always acted “as a powerful Other against which ideas of civilization were built” (Mills 5). However, Sean Mills also showed that the dominant discourse about Haiti in 20th-century French Canada was unique in its dual representation of the island nation as “both connected to French Canada by ties of language and culture yet fundamentally different and less civilized” (23). On the one hand, since the 1930s, French Canadian and Haitian intellectuals believed that “Haiti and French Canada had a special bond based on language and religion, a bond that was understood through metaphors of family” (23). Haiti – or to be more accurate, the Haitian elite –, with its
similar French language, Catholic religion, and French-influenced history and culture, was seen as a “brother” or “sister” society, and this perception carried out over time. In a 2002 article in *Le Devoir* on Haitian-Canadian writer Emile Ollivier’s death and legacy, Académie des lettres du Québec president Jean Royer indeed referred to the Caribbean using these exact terms: “the Caribbean, our neighbor and sister.”

Yet another belief was also at the core of the Quebecois dual discourse, one that was based on “the dire situation of the Haitian peasantry and its lack of culture and civilization, symbolized by the persistence of both Vodou and Creole” (23). Much like the American touristic discourse of the 1950s that represented Haiti as a beacon of both Europe and Africa, with all the attached prejudiced beliefs (Rosenberg), the dominant discourse in Quebec created a seemingly self-contradictory image, both essentializing Haiti and turning it into an ersatz France along social, linguistic, and religious lines. While the Haitian elite “embodied the best of French civilization” through the Parisian variety of French they spoke and their upscale manners, “the abject situation of the peasantry reinforced the belief in French Canada’s responsibility to help evangelize the country’s poor” (Mills 23). As a result, “Haiti would come to represent both French civilization as well as its radical negation” (23). In other words, Haiti was seen as a “sister” society thanks to its elite, but Haitians, and more specifically Haitian masses, were also perceived “as deviant and childlike, in need of the assistance that French Canadians could provide” (5).
Such a paradoxical vision of Haiti is rooted in the 20th-century cultural, economic, and religious exchanges between Quebec and Haiti, which the Second Congress on the French language in Canada held at Université Laval in Quebec City in 1937 truly launched. Three of such congresses took place in Quebec in 1912, 1937 and 1952. Following the “Protect our French heritage” motto, their goal was to discuss the state and survival of the French language in Canada and North America. All French Canadians, Acadians, and Franco-Americans were invited to participate, as well as foreign persons or corporations as observers. It is under that title that Haitian delegates participated in the event (Mills 29).

1937 was not the first encounter between Haitians and French Canadians. Intellectuals from both countries had already met a few times, including during talks that some Haitians had given in Quebec City and Montreal. Yet it was the first time that a whole delegation of Haitians was present in Quebec for such an event on the issue of the French language. According to Mills who based his argument on Haitian poet and jurist Dominique Hippolyte’s speech, Haitian delegates emphasized the natural religious and linguistic ties between Haiti and French Canada. They portrayed their country as fundamentally Catholic and francophone, and in these terms, very similar to French Canada (25).

___________________________

15 Benito Sylvain in 1910, Dantès Bellegarde in 1934, among others.
Haiti’s participation in the Congress and the Haitian delegates’ emphasis on the relationship between Haiti and France were also a response to the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934. After almost twenty years of humiliation and racism from U.S. Marines, “many Haitian elite began accentuating the French aspects of their culture, emphasizing their ‘Latin refinement’ against the crass nature of their American occupiers” (Mills 29). Going to the Congress was a way for the Haitian elite to assert themselves as part of the francophone Americas, alongside French Canada and Acadia, for whom France, and not the United States, was still the cultural metropole and French the language of culture and civilization.

In Quebec City, by emphasizing the linguistic and religious ties between French Canada and Haiti, the Haitian delegates did not give a true-to-life representation of their country and represented only a minority of Haitians. They spoke only for the elite who were indeed francophone and Catholic in the 1930s but did not account for the great majority of rural and monolingual Creole-speaking Haitians. As such, they ultimately reproduced the system that had allowed them to maintain their dominant position by leaving the great majority of Haitians out of national governance as well as cultural and social issues. The Haitian elite’s presence at the Congress and the way they connected Haiti with French Canada through language and culture highly contributed to the French Canadian’s creation of the image of Haiti as a beacon of French civilization.
Ultimately, by simultaneously portraying Laferrière as an intellectual “brother” in the “francophone Americas” and demeaning Haitians as primitive peasants, Laferrière’s packaging following 1989 illuminates the cultural ramifications of Quebec’s dual discourse on Haiti and Haitians. Read against the backdrop of the historical relationship between the two countries, these covers show that the dual discourse had a lasting impact on Quebec’s imaginary of Haiti.

***

Although Quebec accepted and integrated migrant writers into its national literature in the late 20th century, Dany Laferrière’s marketing and the packaging of his books since 1985 offer critical insights into Quebec’s struggle to produce such literature without resorting to Othering processes rooted in racial difference, Quebec’s specific self-conceptualization and its national discourse on Haiti. Despite the provocative and satirical tone of his first narrative, Laferrière was perceived as an intellectual “brother,” connected with Quebeckers by language and culture. However, with Comment’s second edition, VLB chose to feature the film poster on its cover which, instead of successfully echoing the narrative’s parody, reproduced racist stereotypes of black people. By displaying racialized images, VLB represented black migrants and, by extension, Laferrière, as Others compared to native-born Quebeckers.

It also acted as a segue to seemingly paradoxical images on Laferrière’s book covers in the following decades. Indeed, the late 1980s also set the foundations of an
alternation between two ways of packaging Laferrière’s texts in Quebec, and by extension, Laferrière’s persona. Since 1989, Laferrière’s covers have portrayed, on the one hand, exoticizing images of Haiti and essentialized representations of Haitians as primitive peasants, and, on the other hand, images that position Laferrière in urban settings and equate him with a “brother” and member of the elite. These contradictory representational practices show the impact of Quebec’s dual discourse on the production of literary works and identities from Haiti. Ultimately, by reproducing Quebec’s pre-1960s ambivalent discourse on Haiti and Haitians, Laferrière’s packaging since 1989 has shown its cultural ramifications and visual application to the field of literary production.
2. Publishing, Representing, and Marketing Dany Laferrière in Haiti

“Haitians hated everything about this book: its title, its themes, its style, everything. Nothing deserved to be saved,” admitted Dany Laferrière in an interview with Bernard Magnier in 2000, reflecting on the way his first novel, *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, had been received in Haiti fifteen years earlier (*J’écris* 172).

To be more accurate, however, he should have substituted “Haitian critics” for “Haitians.” Indeed, for more than a decade, because of unequal book circulation dynamics in the French-speaking space, Laferrière had no readers in Haiti. While many a Haitian critic and intellectual discussed – and often despised – the writer’s work and persona, only a few had access to his Quebec-published books, and as such, had actually read them. More than anything else, for fifteen years, Dany Laferrière was no writer but rather an “idea” in Haiti. Despite this, the strong reaction his first novel elicited in his homeland stood in opposition with that in Quebec. What was praised in his adopted country was frowned upon in Haiti. This negative reception revealed a different understanding of the role of writers, more specifically Haitian writers, and what literature, and particularly Haitian literature, was or ought to be.

Is Dany Laferrière a Haitian writer? To what extent did the author break with the traditional model and in what ways was he painted as an outcast for fifteen years? How have his literary choices and those of his Haitian publishers, from the 1990s on,
contributed to resisting that image? What power dynamics at play in the Haitian literary sphere have his book circulation - or lack thereof - and reprinting in Haiti illuminated? How did his recent Creole translation enable him to integrate Haitian Creole literature as well? These are a few of the questions that this chapter will discuss by demonstrating how, just like in Quebec and France, Dany Laferrière’s trajectory, representations, and controversies about his work in Haiti uncover intertwined literary, linguistic and economic issues that both are inherent to the Haitian society and encompass more global contexts.

We will first look at the many ways in which Laferrière’s persona and his first novels published in the 1980s broke with the Haitian literary tradition. We will then examine how, in the following decade, *L’odeur du café* marked a turning point in his career, and highly contributed to changing his image as an outsider. We will show that his distribution in Haiti in the late 1990s and subsequent repatriation through local publishing in the early 2000s instituted him not only as a Haitian writer, but as a young adult writer as well. While several other Haitian-born writers also had to go through France before reintegrating the Haitian book market, Laferrière is the only one who was lauded as a writer in Quebec for close to 13 years prior to emerging in France and to circulating in print in Haiti. As such, Laferrière’s trajectory, even more so than any other Haitian writer, offers a particularly striking insight into the mechanisms of power and consecration in the Francophone book market and the marginal role Haiti has held in it
for decades. Yet, the incorporation of his work in recent editorial initiatives, including the development of young adult literature, also sheds light on the growing resisting practices against foreign publishing domination. In particular, we will show how his recent translation into Creole, as the final step towards integration into the ultraminor Haitian Creole literature, both reveals unequal linguistic, economic and social power dynamics and offers a critical understanding of a current broader transnational movement effectively promoting national literature and identity through the Haitian Creole language.

2.1 A Literary Outcast

In 1985, *Comment* propelled Laferrière to success in Quebec, and contributed to influencing national debates about Quebec identity and literature. Its first release in France with Belfond in 1989 went rather unnoticed, and despite its new edition ten years later with Le Serpent à Plumes, it is not the book that French critics and readers traditionally associate with Laferrière. In Haiti and the Haitian diaspora, *Comment* was not met with the same enthusiasm as in Quebec, nor indifference as in France. While Quebeckers lauded it as offering a new perspective both on Quebec society and the life of immigrants and shaking the literary establishment, most Haitian intellectuals who read it in Haiti and the diaspora reacted negatively to Laferrière’s foreign literary and popular success. What was praised abroad about his work and persona did not reflect
what most Haitian critics considered to be literature, let alone Haitian literature. For them, by writing for the foreign public and exploiting racial stereotypes, Laferrière was not only making a fool of himself, but he was also making a fool of all other Haitian writers. Indeed, by the very fact of being a Haitian man living abroad and writing primarily for a foreign audience, Laferrière came to represent more than just himself. For Quebec readers who had a limited knowledge of Haitian authors, Laferrière acted as one of them, ultimately representing Haitian literature. For critics in his homeland, since Laferrière was a Haitian-born writer who had spent the first 23 years of his life in Haiti, his work also naturally positioned him vis a vis a certain Haitian literary tradition and was judged accordingly.

Haitian critic André Gaudreault wrote one of the first reviews of Comment in Haiti’s oldest and most prominent daily newspaper Le Nouvelliste on December 7, 1985 - merely one month after the book’s release in Quebec. The text perfectly transcribes the idea that the critic’s fellow intellectuals held about Laferrière. Gaudreault’s first sentence sets the tone: “Dany Laferrière is a Montreal Black, probably of Haitian origin, who just cranked out a first book that he calls a novel; ‘Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer.’” With this opening statement, Gaudreault explicitly dismissed Laferrière’s work by denying it any literary value. In the critic’s words, the “poorly constructed book,” which Gaudreault consistently refused to refer to as a novel, was “rather the realization, and more specifically through writing, of [Laferrière’s] most
wacky fantasies, among which most are related to sex… as the title suggests.”

Gaudreault’s negative review contrasted sharply with the other book he also reviewed on that day; Aris Fakinos’s L’aïeul. Defined as “a beautiful and serious book, both simple and profound, with a touch of humor,” L’aïeul stood out as the perfect counterpoint to Comment, described in contrast as “a kind of sarcastic trial in which subtle humor is not the dominant feature.”

Besides explicitly showing its author’s disapproval, the review also revealed Gaudreault’s lack of critical engagement with Laferrière’s text as evinced by his incorrect references to several elements of the novel. For instance, while this was never brought up in the narrative, Gaudreault mentioned that Vieux and Bouba “both live on welfare.” More significantly, the literary critic misread Laferrière’s purposefully controversial key argument about gender and race hierarchy in sexual relationships. In Comment, Laferrière’s narrator claims that “in the scale of Western values, white woman is inferior to white man, but superior to black man” (41). Quite far from this statement, Gaudreault misquoted the narrator’s argument as “the White is superior to the black man, but the Black is superior to the white woman.” This inaccuracy suggests that either Gaudreault did not read Comment carefully enough to remember the narrator’s argument on sexual politics, or he did not understand it. In addition, in the bibliographical reference to the book, Gaudreault also misspelled the writer’s last name as “Lafferrière.” Ultimately, these numerous inaccuracies undermine Gaudreault’s authoritativeness as a critic.
In addition to misspelling Laferrière’s name, the critic also significantly downplayed the writer’s “Haitianness.” By describing him as “probably of Haitian origin” (my italics), he not only showed his lack of information on the writer, but also depicted him as an outsider. Having spent the first 23 years of his life in Haiti – more than two thirds of his life in 1985 –, Laferrière was not a second-generation immigrant, nor a person who had left his homeland when he was a child like Edwidge Danticat did at the age of 12, for instance. He was born in Haiti, and his parents were native-born as well. In the 1950s, Laferrière’s father became the youngest Port-au-Prince mayor and later briefly served as Minister of Commerce and Industry under Duvalier before leaving for New York City. As the author declared, “my family has most likely been in Haiti since the colonial period” (J’écris 142). In other words, Laferrière was not just of Haitian descent – he was Haitian, both culturally and under jus sanguinis law, which has determined who can be a Haitian national at birth since the 1987 constitution. But if he was Haitian, was he, and could he be considered, a Haitian writer? This is where the problem lay and what the critic openly questioned.

In an interview with Carrol Coates in 1999, Dany Laferrière reflected on the negative image he held in his homeland’s literary sphere: “at the beginning of my career […] Haitian writers, given the title and theme of my first book (so distant from their own concepts of literature), balked even at admitting that I might be a writer.” (Coates 920). Neither his novel nor his persona fitted what Haitians considered literature. By Haitian
literary standards, in Laferrière’s own words, he was just “a clown and a sellout” (J’écris 172). Indeed, for Gaudreault and most of his fellow Haitian intellectuals and writers who initially shared his hostility toward Comment, Laferrière was not a writer, and least of all a Haitian writer, no matter where he was born and raised.

Several things set Laferrière and his work apart from traditional Haitian literature. First, his writing style, which consisted of short, direct sentences and seemingly simplistic prose, contrasted with his fellow writers’ traditional use of long and complex sentences. Contemporary diaspora writers Emile Ollivier or Anthony Phelps, who also wrote from Quebec, were known and praised for their poetic prose. In a 1992 article on “The Haitian Novel during the Last Ten Years” providing an overview of the most recent works produced in the diaspora, highly respected scholar of Haitian literature Léon-François Hoffmann notably described Mère-Solitude, written by Emile Ollivier in 1983 as “the best novel ever written by a Haitian (…) expressed in highly literary, allusive, and baroque language” (764). The literary density and richness of this narrative was such that “each successive reading reveal[ed] new levels of ambiguity” (764). In the same article, which covered the decade during which Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer and Eroshima were published, Laferrière was only mentioned in passing. Hoffmann did not dwell on Laferrière’s prose but wrote about his “ironically entitled” books (761), notably noting that they were listed by the Library of Congress under the “Francophone Canadian Literature” heading and not “Francophone
Caribbean Literature,” therefore assigning an outsider status to Laferrière vis-à-vis the Caribbean and Haitian literary traditions.

Second, Laferrière’s motivation for writing also strongly differentiated Laferrière from fellow Haitian writers. Due to the population’s low literacy rate and purchasing power, and the lack of professional publishing houses, success for Haitian writers has traditionally not been measured in book sales but rather in social status. In the late 20th century, most Haitians saw writing as a way to achieve a higher social status, denounce social inequalities and call out for justice. Contrary to authors like René Depestre, Yanick Lahens or Lyonel Trouillot, Laferrière wrote neither to benefit his community nor to produce a work of art. As Laferrière declared, summarizing his opinion on the matter, “I have never thought of art for art’s sake. I have never thought of engaged art” (*J’écris* 137). His lack of public political opinion posited him as the antithesis of famous writers from previous generations who were often founders or members of the communist party, or at the very least very vocal about their disapproval of contemporary repressive politics. Indeed, before Laferrière, the most prominent Haitian writers of the 20th century like Jacques Roumain, Jacques Stephen Alexis, and Marie Vieux-Chauvet were all keenly aware of the social, political and economic realities of their country and all used literature as a way to promote equality, social justice, and denounce oppression from foreign powers and national elites.
Laferrière was one of the first to break with this tradition and use his words in a more individualistic way in order to achieve fame and a certain financial success, too (J’écris 125). For Laferrière, writing, and more specifically creating a marketing buzz and capitalizing on sales, were ways of improving his livelihood. By focusing on provocative topics like sex and race, and seeing books as commodities, Laferrière approached literature in a self-serving and entrepreneurial way. Most Haitian intellectuals did not identify with his capitalistic take on the literary market, nor with his opportunistic use of North-American popular media to better reach his Quebecois readership, increase his visibility, and ultimately benefit his career and finances.

Moreover, Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer’s deliberately provocative and Quebec-focused content was far removed from the Haitian social and political context. In 1985, when Comment came out, Haiti was still under the dictatorship. Yet nothing in the text alludes to Haiti nor its brutal regime. Laferrière was not the first Haitian-born writer to step away from the practice of writing pieces related to Haiti. Before him, some of his contemporary writers had also sought inspiration outside of their country of origin. Roger Dorsinville, exiled in Liberia and Senegal during the Duvalier dictatorship, notably published several novels set in Africa: Kimby (1973), L’Afrique des rois and Un homme en trois morceaux (1975), and Renaître à Dendé (1980). Jean Metellus, who had left for France, had also written two novels set in Switzerland and
France, in which no Haitian characters appeared: *Une eau forte* (1983) and *La parole prisonnière* (1986).

Contrary to Laferrière, however, neither of these authors’ work was met with contempt from critics. The main difference lay in the writers’ careers, and the point of focus of their novels. Before the 1970s, Roger Dorsinville had worked as an ambassador and written at length about Haitian rural society and social formation. The inspiration he drew from Africa, while offering a new perspective on its role in Haitian writers’ quest for identity, was not far removed from the work of other Haitian writers during the *indigéniste* movement. Moreover, in an interview with Jean Jonassaint in 1986, Dorsinville reaffirmed his own sense of belonging to Haitian literature: “no one can prevent me from being a Haitian writer, who was born here, acquired his techniques, his weapons, and developed his original sensibility, even though this sensibility broadened in contact with Africa, nothing from a Haitian point of view can prevent me to situate myself in the Haitian tradition” (Jonassaint 36). As for Jean Metellus, he had also previously showed a deep interest in his country of origin. His first novel, *Jacmel au crépuscule* (1981), published in Paris, explored the social and political changes in Haiti before the Duvalier dictatorship, and his previous poetic collections also drew inspiration from Haiti directly.

Beyond the fact that his narratives did not take place in Haiti nor featured any Haitian character, it was Laferrière’s lack of commitment to his homeland and his
attitude that really made him stand apart from fellow contemporary diaspora writers.

Indeed, in addition to focusing on sexual politics in Montreal, the author never brought up Haiti nor its political and social realities in the numerous interviews he gave, which could have contributed to making the issues faced by his countrymen more visible.

According to Laferrière, this distancing from the dictatorship and his country of origin was on purpose. In his own words, “My intention was to get away from the beaten path of our literature. What society expects gives me a pain in the ass. Pious sentiments (on race, peasants, political victims, social prejudices) don’t interest me” (Coates 911). Instead, he wished to focus on his experience in Montreal:

I finally decided that I had to experiment by writing the book that I wanted to write. A book that would tell a story that interested me. My own! Not a political story, poking around the Duvalier regime (...) I was not interested in imitating other Caribbean writers I knew who kept writing about the country they came from after living thirty years in New York, Paris, Berlin or Montreal. I wanted to give an account of the life I was leading at the moment, not of the past. At that time, the past was too recent to interest me. For me, the past was the dictatorship. (Coates 911)

His decision to write about his life in Quebec was indeed self-centered. It was his wish to be read and talked about in North America, and not in Haiti, that motivated his writing:

Since my goal was not to be seen as an ethnic or immigrant writer, I had to tackle Montreal, which would make the critics read me. I wanted to talk about the city where I was living, but also about all of North America-and in a tone that was violent, tender, and provocative, all at once! I wanted to force them to talk about me without falling into that paternalistic attitude that they use when they're dealing with “exotic” writers. The topic of interracial fucking hit them right in the solar plexus. (Coates 911-2)
Combined with his lack of acknowledgment of Haiti and his disengagement with Haitian issues, Laferrière’s choice to address North-American readers rather than his countrymen were perceived as a betrayal. This attitude earned him the reputation of a traitor, much in the same way that Haitian writer Lyonel Trouillot, one of Laferrière’s most vocal critics, understood his declaration that he “was born as a writer in Montreal” as a denial of his roots and took offense for it (personal interview).

After Comment, Laferrière’s second novel, Eroshima, which came out in 1989, did very little to change this perception. In two special 1986 issues of the Haitian journal Conjonction, Pierre-Raymond Dumas gave an anthology of Haitian diaspora writers and their work, including that of Laferrière. With its openly erotic content, Eroshima “is consistent with Laferrière’s first novel, Comment faire l’amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer, which inspired a successful movie” (274). According to the critic, this other provocative and seemingly vapid novel on interracial sexual relationships between the black narrator and Japanese women only further demonstrated to Haitian intellectuals that Laferrière was a “writer obsessed with the laws of the market, who is inexhaustible when it comes to publicity” (274). As Dumas concluded, “sex is a shocking ad. It sells every time” (274). For many critics, Laferrière simply chose these topics in order to create controversy and then courted popular media to be famous and increase his sales. Thus, it is no surprise that the novel did not generate much positive critical reaction in the Haitian literary sphere (Dumas 274).
Laferrière later defended himself and his second novel’s poor literary quality by saying that *Eroshima* was not written as a separate work: “it was part of *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, the editor simply removed it” (Dominique). Although Laferrière put the blame on Lanctôt, the writer still had to give his agreement to publish it, which he did, and thus was also responsible for it (*J’écris* 190). Ultimately, this new novel merely confirmed what Haitians already thought of Laferrière: he was a provocateur and an outsider, not a writer, let alone a Haitian writer.

### 2.2 Dany Laferrière’s Return through Writing

A lot changed with Laferrière’s third novel, *L’odeur du café*, published in Quebec in 1991. This novel, set in a small Haitian village, highly contributed to easing Laferrière’s controversial reception in Haiti. As Laferrière declared, “the book that turned me into a writer for Haitians is *L’odeur du café*” (*J’écris* 173). Contrary to *Comment* and *Eroshima*, which were both set in Montreal and did not allude to Haiti at all, Laferrière’s third narrative took place in Petit-Goâve, the small village in which he grew up with his grandmother. As the first of many novels set in Haiti, *L’odeur du café* marked a milestone in Laferrière’s career: his metaphorical return to his homeland through the act of writing.

In his interview with Magnier, Laferrière admitted that, after *Comment*, he was not planning to write a second book. Considering that *Eroshima* was made of excerpts
from Comment’s original text and thus hardly counted as a new novel, L’odeur du café truly was Laferrière’s next book, which he had to write from scratch. After moving to Miami with his family, the author was struck by an idea: writing a single book made up of several volumes, including Comment and Eroshima, that would eventually tell his slow autobiographical drift across the American continent (J’écris 191). Enthralled by this project, he set himself to lay the foundations of his “American autobiography,” and spent “one month frantically typing L’odeur du café” (J’écris 191). As the text that chronologically opens his “American autobiography,” the narrative focuses on Vieux’s childhood and relationship with his grandmother Da, who raised him while his mother and sister were in Port-au-Prince. His grandmother’s character and the description of his life as a young boy growing up outside of Port-au-Prince, won the Haitian readers over. “They could not resist L’odeur du café,” gushed the writer, adding that “even the Haitian elite gave in to my grandmother’s admirable face” (J’écris 173). Ultimately, and while some critics still questioned his motivations and writing style, L’odeur du café allowed Laferrière to prove his merits as a writer in Haiti, and to be recognized as such. As Dany Laferrière declared, L’odeur du café even became assigned in school.

This choice to step away from provocative topics and to set his narrative in his native country, and particularly in the countryside - as opposed to the urban environment of his previous novels - was not anodyne. Beyond shedding light on Laferrière’s formative years, L’odeur du café shows his wish to write about his homeland,
and as such symbolizes his literary return to Haiti. This new text, so different from his previous ones in terms of content, did not mean however that Laferrière turned into a politically committed writer. While the narrative took place during the early 1960s, the author still did not address the Duvalier dictatorship, but rather focused on his everyday life as a child, shielded from direct contact with political issues.

While Laferrière’s choice to turn to his childhood in Haiti certainly participated in making him a more acceptable writer, another factor contributed to greatly improving his reputation in Haiti by consecrating him as a Caribbean writer. In 1991, L’odeur du café was awarded the Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe, a Caribbean literary prize founded a year before by the journal Carbet. Held once a year, the Prix Carbet aimed to reward the best literary work from the Caribbean and the Americas, written in French or Creole.¹

Literary prizes are part of the consecrating institutions or “instances de production de la renommée” (Rouet 20). The very concept of literary prizes today is to confer value to literary works and consecrate them as worthy of attention while also increasing the writer’s and publisher’s visibility and prestige. As James English showed in The Economy of Prestige, “institutionally, the prize functions as a claim to authority and an assertion of that authority – the authority, at bottom, to produce cultural value” (51). Yet, on the other hand, literary prizes like other cultural prizes are also said to

---

¹ In 2011, it was renamed “Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe et du Tout-Monde” and extended its geographical limits to include Africa.
systematically neglect excellence and reward mediocrity; turn a serious artistic calling into a degrading horse race or marketing gimmick; focus unneeded attention on artists whose reputations and professional livelihoods are already solidly established; and provide a closed, elitist forum where cultural insiders engage in influence peddling and mutual back-scratching. (English 25)

In practice, only a few of the most prestigious prizes transfer significant symbolic and economic capital. In France, the Prix Goncourt is the oldest and most prestigious of all. Founded in 1902 following Edmond de Goncourt’s will, the Académie Goncourt established itself in opposition with the Académie française (“the French Academy”), created in the mid-17th century in order to challenge its consecrating power through the establishment of an independent authority. As Gisèle Sapiro explains, the Académie Goncourt “aimed to defend literary legitimacy against the law of the market by proposing a selection based on specific criteria and on peer judgment, in order to guide the public’s taste” (Metamorphosis 10). Contrary to the French Academy, which opened its membership to men from various working sectors, only writers were accepted as Académie Goncourt members.

