

# HERE AFTER

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The Living and the Dead Ensemble, *Overtures*, 2019.  
All images courtesy of the artists.

Hereafter exhibition  
8 Feb – 3 Mar  
Arti et Amicitiae

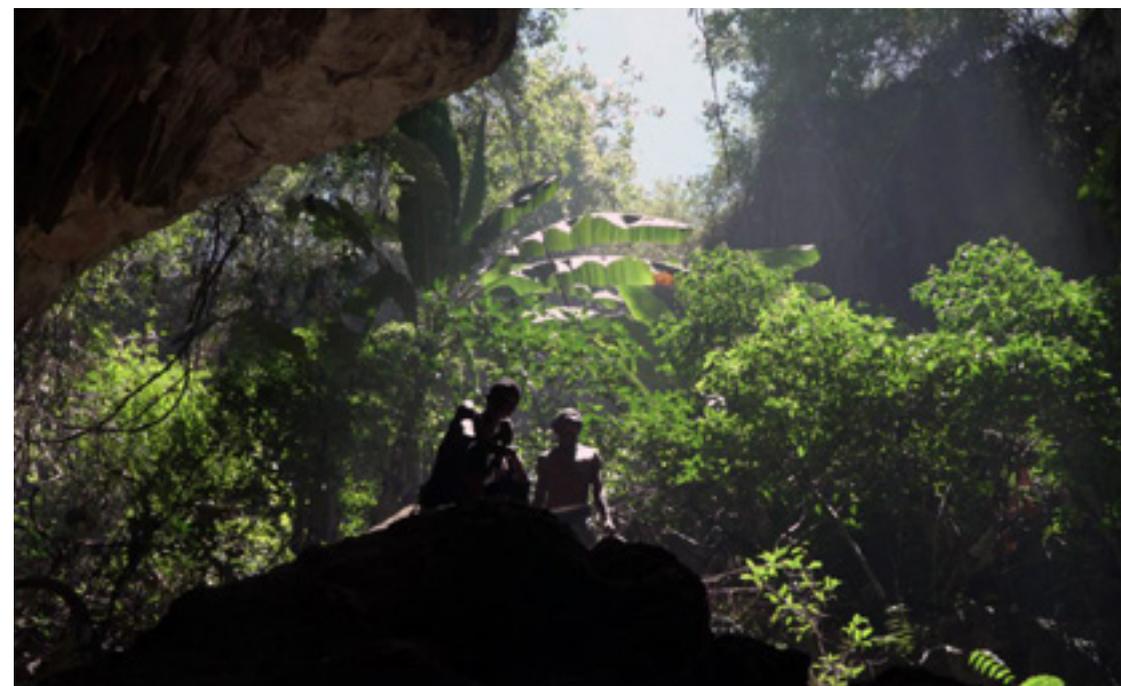
23 Feb  
Film programme  
De Brakke Grond

24 Feb  
Conference lecture  
De Brakke Grond

*These lowest depths, these deeps*  
Louis Henderson and João Polido with fragments of  
poems written by members of The Living and the Dead  
Ensemble

*Bring breath to the death of rocks*  
Louis Henderson

*Dialect of hurricanes. Patois of rains. Language of  
storms. Unfolding of life in a spiral.*  
Louis Henderson



DOES THE WORLD HAVE AN INTENTION?

Matter  
Alive  
Waters  
Lunar  
Solar  
The Stone  
The Bone<sup>1</sup>

I opened my eyes wide to see better, and the world was born without any veil of modesty. A vegetal whole in an imperious evening dew. I ...The leaves were many, green in infinite ways, as well as ochre, yellow, maroon, crinkled, dazzling, indulging themselves in sacred disorder. I ...The vines sought out the ground to mix themselves up some more, try rooting, sprouting buds. I could lift up my eyes and see these trees that had appeared so terrifying to me in their great-ropes of the night. I could gaze on them at last.

They were all immense. Each one nurtured the intangible in a mystery. They harvested light high, high up, and smuggled it to their feet as phantasmal contraband. Their branches sealed alliances

<sup>1</sup> From the epigraph and the contents page of Patrick Chamoiseau, *Slave Old Man: A Novel* (The New Press, 2018). Translated from French and Creole by Linda Coverdale.

of shadows, and glowing openings. The vault of vegetation braced against the earth, dispatched its trunks straight and wild toward the sustenance of the sky. Living trees, dead feet, green twigs, barren branches, parasitic plant hair, buds and rotting spots, seeds and broken blossoms, earthly night solar light – bound themselves together in one momentum. Plant life and death went on with this same ardour, in complementary but undifferentiated cycles...

They were all there, *Bois-rivières*, *Pains d'épices*, *Génipas*, and if they did not see them, I could feel them coming up. Here are the Breadfruit trees planted by the Maroons, and the Avocado trees that mark their trails; here are the Acacias bearers of knowledge; there are the Ebony trees that anchor the axes of a strange saga. There they are, trees that the light clothes in secrets, or those that wrap themselves in a halo of fait-noir: darkness. All came out of the earth with the same force, as from a staved-in belly. I wanted to wallow in this earth giving rise to so many strengths. My need for these strengths made the trees beauties. And this beauty allied both the earth and the sky, and the night and the day. I covered myself with humus, then volcanic-ash tuff brought up beneath my scrabbling fingers. My body was discovering the appetite of roots, the gluttonous solitude of earthworms. My hands excavated clutches of black soil I rubbed on my body. A swarming escorted me: snails, wood lice, and hawkmoth caterpillars, ants and millipedes... I was eating earth. It dissolved warm on my tongue with an aroma of caverns and salt. The earth endowed me with a feeling of puissance well beyond life and death.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the centre of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.<sup>3</sup>

They all sat there in the deep shade of many trees in the garden of the Centre d'art in Port-au-Prince. Rossi next to Cynthia next to Fleurissant next to Léo next to Mimétik next to Louis next to Bijou next to Olivier next to Desiris next to Dieuvéla. The words of the dead at our lips. We rose, placing a left hand on the right shoulder of the person to the left, and Rossi, first in line, walked towards the centre and began circling around. I was first in line, and then I followed behind, and behind you was me and then behind those three at the front; there was I. And so

2 Patrick Chamoiseau, *Slave Old Man: A Novel* (The New Press, 2018), Translated from French and Creole by Linda Coverdale.

