

Postcolonial traditions

Toward comparative genetic criticism through a Caribbean lens

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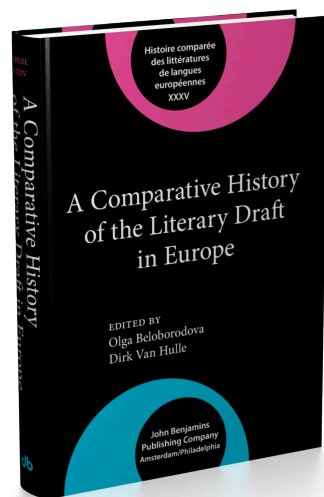
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1.2.9 Postcolonial traditions

Toward comparative genetic criticism through a Caribbean lens

Rachel Douglas

This chapter discusses literary drafts in the context of postcolonial endangered archival situations. My aim is to examine how certain archival situations, particularly across the Caribbean region, have impacted writers' creative processes, leading to a significant tradition of published books, which have a distinctive *manuscriptesque* aura.¹ What will become clear is that these postcolonial writers and their works purposefully straddle and disrupt the old spatial boundaries separating Caribbean islands from one another, and from Europe, and North America. This chapter looks at comparative genetic criticism through a decolonial Caribbean lens. Such a comparative approach to postcolonial literary drafts from the region is apt because the Caribbean space remains balkanised along old colonial linguistic lines to this day.

Keywords: postcolonial genetic criticism, *rasanblaj* (gathering/reassembling), rewriting, Caribbean, Haiti, endangered literary archives, Haitian boatpeople, Kamau Brathwaite, Dany Laferrière, Frankétienne

Introduction: Studying and preserving Caribbean literary drafts

The present chapter offers a new perspective on creative processes in the Caribbean context by examining how the literary drafts and different versions of published texts themselves deliberately try to cross spatial, linguistic, generic, and even material or digital borderlines as far as possible. While it is important not to use decolonisation as a metaphor, as Tuck and Yang have argued (2012), we can follow a decolonial approach to genetic criticism that is inspired by the geneses of important Caribbean literary works. This chapter builds a decolonial model of genetic criticism that is based on the fundamental Haitian/global South concept and process of *rasanblaj* (gathering and reassembling), which has been theorised most eloquently by Haitian artist-anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse (2012, 2016, 2017).

The use of methods from genetic criticism in the Caribbean context can be particularly instructive. My work on key transformations in Caribbean literary drafts and different published versions is inspired by the innovative work of the *Institut des textes et manuscrits modernes* (ITEM), which is based in Paris as part of the French *Centre National de Recherche Scientifique*, and particularly by the “Francophone Manuscript” section. While genetic criticism has had considerable impact in France and some Francophone regions, it has not travelled

1. Here, I follow Walter Benjamin's use of the term “aura” where artworks are uniquely present in time and space in their own particular contexts (1992), which means that they cannot be reproduced as such.

so well to some other parts of the world. This chapter takes genetic criticism further toward the global South and speaks to the multilingual Caribbean region in particular. It tries to broaden the focus from a uniquely Francophone approach, which risks entrenching the monolingualism of genetic criticism. In particular, I am inspired by recent attempts by ITEM members to widen the scope of genetic criticism beyond France to Francophone authors, to literature written in other languages (Hispanic), and to other geographical locations (Argentina and Russia), the focus on Africa and the Caribbean, and new thematic directions including theatre, autobiography, letter writing, photography, and comics.

This chapter continues my previous work where I have tried to make genetic criticism methodologies speak to the Anglophone and Hispanophone Caribbean too (Douglas 2009, 2019), as well as the French-speaking parts of the region. In particular, my readings of Caribbean literature have been based on a genetic criticism-inspired approach to the sprawling drafts of *The Black Jacobins* in history and play form of the radical Marxist Caribbean thinker C. L. R. James. For some C. L. R. James scholars, the idea of genetic criticism is too literary and apolitical for such a fundamentally political person as James. However, I have found theatre genetic criticism extremely useful for reading the sprawling, unfinished, open drafts of his plays as the radical opposite of bourgeois, finished theatre, along the lines of Brazilian theatre practitioner, drama theorist, and political activist Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* ([1974] 1979) politically engaged approaches to drama.