While its initial ambition was to challenge the Académie française and the law of the market by creating an autonomous entity, the Académie Goncourt soon gave in to extra-literary pressures (Sapiro, Metamorphosis 11). Press coverage of the Prix Goncourt and its winner increased throughout the years, and rapidly turned the literary prize into an economic stake for publishers. Now, winning the Prix Goncourt goes beyond having one’s book’s literary value legitimized; it has become an economic stake for both the publisher and writer. As the most prestigious of all literary prizes, it leads to the highest
increase in book sales. In the 1980s, Prix Goncourt winners reached record numbers: 
1984 winner Marguerite Duras sold one million copies of *L’Amant* and 1985 winner Yann Queffélec’s *Les noces barbares* still holds the all-time record of two million sales (Ducas 179). Sale numbers went down afterwards, but the prize retained a significant economic power. Between 2005 and 2011, Goncourt prize winners sold an average of 431,000 copies, which represented 10 to 35% of their publisher’s annual sales (Ipsos) and amounted to at least 3 million euros (Proust), while prize winners between 2012 and 2016 sold 398,000 copies on average (Prix Goncourt: la garantie d’un succès).

Besides the Goncourt, the Renaudot, Fémina and Médicis – which Laferrière received in 2009 – are also known to significantly increase sales (Proust). Due to its very recent creation when it was awarded to Laferrière, the Prix Carbet did not have the same reputation, consecrating power and economic impact as other more prestigious prizes. However, while the Prix Carbet did not award Laferrière with the same level of symbolical and economic benefits, it nevertheless held significant symbolic power in the Caribbean region. Indeed, despite its short existence in 1991, the Prix Carbet boasted a very influential president: Martinican seminal writer and creolization theorist Edouard Glissant, who was already highly respected in France and the Caribbean. At that time, thanks to Michael Dash’s and Betsy Wing’s translations of his work in English, Glissant had also started to attract increasing attention in the global literary and academic sphere. His work on creolization, globalization, and decolonial theory in texts like *Caribbean*
Discourse and Poetics of Relation, weaving poetics, theoretical concepts and neologisms, have since highly influenced scholarship in the fields of Latin American and Caribbean studies at large, but also of African-American studies.

Before Laferrière, Martinican writer Patrick Chamoiseau was the first Prix Carbet recipient in 1990 for his novel Antan d’enfance, published at the same time as a prominent essay on creolization; Eloge de la créolité, which he wrote with Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant. The Prix Carbet put a spotlight on the writer who rapidly became one of the most prominent contemporary French Caribbean writers, as well as a member of the Prix Carbet jury. It was the first of many other literary prizes the writer would receive, including the Prix Goncourt for his most famous novel, Texaco, in 1997. In Laferrière’s case, it was also the first but not the last literary prize he garnered. Despite its short existence, which did not guarantee a jump in book sales, the Prix Carbet’s first two editions proved successful in bringing attention and visibility to promising authors.

Interestingly, several categories of authors coexist in the list of the past 25 winners. Some of them already had a plethora of literary works under their belt before receiving the prize, like Frankétienne, René Depestre, and Simone and Alain Schwartz-Bart. Other winners did not, but went on to receive other more prestigious awards at a later point in their career. While some of them had already published a few novels before winning it, they were relatively unknown. Among them, L’odeur du café was Laferrière’s third novel, but the first one that elicited an unanimous positive critique.
Raphaël Confiant’s and Gisèle Pineau’s career trajectories followed a less popular but similar path: Pineau for instance was awarded the Prix Carbet for one of her first novels in 1993 and became the recipient of many, although somewhat less prestigious, other literary prizes. Closer to us, other writers like Jacqueline Picard (2000 winner), Monchoachi (2003), or Miguel Dulpan (2007) were rather unknown to mainstream readers at the time of their recognition. Through this eclectic mix of prize recipients, the Prix Carbet has not shown a steady operating mode rewarding a specific category of writers, but rather a wish to recognize a diverse pool of authors at different stages in their careers.

In 1991, Laferrière’s novels were not distributed in Haiti. As a result, the Prix Carbet could not significantly boost Laferrière’s book sales in his country of origin. However, it certainly influenced Haitian critics. The Prix Carbet combined two complementary qualities - in addition to being presided by one of the most influential Caribbean authors and being awarded to specifically Caribbean authors, its process and operating mode were similar to metropolitan prizes. Because Haitian literature was published and consecrated in France, Haitian literary critics, intellectuals and writers were often part of the French literary sphere, and as such, were within its area of influence and susceptible to its hegemonic mechanisms of recognition. Ultimately, the Prix Carbet, which Laferrière dubbed “the ultimate Caribbean prize” (J’écris 173), not
only highly contributed to making previously despised Laferrière more acceptable as a writer, but also recognized him as a Haitian one.

While true in essence, this statement must nevertheless be contextualized and somewhat nuanced. After L’odeur du café, Laferrière did not return to explore his narrator’s life in Quebec right away. Coherent with his wish to write a long autobiography of his spatial and temporal drift across the Americas, he wrote no fewer than seven other books in the 1990s. Written in a non-chronological order, they alternate between narratives on his childhood, his formative years in Haiti, his exile, his life in Quebec and his perspective on North-American culture. Publishing so many books in a short period of time also earned him the reputation of a prolific author.

While the 1990s coincide with Laferrière’s physical presence in Miami, the decade also corresponds to his literary focus on Haiti. Out of the seven books he wrote after L’odeur du café during that decade, five focus on his narrator’s life in Petit-Goâve and Port-au-Prince: Le goût des jeunes filles (1992), Pays sans chapeau (1996), Le charme des après-midi sans fin (1997), La chair du maître (1997), and Le cri des oiseaux fous (2000).

However, despite writing several Haitian-inspired novels and receiving the Prix Carbet as we saw, his reputation as a provocateur followed him until the late 1990s. Laferrière’s prolific writing, overbearing presence in Quebecois media, and trademark self-publicizing attitude continued to raise a few brows.
In 1998, Lyonel Trouillot implicitly alluded to Laferrière when he lamented knowing “some very proud people who (...) work eight hours a day to keep up the pace: their best work will be to pose, puffing out their chest, for a pornographic magazine” (qtd. in Dalembert 7). At that time, Trouillot was not the only one to still question Laferrière’s motivation and status. Oftentimes, they seemed to be unable to detach themselves from his first book. In 1999, Radio Haïti-Inter lead journalist and Laferrière’s former boss Jean Dominique followed in Trouillot’s footsteps by expressing concerns shared by many in Haiti about Comment’s literary value. In an interview with the author, he notably told him: “it was not literature yet, Dany, admit it” (Dominique).

In a 1999 article on the author in Notre Librairie, Louis-Philippe Dalembert summarized what most of Laferrière’s Haitian critics still thought of him and his work at that time: “it’s solicitation, say his detractors who accuse him of selling his soul to the business market. Literature, art should be placed high above these petty realities. No belly-dancing, then, and least of all, lower belly dancing” (7). With this statement, Dalembert touched again on the very root of Laferrière’s negative reception in Haiti, which originated in a different understanding of literary success and what a writer ought to be. Indeed, as Dalembert explains, “in Haiti, writing has always been conceived as being outside any economic context” (7), and this clearly did not match Laferrière’s take on the act of writing.
In the midst of this disapproval, a few critics nevertheless supported Laferrière and equated their peers’ negative attitude toward the writer with envy and jealousy. Pierre-Raymond Dumas described the author as the “most western of Haitians and the most liberal one in a country that has, of course, still not understood anything about liberalism” (274). He admitted to defending Laferrière in the face of his fiercest critics’ “jealousy”: “it is time to say that I have been to many salons to relay and laud this innovative novelist’s work” (275). Looking at Laferrière’s achievements, Louis-Philippe Dalembert also suggested that the novelist’s critics may express jealousy first and foremost rather than legitimate criticism: “Dany Laferrière made a bet that he could live off his job. Through thick and thin. Well, he has been pretty successful considering his popularity beyond Canadian borders, the multiple reprints of his texts and their foreign language translations (about a dozen). What’s better than that?” (11).

But for most Haitian intellectuals, Laferrière’s take on the act of writing still opposed their understanding of the role of the writer as a sacred one somewhat detached from material and economic realities. Ultimately, by associating it with something he would do “eight hours a day,” Laferrière reduced writing to the status of a regular job instead of a form of artistic expression detached from economic realities. Moreover, by desacralizing writing, Laferrière figuratively robbed them of the sense of moral superiority and nobility they attached to themselves. Even Dumas, who publicly supported Laferrière, regretted the author’s lack of artistic rigor in favor of a more
commercial approach to literature: “deliberately, he ruined part of his career, often taking the easy way out and favoring commercial stances in the media over the demands of a powerful and innovative art” (278). Ultimately, up until the late 1990s, Laferrière’s first novel remained the one that most Haitian critics talked about and his status as a Haitian writer kept being questioned.

2.3 Laferrière's Repatriation to Haiti

2001 marked the first time Dany Laferrière was published in Haiti, 16 years after his first book came out in Montreal. Despite Laferrière’s symbolic return to Haiti through writing ten years earlier, and the prestige and recognition as a Caribbean writer that the Carbet literary prize had awarded him in 1991, Haitian readers had to wait till the late 1990s to access Laferrière’s books. This happened first through distribution, and then through the local republishing of some of his texts.

In addition to being a critical step towards his full recognition as a Haitian writer, Laferrière’s repatriation to his country of origin illuminates the unequal ways in which Haitian books circulate and the continued domination of France as a literary center. Indeed, while other Haitian writers’ works were also first published in France before being distributed and published in Haiti, Laferrière is the only one whose literary work was lauded in Quebec for close to thirteen years prior to being published in France, and consequently circulated in Haiti. As such, Laferrière’s trajectory, even more
so than any other Haitian writer, offers a particularly striking insight into the mechanisms of power and consecration in the Francophone book market and the marginal role Haiti has held in it for decades.

In 1985, while Lanctôt sent 3,000 copies of Comment to France immediately after the book was published in Quebec, there is no mention of such an initiative in Haiti. At that time, the Quebec book market had a limited area of influence, and did not reach Haiti. Therefore, Quebec-published books, including those of Laferrière, did not circulate much outside of the national borders. Because Laferrière’s novels were not distributed in his country of origin at that time, only a few Haitians, those who could travel, had access to them. As a result, most of Laferrière’s bad press in Haiti in the 1980s and 1990s stemmed from a limited number of Haitian critics rejecting his work as too sensational and his personality as an opportunistic provocateur. Laferrière’s reputation preceded him and most of the public opinion was highly influenced by the intellectuals’ disregard for his individualistic endeavor and break with the national literary tradition rather than their own take on the novel. Moreover, because Laferrière’s books were not distributed in Haiti, it is likely that not all critics expressing their concerns about Laferrière’s work had actually read his books. As we saw earlier, Gaudreault’s inaccurate references to the text implied at best a lack of attention on his part, or, at worst, the fact that he did not read it.
The Haitian public had to wait till his novels were republished in France in the late 1990s to access Laferrière’s books. Le Serpent à Plumes, which released five of his novels in three years - *Le charme des après-midi sans fin* (1998), *Pays sans chapeau* (1999), *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* (1999), *Le cri des oiseaux fous* (2000), and *La chair du maître* (2000) - was a small publishing house. But its status as a French one held symbolic power in what James English called the “economy of prestige” of the Francophone literary space. In a similar way as literary prizes’ operating mode, the republishing Laferrière’s novels in France conferred value to the narratives. Consecrated as a legitimate writer in France, Laferrière saw his prestige increase in Haiti.

Simultaneously with conferring literary value to Laferrière, being published in France also made the diffusion of his books in Haiti possible. As Lyonel Trouillot declared in 2017, “15 years ago, there was no writer called Dany Laferrière in Haiti” (personal interview). Indeed, according to the most prominent Haitian book distributor Communication Plus director Anaïse Chavenet and several booksellers in Haiti’s main bookstores La Pléiade and Astérix, Laferrière’s books only started being distributed in Haiti when Le Serpent à Plumes republished them. This shows that, although Laferrière wrote nine more books in Quebec after *Comment*, being published in France was an essential prerequisite for his reintegration into the Haitian market. In the late 1990s, Le Serpent à Plumes acted as both a consecrating agent and a necessary vehicle for Laferrière to circulate his books in Haiti.
Laferrière’s book circulation in the French-speaking space is not anodyne. It sheds light not only on Quebec-published authors, but more broadly speaking, on most Haitian writers who need to go through France to have their books published, circulated and then later re-integrated into Haiti. The publishing trajectories of Frankétienne, Yanick Lahens, Evelyne and Lyonel Trouillot, Gary Victor, among others, are all testaments to the economic domination of France and its cultural legitimizing power at the turn of the 21st century. Indeed, like Laferrière, they were first published in France by publishers that specialized in non-metropolitan literatures like Actes Sud, Sabine Wespieser, L’Harmattan, Le Serpent à Plumes, Vents d’ailleurs, and more recently, Zulma, before re-integrating the Haitian book market through distribution and, later on, local publication. However, none of them became successful and recognized as writers in another country than France before being regarded as such, as Laferrière did. Through this, Laferrière’s publishing path, even more so than any other Haitian writer, strikingly uncovers the unequal power dynamics at play in the Francophone book market at the turn of the millennium, as well as the peripheral position that Haiti has traditionally occupied in it.

Like in other postcolonial societies in French-speaking Africa, the consecrating and legitimizing power of French publishing is directly correlated with the legacy of colonization and Paris’ persistent prominence in the construction of the “World Republic of Letters.” In the Francophone literary space, books now circulate in many
directions following a multitude of routes between centers and peripheries. However, despite a crisscrossing of paths, this polycentric space is not egalitarian (Casanova, *World Republic of Letters* 122). Indeed, as Casanova has suggested, peripheral literary spaces like Haiti face a dual form of domination by both traditional centers of literary influence and emerging centers (122). As a result, the circulation of books written in French mostly remains “a one-way relationship: from the center, which is mainland France, and more specifically its capital city, to the other French-speaking regions in a relatively close or distant periphery” (Pinhas 277).

In this unequal space, still heavily structured according to a colonial publishing system highly centralized in Paris, a majority of French books flow from France to Northern Francophone countries. In 2017 for instance, 51,9% of French books were exported from France to Belgium, Switzerland and Quebec (Statistiques Export Livres 2017). The same four countries are the main producers of books in French, and are also, among themselves, the main exporting and importing countries of books in French (Baillargeon 557). In Haiti, however, which only represents a tiny fraction of the total sales (0,2% of export market shares), the circulation of books in French primarily benefits French publishing: while France exports’ value to Haiti as the 46th importing country was about one million euros in 2017, imports from Haiti to France represented only 5,000 euros (Statistiques Export Livres 2017).
Just like Laferrière’s belated distribution in Haiti shows, the Haitian book market has been struggling to grow in the shadow of the French book industry, without ever severing its symbolic dependence vis a vis the French capital city. Despite the lack of official data publicly available on the Haitian book market, an analysis of the current book diffusion and selling trends in Haitian bookstores coupled with interviews with booksellers and distributors confirms the prominence of French-published books in the local market.

In 2011, Presses Nationales former director Wilhems Edouard declared that “if the book is not published in France, it is unlikely to be found in Haitian bookstores” (Joseph). Six years later, books available in the four Haitian bookstores all centralized in the capital city or its suburb Pétion-ville,\(^2\) whether written by Haitian authors or not, were still primarily imported from France. In 2017, Astérix bookstore sales representative Myriam Sylvain reported that, besides a few of the main Haitian publishers like Henri Deschamps, the oldest one, and more recent houses like Editions de l’Université d’Etat and C3 Edition, they only order from France (personal interview). According to her, French publishing houses are perceived as more rigorous and selective in terms of literary content and granted with more legitimizing authority as opposed to

---

\(^2\) Since the late 1980s, there have been four main bookstores in Haiti, all located in Port-au-Prince or its suburban and richer neighbor up the hill, Pétion-ville. La Pléiade bookstore, founded by Daniel Lafontant in 1962, has two branches in Bois-Fatate and Pétion-ville. Astérix bookstore and Imagine (which belongs to Henri Deschamps, a printing house founded in 1898 before becoming a publishing house as well in the 1940s) are both located in Pétion-ville as well.
the high number of often self-published books in Haiti that do not undergo manuscript selection process nor serious editorial work.

From the point of view of Haitian readers, many in 2017 also still saw French publishers as prestigious consecrating agents. Being published in France was considered a testament to the writers’ literary talent, and for this reason, readers still favored French-published books. This preference was also due, in part, to the fact that the most renowned Haitian authors had French editors. All major authors of the 20th century like acclaimed Jacques Stephen Alexis, René Depestre, Frankétienne, Yanick Lahens, Jacques Roumain, Lyonel Trouillot, Marie Vieux-Chauvet, or Gary Victor, were published in France. However, what many failed to consider, was that having a French publisher was not a choice but often an economic and literary necessity for Haitian writers. Indeed, to have their work circulated both in their homeland and abroad, these Haitian writers, like many other non-metropolitan authors, had to comply with the rules of the French book market, still heavily structured according to a colonial publishing system centralized in Paris. In a self-perpetuating way, the very fact of being published in France has been acting as a practice legitimizing and by extension producing literary value.

Moreover, in addition to symbolic factors set within the postcolonial historical context, other considerations due to external and internal forces, like a restricted local market - due to a high illiteracy rate and low purchasing power - and the absence of
strong national structures promoting the book industry also explain the domination of French publishers in Haiti.

Despite the creation in 2005 of the Direction Nationale du Livre, attached to the Ministry of Culture, the Haitian book policy remains weak. First, local production is not supported by the Haitian state. Indeed, producing books in Haiti is often more expensive than abroad due in part to the taxation on the necessary raw materials that should be exempted. Existing national conventions are not applied. Raw material, which should be exempt from VAT, is taxed at 10%. While Haiti signed the 1950 UNESCO treaty (known as the Florence agreement) on the exemption of custom duties on imported educational, cultural and scientific materials, it did not ratify the international 1976 Nairobi protocol expanding the types of materials covered. And as Zémès publisher Charles Tardieu declared, “all the printing material; paper, ink, etc., is imported and taxed like regular commercial goods despite national conventions meant to facilitate cultural exchanges and development that are not implemented” (personal interview). Because of this, imported books are cheaper than those produced in Haiti (Tardieu, personal interview).

Furthermore, foreign production is often heavily discounted. French publishers give booksellers discounts of about 40 to 50% on certain books, such as those written by Haitian authors. This significantly lowers the costs for booksellers, who are thus more
likely to order from them. For instance, Sylvain declared that a book usually sold €20 in France was discounted to €12 (personal interview).

Second, thanks to better technical means like higher quality printers, ink, and paper, the material and aesthetic aspects of the book-objects sold by French publishers are higher than those produced in Haiti (Sylvain, personal interview). Local presses are also limited in terms of technical means, which makes it almost impossible for Haitian publishers to compete with foreign ones. For instance, no Haitian press is equipped to produce hardbound books. As a result, publishers who want to offer high-quality objects need to work with presses in Canada, the United States, the Dominican Republic, or even Korea (Brutus; Cinéus and Paul; Jadotte; Petit-Frère et al.; Renauld Armand; C. Tardieu; J. Trouillot).

In addition, because French publishers do not plan their survival on the book sales they make in Haiti since they have a much bigger audience both in France and in Belgium, Switzerland and Quebec, the restricted local market ultimately also benefits them. While the Haitian insular population amounts to 11 million people, only about half can read. After consistently increasing from 1982 to 2003 for people over 15, with a peak of 58% in 2003, literacy was measured a bit under the bar of 50% in 2006 (UNESCO), which statistically limits readership. As a result, most Haitian publishers, who are limited to their readers in Haiti and do not export, struggle to survive with a maximum of 500 to 1000 copies printed per book.
Moreover, two interconnected issues limiting readership are additional obstacles to book purchases: the high selling price of most books and the low purchasing power of the Haitian population. In 2004, Ernst Saint-Louis noted that “over 75% of the Haitian population cannot enjoy the kind of pleasure given by a book, which remains a luxury item.” Writer Lyonel Trouillot, who also directs L’Atelier Jeudi Soir publishing house, notably lamented the fact that “people who read are not necessarily the ones who have money. It is difficult to sell books priced above 500 HTG (about $7,50)” (personal interview).

Initiatives tackling the low purchasing power of the Haitian population have emerged. Several annual book fairs like “Livres en Folie,” “la Foire Internationale du Livre d’Haïti” (FILHA) and “Livres en liberté” are organized to encourage reading and book sales by allowing people to buy heavily discounted books, provided they pay an entrance fee. Supported and subsidized by private companies (UNIBANK for “Livres en Folie,” for instance), these book fairs offer 40 to 60% discounts to buyers who can purchase Haitian classics for about 200 HTG (around $3). Despite these much lower rates, there is a large price disparity depending on the genre, theme, publisher and author. At “Livres en Folie,” for instance, the largest book fair in the Caribbean in terms
of book sales and turnout according to Emmelie Prophète (Victorin), price tags can vary from 60 to 2500 HTG (from $0.90 to $38).³

Set in the literary, economic and linguistic context of the Haitian book industry at the turn of the millennium, the distribution of Laferrière’s books in Haiti highlights in a particularly dramatic way the many mechanisms of power that Haitian writers and book professionals face in order to exist in the margin of the Francophone market. Like other postcolonial editorial spaces, Haiti struggles to emerge in the shadow of its former colonizer. Yet, over the past fifteen years, many book professionals have taken action to assert the independency of the Haitian book industry and literary sphere from the French book market. By including Dany Laferrière’s work in their editorial initiatives, several actors of the local book industry have worked towards developing independent and increasingly professional structures as well as cultural training programs. The ways in which Laferrière’s work reintegrated the Haitian literary space through publication provides insight into this recent and powerful movement in favor of more autonomy.

In 2000, two years after Le Serpent à Plumes started republishing Laferrière’s work in France and distributing it in Haiti, Haitian publishing house Editions Mémoire, directed by Rodney Saint-Eloi – who would leave Haiti a few years later and founded Mémoire d’encrier in Montreal – co-published Je suis fatigué, with the author’s Quebec

³ It is important to note that, besides “Livres en liberté” that changes location each year, all other annual book fairs are located in Fort-au-Prince, just like the four main bookstores. With its structure heavily centralized in the capital city and its suburbs, the Haitian book industry contributes to the national urban/rural divide regarding access to literature and knowledge.
publisher, Lanctôt, and French publishing house Les librairies initiales. A promotional campaign distributed 20,000 free copies in France, and 5,000 in Haiti and Quebec. After this book – which Laferrière thought at that time would be his last literary piece – three other novels were also republished in his country of origin. Les Presses Nationales, directed by late Wilhems Edouard at that time, published *Le cri des oiseaux fous* in 2008 and *L’énigme du retour* one year later. In addition, three different Haitian publishers, Areytos, Zémès, and LEVE, have since republished *L’odeur du café*, or part of it, in 2006, 2013 and 2016.

Laferrière’s reintegration into the local market in the 2000s and 2010s happened at a significant moment for the Haitian book industry. As we saw, the distribution of Laferrière’s books in the early 2000s sheds light on the ways in which the Haitian market has always struggled to exist in the margin of the French book market. Yet, Laferrière’s subsequent publication in Haiti is set within a context of resistance to this asymmetrical power dynamics and highlights the progress made by local publishers towards acquiring more autonomy from France. More specifically, Laferrière’s reintegration into Haiti through local publishing uncovers Haitian publishers’ effort to repatriate Haitian literary works previously distributed by French houses.

Besides *Je suis fatigué*, a personal reflection on Laferrière’s life and state of mind at the turn of the millenium, *L’odeur du café*, *Le cri des oiseaux fous*, and *L’énigme du retour* all have three things in common. First, as opposed to Laferrière’s other books that took
place in Montreal and the United States, they are set in Haiti. This shows that publishers clearly favored Laferrière’s narratives that took place in the national space. Second, the three books were consecrated by foreign literary prizes. Indeed, as we saw earlier, *L’odeur du café*, based on Laferrière’s childhood in Petit-Goâve, received the Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe in 1991. Two years later, *Le cri des oiseaux fous* – a narrative of his last day in Haiti before he fled for Montreal in 1976 – garnered the Prix Carbet des lycéens, a prize awarded by high school students from Guadeloupe, Guyane and Martinique. As for *L’énigme du retour*, it received the Prix Médicis in 2009, which is one of the most prestigious French prizes and as such, holds one of the most consecrating powers.

Finally, all three books were published in France in the 2000s before being published in Haiti. Le Serpent à Plumes republished *Le cri des oiseaux fous* and *L’odeur du café* in 2000 and 2001, while *L’énigme du retour* was released in 2009 by Grasset, one of France’s most prominent publishers.

This initiative to repatriate Haitian novels illuminates Haitian publishers’ ambition to reintegrate recognized foreign-published Haitian writers into the national market. Interestingly, this was a double sworded practice. While it recognized the legitimizing process of French publishing, it also constituted a powerful editorial act to resist its domination. By repatriating books, Haitian publishers both circulated certain texts that were not previously present in the country and offered a local and cheaper alternative to those that were already available through distribution.
In 2011, Evelyne Trouillot highlighted the difficult circulation of Haitian literature in Haiti when she stated that “books, and not only mine, are not accessible enough in Haiti. It is a pity. It enriches the writer when readers from their country of origin know them” (Kénol 277). Although the vast majority of Haitian writers choose French as their language of literary expression, this statement is especially true for writers who, in addition to being published abroad, also write in English, like Edwidge Danticat, which makes it even harder for them to be read in Haiti.

