

The Formation and Evolution of a Literary Discourse One, Two, or Three Literatures?

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In recent years it has become customary to speak of two Caribbean literatures, particularly when considering islands with a French tradition, i.e., Haiti and the French Overseas Departments (DOM) of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guiana. This terminology reflects a change in political as well as epistemological orientation as it takes into account the existence of two cultures and cultural institutions characteristic of all Caribbean islands, if not of all postcolonial societies. For historical and ideological reasons this cleavage is more apparent in colonial societies with a French history, for France fostered a particularly great distance between national folk cultures and an elite culture of universal orientation. The latter aspect is already present in quite early concepts of France's mission of universal civilization, and reached a new peak in the cultural ideology of the French Revolution of 1789, which opposed enlightened French culture and the "superstitious" folk cultures linked to feudalism. Subsequently the French colonial empire interpreted its civilizing mission as representing the universal achievement of the human mind. This attitude resulted in a cultural policy characterized by two traits: first, French cultural domination is not seen as part of colonial policy, but as a generous gift (francophony is offered as an entry ticket into the great human collectivity of France, to paraphrase a comment made by Pierre Messmer in 1971); second, the inherent elitist connotations of this attitude resulted in a qualitative concept of acculturation instead of a quantitative one, as in British colonial policy. The gap between those few who by virtue of their education are marked by a French universal culture and the large number of those who depend on creole culture in their daily life was never filled by a continuum of intermediate forms characterizing daily culture, as was the case in the former British possessions, where different varieties of West Indian English resulted.

Thus the particular French concept of culture increases and emphasizes a cultural division that is rather common, particularly in postcolonial

societies, but also in others. At the level of language this division is described by the term *diglossia*, which we shall define as the coexistence of French and Creole. The current meaning of diglossia was developed partially on the basis of the Haitian linguistic situation. Although the implications and concrete application of the term are still debated, it serves as a valuable tool in order to conceptualize the respective domains of the Creole and French languages, which represent different and conflicting patterns of culture but are, at the same time, symbiotic and complementary. In order to understand the coexistence of French and Creole we have to keep in mind some of the peculiarities of usage.

First, each member of the society participates, to a certain degree, in both sets of culture, which, if we adopt the Ferguson terminology (Ferguson 1959), appear to be the “high” and the “low variation” of the same cultural system. Poor rural communities depending largely on a subsistence economy and isolated from the mainstream of modernization would, however, appear to be “more creole” than the relatively wealthy urban middle class. This graduation is also valid when we compare all francophone island societies: Haiti, where about eighty percent of the population live in isolated rural communities, would generally appear to be “more creole” than Martinique or Guadeloupe, where the heavy impact of French financial and technological resources has created a relatively large middle class.

Second, creole culture differs from indigenous cultures insofar as it is of colonial origin and, thus, directly related to French culture itself. It has no independent precolonial history of its own. Cut off from the colonial culture — as happened within some maroon societies that evolved in continental areas providing a protected hinterland — it may develop autonomy, but the characteristic creole settings are islands that have very limited space. The creole way of life developed within the limits of the plantations and maintains a dialectical relationship to the dominant culture.

This dependent status of creole culture does not have exclusively negative connotations. It was a necessary counterpart to a highly coercive system. The freedom of Creole still offers an escape valve today, especially as a possible means of violating rules in order to relieve the unbearable stress imposed by obeying the demands of French culture. Even from the perspective of progressive writers, Creole’s lack of formality and elevation makes it an inadequate tool for the creation of literature beyond popular and oral genres. A significant argument to explain the inadequacy of Creole for literary purposes has been offered by Aimé Césaire quite frequently in

interviews: Creole language, like creole society, seems to be characterized by the absence of history, a concept that he understands as the processes of cultivation and refinement that other languages have experienced in the course of centuries (Césaire 1979). It should be noted that he uses the term *history* in a very traditional sense: as a succession of meaningful events or developments that are interrelated in such a way as to indicate a linear and consistent evolution. History is French; Creole has no separate history but is linked to French dialectally, as a form of resistance to French evolution. The traditionally conceived history of literature, which determines the relative position and value of canonized literary objects, necessarily belongs to the French line of thought. Though the new concept of *two literatures* stipulates — implicitly or explicitly — the history of literature in Creole, there is a general uneasiness about how such a nonevolutive history is to be conceived.

History or even national history are concepts alien to creole cultures, which would not identify themselves in relation to single and unprecedented events. Whenever a possible history of literature written in Creole is evoked, it always seems linked in some way to literature in the French language:

1. Discourse in the Creole language appears as an object of French national discourse, for instance, when Creole appears within a French text for specific purposes related to its discourse, such as the literary tradition of local color or the reproduction of presumably authentic direct speech.

2. Creole discourse is seen as an implicit or a hidden part of French discourse because the writer — no matter what efforts he or she may make to present a text as French — belongs to the creole culture and cannot hide it.

3. Discourse in the Creole language is seen as possible or necessary continuation of French discourse on the level of a linguistic substitution. This relatively new and politically motivated attitude underlies the tedious discussion of whether Creole can be used in place of French, i.e., whether literature written in Creole can enter into an already established literary discourse.

The apologetic nature of literary discourse in Creole brings up quite a number of epistemological problems, which will be discussed more extensively in the appropriate section. The question of history, however, is not the only problem of literary discourse within a diglossic setting. Problems also occur when we consider the social aspect of the production and consumption of literature, which can differ greatly depending on whether the

texts are produced in oral or in written form. Though it is relatively easy to identify the social context of orality within the respective societies, the same does not hold true for literacy and its social context, the intellectual middle class, whose orientation, as in most postcolonial societies, is more international than local. The creation of a discourse of national literature is a rather ambiguous development — not only in the French Antilles, where literature always tended to be integrated into the French mainstream, but also in Haiti, where the tradition of exile, which is stronger than ever, tends to produce an expatriate literature. It is not always easy to differentiate an international literary discourse from a national one, but the growing strength of the former, compounded by the scarcity of readers within the island societies themselves as well as the current boom in the market of Third World literature, makes it necessary to consider the possibility of a third strain generated by the taste and the expectations of the international readership. Thus, we shall discuss in what follows three relatively distinct levels of discourse, which, of course, are not equally present or dominant at all times and in all societies considered: (1) the discourse of a national literature, which is most clearly expressed in Haiti; (2) the dependent discourses on and of literature in Creole; (3) the internationalist discourse, which is an important frame of reference for French Antillean writing and for recent Haitian literature.

1. The Discourse of a National Literature

The history of literature has been, since its beginnings, a history of national literature; the concept of literary history does not appear in a systematic way before the age of romanticism, when literature was first perceived to be a collective expression of the national genius. In this sense, not only the term *national literature*, but even the writing of this history itself may be problematic when we consider postcolonial societies that achieved statehood relatively late or even, as in the case of the French Antilles, not at all. Moreover, it is questionable whether some of the essential attributes of a national literature, such as a distinct language and literary tradition, are even present in that region. We have to ask, therefore, what national literature means in the Antillean context, especially in view of the fact that no descriptive histories appeared until the 1950s. Particularly within the Caribbean context we have to beware of the confusing real national literature with the general

discourse that generates this classification. The history of literature does not need to exist as such; its establishment is already part of an ideological framework implying the conception of history as a succession of singular events, which, through a process of selection and interpretation, are seen as part of the evolution of a social group: the nation. Though both terms, *evolution* and *nation*, refer to a historical reality, they have to be understood, above all, as parts of a “myth.” This myth may, however, create its own “reality.” Historically, the nation has not been the basis for interactions and institutions; but, as the example of France and other European nations shows, it evolved in this direction and formed certain institutions — such as a common language, a unified legislation, and a characteristic form of government — that are seen as elements of a successful nationhood.