3 Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', in (ed.) Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (1969), p. 76.

on, and as such, we all followed. Starting to spin around and around, moving from under the tree toward the garden exit onto the street. Moving forwards. Constantly spiraling together, hands on shoulders, and faces up towards the sinking sun. We didn't know where we were going but we knew we wanted to go. Rara beat the tone of the drum. Spaghetti and beer and cigarettes were all we had or all we needed perhaps. The streets started to glisten from rain as the sun gently hovered. Eventually, the moon (round like a marble and as full as an egg) came to watch over us, and as the light faded over the city falling into the dark, a page was written. Kreyòl Ayisen curled its baroque form over the blank page and would become the sound echoed from the body of that being, from the voice of the We.

I remember that, yes, perhaps it was that night. We walked together for what seemed like an interminable distance, we were forever-walking further into the night. Deeper into the night. Surrounded on both sides by motionless cars in the middle of the road, headlights lighting our path, hands held, or on shoulders, or carrying bags, and gently pushing another's hips to steer them around a huge, open hole in the ground through which the city's water rushed at a pace under the Route Nationale 2 traffic jam that snaked through Port-au-Prince from Carrefour to Martissant all the way to Grand Rue. Exhausting. Exhilarating. The forever-walk among the traffic and rain brought us somewhere we would never have expected. Lightning in the sky and rain falling, we no longer worried about where we were walking; we just wanted to walk. Walk together. Somewhere. In the end we walked from Carrefour to Grande Rue. The night held not much up to us, and we refused and refused to succumb to its threat of sleep or death and perhaps both.

As if chased by dawn they fled further into the night. Exhausted, we had to rest, so we slept in the cemetery among those things varied and divine. When I woke, I saw a new place in which our body had arrived. We were in the belly of a cave as if digested by the mountain. And so, lighting cigarettes, we blindly made our way down, deeper into the earth. Dark. Dark cave. We came to a standstill in a large chamber at what we imagined was our centre. Curling and sparkling formations of limestone decorated the walls, floor, and ceiling, and it appeared before our eyes that we were inside a diamond-encrusted cathedral, of sorts. I cried out and my cry came back to me, and again on the left and the right and above and below. Surrounded by echo on all sides. Then Fleurissant cried out and Bijou and Louis and Olivier and Cynthia and Léo and Rossi and Desiris and Dieuvéla and Mimétik. All at once we cried out loud the words of the dead we had carried on our tongues.

Cacophony. The cave sang them back to us in its own voice. Our voice, yet completed with the inflexions and textures that the walls pressed into our words. Echo defeats the Gods by repeating the last words of Narcissus. She enables herself to speak, but only through repeating his words in her voice. In a certain way she appropriates his language. In repeating she responds to him. She speaks in her own voice by repeating his words. And as such, the cave translated our noise into polyphonic melodies that resonated in and through our bodies. Echo-translation. The voice of the We.

“There is a kind of pressure that music and poverty (constraint) puts on the sentence; the remainder (freedom) is poetry. Over the course of history the demands of truthful expression (as either or both correspondence and discovery) become more and more severe, but at the same time ‘the plain sense of things’ becomes more plain and the striated polyvocality of the vessel, the medium, the conductor strives for directness.” I think poetry is what happens or is conveyed on the outskirts of sense, on the outskirts of normative meaning.<sup>4</sup>

\*

While walking Léo says to Desiris that Haitian Creole is itself a form of spiraling in the way that it escapes direct meaning through the frequent use of images within its everyday poetics. James replies that this is like camouflage, like marronnage: Haitian Creole flees sense and hides its meanings. Léo responds that, indeed, Haitian Creole escapes colonial vigilance, reinventing itself at every turn.

\*

I take the pulse of the spiral and inscribe it in graphs and charts, from the very life of writing. It's a pluridimensionality at the level of words – words functioning as particles of sonic energy in motion.<sup>5</sup>

Inserted with precision into a sentence, the word becomes a sort of slave and thus loses its nerves, its lifeblood.<sup>6</sup>

More effective at setting each twig aquiver in the passing of waves than a pebble dropped into a pool of water, Spiralism defines life at the level of relations (colors, odors, sounds, signs, words) and historical connections (positionings in space and time). Not in a

4 Fred Moten, 'Words Don't Go There: An Interview with Fred Moten', in *Callaloo* 27, no. 4, 2004, pp. 953–66, at p. 960.

5 Frankétienne, *Ready to Burst*, 2014 [1968], p. 80. Translated from French by Kaiama L. Glover.

6 Ibid, p. 83.

closed circuit, but tracing the path of a spiral. So rich that each new curve, wider and higher than the one before, expands the arc of one's vision.

In perfect harmony with the whirlwind of the cosmos, the world of speed in which we evolve, from the greatest of human adventures to struggles for liberation, Spiralism aligns perfectly – in breadth and depth – with an atmosphere of explosive vertigo; it follows the movement that is at the very heart of all living things. It is a shattering of space. An exploding of time.

Re-creating wholes from mere details and secondary materials, the practice of Spiralism reconciles Art and Life through literature, and necessarily breaks with the hypocrisy of the Word. Re-cognition. Totality.

In this sense, as means of expression – efficient, par excellence – Spiralism uses the Complete Genre, in which novelistic description, poetic breath, theatrical effect, narratives, stories, autobiographical sketches, and fiction all coexist harmoniously...

