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## Telling Stories from Haiti: Dany Laferriere and Authenticity and Authority in Autobiography

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## Telling Stories from Haiti

*Dany Laferrière and Authenticity and Authority in Autobiography*

- Lee Skallerup Bessette

### Introduction

On June 27, 2011, the website GOOD.is published the article "I'm Gonna Need You to Fight Me On This" by journalist Mac McClelland.<sup>i</sup> In it, she describes her PTSD, acquired when she was sent to cover the rapes that were taking place in Haiti post-earthquake. As McClelland watched one rape victim reduced to hysterics when they spotted one of her rapists, McClelland suffered her own trauma. As a result, McClelland negotiated to be "raped" violently by a friend in order to overcome her PTSD. Within hours, the backlash against McClelland's piece had appeared online.

The most widely-circulated reaction comes from a group of 36 female reporters who have lived in and written about Haiti for years. In an open letter to the editors of GOOD.is, the women write:

In writing about a country filled with guns, "ugly chaos" and "gang-raping monsters who prowl the flimsy encampments," she [McClelland] paints Haiti as a heart-of-darkness dystopia, which serves to highlight her own personal bravery for having gone there in the first place. She makes use of stereotypes about Haiti that would be better left in an earlier century: the savage men consumed by their own lust, the omnipresent violence and chaos, the danger encoded in a black republic's DNA.

...

Unfortunately, most Haitian women are not offered escapes from the possibility of violence in the camps in the form of passports and tickets home to another country. For the thousands of displaced women around Port-au-Prince, the threat of rape is tragically high. But the image of Haiti that Ms. McClelland paints only contributes to their continued marginalization. While we are glad that Ms. McClelland had achieved a sort of peace within, we would encourage her, next time, not to make Haiti a casualty in the process.<sup>ii</sup>

Michael Deibert, another journalist who has also lived in and written about Haiti, comments that "I don't think I have ever read something that has viscerally struck me as more narcissistic as a piece of writing about this country I dearly love" and asks if the future of journalism is, indeed, "Where the suffering and struggle for survival of the majority of the world's population merely provides a backdrop for navel-gazing to even further promote what has already become our incredibly inward-looking, self-referential culture?"<sup>iii</sup>

Perhaps, however, the most disturbing aspect of this situation is the one voice and story that is completely subsumed by first McClelland, then by those who would criticize her; the voice and narrative of the rape victim who "triggered" McClelland's PTSD. In an essay published on *essence.com*, Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat gives voice to Sybille/K\* (as she is referred to in McClelland's essay/article/Twitter feed). Danticat, with K\*/Sybille's permission, reveals that McClelland live-tweeted K\*/Sybille's post-rape ordeal, without her permission, and endangered her safety when McClelland exposed their location through her Twitter feed and subsequent article. In a handwritten letter, in Haitian Creole, which was sent through a lawyer to Mother Jones (where McClelland's article on Haiti originally appeared), reads:



You have no right to speak of my story.  
You have no right to publish my story in the press.  
Because I did not give you authorization.  
You have no right. I did not speak to you.  
You have said things you should not have said.  
Thank you

Later, in an email to Danticat, K\* writes "I want victims in Haiti to know that they can be strong and stand up for their rights and have a voice. Our choices about when and how our story is told must be respected."<sup>iv</sup>

I begin with this example because it represents one of the central tensions when talking about life writing in and about Haiti, or other postcolonial countries: whose voices are given the authority to speak and what are those voices permitted to speak about, and how can "native" voices counter the First World voices that have often spoken for or spoken over them. Dany Laferrière, in his multiple versions and revisions of his autobiographical novel *Le goût des jeunes filles* (*Dining with the Dictator* in English translation) would seem to be examining these very questions. While not offering any concrete answers, Laferrière confronts a First World reader (albeit subtly) with their expectations and then slyly subverts them to great effect. In his second novel, *Érosbima*, Laferrière begins the process of questioning ideas of authority and story-telling in a short scene. The scene became an iconic image in *Le goût des jeunes filles*, both the original novel and the movie. Soon after the movie was released in 2004, Laferrière published a new version of the novel, one that almost doubled in size. The additions to the new version complicate the relationship between reader and author, the "autobiographical pact", and underscore issues of both gender and class.

### Laferrière and Life Writing

Dany Laferrière is the author of 20 books and screenplays all centered on various periods in his life growing up under both Duvaliers in Haiti, then as an exile in Montreal. His father, Windsor Laferrière, was exiled by Papa Doc in 1959, when Dany was only six years old. Dany was already living with his grandmother in the countryside, hiding in plain site because of the political work his father was doing in the capital. Dany moved back to Port-au-Prince in 1964 and became a journalist in 1972 for the newspaper *Le Nouvelliste*, as well as for *Le Petit Samedi Soir* and Radio Haiti-Inter. In 1976, Dany's best friend and fellow journalist, Gasner Raymond was found decapitated by Baby Doc's security forces, with the message that he was next. Dany left for Montreal, leaving behind his family. His work has won numerous awards, most recently the prestigious Prix Médicis from France.

Early in *J'écris comme je vis*, Laferrière talks about the ongoing argument he has with his aunt Raymonde (who we meet at the beginning of *Le goût des jeunes filles*) about the authenticity of his novels: "J'ai beau essayer de lui faire comprendre que mon travail ne consiste pas à dire les faits mais plutôt à faire surgir l'émotion qui compte et rien d'autre, pour elle, je déforme la réalité." [I tried to explain to her I'm not interested in the facts when I write, but instead focus on the emotion and nothing else, but for her, I'm warping reality.]<sup>vi</sup> In other words, for Laferrière, emotion trumps what most of us would consider a factual description. Reality and emotion for Laferrière are not mutually exclusive, and one cannot exist without the other, but for him, emotion fuels the recreation of reality, not the other way around. Elsewhere, he puts it as follows: "As for the matter of the percentage of true facts in fiction or fiction in true materials, I have my way of being a writer. When I talk about my books, I always say that they are an autobiography of my feelings. I'm not

interested in recounting my life in any traditional way...The life I dream is as true as my actual life."<sup>vii</sup> This impacts how we understand Laferrière's writing more generally.

Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw suggests that this "hybrid action" between the real and unreal, between real life and dream life, is a reflection of Laferrière's refusal to be easily categorized: "Just as his writer's "I" has no fixed or rooted nationality, so too does Laferrière inhabit a liminal identity, dancing at the borders, forever in motion."<sup>viii</sup> Gillian Whitlock suggests that what Laferrière is doing is a part of a larger tradition of Caribbean life writing: "In place of authenticity and a unified, organic sense of subjectivity one finds a profoundly historical, political, and contingent sense of self-identification...Caribbean subjects have never been able to take for granted the occasion for speaking, nor the terms in which they will be heard and recognized."<sup>ix</sup> Laferrière not only explicitly comments on the subject of authenticity and subjectivity through his elusive "I" identity, he also problematizes the issue of who is privileged, or authorized, to speak through numerous intertextual references.

### V.S. Naipaul, Douanier Rousseau, and the Artist's Role

*Érosbima*<sup>x</sup> is Laferrière's second novel. It finds the narrator (Laferrière's alter-ego, Vieux) "trapped" in the apartment of a Japanese-Canadian photographer, Hoki. He is there alone, as Hoki has traveled to New York because of the assassination of John Lennon. Laferrière, in an interview, has revealed that he had never been the kept man of a Japanese woman, but he would have wanted to be.<sup>xi</sup> The book is a fantasy, but one that turns into a rumination on how we deal with trauma, specifically, the trauma of the atomic bomb. As I have written elsewhere,<sup>xii</sup> the book becomes one author's attempt to understand how people, the ordinary and the artist alike, deal with an event so traumatic, it literally changes the direction of history; in the book the trauma is the atomic bomb, but in Laferrière's case, it is the murder of his best friend and subsequent exile to Montreal. This is an important question for Laferrière, as he, at this point in his career as an author, is attempting to figure out how to write about his own traumatic experiences growing up in Haiti.

