

“Haitian Is My Language”

A Conversation with Frankétienne

by Michael W. Merriam

I have a chaotic language. I have a baroque language. I have an opaque language, and I claim my opacity because life is opaque.

IN A COUNTRY WHERE literature takes many forms, and where the act of making literature has historically carried so many risks, Frankétienne has been an innovator of writing and of a kind of publishing-through-performance. His recognition by the French Legion of Honor brought attention to one aspect of his literary output, but the novelist, poet, and painter exhibits and distributes some of the most important literature in Haiti through many other channels. Engaging with his work—not only as it was written down but as it was performed, from village to village, in the days of the Duvaliers, and discussed in the daring literary salons held by his wife, Marie Andrée Etienne—helps us appreciate the depth to which literature has always permeated the nation of Haiti, no matter what its official “literacy rate” has been. In our interview, which switched now and again between French, Haitian, and, occasionally, English, we discussed the brand-new English translation of his 1967 *Mûr à crever*, published as *Ready to Burst* by Archipelago Press.

Frankétienne: I started to write *Mûr à crever* in 1967. I finished writing it in 1968. I published it in July 1968, the same year I finished writing it, under François Duvalier’s regime, and it was a book that almost gave me a lot of trouble. Already the title of the book is very suggestive: *Mûr à crever* (Bursting with ripeness). This means *something* was almost ready to burst, and

Duvalier was not at all happy that I wrote this book. And this is the first novel I wrote in my life. It’s a novel I wrote in French, but it’s the first novel I wrote, and I was thirty-two when I wrote it.

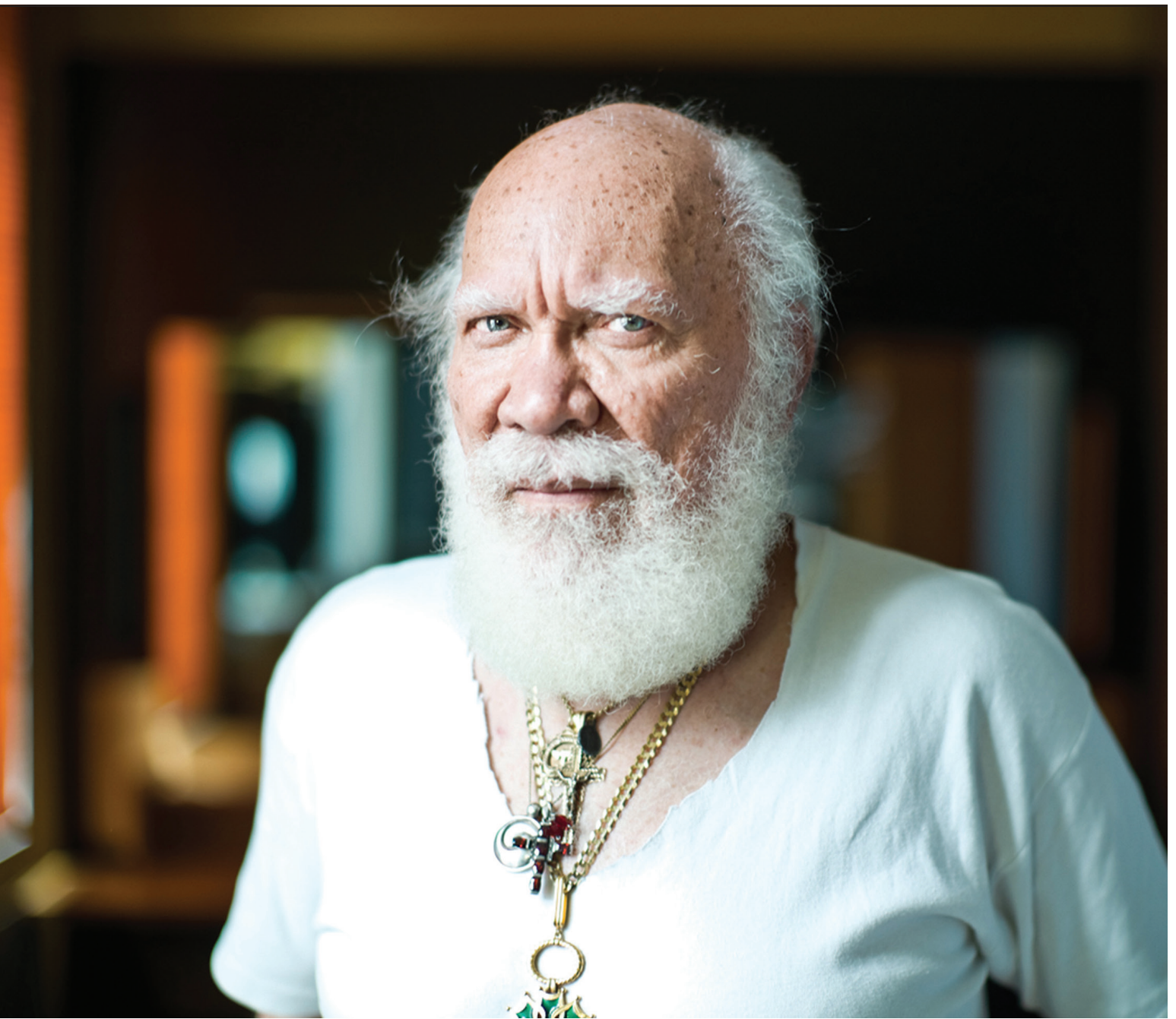
Michael W. Merriam: You can sense tension right away, just from the title.