Another particular influence on this chapter is the special issue of *Genesis* from 2017 edited by Rudolf Mahrer and titled *Après le texte. De la réécriture après publication*. This was a welcome addition to genetic criticism scholarship because traditionally, there has been a strict cut-off point between the manuscript *avant-texte* or pre-text and the published text. Normally, the text is considered by most genetic critics to harden into a final, fixed form at the publication point, with authorial manuscript variants being studied only up until that definitive cut-off moment. As we will see, the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean texts that I am discussing here continue to morph *after* publication, and this chapter will use genetic criticism methods to read variants across published textual versions too.

Why is such continued rewriting after first publication so prevalent in the Caribbean region? This is particularly the case because of the different archival situation there. The Caribbean and especially Haitian tradition of rewriting even, and especially after, publication is to a large extent shaped by the endangered situation of its archives, and particularly its literary archives. I am currently working with the British Library Endangered Archives Programme and the Prince Claus Fund Promotion and Preservation of the Haitian Arts and Culture Programme in collaboration with Haiti's National Archives and Haiti's National Museum, the Musée du Panthéon National Haïtien, to work on preserving and digitising its fragile and at-risk archival collections together with Digital Library of the Caribbean. In the context of the Anglophone Caribbean, Alison Donnell has focused on the precarity of writers' manuscripts as they are often in private hands and do not usually have a safeguarded institutional repository (see also

Cummings and Donnell 2020).² Across the Caribbean, disasters including earthquakes, hurricanes, landslides, and flooding have had a destructive impact on the region's archival and library collections. A fire sparked by a lightning strike destroyed major historical documents a two-storey block at the Barbados Archives Department in June 2024.³ In Grenada in 2004, the Public Library lost parts of its roof.⁴ One of the Anglophone Caribbean writers that features in this chapter is Kamau Brathwaite, originally from Barbados, who lost his extensive and significant private archives and what he termed his "Library of Alexandria". This was in the Irish Town mountains of Jamaica in 1988 due to Hurricane Gilbert, which he called the "Gilbattery" to emphasise the total destruction it wrought. In Haiti in 2010, a devastating earthquake led to massive loss of life (up to 300,000 people dead) and destruction of buildings (1.5 million people made homeless), and there were many invaluable cultural losses too, including literary archives. In the light of such repeating disasters, the work to digitise archival collections becomes ever more imperative. Important work in this regional context is being carried out by the Caribbean Digital Scholarship Collective, Digital Library of the Caribbean, the British Library Endangered Archives Programme, and the Modern Endangered Archives Program at UCLA.⁵

This precarious Caribbean archival situation has had a definite impact on the extensive rewriting both before and after publication. This chapter will look at the text-image ensembles of two Haitian writers Frankétienne and Dany Laferrière. Both are writing or have written by hand, inscribing fragile handwritten traces, and sometimes even publishing the final book in handwritten format. These writers are seeking the permanence of the printed text for their literary archives (notes and drafts), which are being produced in the physical book-form of every copy of the book. Here archive and published edition merge and blur. What these Caribbean writers produce are book-archives which have a *manuscriptesque* aura. Making multiple copies of these *manuscriptesque* book-archives can help to maximise their chances of survival against natural or manmade hazards, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, or dictatorships from destroying every copy. Reproducing the book-archives in printed form and inscribing the various stages of their genesis means that of the many copies of them, at least some should be able to withstand disasters physically. This is a similar strategy to the LOCKSS programme at Stanford University where the acronym literally stands for "Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe".⁶ These multiple print copies of Caribbean book-archives store textual information almost like a Portable Document Format or PDF. One French 1996 edition of Frankétienne's previously self-published Haitian one of *L'Oiseau schizophone* (1993) was faxed to the French publisher where it was printed on better quality paper.

2. See Alison Donnell's Leverhulme Network grant for the project "Caribbean Literary Heritage: Recovering the Lost Past and Safeguarding the Future", www.caribbeanliteraryheritage.com.

3. See <https://barbadostoday.bb/2024/06/18/historic-documents-destroyed-in-fire-at-archives-department/>.

4. See <https://thegrenadianvoice.com/hope-for-the-public-library>.

5. On the work of the Haiti Cultural Recovery Project, which became the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative, see <https://culturalrescue.si.edu/> and Kurin 2011.