Towards the end of the novel, Laferrière quotes a Japanese photographer, Hiromi Tsuchida, who travelled to Hiroshima to chronicle the aftermath of the bomb. He quotes:

Even if I could commune with the suffering of the victims, what would be the result? All I perceive is the deep gulf between the victims of the atomic bomb and ordinary people. I must recognize that this collection of photographs will not succeed in bridging this gap. There is nothing left for me to do about this, except admit the shame of my artist's vision.<sup>xiii</sup>

It is interesting to note that even though the photographer is from Japan, thus in a supposedly privileged or authentic position to comment on the disaster, he is left powerless in the face of such destruction. He is not trying to speak for the victims, but instead trying to bridge the gap between the victims and those who were spared the immediate trauma of the bomb. But, as Laferrière points out throughout the narrative, trauma has touched the lives of so many who were not in Hiroshima when the bomb was dropped: survivors of the Holocaust, Japanese ex-pats who weren't even born when the bomb was dropped, German descendants of former Nazi soldiers, Americans and Europeans left at once horrified and relieved as the bomb signified the end of the destructive force of World War II. So who, indeed, has the right or the authority to speak about the trauma of the bomb? Laferrière is also questioning how an artist is supposed to interpret and communicate that trauma.

Tellingly, the quote from the Japanese photographer comes immediate after a section describing Port-au-Prince, Haiti; this is Laferrière's first mention in his books of his



prior life, the life before his exile to Montréal. In both *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* and most of *Éroshima*, the nationality of the narrator remains vague and unclear. This scene would re-appear in *Le goût des jeunes filles* (1992), his second novel dealing with his life and childhood in Haiti under the Duvalier dictatorship. This juxtaposition of scenes is not by accident and would seem to point us to Laferrière's effort to work through his own fragmented life, pre- and post-exile. It is worth noting that the novel immediately following *Éroshima* is *L'odeur du café* (An Aroma of Coffee), describing some of his time living with his grandmother in Petit-Goâve in rural Haiti. Most interestingly for the purposes of this paper is how Laferrière titles this section: "Un paysage du Douanier Rousseau retouché par V.S. Naipaul" [A landscape by Douanier Rousseau Revised by V.S. Naipaul]; Rousseau and Naipaul's work as artists has been problematically received particularly in relation to authenticity and authority, not to mention each artist's problematic use of race in their work.

Henri Rousseau, often called Douanier Rousseau because he worked as a sort of municipal customs agent,<sup>xiv</sup> was known as a "Primitive Painter". This primitivism comes from the fact that he was a self-taught painter whose art contained a sort of naïveté that differed from the art that was being produced during the same period.<sup>xv</sup> According to Henri Béhar, Rousseau possessed a "freshness of imagination, the childlike vision he managed to preserve in all his works,"<sup>xvi</sup> a quality that harkened back to a more primitive, oral and folk-art tradition that was being largely ignored by Modernism.<sup>xvii</sup> But it may also be applied to the subject of his most famous paintings, what are referred to as his Jungle landscapes. In them, Rousseau paints exotic landscapes, animals, and "natives;" subjects he had never observed first-hand.

Guillaume Apollinaire describes a version of Rousseau's life that is completely fabricated but that attempts to justify or lend authority to Rousseau's painting and subjects: "In many articles [Apollinaire] states that Rousseau went to Mexico with troops sent by Napoleon III to support Maximilian, and this is the memory of the 'forbidden' tropical fruits in Central America that obsessed him in his Jungle paintings. Never sent to foreign parts during his military service, Rousseau found the tropics at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris."<sup>xviii</sup> In fact, Rousseau's obsession with lush jungle landscapes would seem to reflect a much more mundane impulse: "This impecunious suburbanite, aware that he had led an unadventurous life, was through the evocations of the 'incredible floridas'...to satisfy his own need for dream, for escape."<sup>xix</sup> How Rousseau represented these fictional worlds to which he escapes is an important consideration in order to understand why Laferrière includes Rousseau in his writing.

Two paintings in particular seem to well-illustrate Rousseau's fictional escapes. "The Sleeping Gypsy" is a painting of a dark-complexioned Black woman, sleeping in the middle of the desert. Looking over her is a lion, and beside her are a lute and a vase. The woman is exotic, unreachable, silent, and contains mystical properties; Jean Cocteau, in a 1926 catalogue description, puts it thusly: "And perhaps it is not without motive that the painter, who never overlooks any detail, has been careful to omit any prints on the sand around the sleeping feet. The gypsy did not come there where she sleeps. She is there. She is not there. She occupies no human site."<sup>xx</sup> This is the Black woman as no-body, as escape, as fantasy. But the image is taken further when Cocteau asks, "Should we regard this picture as one of Rousseau's dreams and the gypsy as his projection of Rousseau himself, the ignored artist-musician?"<sup>xxi</sup> The painting is indeed fantasy, but that fantasy is a product of and produces an engendered and racial imagery that is problematic at best, racist at worst. One wonders why Rousseau chooses a black woman to embody his crisis, or why a foreign, postcolonial landscape. It does not seem fair or just to use a dominated and subaltern figure to represent the fantasies of a dominant culture.

Fantasy and the fantastic are prominently featured in the painting "Tropical Landscape: An American Indian Struggling with an Ape." It is, indeed, just as the title describes. The Native American is dressed in the most stereotypical of costumes: feather headdress, bare-chested, nothing more than a feathered skirt covering his lower-half. The image is "drawn from the rich, romantic tradition or the Noble Savage" and has appeared in other forms elsewhere in Rousseau's work.<sup>xxii</sup> Of course, a Native American would not be found in a jungle, nor would he be facing off against an ape. But the lush vegetation that Rousseau paints is also imagined: "Rousseau creates new flora and does not even attempt to describe any plausible landscape...[taking] on a value that is more poetic than descriptive."<sup>xxiii</sup> Interpreting this wholly imaginary and unreal landscape is not unproblematic. Rousseau could be, once again, projecting his being into the figure of the Native American, or perhaps he is illustrating the imagined and unreal aspect of the stereotype itself; this sort of image of the Native American, at the end of the nineteenth century, "had become a cliché of the circus and theater."<sup>xxiv</sup> This could be the work of a sly social critic or the fantasies of a naïve, child-like painter. Descriptions of Rousseau and his approach to art would suggest the latter interpretation, showing again a racially coded version of escape and fantasy.

The landscape, however, that appears in Laferrière's book does not belong entirely to Rousseau; it is "retouché" by V.S. Naipaul and thus further problematized and mediated. Depending on your view, Naipaul is either one of the greatest English writers of the twentieth century or one of the most important apologists for Imperialism; or, more accurately perhaps, both. A great deal of praise focuses on Naipaul's skill as a writer to capture details of the surroundings and that he "has disproved all the identifications that critics have attempted, the labels of 'West Indian Writer' and 'Emergent Third-Worlder,' 'Mandarin' and 'Transplanted Indian'...Wholly original, he may be the only writer in whom there are no echoes of influences."<sup>xxv</sup> This "originality" that Naipaul possessed led to his emergence "as one of the most thoughtful writers of the postwar period because of his shifting and challenging views on at least one great problem fundamental to our age [the postcolonial condition]."<sup>xxvi</sup> It is arguable that the view Naipaul offers challenges our views, as it could simply reinforce old colonial discourses that have fallen out of favor. Laferrière himself defends Naipaul as a writer and artist: "Une type comme Naipaul n'est ni raciste ni antipatriotique. C'est un critique féroce. C'est ainsi qu'il regard le monde" [A writer like Naipaul is neither racist nor unpatriotic. He is a ferocious critic. That's how he sees the world.]<sup>xxvii</sup> One can understand how a writer like Laferrière who was himself exiled because of his ferocious criticism of those in power would defend Naipaul, but while Laferrière defends Naipaul, others disagree.