\*

Every day, I employ the dialect of the untamed hurricanes. I speak the madness of opposing winds.

Every evening, I use the patois of furious rains. I speak the rage of overflowing waters.

Every night, I speak to the islands of the Caribbean in the language of hysterical storms. I speak the madness of the sea in heat.

Dialect of hurricanes. Patois of rains. Language of storms. Unfolding of life in a spiral.<sup>7</sup>

7 Ibid, p. 7–8.



Without a visa I cross the water  
I don't need a dugout boat to take myself  
across

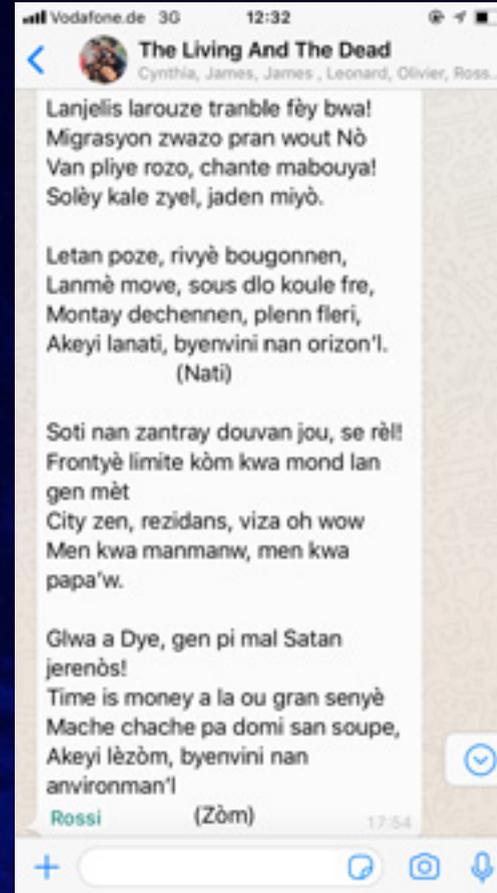
Agwe will give me a boost  
Giving me waves to step on land  
If my feet don't reach I will grow wings  
I'm just passing by  
I only trace my route

Léonard Jean-Baptiste



If thunder roars it can be heard in Guinea and  
announces we are on our way.  
Captain Agwetawoyo m awoyo  
Because I have you in me I am without fear.  
So I can turn around suddenly and cross again,  
You helped me arrive and you will bring me back.  
I don't believe I need to do much to go there.  
Visa? Passport? No no, I need only a critical reason.  
The truth is that history cast me here fallen  
just so I can take the opportunity to remind you  
that I am going back home.

Dieuvela Cherestal



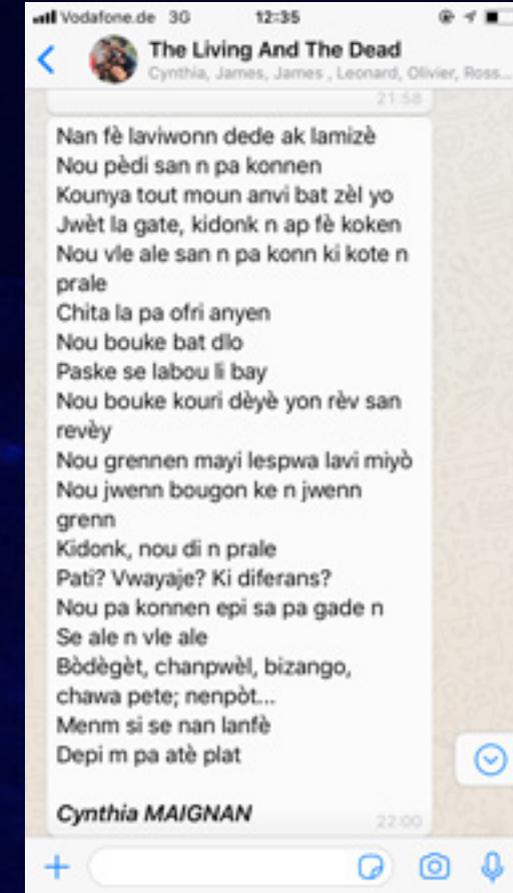
Twilight dew trembles the tree-leaves  
Migratory birds take the North Road  
Wind bending reeds, a lizard sings!  
The sun opens its eyes, the fields are happy.

Calm lake, bubbling river,  
Rough sea, springs of flowing freshwaters  
Peaceful mountain, flowered plains,  
Welcome nature, welcome to the horizon.  
(Nature)

Coming from the womb at dawn, there was a cry!  
Borders closed as if the world had a master  
City-zen, residence, visa oh wow  
This is the cross of your mother,  
this is the cross of your father.

Glory to God, there is much worse  
Renounce Satan!  
Time is money with your big ears oh Lord  
Those that seek it will not sleep without soup,  
Welcome men, welcome to your environment.  
(people)

Rossi Jacques Casimir

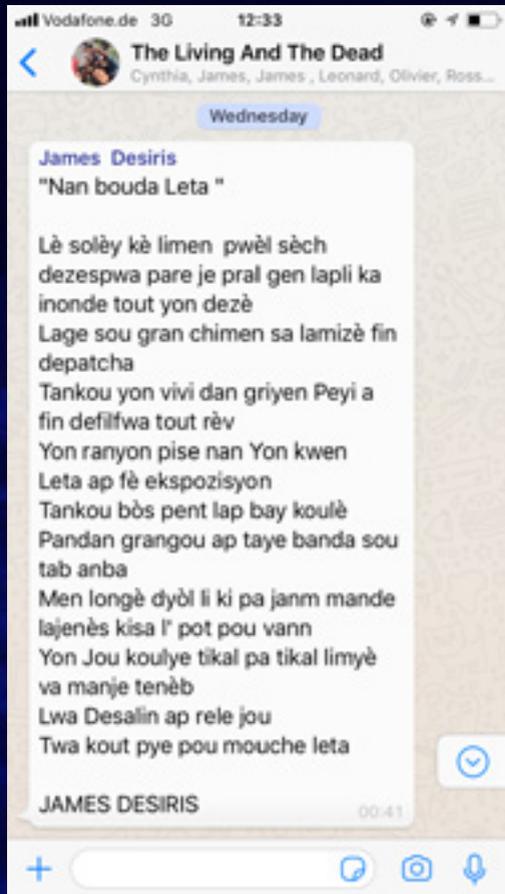


We spin round and round with our misery  
We are lost without knowing it  
Today everyone wants to beat their wings  
A pointless game, and so we cheat  
We want to go without knowing  
where we are going