In order to understand the Caribbean situation, it is essential to grasp the difference between nationalism as a general political discourse and its realization within concrete social and economic structures. In the Caribbean, the nation-building process was influenced by very unfavorable conditions: social fragmentation, economic dependence, cultural heterogeneity, and what will interest us particularly, a weak middle class. National independence, economic and technological modernization, and intellectual Enlightenment were the ideals of colonial emancipation. The fact that these concepts proved to be inapplicable to the Caribbean and ineffective for the solution of its problems did not really diminish their importance, but they remained confined to the level of verbal expression, without influence on the actual context.

The particular conditions of Caribbean writing are, therefore, determined by contradictions between an ideological framework at the level of discourse and the institutional context in which the writing takes place. Both are, with some modifications, linked to developments during the Enlightenment in Europe, where, from the eighteenth century onward, the production and consumption of literature was seen as part of a general scheme to educate and cultivate entire nations. Under this scheme, writers and the public are bound together by their intent to propagate reason, good taste, sensitivity, and appropriate bourgeois values. This social bond is then cemented by a number of intermediate institutions such as publishing houses, specialized reviews, bookshops, theaters, critics, and literary circles that constitute the rather amorphous compound sometimes called the literary society.

Quite a number of more or less questionable terms have been used to encompass this complex social body: *art as institution*, *literary public*, or, as

above, *literary society*. This social compound, however, does not just serve its idealistic goal of establishing national middle-class values; it also becomes the main agent in the commercialization of literature. The necessity of selling their writings forces authors to make concessions to the public taste; thus, the idealistic purpose of literature becomes diluted. On the other hand, the literary society, by following the capitalist principle of continuous expansion, is prevented from enclosing itself within the ivory tower of a completely elite institution. Barthes's concept of the double character of literature, which he sees as resisting history even as it signifies history, cannot be discussed here in detail; it offers, however, some keys to understanding the particular problems of literature within the Caribbean.

Obviously, the literary society did not develop along the same lines in the Caribbean as in Europe. The very nature of colonialism, which in Europe increased the wealth, power, and expansion of the middle class, prevented its emergence in the colonies. Plantation colonies in particular, with their clear-cut division of labor and privileges, suffered from a notorious lack of money, thwarting the development of handicrafts, trade, and services at a local level. Because the plantations were nearly self-contained units of production and consumption, there was no notable development of urban life. The planters themselves, afraid of new ideas from Enlightenment Europe, were traditionally hostile to any kind of education. In short, the colonies did not offer any basis for the institutionalization of a local literary society. The few *béké* (local white) writers who were still able to gain some degree of recognition were either disappointed members of the planter caste or marginal members of the colonial society who had discovered in Chateaubriand's very popular *René* a convenient role for themselves: writing texts set in an exotic landscape about happy Negroes, sad Indians, or vigorous Creoles allowed them to maintain their hostile attitude toward the modernizing French society and still produce profitable merchandise for a French readership with a taste for what it considered exotic.

Does the sale on the French market of a fictionalized Martinique — seemingly authenticated by the author's origin — constitute the beginning of a national (or, in this case, regional) Antillean literature? It is quite instructive to look at the contradictions between different written histories of (French) Caribbean literature. Such historians as Viatte and Corzani include all writers, whatever their origin, provided they spent some time on the islands and wrote about them. But Viatte remains generally doubtful about his own classifications: "Can we speak of 'Antillean writers,' if we

do not all call Flaubert a ‘Norman novelist’ or Lamartine a ‘Burgundian poet’¹?

The same author has no doubts, however, when defining the parameters of Haitian literature. It can be considered a truly national literature starting in 1804, the Declaration of Independence being the first piece of this national literature. In other words, writers only had to have Haitian citizenship; the subject on which they wrote was not of primary importance.

This contrast leads us to the question: What does national independence mean in relation to the evolution of literature? Or, to put the question more specifically: Is there any basic difference between the discourse of the French Antilles and that of Haiti? As far as the development of literary institutions or of a national book market are concerned, Haiti certainly had no considerable head start over Martinique or Guadeloupe. The Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, which in 1860 still had fewer than 30,000 inhabitants, was certainly not a more cultivated or cosmopolitan town than the Martinican “capital” Saint-Pierre; even literacy was not more widespread in Haiti than in the French Antilles. Nevertheless, from independence onward, Haitian literary production attained a quantity and consistency that would not be found in the dependent French territories until a hundred years later. What difference did Haiti’s independence make in the development of its literary discourse?

The double character of literature, as we have already mentioned, took on a particular shape with the reshaping of European societies during the Enlightenment: the book, which was supposed to propagate authentic bourgeois values, was simultaneously degraded to a piece of merchandise on the bourgeois market. In Haiti, however, this commercialization of literature never took place because the book market within the country never acquired commercial dimensions. Nevertheless, the creation of the Haitian state, which was closely associated with the French Revolution, was a product of the Enlightenment in Europe: Haiti intended to continue the revolution that, from a Haitian perspective, had been perverted by Napoleon. The new mulatto ruling class that had abolished the feudal planter caste saw itself legitimized by education and Enlightenment ideals. In their view, the creation of literature was one of the most important means of furthering modernity, a civic spirit, and the evolution of good

1 Mais peut-on faire des “écrivains antillais,” à moins de baptiser Flaubert “romancier normand” ou Lamartine “poète bourguignon”? (Viatte 1954: 490).

taste and sensitivity, and thereby of countering the prejudices against the new “black” country that were circulating in Europe and the rest of the world.

All nineteenth-century Haitian literature is, in some way, related to that idealistic pattern, though its concrete literary expression varies according to the differing historical circumstances found within that century. We will briefly characterize three of the most prominent subdiscourses.

1. The first one is highly affirmative and tends to justify or defend the creation of the new state according to the tenets of Enlightenment philosophy and the subsequent development of positivism from Auguste Comte to Gobineau. Its original form of literary expression was highly rhetorical patriotic poetry, which has to be understood as a positive attempt to overcome the basic dissensions that threatened the new republic from the first days of its existence. The sociocultural background to this preoccupation was the opposition between the formerly enslaved blacks and the formerly slave-owning people of color. What at first seems to be a conflict based purely on race and class has a very important ideological aspect. That is, the conflict over whether Haiti’s historical destiny was to be interpreted according to the concept of individual natural rights or according to the concept of human evolution: Does the basic right to personal freedom justify a revolution that (in European Enlightenment literature as well as in this discourse) is increasingly described as a succession of barbarous acts of savagery and of the destruction of bourgeois property? Or is freedom the result of human evolution toward Enlightenment ideals, an evolution that would presuppose civilization? Because of the nature of this discussion the essay was one of the favorite genres of early Haitian literature, as J. Michael Dash makes clear in his book on Haiti. The first half of the nineteenth century was characterized by an extensive historiography that implicitly aimed at evaluating the revolutionary events and, subsequently, the meaning of Haitian statehood. The early black perspective of an unconditional right to liberty, of which Juste Chanlatte’s *Histoire de la catastrophe de Saint-Domingue* (History of the catastrophe of Santo Domingo), 1824, offers a good example, is rapidly replaced by a voluminous mulatto historiography that, as in Beaubrun Ardouin’s *Etudes sur l’histoire d’Haïti* (Studies on Haitian history), 1853, emphasizes the universal moral lessons to be learned from history. The condemnation of “black savagery” in favor of “mulatto chivalry” and “civilization” — typical of the time — led inevitably to an evolutionist view of history. The allegorical novel *Stella* by Eméric Bergeaud puts

that view very crudely when it excuses the atrocities of the Santo Domingo war as the savagery of those who still represented a primitive, savage state in the evolution of humankind (Bergeaud 1859: 298). But he also provides a typical consolation: “Time rolls on for all races; civilization will not wait for any of them”².