6. <http://www.lockss.org/>

While these multiple printed copies are analogue in many respects, they also reach out beyond the text to digital transformations and remediation in different materials (on remediation, see Bolter and Grusin 1999). The works of Frankétienne, Brathwaite and Laferrière try to outwit the confines of the standard printed book. All three Caribbean writers produce A4 books that are objects to look at, as well as books to read.

Sycorax video style: Kamau Brathwaite's "hypertextual" typography

Brathwaite has tried to decolonise the book, computer, and digital technologies through what he dubs "Sycorax video style". These are his distinctive own-design fonts that reach out to the digital and reclaim Caliban's absent mother from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Sycorax video style is Brathwaite's Caribbean aesthetics and his *modus operandi* for constructing new visions of Caribbean culture, history, and identity. Self-representation from a Caribbean point of view is presented as crucial: "we have to have a presentation of ourselves", become "visible in [our] own image", and bring "self into focus" (Brathwaite 1992: 149; 1973: 53). According to Brathwaite, "we talk about aesthetics because we'll *look* different" (1992: 149). He is definitely the Caribbean writer who has gone furthest in making his works *look different* through his decades-long experimentation and his creation of "fonts with our faces on" (2002: 39). Sycorax, Caliban's mother who is only mentioned *in absentia* in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* becomes the writer's principal Caribbean cultural icon. Sycorax has increasingly dominated his symbolic universe embodying his version of Caribbean aesthetics. Beyond the cultural decolonisation of the old Caliban-Prospero binary opposition, Brathwaite writes in Sycorax and invents a new character: Stark, Caliban's sister. Both function as protectors of Caribbean cultural resources.

The distinctive style dubbed "Sycorax video style" is characterised visually by radical typographies ranging across a motley spectrum of font types and sizes (on Brathwaite's Sycorax video style, see Otto 2009). Brathwaite's texts have "hypertextual" features where the visual hyperactivity of the page resembles interactive web-based hypertext. Visually, Brathwaite's books often evoke the frames of the screen or browser windows, giving the impression of watching text being constituted on screen. The layout of the printed text takes us to the interface between print and hypertext. Brathwaite is always juxtaposing computer-generated graphics. Further signatures of Sycorax video style include the process of breaking up and reconstituting words to reveal latent meanings within. Violent line and word breaks are introduced through disruptive positioning of full stops, commas, slashes, chevrons, Greek letters, computer glyphs including boats, snakes, scrolls and oversized letters, mostly Xs and Ss (see Helstern 2000: 146–151).

The emphasis on the letter "X" recalls Caliban in Aimé Césaire's rewriting of Shakespeare in *Une tempête* (1969). Here, Caliban throws off his slave name and renames himself in a way reminiscent of Malcolm X where the "X" symbolises the lost African name and also resembles the brand many enslaved people bore on their bodies from a red hot iron brand. As for the stress on the letter "S", it brings to mind Sycorax. Symbols of Caribbean non-scribal communication systems are often recalled here, such as pre-Columbian petroglyphs or "Timehri"

from Guyana and also “Vèvè” – the sacred drawings of Haitian Vodou, symbols used to invoke the gods at a Vodou ceremony (see Mohammed 2009). The oversized Ss resemble the Vèvè for Vodou gods such as the serpent Danbala, creator of all life.

Sycorax video style continues Brathwaite’s search for an authentically Caribbean way of saying – what he calls Nation Language – now adding the dimension of a different Caribbean way of *seeing* (see Brathwaite 1984). “Dream Haiti” is Brathwaite’s long poem based on the plight of Haitian boat people struggling to make it to the US during the military coup of the 1990s. “Dream Haiti” was often held up by the writer himself as the exemplar of Sycorax video style. We can also trace the evolution of this style over the course of two decades of Brathwaite’s engagement with the subject of Haitian refugees in the multiple versions of this long poem. Changes to the content – the actual words themselves – may be minimal, but the visual appearance of the words on the page, and even the very shape of each page, morph greatly every time. Hearing has always been key for the dynamics of Brathwaite’s writing, but increasingly, seeing has become important too. Through Sycorax video style, the writer tried from the 1990s onwards to find a visual corollary for the distinctive sound of his poems.