To stay doesn't offer anything  
We are exhausted from treading water  
Because all it makes is mud  
We are exhausted from chasing dreams  
without waking

We sow seeds of hope for a better life  
We reap corn and we reap grains  
So then, we say we're going  
Leave? Travel? What difference?  
We do not know and so we don't look  
We just want to go  
Bòdègèt, chanpwèl, bizango, chawa pete; anywhere...  
Even if it's in hell  
Since I'm not yet flat on the ground.

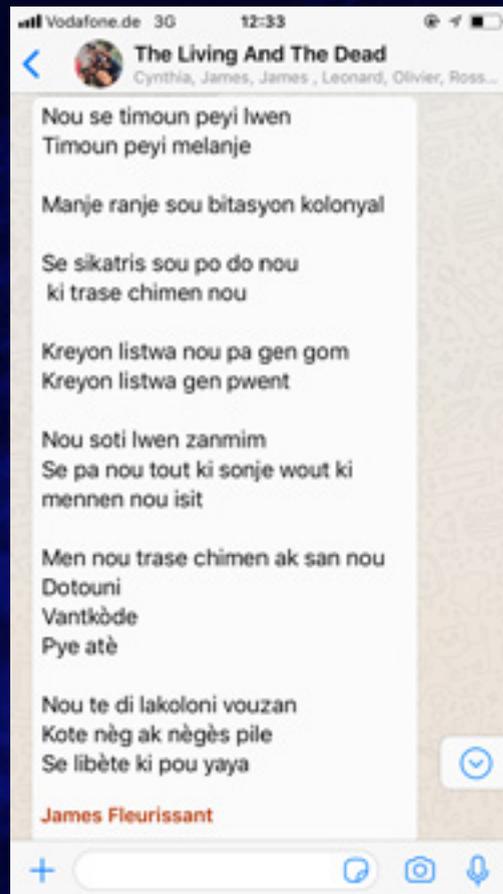
Cynthia Maignan



To the Ass of State.

When the sun lights the dry hairs of despair  
 Waiting for the rain of tears to flood the desert  
 Abandoned on the high street is what misery entails  
 Like a stubborn person the country has devoured our dreams  
 From the debris on every corner the State makes an exhibition  
 Like a painter giving colour  
 Whilst hunger parades at our table  
 Mouth gaping open without ever asking the youth what they have to offer  
 One day the light tasted the darkness  
 Ogou Feray called the day  
 Three kicks in the ass for 'Mister State'.

James Desiris



We are children of a far-away land  
 Children of mixed countries

Poisoned food at the colonial plantation  
 It is the scars on the skin of our backs that trace our path

The pencil of history has no eraser  
 The pencil of history has only lead

We come from far away my dear friends  
 It is not all of us who remember the route that led us here

But we draw our own paths  
 Barebacked  
 Shrivelled stomachs  
 Barefoot

We said to hell with the colony  
 Because there, where black people arrived  
 Freedom must be enjoyed.

James Fleurissant



In Haiti there are young people who wanted to smoke a joint

But life's troubles made their nostrils fume

When there's elections all the candidates are children of the people

But when they take power they act like motherless children

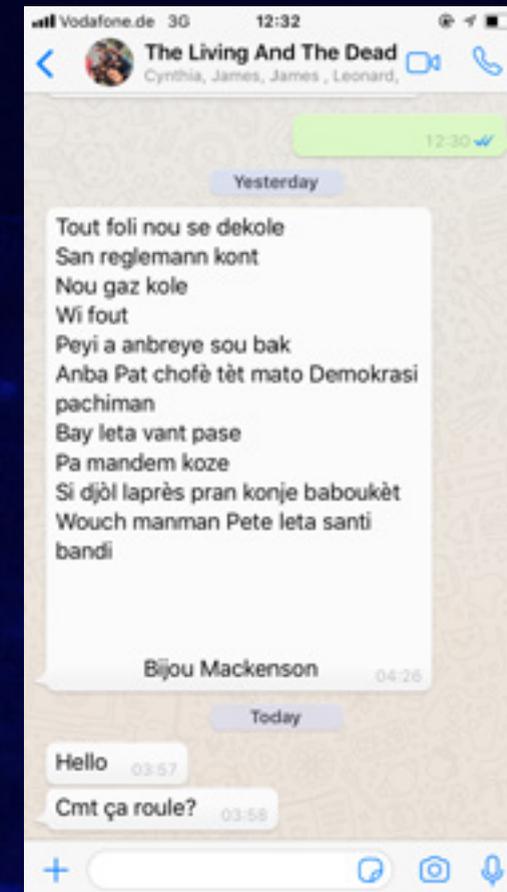
Come to a small island where a joint is more accessible than a plate of food

Come to a small country where they pay people to clean their own houses

The animal is in misfortune and there it remains

Haiti moves forwards but in billboard mode.