In the 2000s, the newly founded Presses Nationales d’Haiti (PNH) publishing house was a pioneer in this repatriation practice. As PNH former editor Wilhems Edouard explained in a 2011 interview with Le Nouvelliste, “one of the priorities of the Presses Nationales’ editorial policy is to repatriate Haitian texts published abroad” (Joseph). Reediting literary works remedied the writers’ “pain to be successful everywhere in the world while not being able to be known in their own country” (Joseph). In addition to republishing some of Laferrière’s works, published by Le Serpent à Plumes and later Grasset, Edouard also chose novels by Louis-Philippe Dalembert, published by Stock and Le Serpent à Plumes, Edwidge Danticat, published in translation by Grasset, Yanick Lahens, published by Sabine Wespeiser, and Evelyne Trouillot, published by Dapper.

Beyond ideologically and economically opposing foreign publishing dominion, reprinting Haitian novels in the 2000s also contributed to democratizing reading.
Indeed, by significantly lowering the price of books, it allowed Haitian readers, whom Edouard called the writers’ “natural readership,” to access acclaimed texts, which was another priority of PNH’s editorial policy. Indeed, in Edouard’s words, when Haitian authors are published abroad, their books are not always available in Haiti, (...) and when they are available, they are not accessible because they are sold 1500, 2000 or even 2500 Haitian gourdes (between $20 and $32). (...) To avoid the situation in which authors who do honor to Haitian literature remain little known or unknown to Haitian readers and the Haitian society at large, we do what is necessary to make available and accessible the works of these writers who have consistently projected a positive image of Haiti abroad. (Joseph)

Considering the low purchasing power of most Haitian population, Edouard significantly lowered book prices to reach “a democratic price, which is one fifth of the regular price abroad.” As he declared, “no matter the book, its price is capped at 250 HTG ($3,80)” (Joseph).

Thanks to the 2011 “Livres en Folie” discount, Laferrière’s *Le cri des oiseaux fous* and *L’enigme du retour*, but also Lahens’ *La couleur de l’aube* and Danticat’s *Adieu mon frere*, *La recolte douce des larmes*, *Le briseur de rosée*, and *Apres la danse*, were priced between 135 HTG and 250HTG ($2 and $3,80). This initiative proved successful: about 1300 copies of Danticat’s novels were sold during the fair (Gaspard). Moreover, according to the publisher’s online catalog, all 1000 copies of Laferrière’s *Le cri des oiseaux fous* had sold out in 2017.

The repatriating practice also enabled Haitian publishers to develop their catalog and establish a partnership with foreign publishing houses. In the case of the republishing of Laferrière’s *Le cri des oiseaux fous* and *L’enigme du retour*, as well as
Danticat’s texts, Edouard had to communicate with their French publisher, Grasset, to obtain publishing rights. The contract between the two parties regarding Laferrière’s novels was signed on Dec. 4, 2007 (Saint Jean, personal interview). Edouard argued that such a practice is an opportunity for Presses Nationales d’Haïti and Grasset to develop a partnership (...) It is another way for the foreign house to know the Haitian market through a partner. Every republishing is based on a commercial transaction, indeed, but in our case, the economic benefit is not what matters most. (...) It is first and foremost the need to make books available to readers. (Joseph)

While this is not what Laferrière has done, many Haitian writers have also actively worked towards repatriating their own literary pieces to Haiti, often communicating directly with their French publishers to obtain publishing rights. Lyonel Trouillot for instance declared that discussing his own rights with his French publisher Actes Sud greatly facilitated the republishing of some of his novels at his Haitian publishing house L’Atelier du Jeudi Soir. As for other writers like his sister Evelyne Trouillot, Rosalie l’infâme was first published in Paris in 2003, but most of her subsequent novels like L’œil-Totem (2006), Le mirador aux étoiles (2007), Le rond point (2015), and short novels published after 1996 like Ma maison en dentelle de bois, Une cousine inattendue (1999) and Je m’appelle Fridhomme (2017) have only been published in Haiti. By remaining local after writing her most successful novel, Rosalie l’infâme, which was also translated into English, Evelyne Trouillot has granted Haitian publishing more legitimizing power.
The Haitian publication of Laferrière’s books in the 2000s and 2010s had a significantly positive impact on his reception, and changed his representation as an outsider and career in Haiti. Thanks to his repatriation, he reentered his native-born market as an acclaimed Haitian author, one who was finally read in his homeland. All in all, reediting books by acclaimed Haitian writers was a win-win strategy for authors, readers and publishers alike. Indeed, based on the principle that the authors were already legitimized abroad, the publishers’ choice to promote them was a low-risk strategy. While expanding the author’s readership, it also simultaneously made it possible for Haitian readers to access their books.

We will now turn to Laferrière’s most famous book in Haiti: L’odeur du café and examine how local publishing significantly altered its reception and turned Laferrière into a young adult writer. The narrative, which was the first of Laferrière’s book to be edited locally in 2006, was received as a novel in Quebec and France, and marketed as such to a general adult public. In Haiti, however, its reception was different. In his interview with Magnier in 2000, Laferrière mentioned that, already as its French-published version in the late 1990s, L’odeur du café was being used as a co-curricular reading. At times, the dictation exam for the primary school certificate was even based on certain excerpts (J’écris 173). This use, specific to Haiti, highly contributed to Laferrière’s recognition as a truly local writer, and more especially one that produced texts for young adults.
L’odeur du café’s first Haitian edition in 2006 highly differed from its Quebecois and French editions and was clearly packaged as a young adult writer. The publisher, Areytos, split the book in two volumes: L’odeur du café and Le goût du café. He added a glossary with Creole translations of certain words and featured drawings alongside the text and on the cover, which showed how he primarily targeted a younger generation. By displaying the same drawings on its cover, based on photographs of Laferrière’s and his grandmother’s Da, and pictures of adult Laferrière laughing on the back cover, its second local reprinting by Zémès in 2013 visually showed the type of readers the textual diptych primarily addressed. The text featured on the back cover made that very explicit: “For the convenience of young readers, the author agreed with the publisher’s suggestion to present the book in two volumes.”

Figure 17: L’odeur du café, Zémès, 2013
The introduction page confirmed Zémès publisher Tardieu’s educational goal and young adult target:

[Laferrière’s] literary works, well known in the French-speaking world but not enough in Haiti, have been translated into English, Spanish, Korean, Dutch, and Swedish. (…) This Haitian edition specifically targets Haitian students so that, through Dany Laferrière, they get to know Haitian literature in all its diversity, and more specifically that of the diaspora.

On Zémès’ website, both volumes are classified as “young adult literature.” In addition, they are advertised as recommended readings for 3rd cycle (high school) students, alongside Georges Castera’s Sodo and less famous works such as L’héritière de la princesse Carolyi by Dany Laferrière’s homonym R.M. Laferrière.

This shows how in the Haitian book market, L’odeur du café was not received as yet another novel by Laferrière, but as one that could match young adults’ reading needs, and that was adapted accordingly. Ultimately, it demonstrates the subverting power of the Haitian book market, despite its limited size. Instead of replicating the
marketing strategy used in Quebec or France or simply copying foreign-published editions of *L’odeur du café*, Haitian publishers altered its content and adapted it to a different type of readership. By modifying its format, content, and use, Haitian publishers turned it into a young adult novel, and by extension, turned Laferrière into a young adult author.

This practice also strikingly illuminates the remarkable development of young adult literature in Haiti in the past ten years, its tension between “its educational and playful purpose” (Brissac 26), and the prominent place it now holds in the Haitian book market. Indeed, among all genres now locally produced, self-help books and first and foremost young adult novels have been the most popular (Armand and Stecher; Brutus; Chavenet, Lafontant Sylvain).

Following a broader world trend, Haitian publishers first started publishing books targeting young adults in the late 1990s, two decades after Martinique, and ten years after Guadeloupe (Brissac 27). For a very long time, literature in Haiti was dedicated to adults and no literature was specifically addressed to children or young adults: the only books available to them were textbooks or foreign books (Altidor Marsan). Several initiatives implemented in the late 1990s changed the situation. In 1998, the French Institute in Haiti organized creative writing and book art workshops for children. They proved successful and, following this initiative, Henri Deschamps, which previously mainly published textbooks, started that same year a collection dedicated to
children, which they integrated into their Hachette-Deschamps branch. Funded by the French-Haitian Project supporting books and reading, they released their first five books, including *Le voyage de la petite feuille* (2000) and *Le trésor du petit village* (2000).

In 2001, seven years after the first edition of “Livres en Folie,” Hachette-Deschamps and fellow Haitian publishers created an annual book festival specifically dedicated to young adult literature, “La Fête du Livre Jeunesse.” Its goal is to encourage literary production for children and public reading, but also to promote Haitian production targeting children and young adults (Altidor Marsan). Like “Livres en Folie,” the festival is sponsored by Haitian and international companies, which allows readers to buy heavily discounted books - often half the regular price. In 2006, Hachette-Deschamps founded Editha, which expanded its young adult-specific catalog to four distinct age categories. Since Hachette-Deschamps was the main textbook publisher, the initiative inspired others and contributed to the popularity of the genre. As director Ilona Armand declared in an interview in 2004, since then, “the number of authors of young adult literature has significantly increased and it gave an impetus to this type of literature in Haiti” (Armand 57). Indeed, other publishers like Choucoune, Canapé Vert, Kopivit and CUC, who traditionally focused on educative material, also started releasing literary works or poems for children.

Since the promising start of young adult literature in the early 2000s, many young publishing houses founded in the 2000s and 2010s, have also picked up on its
success. C3 Editions, for instance, has included young adult collections into its catalog and its director Fred Brutus now cites it as the bestselling category (personal interview). Moreover, several initiatives have taken place to promote young adult literature and creative writing. In 2015, the Centre pour la promotion de l’excellence, de la culture et de la citoyenneté (CPECC) and APROPH (Association des professeurs de français et de créole en Haïti), in partnership with C3 Editions, launched an annual writing contest encouraging high school students of 16 to 18 years of age to submit short stories in order to be published. In 2017, the jury received over 1000 texts and selected 12 to create Max! Max! Max!, a collection of short stories edited by writer and CPECC founder Gary Victor, which were later published by C3 Editions. These initiatives proved successful in many ways. While bolstering children’s creativity, writing and reading skills, they also yielded numerous sales for the publisher. Indeed, in June 2017, Fred Brutus confessed that Max! Max! Max! was one of his best-selling books (personal interview).

In addition, many literary works that were originally produced for adults have since become part of Haitian young adult literature. This is what happened to Laferrière’s L’odeur du café, but also Jacques Roumain’s classic Gouverneurs de la rosée (Brissac 26). Other less known works by the latter were also adapted to younger generations. For instance, in 2007, CUC published a collection of short novels by Jacques Roumain for young readers, Jacques Roumain parle aux enfants, which CUC director and
Creole Academy member Jocelyne Trouillot also translated into Creole as *Jak Roumen ap rakonte*.

In 2006, the same year as *L’odeur du café* was printed in Haiti and adapted to a young adult audience, Laferrière also turned the original text into an album with images, *Je suis fou de Vava*, published in Montreal by Editions de la Bagnole. As Laferrière’s first work featuring, in Laferrière’s words, “the world of children, an enchanting world” (Jobnel), it specifically targeted children. In an interview with *Le Nouvelliste*, Laferrière explained his decision to write for the youth:

> I thought there were not enough books telling, in a simple way, a Haitian childhood with such a powerful theme as love fever. Children’s books are often adapted from popular fables. The world of children is already magical; there is no need to add mythologies. Just playing soccer with friends can cause an incredible explosion of joy. (Jobnel)

In 2007, *Je suis fou de Vava*, which featured illustrations by Frédéric Normandin, was awarded a prestigious Canadian literary prize in the category of young adult literature in French; the Prix du Gouverneur général du Canada. Distributed in Haiti by Communication Plus, *Je suis fou de Vava* circulated at the same time as some of Laferrière’s novels, including *L’odeur du café*, were re-edited locally. However, while the local adaptation of the original text, *L’odeur du café*, was aimed at a young adult audience in Haiti, *Je suis fou de Vava* and its colorful images and limited text addressed even younger readers. Its translation into Haitian Creole that same year, *Mwen damou pou*
Vava, and the publication of two other children’s albums, La fête des morts (2009) and Le baiser mauve de Vava (2014), available in Astérix and La Pléiade bookstores, further instituted Laferrière as a young adult writer in Haiti. Ultimately, these five books and albums and their consecrating prizes instituted Laferrière not only as a Haitian writer, but also as a successful author for several age ranges.

2.4 Da/L’odeur du café: A Creole Translation

The most recent reprinting of L’odeur du café marked another very important moment in Dany Laferrière’s career in Haiti. After the repatriation of his work in the 2000s, Editions LEVE took Laferrière’s reintegration into Haitian literature even further. In 2016, LEVE, founded a year earlier by Frantz Gourdet, published another edition of Laferrière’s L’odeur du café, but this time as a Creole/French bilingual version.

Laferrière’s translation into Creole came at a timely moment. In 2014, the Creole Academy whose purpose is to standardize and promote the use of Creole as a national and literary language was created. As one of the first works of a contemporary Haitian-born writer to be available in Creole translation, it played a particularly important role in Laferrière’s deeper incorporation into Haitian literature. Set within the postcolonial linguistic and literary context of Haiti, the author’s involuntary integration into the

---

4 Mwen damou pou Vava, translated by Lyonel Trouillot, was published and distributed by Educa Vision. Created in 1991 and located in the United States, Educa Vision specializes in pedagogical material for children. At first, their target audience was Haitian students but they now publish and distribute books in many languages such as Creole, French, English, Arabic, Urdu.
Haitian Creole book market provides a powerful insight into the power dynamic between French and Creole in Haiti, and illuminates several interconnected processes.

First, as a third party’s translation, *Da/L’odeur du café* shed light on Laferrière’s lack of engagement with the Creole language, hereby both demonstrating his difference from other engaged Haitian writers and showing the persistant struggles of Creole to be considered a legitimate written language in Haiti. Second, Gourdet’s decision to select Laferrière as one of the first authors to be translated, right after his election to the French Academy, both underscored and contributed to reinforcing the mechanism of consecration and legitimation at play in the French-speaking literary space. As yet another way to consecrate a writer and literary work written in the major French language, the translation process simultaneously assigns value to the original work, *L’odeur du café*, and transfers its literary capital to the target Haitian Creole literature by annexing it. Yet, while on the one hand this process reveals the predominant position that French still holds vis a vis Creole, the bilingual edition of *Da/L’odeur du café* also positions Laferrière, albeit somewhat reluctantly, at the center of a practice of resistance promoting Haitian Creole as a national and literary language through the rapidly developing young adult genre. Moreover, combined with the Creole translation of his children’s album *Je suis fou de Vava*, *Da/L’odeur du café*’s further instituted Laferrière as a young adult writer in Haiti.
Finally, although Laferrière did not take part in the translation of his novel in Creole, as the author of the original work, he nevertheless retained and exerted power over the translation process. Indeed, while he agreed to having *L’odeur du café* translated and distributed in Haiti in Creole, he explicitly refused that Gourdet translate his first novel, *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, which was so poorly received in Haiti and for which he was seen as an outcast. Despite his lack of direct engagement with Creole or the translation process, Laferrière’s decision to allow or refuse to make some of his novels available in his native language illuminates a strong and conscious wish and, equally importantly, a power to retain control of his image in Haiti.

***

The idea to translate *L’odeur du café* into Creole did not come from Laferrière but from a Haitian-born publisher and translator, Frantz Gourdet, who chose the novel as one of the first bilingual editions that he released with his newly founded publishing house, LEVE Editions. By not being his project nor taking part in the translation of *L’odeur du café*, Laferrière revealed his lack of concern with the question of language in Haiti in a striking way. Unlike many of his peers, Laferrière never took any overt political position regarding linguistic or social issues in his country of origin. As we saw earlier, and in part because he did not want to be categorized as a Haitian writer, Laferrière never identified as a spokesperson for Haitians, which often led to his fellow writers’ criticism. Consistent with this attitude, he never engaged in political statements.
regarding the linguistic situation in Haiti, which has been the object of many debates. Laferrière’s position has clearly contrasted with that of many Haitian writers, who have often acted as activists defending Creole as the true national language, or at least one that needs to be on equal footing with French.

Indeed, despite being the only language spoken by all Haitians since the independence, Creole only joined French as an official language in 1987. While all Haitians speak Creole, Creole/French bilingual speakers represent a minority: estimations vary from 15% to as low as 3 or 2% (Dejean; DeGraff; Valdman). As such, the linguistic situation in Haiti cannot be defined as bilingualism, but rather as a diglossia. Linguist Charles Ferguson developed this concept in 1959 based on the French term “diglossie,” which refers to a society in which two varieties of a language are used in different social contexts, one being deemed “high” while the other one is described as “low.” In regard to Haiti, Ferguson argued that Creole and Standard French were two varieties of French that coexisted, the first being used in ordinary conversation while the latter, “highly codified and grammatically more complex,” was “learned primarily through formal schooling” and was used “almost exclusively in writing and when formal speaking is called for” (336).

Haitian linguists Yves Dejean and Michel DeGraff have since demonstrated that, while sharing some elements with French, Creole is neither what Ferguson called a “French dialect” (336) nor grammatically less complex. Moreover, while Ferguson
implied that French and Creole were specifically assigned to separate spheres, Dejean showed that it was not the case. Indeed, on the one hand, because all fluent French-speaking Haitian are also fluent in Creole, the entire Haitian population belongs to the Creole speech community. On the other hand, for the unilingual Creolophone majority of Haiti, Creole is actually not excluded from any domain besides the writing sphere (“Diglossia Revisited” 192). Despite its obvious limitations, especially regarding its application to Haiti, Ferguson’s concept of Diglossia nevertheless permits a general understanding of the Haitian linguistic situation. French is mostly reserved to sectors like administration, justice, education, and literature, while Creole is used in daily life, songs, and spoken conversations.

For the past two hundred years, the Haitian society has been divided between a French-speaking urban and educated population and a majority of rural and illiterate unilingual Creole speakers. In this context, the linguistic issue has contributed to the social, economic, and cultural gap between the urban bourgeoisie and the rural masses, with French being associated with prestige, power, and higher social status. As Michael Dash showed in *Culture and Customs of Haiti* (2001), this divide between French and Creole languages and cultures is rooted in colonial values that, like in other French-speaking Caribbean colonies, favored the so-called universal and superior nature of literary and intellectual culture over all non-literary ones (95). Ultimately, “such cultural influences have combined with the acute divisions in Haitian society to produce a
remarkable disparity between a hyper literate elite and a peasantry cut off from the mainstream of a French-oriented universal culture” (Dash 95).

Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the symbolic and linguistic power of languages in any linguistic market, the variable ability to speak French has attached value to that language and transferred linguistic or symbolic capital to French speakers, who have then earned sociolinguistic profits over monolingual Creole speakers (Saint-Fort, “Le ‘marché linguistique’ haïtien”). And despite advancements in the use of Creole in its spoken form, the cleavage between French and Creole is still very present in writing. Indeed, spoken Creole is now commonly used in sectors that were reserved to French only beforehand, like media and administration. However, as of 2017, the 1987 constitution instituting Creole as an official language and promoting the use of both languages in writing was still not applied in formal official written communication, laws, school, or any “written document disseminating knowledge (and power) in these formal spheres of society” (DeGraff 178).

Much still needs to be done to attain equality between the two languages, and most Haitian writers, except Laferrière, have engaged in the topic. Consistent with his refusal to engage in Creole advocacy, Laferrière has also never used his mother tongue as a literary language, not even in poetry. This decision to steer clear of Creole clearly sets him apart from his peers, living in Haiti or abroad, who have traditionally used Creole as a creative language in one way or the other. While, besides Frankétienne, very
few Haitians began their writing career using Creole, most of them have used it in poetry, which has traditional been attached to that language because of its “oralité.”

Due to Haiti’s colonial history and the influence that France retained for centuries in the domain of culture and literature, French has always been the major language of Haitian literature. The first national writings in the early 19th century were in French, whether it is the declaration of independence, Baron de Vastey’s 1814 essays on Le système colonial dévoilé (The Colonial System Unveiled), or literary journals like L’Abeille Haytienne (1817) and L’Observateur (1819). The first Haitian novel, Bergeaud’s Stella, published in 1859, was also written in French. In the 20th century, the most famous Haitian authors, be they Jacques Roumain, Jacques Stephen Alexis, Marie Vieux-Chauvet, or renowned ethnographer Jean Price Mars, also wrote in French. Similarly, during the 1957-86 Duvalier dictatorship, many intellectuals and writers who left the country for Quebec and France, like Dany Laferrière, traditionally chose French to be published in their new country.

Many of them, however, concurrently wrote poems in Creole. Indeed, in part because of its oral tradition, Creole, when used in a creative written form, has traditionally been associated with poetry. The first known poem, “Lisette quitté la plaine” was written before the Haitian Revolution. Transcribed by Moreau de Saint-Méry in 1797, it was attributed to Duvivier de la Mahautière mid 18th century. At the end
of the 19th century, Oswald Durand wrote his famous “Choucoune” that then became a song in 1883.

While Creole was used fairly frequently in poetry, Haiti had to wait till 1975, around the same time Laferrière left for Montreal, for the first novel in Creole to be published; *Dezafi*. Its author Frankétienne has since become a major Creole writer and produced many successful plays and other novels in Creole as well as French. *Dezafi* was a tremendously significant step forward for the Creole language that paved the way for other writers to use Creole as a creative language in fiction. Since then, Louis Philippe Dalembert, Félix Morisseau-Leroy and Lyonel Trouillot have followed Frankétienne’s lead and also written novels in Creole.

However, despite these efforts that started in the late 1970s and 1980s, there remains a great disparity between the number of poems and novels written and published in Creole. Indeed, in 2005, Evelyne Trouillot lamented the scarcity of available novels written in Creole: although there are “many informative booklets, children’s books, and poetry” in that language, “since Frankétienne’s *Dezafi*, there haven’t been 50 novels written in Creole” (Danticat). Yet, she was hopeful. Indeed, despite ongoing asymmetrical power dynamics between Creole and French, she also noted that “many Haitian writers write more and more in two languages” (Danticat), often leveraging the literary legitimacy they acquired in French. Younger authors like Mackenzy Orcel and Guy Régis Junior have also applied that strategy with recently founded Haitian
publishing house Legs Edition. By being already renowned, recognized and consecrated in French in the Francophone literary sphere before publishing in Creole, they have used their literary legitimation to valorize Creole as a written language.

Despite his popularity and academic consecration, Laferrière has never taken that approach. He never published any poem, nor any other type of text in Creole. The only book in which he used Creole is Pays sans chapeau, but the way he integrated it into his novel is revealing. First, its presence is highly marginal. Creole appears in proverbs before each section (or chapter) and serves a specific purpose. In the novel, Laferrière explains that “the Haitian proverbs that are emphasized before each chapter of this book are transcribed in etymological rather than phonetic Creole and translated in a literary way. This way, their meaning will always remain a bit secret. And this will allow us to enjoy popular wisdom and fertile Haitian linguistic creativity” (Pays sans chapeau). This short introduction to the novel reveals that Laferrière’s primary readers of this book, written in 1994, were Quebecois. In that context, Creole simply acted as a reminder that the plot took place in Haiti. It was not central to the plot, but was rather an adornment or an exoticizing element that located the narrative in the Caribbean. Indeed, despite his wish to use Creole in a creative way, Laferrière only quoted it as proverbs, in other words, fixed sentences that were part of the Haitian traditional culture. This essentialization of Creole was even reinforced by the short “folkloric song” that Laferrière added before the beginning of the novel: “Trois feuilles / trois racines oh / jeté,
blié / ramassé, songé.” Ultimately, through his use of Creole, Laferrière did not create with the language but rather reduced it to the status of a folkloric device.

Laferrière’s spelling also revealed his lack of engagement in Creole’s legitimation. Indeed, the way he spelled the proverbs or song did not follow the standard orthography. Through this, Laferrière showed a lack of concern or familiarity with the official orthography instituted in the 1987 constitution, which is still widespread in older generations today. Because no official orthography existed before 1987, many Haitians, like Laferrière, did not learn how to write or read in standardized Creole, but were used to the common French-influenced spelling. Many were also not formally instructed in Creole but in French, so they never really learned how to read or write in their native language. Consistent with this, the French-influenced spelling was the one that Laferrière used in the proverbs before each section of *Pays sans chapeau* as well as in the folkloric song. Written according to the newly instituted standardized version of Creole, the song should have read: “Twa fèy / twa rasin o / jete, bliye / ramase, sonje.”

Moreover, other elements highlight the fact that Laferrière equated Creole with an oral language. In *Pays sans chapeau*, while acknowledging that Creole was the true language of Haiti, the author automatically transcribed his characters’ conversations in French. Indeed, the narrator claims at some point that “now, we are speaking Creole, and we don’t even know if we are. We are just speaking. It is not the same in another
language, even if it is French” (204). Ironically, these words do not appear in Creole but remain in French. As Laferrière declared to Magnier in 2000, “Creole exists even when the characters are speaking French. Incidentally, one of the characters highlights the fact that they have been speaking Creole for a certain time, even though they never stopped speaking French” (J’écris 224). By being mentioned in the text, but not appearing in print in any other form than proverbs, Creole becomes invisible, relegated to its oral status only.

In 1991, Laferrière went even further in actively removing any trace of Creole from his writing style. According to him, L’odeur du café’s original syntax, in its manuscript form, was Creole. As Laferrière recalled in 2000, “in a way, it was impossible to write a book about my childhood in Petit-Goâve in another language than Creole. (…) the entire book was immersed in Haitian culture whose backbone is Creole” (J’écris 224). Although he acknowledged the tight connection between the Creole language and the Haitian way of life, as well as the impact they had on the development of his own identity, he decided to favor his Quebecois readership’s linguistic limitations over his original creation: “because the vast majority of my readers only read French, (…) I revised the manuscript to write the text in French” (J’écris 224). Through this, Creole effectively disappeared from the written world and remained oral, hereby reproducing an enduring prejudiced opinion against Creole that is still widespread today.
Laferrière’s lack of engagement with Creole did not prevent Gourdet from translating L’odeur du café into Creole and thus integrating it into the small corpus of Creole novels. Published in 2016, Da/L’odeur du café was LEVE’s second book to be released, after Ti Prens Lan/Le petit prince in 2015. Located in southern France, LEVE is not a Haitian-based publishing house, but a truly transnational initiative. While its Haitian-born founder, translator and editor Gourdet is not physically present in Haiti, the books published by LEVE have been available for purchase online and have been distributed in Haiti by Université d’Etat d’Haïti and Kopivit, including during the “Livres en Folie” book fairs. For Da/L’odeur du café, Gourdet implemented the same strategy as Areytos and Zémès and split the book into two volumes. As of 2018, only the first one, Da/L’odeur du café, has been released, while the second half is in preparation.

