

## CULTURAL NOMADISM BY DANY LAFERRIÈRE

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**Abstract:** *Dany Laferrière, a member of the Académie Française since December 2013, is a native Haitian writer who moved to Montreal during the period of the dictatorship of Duval and now lives in Miami. His first novel, Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer, published in 1985, after having taken almost nine years to complete, was a great success. Starting with this novel, the next three, Eroshima (1987), Cette Grenade dans la main du jeune Nègre ou est-elle une arme à fruit? (1993), and Chronique de la dérive douce (1994), also address the problems of a Haitian's adaptation in North America. Laferrière, who is so multi-faceted and complex, the author of several novels, but also a journalist and radio reporter, highlights the various shocks he underwent when beginning to write in French in a foreign and English-speaking country, embodying the figure, rather than of the "migrant writer", of the "nomadic" writer, who deterritorializes so as to resist a definitive identity or a localization.*

*This study aims to examine the cultural contribution of Laferrière, who has always tried to avoid materializing a social identity, embodying rather a dynamic identity, and returning, in this way, to a concept dear to Edouard Glissant: identité rhizome. That is, an identity that does not have a single root, but a multiplicity of roots that come together. His status as a permanent exile can be seen as an obstacle: he is not exactly a Haitian but neither is he a Canadian. He calls himself "Américain", i.e. an inhabitant of the American continent; "un écrivain américain à qui il est arrivé tout simplement d'écrire en français", emphasizing that he belongs to a plural America because Petit-Goâve, Port-au-Prince, New York, Miami, and Montreal, are on the same continent. This America is synonymous with the New World, "un monde à la fois réel et rêvé", a plural world.*

**Keywords:** *identity; nomadism; migration; belonging; language*

### 1. INTRODUCTION. THE TERM INTERCULTURAL IN QUEBEC

The term *intercultural* appeared for the first time in Québec in 1968, in the name that Montréal's *Groupe d'information et d'échanges interculturels* gave its magazine: "Interculture". The *Groupe* established that the meeting of cultures, dialogue and intercultural relations could be organized in two ways: by focusing on the comparison between the culture of origin and that of reception, a comparison in which the differences between the two emerge; or, instead, by highlighting their similarities and their common ground, the ways in which they resemble each other. In fact, this idea of "intercultural" arose from the reality of immigration which produces culture shock. In this era of exoduses, of planetary migrations, one's place of origin no longer necessarily works for identity recognition. Geography has acquired an indefinite value, like, for example, the titles of Desrosiers' collections, which evoke extensive spaces, *Savanes*, or circumscribed and urban ones, such as the

*Métropolis Opéra*. In Desrosiers, exile itself no longer has a negative value, since writing, *encre*, makes *ancrage* possible.

Literary writing, which is one of the manifestations of interculturality, tends to emphasize disparity, diversity and even heterogeneity, and the possible reconciliation of various identities. In this sense, Claude Beausoleil is right to say that writing is a desire to go beyond, that authors are always stretching toward an imaginary other place.

Obligatoirement, on devient mobile, parce qu'il y a toujours un aspect de découverte: les mots nous amènent ailleurs, notre désir des mots nous amène à découvrir autre chose (Gaudet, 1985:207).

The concept of interculturality is closely linked, therefore, to the concept of "migrant culture" or, better, "immigrant culture", which: "à défaut de pouvoir survivre comme telle, pourra, dans une situation d'échange interculturel véritable, féconder la culture québécoise et ainsi s'y perpétuer" (Micone, 1994:203).

The term intercultural thus becomes the possibility of keeping writing in a state of equilibrium, in which the immigrant writer becomes a spokesman for his native community, or rather, he becomes a *mélange* of cultures, the product of an integrated sum of forms and consciousnesses so different as to seem ‘undifferentiated’. Intercultural means to compare writings, mentalities, consciousnesses which, in the beginning, do not have much in common, but which, in coexisting and interrelating, approach one another, and form bonds, while still maintaining their particular character. The so-called neo-Québec works are no longer simply a part of the system, but are a necessary component of Québec’s literature, which would no longer have the same characteristics without the contribution of these “other” writings. In this sense, Harel is right when he states that:

Non, Montréal n’est pas seulement cosmopolite [...]. Montréal ne se contente pas de comptabiliser les cultures. Elle préfère les laisser jouer, parfois euphorique, parfois mélancolique, mais toujours soucieuse de respecter la tendresse des immigrants qui viennent y habiter. C’est pourquoi cette ville, demandez-le à un Montréalais d’adoption, est vraiment aimée (Harel, 1992:374).