Mimètik Nèg



Bijou Mackenson

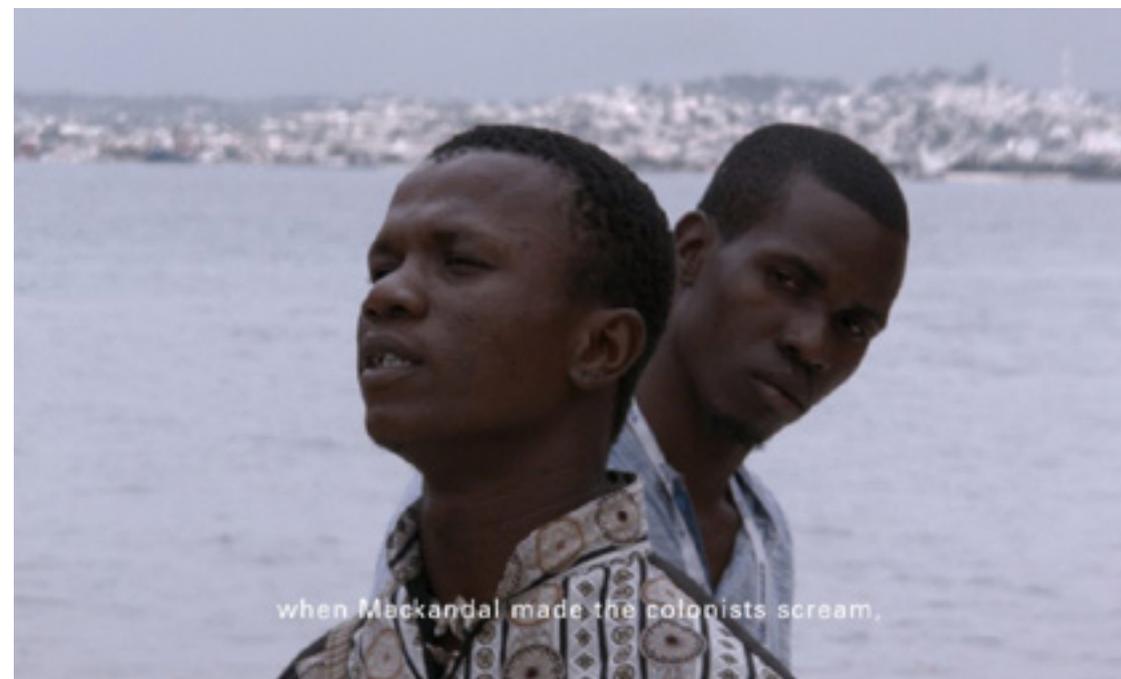
I am starting my work anew.  
I will cross the seas in the other direction.<sup>2</sup>

### Translate, Run, Cry

The words above, spoken by Toussaint Louverture in the 1961 play *Monsieur Toussaint* by Martinican author Édouard Glissant, are taken up and rendered their own by The Living and the Dead Ensemble in their forthcoming film *Ouvertures*, in which the ghost of the Haitian revolutionary leader – killed in captivity in France in 1803 – returns to his native land from an imposed exile. Glissant's play puts into motion the frozen prison cell of the *Fort de Joux* in the Jura Mountains, where Louverture is dying. A talkative assembly of ghosts comes to occupy his last days: revolutionary soldiers, free people of colour and slaves, French generals, famous and unknown Maroons, friends, foes, and voodoo priestesses. They are there to hold Louverture to account and to negotiate their position within this polyphonic history. The film attempts to take Glissant word for word, to meet him at his own poetic method (which is also a politics of history) through amplifying movement and noise; to make a racket (*faire un boucan*) that moves and shifts spaces, that awakens the dead.<sup>3</sup> In the film the ghost of Louverture returns to wander around a new country, a completely different one: from the Port-au-Prince of today, devastated by an earthquake and eroded by endemic corruption, to the south coast of the island where the mangroves are mere skeletons of their former selves since the passage of Hurricane Matthew. A poor country that still pays a high price for its independence and continues to live many forms of recolonisation through 'emergency aid' policies.

Rather than simply performing the play, the Ensemble worked at translating it within its new, impoverished conditions, to reanimate it into a social body with political consistency in the present. As J. Michael Dash notes: 'to translate this play is to creolise it. To translate this play into Creole is to invent a new language from the traces of the original; according to the director's intentions, it is to enrich the imaginary of the

<sup>1</sup> The title is left in French because it is a subtle wordplay that is not easily translated into English. Literally it means 'The noise at Glissant's', but *boucan* is a slang word with varying meaning – it comes from the Middle French verb *boucaner*, to imitate the cry of a *bouc* (a male goat). *Boucan* both evokes places of debauchery and the noise they produce, the spirit of *din*, the music of disorder. Furthermore, if in this text we concern ourselves with noise as a way of making sense, we do not abandon another meaning of the word *boucan*. Among the indigenous of the Caribbean the word evoked a wood-burning grill for smoking meat and fish. It is this object that gave the pirates of the region their name of buccaneers, as they copied this practice of preserving meat. It will therefore also be a question, in this text, of the decomposition of meat, of the flesh of Toussaint Louverture. The *boucan* can also thus be understood as the ritual of conservation for this body, a body that is the place of a certain recomposition of the history of the Haitian Revolution.



text "in a manner both errant and fixed at the same time"<sup>4</sup>. In *Ouvertures*, the young members of the theatre company from Port-au-Prince work at translating the voices of certain characters into Haitian Creole before even attempting to perform the play. This movement between French and Haitian Creole, that Glissant himself refused to make,<sup>5</sup> echoes the new circumstances within which the work is taken up and presented. The work is thus situated and errant at the same time because this free