Because of how translation operates, Da/L’odeur du café’s bilingual text contributed to consecrating the author and highlighted the prominent place that French and French literature still holds vis a vis Haiti. In 2017, LEVE’s short catalog listed two bilingual books alongside Laferrière’s Da/L’odeur du café; French classics Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s Ti Prens Lan (The Little Prince), and Albert Camus’ Yon Nèg Apa (The Stranger). The latter was offered in both Creole/French and Creole/English translations, which showed Frantz Gourdet’s wish to address the Haitian diaspora at large. While these texts by Saint-Exupéry and Camus had already been translated in Creole and published in Haiti in the 2000s and 2010s – DNL and C3 published writer Gary Victor’s
translation of *Le petit prince*, and Presses Nationales published Guy Régis Junior’s translation of *L’étranger* – it was the first time that bilingual versions of their books came out. Perhaps more importantly, the release of *Dal/L’odeur du café* marked also one of the first times that a Haitian-born writer was being translated into Creole. Ultimately, these translations were also among the few that had been done into Creole – for a total of fewer than 30, according to Gourdet (personal interview) – which highlighted the innovativeness of the process.

Translation is a powerful tool in the circulation of literature and the annexation of literary capital to other cultures. Indeed, as several literary and postcolonial scholars have argued, far from being a transparent process, it is “a highly manipulative activity” that rarely “involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems” (Bassnett and Trivedi 4). In the same way that the world book market is structured according to asymmetrical power dynamics, translation can only be understood as an unequal exchange within a highly hierarchical world system (Casanova, “Consécration” 7). According to Gisèle Sapiro, literary capital “can be measured through the number of works from a national literature which have become part of the world cultural heritage” (“Strategies” 146). Because of its prominence as a literary center and its high contribution of literary works to the international cultural legacy, French literature has acquired a significant amount of literary capital since the 18th century. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Gourdet chose Camus and Saint-Exupéry in the literary bank of world
literature. They are among “the ten writers most translated from French worldwide” (Sapiro, “French Literature” 311).

By translating French as a dominant or major literary language into Creole as a dominated or ultraminor literary language, Gourdet accomplished what Casanova called a “diversion of capital” (“Consécration” 10). Through his translation of renowned authors like Antoine de Saint Exupéry and Albert Camus, but also Haitian-born Dany Laferrière, Gourdet annexed all three of them to a growing corpus of literary works in Haitian Creole. This process simultaneously transferred the symbolic capital attached to these works to the Haitian Creole language, and symbolically consecrated Laferrière as a fellow writer of Saint Exupéry’s and Camus’s.

Gourdet’s mission is reminiscent of the early 19th century German translation program of Greek and Roman authors, or Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere’s translation of three of Shakespeare’s plays into Swahili in the 1960s. Just like translation did to the German language, the Creole translation of classics would contribute to transforming Haitian Creole by “literarizing” it and universalizing it through the importation of French literary capital into the language itself.

Although Laferrière never produced any work in Creole, the Creole translation of L’odeur du café positioned him at the center of a recent practice developing the corpus of texts in that language. On the cover, the font used for the title in French was bigger than its Creole equivalent, but the content of the book primarily brought attention to the
Haitian Creole text by featuring it on the left page and assigning the right one to Laferrière’s original text in French. Because the natural way of reading a text in French or Creole is from left to right, having Creole on the left gave it more prominence as it was on the first page the readers’ eyes encountered. Through this choice, Gourdet showed his wish to grant more power to the translation in Creole than to the original text in French.

As another means to establish a corpus of texts and models, translation also plays an important role in the development of national literatures (Even-Zohar). With a highly limited corpus of novels written in Creole, whether originally or in translation, there is much to do to increase the number of Haitian classics and world literature available in Creole. As Gourdet declared, “translating one book into Haitian Creole is useless. We need to translate hundreds of texts. In ten years, I would like anyone to be able to read anything in Creole, any author of universal, world literature” (personal interview).

Gourdet’s ambition is to translate 1600 texts of world literature over the course of ten years (personal interview). But translation takes time and is expensive. In order to reach that goal, he has just started a free program in partnership with the Université d’État d’Haïti and subsidized by the French embassy in order to both recruit and train Haitian translators. This is a one-of-a-kind initiative in Haiti where no other training programs in book-related industries are currently available. Indeed, Haitian publishers
and other book professionals either learned on the job or had to go abroad, mainly to Canada or France, to enroll in specific academic and professional training in cultural industries. Gourdet’s initiative promoting local training shows concrete action to develop local knowledge and expertise in the field of culture. It is reminiscent of the week-long training in the book industry organized by La Pléiade bookstore and the International Association of French-speaking Booksellers in 2015.

As the first year of the training program in translation has come to an end, about thirty Creole/French bilingual versions of a whole range of texts from various periods are “in the making.” While about half of the texts are French classics, Haitian writers make up the other half, with Laferrière holding a particularly important role. Indeed, certainly due to his recent status as a member of the French Academy, Dany Laferrière is the writer with the most translation projects in the making: translators are working on the second part of L’odeur du café, L’énigme du retour, Je suis un écrivain japonais, and Tout bouge autour de moi.

Besides working on French classic novels like Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables or Alexandre Dumas’s Le comte de Monte Cristo, the students have also chosen to translate Frantz Fanon’s postcolonial seminal work Peau noire, masques blancs, as well as more recent works like Marguerite Duras’ L’amant and Laurent Gounelle’s airport novel L’homme qui voulait être heureux. In addition, autobiographies by Caribbean and African writers like Joseph Zobel’s Rue Cases-Nègres, Camara Laye’s L’enfant noir are also
present. As for other Haitian texts, they chose works like Jean Price Mars’s classic *Ainsi parla l’oncle*, as well as novels by writers in Haiti and the diaspora. Besides Dany Laferrière, they are also translating texts by René Depestre, Jean-Claude Charles, Yanick Lahens, Justin Lhérisson, Lyonel Trouillot, and Gary Victor, as well as children’s literature like *Mimi Barthélémy raconte des contes d’Haïti et d’ailleurs*.

Despite Gourdet’s wish to translate a variety of world literature, 90% of the texts translated by the first cohort of translators were initially written in French. Out of the 30 texts, only *Harry Potter à l’école des sorciers* (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*) was written in a different language - English. Gourdet would like to publish books in Creole only, but he is not entirely free. Indeed, the translation program is supported by the French Embassy and it is in their interest to promote books in French, too. In his own words, “they are pushing bilingualism forward because they realize that the fight for French on its own is already lost” (personal interview). Ultimately, Gourdet hopes to be able to offer books translated into Creole only, but for now, from an economic point of view, publishing bilingual texts may well be the best way to promote Creole. Indeed, as he rightly questioned, “I can sell Creole/French bilingual texts, but when I publish only in Creole, I sell ten times fewer books, so is there a point for now to publish only in Creole since people have both Creole and French in the bilingual books?” (personal interview).
In addition to being central to efforts to develop a corpus of literary texts in Creole, Laferrière’s Creole translation reinforced Laferrière’s image as a young adult writer an positioned him at the center of another fairly recent practice; the editorial use of young adult literature as a vehicle promoting Haitian Creole. Indeed, it is revealing that, among all four of Laferrière’s novels published in Haiti, Gourdet chose to first translate *L’odeur du café* in Creole. By making it available in Haitian Creole while several children’s books with Laferrière’s name on them already circulated in Haiti, Gourdet reinforced the image of Laferrière as a young adult author. In addition to *L’odeur du café*, which, in its original French language, had already been adapted to a young adult readership by Haitian publishers, its Quebec-published album version for children *Je suis fou de Vava* as well as its Haitian Creole translation and *Le baiser mauve de Vava* were also distributed in Haiti by Communications Plus.

Like the original narrative that was already known and used at school, *Da/L’odeur du café* is part of an increasing national editorial focus on young generations. As one of the first books Frantz Gourdet released alongside *Yon Nèg Apa/L’étranger* and *Ti Prens Lan/Le petit prince*, it specifically targeted young adults. As Gourdet shared on his website, in addition to reaching broader publics, his goal is “to distribute the translated works to primary and secondary schools” (“Qui sommes-nous ?”). LEVE’s past and soon-to-be-released bilingual texts show this ambition: one third of the titles are classified as young adult literature, while another third are readings recommended
by the Association des Professeurs de français d’Haïti and are categorized as co-curricular books that can serve as pedagogical support. This sheds light on the publisher’s educative ambition and the promoting vehicle that children’s and young adult literature have provided for Creole’s revalorization in the past fifteen years.

In 2016, like other Haitian-published genres, most children’s and young adult novels were written in French. Indeed, whether adapted from literary works for adults, like Laferrière’s Da/L’odeur du café, or written by authors who specialized in that genre like Odette Roy Fombrun, Franck Paul, and Clélie Aupont, or children themselves like Max! Max! Max!, French remained the dominant written language. This was often due to the stigma that older generations, and more specifically parents, still attached to Creole and the social and professional leverage that mastering French represented for their children. Already in 2004, Henri Deschamps’s assistant director Ilona Armand explained in an interview for the Takam Tikou journal dedicated to young adult literature that:

“Although children are Creole speakers, the books published by Hachette-Deschamps are usually written in French because Haitian parents are attached to the French language and want their children to read in that language” (57). This was still true in 2017. Indeed, at CUC, Jocelyne Trouillot experienced the same ongoing resistance from parents towards buying books in Creole for their children. For instance, despite children’s higher interest in her Creole translation of Jacques Roumain’s short novels, Jak
Roumen ap rakonte, they took twice as much time to sell as the original version in French (personal interview).

As Ilona Armand rightly noted, by selling young adult novels in French, such as Laferrière’s L’odeur du café, publishers have “indirectly contributed to the promotion of French in a predominantly Creole-speaking society” (57). While Armand is not an active defender of Creole, other more politically and linguistically engaged publishers like Jocelyne Trouillot (CUC) and Charles-Marie Tardieu (Kopivit) have repeatedly pointed at this practice as highly problematic, and promoted children’s books written in Creole. For instance, in 2017, the CUC publishing house’s catalog offered over 100 books written in Creole out of a total of 150, including 70 that were available at “Livres en Folie” for about 150 HTG ($2). New books in Creole came out regularly: 13 were published in 2017 only and were available at the FILHA in December 2017. At Kopivit, 38 out of their 56 young adult books were written in Creole. To encourage parents to buy them, some – like LEVE’s Da/L’odeur du café – were also offered in Creole-French bilingual editions, and even Creole-French-English trilingual versions of the saga Rene ak Rita for members of the Haitian diaspora.

This dynamic initiative targeting young adult readers to promote Haitian Creole is promising. While more than half of the Haitian population was illiterate in 2006 (UNESCO), the literacy rate of teenagers and young adults between 15 and 24 has increased steeply for the past 35 years. From 51% in 1982, it went up to 72% in 2006 after
peaking at 82% in 2003 (UNESCO). Considering that children under 14 made up 34% of the total population in Haiti in 2015 (UNESCO), these statistics show young people’s demand for literature designed for them and also highlight the impact that reading and writing in Creole can have on younger generations. By specifically addressing bilingual texts such as Da/L’odeur du café to this category of the Haitian population, publishers use renowned authors like Laferrière to change youth perspective on Creole and normalize it as a written language.

Laferrière’s recent translation into Creole, while not voluntary, played an important role in his own positioning vis a vis the Haitian Creole language and literature. By being part of the editorial agenda of a Creole activist, Frantz Gourdet, he took on a role that was not supposed to be his. The consequences of this somewhat forceful integration into Haitian Creole literature through translation were not anodyne. Because of Laferrière’s initial reluctance to be translated, and contrary to his peers who have voluntarily engaged in Creole promotion, his translation offers particularly unique insight into his own agency in the process, and his wish to control his image.

Laferrière was initially reluctant to have his work published in Creole, and only agreed to have some of it translated. As Gourdet declared, “he does not like it very much” (personal interview). Despite the presence of several of his works in the list of upcoming translations to be published, it is unclear whether Laferrière will accept to see them come out. Indeed, in May 2018, the academic translation into Creole of Tout bouge
autour de moi was complete, but Gourdet declared that “we don’t know whether he wants and will accept to have it translated into Creole” (personal interview).

More importantly, the publisher revealed that although Laferrière was eventually fine with Da/L’odeur du café, he refused to let Gourdet translate his first novel, Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer (personal interview). And although it could be due to a question of rights, the most obvious reason for Laferrière to refuse is related to the controversy the novel created among Haitian writers and intellectuals when it came out. One can imagine that any Haitian author writing in French, especially those who are published abroad, would be happy to be translated in their native language, and made accessible to the readers of their country. Lyonel Trouillot, for instance, who also writes in Creole, already agreed to have any of his novels translated into Creole (Gourdet, personal interview).

Beyond showing that Laferrière is capable of exerting his agency to decide which book can or cannot be translated into Creole, this power to consent and veto specific translations reveals his wish to retain tight control of his image, one that took so long to improve in his country of origin and that could be easily tarnished by a broader accessibility to his first novel. It is indeed no coincidence that among all of the foreign-published books distributed in Haiti alongside his locally published ones, Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer is still not one of them. Indeed, Anaïse Chavenet currently distributes Laferrière’s books published in Quebec by Mémoire d’encrier, Tout
bouge autour de moi, Journal d’un écrivain japonais, and Tout ce qu’on ne te dira pas, Mongo, as well as Laferrière’s children’s books, Je suis fou de Vava and Le baiser mauve de Vava, published by Editions de La Bagnole in Montreal. But no trace of Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer. For now, Dany Laferrière seems to have chosen his image: that of a young adult writer, and not a provocateur.

2.5 Dany Laferrière Today: “Immortal” or Traitor?

Today, Laferrière’s persona and work are less divisive in Haiti. His reception is mostly positive in the media, the public, and the literary spheres. Nevertheless, Laferrière’s conscious choice to circulate Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer neither in French nor in Creole is a clear sign that he does not take his improved image for granted, and that some controversies are probably better left in the past. Indeed, some aspects of his personality, work, and literary trajectory still ruffle a few feathers. Some writers, intellectuals or critics like Lyonel Trouillot and Eddy “Tontongi” Toussaint have remained very critical towards his persona and his lack of engagement with Haitian political and social issues. This lack of complete national consensus on him and, more specifically, the controversy sparked by his election to the French Academy shed light on internal issues regarding language politics in Haiti and the expected role of the writer vis-à-vis such issues, even today.
His election to the French Academy on December 12, 2013 was overwhelmingly perceived as a prestigious accomplishment and celebrated in Haiti. As Le Nouvelliste editor-in-chief Frantz Duval wrote in his newspaper, Dany Laferrière, or rather “Dany the Immortal,” makes Haitians proud. Government officials congratulated him for his election, but also thanked him for the positive impact it had on Haiti’s image abroad. On the same day, President Martelly sent a note stating that

this new function of Mr Dany Laferrière confirms once again the excellence and dedication of this son of Petit-Goâve. It is first and foremost an honor for Haitians that have always recognized this great author’s knowledge and openness, and then a testament to the enduring power of the act of writing on time, and a source of pride for the other writers of his generation as well as the young writers. (“Marteley salue l’élection de Laferrière”)

During a reception organized in Laferrière’s honor, Minister of Culture Josette Darguste notable declared that “it is extraordinary, it is an honor for Haiti. This tribute reflects on all of our writers and men of letters” (“Académie française”).

Other scholars, writers and intellectuals also lauded Laferrière’s election as a tribute that extended beyond a personal accomplishment. Linguist Huguès Saint-Fort wrote: “beyond Dany, this honor reflects on Haiti, our country and our literature” (Les premières retombées). In an article in Le Nouvelliste, Dieulermesson Petit-Frère, co-editor at Legs Edition, also lauded Laferrière’s election as historical not only for the writer but also for Haiti. According to him, Laferrière’s election was “a historical act that just put us back on the world map. (…) With Dany’s election to the French Academy, a whole new page of Haiti’s history was just written, or re-written. It is time to send another
signal to the rest of the world so that we are seen in a different way” (Dany Laferrière tourne la page). This statement shows how, according to him, the author’s personal accomplishment had an impact on the Haitian society at large and the way it could be perceived. This is especially relevant considering that the election took place just short of four years after the devastating earthquake that killed an estimated number of 223,000 people (EM-DAT; Munich).

At that time, the international media covering Haitian news still mainly focused on the aftermath of the earthquake and circulated narratives that reinforced Haiti’s image as the “poorest country in the western hemisphere.” Contrary to this, the election of a Haitian-born writer represented Haiti in a positive light. In another article a few days later, Petit-Frère extended the positive impact of Laferrière’s election on the country and all Haitians to the whole American continent and black people worldwide. By joining the French Academy and becoming an “immortal,” Laferrière also “allowed the Haitian people, therefore the American continent and the Black world, to conquer immortality in one day” (“Dany Laferrière: entre reconnaissance et éloges”).

While many officials and intellectuals did not mention any concrete ways in which Laferrière’s election could benefit Haitian society at large, Haitian writer and artist Frankétienne gave hints at what could be gained from this event. Beyond being “a good thing on an individual level,” he saw it as an opportunity for Haiti to further implement educative projects and promote culture. Indeed, in an interview with Télé
Kiskeya, he declared that Haitians could use it as a way to “facilitate the implementation of certain projects related to education, books, libraries.”

However, in the midst of this enthusiastic response, a few critics, and two in particular, did not celebrate Laferrière’s election but rather voiced concerns regarding its implications. On his website, Eddy “Tontongi” Toussaint, a Haitian-born, Boston-based writer published a long article entitled “The unfortunate implications of Laferrière’s election to the French Academy” in January 2014. In this text, which was also released a few days later on Alterpresse.com, Tontongi called the event “a fool’s game, one of those honorary tricks used by the master to flatter the vanity of the enslaved.” Tontongi argued that electing Laferrière was problematic because of the writer’s provocative work and persona, and the way he exploited racial stereotypes to advance his literary career. Contrary to many other Haitian writers more concerned with social issues and literature as art, “it is that reproduction of the stereotyped image of the hyper sexualized Negro who seeks and gives pleasure that the French Academy and his apologists like Bernard Pivot seem to privilege in their consideration of Haitian literature.”

In addition, the critic questioned the timing and consequences of the election vis-à-vis the recent movement promoting Creole in Haiti, like the institution of a Creole Academy in 2014: “what makes us uncomfortable with the election is its timing, its impact at a time when the Haitian intelligentsia, Francolonized to the core up until now, is reexamining the importance of a revalued Creole language with respect to a Haitian
authentic identity and, even, to its economic development program.” This was even more troubling for Tontongi considering Laferrière’s lack of concern for Creole. While other Haitian writers like Frankétienne or Lyonel Trouillot have promoted or at least raised awareness about Creole, Laferrière has never done so. This led the critic to “suspect that choosing a Francophile Haitian writer to join the French Academy will not be particularly beneficial to the advancement of Haitian Creole as a legitimate and valorized language of identity.”

These statements were coherent with Tontongi’s work in defense of Creole. Over the last decades, Tontongi has actively written on the unequal linguistic situation in Haiti and its French literary tradition, such as in Critique de la francophonie haïtienne (2007) and articles in his trilingual journal Tanbou. For Tontongi, in addition to undermining the recent efforts to promote the Creole language as an equal to French in Haiti, Laferrière’s election effectively turned the writer into an agent of French neocolonial cultural imperialism. He argued that

far from bestowing an honor that would validate the Haitian contribution to the beautiful French-language literature, Dany Laferrière’s election is part of a trick – unconscious or predetermined, it makes little difference – to restore the brand image of French and simultaneously broaden its application and revalue it at a time when it is losing ground to – and seems increasingly obsolete compared with – English.

Tontongi was not the only one to express his concern. Lyonel Trouillot, as a longtime nemesis of Laferrière, also deplored the consequences of this event, and more especially the way Haitians reacted to it. After not attending the reception organized in
Port-au-Prince in honor of Laferrière’s election – but nevertheless congratulating him in a note (Petit-Frère, “Dany Laferrière: entre reconnaissance et éloges”) – he notably declared that “the French Academy remains a French national institution. And is not considered a legitimizing authority by all in France. Its opening up to non-French people is a positive sign. But Dany Laferrière has not become a great writer… just because he now is a French Academy member” (“Petits meurtres entre gens de lettres”).

More recently, the decision to name the public library in Laferrière’s hometown Petit-Goâve after the writer sparked a controversy. Destroyed by the 2010 earthquake, the library was rebuilt thanks to funds allocated by the European Union and German NGO Welthungerhilfe. The project leaders wished to name it “Bibliothèque Nationale Dany Laferrière” as a tribute to the writer and his ties to the town. But shortly before the inauguration ceremony scheduled for September 7th, 2017, political activists from Petit-Goâve known as “Front mixte de libération” crossed out Dany Laferrière’s name on the building. To justify their opposition, they referred to Article 7 of the 1987 constitution preventing any public building from being named after a living person: “The cult of the personality is categorically forbidden. Effigies and names of living personages may not appear on the currency, stamps, seals, public buildings, streets or works of art” (“1987 Constitution of Haiti”).

This amendment to the constitution was originally created following the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship, and was meant to prevent political propaganda and myth
making of such totalitarian figures. While most used this legal reason to justify their opposition to the project of naming the library after Laferrière, others criticized his lack of engagement in favor of his hometown. According to some of the opponents, Laferrière never did anything to improve the infrastructure, health, economy, and finances of the population of Petit-Goâve, nor did he negotiate with foreign powers to benefit his hometown community, and as a result does not deserve to have a building named after him (Pierre-Louis). To add to this controversy, his cousin and mayor of Petit-Goâve was believed to be among the opponents, and did not attend the inauguration ceremony, which ended up celebrating the opening of the “Bibliothèque Municipale de Petit-Goâve” (Daudier).

These dissenting voices, albeit in minority, nevertheless show how Laferrière’s personality is still the object of debates in Haiti nowadays. While many Haitians have warmed up to Laferrière and his work, Laferrière’s lack of engagement, his practical take on the role of the writer and his hyper visibility in the media continue to fuel most of his critics. Ultimately, in light of the evolution of his literary reception in Haiti, Laferrière’s current perception illuminates the many ways in which his career trajectory and public persona have set him apart. Despite his local publishing and translation into Creole, the recent controversies over his election to the French Academy and the naming of the public library show how for some he still does not fit the traditional role of the writer in Haiti modeled on writers like Jacques Roumain, Jacques Stephen Alexis or
Frankétienne. By not being a politically and socially engaged artist actively working to serve his community and society at large, he has contributed to redefining what being a Haitian writer means, especially outside of Haiti. In addition, Laferrière’s refusal to have his first novel Comment translated into Creole also shows that he, as always, is very aware of his public persona and the impact that it had on his reputation in Haiti. Now that he is mostly perceived in a positive light, his decision demonstrates that he wishes to keep everything that could damage his reputation in Haiti at bay.
3. Publishing, Representing, and Marketing Dany Laferrière in France

“I move stealthily,” declared Dany Laferrière in a 2011 interview for French magazine Télérama. “That’s why I don’t like labels: I don’t like to be seen. I want to be in the middle of the crowd without anyone knowing it” (Crom). These words capture his ambivalent attitude towards so-called “francophone” literature and mirror his own emergence in France in a remarkable light. In hindsight, they also announced the master “trick” he was about to play a few years later with his election to the French Academy.

In 2013, Dany Laferrière was elected to France’s oldest cultural institution, the Académie française. How did a Haitian-Canadian writer, the first to be either Haitian or Quebecois, the first non-French citizen, and only the second Black writer after Senghor to join the ranks of the self-proclaimed “Immortels” manage that feat? Perhaps even more importantly considering the well-known conservatism of the institution, which, at first sight, seems to run counter to Laferrière’s versatile personality – why did he even apply? But first, how did Dany Laferrière enter the French literary space, and how did French critics and publishers portray him and his texts? After contributing to changing the definitions of Quebecois and Haitian literatures, did Laferrière have a similar impact on French national literature and is he now, as an académicien, considered a French writer? These are a few of the questions that this chapter will answer by investigating the emergence of Laferrière’s literary identity in metropolitan France, his portrayal in
the press, his ambivalent positioning vis-a-vis the concept of Francophonie, and the images that French publishers have used on his book covers to package his novels.

By displaying images of an exotic Elsewhere and commodified Black bodies, French publishers have used othering practices reminiscent of those of their 1980s Quebecois counterparts. However, while referring to similar tropes, they were set within a different historical context and are remnants of France’s colonial past. Ultimately, they illustrate the difficulty of the French publishing industry to distance itself from tropes, practices, and terminology reproducing neocolonial hierarchies between French and Francophone literature, and national – understood as metropolitan – versus foreign identity. They also explain why, in order to be visible in the French literary marketplace, postcolonial writers like Laferrière strategically manipulate their marginality, much like Graham Huggan convincingly argued in regard to Anglophone authors in *The Postcolonial Exotic*. Laferrière’s emergence in France also underscores the way literary institutions and related editorial practices consecrate writers by transferring them symbolic and economic capital. From being represented as specifically “Caribbean,” Laferrière turned into a brand in the 2000s. Finally, his increasing visibility in the French literary field ultimately culminated in his election to the French Academy in 2013, which, as we will see, both reinforced France as a central source of literary authority and illuminated the writer’s creative agency in his own legitimation process.
3.1 Dany Laferrière’s Entrance in the French Literary Space

Laferrière’s first book, *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, was first published in France in 1989, the same year its film adaptation came out, and was also re-edited as a pocket book in 1990. While *Comment* had propelled him to fame in Quebec four years earlier, it did not have the same effect on French critics and readers. “I have never seen a book as eager to be published in Paris,” Laferrière claimed in 2000, explaining the difficult debut of the novel on the French literary scene (*J’écris* 178). In an effort to launch *Comment* in France and increase its readership, Lanctôt sent 3,000 copies of the novel to France immediately after the book was published in Quebec in 1985. However, his first attempt to distribute the novel in France quickly failed. In reaction to Lanctôt’s illegal use of Matisse’s painting on the first book cover, the artist’s heirs had the novel taken off the shelves of French bookstores (Laferrière, *J’écris* 178).