F: The title, for what it means in any language: *mûr a crever* is a fruit that may be ripe to the point of exploding, and even if you didn’t put an accent on *mûr* (to make it mean “wall” instead of “ripe” or “ready”), to break a wall means you’re in a situation of rebellion. It’s not just the title that is suggestive. But it’s what was inside the novel that was more important.

MWM: Since you stayed in Haiti, without joining the diaspora, was the inside of the novel, as you say, a place to take refuge?

F: I wrote it during a moment when I practically lost, or rather was separated from, all my friends who had left. It was a period of exile. I was living a sort of internal exile. It was not just a way to protest what was happening during Duvalier’s regime. It’s also a book with a universal character because it’s a book that protests against injustices happening in the world. For example, the Vietnam War is referenced in the book.

MWM: If it was your first novel, how much of your own early life is in there?



F: I have a very particular existence. I come from a rural section, the smallest such geographic section in Haiti. . . I come from a hole, a small hole. So this was already a particular existence with a particular mother who was illiterate. When my mother was pregnant, perhaps my father was afraid of society and so didn't marry my mother, and sent us back to Ravine-Sèche. So when I left Ravine-Seche at age three, where did I go? I went to a neighborhood called Bel Air, a neighborhood of subver-

sion, a neighborhood of turbulence. They even call it a neighborhood of No Rights. This is where I grew up.

I believe that courage, faith, cowardice, and also weakness and grandeur come from the genetic code, from DNA. People don't really know how much we are the masters of ourselves. We are born with a set of parameters that we cannot control. All these parameters will make you a particular individual. Well, these come from your genes, your DNA, from *pati*, your genetic code.

The rest is *folie*. Sometimes brave, sometimes cowardly . . . because each individual has a bit of *folie*.

MWM: Talking about DNA begs the question of *spiralism*. Can you describe that movement for us a bit?

F: The spiral is a geometric structure on the classical plane in which you find a central point (the point of origin) that develops in size and profundity, which is why you find ascending spirals and

descending spirals. But I would rather say a cluster of spirals because it is never just one. It's always a bunch of spirals that are wrapped up that leads to a chaotic dimension, because there is a strong affinity between the spiral and chaos. You can find spirals in absolute structures, you can find the spiral in the galaxy, you can find the spiral in physics, in elemental particles, you can find the spiral in cyclones, in earthquakes, in the vortex, in tornadoes . . .