Jean Jonassaint, a writer of Haitian origin, thinks it is time to go beyond ethnocentrism to

penser le Québec non plus comme français, mais comme *pluriel*, espace géopolitique ouvert aux multiples influences, de multiples habitus comme ceux qui l’habitent ou l’habiteront (Jonassaint, 1985:13).

Thus, the challenge of Québec is in the cultural *métissage* understood as the acceptance of the legitimacy of belonging of every different group in the country: “L’occasion est belle au Québec pour les créateurs de démontrer que l’on peut “appartenir” à un espace géographique commun tout en l’interprétant à partir de divers sensibilités et imaginaires” (D’Alfonso, 1985:20).

## 2. DANY LAFERRIÈRE’S CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION

Through the dramatization of the social question, the immigrant condition, and the relationships between men and women and marginalization, Laferrière’s work encompasses themes of identity and intercultural experience which interest contemporary critics.

Dany Laferrière, a member of the Académie Française since December 2013, is a writer originally from Haiti, who moved to Montréal during the dictatorship of Duval and currently

resides in Miami. His first novel, *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, published in 1985, after a gestation of almost nine years, was a great public success. Starting with this novel, the next three, *Eroshima* (1987), *Cette Grenade dans la main du jeune Nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?* (1993), *Chronique de la dérive douce* (1994), deal with a Haitian’s problems of adaptation in North America. These four novels can be divided into two parts: one, in which there is a critical and ironic description of America as seen by a *Nègre* native to the Antilles; the other, in which the author nostalgically evokes a Haitian childhood, a ‘paradise’ lost forever. These two parts are, however, closely linked, united by the author’s same lucid eye.

Laferrière’s hero-narrators seem to have a dual personality: on the one hand, they are inhabited by an obsession with success at all costs and through any possible means; on the other hand, they cannot forget the universe they come from, which formed them and which taught them values incompatible with the American world.

Laferrière, so multifaceted and complex, author of numerous novels, but also journalist and radio chronicler, reveals the various shocks of the early days of his writing in French in a foreign and Anglophone country, embodying not the figure of the “migrant” writer, but that of the “nomadic” writer, who deterritorializes himself to resist a definitive identity or location.

The cultural contribution of Laferrière is evident, he has always tried to avoid materializing an identifying belonging, embodying rather a dynamic identity, and thus recapturing the concept dear to Édouard Glissant (1990) of *identité rhizome*. An identity, that is, that does not have a single root, but is a multiplicity of roots that encounter each other. His permanent exile status can be seen as an obstacle: he is not exactly a Haitian, but nor is he a Canadian. He defines himself “Américain”, i.e. an inhabitant of the American continent; “un écrivain américain à qui il est arrivé tout simplement d’écrire en français” (Mathis-Moser, 2003:81), emphasizing his membership in a plurality of Americas because, Petit-Goâve, Port-au-Prince, New York, Miami, and Montréal are on the same continent. This America is synonymous with the New World “un monde à la fois réel et rêvé” (Laferrière, 1996), a plural world.

The statement *L’Amérique c’est moi* echoes the notion of José Martí’s *muestra América mestiza* (1974:25). This fundamental concept which structures the thinking of the Cuban writer, sums up the nature of the new American individual as a mixture of cultures and races, characteristic of the Carribean and of Latin American populations, as opposed to the white Eurocentered individual of North America.

The four novels mentioned above have a unique and true *trait d'union*: the desire of the 'black' narrator to become a successful writer; the desire, therefore, to succeed, to become rich and famous, to take full advantage of America and all its pleasures: glory, women, money. This spasmodic desire is at the origin of the writing of the novel which the hero is working on in *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, the famous *Paradis du dragueur nègre*, the novel that could and should allow *Nègre* to escape from extreme poverty.