Toward the end of the century the racist aspect of evolutionism definitely got the better of Haitian intellectuals and forced them to take part in the debate on race. Simultaneously with this historiographical argument, and directly linked to it, there appeared a large body of writing that has been described as “Haitian anthropology” (Hurbon 1984). The overall thesis is that the mere existence of Haiti demonstrates the evolutionary capacity of the black race, an argument that forces the writers to reject any critical attitude toward the country at the same time as it compels them to highlight any evidence of civilization. This necessarily results in an indirect form of racial self-discrimination; the first sentence of the best known of these texts, Anténor Firmin’s *De l’égalité des races humaines* (On the equality of the races of humanity), 1884, illustrates this paradox: “I am black. On the other hand, I have always considered the cult of science the only true one, the only one worthy of constant attention”³.

2. Almost simultaneously with this abundant apologetic literature, a rather consistent group of novels appeared (usually classified as the *roman national* [national novel]), which, at first glance, seems entirely opposed to positivist optimism. They depict, in a bitter, satirical, and pessimistic way, a country where each attempt to run public affairs in a rational and modern way is immediately absorbed by a general chaos of corruption, incompetence, and violence. In fact, the second half of the nineteenth century is characterized by continuous civil wars and their corollaries of arson and mass executions; in this, the *roman national* seems to be more realistic than the apologetic essay. Nevertheless, the ideological background is the same: the leading class of corrupt and incompetent politicians is denounced by a very small elite whose members proclaim the ideal of the Enlightenment intellectual. Nearly all these novels end in disaster because the positive characters are removed from public office and even suffer persecution. Very

2 Les temps avancent pour toutes les races; la civilisation ne reculera pour aucune d’elles (Bergeaud 1859: xi).

3 Je suis noir. D’autre part, j’ai toujours considéré le culte de la science comme le seul vrai, le seul digne de la constante attention (Firmin 1884: xii).

often these tragic heroes are also presented as sensitive poets; their failure reflects what we have mentioned above: the dissociation of discourse from reality.

3. The most significant part of this Enlightenment-influenced discourse concerns the importance of books in general and of literature in particular. This is already apparent in the quotation from Firmin, above, and the point also appears in the anthropological essay, where the authors, in order to illustrate Haitian civilization, enumerate the names and deeds of poets. The extraordinary value attributed to literature explains why, throughout the nineteenth century, didactic literature was accompanied by a large amount of romantic poetry that later developed into movements corresponding to Symbolism and Parnassianism. The high valuation of literature is indirectly related to the civilization project because the appreciation of literature is supposed to confirm the Haitians' capacity for noble sentiments and aesthetics as well as making the younger generation better educated — or at least the few of them who have access to written material. The exaltation of books and reading is a commonplace in Haitian literary discourse; each of the major social and political crises of the country led to an increase in writing and publishing. Thus, indigenism was, first and foremost, yet another attempt to provide a literary answer to a national crisis — in this case the crisis that brought about the U.S. occupation of 1915. As the most prolific exponent of the movement, Jean Price-Mars, put it in 1917, reading should be the means to create “better” Haitians and to “escape, sometimes, the harsh reality of our life”⁴. Together with other indigenist writers, he complains repeatedly of the scarcity of bookshops and public libraries in that country. According to Price-Mars, the absence of a national book market suffocates Haitian writers, who are never able to live off their writing (Price-Mars 1939: 120).

This brings us back to our initial reflections on the relationship between the Enlightenment-derived valuation of literature and the commercial necessity for continuous expansion. Haiti had inherited the Enlightenment concept of the importance of literature, but, being a poor postcolonial society, it lacked the socioeconomic room to expand on this concept. In a case like this, the mechanisms of commercialization — publishing houses, book reviews, etc. — become pseudoinstitutions. The literary society is reduced to a small circle of writers and readers who know one another personally;

4 Lisez pour fuir quelquefois les réalités mauvaises de notre vie (*Témoignages...*1956: 85).

the publication of a book acquires a mainly symbolic value as an entry ticket into that circle, which — in pure positivist tradition — lays claim to all political functions. The *roman national* exemplifies the ritual complaint about the country creating its own disaster by not honoring its most capable persons, the writers. But, as Léon-François Hoffmann says:

We should not believe, however, that the life of the Haitian novelist is nothing but a long torture and that he is a defenseless victim of public malice. Belonging to a small and closed society has its good points. The publication of a book or a simple booklet of verses is an event; despite the absence of commercial publicity, it assures the celebrity of the author. (Hoffmann 1982: 56)⁵

Politics and literature are closely linked, as is shown by the careers of most Haitian writers; publishing books becomes a key factor in the attainment of the attractive but rare middle-class status that is the indirect reward for the author's work. This pattern allows for the development of a modern national literature on a premodern socioeconomic base; it induces the authors to provide personal money for their own publication, money that will almost certainly be lost because most of the copies have to be distributed free of charge within the small circle of writers and readers.

By these unique mechanisms of reproduction a relatively small and stagnant bourgeois group was able to maintain a socially progressive discourse on national literature. Its obvious failure to change Haitian reality did not invalidate it but provoked a further dissociation of the elite group from its own country until the whole artificial structure collapsed under the impact of U.S. occupation. However precarious Haitian independence was, it constituted a powerful element of the national discourse that was absent in the French Antilles, where the formation of a national middle class started only after the abolition of slavery in 1848. The gradual rise of this class was entirely dependent on the tutelage of French authorities, who hoped the evolution of a mulatto elite would balance the power of the conservative planter caste. Further milestones were the establishment of a public school system in 1870 and the consolidation of the French African colonial empire, which enhanced the

5 Il ne faudrait toutefois pas croire que la vie du romancier haïtien n'est qu'un long martyre, et qu'il est la victime sans défense de la malveillance publique. Appartenir à une petite société fermée a ses bons côtés. La parution en Haïti d'un livre ou d'une simple plaquette de vers est un événement; malgré l'absence de publicité commerciale, elle assure la célébrité de l'auteur (Hoffmann 1982: 56).

position of the older colonies. But colonial structures continued to dominate and, as late as 1941, still aroused André Breton's indignation when he visited the island. The number of preferred social positions available did not grow at the same rate as the mulatto middle class, which had to emigrate and was largely used in the colonial administration of Africa. This forced mobility was the main reason why the new Antillean elite saw its home not so much in the small islands of its childhood, whose limitations Aimé Césaire describes woefully, but in an international "French" elite and more generally among black readers throughout the world.