- <sup>2</sup> 'J'entreprends le travail à nouveau. Je traverserai les mers dans l'autre sens.' Édouard Glissant, *Monsieur Toussaint, Version scénique* (Éditions du Seuil, 1986), p. 50. Translation by Louis Henderson.
- <sup>3</sup> The noise or racket (*boucan*) of which I speak here should be understood as a 'common' one, as a possible form of meaning and as an energy that is necessary for the production of knowledge and the experience of struggle. The form is not always intelligible, yet it is translatable because it already makes sense by the way it produces a place of speech, a place in motion. A meaning that creates itself from chaos: a cry, which is the first gesture of a return from a space of imposed silence. We must stop thinking the cacophonous conversation as the bad manners of loud people who always speak too loudly and in a disorderly fashion; in fact they are political in a shorthand way, through acting directly on, in and through the body. As we don't know how to accept this form, we will speak of translating it within the codes of an already agreed political language, as if it wasn't already political, as if popular cacophony must return to something intelligible for those that do not participate in it. However, it speaks from the experience of co-presence, as is the case with all ritualistic forms that do not make sense when witnessed from the outside. Cacophony destroys the idea of an isolated meaning; it is primarily a form of social sculpture, a form of song. The devotion that is necessary in order to listen and think with these kinds of situated gestures is what I call 'an ecology of shadows'.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Michael Dash, Preface to the bilingual French/Antillean Creole edition of *Monsieur Toussaint/Misyé Touden*, translated by Rodolf Étienne, English translation by Louis Henderson (Editions Mémoire d'encrier, 2014), p. 8.
- <sup>5</sup> The original text is written primarily in French. In the preface to the 1978 theatrical version of *Monsieur Toussaint*, Glissant remarks that he resisted 'a simple mechanism of creolisation' and that 'the mise-en-scène of this story could be decided according to its linguistic environment.' Quoted in Glissant, *Monsieur Toussaint, Version scénique* (Éditions du Seuil, 1986), p. 10. Translation by Louis Henderson. Glissant often worked within French, twisting the language and inventing his own poetic tools with many neologisms. If French remains the political and administrative language of the island, Haitian Creole is now the sole language of 80 percent of the population. The translation of the play into Haitian Creole by The Living and the Dead Ensemble is based on a desire to both make it accessible to a wide audience and to give it another resonance. In this version of the staging, the choice was focused on a weaving between French and Creole, giving the characters a certain linguistic coherence (Toussaint Louverture being the only one to circulate between two languages). The idea that some of the dialogues may be partially opaque for some viewers seems to us to be part of a relevant linguistic experience that values polyphonic sonorities and sensation over and beyond meaning.

adaptation becomes the pretext for a series of *dérives*, by members of the Ensemble and their characters in the play, towards a new form of *marronnage* guided by the ghost of Louverture.<sup>6</sup> In enacting the Glissantian gesture of bringing to life the promises of the past as traces within the bodies of the present, The Living and the Dead Ensemble show the current circumstances of the Haitian youth, who carry within them the bitter fire of the Revolution and a desire for a newfound exile. The translation is therefore double, both within the friction of languages – from a particular emphasis of French within the choral Haitian Creole of the streets, a *cacophony of signification (boucan des significations)* – and in setting the *scène* in motion.<sup>7</sup> Everything is basically already there, like a seed in Glissant’s text, like an unpredictable programme through which the young Haitian Ensemble fulfils its potential.<sup>8</sup> They will embark on a journey that is also a method of storytelling because if *Ouvertures* is a film of errantry, it is only so through the way it uses the *détour*<sup>9</sup> as a way to resonate the subtlest of vibrations – the most damaged of rhythms – from within the music of history. And as such, the Ensemble performs in the Glissantian style, but like a Rara band without a score,<sup>10</sup> without respect, playing by ear, accelerating the tempo, slowing it down with a step to the side, multiplying the times and the out-of-times. The prison cell that Glissant makes the heart of his composition becomes, in this re-reading, a space that moves and resonates – sometimes ruin, sometimes cave, sometimes chaotic and nocturnal streets where the collective body of the story spreads itself out.

Here, we shall return to certain motifs in *Monsieur Toussaint* to observe just how much the Haitian versioning (in the musical sense of the term) of this text, while fragmentary, intensifies the scope of the play through collecting together historical traces and replaying its conflicts. But it would be unfair to attribute to Glissant alone the invention of this form of ‘wandering in history’ and the atomisation of voices because of the work of the ‘Spiralist’ literary movement in Haiti (led by Frankétienne), which continuously sought to undo the body of the single narrator and to people it with the whirlwind of their environment and sensations.<sup>11</sup> The Living and The Dead Ensemble, therefore, cut their own version under the poetic powers of the island in which they repatriate the body of the tragic hero to fertilise a better future.

6 We use the French word, *marronnage*, but to clarify for the reader, it indicates the state of extricating oneself from slavery – to become a maroon.

7 I use here the word ‘scene’ in a sense similar to that developed by Jacques Rancière. It describes the situation of a collective movement in the process of producing itself, a form that occurs from a multitude at the same time as it is thought. Thus, no concept precedes it or announces it. (See Adnen Jdey and Jacques Rancière, *La Méthode de la scène*, Lignes, 2018.) We could broaden this idea to the possibility of a composite space that fills the identity of subjects with multiple other presences, sensations, and traces – what I call ‘landscape-bodies’. Rancière’s term in French is *scène*, which can be translated into English as both ‘scene’ and ‘stage’. In the English translation of this text, we have decided to use both at different moments to indicate the subtle change in sense according to the particular context of the sentence.

8 I play along with Glissant’s poetics here in creating an oxymoron. For him, it is essential to experience chaos. Unpredictability is one of the cornerstones of his thought that escapes all instrumentalisation. It is by virtue of its elusive becoming that creolisation completely separates itself from multiculturalism and *métissage* (mixed ethnicity).