MWM: So we can find it in this novel, when you talk about speaking “the dialect of hurricanes.” Is the spiralist the language of hurricanes?

F: That's a way of saying that the hurricanes, the cyclones, when they manifest they have a language of their own, a jargon, all sorts of things—slang, rap. When you say “cyclone,” automatically you'll find that most often it's the poorest regions that are affected by the cyclone. I could have said the “symphony of hurricanes,” but it wouldn't have worked as well. It is the dialect of hurricanes, that is to say a baroque language. I have an ambiguous language. I have a chaotic language. I have a baroque language. I have an opaque language, and I claim my opacity because life is opaque. Even when we think it is daytime, and it is high noon, it is already nighttime. The aesthetic of opacity, the aesthetic of the baroque, is much stronger than that of transparency. A man like James Joyce is more interesting to me than a writer who says it all in a clear manner. I have read *Finnegans Wake*, via translation, which even some Irish have never read, or refuse to read. From the start, I was someone who was interested in this kind of language. Because I was raised in Kreyòl, there is also the same musical resonance of Kreyòl in my French writings.

MWM: You've spoken about *Finnegans Wake* before. Was Joyce a major touchstone for you, in terms of style?

F: No, no, no, no. My first inspiration, the first reason why I wrote this way, was a form of *marronage*, because I was living under a vicious dictatorship. I wasn't able to leave under Duvalier's regime, so I couldn't write in

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a transparent manner. Even if they came to realize that I was being subversive, they wouldn't be able to catch me because, not only was I creating new words, I was also distorting the French words.

MWM: How important has it been for you to write in Kreyòl rather than in French? I suppose I'm really asking how the product of the writing is different when you write in Kreyòl and how it, in itself, has generated a distinct literature from your writing

in the French language. And most of all, I'm interested in how the *feeling* of writing in Kreyòl is different from the feeling of writing in French.

F: I'm very happy that you ask this question, and you are the first journalist to ask me this question. My conception of Haitian Creole has changed. I'm no longer involved with *Kreyòl*. I'm involved with *Haitian*. It is a mistake that people keep talking about the Creole language. Kreyòl is the language of the plantation. Kreyòl is tied to colonialism. Kreyòl is tied to slavery. Lately, I've heard that they would like to found a Creole Academy. To this I say, “No!” Creole is not my language; Haitian is my language. The English speak English. The Spanish speak Spanish. The French speak French. Well, since I claimed my independence . . . before I had yet to claim my independence, yes *Kreyòl*. There was Creole because it was tied to the economic and social system that was called slavery and colonialism. But since January 1, 1804, we have yet to have the lucidity, up to today, to say that we speak *Haitian*, and maybe if we had done this long ago, all Haitians would have a personal and profound consciousness of their being, of their Haitian nature. I am Haitian. I speak Haitian. I do not speak Creole. Creole is for Martinicans. Creole is for Guadeloupeans. Creole is for St. Lucia. There are Creoles at the lexical level in all languages. There is Creole on the island of Mauritius; there is Creole on the island of Reunion. Well, now this is the battle that I'm fighting in Haiti. They don't want to hear it yet. They must tell the children now that, in Haiti, there are two languages spoken: Haitian and French. So this is the first part, and now I can return to the question because you asked what I feel in those two languages. Even if it's not Creole, Haitian is a language and French is another.