In 1987, when *Éroshima* was first published, Edward Said had just two years earlier publicly accused Naipaul as being a "witness for the Western persecution" of the Third World<sup>xxviii</sup> and that he favored "the tritest, the cheapest and the easiest of colonial mythologies about wogs and darkies."<sup>xxix</sup> Said explicitly states that Naipaul, because he is an Indian Trinidadian, "has had ascribed to him the credentials of a man who can serve as witness for the third world; and he is a very convenient witness. He is a third worlder denouncing his own people, not because they are victims of imperialism, but because they seem to have an innate flaw, which is that they are not whites" (465).<sup>xxx</sup> While critics were praising his travel narratives, *The Middle Passage* and *An Area of Darkness*, as being refreshingly honest and critical because Naipaul's "most pressing insights go directly against the grain of the standard liberal bias held in common by most Western intellectuals today,"<sup>xxxi</sup> critics like Said were pointing to the larger issue of neo-Imperialism that seemed to run through Naipaul's writings about the Third World.



This also doesn't take into account his clearly biased at best, racist at worst, view of Blacks. In *V.S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading*, Selwyn Reginald Cudjoe outlines the way Naipaul treats Blacks, particularly in *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul's account of his return to the Caribbean after living in England. Naipaul thought that "the Negro was condemned to 'permanent inferiority'"<sup>xxxii</sup> and he "could not describe the Negro in other than physical terms because he could not grant that African peoples in the Caribbean had a spiritual or mythological tradition. Accepting the notions of the English racists, [Naipaul] could not move beyond the colonizer's confined vision of the society."<sup>xxxiii</sup> This attitude is repeated often in Naipaul's fiction, notably, *In a Free State*, *The Mimic Men*, and *The Overcrowded Barracoon*, granting us "only stereotypical responses to the conditions of the subject in postcolonial societies"<sup>xxxiv</sup> where "blacks remain in a state of 'sweet infantilism,' without language and without basic intelligence."<sup>xxxv</sup> It is interesting, then, that Laferrière chooses Naipaul to "rewrite" or "revise" the landscape we are about to read.

The scene in question takes place one hot summer night in Port-au-Prince. Naipaul is in Haiti to write a story for the magazine *Rolling Stone*. The fictional Naipaul is accompanied by a group of Haitian girls, whom he chauffeurs in his "Buick 57." Naipaul, as described in this brief passage, seems completely detached from the surroundings. Despite the heat, Naipaul barricades himself in the Buick in an effort to understand "this lunatic asylum of a city":

A guy with a dozen watches around his arm yells something at Naipaul and lifts his wrist. A woman's knotty hand guides a little boy dressed in a new sailor suit. Pan left to Bazar La Poste: a neck of a cola bottle, fat lips and ivory-white teeth part for the pinkish liquid... Slow motion: the red throat of a bottom feeding fish sucking up its food... Interior: Naipaul drowning in his sweat and the specks of dust washing over the glass in flakes of liquid silk, in reddish streaks, in sarabands of ectoplasm detaching the retina of the eye.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In the heat and chaos, even Naipaul's eye becomes detached from himself, and it is clear that Naipaul is unable to make much sense of his surroundings. It would be impossible to make sense of a place like Port-au-Prince if one stays locked in the car, unwilling to venture out into the chaos, unwilling to see beyond the superficial bodies that parade in front of him. Further along, while sitting, waiting for the girls to get ready, "Naipaul observes. The black back on the cockroach like the broken neck of a beer bottle. Its fine antennae in constant movement. Naipaul's foot crushes it and it vomits out a whitish substance."<sup>xxxvii</sup> Previous to that passage, the women's (black) bodies have been described tenderly and it is shown how the women take care of each other: "Michaëlle brushes Pasqualine's silky hair in front of the large oval mirror... Michaëlle strokes the nape of Pasqualine's neck and gently kisses it. Then rubs her back with eau de cologne."<sup>xxxviii</sup> Naipaul would seem to want to crush the black bodies and expose the "whitish substance" while the girls themselves attempt to care for each other and build affection. Naipaul cannot capture Port-au-Prince when his goal at the outset is to destroy.

As homage to Rousseau, we can assume that this scene is wholly fantasy, created from Laferrière's imagination; like the ape and the Native American, Naipaul had never been to Haiti, nor did he ever write for *Rolling Stone*. The figures of the young women, as imagined by Laferrière, or even all of Port-au-Prince, are locked in a battle with Naipaul, who resists knowing them or the reality they present to him. Tellingly, the section ends thusly: "In the back seat the girls are laughing, showering perfume and powder on each other. Naipaul turns around and catches powder puff in the eyes. The girls keep laughing. The Buick (an oblong black mass) speeds on. There is no destination. Coolly into the Apocalypse."<sup>xxxix</sup> Once again,

Naipaul has his sight compromised, this time not by the city itself, but by the girls. In a book already titled "Éroshima," one cannot miss the phallic (but also colonial) imagery of the Buick Naipaul is driving. This modern, Western, patriarchal instrument may temporarily shelter Naipaul from the chaotic city, but it will also play a role in blinding him to the reality around him, guiding him (and, unfortunately, the girls) towards the Apocalypse.

But how is what Naipaul does in this brief passage any different than what Laferrière has done throughout the rest of the novel? Laferrière admits at the close of the book that "I am interested only in clichés, and the foremost cliché concerning Japan is eroticism. I fell madly in love with a Japanese woman when I was 12 years old. A Hokusai engraving (I believe). A tall girl with horizontal eyes... For me, supreme elegance is Japanese. The women's clothing. Especially the fabrics. And, of course, their feet (which I can only imagine). I am not talking about modern Japanese women... Japan has become Americanized."<sup>xl</sup> The book is a fantasy, a collection of reflections based not on reality, but the reality Laferrière imagines. The difference, it would seem, and this becomes the central distinction between Naipaul in Port-au-Prince and Laferrière in the rest of the book, in their approach to the subjects in question. Laferrière, in *Éroshima*, never seeks to crush the subject in order to expose the repulsive innards, but instead watches, reads, listens, and attempts to learn. He does seek to appropriate the voices, but lets them speak to him. Laferrière doesn't lock himself in a car to cut himself off from the world around him, but instead immerses himself in the fantasy, which is often sidetracked and even derailed by reality which he embraces.

Laferrière has said that an artist needs to be free to explore any subject in any way that s/he wants to: "Personne ne m'a demandé d'écrire, donc personne ne me dira quoi écrire."<sup>xli</sup> Laferrière's sentiment towards art closely echoes how Italian Futurist, Ardengo Soffici, described Rousseau's art: "[Rousseau] has understood this truth, that in art everything is allowable and legitimate if everything concurs in the sincere expression of a state of mind."<sup>xlii</sup> The problem comes when we try to decide at what point does an artist begin to appropriate otherness or begin to misrepresent their subject matter. Rousseau never claimed to be capturing reality; his paintings were purely a product of his imagination. Laferrière describes the chapter as being a landscape painted by Rousseau but "retouché" by V.S. Naipaul, whose position within postcolonial writing is equally problematic. The invocation of these two artists, whose subject matter often involved the exotic, the "savage," and the primitive can be read as a dig at those who would elevate an artist to speak or represent a whole people rather than their own subjective position. This section comes at the end of a novel, written by a Haitian-Canadian, that is concerned with Japan, Hiroshima, and the victims of World War II, suggesting that Laferrière is well aware of the difficulty in the current critical moment to examine questions and cultures outside of our own.<sup>xliii</sup> But one also cannot ignore the accusations that have been placed at the feet of authors like Naipaul that their work, through its critical veneration (or perhaps because of it), misrepresents and even further marginalizes postcolonial voices. It is a delicate and difficult task, writing in the first person about a postcolonial and traumatic situation. Laferrière, in this brief passage, pushes the reader to examine these issues.