### To People the Margins

In 1978, Édouard Glissant published the stage version of *Monsieur Toussaint*. The first text, written in 1959 and published in 1961, proposed a form of recounting the facts and places of the Haitian Revolution, yet it was deemed too didactic by the author. Nineteen years later, Glissant finished a new version of the play, with a stronger political stance. While keeping with the same language (French), this transposition to the theatrical is nonetheless a first significant form of translation. This new text brings the divergent voices of history to life, within the single space of Louverture’s prison cell, through a spectral mode of address. Glissant gives a lot of importance to orality, notably to the baroque form of the Creole folktale,<sup>12</sup> and to how it allows for modes of storytelling through

9 *Détour* is left in French here to connect to how Glissant uses the term in distinction to a *retour* (return). For Glissant the *détour* is a return to something but at a significant remove from the original. It takes the shape of a spiral or an echo.

10 Rara is a musical form originating from Haiti performed during street parades, usually during the week of Easter. Rara bands consist of a set of cylindrical bamboo trumpets called *vaksen* (which can also be made of metal pipes), drums, maracas, *güiros* (a percussion instrument) and metal bells. The *vaksen* perform repetitive and rhythmic sounds with the help of a drummer. The genre, even if predominantly Afro-centred, is also characterised by some Taino-Amerindian instruments such as the *güiros* and maracas. The songs are sung in Haitian Creole and celebrate the African descent of the Afro-Haitian population. It is an important part of Vaudou religious practices.

11 Frankétienne (b. 1936) is a Haitian writer, poet, playwright, painter, musician and activist. He is recognised as one of Haiti’s leading writers and playwrights in both French and Haitian Creole. ‘Frankétienne, along with Haitian writers Jean-Claude Fignolé, and René Philoctète, formulated the aesthetic philosophy of *spiralisme* in 1965. Committed to discovering an original approach to creative expression for the Haitian artist and individual, they established the spiral form as the primary thematic and formal point of departure for their works.’ Kaima L. Glover, ‘Showing vs. Telling: “Spiralisme” in the Light of “Antillanité”’, *Journal of Haitian Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, Special Issue on Frankétienne, 2008, pp. 91–117, at p. 114.

12 ‘And when I study, for example, the phenomena of colonisation in Caribbean discourse, I refer (as a place of resistance) rather to the language of the storyteller than to ordinary language. There is this kind of impregnation of speech staged by the Creole storyteller in my writing. Moreover, in the tales I heard in my childhood, there were cabalistic formulas which were probably inherited from African languages, whose meaning no one knew, and which affected us strongly without anyone knowing why. It is quite obvious to me, now, that I have been influenced by this unenlightened presence of languages or formulas which are meaningless and still act upon you, and it is perhaps possible that a whole part of my theories on the necessary opacity of language come from there.’ Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Editions Gallimard, 1995), p. 116. Translation by Louis Henderson.

errantry, gossip, accumulation, and *détour*, which undo the continuity, authority, and hierarchies of grand narratives of History, its propensity to make heroes, to force causalities, and to clarify. In the play, we have an un-resolved, conflictual, and sometimes obscure history in which multiple voices resonate through the cell of the famous Haitian captive.

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I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance, as location of radical openness and possibility.<sup>13</sup>

Of this place, watched over by death, petrified by Jurassic coldness, Glissant makes an echo chamber, a space put into movement by an undisciplined concert of voices. The Glissantian site, situated between anchorage and rhizomatic movement, is always occupied with its own contradictions. It is the space of a permanent exercise in the composition of diverse forces that are convened chaotically. Violently. Unpredictably. And has nothing to do with a clever negotiation or a mixture without taste. Also, in *Monsieur Toussaint*, the site has no rest. The ghosts have not come to gather peacefully around the tragic and dying body. By way of a wake, 'the old darkie' (*le vieux moricaud*) has the right to a real bash that could awaken the dead (*un véritable boucan à réveiller les morts*).<sup>14</sup> They speak, they cry, they mock, the state makes proclamations, and the Maroons spit out sarcasms disguised as laws. The body of Louverture serves as a *potomitan* for this unlikely assembly, as a space of mediation, of debate, as a battlefield, but finally as a form of precarious architecture of a common becoming. In Caribbean culture, the *potomitan* is the name of the central post in a Vaudou temple (*Hounfour*). By extension, we use the term to speak of an individual around whom everything is organised and supported. Most frequently it is the woman for her role as the pillar within a domestic space, in opposition to public space where masculine figures generally parade. While French powers push Toussaint out of the political arena of Saint-Domingue by exiling him in a far away and peripheral space at the world's end (the Jura being far on the Eastern border of France), Glissant's mise-en-scène turns the frozen cell of the Fort de Joux paradoxically into a warm foyer, serving as a place of welcome and for the recomposition of history through

13 bell hooks, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36, 1989, pp. 15–23, at p. 23.

14 This is how the jailer *Manuel* refers to Louverture in the play. *Le vieux moricaud* is a pejorative expression that names a person of colour and is probably used to indicate a class position. Manuel is from the working class and his familiarity is less an insult than an impolite way to address a complicity, an awareness that, through being imprisoned, Louverture 'descends' from his status, becoming once again part of the class of people tormented by 'superiors'.

storytelling within the imaginary of a wake. Moving away from canonical historical forms, Glissant clearly approaches a writing of History through necromancy, a sorcerer's practice of the word, an invocation, which he calls 'a prophetic vision of the past'.<sup>15</sup> The margins become the possible site for this history *otherwise written*, filled by the powerful voice of the Vaudou priestess *Maman Dio* – the alternative feminine figure, carrier of secret knowledges, a nocturnal and reversed mirror to the faithful wife of Louverture. From a margin of suffering and forced exile, the scene turns into a margin of desire, a space of potentiality, 'as location of radical openness and possibility', to use the words of bell hooks.

When J. Michael Dash emphasises the analogy between the architecture of the cell with its single window and the hold of a slave ship,<sup>16</sup> it is to give a feeling of potential tragedy; a place that, in spite of everything, moves towards a becoming in the 'beyond', in the land of the dead. A slave ship where the noise of the captives is also a cry to an army of skeletons, lying on the ocean floor, caught up in the same stratigraphic, limestone layers that imprison Louverture – weren't the Jura Mountains once an ocean in another time?