It is Haitian. It is the Haitian language because it gives you an awareness of the essentials and the fundamentals

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of being Haitian. Creole is vague. There are fifteen, twenty countries that speak Creole, and each has its own reality. And all these countries that speak Creole, they did not break off, they did not have a revolution. It is in the name of the revolution of 1804 that I say I have severed myself from colonialism, severed myself from slavery. Well, I am breaking myself off from this language because this language was also

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formed by whites. A large part of Kreyòl comes from what the whites created in order to communicate with the slaves, and for the slaves to communicate among themselves because they spoke many different dialects. But as soon as 1804—1804 was a huge revolution—well, at that time they should have realized, intellectually, psychologically, linguistically, and, especially, spiritually, simply that they could not speak Kreyòl, which had tied them to the plantation, which had tied them to the cane, which had tied them to coffee, which had tied them to cocoa. It should have been a whole new stage, a new language called Haitian. This is my point of view, and I will hold onto it until the very end. It doesn't matter if it's not accepted, but I know that I'm speaking the truth. There is one last thing that I will say, and I will keep it short. I still maintain the same untamed (*mawon*) behavior, the same spiral aesthetic, be it in French or in Haitian.

Early on, I had not yet formed this opinion. What I'm telling you now, this is why I said "new" . . . you have a scoop! This is new for me. This has just happened, maybe two or three months ago. I realized that I've been saying I wrote the first Kreyòl novel. No! Frankétienne wrote the first Haitian novel! I'm giving a warning! I know that they will say don't pay any mind to that crazy man with the white beard, an old man of seventy-eight years of age from the tiny, poor country of Haiti, because I know what they think of Haiti. But still, I give this warning: we must proceed with caution toward a complete explosion that will lead to a catastrophe, unfortunately, for the entire human species.

MWM: So Marx is still important to you, intellectually?

F: I have too many reproaches to address with the Marxist school of thought, which is also a fragmented way of thinking. Even if Marx has spoken of the dialectic, and the three movements, the thesis, the antithesis, and the synthesis . . . he never once mentioned Haiti. The Haitian Revolution was the first movement to break the system of slavery, which was the capitalist system of that time, the system of slavery. He never once spoke of this.

MWM: I'm glad you mentioned *Dezafi* earlier. What did that novel mean to you?

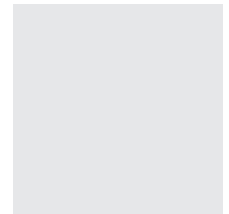
F: I came to realize that there was an alienation under Duvalier's regime that transformed my people, my Haitian people, into robots, zombies, soulless people, without vigor, without energy. When I tried to understand why I was so happy to write *Dezafi*, it was because I realized that it was a universal work, in the Haitian language, that can be used to touch all people. What were the gulags? It was slavery. But it was also zombies. The people who were in the gulags, in the time of the Soviet Union, they were zombies. All countries where there are people who are enslaved, who cannot think, who cannot act, who cannot react, they are zombies. This is why *Dezafi* is a universal novel.

And now, we have zombies everywhere! We have zombies because of credit cards, the Internet, with all these systems, they know everything that is happening in people's homes. There is no private life. All messages that are sent are stored somewhere so that one day when they need to dig it up to deal with something regarding you, they can. The globalization that pretends to be a system of globalization is also a system of zombification but a zombification of the whole planet.

Frankétienne ended the interview by clapping my shoulders, tightly, and shaking me. He looked directly into my eyes and said, "You are God." I thanked him, as gravely as I could. And, as if very eager to convince me, he said it again. "You are God." He kept shaking me, warmly, affably, and very firmly. I thanked him again.

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Translations from the French & Haitian
By Wynnne Lamour



Wynnne Lamour is an educator and translator who teaches Haitian Creole in the New York City metro area. Her most recent work includes a translation of an excerpt of Frankétienne's novel *Dezafi* in *Transition* magazine.