“Postmodern” is the epithet which is often appended to the term “video style”. This is a trademark Brathwaitian pun to draw attention to its means of production: the computer that makes this whole new Caribbean way of seeing possible. Brathwaite has detailed his fights with what he calls “Prospero” publishers who refuse to reproduce Sycorax video style faithfully. This situation forced the previously successful author Brathwaite to self-publish with his own imprints Savacou, in the Caribbean, and Savacou North in New York. He oversaw the printing and layout at the New York printers. Some of these editions could only be purchased during Brathwaite’s lifetime from the author himself or his second wife. As for the computer and its technologies, they could potentially be seen as reincarnations of Prospero neocolonialism too. However, “writing in light” on the computer is actually perceived as a Caribbean ally capable of bringing writer and reader much closer to the spoken word (Brown 1989: 86–87). As a transformative medium, the Sycorax/Stark computer is presented as a gateway to new ways of seeing, enabling the poet to strive after radical transformation of language down to its concrete shape on the page. These metamorphoses and shape-shifts are often linked to mirror images.

One way in which Brathwaite gives text, voice and image to the plight of Haitian boatpeople is through visually striking mirror imagery. What makes the words on the pages of “Dream Haiti” (2007: 168–169) appear so odd is the reversal of the normal letters and words, meaning that “US Coast Guard Gutter” is actually spelled backwards (for details on this passage, see Shemak 2010: 84). This reversal of the words on the lifejacket operates a type of *Verfremdungseffekt à la Brecht*, an alienation effect which makes the words seem strange. Brathwaite pushes the boundaries of the English language as the text of “Dream Haiti” morphs from one version to the next. What changes here at once highlights the power of language, but also seeks to disrupt standard English. Now the readers must also navigate a language that has been made completely alien and foreign for us too. The effect of making English so strange is that we encounter the strange-looking language in a similar way to the majority of Haitian Kreyòl-speaking, often illiterate or semilliterate boatpeople; those Haitian migrants who cannot afford

visas or airfares. One major obstacle facing these boatpeople is the bureaucratic paperwork they are required to fill out in order to gain entry to the United States. Here we see how language is used as a powerful weapon of hostility, and not of hospitality. As readers therefore, we have the impression of encountering ourselves the hostile US Coast Guard military checkpoints of interdiction at sea.

Translation of the refugees' testimonies is a fundamental issue, as Shemak (2010) and Payen (2001, 2002) make clear, with the official US accounts tending to skew the story, or to tell only half of it. To this, I would add that not only non-translation, but also mistranslation and misrepresentation are key moves carried out by the Coast Guard representatives of US state power. Building on Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot's thinking about the active and transitive process of silencing the Haitian Revolution at all stages throughout the production of history, I argue that there are equally active and transitive processes of mistranslation and misrepresentation which are complicit with the processes of domination and control governing all of the US officials' interactions with the Haitian refugees. Here, we see the laws of hostility instead of hospitality towards Haitians. Emily Apter's notion of the "translation zone" connecting translation and transNation is highly relevant (2006) and translation of refugee testimony is a highly political act (see Shemak 2010: 60). While translation can facilitate their entry into the US, what is more likely is the active mistranslation, misrepresentation, silencing or skewing of the boatpeople's stories. Such mistranslation acts hinder hospitality, while reinforcing hostility and the likelihood of deportation back to Haiti.

There is also slippage between the usual word for a US Coast Guard vessel "cutter" and the startling word "gutter", which Brathwaite interpolates in its place. For centuries, Haitians have been constructed as diseased others who should be contained by US authorities. Throughout "Dream Haiti," Brathwaite refers to the US Coast Guard vessel by the name "Impeccable," and describes its steep-sided, "hard" inaccessible deck (2007: 200). This name suggests that the boat is kept unsullied at all costs by the would-be Haitian migrants who are treated as threatening human waste; disposable people who need to be contained and washed out through a process of cleansing (on the notion of "disposable" people, see Bales 2012; Seely, Malbert, and Lobb 2008, and Mayotte 1992). Rather than gain access to the squeaky-clean cutter, they are washed out through the renamed "gutter" or sewer for human waste, and sent back to where they came from.

