

Translating Haitian Literature Into English

An Interview with Scholar and Translator Carrol F. Coates

by Danilo H. Figueredo

Given his English and German ancestry, Carrol Coates might seem more at home in a cornfield than roaming Haiti and befriending scholars from such different universes as Africa and Cuba. Yet this friendly scholar, eager to embrace the world, has become an important promoter of Haitian and African literature, translating into English, often for the very first time, the works of such major figures as Jacques Stephen Alexis, René Depestre, Dany Laferrière, and Ahmadou Kourouma.

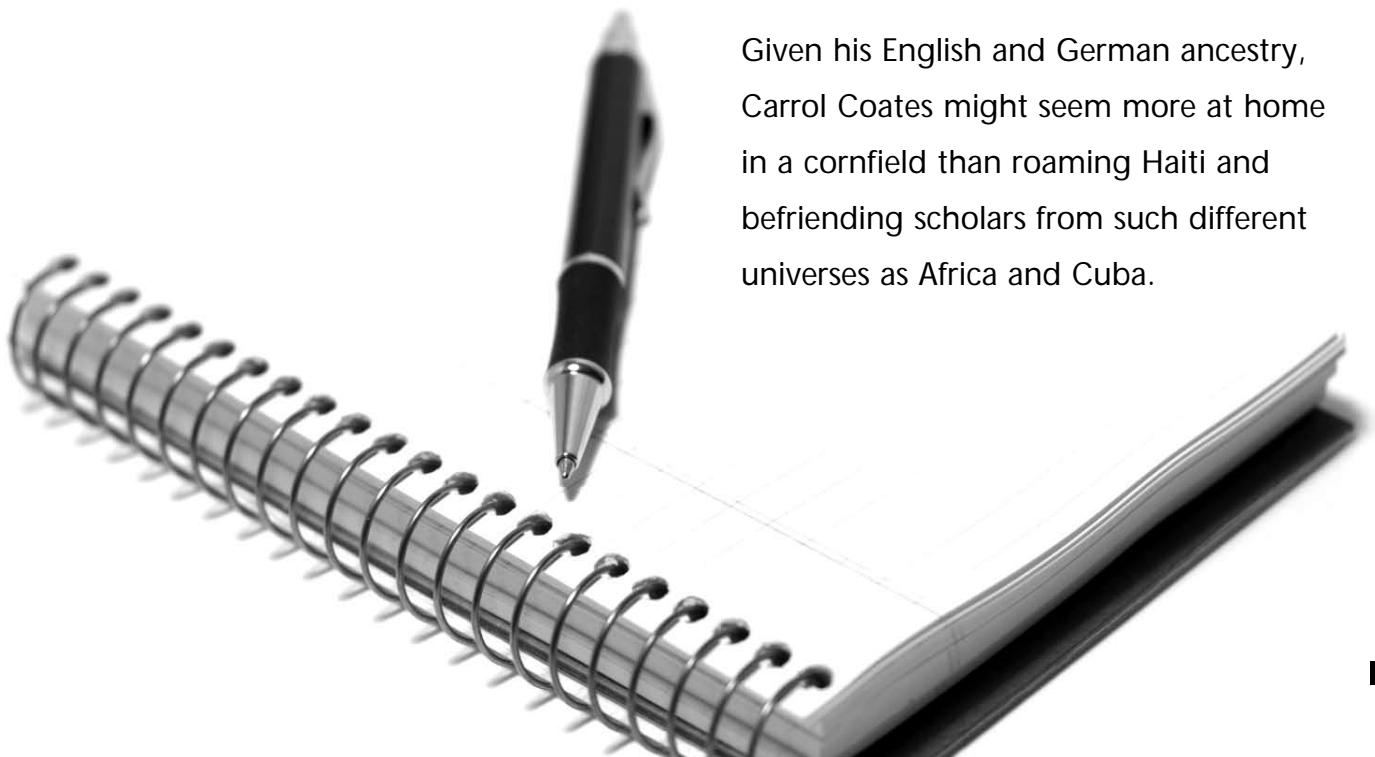
His love of world literature dates back to his early years in high school when he decided to study Spanish, despite his mother's advice. She had taken Spanish and Latin in secondary school and disliked her Spanish classes. But he admired his Spanish teacher and looked forward to conjugating new verbs. His fascination with language led to a deep interest in the cultures embedded in the language. Later on, he expanded his studies to French language and literature.

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Haitian, Caribbean, and African literatures. He is series editor of CARAF Books (Caribbean and African Literature translated from French; published by University of Virginia Press) and an associate editor of *Callaloo*, a *Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters* (Johns Hopkins University Press).