The same thing happens in *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit*, in which the narrator dreams of becoming the great contemporary black writer, able to match and go beyond James Baldwin and enter the hall of legendary American heroes. In this way, Laferrière differs from most Québec novelists who tend to distance themselves from America and American writers: while, in fact, the heroes of a Godbout or Poulin go to the United States willingly, they often come back bitter and disillusioned with their American experience, disappointed by the violence and conformism of this society and, above all, happy to return to Québec.

This is not the case for the characters in Laferrière's novels, the writer's doubles, for whom Québec (and Québec is essentially Montréal) is nothing more than a particular facet of the American reality. *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* turns out to be a faithful representation of America's ideological complexity: "Le débat sur la question raciale n'existait pas très fortement comme je l'ai écrit ici. Il existait plutôt aux États-Unis" (Laferrière, 1985:17).

The author, in fact, is clearly conscience of belonging to a certain literary tradition, a 'nègre' literature; and the writing of a manuscript by the narrator *Paradis du Dragueur Nègre*, emphasizes Laferrière's will to go beyond the masters of the Black American novel. He will, in fact, in that regard, say that: "Un jeune écrivain noir de Montréal [veut] envoyer James Baldwin se rhabiller" (Laferrière, 1985:89).

However, in the same way that the narrator's attempt to incorporate American ideology is evident, adopting a sort of "instant philosophy", striving to highlight the immediacy and simultaneity of the experience and the real *here and now*; it is equally evident that Laferrière, like others from Québec, will never become fully American in the 'étatsunien' sense of the term. The voice we hear and the pages that we read are surely of America, but of a South American, with black skin and culturally distinct from the American economic empire.

Rather, we can say that the writings of Dany Laferrière are examples of textual hybridity, characteristic of 'border writing'. The border as metaphor evokes a space securely partitioned by physical limits but where the different areas defined by those limits must inevitably co-exist. This space produces a de-territorialized gaze which encompasses everything appearing on both sides of the boundary and also registers instability, movement, incessant leaving, arriving or crossing over. In this space, notions of origin and authenticity are necessarily put into question. Border space shapes origins as a sequence of moments subjected to new arrivals and new influences, a space which is constantly becoming and therefore un-rooted and disconnected from its past.

The author is a border subject himself. His life has been a constant defiance of territorial limits. Born in Haiti, he arrived in Montréal in 1976 where he continued his journalistic activity, publishing in the *Haiti Observer* of New York. In 1990 he left Montréal to settle in Miami. Although he lives in Florida now, he continues publishing in French in Montréal and appears regularly on Québec television as a literary and social critic. This 'border writer' represents the deconstruction of racial stereotyping and shows that his 'war' is ultimately the product and constituting factor of a "pernicious act of language" (Gates, 1986:5).

Verbal provocation becomes the first weapon. The title of Dany Laferrière's first novel, *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, was meant to provoke the Québec public and it did. Non-black Québécois saw it as an insult; non-white Québécois says the author seemed to be condoning stereotypes. Especially revealing was the reaction of certain Haitians in Montréal who also appeared uncomfortable with this book for other reasons. According to them, this author does not write like a Haitian: from his novel, you cannot even tell he is a Haitian. Expectations about writing 'like a Haitian' pose the whole question of boundaries. Laferrière's writing is not legitimate, precisely because he has not respected his particular origins, but he says: "Toujours la même connerie. Les gens doivent écrire sur leur coin d'origine. J'écris sur ce qui se passe aujourd'hui là où je vis" (Laferrière, 1993:15).

He does not reject his origins as a Haitian, but his representation of his place of origin is imbedded in the multiple histories of the past. The body of Laferrière's work rejects stereotypes of exotic Haitianess by refusing to reduce origins to homogeneous definitions frozen in time. Characteristically, in a recent interview about his latest book, the author stated: "Chacun est susceptible

de dire l'Amérique c'est moi" (Chartier, 1993:D2), and he constantly refers to America as a "tout" (Laferrière, 1985:29), something he wants to grasp in its totality with all its differences.