### *Le Goût des jeunes filles*, Take One

*Le goût des jeunes filles*<sup>xliii</sup> was published in 1992 and appeared in English as *Dining with the Dictator* in 1994.<sup>xliii</sup> It is the story of one fateful weekend in 1971 when the narrator (implied to be the author but who remains nameless throughout the narrative) is forced to hide out in the house of the young girls he has watched from across the street for years. His friend, Gégé, has symbolically fooled him into thinking that the Tonton Macoutes (Duvalier's civilian security force) were after him; Gégé leads him to believe, in fact shows



him, fabricated evidence that he has cut off the testicles of a Tonton Macoute who had earlier drunkenly harassed the narrator. Over the weekend, the narrator reads the poetry of Magloire Saint-Aude, and learns about the lives of the girls he has only ever fantasized about. These are the same girls that appeared in the brief scene in *Éroshima*. The novel (clearly identified as such on the cover) starts, however, "Vingt ans plus tard, une petite maison à Miami" (Twenty years later, in a little house in Miami).

It is in this house, belonging to two of his aunts, that Laferrière establishes his view on authenticity when it comes to writing about his life story. His aunt Raymonde confronts him about the recently published (although not referred to by title) *L'odeur du café*, a book about his early childhood in rural Haiti with his beloved grandmother Da: "Your book is a lie from first page to the last," she tells him.<sup>xlvi</sup> When Laferrière tries to deflect his aunt's criticism by telling her "Of course, Aunt Raymondet's fiction,"<sup>xlvii</sup> she isn't buying it. His aunt takes offense in that if he is going to use real people in his stories, then he has a responsibility to "get it right." But what does it mean to "get it right?" She is particularly upset by her nephew's portrayal of his grandfather, her father.

"Everything you wrote about my father was lies."

Apparently I wasn't going to be spared. Even if I did draw a very fair portrait of my grandfather.

"He was my grandfather, Aunt Raymonde," I stammered.

"I know. But that doesn't mean you knew him."

"A grandfather is different from a father. I mean, he might be the same person, but he has two different functions."<sup>xlviii</sup>

A bit further down, Raymonde continues with the defense of her father:

"Let me finish young man. You had your opportunity, and now everyone knows everything about us, people I don't know and I'll never know... My father sent us to Port-au-Prince to study. You can't imagine what that meant back then. This man," she said, pointing to the large photo of my grandfather that hung above the telephone, "this man sacrificed himself for his daughters, and that's not in your novel."<sup>xlix</sup>

The perception of any given situation will depend on the position of the observer. Laferrière can only see his grandfather as his grandfather, while his aunt has built him up so much in her mind as a father that "she'd poisoned her sisters' lives with her obsession with one man."<sup>l</sup> Neither Laferrière nor his aunt is wrong in their recollections of the man who was both her father and his grandfather, but both views are also flawed and highly subjective.

In fact, one could read aunt Raymonde's apartment as an image for the challenges in telling a story in any sort of reliable way; it is filled with newspapers and magazines, along with a TV that is always on: "*The Miami Herald*, *Ebony*, *The Amsterdam News*, *Free Black Press*. Aunt Raymonde lives off of coffee and the TV news."<sup>li</sup> She goes on to tell her nephew a few of the pieces of bad news she has heard: two men break into a house, shoot a woman in the head, and set her on fire; a man loses his job, doesn't tell his family, and the next morning shoots up a McDonald's; a boat of Haitian refugees abandoned off the coast of Florida. Laferrière, however, shows how incomplete her knowledge is of the events, how limiting the "facts" can be in understanding a story. He asks if the man who went on to shoot up the McDonald's made love to his wife the night before and how the owner of the boat filled with Haitian refugees could have abandoned them in the middle of the Atlantic ocean.<sup>lii</sup> His aunt's stories lack context, emotional details that could make the events more meaningful, more real, rather than simply headlines meant to shock and horrify. In the quest for "just the

facts," news would seem to have lost its ability to move people. And, if the news is as reliable as aunt Raymonde would seem to believe, why the various sources for her news? Even the variety of news sources she consults implies the inherent subjectivity that comes when telling any story, news or otherwise.

After leaving his aunt's, Laferrière receives a phone call from Miki, whose house it was he used to watch from afar and escapes to that fateful weekend. She points him to an issue of *Vogue* magazine, where a picture of one of the other girls is featured. Laferrière reimagines the weekend when he was trapped in Miki's house and experienced their world. He conceives the story this time like a screenplay, complete with a cast of characters. The number of women, from *Éroshima* to this version, have expanded from four to six, and we have the added story of young Laferrière and Gégé, who were wholly absent in the first version. "Scene 1, Vendredi après-midi," opens in exactly the same way as the passage from *Éroshima*: Chouquette drowning her chicken in ketchup. This time, however, rather than Naipaul picking them up, Papa picks them up in his Buick, a high-ranking Tonton Macoute. "Scene 3" contains other parts of the passage from *Éroshima*, and the similarities continue on throughout the narrative. There is a writer from *Rolling Stone* magazine there to profile the music scene in Port-au-Prince (but it's not Papa), as well as a foreign photographer who becomes enamored by one of the girls.

One of the most significant differences between the brief passage told in *Éroshima* and the expanded universe of *Les goûts des jeunes filles*, however, is that we get dialogue between the girls, talking about their lives, their hopes and their dreams. Each girl in the narrative is given the opportunity to "confess" to the narrator as he sleeps on their couch, looking to evade capture. Rather than silently performing for fictional Naipaul's gaze, the narrator learns of their hopes, their dreams, and of their fierce determination to survive in an unforgiving place. The image of the girls in the car with Papa remains as well, as the narrator often watches them drive off, both from his own window at home, and then from the window of his hideout. These girls that he has often fantasized about become flesh and blood women with complex emotions and motivations for their actions. Miki, the ringleader, and who we know will go on to own her own fabric shop, knows that her youth and looks will only protect her for so long; Marie-Michèle is studying medicine and looking for any way out of Haiti; Marie-Flore, Miki's cousin, who is trying to escape her lecherous father, at fourteen knows more than a girl of that age should about men and sexuality; Pasqualine is only with Frank, another Tonton Macoute, in the small hope that she might get news about her imprisoned brother. We also know, again from the introduction to the story, that Chouquette, Papa's woman, and perhaps the hardest of all the girls, ends up a Jehovah's Witness after Papa (who finally left his wife and kids for her) shot another man that she had been fooling around with. Unlike Naipaul in the brief scene in *Éroshima*, Laferrière allows the women to speak and gives voice to their individual strength and collective grief.

The *Rolling Stone* reporter and photographer from *Vogue* play a small, but important role in the narrative in examining the question of authenticity and authority to write about Haiti. They are there to cover the (very real) musical revolution that was currently taking place in Haiti at that time, and the novel often makes reference to real bands that were popular at that time, such as Les Shleus-Shleus. But the journalists were also drawn to the more clichéd aspects of Haiti: "landscape, music, dance, voodoo, the local beauties."<sup>liii</sup> As the narrator puts it: "Their mandate was different. The *Rolling Stone* journalist was aiming for the heart of things. The photographer stayed on the surface. You have to read both magazines to get the complete picture."<sup>liiv</sup> But the complete picture still remains elusive. The musicians are understandably hesitant to talk to the American journalist, who keeps prefacing his questions with "without talking politics..." The musicians warn him against using words like



“explosion,” “upheaval,” or, worse, “revolution” when talking about their music.<sup>lv</sup> The interview, however, comes to an abrupt end when the reporter asks: “Do you think... that all of this is due to the fact that, when all is said and done, Haitian artists refuse to face reality?”<sup>lvi</sup> It is almost laughable to accuse these men in Port-au-Prince, one of whom, it is implied, will be forced to perform oral sex on a Tonton Macoute as retribution,<sup>lvii</sup> of refusing to face reality. These musicians are making music and trying to survive. And, according to Gage Averill, the musicians of this generation, years later, helped inspire the overthrow of Baby Doc.<sup>lviii</sup> We see a privileged foreign writer try to impose his vision of what Haiti should be and an artist’s role within that system.

Laferrière, through the narrative, continues to probe the question of being an artist in a dictatorship, or any sort of volatile political situation. Magloire Saint-Aude is considered to be one of the best poets of Haiti, or, according to the author, one of the best poets, period, but he also has a very problematic history with François Duvalier, having supported him and his policies, helping him get into power. Laferrière examines whether an artist’s political views or history disqualify him from being a truly great Artist?