Brathwaite links the absolute dehumanisation of the Haitian refugees through such modern inhospitable processing to the plight of those who crossed the sea of the Middle Passage in slaveships. In connection with slave voyages and Caribbean plantation slavery, Brathwaite frequently refers to "limbo" ("Dream Haiti" 186; "Caliban" 194–95; *Islands* 37–38). The limbo dance involves passing through the narrowest slit of space possible, contorting the limbs into a spider-like shape. Brathwaite is clear: it was through such limbo spider-like contortions that enslaved Africans survived the treacherous Middle Passages with their inner resources or soul "nam" intact. Like spiders, they could appear ostensibly dead, but survive such horrific experiences through limbo-like transformations. Brathwaite conceives of a "limbo gateway" as the passage through a narrow crack over the threshold into new worlds where radical transforma-

tion can occur. Limbo in this context also applies to the in-between geopolitical limbo space adrift in the middle of the sea between Haitian and US waters where Haitian refugees must pass through the hostile checkpoints of the US asylum process as they risk life and limb in the quest for a better life elsewhere.

Positives are hard to discern in “Dream Haiti”, but Brathwaite has elsewhere associated “limbo” with the Haitian Vodou *lwa* or god of the crossroads, Legba, and with the symbolic opening of the Haitian Revolutionary Toussaint Louverture’s name whom the Barbadian writer explicitly calls “Toussaint Legba Louverture” (2007: 189). Brathwaite’s mirroring of language creates a *rasanblaj* reassembly that passed through the limbo gateway so that the US Coast Guard officials no longer control everything. The poet wrests back control over the “limbo” in-between space of the page and the representations of Haitians on these pages. When faced with such mirror images as displayed above, we the readers have to actively reassemble the language fragments, which offers some possibilities for reimagining recovery and transformation through the limbo gateway between life and death, which is where the refugees are existing in the poem.

In this limbo space, the lifejacket of the US Coast Guard’s supposed search and rescue mission becomes instead a symbol of death, a tombstone, through the link to “coffin”. Through word slippage in some versions, this mutates to “coffle”: the chaining together of enslaved people; once again invoking the transatlantic slave trade. In places, it appears that the refugees are already dead, reflecting the high mortality rate among Haitian boatpeople during their quests to reach US shores: “we was all quite dead & bloated by this time & some of us had even start floatin on our blacks up to the scarface” (2007: 189). Here, the slippages and puns between the expected word “backs,” “surface,” and the surprising changes to “blacks” and “scarface” recall the racialisation of US refugee policy to this day (see Shemak 2010: 85).

Elsewhere, we hear of how the refugees or their advocates “went lobbyin lobbyin by w/ their heads up & down in the corvée of water & they arms still vainly tryin to reach Miami” (2007: 199). One word which sticks out in this text is the word “corvée”. In the context of the limbo space between Haiti and the US, this term is particularly loaded because it refers to the forced labour which the US troops implemented during their long military occupation of Haiti (1915–1934). Haitians were obliged to labour long hours in difficult conditions to build roads and other public works as ordered by the US occupiers. When Brathwaite invokes the word “corvée” here, he links the harsh treatment of Haitian boatpeople and the forced migration of enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage of slavery, with the nineteen-year US occupation as a second period of enforced slavery. Taking Haiti was an important part of the US strategy for strengthening their global domination (see Renda 2001 and Dalleo 2016).

In Brathwaite’s Sycorax video style, the page often resembles the computer screen, which functions as a mirror. Sycorax and Stark are the Vodou *lwa* or gods residing at the back of the computer and operating as female equivalents of Legba – the Vodou god of the crossroads. Sycorax video style turns the transformative space of the computer screen into a crossroads or gateway leading to new worlds (1994a: 317; 1994b: 658).

At the same time, Brathwaite talks about Sycorax video style taking him back to the Middle Ages and ancient times. He says that what he is trying to create are continuous illuminated scrolls. He also describes Sycorax video style taking him back to Ancient Egypt and the text/image possibilities of hieroglyphics, and beyond that of pre-Columbian Caribbean petroglyphs known as *timehri*. So “writing in light” on the computer is at once ancient and very modern. According to Brathwaite, it involves a process of video-thinking and a presentation – a representation – of illuminated scrolls.

Another type of screen is invoked: the TV screen. Haiti is key to Brathwaite’s indictments of TV voyeurism. CNN is represented as Brathwaite’s adversary as a major global TV news station which symbolises the style of round-the-clock 24-hour news coverage. CNN is in the poem the principal vehicle of the harrowing images he writes about in “Dream Haiti”. The writer describes the image of a little boy and calls out to the reader “you have seen him on tv” and “you wd now be watch” as if the reader would be bound to know the iconic images in question. When we talk about the CNN effect, we can see that the news channel is seen as a symbol of a phenomenon going beyond CNN itself (see Bahador 2007 and Robinson 2002). Media coverage, especially images, can act as catalysts for galvanising public opinion to pressurise governments to “do something” to end the suffering that viewers are watching on their TV screens.