The result is a writing that mixes and transgresses all borders, suggesting what Benedict Anderson (1983) calls *imagined communities*, what Édouard Glissant (1993) calls *Tout-monde*, what Benitez Rojo (1992) calls *the culture of the Archipelago*. These notions do not refer to the same cultural dynamic, but they all signify the necessary questioning of arbitrary geo-political boundaries, in an attempt to understand the way identities are represented and constructed.

Laferrière sees North America as a space where tenuous borders exist in a constant flow and intermingling of ethnic groups; this has resulted in or is inevitably bound up with racial confrontation: "La guerre fait rage au Nouveau Monde...la confrontation Blanc/Noir...il n'y a que ça qui m'intéresse en Amérique" (Laferrière, 1993:13). Writing his North American novels, the author represents this confrontation by waging his own 'war' against racial stereotyping.

In the third novel, *Cette Grenade dans la main du jeune Nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?*, Nègre travels across the United States, documenting all the discourses that constitute the great variety of cultural and racial relations in that country. One of his aims seems to be to dispel any illusions of a homogeneous black culture.

Laferrière rewrites Simone de Beauvoir's statement, "On ne naît pas Nègre, on le devient" (Laferrière, 1985:153) and makes it the postface of his first novel. Henceforth, race has replaced gender and Laferrière's battlelines are clearly drawn.

In the case of Laferrière, the intertextual relations rely on parody, on a fragmented narrative held together by a single narrating voice, an intertwining of oral and scribal boundaries, and on a multiplicity of encounters between high literary tradition and what Bakhtine calls "le corps grotesque" (Bakhtine, 1990:35), the low body of popular culture. With the statement: "On ne naît pas Nègre, on le devient" (Laferrière, 1985:153), the author essentially negates the black man's humanity. "On dit les Noirs. C'est une espèce. Il n'y a pas d'individu" (Laferrière, 1985:147). Emphasizing the black being's animal functions highlights the inhuman gaze of the *Other* (Whites, according to the narrator). However, and in spite of everything, in the novel *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* there is a spasmodic desire to meet the *Other*. When, for example, the narrator says of Miz Sophisticated Lady that he "veut baiser son identité" (Laferrière, 1985:74), he means to speak of and

emphasize a fusion pact. And again, the narrator complains that *Blanches* women are afraid to spend the whole night with a *Noir*:

Qu'est-ce qui peut bien se passer durant la nuit, pendant le sommeil? Peut-on rêver l'autre? Peut-on pénétrer le rêve de l'autre? L'Occident dit: territoire inconnu. Attention: DANGER. Danger d'osmose. Danger de véritable communication (Laferrière, 1985:77).

To fill this communication void, Laferrière resorts to writing, which allows:

aux identités de se jouer et de se déjouer les unes les autres. Elle constitue des frontières poreuses, traversées par les rêves. Elle détotalise, elle institue un droit au fantasme d'être autre, d'ailleurs, par-delà, en deça, en devenir (Robin, 1998:373).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we can share the affirmation of Sherry Simon (1987:125), that "the Nègre is not a reading of cultural difference but rather the opening of a neutral, almost a negative, cultural space", adding that the writing of these novels is a cathartic act, an attempt to differentiate, through which the author can assert: "je ne suis plus un écrivain nègre" (Laferrière, 1993:199).

In the last novel, *Chronique de la dérive douce*, the narrator-author seems to make his final choice: he refuses to consider himself an "écrivain nègre", since "être nègre n'est pas tout dans la vie" (Laferrière, 1994:55).

Liberated from ethnic attributes, Dany Laferrière remains the writer of the gaze, the writer of the relationship between the self and the other. And it is precisely the problem of multiple plurality which is articulated in all the works of Laferrière and if, as Pierre L'Hérault states, "la littérature québécoise s'articule désormais sur la tension de l'identitaire et de l'hétérogène" (L'Hérault, 1991:56), then Dany Laferrière is by all means a *Québécois*.

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