### To Compose, to Decompose

If Glissant sees an inspiring model in the Black Revolution of Haiti, he never loses himself within a heroic narrative; nor does he celebrate a slave uprising washed of its complexities and ambiguities. Neither does he place one factor above another in the interlacing of the struggle, in the chaos of liberation. The radicality of François Mackandal, an eighteenth-century Haitian Maroon leader in Haiti, comes up against the demands of Rigaud, the free man of colour; the power of traditional magic comes up against the republican fascinations of Toussaint; the cries and the songs fight against the eloquence of the Army Generals. Everything here is painfully entangled and contingent, and it becomes evident just how much this Caribbean thinker struggles with his own identity while weaving the tragic figure of Louverture.

In his text *Blackness and Becoming: Édouard Glissant's Retour*, Louis Chude-Sokei reads in the wake of the Caribbean authors CLR James, Édouard Glissant, and Wilson Harris the tragic dimension of the character of Toussaint Louverture.<sup>17</sup> In the work of the latter two, the tragic

15 Édouard Glissant, *Monsieur Toussaint*, p. 7. Translation by Louis Henderson.

16 Preface to the bilingual French/Antillean Creole edition of *Monsieur Toussaint/Misyé Touden*, p. 7. English translation by Louis Henderson.

17 Louis Chude-Sokei, 'Blackness and Becoming: Édouard Glissant's Retour', in *The Black Scholar*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2018, pp. 43–53.

aspect is born from a composite political identity that brings together two apparently irreconcilable realities: the concept of freedom issued from French revolutionary thought and the modes and desires of liberty inherited from slaves (a radical and unconditional emancipation that brilliantly illuminates the blind spots of French Revolutionary Universalism and its necessary ties to slavery and capitalism). It is precisely within this contradiction that the figure of Louverture is held, animated by a desire for political composition that produces conflict, a tearing apart, and, perhaps, a feeling of betrayal towards the purest and most concrete forms of freedom. As a tragic hero, he will have no other choice than to retreat from the scene so that a more radical form of revolution (that which Louverture was blocking by his ambiguous presence) can finally come to the fore. This radical form was the combat led and incarnated by General Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a fight for liberation marked by Dessalines's past as a slave labourer on a plantation, at quite a remove from Louverture's past as a domestic slave who was freed and awarded specific privileges, such as an education in the French political imaginary.

In this same text, Chude-Sokei quite rightly shows how the gesture of return (*retour*), as historical method, calls for a reparative heroism as the basis of political identities for African American communities and Black Studies in the USA. In Glissant's method of the *détour*, he finds a way of undoing the toxic desire for heroes through the favouring of composite and contingent identities, like that of Louverture. Glissant articulates two worlds in his thinking: atavistic societies (obsessed with vertical roots, filiation, and the purity of territory) and composite societies (growing rhizomatically, through relation and creolisation). But to better understand the nature of this second world, which could appear to be nothing more than a globalised and floating scene opposed to forms of situated existence, it is necessary to look more closely at the particular relation this Martinican writer maintains between a place and its aporetic, internal contradictions:

The relationship is intense between the unavoidable necessity and reality of creolisation and the unavoidable necessity and reality of the place, that is, the place from which human speech is made. We do not utter empty words, merely diffused into the air. The place from which one utters the word, from which one utters the text, from which one utters the voice, from which one utters the cry, that place is immense. But the place, we can close it, and we can close ourselves in it.<sup>18</sup>

18 Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Éditions Gallimard, 1996), p. 29. Translation by Louis Henderson.

The fugitive – the African doomed to the injurious islands – did not recognise even the taste of the night. This unknown night was less dense, more naked, it was unnerving. He heard the dogs far behind, but already the acacias had snatched him from the hunter's realm, and, man from vast lands, thus he entered another history, all unaware that there, times were beginning again for him.<sup>19</sup>

Here, it is important to understand how a reading of Glissant, like that of the work of his close friend and Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau, or Haitian author Frankétienne, develops a particular representation of place – or, more precisely, the body as place. This would shift the question of identity to what I call landscape-identities (*identités-paysages*) and place-identities (*identités-lieux*), a body amplified by its own environment, inhabited by perfumes, sensations, geographies, forms of living, languages, experience. A body-place that moves about and shifts with the traces of a world. It is from this perspective that we can observe the way in which the minority body upsets the social and historical order. It brings to life – by its very presence, over and beyond itself, alongside its identitarian claims and in an unpredictable, chaotic, and unspeakable way (thus it flees from classical political categorisations) – the traces of certain initial conditions of place. This presence makes audible the din (*boucan*) of an out of tune History.

Following this idea of the body-place (*corps-lieu*), J. Michael Dash highlights the interest that Glissant has for the imaginary of the city and how he makes Louverture into a space to be 'peopled' and wandered over: a geography.<sup>20</sup> We could also suppose that in *Monsieur Toussaint*, the stage is not only the cell of the captive but also the body of the dying man himself – that the stage offers a place open to controversy and to the most undesirable of hosts, a painful space of composition and decomposition. Death here is fertile; in undoing the hero, it nourishes a terrain. We could imagine, therefore, following on from Glissant, that the retreat and exile of Louverture was a political gesture of shifting the centre to another place, the composition of another possible ground in which dissonant voices could come together without ever having to create a hierarchy or any form of illumination. It is this principle of an errant controversy, this art of the unfinished conversation, that The Living and the Dead Ensemble composes in the film *Ouvertures*.

19 Patrick Chamoiseau, *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse* (Éditions Gallimard, 1997). Translation from *Slave Old Man: A Novel* (The New Press, 2018), p. 16. Translated from French and Creole by Linda Coverdale.

20 Preface to the bilingual French/Antillean Creole edition of *Monsieur Toussaint/Misyé Touden*, p. 5. English translation by Louis Henderson.