Négritude, the first consistent literary ideology of the French Antilles, evolved into the wider African and Afro-American realms, and the anti-colonialism proclaimed by the Antilleans was more closely related to the black race in general and Africa in particular than to their home islands. The latter served, as the cases of Aimé Césaire or Frantz Fanon show, for the diagnosis of the colonial evil, but not for its cure. Actually, none of the Antillean writers advocated total independence for the French Antilles.

Their cautiousness was due to several factors. First, the size of the islands, their extreme dependence on France, and, above all, their conservative socioeconomic structure made independence neither conceivable nor desirable; second, the generation of Antillean writers, intellectuals, and politicians born on the eve of World War I were, by virtue of their education and their ideals, more closely related to France than to Martinique and Guadeloupe; their readers were the members of the Parisian counterelites whose values they shared. Home was a dreadful place for a poet, as Aimé Césaire explains bluntly: "No town. No art. No poetry. Not a germ. Not a sprout. Or only the hideous harp of imitations. In truth, a barren and mute country"⁶.

Césaire's vision was not one of decolonization but of the social and political transformation of France. When a left-wing government came to power in 1936, this prospect seemed to many to be at hand. The brief but heady enthusiasm for a new socialist France after the Second World War encouraged Aimé Césaire, then a fledgling politician, to advocate the departmentalization of Martinique within "La FRANCE-OUVRIÈRE" (WORKING-CLASS France) (quoted in Darsières 1974: 139). The project of progress, modernity, and Enlightenment was able to expand, not within the island society, but only within a larger context of French Enlightenment.

6 Point de ville. Point d'art. Point de poésie. Pas un germe. Pas une pousse. Ou bien la lyre hideuse des contre façons. En vérité, terre stérile et muette (*Tropiques* 1, Introduction).

Negritude is, therefore, deeply embedded in French countercultures: regionalism, surrealism, ethnography, and, above all, in an overall search for new values that would help to overcome the general uneasiness between the two world wars. The experience of the misuse of progress that led to new and more effective killing machines had produced new fears of civilization and heightened a longing for what was considered the primitive, a tendency that had been exploited more consistently by Senghor than by Césaire. Césaire did use exoticized images, such as that of the noble savage within an exuberant tropical nature, but for him these remained tools in a more general and deeply engaged quest for the progress of France and humanity.

In this respect, the discourse of negritude is very different from Haitian indigenism, although they tend to be considered almost the same thing by quite a few authors. Certainly they are linked by their reference to parallel European discourses, particularly that of ethnography. Nevertheless, Haitian indigenism — which in fact appeared a few years before negritude — was, particularly in its formative years, an immediate reaction to a local event, the U.S. occupation; moreover, it was dialectically bound to the earlier development of Haitian literature as characterized above.

Seen from today's perspective, Haitian literature before 1915 is generally judged to be alienated, and it is to Michael Dash's credit that he showed how such a view simplifies the real process (Dash 1981: 1-23). In addition, romantic literature in Haiti was more than a mere imitation of French models: it was also, as we have shown, the expression of real contradictions within Haitian society. On the other hand, most literary movements choose to stress works that call attention to their own most revolutionary aspects rather than other works that would show how a new movement appeared gradually. In Haiti, the monument of indigenist revolution has been *Ainsi parla l'oncle* (Thus spoke the uncle), 1928, by Jean Price-Mars. Strangely enough, this work has little or nothing to do with literature, but is a collection of essays on Haitian peasant folklore, with a preface in which Price-Mars admonishes the traditional elite, that "insofar as we try to perceive ourselves as 'colored Frenchmen' we forget to be simply Haitians, i.e., men born into specific historical conditions"⁷. Later he stresses "That we [the Haitians] also have something to offer to the world that is not faked

7 Au fur et à mesure que nous nous efforcions de nous croire des Français "colorés," nous désapprenions à être des Haïtiens tout court, c'est-à-dire des hommes nés en des conditions historiques déterminées (Price-Mars 1954: iii).

or imitated”⁸. The real Haiti was now discovered in the peasant class, which had been despised up to that time and even persecuted. Indigenism first produced a few shortlived literary journals (*Les Griots*, *La Revue Indigène*) and a relatively large and consistent group of peasant novels. The bases of the discourse are the first meticulous and lengthy descriptions of the peasants’ life and lore, particularly the voodoo religion, based on poorly developed and simply structured plots (for example, the first novels of Cinéas and Savain). Later, indigenism transcends this limited ethnographic framework and develops two characteristics: first, a marvellous realism where voodoo becomes an occult force connected to dreadful events that gratify the interest in the exotic of the local (and potentially international) readership (Milo Rigaud, Thoby-Marcelin, and even the early Jacques Roumain); second, the portrayal of the peasants’ misery and of their persecution by town elites (Saint-Amand, Roumain and, in some ways, Jacques Stephen Alexis), thus anticipating the socialist novel.

The reconsideration of a (lost) traditional Africa that characterized early negritude was limited in Haitian indigenism to a particular branch of poetry presenting stereotyped images of naked, happy savages dancing around baobab trees. The vocation of the Haitian movement was almost exclusively directed toward the description and rehabilitation of local culture, particularly of voodoo, which had developed during the previous century into the central symbol for Haitian backwardness. In some ways the entire evolution of the national discourse is here condensed into the discussion of the popular religion: during the nineteenth century the mulatto authors went out of their way to prove its nonexistence, particularly since a very discriminatory — and correspondingly popular — report by a prejudiced British diplomat had associated voodoo with cannibalism (St. John 1884). Indigenism brought not only a number of more or less scientific explanations of voodoo phenomena but open acceptance by intellectuals who considered it to be the true Haitian religion. The extensive descriptions of ceremonies that were mandatory for all indigenist novels developed into a voodoo mysticism destined to attract middle-class readers inside and outside of Haiti. The turning point is illustrated by Jacques Roumain’s famous *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (Masters of the dew), 1944. Although the novel still contains a voodoo ceremony, the hero, a sugarcane cutter named Manuel who has

8 Que nous avons, nous aussi, quelque chose à offrir au monde qui ne soit pas une matière frêlée ou un produit d’imitation (Price-Mars 1939: 145).

returned to his starving village, declares that he accepts voodoo only as part of an African heritage but does not believe in it. Another author whose work is very representative of later socialist fiction, Jacques Stephen Alexis, uses an entire novel, *Les arbres musiciens* (The musician trees), 1957, in order to bring to an end the literary discussion of voodoo. He describes a traditional village where the local voodoo priest is a positive leader and a good father figure to the villagers. But times change and the collective efforts of the Catholic church and U.S. business interests lead to the destruction of the voodoo temple. At the end of the novel, a new type of man, the proletarian *homme total*, opens a new age of scientific socialism, where traditional magic is no longer necessary. This novel is the last critical document of Haitian indigenism, for the interest of Haitian writers had already turned toward the rapidly emerging city, the new center of Haitian misery.

In some ways the socialist realism of Jacques Stephen Alexis constitutes the final and most extreme formulation of Haitian thinking derived from Enlightenment philosophy; it also represents in a tragic way the end of the national history of Haitian literature. The year 1958 brought the Duvalier dictatorship to power and one of its first victims was Alexis; most of the mulatto elite, including all the then-important writers, emigrated, and they will probably never return to Haiti. The strong stream of Haitian literature has become a small trickle, dried up by persistent poverty. Present-day Haitian writing has become dispersed in many countries. Its readership includes the hundreds of thousands of Haitian emigrants who make up nearly the entire intellectual elite of the country.