As Laferrière explained, when a French edition of *Comment* finally came out with Belfond in 1989, it did not sell very well. Shortly after, as expected in such circumstances, Belfond ceased his collaboration with Laferrière and sold the book’s rights to a mass market paperback imprint, *J’ai Lu*, created by Flammarion in 1958, which released a pocketbook version in 1990 (Laferrière, *J’écris* 178). Following that aborted attempt to successfully integrate the French market, the author had to wait till the very late 1990s to collaborate with Le Serpent à Plumes, a young publishing house that Laferrière described as “outside of the system” (Dominique), which released several
of Laferrière’s books, including yet another edition of Comment in August 1999. As Laferrière’s visibility and popularity grew thanks to his multiple appearances in the media, his versatile personality, and the literary prizes he was awarded, he attracted the attention of a more prestigious and large-scale publishing house, Grasset, which took over after Editions du Rocher bought out Le Serpent à Plumes in 2004. By the mid-2000s, Laferrière was published simultaneously in Quebec and France, and Boréal and Grasset were his primary publishing houses.

Laferrière’s difficult start in France was not an isolated case but extended to other Quebec-published authors as well. As Luc Pinhas declared, “until the 1990s, every attempt to establish Québécois books in France failed and the few Québécois writers who made a breakthrough in Paris had to transfer their book publishing rights to their French publishers and establish themselves in the French capital” (39). Laferrière did not move to Paris, but Lanctôt agreed to transfer his publishing rights to Le Serpent à Plumes so that Laferrière would be given the opportunity to enter the French space. For literature in French, Paris remained the most prominent center. As Laferrière declared in his interview with Magnier in 2000, Lanctôt valued the writer’s success and critical reception in France more than in the United States: “Lanctôt prefers a very brief mention in Le Monde to a long article on the front page of the New York Times. For me, it’s the other way around” (l’écris 176). Likewise, when Laferrière was invited to Bernard Pivot’s popular literary show “Bouillon de culture,” the author saw it as an opportunity to
become visible and reach the French readers. For Lanctôt, however, it also acted as a recognition of his editorial work (J’écris 176).

Lanctôt’s attitude towards the French literary sphere shows how dominant France still was in the late 20th century vis-a-vis the Quebecois market. As David Homel, both Laferrière’s English translator and a writer himself, wrote in The Toronto Star in 1991, “Quebec shares at least two things with the rest of Canada: Quebec readers like to read about themselves, and their shaky book industry is massively dominated by a foreign giant – France, not the United States.” Lanctôt’s attitude towards the French press and cultural programming also reveals mechanisms of popular and literary consecration at play in the Francophone literary market. And while Laferrière declared “not caring about literary prizes” (J’écris 176), his emergence in France in the 2000s, and his 2004 switch to more prestigious and wide-reaching publishing house Grasset show that he was very aware of the power of literary prizes, publishers, and institutions in mediating both his popular reception and economic success.

In 1989, when Comment was released in France, its cover exhibited references to its provocative content. However, while the Quebec re-printing of the same year displayed the poster of the film adaptation, which would also be used on the cover of the French 1990 pocketbook version and gave center stage to the black character by playing on his exaggerated erection, the focus on Belfond’s 1989 book cover shifted. The title, written in red capital letters against a black background, suggestively marked out
the shape of a female upper body, leaving her head and legs out of frame. The word “L’amour” was spread across her breast while “Nègre” was positioned across her thin waist. The color choice was significant: the red characters, symbolizing passion, stood out against the black background, which reflected the protagonist’s skin color and emphasized the erotic content of the book.

Figure 19: Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, Belfond, 1989

The female body, less explicitly offered on display than on the cover of its Quebec-published counterpart featuring a picture of half-naked actress Roberta Bizeau, remained overtly sexualized. It is unclear whether the silhouette was that of a real woman or a Barbie doll, but it certainly featured female attributes considered ideal in Western advertisements, films, or magazines - round, perky breast and a small waistline. The varying size of the title’s characters pushed “L’amour avec un Nègre” forward, emphasizing the suggestive nature of the novel. In addition, most importantly, the cover
featuring a woman’s silhouette did not include her head, and thus merely reduced her to her sexual attributes.

One can wonder why Belfond did not choose to feature a picture or design that underscored the interracial relationships at play in the novel. As I showed in the first chapter, the image used by Lanctôt in 1985 clearly invited readers to engage in an ethnographic reading as his Quebec counterparts did. It enticed readers’ curiosity about immigrants’ lives in Montreal as well as what perception immigrants had of them. As for the film poster, by downplaying references to Montreal, it allowed for a broader consumption while still underscoring the interracial aspect of the story and referring to a context of racial and literary change. But what was the literary and social context in France in the late 1980s? More specifically, were black writers considered part of French literature, and which Haitian authors were already part of the French literary sphere?

When Comment came out in 1989, its provocative and suggestive cover featuring the upper body of a woman was not the first of its kind in the literary landscape. In an interesting coincidence, the female anatomy had also been emphasized a few years earlier on the book cover of the second edition of Haitian writer René Depestre’s book, Alléluia pour une femme-jardin. Its mass market version, published in 1986 in Gallimard’s Folio pocketbook collection, departed from the mythical reference of its first edition. On the original 1982 novel’s dust jacket, a man and a woman, both black, were naked and surrounded with a plethora of animals, from tigers to goats and dogs to horses, giraffes,
gators and ostriches. A snake was wrapped around a tree in the center of the image and seemingly communicating with them.

Figure 20: Alléluiia pour une femme-jardin, Gallimard, 1982

While this depiction of the biblical account of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden emphasized the mythical elements of Depestre’s novel’s magical realism, it also departed from a traditional western depiction of the scene. By featuring Black Adam and Eve, it acted as a reminder of the Caribbean origins of Depestre and his novel’s characters.

Four years later, the mass market cover displayed a very different cover: it featured a painting of a naked woman sitting in the grass and turning its back to the viewer.
Figure 21: Allélui a pour une femme-jardin, Gallimard (Folio), 1986

With this change, Folio clearly chose to emphasize and market the sensual and erotic elements of Depestre’s text over the mythical ones. Yet the Caribbean was not left out of the picture: here, the woman’s dark skin and curly hair were the elements that served as reminders of the foreignness of both the author and his narrative’s setting.

This editorial choice to instrumentalize the female body as a marketing tool on both Laferrière and Depestre’s books packaging within a few years interval certainly calls into question its intentionality. Either way, it demonstrates that Laferrière’s French publisher Belfond decided to erase the racial undertones of the title and film poster to instead focus on suggestive sexual images only. By changing its paratext, Belfond displaced Comment and positioned it in the specific French space, in which Haitian and more broadly speaking Caribbean writers were not perceived in the same way as in Quebec.

As Haiti’s most well-known author in France in the late 1980s, Depestre’s literary entrance into the French market offers fundamental insights into the context in which
Laferrière’s first novel inscribed itself. In 1989, René Depestre, Jean-Claude Charles, and Jean Metellus were the most famous contemporary authors from Haiti to be known in the Hexagon. Contrary to Laferrière, they had chosen France as their adopted land, albeit temporarily, oftentimes hoping they would go back to Haiti once the Duvalier dictatorship would be over. However, while the community of Haitian writers, intellectuals, and publishers who had settled in Montreal during the dictatorship had become a visible and active minority in the Quebecois cultural space, the situation was different in France.

Until the 1970s, the first wave of Haitians who had emigrated to metropolitan France were students or worked in liberal professions. Most of them belonged to the Haitian middle or upper middle class, and came from the capital city of Port-au-Prince or its suburbs (Bastide et al. 13). Under the rule of Jean-Claude Duvalier (1971-1986), Haitian migration to France increased, along with that to North America (Mooney 5). As Margarita Mooney noted, very few studies have been done on this second wave of emigration.¹ According to censuses of residents who were not naturalized French citizens, the Haitian population more than doubled between 1982 and 1990, and jumped from 4,724 to over 12,000, most of them settling in Paris’s suburban area (INSEE). Taking into account the fact that such censuses do not include undocumented people, which often represent twice as many people, nor naturalized French citizens, an estimated total

number of 30,000 Haitian residents in the early 1990s is probably more accurate (Delachet-Guyon).

In the late 1980s, when Laferrière’s first novel came out in France, René Depestre had just won several literary prizes for his third novel, *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, including the prestigious Renaudot. He was thus the most well known Haitian writer in France.² In 1979, *Le Monde* had already described Depestre as “the most celebrated Haitian poet, with Davertige” (Bosquet). Ten years later, in an AFP article reporting on the Renaudot literary prize Depestre’s novel garnered in November 1988, the author was called “one of the great names of Caribbean literature, with Martinican poet Aimé Césaire” (“Le prix Renaudot au Haïtien René Depestre”). This last report effectively sets the scene of the late 1980s: Haitians were, like writers from Martinique or Guadeloupe, grouped in the category of “Caribbean authors.”

From an older generation, Depestre was much more engaged in politics than Laferrière and exhibited a very different literary style and influence. Arrested in Haiti in 1946 for being one of the leaders of the revolutionary student movement that overthrew President Lescot, Depestre was sent to prison and later in exile in France, where he studied at la Sorbonne and met intellectuals of the Négritude movement. Expelled from several countries due to his political engagement, he spent 10 years traveling across

---

² Up until December 2018, over 750 articles have been written on René Depestre, while half this number have focused on Jean Metellus, and less than 150 on Jean-Claude Charles, which gives us an idea of how popular or publicized these writers were.
continents, from Austria to Brazil and Chile before settling in Cuba for 20 years and later
coming back to France in 1978. As a poet and novelist, Depestre’s work was highly
influenced by Cuban Alejo Carpentier’s magical realism, much like fellow Haitian writer
Jacques Stephen Alexis. Their work, influenced by Latin American literature, along with
that of authors like Jacques Roumain and literary movements like *indigénisme* that
emerged in the first part of the 20th century, broke with the earlier tradition of Haitian
literature that had dominated for a decade, also called “bovaysme.”

Indeed, Haitian writers were first marked by French literary models and for a
long time strived to mimic them. As Max Dominique declared, until the early 20th
century, the ideal of Haitian poets was to make Haitian literature a branch of French
literature. Highly influenced by the French clergy that ruled the educative system in
Haiti, the Haitian elite was trained in a Eurocentric fashion and Paris was its cultural
center until the U.S. occupation in 1915. Even the most nationalistic Haitian writers of
the early 20th century, such as Anténor Firmin or Louis Joseph Janvier, were eager to be
recognized by their French counterparts. Léon-François Hoffmann argued that while
writing and nationalism were closely linked in Haiti, publishing in Paris led Haitian
writers to be recognized as equals to French intellectuals: “In Haiti, being published has
traditionally acted as a patriotic act, especially when being published in Paris served as a
way to show that Haitian intellectuals were equal to those from the spiritual metropole.
Any published author earned their fellow citizens’ respect, but to be published in France ensured their admiration” (10).

Depestre’s publishing trajectory in France reveals the traditional way Black authors integrated the French book market in the second part of the 20th century. His first poetic works were not published by mainstream or prestigious publishers like Gallimard but appeared alongside those of Caribbean and African writers in the catalogs of specialized niche publishers Seghers and Présence Africaine. Founded in 1944 by war resistant Pierre Seghers, Depestre’s first publishing house focused on poetry and featured authors like Paul Eluard and Louis Aragon, but also African writers like Ivorian Bernard Dadié. As for Présence Africaine, which published two of Depestre’s poetry collections in 1956 and 1967, it was first a journal, founded in 1947 by Alioune Diop, which became a publishing house as well two years later. As the first of its kind in France, Présence Africaine’s editorial project was to primarily speak to Africa’s youth and to analyze Europe’s relationship with the rest of the world by taking Africa as an example (Diop 12). As a publishing house, its goal was similar: it aimed to give a voice to Black authors, to circulate their works and those of Africanists in France and French-speaking Africa, and to promote anti-colonial and postcolonial theories.

Depestre’s first poetry collection to be published in Paris in 1951 by Seghers, *Végétations de clarté*, came out only a few years after Présence Africaine was founded and Léopold Sedar Senghor’s *Anthologie de la poésie nègre et malgache* came out. Senghor’s
work revealed Aimé Césaire’s seminal Cahier d’un retour au pays natal to the world and effectively launched the Négritude literary movement, in part due to Sartre’s controversial preface “Orphée Noir.” Most significantly, Végétations de clarté was introduced by a foreword by Aimé Césaire. Written by one of the most influential Black intellectuals of that time, the preface turned Césaire into a patron, presented Depestre as a participant in the broader discussion of African diaspora consciousness, and ultimately inscribed his work in the anti-colonial movement. Due to the power of mediation of such paratext, Césaire’s foreword directed the reception of Depestre’s work in metropolitan France.

Close to three decades later, Depestre turned to writing novels and his first work, Le mât de cocagne (1979), attracted the attention of France’s most prestigious publishing house Gallimard, which would later publish Alléluia pour une femme-jardin in 1981 and Hadriana dans tous mes rêves in 1988. Depestre’s switch to Gallimard in 1979 shifted his work’s metropolitan reception, acted as a consecration of his literary talent as a novelist, and allowed him to win the 1988 Renaudot literary prize, traditionally awarded to the most prestigious houses only. While his first novel, Le mât de cocagne – which introduced many mainstream French readers to his work and removed it from the niche it occupied – increased Depestre’s visibility in the French book market, its iconographic paratext nevertheless marketed the writer as a specifically Caribbean author.
Like other prestigious French publishing houses, Gallimard traditionally features minimalistic book covers. Contrary to Anglophone publishers like those in the United States or England who started illustrating book covers in the 1950s, simple covers have long been seen as tokens of elegance and seriousness in France. Before World War I, most publishers were not interested in creating specific visual identities. The Nouvelle Revue française, which soon became inseparable from Gallimard starting in 1911, was the first one to display its now iconic cream-colored cover with a red and black frame and a red title while all other publishers featured the same yellow cover and black title.3

Depestre’s first novel, however, did not display Gallimard’s traditional minimalistic cover but featured an illustrated dust jacket, much like Laferrière’s Belfond cover did in 1989. Le mât de cocagne’s cover displayed vibrant colors and images: a half-naked dark skinned man was climbing up a multicolored pole, from which were hanging a machine gun, a blue military costume, and a dollar bill. Below him, lush tropical vegetation and animals stood out against blue waters and a clear sky.

---

3 For more information, see Jean Tardieu’s analysis of French publishing history, which shows the evolution of the visual aspect of the book as an object and its importance for publishers.
With its palm trees, colorful parrot and gigantic flowers and leaves, this seemingly hand-painted scene introduced the reader to the novel’s magical realism challenging the accepted reality by mixing a realistic view of the world with fantastic elements. However, to readers unfamiliar with the genre, it also referred to a more mainstream western tropical imaginary: that of luxuriant rainforests and heavenly islands.

Although no other novel by Depestre published by Gallimard afterwards would exhibit such an exoticized dust jacket, it illuminated a practice that was widespread at that time, especially for mass market and pocket books: that of using images on the covers of Caribbean and African authors’ books. Indeed, while being published by Gallimard no longer classified him as a Black writer or one engaged in cultural and political Pan-Africanist issues, the publisher nevertheless chose to use the visual paratext to make Depestre’s origins explicit, and thus to define the way his work would circulate in France. In doing so, Gallimard also indirectly contributed to setting the
context in which Laferrière and Comment would be received a few years later, and presented Depestre as the Haitian writer against whom Laferrière would first measure himself.

### 3.2 Images & Tropes of Haiti

In the summer of 1999, ten years after its first publication in France, Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer was edited in France for the third time. As Laferrière put it the following year, “I believe the book has a chance, this time, because it is the first time it is part of a global publishing project and not a desirable object asked to perform on its own” (J’écris 178-179). Indeed, instead of starting with Comment, Le Serpent à Plumes director Pierre Astier and “Motifs” collection director Pierre Bisiou decided to change the chronological order of Laferrière’s initial publishing and treat the controversial novel as part of a bundled release of seven books over the course of five years.

Bisiou first approached Laferrière at the Montreal book fair in 1993, where he was doing research for an issue of Le Serpent à Plumes on Canada, which at that time was still a literary journal (personal interview). Five years later, they released Le charme des après-midi sans fin and Pays sans chapeau followed in the early 1999. After publishing Comment in the summer of 1999, they released Le cri des oiseaux fous and La chair du maître in 2000, L’odeur du café in 2001, and both the first edition of Cette grenade dans la main du
jeune Nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit ? in 2002 and its mass market version the following year.

Releasing Comment in the middle, after two of Laferrière’s most “Haitian” and least provocative books, revealed the collection director’s choice to not capitalize on its openly controversial effect. Rather, it evinced Le Serpent à Plumes’ strategic decision to include it within a curated ensemble and to offer it to potentially already seasoned readers who would have previously discovered Laferrière through much less provocative novels. As Pierre Bisiou confirmed, “the idea was not to exploit a joke but to make a literary decision, to first establish Laferrière as a writer and then to release Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer“ (personal interview). As Dany Laferrière declared in one of the speeches he gave for his induction to the Academy, the transition from well-known author to author that people actually read required planning (“Dany Laferrière à l’Académie française” 28). While, according to Bisiou, in a way Comment was Laferrière’s best book because it had launched him on the literary scene, it was also not his best written one, and as such it would have been a mistake to publish it first (personal interview).

The most striking aspect of the selection of Laferrière’s texts that Le Serpent à Plumes published is the relative spatial homogeneity of the narratives. In five books out of seven, the plot is set in Haiti. At that time, Laferrière had also published Le goût des jeunes filles, Eroshima, and Chronique de la dérive douce, with the last two taking place in
urban North American spaces. By not relying on Comment’s powerful marketing buzz potential and leaving out Eroshima, Pierre Astier and Pierre Bisiou showed that their intent was not to portray Laferrière as a provocateur or a Quebecois writer, nor to use sex as a selling point. Even more importantly, this text selection and the books’ packaging illuminated the publishers’ strategy to release novels that fell into a more easily digestible and marketable category for a metropolitan French readership; that of Caribbean literature, and, more broadly speaking, “francophone” literature.

The mediating process of Laferrière’s novels in France started even before his books’ packaging. The simple act of publishing with Le Serpent à Plumes contributed to influencing his novels’ reception as “francophone.” Indeed, in the 1990s, Laferrière’s books were not published by a mainstream publisher nor an high-scale house like his future publisher Grasset, which offered a wide variety of genres and authors, but by Le Serpent à Plumes, a small-scale publishing house whose history and list of authors illustrated the editors’ interest in non-metropolitan literary works. Before becoming a publishing house in 1993, it was first a literary journal created in 1988 by Pierre Astier. It dedicated several issues to literatures from various linguistic and geographic areas like Canada, Latin America, or the United States. In 1994, the paperback collection “Motifs” was born. It is in this collection which Pierre Bisiou started directing after its 50th title that most of Laferrière’s novels appeared.
Le Serpent à Plumes did not have the same mediating power as other specialized publishing houses like Présence Africaine or L’Harmattan, which strongly directed the reception of literary works as militant and more specifically “African,” and were perceived as constraining literary “ghettos” (Cévaër 185). But it nevertheless held a reputation to primarily publish “francophone” works and as such, it also influenced Dany Laferrière’s reception.

The “Motifs” collection put a particular emphasis on the book covers. Like the title of the collection indicated, Bisiou and his collaborators wanted them to convey an idea of patterns and textures, as opposed to the more traditional colors and designs that most respected French publishing house sported (Bisiou, personal interview). In order to do that, they hired Armenian-born fashion designer Karen Petrossian who had never worked in the book industry. The creative process was a collaborative work; Bisiou would give a short summary of the text to Petrossian, who then would choose patterns and fabrics and would present them to Bisiou for approval. As a pocketbook collection, “Motifs” did not release any new text, which gave Bisiou’s team a lot more creative freedom in terms of packaging (Bisiou, personal interview). As he declared, unless authors wanted to collaborate, they did not have to work or “negotiate” with them to reach an agreement on the cover or back cover text, which allowed them to create them as they wished.
Several of Laferrière’s covers from the late 1990s and 2000s exhibited patterns and hand-drawn images that were unmistakably perceived as Caribbean and evoked an exotic Otherness vis-a-vis metropolitan France. *Le charme des après-midi sans fin*, published in 1998, featured palm trees, a small cabin with two barrels and strokes of orange, red, brown, blue and green.

![Figure 23: Le charme des après-midi sans fin, Le Serpent à Plumes, 1998](image)

*Pays sans chapeau*, released in 1999, displayed a pattern made of palm trees and dark blue brushes. Several pairs of mysterious eyes were watching, exhibiting a range of emotions: from curiosity to fear, sadness, and potentially bad intentions.

![Figure 24: Pays sans chapeau, Le Serpent à Plumes, 1999](image)
In *Pays sans chapeau*, readers follow the main character’s return to Haiti after spending twenty years in exile. They are thrown into his experience of two spaces, the “real world” and the “dreamed world,” which structure the narrative. In stark contrast with the previous, significantly more joyful cover, the mysterious cover seemed to evoke a sense of uneasiness, mystery, and confusion. Yet, key tropical tropes like palm trees were still present and overtly signaled metropolitan readers that the narrative was set in an exotic Elsewhere.

*Le cri des oiseaux fous*, released two years later, featured a different design, closer to *Le charme des après-midi sans fin*’s cover.

![Figure 25: Le cri des oiseaux fous, Le Serpent à Plumes, 2000](image)

All elements were carefully colored, which made the cover look like a collage or a piece of fabric cut randomly, matching the type of design Bisiou aimed for. However, apart from the large sun that was not on the cover of *Le charme des après-midi sans fin*, both covers displayed the exact same elements: a small cabin and the iconic palm tree, colored with bright shades of orange, red, brown, blue and green.
In a similar vein, these elements also appeared on the cover of *L’odeur du café*, published in 2001, which featured a succession of colorful houses and green palm trees, put together in a collage technique.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 26: L’odeur du café, Le Serpent à Plumes, 2001**

With their frank delimitations between elements, these two covers, even more so than the previous ones, seem to refer to Haitian art, also called naïve art. For non-initiated readers basing their judgment according to Eurocentric standards of artistic craft, the simplistic style, vivid colors evenly applied, and traditional settings that Haitian artists like those of Saint-Soleil painted can evoke a folkloric practice far removed from a more traditionally accepted notion of sophisticated artistic style. This is even more apparent on the cover of a volume published by Le Serpent à Plumes in 2002 grouping together three novels written by Caribbean writers, including Laferrière, and revealingly titled *Le grand cri Caraïbe*, alluding to Aimé Césaire’s famous “grand cri nègre.”
In this special publication, Laferrière’s *Le cri des oiseaux fous* appeared alongside Guadeloupean Gisèle Pineau’s *La grande drive des esprits* (1993) and Cuban Reinaldo Arenas’ *Adios a mamá* (1993). Here, the iconographic discourse clearly infantilized the narratives and mediated their reception as children’s literature. Indeed, the cover featured a collage of palm trees, barrels, goats, and dark-skinned farmers simplistically sketched out, which evoked rudimentary craft. Moreover, the authors’ names and books’ titles appeared on a school black board, written in multicolored and childish font. Although the novels grouped together were not written with a young audience in mind nor initially marketed as such when they were released, the childish visual elements catch the readers’ attention and convey that impression.

Additionally, this collection grouping narratives written by three writers from different parts of the Caribbean and displaying the same type of visuals as those on Laferrière’s novels offers further insights into the operating mode of Le Serpent à Plumes’ marketing strategy. Indeed, while “Motifs” collection director Bisiou declared
that in the late 1990s he did not think of covers in terms of potential commercial benefits but merely as aesthetic elements of the book, he nevertheless recognized the impact of certain book covers on sales. When talking about *Pays sans chapeau*, which did not sell as much as the previous books, Bisiou declared that “the cover played a role [in the low number of sales], it was dark and a bit too sad, it did not entice people to buy the book” (personal interview).

Laferrière’s covers presented a stereotypical vision of the Caribbean as a place where nature flourished, and a traditional and relaxed way of life. However, they were not the only ones to display exoticized images, and *Le Serpent à Plumes* was not the only publisher to use such visuals. While Laferrière, in his own words, wished to avoid “folklorization” by differentiating himself and his works from fellow Caribbean writers’ traditional topics and concerns (Chartrand), and, in broader terms, from Caribbean literature that “tastes like tropical fruit” (“Ce livre”), he shared the same iconographic discourse with them. Indeed, in the 1990s, many other French publishers, especially those specializing in pocketbook versions, displayed similar exoticizing images on books written by French Caribbean authors like Maryse Condé, Raphaël Confiant, or Patrick Chamoiseau.

A quick look at some of these writers’ book covers reveals publishers’ use of palm trees, painted islands, tropical fruits, and dark-skinned hatted men on their packaging. On Maryse Condé’s *En attendant le bonheur*, published by Robert Laffont in...
1997, a small square photograph placed at the center of the cover presents the reader with an island landscape: a pagoda in blue waters is tied to a palm tree whose leaves stand out against the blue sky.

Figure 28: En attendant le bonheur, Robert Laffont, 1997

Similar elements are featured on the bright-colored cover of Raphaël Confiant’s *Eau de Café*, published by Le Livre de Poche in 1993. An island appears in the distance while a harbor, simplistically sketched out, is on the forefront. Street vendors, men and women, are gathered in the shade of a red roof and sell fruits and spices. Some women carry buckets on their heads while men wear straw hats.
This clichéd representation of Caribbean men is a recurring motif of Patrick Chamoiseau’s covers. From 1991 to 2003, it is present on four of his books published in pocketbook versions by Folio, along with other clichés like palm-trees, tropical fruits (bananas, pineapples), and the madras fabric.