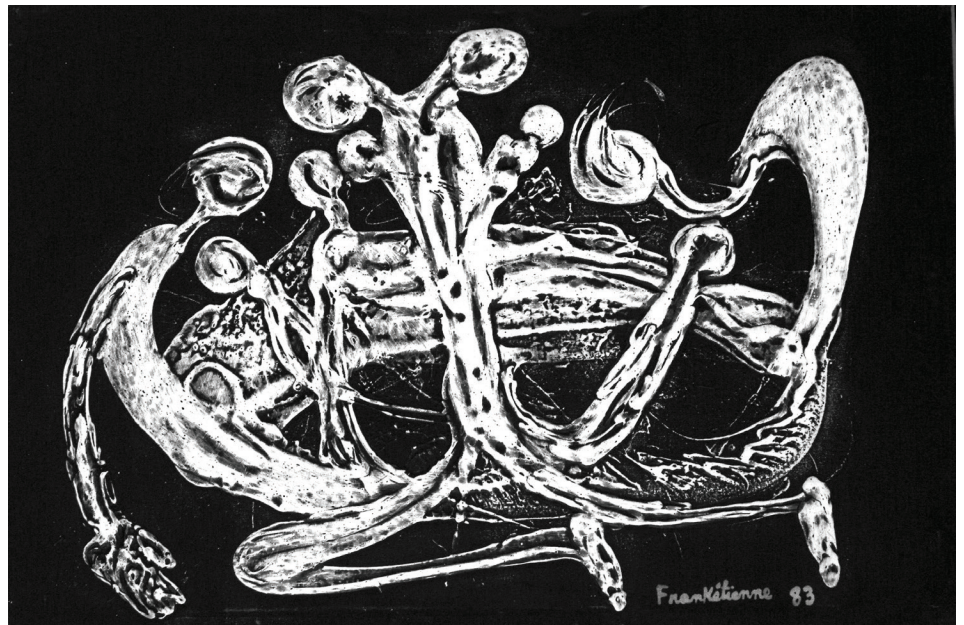
Haitian Literature as a Model for World Literature

by Michael W. Merriam

The category of literature must be expanded to encompass events as literary occurrences that can be read across more than one type of printed work. The study of Haitian literature could teach us to think about world literature this way.

HAITIAN LITERATURE SHOULD be enjoying a period of well-earned attention and praise. Frankétienne's splendid novel, *Ready to Burst*, was just released last October, and a documentary about the artistic movement with which he is associated, spirralism, recently screened at the New York Film Festival (*Eye of the Spiral*, directed by Eve Blouin). Throughout the regimes of both Duvaliers, Frankétienne and his wife, Marie Andrée Etienne, were at the heart of a dangerously positioned literary salon that produced a number of works only now being translated for the West.

His *Mûr à crever* (written in 1967) has just been translated into English as *Ready to Burst* and released by Archipelago. It registers the influence of surrealism, an influence in Haitian letters deriving from



André Breton, surrealism's founder, who was appointed the liaison between Haiti and France and briefly lived and lectured in Port-au-Prince. The spirralist movement of Haitian literature and art draws in part from Breton's inspiration, and *Ready to Burst* is the epitome of a spirralist work. Frankétienne's imagery often juts through the story. Among other things, the book is about writing. "I've become no more than a screaming mouth" illustrates the agony of making literature under threat of imprisonment and torture, while disillu-

sionment with writing, many pages later, is described as "parodying the language of sewn-up mouths."

More often than not, phantasmagoria takes over: "The sun, giant monster, casts its voracious tentacles on the rooftops . . . Arms itself with a circle of teeth that bury themselves deep into the bones of things." The narrative words seem like marginalia next to the strong images, a visual effect similar to some of the author's paintings. The book opens with an authentically spirralist meditation: "I speak the madness

of opposing winds . . . Dialect of hurricanes. Patois of rains. Language of storms. Unfolding of life in a spiral.”