2. Discourses on and of Literature in Creole

The appearance of literature in vernacular Creole goes far back into colonial times. Most Caribbean critics would consider it to be mainly and even solely an oral literature that, in the course of time, has established a number of characteristic genres, or rather traditions:

1. The tale in Creole, which includes a number of subtraditions, such as the marvellous tale (which is relatively close to the fairy tale) or an ironic version of the aetiological tale that explains the particular fate of the black race. Best known is the wide range of animal tales that have two opposing protagonists such as *compè tig* and *compè lupin* (Brer Tiger and Brer

Rabbit in the anglophone Caribbean) or the elephant, the hyena, and other animals often unknown in the New World.

2. The various types of songs in Creole, which may have themes of work, love, or certain social and political circumstances. The social and political themes appear in the *chanson-pointe*: such songs offer obliquely ironic comment on current events; upon becoming popular they often anticipated and accelerated the fall of governments in Haiti. A modified continuation of this is the modern hit song in Creole, which also may be very critical.

3. The bottomless well of proverbs in Creole, which are very creatively adapted in order to comment ambiguously on subjects that cannot be mentioned openly, may also be considered part of oral literature.

4. Riddles in Creole, which are very traditional insofar as they have to be solved by memory and not by reasoning.

It is significant that the first three genres — the tales, the songs, and the proverbs — are seen as being in opposition to the dominant culture. They are the expression of an oral counterculture (Jardel 1977: 21), which may be valued very differently from diverse perspectives. From the perspective of the progressive and enlightened citizen, the oral counterculture may seem to reflect a fatalistic attitude toward life, characterized by irrational expectations of supernatural aid or the fear of magic forces. Even dedicated Haitian folklorists like Emmanuel C. Paul will, more or less directly express the hope that some of this folklore will disappear with the progress of modernity, particularly in urban areas (Paul 1962: 16ff.).

Usually, even Caribbean intellectuals ignore the fact that works of literature written in the Creole language existed, even before 1950, the date that marks (at least in Haiti) the official recognition of literature in Creole. Students of the national literature retain only a few of them: the poems *Lisette quitté la plaine* (Lisette, leave the lowlands), 1757, written by a white Creole, Duvivier de la Mahautière; *Adieu foulards, adieu madras* (Good-bye head ties, good-bye scarves), 1769, by the French governor of Guadeloupe, Bouillé; *Choucounne* (Yellow bird), 1884, by Oswald Durand; *Haiti chérie* (Beloved Haiti), by Othello Bayard. Besides these early works, literature in Creole before 1950 was represented by various translations of La Fontaine's fables (1826, by Francois Marbot, Martinique; 1901, by Georges Sylvain, Haiti). Only in the 1980s did the rising interest in literature in Creole lead to the discovery of more early literary documents written in Creole and hidden in archives; these include a full-scale novel from French Guiana (*Atipa* by Alfred Parépou, 1885) and a collection of *Idylles et chansons, ou*

essais de poésie créole (Idyls and songs, or attempts at Creole poetry), published in 1811 in Philadelphia. As Maximilien Laroche suggested in 1981, there may be a considerable number still waiting to be discovered. One may surmise that these include material that could usefully contextualize extant Creole works which, being transgressions of the rules of writing in French, contain a whole discourse on the relationship between Creole and French in Haiti. If this hypothesis should prove accurate, new relations between oral and written works in the Caribbean may emerge in future.

Literature written in Creole before 1950 was characterized by certain limitations that are part of the corresponding discourse:

1. It consists of isolated and incoherent documents that do not make up an independent history, but are only the tip of the iceberg compared to a larger underlying discourse; they are somehow dependent on the French discourse of which they are a part.

2. It is significantly limited to certain genres: a type of poetry that is very close to folk songs, popular comedy (“vaudeville”), and writing that bears a resemblance to La Fontaine’s fables. The particularities of these genres are quite obvious. First, they entail a certain necessity for oral performance; the poems we mentioned have, in fact, been put to music; the vaudeville texts are only written down after a number of improvised performances; the fables are intended to be the written record of oral performances and are supposed to be read aloud to an illiterate audience. Second, these texts constitute a less serious variety of a larger genre — for instance, poetry or theater — where the diglossic division is evident. Tragedy had to be written in French, and most of it is unbearably artificial. Comedy, however, is a highly esteemed *fête de famille* (family entertainment), a popular event in settings in which social rules do not sanction the free use of Creole (Morisseau-Leroy 1954: 49- 50).

Thus, diglossia was not overcome by the few pieces of literature in Creole; on the contrary, it was included in literature. The application of the term *diglossia*, therefore, goes far beyond the strictly linguistic sense. It reflects a partition of the world into two halves that carry distinctive, even exaggerated traits. The language of daily parlance represents freedom and familiarity, but also disorder and imperfection. Former minister of education Dantès Bellegarde expresses his differential view of language functions perfectly when he describes speech in Creole as: “Unstable, subject to continuous variations in its vocabulary, in its pronunciation, and in its syntax,

it has not at all the character of a determined language and can only be preserved by daily use”⁹.

The language of literature has to be clearly distinct from reality; it is different from Creole, because it has a history (as Césaire pointed out), strict rules, and stability. Furthermore, the language of literature presents the elevation above reality that the neoclassical ideal of a literary society seeks.

Since 1950 the discourse on literature in Creole has taken very different directions in Haiti and the French Antilles. In the latter, the administrative integration of the islands into the French metropole has increased French literacy up to the standard of the French mainland; since Creole was, therefore, no longer strictly necessary, the written use of Creole became a political issue. Haiti, on the other hand, appears to have lost the battle for francophony: large segments of the intellectual elite have left the country; the schooling situation is worse than ever; Creole is gaining entry into the media; and a standardized orthography of Creole, the object of continuous disputes since 1940, is now widely accepted. The use of written Creole, though still abhorred by the Frenchified upper class, has become a reality. As Albert Valdman (1984) has pointed out, diglossia between French and Creole is disappearing as a linguistic fact; it continues, however, as a mental frame of reference. But, paradoxically, it seems that prejudices against the vernacular are more pronounced in Haiti because the linguistic revolution of the last few years appears to have been imposed by poverty; in the French Antilles, the question of the linguistic future is more academic, as all possible alternatives depend on the future role of regional languages in a decentralized French state. In the 1980s some progress was made in France on the official recognition of regional languages like Breton and Corsican. Nevertheless, emotions ran high when the classification of Creole as a regional language (which implied the possibility of its use in the schools) was suggested in 1981, because many Martinicans feared that this might be a first step toward secession from France.

In the French Antilles, the traditional argument concerning the literary inadequacy of Creole is still very much alive, but it has become more sophisticated. Creole authors are blamed for reducing the language to its lowest common denominator, whereas the task of a responsible writer is

9 Instable, soumis à de continuelles variations dans son vocabulaire, dans sa prononciation et sa syntaxe, il n'a point les caractères d'une langue fixée et ne peut se conserver que par l'usage (Bellegarde 1949: 39).

taken to be the imposition of his or her own idiom. This argument could be used in favor of Creole but is not. The linguistic deviation that Aimé Césaire advocates in an Antillean literary style can already be found, he thinks, within the range of registers of French, although he may present his manner of subverting the language as a form of resistance to colonial linguistic domination: “I have fabricated a language for myself... Why? Because I am conscious that the French language has not been invented for me. It has not been invented in order to express the ideas, the thoughts of a Negro and an Antillean... Let us say that, having been colonized by the French, I wanted to colonize French language¹⁰.