Three hours later, I was engaged in conversation in front of the little oval mirror. Myself and the Other.

OTHER Aren’t you forgetting that Magloire Saint-Aude never had to worry while Duvalier was in power?

SELF Isn’t that for the best?

OTHER Maybe, but do you want to know why he was so free

SELF If you want to tell me.

OTHER See? You’re denying it already.

SELF I’d rather have Saint-Aude free on the streets of Port-au-Prince than rotting away in Duvalier’s prisons.

OTHER He was Duvalier’s friend till the end. They even died the same year.

SELF So what? Saint-Aude was never a political poet.

OTHER Yet he was at the origins of the Duvalier ideology.

SELF Prove it.

OTHER In June of 1938, your Saint-Aude signed *Le manifest des griots*, the Caribbean equivalent of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. Who signed with him? Carl Brouard, another anarchist poet who enjoyed a state funeral when he died, the shadowy Lorimer Denis and the sinister Duvalier himself.

SELF You’re going a little too far. You know the manifesto created increased awareness of nationhood.

OTHER Awareness of Duvalierism, that is. Even during the darkest years of the dictatorship, Saint-Aude never repudiated Duvalier.

SELF But his work did.

OTHER Explain yourself.

SELF Saint-Aude’s work is the negation of his political thought.

OTHER Which proves he’s fake.

SELF You’re not convincing me, brother...

Silence fell upon us. We evaluated each other like boxers at the weight-in.

OTHER So, for you, is he still the greatest poet of the Americas?

SELF I’m afraid so!<sup>lix</sup>

Throughout the narrative, the poetry of Saint-Aude is shown to have sustained and strengthened the narrator that fateful weekend, regardless of the hand Saint-Aude may have had in creating it (by supporting Duvalier and the dictatorship, which enabled the Tonton

Macoutes to terrorize the city). For example, the narrator reflects on his status as prisoner in the Miki’s home, observing that he may be no safer there than outside. He opens the Saint-Aude’s book of poetry at random and finds the lines “The prisoner’s poem/As memory’s sun sinks,” and then thinks to himself: “That’s crazy! I came to this place and found a book that expressed my emotions perfectly, what I was feeling at that very instant. A poem touches us when it speaks specifically of our state of mind at the moment we read it.”<sup>lx</sup> The “Other” side of Laferrière may have doubts and reservations about Saint-Aude, but the “Self” understands how powerful and beautiful the poetry is and what the poetry represented to a young and confused boy.

These questions of politics and art, fiction versus the truth or reality, haunt Laferrière more generally and this novel in particular. David Homel, Laferrière’s long-time translator and the translator of *Dining with the Dictator*, explains why he chose the title he did for the English translation, “for reasons of reception”:

Though the problem started with *How to Make Love to a Negro*, Laferrière’s first novel, it reached its culmination with *An Aroma of Coffee*, his third work. In the *Globe & Mail*, a reviewer complained that the book was not political, and that any book by a Haitian writer set in Haiti had an obligation to be political...I have heard similar comments about other Laferrière books. A formalist poet with only a theoretical knowledge of political representation dismissed *Le goût des jeunes filles* as being “too frivolous, too light.”<sup>lxi</sup>

For the English audience of the book, the political elements of the novels were required to trump any other concerns that the artist, Laferrière, may have had. Much like the fictional *Rolling Stone* journalist accused the musicians, Laferrière is facing accusations that he is essentially ignoring reality. But it isn’t just the concern about being political; much like Laferrière’s aunt Raymonde, many critics of the novel focused on how the book got it wrong, or focused on the fictional nature of the book. Nathalie Courcy and Dennis F. Essar both speculate on the author’s actual age in the story, putting him either at the age of 18<sup>lxii</sup> or 20.<sup>lxiii</sup> *Le goût des jeunes filles* is the first of Laferrière novels that critics can attempt to compare with history because Laferrière closes the novel with the revelation that Duvalier has died. In the novel, it is Monday morning, but in actuality, Duvalier’s death was announced on April 22, 1971, which was a Thursday.<sup>lxiv</sup> The novel implies however that the narrator is much younger than 18 years old, still being babied by his mother and aunts, dutifully studying for school, playing pranks with Gégé, and even still going to see movies with his mother and aunts. This age difference is made much more explicit in both the movie adaptation and the subsequent expanded novel, where the narrator makes clear that the events during that fateful weekend happened when he was fifteen years old.<sup>lxv</sup> Regardless of the factual truthfulness of the narrative, Laferrière is faced with a series of impossible choices in composing the narrative of his life: be honest about the emotions and be accused of being dishonest or a-political. In rewriting *Le goût des jeunes filles*, Laferrière appears to be addressing these criticisms head-on.

#### *Le goût des jeunes filles*, 12 years later<sup>lxvi</sup>

There are two major additions to the 2004 version of *Le goût des jeunes filles*; the first is the addition throughout the text of excerpts of a published diary by the character Marie-Michèle. It is revealed in the beginning of the narrative that Marie-Michèle had been lying about who she was at that time; she was not, as thought, a medical student fighting to find a way to escape Port-au-Prince, but instead a member of the upper-class, part of the city’s elite who lived in a mansion in the rich part of town. The journal itself, however, is wholly fictional. The second addition to the book is a Coda at the end that reveals that Aunt Raymonde is dying of cancer. The person who would seem to have held Laferrière



accountable for writing "the truth" was about to pass away. The newly revised novel now is explicitly filled with a fictional counter-narrative to Laferrière's original story. This is not a coincidence.

When he goes to see Aunt Raymonde, Laferrière is confronted with the difficulty of even telling her story; much in the same way the two argued over his portrayal of his grandfather, her father, Laferrière (and thus the readers) are confronted with the myriad of possible ways of understanding his aunt. His mother's description of her sister is of someone who was theatrical, but manipulative: "Elle [Raymonde] organisait tout un spectacle et finissait par arracher le oui qu'elle voulait. On savait qu'elle jouait, mais elle était irresistible" [She put on such a show that she always ended up getting what she wanted. We knew she was playing us, but she was irresistible].<sup>lxvii</sup> The family even went so far as to call her a little dictator. Her sisters and nephew embrace that about her, as Laferrière states "c'est elle qui m'a toujours dit de me laisser personne diriger ma vie" [she taught me never to let anyone control my life].<sup>lxviii</sup> Raymonde's daughter, however, has a different view of her mother and her attempts to control, to dictate, leading her to move far away from her mother.<sup>lxix</sup> Once again, we are reminded that there are multiple stories that are taking place at the same time, involving the same people, and we can only ever really offer our own admittedly biased position and perspective.

Marie-Michèle's journal remains problematic and difficult to evaluate. Sophie Kérouack, in one of the only studies of the novel that includes the journal, says that the journal provides a "contrepoint narratif [qui] enrichit les événements passés de toute une gamme de sensations et de perceptions qui leur donnent profondeur et témoignent, en quelque sorte, de leur véritable authenticité" [... narrative counterpoint, enriching the events described with sensations and perceptions that add depth while bearing witness to their authenticity].<sup>lxx</sup> The irony, of course, is that the journal is wholly fictional, a creation exclusively of Laferrière's own imagination. But he nonetheless chooses the form of a journal, published as *Fast Lane: Girls, Food, Sex, Music—The Sixties in Haiti*, based off of Marie-Michèle's personal writing during the time when she was hanging out with Miki and the other girls, a time that overlaps with the narrator's experience hiding out at Miki's. It is also published in English (although appears in French in the book, and one would imagine that it was "originally" composed in French by Marie-Michèle). The diary or journal, as a form of life writing, is often seen as a more spontaneous and less mediated form of life-writing; Philip Lejeune goes as far as calling it "antifiction," explaining "L'autobiographie vit sous le charme de la fiction, le journal est aimanté par la vérité." [Autobiography lives under the spell of fiction, the journal is drawn to the truth].<sup>lxxi</sup> But while the author of a journal may not know how the story ends, Laferrière nonetheless reveals that Marie-Michèle's journal is as mediated a document as his own autofictional/alterbiographical writing.