Figure 30: Solibo Magnifique, Gallimard (Folio), 1991
Figure 31: Texaco, Gallimard (Folio), 1994

Figure 32: Chronique des sept misères, Gallimard (Folio), 1997
French publishers started displaying photographs or colorful hand-drawn images on book covers in the 1970s following the emergence of marketing, which coincided with the creation of pocketbooks. Because of its smaller size, affordable cost and large-scale distribution, the pocketbook became a more widely accessible product that desacralized the book-object for commercial purposes. As Gérard Genette declared:

"Today, therefore, “pocket-size” is basically no longer a format but a vast set or nebula of series (…), and the series emblem, much more than size, conveys two basic meanings. One is purely economic: the guarantee (variable, and sometimes illusory) of a better price. The other is indeed “cultural,” and (…) paratextual: the assurance of a selection based on revivals, that is, reissues. (21)"

By turning the book into an object for mass consumption, the pocketbook market directly opposed the traditional elitist vision of literature. According to Theodor Adorno, the rise of pocketbooks embodied a decadence of literature which notably manifested itself through the evolution of book covers that turned into advertisements (*Notes sur la littérature*). With this statement, Adorno effectively foresaw the increasing
commercial power and marketing purpose of the book’s packaging. In light of the material shift that literary production has undertaken since, his statement resonates even more powerfully nowadays.

At first sight, set in the French socio-cultural context of the turn of the 21st century, the images on the covers of works by French Caribbean writers may be perceived as references to the relaxing holiday venues that Caribbean islands represented for metropolitan residents who wanted to escape winter temperatures. However, when analyzed through a diachronic lens, the images take on significant neocolonial meanings. What these covers tell us is that the Caribbean at large – Cuba, Haiti, or French departments – was represented according to similar exoticizing tropes.

As Nadège Veldwachter showed in her analysis of French Caribbean authors’ book covers, in the late 1980s and 1990s, metropolitan publishers established a specific iconographic discourse around texts from Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guyana. By using specific terms to differentiate between metropolitan literature identified as French literature and non-metropolitan literature called “francophone,” the French literary system drew a line between what was considered national and what was not, which “implicitly associate[d] the francophone text with a foreign body” (172). This differentiation is a remnant of colonialism that takes full meaning in light of the way literature from the French Caribbean is packaged.
In 1946, the constitution of the 4th Republic changed the status of Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Guyana from colonies to French departments. As such, legally and in theory, their status became the same as any other metropolitan departments. In practice, however, publishers, booksellers, and literary critics used the label “francophone” to present Caribbean literature as distant and foreign to the metropole. This separation between what was perceived as national and what was not, despite its legal status, manifested itself through iconographic discourse. As Velwachter put it, “francophone texts are paraded on book covers” (174). By using stereotyped imagery and grouping French Caribbean literatures with those from former African colonies, editorial practices revealed the social tensions that underpinned French society following decolonization, the “intranational” colonized status of the French Antilles (173), and France’s reconfigured problematic relationship with the Other.

Although Veldwachter’s study focused on Guadeloupean and Martinican authors such as Condé and Chamoiseau, her statement on the performative function of French Caribbean book covers as spectacles of the Other also applied to Haitian literature in France. As Laferrière declared in 2000: “in the word ‘Caribbean,’ we immediately see all the ingredients: local color, evergreen landscapes, dictatorship, colonial dependence. It is the Other’s gaze that operates” (J’écris 107). But despite his wish “to avoid that gaze first and foremost,” (107), Laferrière quickly joined the
“francophone,” and more specifically “Caribbean,” category through various editorial and marketing practices.

The western gaze on both the texts and the Caribbean region echoes the concept of the exotic as a “a clean cut between what is endogenous [familiar, close] and exogenous [foreign, far]” (Schon 13). In their 1989 Eloge de la créolité manifesto, the same Caribbean authors Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, along with Jean Bernabé, also drew attention to the issue of exoticism and defined the practice in literature as writing for the Other. In both cases, however, the Other and the foreign are not to be understood as shifting depending on the position of the self, but rather in a specifically Eurocentric way. Indeed, “profoundly influenced by the advances and the retreats of colonialism” (Moura, Lire l’exotisme 13), the Other or the Exotic have come to automatically mean “unfamiliar to westerners.” Indeed, Jean-Marc Moura defines the exotic as “the representation of men and societies that do not belong to Europe” (Lire l’exotisme 14) and “the western representation of other cultures - called primitive, Oriental, or the Third World” (Exotisme et lettres francophones 11), while Roger Célestin describes it “as a relation between (Western) Self and (exotic) Other” (7). In line with this European conception of exoticism and its link with colonialism, the lush island nations of the Caribbean and non-white people became figures of the exotic and permeated the French imaginary in long-lasting ways.
In the marketing sphere of French literary production and consumption, the representation of the Caribbean as foreign on Laferrière’s and fellow Caribbean writers’ book covers gave metropolitan (or western) readers the opportunity to get immersed in a text with unfamiliar references. However, the use of similar tropes for narratives written by Haitian, French Caribbean, and Cuban authors also revealed a tendency in the French literary sphere to group together literatures from the Caribbean region as a whole. Through the same movement, this widespread representational practice achieves a double effect. By blurring novels’ creative or poetic specificities into a broader category solely based on their authors’ origins and exploiting an already internalized evocative iconography, Caribbean literature – and in broader terms, “francophone” literature – becomes more easily opposable to metropolitan literature. Ultimately, this strategy eases metropolitan readers’ rapport with the text: while covers mediate texts’ reception as foreign and exotic, the same narratives are not completely foreign since readers are already familiar with the imagery featured on the covers.

In addition to determining the marketing and consumption of literary goods, these exotic tropes illuminate stereotypical views inherited from previously established systems of representation of the colonial Other that have remained alive in collective memories. Created during the colonial period, they reproduce a prejudiced discourse on colonized lands and people that also encompasses Africa, a discourse that evolved throughout the 20th century and was adapted to the reconfigured French society of the
post-decolonization period. Laferrière was very aware of this tendency to group Black authors together, including himself: “it’s crazy, I am usually put together with Caribbean or African authors even though I don’t know that literature very well” (J’écris 88). Reflecting on the practice, he declared: “Those who place me in that group follow a racial principle according to which all people with the same skin color probably also share the same culture,” before erupting: “it’s a shame!” (J’écris 88).

Comment’s cover, from the same time period, exemplified this French imagery exploiting multi-regional colonial clichés and racialized stereotypes. For once, no sign of palm trees or small cabins. On a bright yellow background, several cut-out figures whose heads were seemingly stuck on colorful spikes evinced a traditional colonial and racist representation of the Black. Simplistically drawn, each figure displays an oversized smile with red lips, two wide-opened round eyes, and an afro.

Figure 34: Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, Le Serpent à Plumes, 1999
With its prejudiced representation of Black faces, the cover can be seen as an overt reference the infamous advertisement for Banania, which highly contributed to inscribing the racist and stereotyped figure of the laughing Black into the French advertising imaginary, and to which Laferrière referred in a chapter title from *Comment*: “Ma vieille Remington s’envoie en l’air en sifflotant y a bon banania” (translated as “My Old Remington Kicks Up Its Heels While Whistling Oh Des Watermelons”). In 1915, the first advertising poster for the chocolate-flavor powdered breakfast drink brand, drawn by Giacomo de Andreis, represented a laughing Senegalese skirmisher wearing his parade outfit and eating chocolate in the African savanna. The ad, drawing its inspiration from colonial stereotypes, was the perfect racist representation of the “good Negro,” both savage and loyal. His facial expression, featuring wide-opened eyes and white teeth purposefully contrasted with his dark skin. Reinforced by the “Y a bon” slogan, which alluded to Africans’ basic knowledge of French language, his body language was also shown as his only mode of expression.

At the time of its creation, this ad exploiting racial stereotypes was not the first one in France, but its long-lasting use had a significant impact on French imaginary. Indeed, until the late 1970s, the chocolate powder brand used variations of the same racialized image to sell its products, which became a classic, and instituted the archetype of the “Y a bon Banania” Negro in French advertisement and imaginary. Despite Léopold Sédar Senghor’s famous revolt against it in his 1940 “Poème Liminaire,” in
which he wrote that he would “rip all the Banania laughters off the walls of France” (translated by Rosello 5), variations of the same image remained on Banania’s packaging for 30 more years.\(^4\) As such, they also remained associated with Africans and, by extension, African diasporic individuals throughout the decolonization period and the subsequent waves of immigration from the newly instituted French departments of Guadeloupe, Martinique, or Guyana, and from former colonies.

In the 1990s, concurrently with these Othering visual representations of the Caribbean, the shifting classification of French Caribbean literature, which sometimes appeared under the “French” label and at other times was classified as “foreign” in bookstores and publishers’ catalogs illuminated its evolving categorization and uneasy status in the French literary sphere and national psyche. A quick look at the *Bulletin critique du livre français*, a monthly critical and bibliographical journal meant to give an overview of French publishing through book reviews in many disciplines, provides insights into the problematical labeling practices.

In 1992, while Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* appeared in the “French novels” category, the reviewer nevertheless reduced the novel’s aesthetic, poetic, and universal power by recommending it to “readers interested in Creole literature” (“Chamoiseau, Patrick: Texaco”). Defined as such, *Texaco* found itself confined to the margin of French

\(^4\) For more information on the representations of Blacks in French advertisement and public spaces, see, among others, Bachollet et al., 1994, and Vincke, 1995.
literature, which, contrary to Caribbean literature’s specificity, was implicitly understood as far-reaching and universal. That same year, Raphaël Confiand’s *Eau de café* was reviewed under the same terms: although it appeared in “French novels,” the critic recommended it to “well-informed lovers of poetic exotism” (“Confiand, Raphaël: Eau de café”), at the same time delimiting its reception and diffusion potential to a very narrow category and defining it as exotic.

Six years later, in 1998, the differentiation between metropolitan and non-metropolitan literature within the “French novels” category materialized in two separate categories. No longer listed under the “French literature” header, Chamoiseau’s *Elmire des sept bonheurs* was listed as “foreign literature in French” (“Chamoiseau, Patrick: Elmire des sept bonheurs”). This new categorization reflected the “intranational” divide between metropolitan France and the French Antilles. By comparing Chamoiseau to fellow Martinican Aimé Césaire but also Haitian Jacques Stephen Alexis, the reviewer grouped all Caribbean writers together, blurring their creative differences under a standardizing classification.

A separate category, created the following year, no longer explicitly referred to French Caribbean literature as foreign, but grouped it with literature from other former colonies and encompassed several continents. In 1999 and 2000, Guadeloupean Maryse Condé, Martinican Chamoiseau, Glissant, and Haitian Jean Métellus and Lyonel

As Veldwachter argued, the integration of non-metropolitan texts written in French into the French literary capital entails a reconceptualization of the French literary space because it redefines the relationship between the center and the periphery, not only in the aesthetic sense, but also in its economic and commercial approach (219). And despite writers’ attempts to break free from the western gaze and mediation of their work, they are bound to comply with the rules dictated by the French publishers who have control over the market. As such, Caribbean writers need to meet the readers’ demands for exotic writing if they want their work to circulate. Ultimately, the stereotyped packaging and standardized branding of non-metropolitan texts such as those by Laferrière reveal the ongoing cultural and economic domination of France in the literary space, and channel French nationalism.

3.3 From “Francophone” to “Immortal”: The Making of a Brand

In 2003, Le Rocher bought Le Serpent à Plumes and its founding editors Pierre Astier and Pierre Bisiou parted with the new management team. Many of the authors they had signed, including Laferrière, subsequently left the publishing house, and found a new home with Grasset, one of the oldest and largest French publishers. Although Laferrière’s switch was not premeditated, its immediate effect was to increase his
visibility and to set him on the path of a broader recognition. Interestingly, Dany Laferrière and Grasset shared the same overt interest in marketing. Indeed, while Grasset is one of the most prestigious houses in France, Bernard Grasset was “the first to use all resources coming from advertising and press relations strategies to sell his books” (Milosevic). Over the years, the publisher turned its signature yellow cover into a key element and trademark of his commercial strategy, and also explored alternative marketing venues to increase his popularity and sales. Traditional and innovative at the same time, Grasset allowed the publishing industry to enter “a new media and advertising age” (Milosevic).

The evolution of the packaging of Laferrière’s works both mirrored the author’s rise in popular and literary consecration and contributed to his legitimacy. While Laferrière was first packaged as a specifically francophone writer, his new publisher Grasset’s packaging evolved in tandem with Laferrière’s recognition as an awarded best-selling author and French Academy member. From evocative images taken from the narratives’ film adaptations, Grasset switched to a heavy author-focused strategy. Ultimately, Grasset’s marketing of Laferrière’s works over ten years illuminates the central role of marketing and packaging in both reproducing and creating value, as well as turning the writer’s name into a brand.

***
When Grasset took over after Le Serpent à Plumes, the publishing house did not follow the order in which Laferrière’s books had been originally published in Quebec but caught up with books that had never been released in France. In 2005, Grasset started with a revised version of Le goût des jeunes filles, which was Laferrière’s fourth book, and had been adapted for the screen the year before. Instead of displaying Grasset’s traditional yellow cover, the cover featured a photograph taken from the film of the same name.

![Figure 35: Le goût des jeunes filles, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2005](image)

Grasset’s decision to feature an illustration, as opposed to the usual plain cover, evinces the publisher’s ambition to catch the reader’s attention by relying on the evocative power of the photograph. Contrary to Le Serpent à Plumes’ covers, however, the image did not exploit overtly exoticizing images of the Caribbean. No palm-tree, no beach, and no traditional house in sight. In the photograph, two Black women were standing by a black convertible, one of them was drinking and seemingly talking to the
other who was turning her back to us. Nothing on the cover signaled the reader that the narrative took place in Haiti specifically. However, it was clear from the women’s fashion that it was set outside of the metropole, in a quite distant past. Most significantly, the back cover, as another paratextual element to the novel, firmly set the narrative in Haiti at the time of the Duvalier dictatorship: “Haiti, 1968. A young teenager looks out the window of his family house. Across the street, young women. (…) They are full of joy and liveliness in the prevailing misery. Tyrant Duvalier is in power, Tontons Macoutes are roaming the streets of Port-au-Prince like sharks.”

Grasset’s decision to publish an expanded version of Le goût des jeunes filles (instead of Chronique de la dérive douce, for instance) sheds light on the higher commercial potential of narratives set in Haiti, especially during the dictatorship, vis-à-vis the day-to-day life of newly arrived immigrants in Montreal. It is particularly revealing that Laferrière doubled the length of the book and integrated text that cut the flow of the original narrative. In its original version, written as a movie script, Le goût tells the story of the weekend that Vieux spent at his neighbors’, a group of young women, in 1971 Port-au-Prince. Its expanded version, on the other hand, includes excerpts from the journal of one of the girls as well as her reflections on politics and social inequalities under the Duvalier regime. By adding such a didactic element, Laferrière played up his insider status to cater the novel specifically for his new French audience while also presenting himself as a more overtly engaged Haitian writer.
Indeed, despite *Le goût*’s generic branding as a “novel,” narratives tackling the political situation of Haiti corresponded better to readers’ expectations of Haitians’ writing on political oppression and the experience of dictatorship that had sent so many into exile. Before *Le goût*, the Duvalier dictatorial regime had already appeared in implicit or explicit terms in many French-published Haitian novels such as René Depestre’s *Le mât de Cocagne* (1979), Jean Metellus’ *Louis Vortex* (1992), or Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *Amour, Colère, Folie*, published by Gallimard in 1968, and whose inflammatory content led the writer’s family to burn all the books they could find in Haiti in fear of retaliation from Duvalier. Before them, Jacques Stephen Alexis and Jacques Roumain had also interwoven political criticism in their work, and were active members of the Communist party. With such a tradition of political and social engagement, Haitian writers in France were traditionally seen and presented as politically engaged, and it is within this pre-conceived context that Grasset situated Laferrière’s novel and mediated its reception.

One year later in 2006, Grasset released a second book by Laferrière: *Vers le sud*. As an edited and extended version of Laferrière’s novel *La chair du maître* published in Quebec in 1992, the book was simultaneously published in Paris and Montreal following the release of the film version. This time, however, the cover featured Grasset’s typical minimalistic typography and plain yellow color. Its marketing element was a partial dust jacket hiding the lower part of the cover that displayed part of the film poster.
Released only a few months apart, the narrative and its film version, nominated for several categories in the Venise film festival at that time, were both featured in newspapers’ cultural sections, hence increasing each other’s visibility. While the film version of *Le goût des jeunes filles* had been neither a commercial nor a critical success, *Vers le sud*, starring Rampling, drew critics’ attention and won the Marcello Mastroianni and CinemAvvenire (Cinema For Peace) awards in the 2005 Venise Film Festival, while being also nominated in the Golden Lion category.

![Vers le sud, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2006](image)

**Figure 36: Vers le sud, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2006**
The image starred an older woman, Charlotte Rampling, looking back and smiling at a black man at the beach. It clearly represented the focus of the novel and film: North-American sexual tourism in Haiti in the 1970s. This image had a significant evocative power. Rampling’s expression of lust combined with the black man’s nudity and sandy beaches in the background shed light on famous racialized tropes. Black bodies and Haiti as locations of western desire were not new. In the 1970s, while many Haitian intellectuals were fleeing the Duvalier dictatorship and settling in Montreal, Quebec tourism to Haiti was rising, and with it, sex tourism too; “for Quebec, ‘Haiti [was] in the process of becoming our holiday brothel’” (Lacaille). As a prominent member of the “image production industry” (Harvey 290), tourism produced and circulated iconographic representations of far-away postcolonial destinations and individuals, drawing upon mental and mythical western imaginaries. Essentialized, sexualized and exoticized images were widespread in art and advertising.
In France, people did not particularly associate Haiti with sexual tourism, but as part of the Caribbean region, the island was conceived as a distant and paradisiacal place. As Sean Mills stated, Haiti, along with other Caribbean islands were receiving “the projected desires of the global north,” and “this global political economy of desire and commodification of black bodies increasingly began leaving a mark in the realm of culture” (207). Rampling’s lusty gaze on a black man symbolized the western consumption of Haiti, and more broadly the Caribbean: the image portrayed the island as a vanished Eden where tourists could consume both individuals and landscapes through observation and imagination.

The dust jacket also played on readers’ stereotyped imaginary of the so-called “Third World.” The book’s cover located the narrative in a country that was part of the Global South: its title, Vers le sud, combined with the illustration, was particularly revealing. Not only did the cover feature the exotic Elsewhere and Other, but it gave center stage to a Westerner and her encounter with a half-naked local, which metaphorically evoked the encounter between the West and the “Third World.”

The iconographic representation of black bodies as commodities, closely related to the western imaginary of the exotic Elsewhere, can also be found on the pocketbook version of Vers le sud, and that of Le goût des jeunes filles. Released in 2012 by Livre de Poche, Vers le sud’s pocketbook edition strongly alluded to interracial sex and power.
Figure 38: Vers le sud, Le Livre de Poche, 2012

On the cover, the upper body of a black man fills up the frame. Only the bottom part of his face is visible, and the focus is clearly on his naked muscular torso. Two white hands are placed on his bare shoulders in a gesture that suggests the person – most likely a woman – is standing behind him. The image composition and the pose cannot be mistaken: the half-naked – or totally naked, we do not know – black man, whose face is erased, is reduced to his body, and is represented as the white woman’s property.

Folio’s edition of Le goût des jeunes filles, released in 2007, integrated a gendered aspect in the commodification of black bodies. The picture on the cover also features a half-naked Black person, but this time, it is a woman.
Figure 39: Le gout des jeunes filles, Gallimard (Folio), 2007

Like the two black men on the covers of both Vers le sud’s editions, she is clearly sexualized. Her body slightly bent backward; she appears to be dancing. She is wearing a cropped white shirt and several rows of carnival-looking pearl necklaces around her neck, but only part of her body is visible: her legs, head, and arms are cropped out while her stomach is left bare.

What is striking in these three covers is that all Black people featured in the pictures are faceless. Publishers either intentionally cropped their heads out of the frame or chose pictures in which their faces were not visible. In all three cases, they are unrecognizable and anonymous. Black individuals are ripped off of their identity, made secondary and invisible, ultimately represented as disposable commodities.

To go back to Grasset’s packaging, the absence of specific references to Haiti on Vers le sud’s cover underscores the publisher’s strategy to rely on an all-encompassing Caribbean Elsewhere imagery to market the text, which firmly placed Laferrière’s
narrative in the “francophone literature” category. However, it was the last book published by Grasset that displayed such images. It was also the last narrative that was turned into a film. From then on, the partial dust jacket that appeared on each one of Laferrière’s books published by Grasset evolved and evinced progressive changes in Grasset’s marketing strategy over the years. By toning down references to the Caribbean following Laferrière’s growing fame and institutional legitimation in France, it also provided critical insights into the evolution of status of an author first viewed as “francophone,” his progression to “immortal,” and the related editorial practices that both mediated and reflected that change.

In 2008, Grasset published a third book by Laferrière, this time simultaneously with his Quebec publisher Boréal: Je suis un écrivain japonais. Its partial dust jacket did not feature any overtly exoticizing image but that of a crocodile in a bathtub on a plain red background. Possibly a reference to the title’s originality and the publisher’s wish to unsettle readers, this image was reproduced with a different background color in the 2012 French pocketbook version as well as on the whole cover of its Canadian edition.
Figure 40: Je suis un écrivain japonais, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2008

Figure 41: Je suis un écrivain japonais, Boréal, 2009
Not only did the image change, but the text on the back cover was also different. It still positioned Laferrière in the Haitian literary tradition by mentioning Port-au-Prince as the author’s birth place and completely bypassing Quebec, but this time it did not draw overt attention to Haiti in the main paragraphs about the text and the author:

“He’s a writer. What does he do? Above all, nothing. He takes baths. He has dinner with Mr. Mishima. He makes love with Midori. He is famous in Japan. Police is coming. With this diabolically smart, deliciously sensual and irresistibly humorous book, Dany Laferrière makes a successful comeback to fiction writing.”

Grasset’s marketing practice of progressively toning down othering references to Haiti and the Caribbean reached a further point with the 2009 release of Laferrière’s following book, *L’énigme du retour*, simultaneously published by Boréal in Canada. The narrative explored the narrator’s return to Haiti after thirty years in exile in fragments of poetic prose. With its multiple intertextual references to Césaire and Naipaul, *L’énigme*
*du retour* inscribed Laferrière’s work in the Caribbean and signaled Laferrière’s open acceptance of his Caribbean heritage.

Grasset’s packaging of *L’énigme du retour* effectively inaugurated the publisher’s new marketing strategy of Laferrière’s texts, which no longer mediated their reception as “francophone.” Rather than appealing to a clichéd imaginary, Grasset’s new approach focused on the literary persona of Laferrière.

Figure 43: *L’énigme du retour*, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2009

The book’s first dust jacket – which changed after the novel garnered the Médicis literary prize – did not allude to any exotic elsewhere but rather featured a photo of the author leaning against the wall of a half-lit and mysterious-looking hallway. With his hands in his pockets and a serious look on his face, he seems lost in his thoughts, waiting for someone, or for himself to make a decision.

Less than two months later, Laferrière’s book received the prestigious Médicis French literary prize. Each fall, the literary prize season during which the most prestigious prizes are awarded occupies a significant part of the cultural sections of
newspapers and magazines. Goncourt, Médicis, Renaudot and Femina literary prizewinners are announced live on the radio and on TV as the jury meets in upscale hotels where they then receive the laureates. Literary prizewinners thus get quite a lot of attention from media in France, and Laferrière was no exception.

The subsequent changes in packaging that Grasset operated both take further their new strategy to focus on Laferrière and illuminate the importance of literary recognition in assigning symbolic and economic value. Indeed, the original dust jacket was quickly removed following the award and replaced with an eye-catching one featuring the coveted “Prix Médicis” mention in white capital letters on a red background.

![Figure 44: L’énigme du retour, Grasset & Fasquelle, 2009](image)

As a critical commercial tool, *L’énigme du retour*’s new dust jacket highlighted the symbolic capital garnered with the prize and ostensibly presented the author as consecrated by the French literary world in order to ultimately increase his sales.
Prestigious French literary prizes shape the reception of texts and authors in multiple ways. “Consecration, in the form of recognition by autonomous critics, signifies the crossing of a literary border,” wrote Pascale Casanova, adding that “the consecration of a text is the almost magical metamorphosis of an ordinary material into ‘gold,’ into absolute literary value” (World Republic of Letters 126). As James English showed in The Economy of Prestige, literary prizes transfer symbolic capital to both the consecrated novel and its author, and act as proofs of quality for readers who are then more likely to purchase award-winning writers’ novels. Through this process, literary prizes also transfer economic capital to authors and their publishing houses.

Sales statistics for L’énigme du retour from the month of November 2009 show the direct relationship between the Médicis literary prize and book sales. On the day of its award victory, 15,000 copies of Laferrière’s book had already sold in France (Beuze-Méry). According to Edistat, a website for book professionals that collects statistics from 1,200 libraries in France in order to monitor weekly sales and trends in the French book industry, L’énigme du retour appeared in the top 200 best-seller books (across all categories) in France the very same week of its award to peak at 117 and then leave on November 30th. In the category specific to novels, it remained in the top 50 best-sellers for six weeks, even reaching the 29th rank for a week. The book then left the best-seller category on January 2nd, suggesting that it was chosen by many to be offered as a Christmas gift. Despite being relatively short-lived, the presence of L’énigme du retour in
the list of best-seller novels directly after receiving the Prix Médicis is a testament to the economic impact of cultural capital acquired through institutional consecration.


At the same time as it reflected Laferrière’s recognized literary value, Grasset’s packaging also effectively contributed to turning the author into a brand. The following year, as Grasset was releasing Laferrière’s book on the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, *Tout bouge autour de moi*, the dust jacket showcased the author’s name, written in white capital letters like the Prix Médicis. In 2012, the publisher adopted the same strategy for the release of an augmented edition of *Chronique de la dérive douce.*
In addition to showing the consecrating power of the Médicis prize, Grasset’s new marketing strategy to emphasize Dany Laferrière’s name also responded to the evolution of readers’ purchasing practices. Indeed, while according to a survey, the most prominent factor that influenced French readers to buy books in 1994 was their friends’ recommendation (23%), in 2006, it was not the case anymore (Garcia 12). Instead, the prime reason dictating a book purchase was readers’ previous knowledge and
appreciation of authors and their work(s), representing a jump from 11% to 38% in ten years (Garcia 12).