With this form of linguistic self-liberation, Césaire delineates and accepts a problem that is characteristic of many of the successful writers of the French Antilles: he is not a Caribbean author in the sense that he is read by the islanders, who — wavering between daily Creole and school French — find it difficult to unravel his complex idiom. In fact, Césaire is known in Martinique as a politician, but many would be surprised to learn that he is a world-renowned writer as well. Even though he writes about Martinique, he must be conscious of the fact that his readers are to be found, not on the island, but within the international readership of French or black literature, a phenomenon that we will take up once more in the final section. He cannot be blamed for where his audience lies. The poor reception locally awarded to the few publications in Creole — mostly poems and popular theater — illustrates the vicious circle caused by literary diglossia. Publications in Creole are a priori suspected to be of inferior quality and they provoke fears of getting trapped in an easy folklorism that would play into the outside world’s racial prejudices.

This constant fear of being misunderstood by the international public has surrounded the discourse at least since the writings of the negritude period. As early as 1955, the ethnologist Michel Leiris warned writers not to play the Antillean by using Creole (Leiris 1955: 111). Frantz Fanon, who devotes a whole chapter (“Le noir et le langage” [Blacks and language]) of *Peau noire, marques blancs* (Black skin, white masks), 1952, to the problem of linguistic alienation, is equally afraid that the acceptance of Creole may

10 Je me suis fabriqué une langue. . . Pourquoi? Mais parce que je me rends bien compte que la langue française n’a pas été inventée pour moi. Elle n’a pas été inventée pour exprimer les idées, les pensées d’un Nègre et d’un Antillais. . . Disons: j’ai été colonisé par les Français, j’ai voulu coloniser la langue française (interview with Aimé Césaire 1976).

confirm the stereotype of the *Y-a-bon banania* Negro, a French stereotype equivalent to the smiling black face on Cream of Wheat boxes marketed in the United States (Fanon 1952: 21). Therefore he advocated the definitive adoption of the French language by the Antillean people.

In the same way, the novels and essays of Edouard Glissant constitute the most complete attempt to get beyond the linguistic trap. The expansion of the French language in the French Antilles shows that the islands are, like most parts of the world, on the way to general multilingualism, which constitutes a new form of individual liberation from submission to any kind of linguistic coercion (Glissant 1981a: 325). The overall “crisis of the written text” will, according to Glissant, lead to the gradual disappearance of the divisions between *écriture* and *oraliture* (literature and orality). Linguistic norms are forms of separation that will be replaced by contact, communication, and, ultimately, by what Glissant calls *relation*, which does not require institutionalized codes but only the identity and autonomy of the locutors. In order to acquire this *relation*, colonized people have to recreate, beyond all linguistic norms, the original significance and value of the word.

This process is described paradigmatically in one of Glissant’s novels, *La case du commandeur* (The foreman’s cabin), 1981. In this work, the hero penetrates the jungle (of the Martinican mountains, but also of his mind) and encounters an old sorcerer. Together they redefine the meaning of (French) words so that they make sense in their own world (Glissant 1981b: 77ff.).

While the French Antilles proceed toward a greater linguistic complexity, Haiti is moving in the opposite direction. As mentioned above, the Haitian intelligentsia in 1950 still adhered to the Enlightenment ideal of a national literature, though the collapse of that ideal was imminent: attempts at such a literature had not succeeded in establishing the national audience that would have assured its commercial and ideological survival. The various literacy campaigns in Creole seemed to some to provide a solution: “Most Haitian writers who write in Creole will or will not discover that they do so in order to get rid of an anxiety that has befallen them, even if they do not completely know where these new experiences will lead them. This anxiety originates from a feeling of personal as well as national failure”¹¹.

11 La plupart des écrivains haïtiens qui écrivent en créole découvrent ou ne découvrent pas qu’ils écrivent en créole pour tenter de sortir de l’angoisse qui s’empare d’eux sans

The first result of the literacy campaigns was an ever-increasing number of small and inexpensive booklets written in Creole, which provided instructions on agricultural techniques or health care or offered simple, didactically conceived stories. They were published by the various literacy campaigns, particularly by religious institutions. Their poor quality challenged other authors to break down the barriers of literary diglossia. Significantly, the first serious attempts were the translations of classical and neoclassical tragedies: *Antigone* and, later, *Le Cid* (The Cid), by Corneille, the performances of which were followed by printed editions. The translator explains that his experience should “make us discover a secret unknown to many. When somebody knows Creole in all its depth, he can tell all kinds of truth that will resound in the hearts of men throughout the whole world”¹².

The 1970s brought a general breakthrough in the further use of the Creole language: it was now used without restriction in local television and other broadcasting; the first scientific articles and books were written in that language or translated into it; poetry — the genre that integrated Creole most rapidly — was already so rich that Lambert-Félix Prudent published a large international anthology, the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie créole* (Anthology of new Creole poetry), in 1984; Creole theater experienced successes French theater in Haiti would never have dreamt of; the first full-scale novels were published, amongst them one that rapidly achieved local and also a measure of international success: *Dézafi* (Challenge), 1975, by Frankétienne. To understand the significance of that novel, one has to know that the author had already achieved some fame for writing in French, particularly for his interest in form and style. Writing in Creole was a challenge for him, first, because “people were waiting for the composition and publication of a work in Creole that would have a greater impact than the usual poems, fables, stories, or tales”¹³. On the other hand, he was never engaged in the political struggle surrounding the Creole language. His viewpoint was considered to be that of an artist

trop savoir jusqu’où peut les couduire l’expérience. Cette angoisse vient d’un sentiment d’échec personnel et d’échec national (Morisseau-Leroy 1954: 51).

12 Fè nou dékouvri yon sékrè anpil moun pat konnin. Lè nèg ki konn kréyòl la nan ras-in palé, li fè li di tout kalité vérité kap konsonnin nan tout kè tout moun sou latè béni (Numa 1975: v).

13 On s’attendait à l’élaboration, à la publication d’une oeuvre en créole de plus grande envergure que des poèmes, des fables historiettes ou des contes (Fleischmann 1977: 17).

objectively appraising the value of his linguistic tool, and Creole was, as he said, fresh, unused, and above all — due to its intrinsic ambiguity — very apt to reproduce Haitian reality.

The success and general acceptance of this novel points to the future development of the Creole language. The creation of its own literary register will carry the phenomenon of diglossia to the Creole language itself when it produces a new cultivated and literary style opposing the traditional peasants' language.