Laferrière emphasizes that "si elle [Marie-Michèle] a gardé le caractère spontané des observations et des commentaries, elle a quand même retouché le style trop naïf (d'après elle) de la jeune adolescente surdouée qu'elle était. La style d'écriture de la première version était souvent télégraphique." [... if she kept the spontaneous nature of her observations and comments, she nonetheless revised her self-described overly-naïve style of the precocious teenage that she was. The writing style of the first version was often telegraphic].<sup>lxxii</sup> Here we clearly see that what we are reading is not the original or first version of Marie-Michèle's story, but an adaptation. We can also assume that the work has been translated from French into English (although we are reading it in French), a further mediation. At the end of the book, Laferrière imagines an interview between a reporter from *Vibe* magazine and Marie-Michèle, where she reveals that "La version manuscrite allait plus vite à l'essentiel, mais mon éditeur m'a demandé de le retravailler. Bon, disons que ce n'est qu'un journal

personnel... Comme on a voulu en faire un livre, j'ai dû adapter un peu certaines histoires. J'en ai jeté d'autres, que le public nord-américain n'aurait pu comprendre. L'éditeur m'a beaucoup aidé en ce sens..." [The manuscript went more quickly to the essentials, but my editor asked me to rework it. I mean, it was just a personal journal... Because we wanted to publish it as a book, I had to adapt some of the stories. I got rid of other ones because the North-American reader wouldn't have understood. My editor helped out a lot in this regard...].<sup>lxxiii</sup> While Laferrière often gets criticized for the fictional nature of his narratives, or his attempts to claim that they are, in fact, autobiographical, Marie-Michèle's work is celebrated for its realism and insight, even though it is as mediated as Laferrière's own text.

Again, it is interesting that not only does Marie-Michèle publish her journal, it becomes a runaway success. The *Washington Post* says "pour la première fois, nous pouvons pénétrer dans la tête d'une jeune fille de dix-sept ans prise au piège, dans un pays en chute libre, d'une classe sociale aveugle et insensible" [For the first time we are privy to the inner-thoughts of a seventeen-year-old girl who is an insider to a class that is both blind and insensitive to the chaos of their country].<sup>lxxiv</sup> But why is her voice given a privileged position over the girls that Laferrière writes about in the narrative? Even being able to write a journal implies that Marie-Michèle possesses more privilege and thus more political power than the girls she hangs out with. Keeping a diary involves certain material comfort, including literacy, private space for writing, and the materials on which to write. The diary represents "modernity's most important sites of freedom, a place where individuals can be alone..."<sup>lxxv</sup> The ability to even produce a diary represents a "particular historical context that reflects class and race as well as gender."<sup>lxxvi</sup> Laferrière's narrative shows just how over-crowded and public the lives of the lower classes are; there is rarely only one person in Miki's house and the narrator observes that his mother continually goes through his possessions.<sup>lxxvii</sup> If anything, Marie-Michèle's journal reveals just how privileged she was as part of the upper-classes of Port-au-Prince.

I wish to focus now on those examples from her journal that reveal how Marie-Michèle silences the voices of the lower-class women she spends her time with. Before becoming enamored with Miki, Marie-Michèle, when she was twelve, wandered out of her upper-class enclave into, what she called "Les Moyens-Ages" [the Middle-Ages] which she infinitely prefers to her "modern life" in "le Cercle doré."<sup>lxxviii</sup> There, she meets a peasant woman, Esméralda, and her five-year-old son, Nanou, with whom she immediately feels connected to: "Je me suis glissée à côté d'elle, jusqu'à me mettre sous son ventre. Son corps mou. Son odeur particulière. Son soufflé doux... Je m'enfouis sous les larges seins d'Esméralda pour sombrer dans le sommeil comme une pierre dans la rivière... Esméralda ne sait pas lire, mais elle sait tout ce qu'il faut savoir pour vivre en harmonie avec son environnement" [I slid in beside her, under her belly. Her soft body. Her unique smell. Her soft breathe... I burry myself under Esméralda's large breasts to sleep the sleep of stones in a river... Esméralda can't read, but she knows everything she needs to in order to live in harmony with her environment].<sup>lxxix</sup> This is a particularly stereotypical view of the lower-classes, specifically of a black woman, there to mother and serve an upper-class child. While Esméralda may open up the country to Marie-Michèle, she remains incredibly detached from this woman: "Cela a duré six mois, jusqu'à ce jour j'arrive et je ne les trouve pas. Esméralda et Nanou, envolés comme des anges. Personne pour me renseigner. Je n'ai pas été triste" [This lasted six months, and, one day, I arrived and I couldn't find them. Esméralda and Nanou flew away like angels. No one to ask where or why. I wasn't sad].<sup>lxxx</sup> Marie-Michèle romanticizes Esméralda and is untroubled by her and son's disappearance, completely negating Marie-Michèle's claim that she was finally able to see her country; from the main narrative, we know that people don't fly away like angels, but disappear in the night at the hands of the Tonton Macoutes. Marie-Michèle may now know some of the myths and



legends of her country, but she is still blind to the reality experienced by most of the people living there. Laferrière, in an interview, explains:

C'est dans *Le goût des jeunes filles* que, pour la première fois, on a donné la parole à des femmes d'une classe sociale défavorisée – c'étaient des jeunes filles qui habitaient la maison en face de chez moi -, presque des prostituées. Ce n'est pas moi qui ai parlé en leur nom ; elles se sont exprimées librement tout au long du livre, on dit leur misère, leur bonheur, leur façon de voir la vie. J'ai voulu leur redonner leur dignité humaine, montrer aussi ce que la dictature avait fait de la femme haïtienne. C'est un des rares livres haïtiens à voir douze femmes comme personnages principaux.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

[In *Le goût des jeunes filles*, for the first time, women from the lower classes are given a chance to speak, young women who lived across the street from my house. These young women were almost like prostitutes. And it wasn't me who was speaking in their name; they liberally expressed themselves throughout the novel, talking about their misery, their joy, their outlook on life. I wanted to give them back their human dignity, show what the dictatorships did to Haitian women. It is one of the rare Haitian novels that features 12 women as main characters.]

Laferrière gives a voice to the women in the novel while Marie-Michèle barely even records a line of dialogue from Esméralda, and remains unmoved when the dictatorship takes her and her son away.

The narrator himself is never mentioned in the journal, even though the journal clearly makes reference to an event that happened in Miki's house while the narrator was there. In Laferrière's narrative, he witnesses Marie-Michèle making a reference to Sagan, and she is shocked to discover that Choupette, possible the most vulgar of the group and Marie-Michèle's chief rival for Miki's attention, seems to know a great deal about Sagan.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Marie-Michèle's reaction to this revelation, and her attitude towards Choupette once again reveals her class privilege and bias in her perceptions of what is happening. Marie-Michèle doesn't believe that Choupette could possibly know anything about Sagan and did it explicitly to humiliate Marie-Michèle. She points out, "Choupette, elle, est complètement enfoncée dans les marécages de la vie quotidienne. La culture reste, pour elle, quelque chose d'inatteignable" [Choupette is buried so completely in the morass of daily life that culture, for her, is unattainable].<sup>lxxxiii</sup> But is this not the same immersion that Marie-Michèle once celebrated in Esméralda? And, if Marie-Michèle herself is a good example, why isn't it possible that Choupette does in fact read Sagan and have an entire hidden life that Marie-Michèle isn't aware of? Marie-Michèle, however, sees what she wants to see, and it is convenient to compare Choupette's perceived ignorance, to that of her mother's, who is only interested in culture insofar as it helps her maintain her social status.<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

Laferrière has commented in an interview about his approach to writing, particularly about those in a subaltern position:

Ma position d'écrivain, c'est de faire entendre la voix de ces anonymes désarmés qui se retrouve face à une élite économique toujours assoiffée de sang, d'argent et de pouvoir. Mais comment parler de tout ça dans un roman sans l'alourdir? C'est ce que je me dis chaque matin en entrant dans la petite chambre où je travaille. J'y arrive en plongeant dans la vie quotidienne qui, tel un fleuve, emporte tout sur son passage: les drames personnels comme les événements historiques. Il suffit de suivre la vie (sans protection) d'un individu ordinaire pour que se déroule une époque sous nos yeux. De plus j'ai pour principe de ne jamais céder le premier plan au dictateur. Mon but c'est exposer dans ses multiples facettes, la vie des gens dont la dictature

empêche l'épanouissement. Cet aspect moral tisse en filigrane la trame de mes romans.<sup>lxxxv</sup>

[My position as a writer is to allow the voice of those who are anonymous and oppressed by the economic elite, always hungry for more blood, money, and power, to be heard. But how to talk about that without writing a "heavy" novel? It's what I ask myself every morning when I enter the room where I work. I do it by diving into daily life, a river that carries everything in its journey: the personal drama along with the historical events. You only need to follow the life (without protection) of an ordinary individual to see an entire age unfold. Plus, I have it on principle that I never give the primary importance to a dictator. My goal is to expose in its multiple facets, the lives of people for whom the dictatorship has limited their development. This morality weaves through all of my novels.]