The narrator frames his poem around watching these images on TV, making it clear that they instigate the very poem he is writing here. He also presents the world watching the rolling TV images passively as if they were just a film or TV drama. Brathwaite frames the text like a TV screen to draw attention to the distancing manner in which the Haitian boat people are contained within the frame. Nowhere does Brathwaite capture the dehumanising ability of such TV screens when he writes the media’s gross misrepresentation and objectification of the drowning little boy to the point that the boy becomes a smiling triangle – like the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland* – with the triangle also evoking the geometric shape most associated with the transatlantic slave trade (see Higman 1999). Brathwaite slams the media’s reductionist reification of the flesh-and-blood human boy.

Graphic novels and *rasanblaj*: Dany Laferrière and Frankétienne

Another Caribbean writer who invokes the frame of the screen is Haitian-Canadian writer Dany Laferrière. In recent years since 2018, he has produced graphic novels – a new departure for him. His work has always been very cinematic, visual and one of his major ambitions was to make films, which he has done in the past. In his first graphic novel *Autoportrait de Paris avec chat* (2018), he writes about moving to Paris ahead of his inauguration to the Académie Française – the bastion of the French language – to which Laferrière was the first Haitian and also the first Canadian to be elected. The book is like a film about his encounters with Paris through the story of image and dialogues between the writer and a black cat. Interestingly, both the Black writer and cat are represented as white. The graphic novels include Laferrière’s coloured drawings of the famous Haitian film theatre the Rex Theater, which was destroyed by the 2010 earthquake. All of the writer’s three graphic novels thus far combine sites of memory in the narrator’s

native Haiti and his adopted homes of Montreal and Paris as he repeatedly crosses geographical boundaries thanks to the power of his *Mèt tèt*, the Vodou *lwa* Legba. Many of the pages of his text-image ensemble graphic novels are panels which resemble comics (2018:11). As Scott McCloud reminds us, panels in comics allow time and space to merge and help to portray motion from one panel to the next (1994: 115). Laferrière's graphic novels present him as the eternal Baudelairean *flâneur*, exploring new and familiar spaces. The frame of Laferrière's graphic novels shift with each new page, continuously moving like the roving narrator.

According to the writer, “dessiner est une autre façon d’écrire” [drawing is another means of writing] (2018: 8). Laferrière's handwritten and hand-drawn graphic novels explicitly refer to the wide variety of materials he has used for writing, from his “old Remington 22” typewriter on which he wrote his infamous first novel in Montreal, typing with just one finger. He also redraws an iconic image of the writer typing on a park bench in the Square Saint-Louis, Montreal. He is recreating his self-fashioned images of the budding writer which were used to promote his scandalously titled debut novel *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985). The photo shows him sitting on a park bench barefoot – his shoes are beside him on the bench along with a bottle of alcohol (2020: 190). He has spoken about how he was consciously trying to insert himself in a long line of American writers: Hemingway, Kerouac, Bukowski, Miller, “des types cool qui boivent” (2000: 162), and he is typing on his typewriter. This self-image has been constructed, Laferrière tells us, to show “un type à l’aise dans sa peau” who is in the middle of writing and who is quite simply a writer at work. Laferrière describes how this photograph formed the basis of posters with which he plastered every bookstore and bar in Montreal. Just as he set out to conquer America back then in 1985, his twenty-first century graphic novels are part of his strategy to conquer Europe and more specifically the capital Paris of the old coloniser France. He bids “adieu”, a fond farewell to the obsolete typewriter, paying a final homage to his “old fighting companion” (2018: 312–313). Here, the writer talks about why he has returned to writing by hand. It seems to be a kind of revolt against the machine/computer, the digital turn, and an opportunity to slow down and capture fleeting moments, hesitations and corrections. His first draft is also the final printed text in luxurious full colour edition by French publisher Grasset and Canadian publisher Boréal. Every element is handwritten and hand-drawn, even down to the publication details. Always, Laferrière is trying to outwit the confines of the normal book, and travel beyond text alone.