3. The Abysses of the Internationalist Discourse

One of the main arguments against Creole has always been the danger that it would isolate Haiti from the rest of the world and that Haitian literature would no longer be accessible to foreigners. As early as the nineteenth century, gaining the recognition of the world was seen as an important task of the national literature, because this achievement was expected to be accompanied by the moral, political, and economic evolution of the nation. More than half of this early literature was printed in Paris, but not because the authors hoped to sell it abroad: instead, the place of publication was meant to increase the prestige of their work at home. The Haitian discourse on a national literature has oscillated between two extremes: whether to be a literature written in French, which is designed for a foreign market, or to be a literature written in Creole, which would necessarily be local. The failure of the Enlightenment discourse of Haitian literature, which was international by virtue of its language and local in its aspirations, became evident with the persistent and increasing poverty and with the Duvalier dictatorship; these conditions forced traditional Haitian literature to dry up to a small and insignificant trickle that, in spite of the creation of a French literary prize, has produced hardly any work worth mentioning since the late 1950s. The Haitian national literature has broken off into its two separate halves: local literary production in Creole, which has to deal with the burden of a nonexistent market and literary society, and a rather large branch of exile literature published in Paris and Montreal.

French Antillean literature has always had to rely on a foreign market; a periodization suggested in 1982 by Roger Toumson divides French Antillean literature into three major currents, all of which were determined less by internal evolution than by a change in the taste of the Paris audience:

the first trend was an exotic one, *doudouisme* (sweetheart exoticism), which lasted until 1930; the second trend resulted from the French and international interest in black literature; the third, initiated by the works of Frantz Fanon at the end of the fifties, which developed into the movement of *antillanité*, merits a closer look because it advocated a form of cultural therapy that could transcend the historical and linguistic isolation of the islands by positing a trans-Caribbean affinity.

This plea for a regionalization of French Caribbean literature seems to be just another alternative in the search for a larger literary scope in a society that, despite widespread literacy, has not succeeded in creating its own literary institutions and, therefore, has always been marginalized. The *doudouisme* of the past century was not only an unproductive niche within the French discourse; it implicitly confirmed white supremacy. Negritude was very popular amongst white French counter-elites from its beginning; it was rapidly able to create its own institutions of art and literature in Paris: a number of reviews and a publishing house (*Présence Africaine*) that offered an organizational and commercial alternative for Caribbean writers. Though Aimé Césaire was considered one of the founders of the negritude movement, none of its various phases really coincided with problems specific to the Caribbean. The mysticism of the Senghorian revaluation of black culture was based mainly on the African cultural heritage. It had already been refuted by Aimé Césaire in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a return to the native land), 1939. Anticolonialist negritude was of no direct relevance to an independent Haiti or to French islands that had already decided upon their political future in 1946; a search for a socialist negritude was the natural result of the political orientations of both Aimé Césaire and Jacques Roumain. Both authors, however, came up against the incompatibility of racial movements with social ones, and this brought the search to an end. The numerous literary histories and anthologies of the period extending from 1945 to 1980 tended to group the Antillean authors with black or even African literature and denied them a specific discourse: "A novel from Senegal will be nearer to *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, published ten years earlier and on the other side of the Atlantic, than a work closer in time and space. There are no geographic borders to the states of the soul"¹⁴!

14 Un roman sénégalais se trouvera plus proche de *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, publié une dizaine d'années auparavant et de l'autre côté de l'Atlantique, qu'une oeuvre voisine

From 1960 onward, when the African colonies had become independent and when their literature began to reflect their own, new political problems, critics became very unfriendly toward the negritude doctrine, which was considered to be a form of counterracism betraying self-exoticization — as Sartre had already argued as early as 1948 — dependent on a dialectical relationship to white culture.

But this was not the only ideological basis for the new *antillanité* movement. Decentralization and regional socioeconomic recovery had become the new passwords of postindustrial Europe. This was particularly true in France, which was characterized by a new era of centralized capitalism after the end of the Algerian war and was torn by civil strife between the peripheral (and ethnically different) provinces, such as Corsica or Brittany, and the central state. The urban insurrections in May 1968 showed how these contradictions between periphery and center became the focus of a new anticolonial movement directed against interior colonization, that is, against the overwhelming power of the centralized state and of multinational corporations, both of which were perceived to be responsible for the progressive destruction of the individual.

This movement offered a new perspective for Antillean intellectuals torn between the economic advantages of French citizenship and its alienating effects. Before and beyond *antillanité* a number of individualistic novels appeared that reflected the loneliness and psychic troubles of the nonwhite French citizens forced to live within an alien and hostile society. Mental illness and suicide — of the authors as well as the literary heroes — were subjects of this literary discourse. In a characteristic passage of *Cajou*, 1961, Michèle Lacrosil explains why her heroine drowns herself while proclaiming aloud her lack of identity. Another woman author, Jacqueline Manicom, committed suicide four years after the publication of a remarkable but desperate novel with the suggestive title *Mon examen de blanc* (My whiteness test), 1972. Maryse Condé has her heroines travel to Africa in search of their real identities, but these trips are failures, which, in *Une saison à Rihata* (A season in Rihata), 1981, leads to mental problems for the heroine. Research was conducted on the high incidence of mental illness in the French Overseas Departments, and Edouard Glissant's *antillanité* — in novels as well as in theoretical studies — also originates in the perception

dans le temps et l'espace: il n'existe pas de frontières géographiques pour les états d'âme. (Achiriga 1973: 15).

and analysis of the individual's mental disorders. *La case du commandeur*, a very paradigmatic novel, shows how the individual crisis is linked to a form of collective insanity: the heroine, Mycéa, is a lucid person who is aware of her loss of the concepts of time and space, but her successful attempts to recover them make her unable to survive in the alienated society of the French Caribbean, and she ends up in a mental institution.

Glissant's message is also part of a postmodern discourse where political questions — such as the problem of autonomy or even of independence — are secondary. He advocates a future where the state no longer interferes with the cultural, the linguistic, the economic, or any other form of individual self-determination but instead tolerates and even furthers multiculturalism at the individual and local levels. It is, however, part of the problem that the understanding and the solution of the Antillean crisis are always bound to the larger international discourse; Glissant and all other important authors are published and read in Paris, from where — as always — salvation is expected.

The recent internationalization of Haitian literature has a different context, and it also produces different results. It had already begun in the 1940s and 1950s with the international success of Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, followed in the late 1950s by the Parisian publication of Alexis's novels, which are currently witnessing a renaissance. An important factor in this internationalization is unique to Haiti; it results from the exile of authors who were persecuted for political reasons. This exile became the collective fate of Haitian intellectuals when Duvalier came to power. It is quite instructive to look at the structure of the huge Haitian community in Quebec: their assimilation was difficult for racial reasons, but not on the socioeconomic level, because a very high percentage were well-educated professionals. Today nearly all important Haitian authors live and publish abroad: Gérard Étienne, Émile Ollivier, Liliane Dévieux, and Anthony Phelps reside in Canada; Cauvin Paul and Roger Pradel, in the United States; Jean Claude Charles, René Depestre, and Jean Métellus, in France; Roger Dorsinville and Gérard Chenet, in Africa. It is quite surprising that despite this literary diaspora, a certain institutional unity has developed and is maintained, even when many members of the expatriate community have acquired the citizenship of their host countries and will probably never return to live in Haiti. They have created their own reviews (*Nouvelle Optique*, *Haïti Observateur*, and, in Creole, *Sèl*); they have their

own literary critics (Maximilien Laroche, Jean Jonassaint); and they are usually described as a group.

Their socioeconomic profile is rather homogeneous: most are successful professionals, often university professors, and the primary reason for their careers as writers has been their desire to use literature for the settlement of accounts with Duvalier's Haiti. Their first novels at least seem to be a sort of continuation of former Haitian literary discourse: a very negative and critical image of the country where political violence, corruption, and incompetence abound. Some of the novels do this by taking up the tradition of the *roman national*, chronicling the destruction of the country and its middle class. This literary Haiti is often, however, far away. The characteristic perspective is that of a child or an adolescent who remembers it sometimes as a paradise, sometimes as a place of horror. In either case, Haiti is portrayed as a place that determined the course of the now-liberated author's life: "in the Americas the worst of all miseries was to be born in Haiti"¹⁵.