Is Marie-Michèle and the other women of the Cercle doré also victims of the social and economic order? There is some indication that, yes, the Cercle is something that needs to be destroyed, or at least challenged due to its rigid structure and hypocritical tendencies. But it is hard to equate the "sufferings" of Marie-Michèle and her upper-class friends with the trials that we know Miki and her friends are faced with. Marie-Michèle clearly states that they do not have to worry about the Tonton Macoutes, her friends and she herself travel freely to any and all parts of the world, they are able to afford food, shelter, and any other luxury they desire. While Marie-Michèle dreams of another Che Guevara coming from her generation and class, Miki, Laferrière, his mother and aunts, and the other girls all have to deal with the day-to-day reality of living under a dictatorship. Even though Marie-Michèle's diary much more explicitly examines class distinctions and the politics of that time, commenting on her parents' hypocrisy and petty concerns contrasted with those of Choupette or Miki for example, her narrative perspective is narrow and ultimately more limiting than the perspective Laferrière's original narrative provides.

In conclusion, when we look at the three textual versions of *Le goût des jeunes filles*, we see that Laferrière has put forward a complex challenge to the idea of authenticity and authority in regards to writing about Haiti. Like Mac McClelland, if we come full circle to where this essay began, Marie-Michèle isn't interested in Haiti, other than to serve her own goals and purposes. Laferrière, through Marie-Michèle, also shows that being a "native" of a given country does not necessarily mean that the narrative they produce will be an authentic representation of life in that place at that particular time. On the other hand, including Marie-Michèle's diary shows that multiple narratives are possible, even necessary, in order to understand the larger picture of any situation, situations that are complex and multi-faceted. Mac McClelland's marginalizing and silencing of \*K's narrative highlights how far we have yet to go to be able to really hear and understand the stories coming from Haiti and other Third World countries. Life writing in any form, for Laferrière, is always highly subjective and mediated, but can be enlightening, even if it is in ways that are wholly unintended.

#### Notes:

<sup>i</sup> Mac McClelland, "I'm Gonna Need You to Fight Me On This: How Violent Sex Helped Ease My PTSD," *Good.is*, June 27, 2011, <http://www.good.is/post/how-violent-sex-helped-ease-my-ptsd/>.

<sup>ii</sup> "Female Journalists & Researchers Respond To Haiti PTSD Article," *Jezebel*, July 1, 2011, <http://jezebel.com/5817381/female-journalists--researchers-respond-to-haiti-ptsd-article>.



- <sup>iii</sup> Michael Deibert, "Michael Deibert's Haiti Blog: Journalism in Haiti: A few thoughts," *Michael Deibert's Haiti Blog*, June 27, 2011, <http://deiberthaiti.blogspot.com/2011/06/journalism-in-haiti-few-thoughts.html>.
- <sup>iv</sup> Edwidge Danticat, "Edwidge Danticat Speaks on Mac McClelland Essay | Essence.com," *essence.com*, July 9, 2011, <http://www.essence.com/2011/07/09/edwidge-danticat-speaks-on-mac-mcclelland/>.
- <sup>v</sup> There is, of course, much debate surrounding the nature of Laferrière's writing. It has been classified as autofiction, autobiography (the author himself calls his first ten novels "An American Autobiography"), or even "alterbiography" (Jana Evans Braziel, "'C'est moi l'Amérique': Canada, Haiti and Dany Laferrière's Port-au-Prince/Montréal/Miami textual transmigrations of the hemisphere," *Comparative American Studies* 3 (n.d.): 29-46.). The author himself says, in *J'écris comme je vis*, "je n'ai pas signé de pacte de vérité avec personne" (Dany Laferrière, *J'écris comme je vis* (Editions La Passe du vent, 2000), 49.), a direct reference to Philip Lejeune's "pacte autobiographique." He goes on to say, however, that "je ne suis pas un écrivain; n'étant pas écrivain, je ne peux envisager que l'autobiographie" (ibid. 200). Philip Lejeune, in reaction to the term "autofiction" writes: "Les plupart des 'autofictions' sont lues comme des autobiographies: le lecteur ne saurait faire autrement" (Philippe Lejeune, "Le journal comme 'antifiction'," *autopacte.org*, 2005, <http://www.autopacte.org/Antifiction.html>.) My translation: Most 'autofictions' are read as autobiography; the reader does not know any other way.
- <sup>vi</sup> Laferrière 2000, 44. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
- <sup>vii</sup> Quoted in Renée Larrier, *Autofiction and Advocacy in the Francophone Caribbean*, 1st ed. (University Press of Florida, 2006), 22.
- <sup>viii</sup> Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw, "Dancing at the Border: Cultural Translations and the Writer's Return," in *Echoes of the Haitian revolution, 1804-2004*, ed. Martin Munro and Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2008), 157.
- <sup>ix</sup> Gillian Whitlock, "From Prince to Lorde: The Politics of Location in Caribbean Autobiography," in *A History of literature in the Caribbean. cross cultural studies*, ed. A Arnold (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1997), 328.
- <sup>x</sup> Dany Laferrière, *Érosshima*, Nouv. éd. (Montreal: Typo, 1998).
- <sup>xi</sup> Laferrière 2000, 161.
- <sup>xii</sup> Lee Skallerup Bessette, "Dany Laferrière, Japanese Writer? Borderless Texts, Borderless Trauma," in *Diasporic Consciousness: Literatures from the Postcolonial World*, ed. Smriti Singh and Achal Sinha (Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2010), 80-91.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Dany Laferrière, *Érosshima: A novel* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1991), 82.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Rousseau was never actually a customs agent. According to Roger Shattuck, Rousseau was a "gabelou" or an employee of the municipal toll service (Robert Shattuck, "Object Lessons for Modern Art," in *Henri Rousseau: essays*, ed. Roger Shattuck and Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.); Galeries nationales du Grand Palais (France), English-language ed. (New York; Boston: Museum of Modern Art, Distributed by New York Graphic Society Books, 1985), 11). This is one of the many exaggerations or outright lies concocted about Rousseau by those around him.
- <sup>xv</sup> Carolyn Lanchner and William Rubin, "Henri Rousseau and Modernism," in *Henri Rousseau: essays*, ed. Roger Shattuck and Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.); Galeries nationales du Grand Palais (France), English-language ed. (New York; Boston: Museum of Modern Art, Distributed by New York Graphic Society Books, 1985), 35-90.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Henri Behar, "Jarry, Rousseau, and Popular Tradition," in *Henri Rousseau: essays*, ed. Roger Shattuck and Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.); Galeries nationales du Grand Palais (France), English-language ed. (New York; Boston: Museum of Modern Art, Distributed by New York Graphic Society Books, 1985), 27.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid, 23-4.