These graphic novels engage with place, literary history, film history and also art history. Repeatedly, he engages particularly with Haitian visual art, which is often problematically referred to as “primitive” or “naive” art. Laferrière tells the story in *Vers d’autres rives* (2019) of how an American Dewitt Peters came to Haiti and set up “Le Centre d’art” with Haitian artists in the capital (see Figure 1).

The *Centre d’art* still exists to this day, although it was very damaged by the 2010 earthquake and had to be rebuilt and its artworks had to be salvaged. From the start, Laferrière has been very influenced by Haitian painting, which is crucial to what he calls his direct American style. What so captivates him about the power of this style of Haitian painting is its power to *penetrate* the viewer:

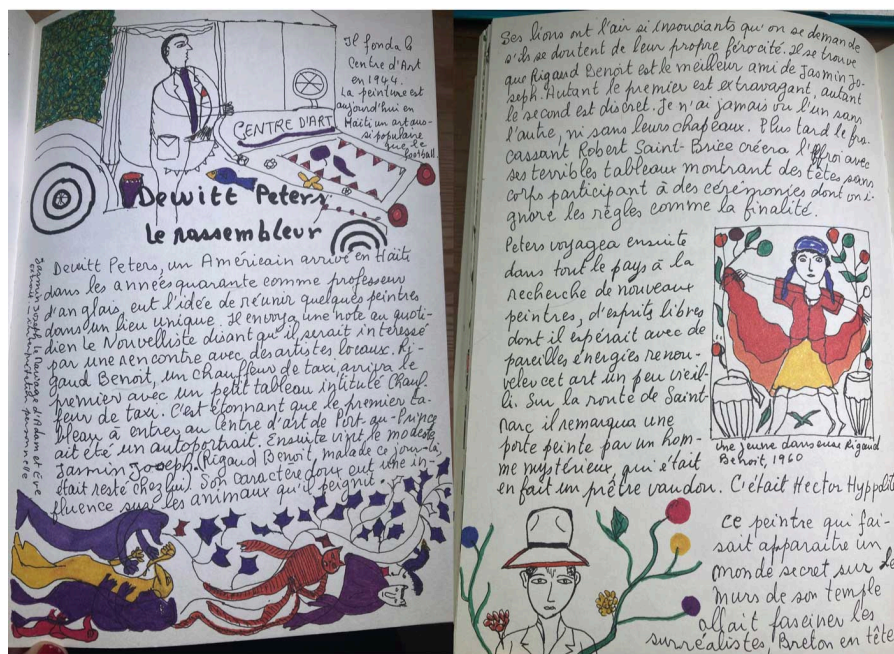


Figure 1. Dany Laferrière, *Vers d'autres rives* (2019)

Mais comme tout est sur le même plan dans la plupart des tableaux naïfs, on finit par se demander où est le point de fuite. Je l'ai cherché jusqu'à ce que j'aie découvert que c'était mon plexus qui servait de point de fuite. Donc voilà pourquoi je n'arrivais pas à pénétrer dans le tableau. C'est lui qui devait pénétrer en moi. (2000: 104)

[But as everything is on the same plane in most naive paintings, you end up wondering where the vanishing point is. I searched for it until I discovered that it was my solar plexus that served as the vanishing point. So that's why I couldn't penetrate the painting. It was the painting that had to penetrate me.]⁷

What he says is most powerful about these Haitian so-called primitive paintings is that they do not have a vanishing point. This lack of any vanishing point means that the viewer does not penetrate the picture; instead, it is the picture which penetrates the viewer to the core, punching them in the solar plexus. As there is no vanishing point, there is no perspective, and it is as if everything is on a single plane and one-dimensional.

In his graphic novels, Laferrière recreates many Haitian so-called primitive paintings by redrawing them himself. He reinterprets the Haitian greats: Hector Hyppolite, Tiga, Philomé Obin, and many others. All of his graphic novels are produced as he puts it "dans l'œil du peintre primitif" (2019):⁸ all from the perspective of a so-called primitive painter. For many years,