The merits of the book—translated by Kaiama Glover—aside, I would have preferred to see the equally fascinating *Dezafi* in an English version. It is not only the first novel written in the Haitian language but would be well positioned to appeal to an extremely wide Western audience with its splendid premise: it is a first-person account from the point of view of a zombie. Like *Ready to Burst*, it represents the poetic sensibility of this early period of Frankétienne’s and embodies it, in some ways, more strongly. “Heavy tongue . . . Tongue cut into a million pieces . . . Full belly. Empty belly. Twisted insides. Thirsting for water. Thirsting for love” (translated by Wynnie Lamour). It is less easy, with *Dezafi*, to mistake the significance of the imagery, which registers, often as trauma, the events of the period in which they were written. The author has told me he cannot accept the comparison of his use of multiple images, in a kind of list, with the work of James Joyce, for example, since the conditions under which the two authors wrote were so crucially distinct. “Longing for sunshine. Longing for light. Dreaming of stars . . .” The multiplicity of species, celebrated elsewhere in Haitian literature, appears in *Dezafi* as a horrific bestiary. “Three-headed lizards. Flying scorpions. Mongoose. Thousand-legged insects. Spiders. Owls. Hawks. Deafening thunder,” are all part of the experience of the beleaguered zombies in the novel.

On the one hand, *Dezafi* could draw an even wider audience to Haitian literature, as it immediately engages popular genres of contemporary American literature. On the other hand, and for that very reason, one can see why it might make publishers nervous. There is the fear of stereotyping Haiti. But is the *zombie* a negative stereotype, or is it an effective symbol of a persistent feature of Haitian life? It is not really up to us. We should respect the work of Haitian authors, especially when

they challenge our prim sensitivities and our ham-fisted attempts to decide, on their behalf, what’s best for them. Still, if we want to encourage a respect for the Haitian religion of Vodou on the one hand and, on the other, to make Haitian literature widely available, we are faced with an ethical question: What, with regard to Vodou, is a beloved and celebrated cultural feature, and what is a stereotype? An inability to work this out might be reinforcing publishers’ default preferences for a certain kind of novel, a novel American audiences expect of “troubled countries.” The result is a pseudogenre that is itself an offensive cliché, and doubly so. There is a side effect to publishing only those books that reinforce the journalists’ Haiti, the zone of unending conflict and crisis. The literary imagination of the country is represented as itself impoverished and thematically monochrome.

The impact of Haitian history and literature upon world literature is probably stronger than we realize. In 2000 *Critical Inquiry* published Susan Buck-Morss’s article “Hegel and Haiti,” which Buck-Morss worked into the book *Hegel and Universal History*. It claims that Hegel knew of the Haitian Revolution and that it was a primary inspiration for his “master-slave dialectic.” Hegel’s influence on successive philosophers and writers is well known, and it would follow that the history of the Caribbean results in the history of modern European literature. When I interviewed Frankétienne in October 2014 (see page 00), he demanded to know why I thought Marx had left the Haitian Revolution out of his work, since it is such a clear example of the laborer overthrowing his oppressor. He is correct: the stubborn refusal to name the Haitian Revolution as a determining event, or even as an inspiration, is vexing. The occlusion is evident everywhere, not just in the writing of Marx and his descendants.

Academic writing often obsesses over the French Revolution, and that solipsism has patterned out into a maddening certainty that the history of European thought is the very history of thought itself. Haiti’s Revolution impacts American literature strongly as well and is less anonymous in its influence there. Still, it is more often a trace than a named determinant. Reading the correspondence of Thomas Jefferson chronologically, we can sense his confidence in the inferiority of blacks to whites melting away as the revolution in Haiti progresses. If we can note the literary footprint of Haitian history everywhere, could this give us some direction in how to think about Haitian literature?

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I would argue that the category of literature must be expanded to encompass *events* as literary occurrences that can be read across more than one type of printed work. The study of Haitian literature could teach us to think about world literature this way. We might begin a survey of Haitian literature in 1805, with the first Haitian Constitution, produced largely by ex-slaves and written down by secretaries. The impact of the *event* has a literary character that seems *registered in* (rather than determined by) printed artifacts like the first Haitian Constitution, which is not only interracial but, as Monique Allewaert points, encompasses multiple species in its gesture of sweeping equality. It says that the Creator “has scattered many species . . . over the surface of the earth, with the sole

end of bringing about his glory . . . through the diversity of his works.” Even if we want to read only those literatures that remind us of European forms, we can see this diversity reflected in the country’s nineteenth-century literary offerings.