In a 2006 March issue of French weekly magazine on the book industry Livres Hebdo, French journalist Daniel Garcia drew a direct connection between the change in purchasing behavior and marketing, and equated authors with brands: “just like for clothing or food, people look for writers who are like brands, whether because they are safe choices (to like Dan Brown or Anna Gavalda once is to like them forever) or because marketing and advertising did a good job” (12).

In Laferrière’s case, his friendly and easy-going personality which expressed itself best on the radio and on television and had allowed him to quickly become a beloved writer in Quebec also became a fundamental aspect of his “brand” in France. As Laferrière’s fame and media exposure increased, Grasset added a supplementary visual reference to the author on the partial dust jackets of his next books. On Journal d’un écrivain en pyjama and L’art presque perdu de ne rien faire, Laferrière’s name was accompanied by a picture of the author.
The effect the two images produce and the message they send could not be more different, however. On the one hand, the picture on the partial dust jacket of *Journal d’un écrivain en pyjama* seemed to echo Laferrière’s playful title: it featured a wide shot of Laferrière, smiling and caught in movement, with his body slightly bent backward and one of his legs up in the air, as if he was leaving the room. On the other hand, the photograph on *L’art presque perdu de ne rien faire* presented a very different side to the
author. In this medium close-up, Laferrière was no longer facetious but appeared very serious and poised. Facing the reader at a slight angle with his hand lightly touching his cheek, he looked the reader straight in the eye, without a smile.

This different packaging can be explained. A major event happened between the release of the two books: Laferrière was elected to the French Academy in December 2013. By publishing L’art presque perdu de ne rien faire three years after its original release in Quebec and by featuring it in the blue collection – the editor’s pick –, Grasset clearly meant to capitalize on the author’s new status as an Academy member, which appeared in an italics subheading: “de l’Académie française.” Therefore, it is no coincidence that the image displayed on the cover featured Laferrière as a more serious-looking man than that on Journal d’un écrivain en pyjama; this new pose highlighted qualities that were deemed more appropriate for Academy members. In addition to appealing to the usual Laferrière readers, L’art presque perdu de ne rien faire certainly aimed to attract a different audience who wanted to discover the new “Académicien.”

Finally, Laferrière’s collection of texts published in France in 2016, Mythologies américaines, strengthened the author’s status as a brand or commercial product in himself. This time the partial dust jacket did not feature Laferrière’s name or picture, but highlighted his most notorious book and the Remington 22 typewriter that the author allegedly used to type five of his books and often mentioned in his work.
In Laferrière’s own words, “I must have typed five books with this Remington 22, but it is present, as a character, in at least seven of my books” (Badie). As a kind of anthology, *Mythologies américaines* brought together one unpublished text and four of his previous works, including his first novel, *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, in which the typewriter is first introduced. By specifically advertising this novel and the typewriter on the dust jacket, Grasset directly addressed readers who were already familiar with Laferrière’s work.

Grasset also came up with a new slogan by introducing the concept of “romans de la Remington 22” (“Remington 22 novels”). While before the release of this anthology, Grasset often used “autobiographie américaine” (“American autobiography”) on the back covers to refer to Laferrière’s first series of texts set on the American continent, 2016 marked the first time that some of his books were referred to as “romans de la Remington 22.” Dany Laferrière was now so well-known that he no
longer needed his name to be emphasized. Instead, the author, his first novel, and his typewriter had become so closely associated with one another that the last two functioned as metonyms for the writer.

3.4 Dany Laferrière’s Trickster Strategy

Tracing Laferrière’s trajectory in the French literary landscape offers critical insights into a variation of what Graham Huggan defined as postcolonial writers’ strategic exoticism. In The Postcolonial Exotic, Huggan shows how English-speaking authors have both resisted and complied with the center’s norms and “alterity industry” in order to position themselves in the marketplace (vii). In a similar fashion, Laferrière’s process of emergence in the French literary space sharply underscores his simultaneously resistant and complicit attitude vis-à-vis French cultural domination.

Before Laferrière’s literary legitimation in France that started in the mid-2000s and culminated with his election to the French Academy, the writer had always been very critical of the French hegemonic mediation of value and assignation of identity. Laferrière had always refused any labels used in the French media or book reviews to describe his work and his literary persona. As he declared in J’écris comme je vis in 2000, “I am doomed, no matter what position I take, to be given a label. The last one I got (...) is ‘francophone writer’” (105). As a general rule of thumb, Laferrière despised all labels he had been given in reference to his extra-metropolitan origin, such as “immigrant
writer,” “ethnic writer,” “Caribbean writer,” “métissage writer,” “postcolonial writer,” or “Black writer” (104-105). “Just because I describe a landscape with mango trees does not make me a Caribbean writer,” he lamented, adding: “I will punch in the face the first person who writes that my style is tropical or solar” (105).

On several occasions, he went even further by openly criticizing what he saw as French neocolonial cultural imperialism. Laferrière sharply criticized the fact that smaller literary spaces like his country of origin were still in demand for recognition and dependent on the hegemonic French publishing system: “Haitian literature, for instance, cannot establish itself. We are waiting, as it has always been the case, that France does us the favor of publishing one book each generation with Grasset, Gallimard, or Seuil” (Sroka). In his 1999 interview with Coates, he also made a point of explaining his self-identification as an American writer in opposition with Caribbean or French: “Haiti is in America, a fact people tend to forget. The Caribbean is a region of America. I detest the word ‘Antilles,’ which alludes to France. When I say that I am an American, I do it in order to place myself and to say that I am not an Antillean (Antillais)—not a French subject” (916).

That same year, and while his books had just started being published in France by Le Serpent à Plumes, he also declared: “I quickly understood that my body could under no circumstances be in America while my mind was still in Europe, and more
especially in France. Strangely, the French-speaking Caribbean intelligentsia has always been in that situation” (Sroka). Setting himself apart, he added:

I did not want to place my fate in the hands of francophonie, that is to say, France. The francophonie banner is another French way of controlling every French speaker. I have never wanted to live there for a very simple reason: I believe that one should never live in a country that colonized them in History because then one spends their whole life being paranoid, feeling attacked, and dwells on a single debate; the racial debate. (Sroka)

At that time, his disapproval of the fraught power dynamics he denounced went as far as refusing to engage in any shape or form with France and its consecrating prizes and institutions. “My money will never come from Europe,” he said. “In any case, France keeps its money very carefully and only sends you medals, and I don’t want to live with others’ medals” (Sroka).

Set against the back drop of his current seat at the French Academy and ongoing collaboration with Grasset since 2004, Laferrière’s strong criticism of the French publishing industry and institutions of consecration sounds paradoxical to say the least. It is, however, an integral part of his ambivalent strategy that allowed for his emergence and visibility in the French literary landscape and set him apart from fellow Haitian writers. Indeed, while Laferrière did not wait for the French publishing industry to recognize him to be a successful writer in Quebec, he also knew he needed to be published in France in order to be famous outside Quebec and reach a broader audience. His decision to engage with the French market served a personal motive. Concurrently with his discourse criticizing the French publishing system, he worked his way into the
French market and made full use of the limited space he had to advance his career and exercise his agency. But in playing the system to his advantage in order to be more visible, Laferrière also simultaneously reinforced France’s central position in the literary sphere and further acknowledged its power to control and assign literary value.

Analyzing Laferrière’s strategy thus offers insights into the creative and at times opportunistic techniques that non-metropolitan writers can use to exercise their agency. At the same time, it also provides a unique lens through which to explore the mechanisms of such “trickster strategies” and their perverse effect of reinforcement of France as a source of authority and control.

In 2007, while his novels *Vers le sud* and the pocketbook version of *Le goût des jeunes filles* had just recently been released in France, Laferrière’s name also appeared in a manifesto, co-signed by forty-four other writers, that shook the French literary world: *Pour une littérature-monde*. As a follow-up to an article published a few months earlier in French newspaper *Le Monde*, the manifesto sought to challenge the term “littérature francophone” that was used in the French literary sphere to differentiate French metropolitan literature from literature produced by non-metropolitan writers. Signatories came from all over the world, from metropolitan French Michel Le Bris to Belgian Jean-Claude Pirotte, Congolese Alain Mabanckou, Algerian Boualem Sansal, Vietnamese Anna Moï, Canadian Nancy Hudson, Lebanese Amin Maalouf, Martinican Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau, Guadeloupean Maryse Condé, Haitian
Lyonel Trouillot, among others. They all advocated for a world-literature in French that would dismantle the traditional center/periphery binary embodied in the term “francophone” as the everlasting representation of a hierarchical division between French literature, understood as national metropolitan literature, and the marginal secondary status of so-called “francophone” literature coming from outside metropolitan France and more especially former colonies.

Dany Laferrière’s piece, written in fragments, in true Laferrière fashion, consisted of a collection of short notes taken in various places, including Petit-Goâve, Montreal, Paris, Port-au-Prince, Manhattan, Dublin, N’Djamena, and São Paulo, in which he reflected on his “voyage en français” across the globe. Compared with essays by Edouard Glissant, Alain Mabanckou, or Michel Le Bris, for example, his contribution was much less militant and remained true to his usual style. “I have wasted too much time commenting the fact that I write in French. And debating the fact that it was not my native language,” he wrote, adding that “in the end, all of this seems very theoretical to me, and even a bit ridiculous” (87). For Laferrière, what makes you a colonized person is not the language that you use to write or speak, but your lack of self-introspection:

this French language has infiltrated my neurons, and its melody rhythms my blood. (...) Before, I would have never admitted this truth by fear of discovering the colonized in myself. But the colonized, I can say it now, is the one who does not see nor hear oneself. He feeds on lies. His life is a fiction. (...) It is time I set in order the attic of my mind filled with old-fashioned ideologies. (87)

Three main ideas related to institutions, aesthetics, and linguistics structured the manifesto’s ideals and goals: the end of the center, the end of assigned thematic and
formal categorizations, and the articulation between nationhood and universality in a globalized context (Porra 110). In the editors’ own words,

the center, this point from which a Franco-French literature was supposed to spread, is no longer the center. Up to now, the center had an absorption capacity that forced writers coming from elsewhere to strip off their baggage before merging in the crucible of language and its national history: the Fall literary prizes now tell us that the center is everywhere, in all four corners of the world. It is the end of francophonie. And the beginning of a world literature in French. (Pour une “littérature-monde” en français)

As we saw earlier, the tendency to differentiate between French metropolitan writing and extra-metropolitan works expresses itself in multiple ways. Non-French writers like Dany Laferrière are automatically classified as “francophone,” while othering images on book covers are used to direct the reception of their writings accordingly. Ultimately, all these practices mediate the production and circulation of texts in the literary market. This is even more problematic and takes a deeper meaning when these othering practices are applied strictly along color lines and affect French-Caribbean authors like Maryse Condé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Edouard Glissant, but also authors who were born in the Hexagon like Marie NDiaye. Born and raised in Pithiviers in Loiret to a French mother and a Senegalese father, NDiaye has indeed been the object of many debates about how to label her and her work. Despite her mixed heritage and her own public distancing from her Senegalese roots, many scholars have privileged her African descent and included her in anthologies on African authors writing in French (Makward and Cottenet-Hage; Ormerod and Volet).
Although the *Littérature-monde* movement was mostly positively received across the French-speaking world, many French Postcolonial studies scholars uncovered several of its limitations and paradoxes. First, while all signatories attacked the concept of “francophonie,” they did so in different ways and never theorized it, not clearly differentiating between institutional and literary francophonie and thus failing to clearly define what exactly they were rejecting. Charles Forsdick shed light on the pitfalls of the universal aspirations of world-literature in French: by limiting its scope to works written in French, the movement necessarily excluded other languages and literatures (14).

Scholars like Alec Hargreaves and Kathryn Kepplinger also highlighted additional limitations like the absence of second-generation Maghrebi writers born and raised in France in the list of signatories, and underscored, along with Véronique Porra, among others, the perverse effect of the discourse on littérature-monde as a so-called Copernican revolution meant to disrupt the center/periphery binary. First, by referring to Copernicus, who theorized that the Sun did not revolve around the Earth but rather than the Earth revolved around the Sun, the signatories did not effectively challenge the center/periphery binary, which would have required them to call into question the very concept of center, but they rather displaced it. Second, while the editors advocated for the end of France as the center, their argument regarding the high number of literary prizes recently awarded to non-metropolitan writers ironically reinforced the importance of France in the French-speaking literary world. Indeed, by taking this as
proof that non-metropolitan literature was increasingly being recognized as valuable, they paradoxically conferred consecrating power to the very French institutions and structures they aimed to dismantle.

Another fundamental pitfall directly related to Laferrière was the ambiguous positioning of some of the co-signers vis-à-vis “francophonie.” As Porra underscored, some of the writers willing to leave “francophonie” in the past and move toward a new terminology of world-literature in French revealed to have previously embraced their marginal status when it allowed them to advance their literary careers:

we find ourselves, with certain authors, facing an obvious paradox: some of them refuse the ‘francophone’ label, which they consider demeaning, but ‘act francophone’ when it can help them promote their work; they demand to be recognized for the literary value of their work only, but paradoxically adapt their thematic and formal choices to dominant social discourses. (113)

Among the signatories, Porra singled out several writers who, according to her, both criticized the “francophone” label while at times also “playing the francophone writer”: Nancy Huston, Anna Moï, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and, most of all, Alain Mabanckou. This contradiction between the discourse of certain writers on “francophonie” and the benefits they drew from it in practice thus revealed a major issue in the argument that contributed to undermining its reception and was used to discredit its foundations.

The ambivalent positioning of certain authors that Porra accurately points out in her article is also that of Laferrière, who is however strangely absent from her list of beneficiaries of “francophonie.” After showing Laferrière’s paradoxical positioning on
the matter, which culminated in his election to the French Academy, we will take Porra’s argument further. Indeed, what Laferrière’s strategy calls into question is: can non-metropolitan writers do otherwise? Can they achieve success without going through the threshold of French publishing, and can France really be one center amongst many others? In terms of publishing, the answer certainly remains no, and Laferrière’s trajectory only reinforces this continued domination of France in the French literary market. However, what Laferrière’s strategy also sharply underscores is that France’s monopolizing status nevertheless provides “cracks” which writers can exploit, provided they play their cards right.

Firstly, Laferrière’s mode of rebellion against "francophonie" is not typical. His positioning vis-à-vis the concept never aligned with the more traditional approach that fellow Caribbean writers have adopted. Several Caribbean authors like Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, or Lyonel Trouillot, have consistently rejected the term and exposed their ideological framework in numerous politically engaged essays and talks. Laferrière’s dismissal of "francophonie," on the other hand, operated according to a different logic.

As we saw, ideologically, Laferrière was against the French hegemonic literary market that subjected the Quebecois market to its domination. On a personal level, he was also against any label that would reduce him to a Caribbean writer, alongside Chamoiseau and Confiant, but, contrary to these writers, Laferrière embraced the
capitalistic system of western hegemonic powers. Indeed, his desire to be famous and rich through writing was intrinsically capitalistic and self-motivated, and was a means to attain individual freedom. As he declared, “the only way to be truly free is to be famous and rich” (Bordeleau 9). And to be famous and rich in France, Laferrière’s best bet was to oppose the term in public while also tacitly agreeing to an iconographic discourse representing him as “francophone.” In other terms, Laferrière’s public discourse rejecting “francophonie” is part of the persona he created for himself and is also what allowed his emergence as a writer in France and his election to the French Academy. By being publicly opposed to a system placing France at the center while in practice implicitly cooperating and agreeing to play the game according to the very rules he criticized, Laferrière exerted a strategic kind of exoticism that allowed him to insert himself in the French literary marketplace and allowed his career to develop.

His first implicit acceptance of the “francophone” label happened at the beginning of his career in France and had to do with the portrayal of his work as Caribbean. Indeed, as we saw, the series of novels released by Le Serpent à Plumes displayed exoticizing images that referred to a foreign Elsewhere, one that played to the metropolitan imaginary of the Caribbean. It is unclear what power he really had over images at that time, but he never exercised it. Indeed, his editor, Pierre Bisiou, declared that while Laferrière expressed interest in the iconic and textual paratext, he never disapproved of any decisions Bisiou or designer Petrossian made. According to Bisiou,
some authors insisted to be part of the decision-making process and asked them to change images or elements in the text on the back covers, but Laferrière was never one of them (personal interview). Laferrière had always had a business-like approach to his writing and as such, was always very aware of the importance of marketing in book sales. By not disapproving of those images, he implicitly agreed to be portrayed as a Caribbean in France because he knew this category was in vogue.

In the mid-2000s, Grasset’s release of *Le goût des jeunes filles* also shows how he tacitly accepted to be seen as a “Haitian” writer despite his public rejection of the label. Indeed, while the first version published in Quebec only narrated the weekend that narrator Vieux spent as a teenager at his neighbors’, a group of young women who went out with Tontons Macoutes, in the form of a movie script, Laferrière significantly augmented the French-published version by adding long excerpts from one of the young women’s diary. In these, the female narrator – the only one with a bourgeois background – reflected at length on social inequalities and class issues in Haiti. This textual addition was not anodyne: compared to the bare-boned first version, it allowed metropolitan readers to know more about Haitian society, and by firmly situating the plot during the Duvalier dictatorship, it added an ethnographical element to the narrative, making it more easily categorized as “Haitian.” Once again, Laferrière self-consciously exploited elements he knew would make his text more attractive and
palatable for metropolitan publishers and readers alike in order to boost the novel’s sales.

Up to that point, Laferrière was not the sole writer to apply strategic exoticism in France. Due to the power of the French publishing industry in mediating and producing literature, many non-metropolitan writers had also been forced to comply with publishers’ and critics’ expectations and formal assignations despite openly rejecting such practices. Interestingly, the second part of the 2000s saw the emergence and consecration of two tricksters on the French literary scene: Haitian-Canadian Dany Laferrière and Congolese-born Alain Mabanckou.

Laferrière and Mabanckou have many things in common, the most prominent one being their strategic positioning in the French literary world and their synchronized emergence in France in the mid 2000s. They also often reference each other – in 2007, for instance, Mabanckou featured on his blog two articles that Laferrière originally wrote for La Presse, along with a picture of the two of them – and have given numerous talks together in several countries including France, Canada, Italy, and the United States.

Like Laferrière who has been described as a Caribbean, Haitian, francophone, and migrant writer, Mabanckou has been assigned various labels: “francophone writer, author who writes in French, African writer, Congolese or French-Congolese writer” (Carpentier and Menossi). Both authors truly emerged in France through institutional recognition. In 2009, Laferrière received the prestigious Médicis literary prize for
L’enigme du retour that legitimized him in France. A few years prior, Alain Mabanckou had also garnered a prestigious literary prize, the Prix Renaudot in 2006, which translated into fame and book sales.

The parallels between the two authors go much further, and their connection can also be seen through intertextuality. Mabanckou’s eighth novel Black bazar, published in 2009, bears striking similarities with Laferrière’s Comment. Like Vieux in Montreal, the main character is a black immigrant in a big francophone city, Paris, who never gives his real name but goes by “Fessologue,” uses his status as an insider to reflect on the migrant community, contemporary society, and racism, while seducing women and writing a novel on a typewriter. In a similar fashion to Laferrière’s, Mabanckou also playfully exploits racial stereotypes by bringing them to the foreground before deconstructing them.

Like Laferrière, Mabanckou was also one of the signatories of the Littérature mondé manifesto. However, contrary to Laferrière, he was one of the leaders of the movement and one of the most vocal critics of the center-periphery dynamics in the French publishing industry. Mabanckou’s contribution was in direct relation with the article he had published in Le Monde the previous year, “La francophonie, oui, le ghetto : non!” In this piece that caught the attention of scholars and intellectuals, Mabanckou did not reject the “francophonie” term per se but condemned the controversial use of the
term and its effects, and openly called for a reversal of concepts making French literature a part of Francophone literature rather than the contrary:

For a long time, I was naïve, and I dreamed of the integration of francophone literature into French literature. Over time, I realized that my analysis was wrong. Francophone literature as a whole embraces several continents with its tentacles. (...) French literature is a national literature. It is its turn to be part of the great Francophone whole.

His article also already called into question the practice of integrating foreign-born white authors who chose French as their language of expression into French literature while considering black writers “foreign”:

Is it because of this hierarchy that Francophile writers – with this term, I mean writers who are not from Francophone countries and who have chosen to write in French – are in most cases immediately integrated into French letters? Makine, Cioran, Semprun, Kundera, Beckett are placed on the shelves of quintessentially French literature while Kourouma, Mongo Beti, Sony Labou Tansi are still identified as foreign literature, despite writing in French.

Ultimately, like in Pour une littérature-monde, Mabanckou held French publishers responsible for these practices differentiating between metropolitan and non-metropolitan literature, and even more specifically between white authors writing in French and writers from the Global South: "Classifications are most of the time supported by French publishers who create collections for Africans" ("La francophonie, oui, le ghetto : non!"). This desire to group authors with African origins in common – albeit from a very distant past for some – is precisely what Mabanckou called out. “It seems like it is a question of visibility for these authors,” he wrote, adding:

Yet this dangerous ghettoization reaches its limits one day or another. It devalues the expression of an entire continent and creates a literature of the heard solely legitimized by the writers’ skin color or geographical place. Locked up,
balkanized, enclosed, and isolated, these authors are irremediably condemned to carry the burden of an ideology incompatible with independent creation. (“La francophonie, oui, le ghetto : non!”)

In parallel with his vocal argument against francophonie and the French publishing system, Mabanckou has nevertheless also been complicit with the thematic tropes he has criticized and has also exploited the marginal status of black writers in France. Indeed, in many of his books Mabanckou has tackled contemporary issues of migration and politics, positioning his narrators as insiders in French society or reflecting on their past in Africa. In addition, it is thanks to the "francophone"-specific literary prize he received in 2005 that Mabanckou truly emerged in the French literary landscape, increased his book sales, and accessed a more central status. In 2016, he even became the first novelist to hold a chair at the Collège de France in Paris. Now a professor at UCLA, he has since the mid-2000s become, alongside Laferrière, one of the most visible “tricksters” of the French literary world by both criticizing and benefitting from the mediating power and assignation of literary value of the French literary system.

What set Laferrière apart from Mabanckou and other writers, however, is the ultimate trick he played in 2013 though his election to the French Academy. Analyzing Laferrière’s strategy thus allows us to better understand the mechanisms at play in the French literary system. It provides a focal point for an analysis of the relationship between center and periphery, national and extra-national writing, and the relative agency that non-metropolitan authors exercise through strategic exoticism, whose
intentionality can at times be hard to distinguish from structural constraints. Indeed, as Porra underscored, “through their work, authors actively reproduce these dynamics and inscribe themselves within the center-periphery dynamic through a process in which it is difficult to distinguish between what pertains to creativity, coercion, or strategy” (120).

On December 12, 2013, Dany Laferrière was elected to the French Academy. His induction did not take place before May 28th, 2015, close to 18 months later. He was the first Haitian and Québécois to be elected, and only the second Black writer, after Léopold Sédar Senghor in 1958. These multiple “firsts” embodied in one individual demonstrate the conservative electing mode of the academy. As of December 2018, only nine women had been elected to the academy out of a total of 732 members since the institution’s creation in 1635. Marguerite Yourcenar was the first in 1980 and five were elected between 2005 and 2018, including Algerian Assia Djebar, who was also the only non-metropolitan woman.

The term used to identify the life-long elected académiciens also offers a glimpse at the value conferred to tradition: they are known as the “immortals,” in reference to founder of the institution Cardinal Richelieu’s motto “To immortality.” While this originally alluded to the divine power of the monarchy, it now refers to the French language, whose members’ mission it is to promote (“Les immortels”). Since its creation, the academy’s ideology has closely been associated with language defense and
promotion. Its main function is to standardize and safeguard the use of the French language through grammar rules and the creation of a dictionary: “the main function of the Academy will be to work, with all due care and diligence, at establishing rules to our language and making it pure, eloquent, and capable of analyzing arts and science” (“Les missions”). Throughout the years, all of its newly elected members, especially those coming from outside of metropolitan France, have vowed to fight for its preservation worldwide. As Oana Sabo put it, “aspiring authors, be they French-born or immigrant, know well that literary consecration is wholly predicated on writing in the national language” (129). The sword they are given a few days before their induction hints at that perilous and militant mission, although its official explanation is that it originally identified the members as belonging to the king’s house.

Before Laferrière, non-French born writers elected to the Academy made a point of highlighting their connection with the French language and literary tradition. When elected, new académiciens give an induction speech in front of all other members as well as members of the French Republic, including the President, in which they pay homage to the intellectual whose seat they will occupy as well as the illustrious past of the state institution. Laferrière’s predecessor Hector Bianciotti, born in Argentina, highlighted the prominence of French models in his intellectual development and the prestige of the French Academy during his induction in 1997. His first words alluded to Paul Valéry, who was also admitted to the Academy: “Paul Valéry – to whom I am forever in debt
since the reason why I entered the delicate maze of French was to read his work in the original language” (Bianciotti). He then proceeded to express his gratitude to the académiciens who elected him, a foreign-born writer: “I wholeheartedly thank your Company, who feared neither audacity nor paradox in choosing to welcome someone who comes for afar, and who has transitioned from his childhood language to that of his chosen literature through smugglers' paths bearing no other offering than an imaginary from elsewhere” (Bianciotti). His following words referring to the prominence of France and the prestige of the French Academy in Argentinian cultured circles were also significant: “Argentina, (...) a young country where love for France is one of the most established traditions, where 'France' means 'Culture,' of which the French Academy remains the epitome” (Bianciotti).