7. My translation.

8. This 2019 book does not have page numbers.

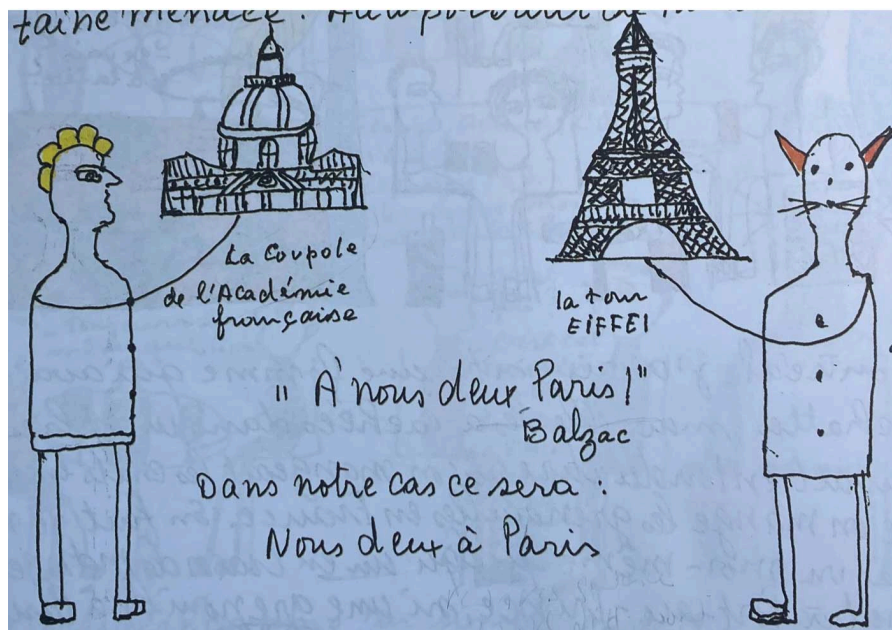


Figure 3. Dany Laferrière, “Nous deux à Paris”, from *Autoportrait* (2018)

change worlds] (2000: 137). Unlike C.L.R. James, Laferrière is not a radical, politically engaged intellectual. However, he does, like Brathwaite, focus on the plight of Haitian would-be immigrants who make treacherous journeys to reach the Americas. For our writer, exile is a personal choice and not a political necessity. Laferrière wants to cross all the spatial, generic, material, and linguistic boundaries. Of the city, he explicitly writes: “Une ville c’est le tissu urbain qui relie” [A city is the urban fabric which binds it together] (2018: 11). His graphic novels, especially *Autoportrait de Paris avec chat* weave together the urban fabric to re-present and reappropriate the foreign city; in this case Paris.

Another Haitian writer-artist and serial rewriter Frankétienne can give us great insight into the creative processes involved in the makings of text-image ensembles which go beyond the text. What I want to suggest is that we can uncover patterns of Caribbean *rasanblaj*: a fundamental concept and process of gathering, reassembling, and rebuilding, which is at the heart of Haitian culture. Haitian artist-anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse has articulated the cultural dynamics of *rasanblaj* and has made a case for why it needs to be front and centre of the transdisciplinary Haitian studies agenda today. *Rasanblaj*, rewriting and reworking can be powerful decolonial tools for genetic criticism. The *rasanblaj* dynamic of self-fashioning is not derivative, nor from the global North. Instead, it takes a Haitian, global South worldview as its starting point for shaping and reshaping Caribbean books. When we look at Frankétienne’s A4 graphic novels, including *L’Oiseau schizophone*, *Héros-chimères*, *Miraculeuse*, and *Chaos Galaxie-Babel*, what we find is a hybrid, multipart collage – a *rasanblaj* – of texts, indian ink drawings, handwritten traces, redrawn photographs, and headlines from tumultuous periods in

Haiti's recent history, which the writer-artist pieces together. Across the multiple editions, there is graphicisation where Frankétienne introduces visual art and collage to his written work, and also degraphicisation where he writes certain images and symbols in actual words. *Rasanblaj* can be a Haitian-led survival tactic or protest, as seen during the Petrokaribe demonstrations of 2018–2019, and after disasters like the earthquake or Hurricane Matthew.

The creative processes of reworking which we find in Brathwaite, Laferrière and Frankétienne closely resemble the Haitian process of *rasanblaj*, of making do and building back the text and its images piece-by-piece as in a collage or mosaic. These Caribbean rewriters/reworkers give us an indication of how to approach genetic criticism and its tools from decolonial perspectives in postcolonial contexts. Here, the archival situation, the (often self-)publishing context and the political situation, for example censorship by the Duvalierist dictatorship, all have an impact on the frequent continuation of authorial rewriting after initial publication: the genesis and the *rasanblaj* continue.

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