Physically removed from the island's life, the authors have gradually tended to stop using Haiti as the setting for their works. In *Un ambassadeur macoute à Montréal* (A Duvalier ambassador to Montreal), 1973, Gérard Étienne creates a fantastic setting to symbolize the destruction of his native island. Haitian horror moves to Montreal and, by summoning up the latent evil of its inhabitants, nearly succeeds in upsetting the peaceful Canadian society. Other authors, such as Jean Métellus, show how emigration is finally completed at the literary level: having quenched their thirst for literary revenge on Haiti, they ultimately write novels that no longer bear any relationship to their home country. The disappearance of Haiti as a literary theme reaches its apex in texts by the younger generation, whose memories of Haiti are increasingly vague. They no longer need to demonstrate their rejection of Haiti. Haiti simply ceases to exist because another problem is more urgent: the difficulty of settling in the large metropolitan centers of the Western industrialized world.

A curious example of this trend is the recent literary success of Dany Laferrière, who left Haiti as a child in 1978 and started his literary career in the Haitian diaspora, writing for the New York-based *Haiti Observateur*. In his novel *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (How to make love with a Negro without getting tired), 1989, Laferrière does not mention Haiti once. The narrator's vague identification with Africa is part of a

15 Dans les Amériques, le pire des malheurs était de naître en Haïti (Depestre 1973: 10).

discourse that he, ironically, rejects: “It is true, the Occident has plundered Africa, but this Negro is reading”¹⁶.

What is even more interesting, the book is largely an autobiographical novel about reading and writing, written in a technique that, since André Gide’s *Faux-monnayeurs* (The counterfeiters), 1926, has been called *construction en abyme* (abyss construction). This technique fictionalizes the process of its own creation, which means it does not describe any reality, but instead describes, in a theoretically unlimited chain, the relationship between the author and reality. All that remains is the fact that a black man writes a book about a black man who writes a book about a black man who writes a book, and so on. Thus, Laferrière purposely avoids any determination of his position in the world. We only learn that the world portrayed is not his own. Two “Negroes” spend their days in their beds in a dirty Montreal room, sleeping, listening to jazz, reading piles of books, making love to healthy and sophisticated anglophone women, and, occasionally, writing down their experiences. Their reading list includes the Koran (which is quoted on every other page), a number of black authors, but also, very conspicuously, Henry Miller and Charles Bukowsky — i.e., authors who deal with the survival of a bohemian subculture in large Western industrialized cities. In the end, the narrator imagines that his novel becomes a success, that he is called upon to read from it, and that it is characterized as “the first real image of Montreal provided by a black writer”¹⁷. It is no longer his relationship to Haiti or the Caribbean that determines his position as a writer but the fact that he is part of a racial minority within a white country. The literary work no longer represents any particular island or country, but universal interracial problems. This *could* be negritude, but, in the final analysis, it is nothing but an abyss where black movements, as well as white benevolence, are parts of an overwhelming network of stereotypes. This imaginary writer imagines situations in which imaginary white readers imagine answering imaginary black authors:

And me, I saw the girl shake her head, ecstatic as she was in front of a real one, a primitive man, a Negro like in *National Geographic*, Rousseau and Company.

16 C’est vrai, l’Occident a pillé l’Afrique mais ce Nègre est en train de lire (Laferrière 1989: 47).

17 Le premier véritable portrait de Montréal venant d’un écrivain noir (Laferrière 1989: 175).

I know this guy very well, and I know that he is not from the bush, but from Abidjan, one of the big towns in Africa, that he has lived in Denmark and Holland before he established himself in Montreal. He is a Western town dweller. But he would never admit this in front of a white girl, since Africa has to serve him as something like a supernumerary sexual organ. (Laferrière 1989: 176-177)¹⁸

Haiti had disappeared from Laferrière's text, but it remains a part of the implicit contradictions that characterize the new Antillean writer in exile; he is black, but makes love exclusively to white women; he only reads books written in English, but writes in French (and probably speaks Creole); he has cut himself off from the tree of Haitian literature, but quotes Émile Ollivier; "Here we are, the Metropolitan Negroes"¹⁹.

By continually constructing abysses, masking his own position, and refusing to make any political commitment, Laferrière has written a novel that represents the absolute negation of everything that the Enlightenment discourse of Haitian literature stood for. The idealism of a literature with neither a public nor a market has come to an end; the anticipated success of the book has become the only reason for writing, and the books' success is measured by how well it solves the author's personal problems, as we see in the very last lines of the work: "The novel seems to stare at me, there, on the table beside the old Remington, in a big red folder. My novel is stout as a bulldog. My only chance. GO"²⁰.

The final switch to postmodernism is, however, not just an accommodation to market expectations. The title of Laferrière's last chapter proclaims that one is not born black, one becomes black. Entangled in the web of successive and conflicting discourses, the author, finally, is no longer able to identify his reality. Paradoxically, the final motivation for writing is its own negation: the desperate conjuration of the abysses that threaten to

18 Et moi, je voyais la fille hocher la tête, en extase devant un vrai de vrai, l'homme primitif, le Nègre selon *National Geographic*, Rousseau et Cie. Je connais très bien ce type et je sais qu'il vient, non pas de la brousse mais d'Abidijan, l'une des grandes villes d'Afrique, qu'il a vécu au Danemark et en Hollande avant de venir s'établir à Montréal. C'est un urbain et un Occidental. Mais cela, il ne l'admettra devant aucune Blanche, l'Afrique doit lui servir en quelque sorte de sexe surnuméraire (Laferrière 1989: 176-177).

19 Nous voici, Nègres Métropolitains (title of a chapter in Laferrière 1989: 97).

20 Le roman me regarde, là sur la table, à côté de la vieille Remington, dans un gros classeur rouge. Il est dodu comme un dogue, mon roman. Ma seule chance. VA (Laferrière 1989: 185).

devour not only the writer but also the Antillean communities and, finally, the islands themselves.

According to Edouard Glissant, Caribbean literature is in a continuous and desperate fight against a predominant fear of annihilation, but the very fact of its creation already presupposes its destruction by alien and imposed discourse:

But the writing is sliced apart, trying to record from a distance what there (and here) is always dissolving. It seems that every day the rounds of erasure accelerate for us Martinicans. Victims of the friction between different worlds, we are continuously disappearing. Piled along a line where volcanos emerge. Banal example of liquidation by the absurd, horrorless horribleness of successful colonization. What can writing do? It never catches up (Glissant 1981a: 15)²¹.

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21 Mais l’écriture s’émince, à marquer de loin ce qui là (ici) se défait sans répit. Il semble que de jour en jour le tour d’effacement pour nous Martiniquais s’accélère. Nous n’en finissons pas de disparaître, victimes d’un frottement de mondes. Tassés sur la ligne d’émergence des volcanos. Exemple banal de liquidation par l’absurde, dans l’horrible sans horreurs d’une colonisation réussie. Qu’y peut l’écriture? Elle ne rattrape jamais (Glissant 1981a: 15).

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