In these first two paragraphs, Bianciotti bestowed the highest distinction upon and deference to French culture and the French Academy, simultaneously reinforcing the consecrating power of the institution while depreciating his native country. In his words, Argentina and France suffered no comparison and, in a classic figure of speech, his country of origin was described as a child compared to France's century-old literary and intellectual history. By highlighting the unconventionality of the Academy in electing a foreign-born intellectual, Bianciotti also shed light on the enduring conservatism of the institution.
Closely tied with French national identity, the French Academy’s ideology and mission sound very different from Dany Laferrière’s transnational positioning and critical take on any national labels. Yet it was the writer’s decision to submit his candidacy to the state institution after “seat 2” was left vacant by its former occupant, Hector Bianciotti, who died in 2012. Indeed, although Laferrière was elected by Academy members, he did not receive the distinction out of the blue but had to formally apply by submitting a letter in order to be considered as a replacement of the recently departed immortal.\(^5\) Considering Laferrière’s public rejection of French cultural imperialism and neocolonial labeling practice, why did he do it, then?

Laferrière’s election to the Academy needs to be set against the backdrop of his consistent creative strategy to posit himself in the global marketplace. As Laferrière half-heartedly admitted to journalists, he was approached by several members of the Academy to discuss his candidacy a few months before the election. In a traditional Laferrière fashion, the unconventionality of his status as a foreigner highly contributed to his decision to follow through:

it happened unexpectedly, I was asked – or considered – a prospective candidate, as we say, to be elected to the French Academy, and it suddenly integrated my inner, emotional universe, and I wondered ‘why not?’ especially since there were difficulties because I am neither French nor a Parisian resident, so I enjoy those kinds of things. (”Dany Laferrière va entrer à l’Académie française”)

\(^5\) Interestingly, Lyonel Trouillot declared that Laferrière was not the Academy’s only choice. Indeed, according to him, Trouillot himself and Patrick Chamoiseau were approached, but they both refused (Trouillot, personal interview).
Indeed, alongside aforementioned Senghor, Bianciotti, and Djebar, five other foreign-born writers had preceded Laferrière as “immortals”: Eugène Ionesco, François Cheng, Amin Maalouf, Michael Edwards, and Andréï Makine. However, all of these authors met the two main criteria previously requested from académiciens: being a French resident and citizen. At the time of his election in 2013, Laferrière was not a French resident, nor a French citizen. The unconventionality of his election is in part what motivated his decision to apply. As of 2019, he lives in Paris but has no intention to become a citizen. Laferrière's election is thus unique because it entailed a major change in the rules previously applied. In addition to being the first Haitian-born and Quebecois citizen to be admitted, he was the first to not be French nor reside in the Hexagon.

Perhaps even more central to his unusual positioning, he was the first to not declare his undying love for the French language, literature, and myth of universality. Indeed, Dany Laferrière never professed admiration for French culture or the French Academy. As we saw, very early on, he even positioned himself outside the French literary tradition and embraced an American writer persona. His first “American autobiography,” set in various locales in America, understood as a continent – Montreal, Miami, Port-au-Prince – illuminated his identification with the American space. “I did not want to be a writer of French culture in America (…). It was not about disavowing my language. I just wanted to be an American writer because Haiti is in America.
Antillean writer? Caribbean writer? No, I do not agree with the idea of the Antilles, it is for me a colonialist vision of space,” he declared in 2011 (Crom). His literary models were not French but Japanese, Latin American, and most of all, American. “Reading American authors made me feel their desire to be in direct contact with reality, they also made me discover the present tense and characters deeply connected to the world,” he said, adding: “Hemingway, Miller, Bukowski fitted perfectly with the vision I had” (Crom).

As a Haitian-born writer, he was also keenly aware of the label he would be assigned, and the Caribbean tradition in which his work would be automatically placed. “By identifying myself as an ‘American author’ writing in French, I took a huge step to the side, I freed myself from the Caribbean determination,” he declared, which led him to choose another path and a distinct tradition: “I inscribed myself in a mythology: I was in the New World, it was mine” (Crom). His strong refusal to identify with any discourses from writers from other French-speaking places and the francophonie concept laid in his rejection of national borders and labels in literature: “people ask me why I am so viscerally against francophonie. Here is one of the reasons: I don’t want any more borders” (J’écris 88).

But as a marketing-savvy writer, Laferrière also knew very well that in order to be more broadly read, his books needed to go through France to be distributed more widely in the French-speaking space and legitimized through several mechanisms of
cultural consecration. And he also found out pretty quickly that no one in France would take him up on his American self-identification. As he admitted himself, “this claim was a bit of a provocation, at a time when the créolité discourse was very popular” (Crom).

In a similar fashion, in addition to being motivated by the unconventionality of the situation, Laferrière also wished to be elected because, I argue, he knew it would help his career. French Postcolonial Studies scholar Oana Sabo, who has recently analyzed Laferrière’s election to the French Academy argues that “the Académie française does not validate talent in the same way literary prizes do. Its value is primarily symbolic, in Bourdieu’s sense of the word” (129). Yet she fails to account for the economic capital that is also attached to the election, much in the same way that literary prizes transfer economic capital by increasing sales. Laferrière’s career post-election is a case in point. Indeed, beyond consecrating him as one of the immortals, Laferrière’s election had a direct impact on his fame and his book sales in France. As the first Quebec and Haitian writer to enter the Academy, he was highly mediatized and received wide press coverage. On Dec 12th, 2013, it was mentioned in several TV news, including the main evening TV news on France 2 and Grand Soir 3, on two of the main and public French channels.

A few months after the public announcement, Grasset released L’art presque perdu de ne rien faire, a collection of reflections of the author originally published in Quebec in 2011. Its French release in September during the “rentrée littéraire” was no coincidence:
it was a strategic move, designed to capitalize on Laferrière’s recent election. It exhibited a serious picture of the author, the new mention “de l’Académie française” right below Laferrière’s name and was also published in the Blue collection to make it stand out from other regular releases. As it happened, besides L’éningme du retour, L’art presque perdu de ne rien faire is the only book by Laferrière that has placed among best sellers in France. It stayed in the top 200 across all categories for six weeks, peaking at number 68 for a week, and even stayed in the top 50 best sellers for essays for fifteen weeks, reaching number 14 for two weeks (Edistat). This correlation between Laferrière’s election and his narrative’s popular success shows how his symbolic consecration turned into media coverage and economic value.

In The Migrant Canon, Sabo declares that Laferrière was elected “on his own terms: not as a Haitian, Québécois, or francophone author” (128). While I agree that his transnational trajectory and writer persona connected him with various locales and differentiated him from previously elected foreign-born writers, I also argue that this statement must be nuanced and that his election did not exactly happen on his own terms only. Indeed, in the words of Historian and French Academy Permanent Secretary Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, Laferrière was elected specifically as a francophone writer. “The Academy opens up to the entire francophonie,” she declared, before explaining that Laferrière could bypass French residency and nationality because these – despite their previous tacit application – were never truly required to be elected. For the
Academy, “language is nationality,” she added, in an ironic contradiction (“Dany Laferrière entre à l’Académie française”). Indeed, according to her logic, since the language of expression of all Academy members is French, and they are members of the French Academy, then their literary nationality is French. But then, why would she refer to Laferrière in loaded terms that specifically call attention to his “francophone” status—understood as “non-metropolitan”? As Laferrière denounced in 2000, “before, we were Haitian, then Caribbean or Antillais, it depends, and now francophone. We have shifted from a geographical border to a linguistic border” (J’écris 89).

Carrère d’Encausse’s ambiguous declaration and the media coverage that followed Laferrière’s election show that labels prove resistant to change. Indeed, just like he was described and represented as a Caribbean, Haitian, or francophone writer for the most part of his literary career in France, his portrayal in the press following his election again underscored his origins in national terms and particularly emphasized Haiti. On December 12th, 2013, Le Nouvel Observateur published an article titled “Dany Laferrière, from Port-au-Prince to the French Academy” (Leménager), while L’Humanité chose “Dany Laferrière, a writer from Haiti among the Immortals” for their Dec. 13th issue (Steinmetz).

This once again reveals, in a new light, the enduring discrepancy between the way Laferrière has identified himself and how his writer persona and his works have been portrayed in France. Concurrently, it also illuminates once again the ambivalent
trickster strategy the author adopted in reaction. Indeed, as we saw, following his
election, the image of him that Grasset chose to display on the dust jacket of *L’art presque
perdu de ne rien faire* was very different from the previous ones, depicting him as a
serious *académicien* and therefore matching a very traditional idea of how intellectuals
should look like. As a well-known writer, and especially considering his new
consecrated status, it is easy to imagine that Laferrière had a say in that decision and
could have refused to have such a serious photograph of him on the cover. But he did
not intervene, and maybe even partook in that marketing decision, knowing very well
that it made sense from a commercial point of view.

Likewise, on the day of his election, Laferrière’s reaction to the event showed
uncharacteristic compliance with the classicism of the French institution, and the
expectations surrounding his integration. Indeed, while he lauded the fact that,
according to him, “this election will show that the French Academy has ceased to be a
closed space but is instead becoming a field increasingly open to cultural *métissage* and
authentic universalism” (Steinmetz), he also shared his intent to “not rock the boat” in
the Academy (“Dany Laferrière rentre à l’académie française”). His new status also
required him to attend weekly meetings under the Cupola in Paris, and he was therefore
forced to move to France, or at least spend a significant portion of his time there to meet
his new obligations. For someone who had once declared he would never live in France
(Sroka), he had certainly revised that statement. Therefore, although in direct
contradiction with many of his previous statements about French imperialism, Laferrière’s election was also a “trickster” move that canonized him alongside Francophile intellectuals and positioned him amongst them. Although it did not turn Laferrière into a French writer per se, it nevertheless set a precedent by changing the rules of who could be elected, and inserted him “into the French cultural patrimony” (Sabo 129).

Yet, despite this new “identity,” that of a classic académicien, that was bestowed upon him at first and that Laferrière implicitly embraced initially, the following years revealed how the writer slowly went back to his old habits and capitalized on his consecrated status. In true Laferrière fashion, he progressively assessed the situation and remained true to his trickster self, ultimately differentiating himself from the literary tradition and classicism attached to the institution he yet belonged to. Indeed, Laferrière made use of his “sword ceremony” and acceptance speeches on May 26th and 28th, 2015, eighteen months after his election, to assert himself within a transnational tradition, and not solely a French one by interweaving multiple references to Haiti and Montreal. During the sword ceremony, after recounting his childhood in Haiti and the succession of events that unfolded on the day of his election, Laferrière went into great lengths to explain why he had chosen to have his sword crafted in Haiti, and his green outfit in Montreal. “If Port-au-Prince must arm me, then Montreal must dress me,” he concluded (“Dany Laferrière à l’Académie française” 25). Montreal is also the place where
Laferrière started his career as a writer, and the author reinstated its importance in his emergence: “all of my French-published books were first published in Montreal. For me, Montreal is not an intellectual branch of Paris, but an incubation place” (28). In his acceptance speech which, as it is the custom, paid homage to his predecessor, Laferrière also referred to Legba. “This vaudou god whose figure can be seen in most of [his] novels” (35), is evoked and described as “the god of writers” by Laferrière who also chose to have his vèvè engraved in his sword.

Perhaps even more importantly, Laferrière’s acceptance speech sharply underscored the transnational tradition attached to the seat he was taking, and by extension, the Academy. Indeed, Laferrière first acknowledged the symbolic power of the Academy, calling it “the most prestigious literary institution in the world” (“Dany Laferrière à l’Académie française” 35). But very quickly, while he was paying homage to Hector Bianciotti, he highlighted the American tradition of the seat: “it is clear that this seat number 2 that we share has an American destiny” (39). Not only did he set the Argentinian writer in the same American tradition as his own with references to the exchanges between Haiti, “the only American country to understand such a passion for freedom” (41) and Argentina, but he also referred to famous previous seat holders. He mentioned Alexandre Dumas son, who had Haitian origins, as well as Montesquieu whose work critiqued slavery, the foundations of the Americas. As Laferrière concluded, “this seat has been the seat of so many adventures related to the Americas that I would
not be surprised if it became the Academy’s American seat” (42). Laferrière also evoked the most famous founding fathers of the Négritude movement: “Martinican Aimé Césaire, Guyanese Léon-Gontran Damas, and Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor” who “allowed us to move smoothly from négritude to francophonie” (57). Through these numerous references to non-metropolitan authors, Laferrière mapped the historical and intellectual connections between France and other countries. Ultimately, he highlighted the fundamental transnational component of his trajectory and that of previous académiciens, but also the inherent interconnectedness of the French cultural tradition that the Academy upholds.

In addition, being a consecrated author also allowed Laferrière to make use of his celebrated status in order to produce an unconventional work, Autoportrait de Paris avec chat, and strategically posit himself outside the canon. For a few years after his election, Laferrière put his prolific writing activity on hold. His new duties as an Academy member probably required some time and energy, especially for someone who did not initially live in France but had to attend weekly meetings. Following his induction in May 2015, Mythologies américaines (2016) came out, but it consisted of several previously published narratives and only featured very short unpublished texts. Autoportrait de Paris avec chat (2018) was thus the first true work to be released after his election.6

6 Laferrière’s Tout ce qu’on ne te dira pas, Mongo, published in 2015 by Editions Mémoire d’encrier in Quebec, was never released in France. Its plot, which centers on the conversation between Vieux and a young man, Mongo, who just arrived in Montreal, was probably too specific to Quebec to be marketable in France.
Jointly published by Grasset in France and Boréal in Montreal, *Autoportrait de Paris avec chat* was described by the latter on the book’s online description page as Laferrière’s “first book as an académicien.” This work is very different from all of Laferrière’s previously published books. Neither a comic strip nor a graphic novel, it is a “real” novel entirely handwritten by the author. It also features hand-drawn illustrations, including on its cover, which also displays one of Laferrière’s name and the book’s title in handwritten red letters. This book, which could also be called an “unidentified literary object,” illuminates Laferrière’s wish to break free from expectations. As he declared, “not that many people would dare, at this moment, handwrite 320 pages and draw with no artistic talent” (“Dany Laferrière se libère de l’Académie française”). This unconventional work precisely stemmed from his desire to reject, at least in spirit, the traditional standards inherent to the Academy canon: “I needed to do something that would strip me bare and would also set me free from the Academy, and maybe from academism,” he admitted (“Dany Laferrière se libère de l’Académie française”).

Despite his election, with this non-traditional and very approachable work, Laferrière has remained true to his literary self and ambitions to write accessible pieces. In 1999, already, he shared his aspiration to not become a great writer in the traditional sense of the word: “I am not the greatest writer in the world, far from it, but I know exactly what I am. (...) My ambitions are elsewhere, that is to say to succeed within the
limits I have built for myself” (Sroka). And his discourse had not changed ten years later: “I will never write a great book, everything will be average, equal” (Crom).

This aspiration and his literary obsession “to not being able to be quoted” (Crom) highly differ from the traditional ambition of intellectuals and writers to see their words consecrated. Yet, in an ironic twist, it is precisely because he is now a renowned author and French académicien that he was able to publish Autoportrait de Paris avec chat. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that Grasset would have agreed to publish the same handwritten novel had it been created by an obscure author. In the same movement, Laferrière’s unconventional book thus illuminates two contradictory processes. Through its originality, it resists classicism, labels, and breaks free for literary expectations attached to the French Academy while its very existence simultaneously reinforces the consecrating power of the cultural institution.

Moreover, as Casanova showed, “the literary power of a central nation can be measured in terms of the literary innovations produced by universally recognized writers from its suburbs” (World Republic of Letters 119-120). Although, on the one hand, Autoportrait de Paris avec chat, coupled with Laferrière unconventional personality and literary career can be seen as a desacralization of the Academy, on the other hand, its direct effect is completely opposite. Indeed, with its unprecedented format, Autoportrait de Paris avec chat can be called a literary innovation, and as such, by being produced
from within by a consecrated outsider, it further establishes the prominence and literary power of the French Academy.

***

Tracing Laferrière’s trajectory and his emergence in France since the 1980s provides a unique lens into the complex matrix of the French literary field. Not only does it underscore the unequal conditions of production and circulation of literature in France, but it also illuminates the creative agency that certain non-metropolitan writers exhibit in this process. As a Haitian-Canadian writer, Laferrière needed to integrate the French cultural sphere in order to reach a broader readership, both in France and abroad, which highlighted the centrality of the French publishing system.

The exoticizing packaging of his works ostensibly portrayed as “Caribbean” in the 1990s and early 2000s showed how French publishers relied on France’s neocolonial imaginary and used othering practices and terminology to differentiate between national and so-called “francophone” literature at the turn of the century. Laferrière’s switch to Grasset, and the evolution of the publisher’s marketing strategy both echoed and contributed to Laferrière’s rise in fame and literary recognition, hereby highlighting the interconnect relationship between cultural and economic literary capital.

Yet, despite the prominence of French publishers and the mediating power they hold, Laferrière’s ambivalent attitude towards the concept of “francophonie” illuminated his own creative agency to position himself in the literary marketplace.
Laferrière’s public discourse opposed “francophonie” and France’s hegemonic domination, but in practice, as an opportunistic and marketing-savvy author, he was also well aware of the benefits that playing along would grant him. Both critical and complicit vis-à-vis French ideological and aesthetic norms, Laferrière played his master trick in 2013 when he successfully applied to the French Academy and integrated the oldest French cultural institution. Through this, Laferrière did not become a French writer but nevertheless turned himself into an “immortal” and, in a perverse effect, also reinforced France’s status as a literary center. Ultimately, Laferrière’s ambivalent strategy shows that while “tricksters” cannot fully deconstruct the system in place, crafty individuals like Laferrière can nevertheless successfully disrupt it and navigate it to their advantage.
Conclusion

Dany Laferrière’s trajectory across continents and over the span of thirty years offers a unique lens into the complex matrix of literary production and circulation in the French-speaking world. Laferrière’s unique strategy to carve a space of his own in Quebec, Haiti, and France also reveals his astute understanding of the national contexts he has navigated and shows how contemporary postcolonial authors act as catalysts bringing together literary, linguistic, racial, and political issues.

Analyzing Laferrière’s emergence in Quebec in the 1980s shows how the Haitian-born author managed not only to insert himself in the literary, linguistic, and racial fabric of that time but also to shape new definitions of Quebecois identity and literature. From migrant author, he became a Quebecois writer, and contributed to shaping debates about national identity and literature. Exploring his portrayal in the press and the iconographic discourse used by his publishers since 1985 also demonstrates how literary works have circulated specific tropes of Haiti and the Caribbean. By displaying paradoxical images of Haiti as an Exotic elsewhere and Haitians as rural peasants while also picturing Laferrière as an urban writer, the author’s book covers have reflected the long-lasting influence of a national dual discourse on Haiti and Haitians on Quebecois’ imaginary. Rooted in the early 20th century, this discourse differentiated between Haitian elite, seen as a sister society linked with Quebec through language and culture, and Haitian masses, identified as primitive and traditional.
In Haiti, Laferrière’s literary work was received very differently. First perceived as a literary outcast and provocateur, his negative reception highlighted how Laferrière broke with traditional Haitian literature, and also announced the difficulties he would have to be recognized as a Haitian writer in his country of origin. Exploring the late circulation of his work demonstrates the marginal place that Haiti holds in the French market, and the power of French publishing and consecration. However, by repatriating some of Laferrière’s work starting in the 2000s, Haitian publishers have also integrated him into the national book market and resisted foreign domination. By altering his marketing, they have showed the dynamic power of the local market and ultimately turned him into a young adult author in Haiti. In addition, even though Laferrière did not take part in the process, the 2016 translation of L’odeur du café into Haitian Creole has positioned the author at the center of local initiatives promoting Creole as a literary language and the true national one.

Laferrière’s rise in France that culminated with his election to the French Academy in 2013 sheds light on multiple mechanisms of literary production and consecration, and his own agency in the process. Analyzing Laferrière’s book covers shows how French publishers have packaged non-metropolitan works according to colonial tropes reproducing hierarchies between French and so-called “francophone” literature, as well as national – understood as metropolitan – and foreign identity. Laferrière’s increased visibility and popularity following the Médicis prize he received
in 2009 also underscores the way literary institutions and related editorial practices
consecrate writers by transferring them symbolic and economic capital. From being
represented as specifically “francophone” or “Caribbean,” Laferrière became a brand in
the 2000s. Finally, by focusing on Laferrière’s public discourse, engagement in the
Littérature-monde movement, and election to the French Academy in 2013, I show
Laferrière’s ambivalent attitude towards the concept of “francophonie.” This
opportunistic and critical position, which I call his “trickster strategy,” ultimately both
reinforced France as a source of literary authority and illuminated the writer’s agency in
his own legitimation process.

All in all, Laferrière’s trajectory across the French-speaking world allows us to
map out the relationships between literature, marketing, and creative agency. The
author’s success story is a testament to the enduring power of the French publishing
system as a source of authority in mediating and producing literature. However, even
though France certainly remains central to Laferrière’s consecration, the writer’s
transnational trajectory and his unique creative “trickster” strategy have also called into
question the French hegemonic model. By seeking simultaneous literary legitimation in
other sites like Montreal and Haiti, and catering his own marketing to various national
publics, Laferrière convincingly shows how migrant authors are able to exert their own
agency and now move “between – and not in-between national, cultural, and linguistic
spaces” (Xavier 18). Although Dany Laferrière neither openly challenges any status quo
nor erases the very concept of “center,” his strategy questions France’s hegemony. Ultimately, through his multiple ties and by cleverly exploiting the French Academy to his own advantage, Laferrière’s lifelong trickster strategy has relativized France’s central position in the "world republic of letters."

Laferrière’s election was the last act of his thirty-year-long career. Examining the factors that enabled his emerged in Montreal, Haiti, and France offers a unique lens into the multiple ways in which migrants contribute to changing traditional definitions of national literature and identity. Through Laferrière’s trajectory, my study also explores how contemporary literary production and circulation in the French-speaking space relates to economics and marketing. By using Laferrière as a focal point, it shows how postcolonial authors’ portrayal in the press and the packaging of their books reflect literary, linguistic, cultural, and political changes inherent to the various contexts they navigate. Perhaps even more importantly, Laferrière’s trajectory tells us that, although the publishing system holds significant power over the way postcolonial works are mediated, there remains opportunities for authors to exert agency through “tricks” to position themselves in the global marketplace. Although one cannot foresee what Dany Laferrière will do next, there is little doubt that the author has more tricks in his bag and more to tell us about how literature, iconographic discourse, and creative agency interweave in the French-speaking space.
Works Cited


Bisiou, Pierre. Personal Interview. 16 April 2016.


Brutus, Fred. Personal Interview. 2 June 2017.


Cinéus, Jean-Rony and Jean-Mino Paul. Personal Interview. 11 June 2017.


Chavenet, Anaïse. Personal Interview. 6 June 2017.


—. “Quirky Quebec Novel Turned into Film.” The Ottawa Citizen, 8 Sep 1988.


—. Yon lekòl tèt anba nan yon peyi tèt anba. FOKAL, 2006.

Delachet-Guillon, Claude. La communauté haïtienne en Île de France, L’Harmattan, 1996.


“Holding Steady.” *Cinema Canada*, vol. 162, April-May 1989, p. 34.


Jadotte, Hérard. Personal interview. 12 June 2017.


—. Chronique de la dérive douce. VLB, 1994; Boréal, 2012.

—. Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer. VLB, 1985.

—. Da/L’odeur du café. LEVE, 2016.


Langevin, André. “Une langue humiliée.” *Liberté,* vol. 6, no 2, March-April 1964, pp. 119-123.

Laurin, Danielle. “Dany ou la Chronique de la dérive douce.” *Actualité,* vol. 19, no 13, 1 Sept 1994, pp. 60-64.


265


Makward, Christiane and Madeleine Cottenet-Hage. *Dictionnaire littéraire des femmes de langue française de Marie de France à Marie NDiaye.* Karthala, 1996.


—. “Master of the New: Tradition and Textuality in Dany Laferrière’s *Pays sans chapeau.*” *Small Axe*, vol. 9, no 2 (2005), pp. 176–188.


Saint-Jean, Ronald. Personal Interview. 16 June 2017.


Steinmetz, Muriel. “Dany Laferrière, un écrivain d’Haïti chez les immortels.”

Sylvain, Myriam. Personal Interview. 14 June 2017.

Tardieu, Charles. Personal Interview. 5 June 2017.

Tardieu, Gérard-Marie. Personal interview. 9 June 2017.


Thomas, Dominic. “Decolonizing France: From National Literatures to World
47-55.

Tontongi (Eddy Toussaint). “Les implications malheureuses de l’élection de Dany
Laferrière à l’Académie française.” Tanbou,

Trouillot, Jocelyne. Personal Interview. 8 June 2017.

Trouillot, Lyonel. Personal Interview. 13 June 2017.

—. “« Petits meurtres entre gens de lettres », Lyonel Trouillot répond à Martine Fidèle.”
http://www.lenouvelliste.com/public/article/126499/petits-meurtres-entre-gens-

—. “Prose pour une ville absente.” Cultura. Voyage à l’intérieur de nous-mêmes. March
1998.


Valdman, Albert. “The linguistic situation in Haïti.” Haïti-Today and Tomorrow, an
Interdisciplinary Study, edited by Charles Foster and Albert Valdman, University

Vasile, Beniamin, Dany Laferrière : L’autodidacte et le processus de création. L’Harmattan,
2008.


Biography

Sandie Blaise was born in France. In 2009, she received a Master’s degree in Anglophone Studies from the Université d’Avignon, France, and also earned an M.A. in Comparative Literature from the University of Kent at Canterbury, U.K., in 2008. She will receive her PhD in Romance Studies through Duke University in 2019, as well as a Certificate in Latin American and Caribbean Studies. During the completion of her doctorate at Duke University, she was selected for a semester-long exchange with Ecole Normale Supérieure of Lyon, France, and obtained a Dissertation Research Travel Award to Montreal through the Romance Studies Department. Sandie was also the recipient of several Summer Research Fellowships through the Graduate School, as well as the Reese Fellowship for American Bibliography, awarded by the Bibliographical Society of America, which allowed her to conduct research in Haiti. She has written an article on Haitian Creole publishing in a special issue of the Bibliodiversity journal on “Writing and Publishing in ‘minority’ languages.” While completing her dissertation, Sandie was awarded the Duke Innovation & Entrepreneurship Graduate Fellowship to lead a project on “Language Matters: Innovating Language Programming through Community Engagement and Entrepreneurship.” She is a member of the Modern Language Association, the Haitian Studies Association, the American Comparative Literature Association, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, and the Bibliographical Society of America.