- <sup>xviii</sup> Shattuck 11.
- <sup>xix</sup> Michel Hoog, "Rousseau in His Time," in *Henri Rousseau: essays*, ed. Roger Shattuck and Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.); Galeries nationales du Grand Palais (France), English-language ed. (New York; Boston: Museum of Modern Art, Distributed by New York Graphic Society Books, 1985), 28-34.
- <sup>xx</sup> Quoted in Roger Shattuck and Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.); Galeries nationales du Grand Palais (France), eds., *Henri Rousseau: essays*, English-language ed. (New York; Boston: Museum of Modern Art, Distributed by New York Graphic Society Books, 1985), 140-1.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid, 226.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Paul Theroux, *V.S. Naipaul, an introduction to his work*. (New York: Africana Pub. Corp., 1972), 7.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Robert Morris, *Paradoxes of order: some perspectives on the fiction of V.S. Naipaul* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1975), 17.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Laferrière 2000, 63.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Edward W. Said, "Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World," in *The new Salmagundi reader*, ed. Robert Boyers, 1st ed. ([Syracuse N.Y.]: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 437.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Ibid, 438.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Edward W. Said, John Lukacs, and Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World: Response and Discussion," in *The new Salmagundi reader*, ed. Robert Boyers, 1st ed. ([Syracuse N.Y.]: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 465.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Selwyn Cudjoe, *V.S. Naipaul a materialist reading* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 80.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Ibid, 146.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Ibid, 152.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Laferrière 1991, 79.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Ibid, 80.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Ibid, 81.
- <sup>xl</sup> Ibid, 83.
- <sup>xli</sup> Laferrière 2000, 55. My translation: No one asked me to write, so no one can tell me what to write.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Shattuck et al. 251.
- <sup>xliii</sup> Laferrière comes back to this issue much more explicitly in his more recent work *Je suis un écrivain Japonais* (Boréal, 2009).
- <sup>xliv</sup> Dany Laferrière, *Le goût des jeunes filles: Roman* (VLB Editeur, 1992).
- <sup>xlv</sup> Dany Laferrière, *Dining with the dictator* (Coach House Press, 1994).
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Laferrière 1994, 15.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Ibid, 16.
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Ibid, 17.
- <sup>xlix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>l</sup> Ibid, 18.
- <sup>li</sup> Ibid, 10.
- <sup>lii</sup> Ibid, 10-13.
- <sup>liii</sup> Ibid, 63.
- <sup>liv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>lv</sup> Ibid, 65.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>lvii</sup> Ibid, 140-1.



- lviii Gage Averill, *A day for the hunter, a day for the prey popular music and power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 154-60.
- lix Laferrière 1994, 25-7.
- lx Ibid, 106.
- lxi David Homel, "Tin-Fluting It: On Translating Dany Laferrière," in *Culture in Transit: Translating the Literature of Quebec*, ed. Sherry Simon, 1st ed. (Montreal: Vehicule, 1995), 47-8.
- lxii Essar, 933.
- lxiii Nathalie Courcy, "Le goût des jeunes filles de Dany Laferrière: du chaos à la reconstruction du sens," *Présence Francophone* 63 (2004): 86.
- lxiv Essar, 933.
- lxv Dany Laferrière, *Le goût des jeunes filles* (VLB éditeur, 2004), 32.
- lxvi For a discussion of the movie version of *Le goût des jeunes filles*, see Mylène F. Dorcé, "Le goût des jeunes filles de Dany Laferrière: De l'oeuvre romanesque à la production cinématographique," in *Rira bien...: Humour et Ironie dans les littératures et le cinéma francophones*, ed. Christiane Ndiaye, Essais. (Montreal: Mémoire d'encrier, 2008), 263-277 and Lee Skallerup Bessette, "Becoming a Gwo Nèg in 1970s Haiti: Dany Laferrière's Coming-of-Age Film *Le Goût des Jeunes Filles* (On the Verge of Fever)," in *Gory Third Screens: A Study of Violence and Masculinity in Postcolonial Films*, ed. Swaralipi Nandi and Esha Chatterjee (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2011).
- lxvii Laferrière 2004, 304.
- lxviii Ibid, 307.
- lxix Ibid, 312.
- lxx Sophie Kérouack, "Zone de turbulence: Port-au-Prince out le mouvement perpétuel dans *Le goût des jeunes filles* de Dany Laferrière," *Francophonies d'Amérique* 21 (2006): 87.
- lxxi Philippe Lejeune, "Le journal comme 'antifiction,'" *autopacte.org*, 2005, <http://www.autopacte.org/Antifiction.html>.
- lxxii Laferrière 2004, 33.
- lxxiii Ibid, 325.
- lxxiv Ibid, 323.
- lxxv Jeremy D. Popkin, "Philip Lejeune, Explorer of the Diary," in *On diary*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak, by Philippe Lejeune (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 12.
- lxxvi Suzanne Bunkers, *Inscribing the daily: critical essays on women's diaries* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 5.
- lxxvii Laferrière 2004, 236-7.
- lxxviii Ibid, 256-7.
- lxxix Ibid, 258-9.
- lxxx Ibid, 259.
- lxxxi Dany Laferrière, *Conversations avec Dany Laferrière: interviews* (Montréal: Les Éditions de La Parole Métèque, 2010), 46.
- lxxxii Laferrière 2004, 245.
- lxxxiii Ibid, 250.
- lxxxiv Ibid.
- lxxxv Dany Laferrière, *Un Art De Vivre Par Temps De Catastrophe (Henry Kreisel Lecture Series)* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2010), 9-10.

## Dismemberment in the Chicana/o Body Politic

Fragmenting Nationness and Form in Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, and Alejandro Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues*

- Danizete Martinez

Dismemberment tends to expose the social and political inscription of the human body and hence of the subject.

—Margaret E. Owens, *Stages of Dismemberment*

Twentieth century body studies have frequently centered on corporeal fragmentation and have attributed the phenomenon to the human psyche's response to advancements in science, technology, and communication, and how these shifts have influenced our basic process of socialization. Jacques Lacan has referred to this as the "fragility of the ego" and ascribes it to an inevitable repercussion of entering the symbolic social order; hence, the fractured body has become a metaphor for the modern fissured psychological condition.<sup>1</sup> Here, I consider how treatments of dismemberment center on the construction and deconstruction of Chicana/o nationalist discourse. I focus on the cracks of radical discourse in Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973) and in the postmodern apocalyptic historiography of Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) in order to illustrate the thematic resonance in two distinct historical moments and novelistic forms whose crises focus on violence directed towards the body and its relation to the Chicana/o body politic. These texts reveal that within each form of violence and within each instance of dismemberment there exists a differently encoded set of implications that account for the excision and extraction of the body within the larger framework of Chicana/o cultural discourse. This includes the obvious aberrations to the integrity of the physical body, as well as to discursive fragmentations that imply cracks in psychological, social, and political spheres in different moments in Chicana/o history. In these narratives, dismemberment is an enactment of violence that deconstructs pre-given notions regarding a fixed Chicana/o identity, and Acosta and Morales characterize what happens when the Mexican-American subject internalizes, resists, and rejects ambiguous racial discourses.

Traditionally in twentieth-century body studies, threats to the integrity of the body begin as a threat towards individual dissolution. Helaine Posner suggests that this preponderance is the result of the cultural isolation of the individual and the following inevitability that leaves the subject vulnerable to social, political, and physical assaults that are aesthetically expressed through the dismemberment of limbs, internal organs, and bodily fluids that—when separated from their body proper—assume a subjective liminality.<sup>2</sup> Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* and Alejandro Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues* demonstrate how these same threats of corporeal violence and dissolution are also present in Chicana/o literature, and point towards a shifting individual and collective cultural identity.<sup>3</sup> Much as Lázaro Lima asserts in *The Latino Body* (2007), I also maintain that dismemberment in Chicana/o cultural production reveals critical social upheavals that indicates "a divide that fracture[s] alliances, elid[es] ethnic and racial identities, and disembod[ies] subjects from the protocols of citizenship." Two critical examples of this division in Chicana/o cultural production is evident in the nationalist and post-nationalist narratives of Acosta and Morales who treat dismemberment—resulting from autopsy and disease—as endemic of the fractured alliances that continue to suffuse the real and imagined corporeal integrity of the Chicana/o body politic.