The nineteenth century is a bit cloudy in the history of Haitian literature. The idea of a canon for that century remains a point of contention. A 2004 article in the *Journal of Haitian Studies* described the problem of compiling a list of crucial works from that period, saying a number of writers, when polled, did not identify nineteenth-century texts, nor did they indicate whether they were unfamiliar with the works, found them unimportant in the larger trajectory of Haitian literature, or if the works were simply unavailable. “The reasons are unclear, but these omissions are a disturbing puzzle.” J. Michael Dash treats Haitian national and literary identity as it emerged in the nineteenth century in his *Literature and Ideology in Haiti, 1915–1961*. I would place the 1805 version of the Haitian constitution first and would venture that

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the rich lists of geographical features found in nineteenth-century Haitian poetry seem to resonate with the “glory” the constitution found in the “diversity of his works” and are forerunners of Frankétienne’s “Dialect of hurricanes. Patois of rain.”

In 1945 André Breton joined a group of intellectuals in the country to develop a movement of revolutionary Haitian literature, based on surrealism. Subsequent collectives combined painting, sculpture, and other art forms into a dynamic complex of literary forms. Novels and underground literary salons remained important—under the tyranny of the Duvaliers, even literature had to be encoded, and the uniquely Haitian strain of surrealism became a means of subterfuge. Many authors fled—some, like Frankétienne, remained and continued to write under terrible threats of imprisonment, torture, and execution. His work, then as now, manifested in painting and sculpture as well as the printed word (he wrote in Haitian and in French). A sense of Haitian literature, it must be said, is visible in phenomena other than written, or printed, literature.

The bodily movements of the *Lwa*, the godlike spirits who possess the *oungan* (a male priest) or *mambo* (female) during a Vodou ceremony, are functionally legible. The first movements, the crowd recognizes a specific *Lwa* spirit with joy. When a *mambo*’s back begins to roll forward in an undulation familiar to all devotees, people will shout “Damballah!” because the grandfatherly sky-python, Damballah the Snake, is as recognizable in his first motion as the opening notes of a well-known song at a rock concert. Everything that attends a Vodou ceremony, from the diagrammatic *veve* drawn on the ground to the coded arrangement of decorated ceremonial bottles on the altar, can be thought of as a functionally literary message. If this seems romantic, essentializing, or if it seems to qualify as a colonialist, Western prejudice, I would counter that in an overly stringent, painfully earnest caution about recognizing such events as literary, we have created a much more misleading and stereotypical image of the Haitian as a subject of interest only to journalists and anthropologists, and not to readers of sophisticated literature.

Why call these phenomena “literature” instead of acknowledging that they are an equally important oral and ceremonial set of cultural traditions? Because it is too easy to cherish an idea of the “anthropological Haiti,” as a country “more oral than written,” which to some translates as “basically primitive.” An attendant problem is the “journalistic Haiti,” a country utterly defined by the very worst of its troubles and characterized, often, by photographic clichés. It creates expectations of disaster and violence. If we rely on journalists to show us Haiti, or even “how Haiti is doing,” without paying attention to Haitian literature and religion, then we are in essence saying that a Haitian’s trauma has more dignity than his genius or his faith. This is an ethical mistake, which should be obvious. Matt Cohen, in *The Networked Wilderness*, has provided a set of techniques for discerning literary qualities in other phenomena, taking early America as his example. He calls for breaking down the divide between oral culture and written literature, “rather than thinking about them as overlapping but always-distinct cognitive categories,” in his words. For those of us interested in the literature of Haiti, Cohen’s book provides a way to read the *event*. Even if we do not go so far as to attribute literary qualities to religious events, or to the architecture of cemeteries, we must not confuse European standards of the novel for “ability” or “relevance.” It is an important time for Haiti, especially in the way it represents itself to the world.