Danilo H. Figueredo: *When I think of the translating process, my imagination takes over. This is what I see: a tired adventurer uncovering a manuscript about a mad knight, and in reading and interpreting the manuscript, the adventurer and the knight leap into modernity. Of course, this is something out of Borges, and we know that Cervantes wrote Quijote, but in the creative process, both Cervantes and Quijote became one, inseparably so, and gave each other immortality. Translating evokes that immortality when a reader of one language brings to another language an unknown text, an undiscovered document. Thus, the reader becomes the translator who becomes a creator. Does this labyrinth make sense to you? Do you see yourself as that type of creator/adventurer? Do you see yourself and the writers you have translated, Jacques Stephen Alexis, for example, as heading into immortality, at least bibliographic immortality?*

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Carrol Coates: The first translation I published was René Depestre's *The Festival of the Greasy Pole* (*Le mât de cocagne*). Depestre wrote a fierce satire of the François Duvalier regime, characterizing the former president-for-life of Haiti as Zoocrates Zachary, the "Great Electrifier of Souls." This satirical portrait alluded at once to the creation of the first great dam of Haiti at Peligre, in an effort to create adequate, stable electric power (more for commerce and industry than for the common people, I might add) and to forms of torture (including electric jolts to the testicles) used by Duvalier's personal militia, the infamous *tonton makout*.

There is no way that I would imagine myself to be the Haitian Depestre, who, as a student, was instrumental, along with Jacques Stephen Alexis and several fellow students, in initiating the revolt that led to the ousting of the dictatorial president, Élie Lescot. Lescot had imposed martial law on all Haiti beginning in 1942 and refused to lift the draconian measure even after the war's end. The communist-oriented students were virtually exiled by being offered scholarships to study in France. The radical young Depestre wandered around Europe and South America, meeting various major and very revolutionary writers such as Pablo Neruda in Chile, before he settled in Cuba soon after Castro took power in 1959. Depestre stayed for some 19 years but found himself increasingly isolated and finally managed to settle permanently in France in 1979.

I found the satiric elements in *The Festival of the Greasy Pole* to be hilarious at moments, erotic in some passages, and outrageous in the description of the abuse of power by the lightly disguised Duvalier and close associates. In this way, I found myself becoming the middle-aged protagonist, Henri Postel—slightly paunchy, depressed by the deprivation and torture he had undergone at the hands of the Great Electrifier, but still alive, capable of both love and an intense

rage at the mistreatment dealt to him and his sister, when they were *restavèk*, indentured child servants, for a bourgeois family and later at the mistreatment by an unsympathetic woman owner of the sisal factory where he worked. I wanted to join the fight of the Haitians and their Dominican fellow workers against the exploitation of the United States multinational sugar companies and the racist policies of the Dominican dictator-president, Trujillo.

In my experience with Dany Laferrière, there is an important difference. I had first (and mistakenly) taken him as a sensationalist writer who gained fame with the outrageous title of his first novel—*Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* (a title that was discreetly shortened in the Canadian English version, *How to Make Love to a Negro*). It was only when I was invited, in 1998, by the Society of the Americas to do a translation and to introduce Dany in the Caribbean Writers conference co-sponsored by the society, Columbia University, and New York University that I reread the first novel and the eight others that had been published at that time. I discovered the contrasting registers and scenes that Dany recreates (always with pronounced autobiographical elements), ranging from the erotic fantasies of the 16-year-old to the overarching fear felt when he found it necessary to escape from Haiti in order to avoid arrest, torture, and probable death. Perhaps because I found Dany to be such an open and engaging person and because none of this experience relates closely to my own, I have tended to identify less often with his characters—although I can still visualize the experience of nine-year-old Dany living with his grandmother in the somewhat protected environment of Petit Goâve, west of Port-au-Prince.

I have to mention at least in passing the very different experience of translating the third novel of Ahmadou Kourouma, *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals* (*En attendant le vote*

I found myself becoming the middle-aged protagonist, Henri Postel—slightly paunchy, depressed by the deprivation and torture he had undergone at the hands of the Great Electrifier, but still alive, capable of both love and an intense hatred for the regime.

hatred for the regime. None of Postel's heroic traits are my own, but I felt a deep empathy, even identification, as I translated his ordeal and campaign to unseat the tyrant.

In a general way, the Depestre experience was followed by a somewhat similar, but more diverse mode of personally living a Haitian life at a specific historical period, 1937. I was seven years old that year and knew nothing about Haiti, but, in the mid-nineties, as I was rereading and working out various parts of Jacques Stephen Alexis's *General Sun, My Brother* (*Compère Général Soleil*), I found myself transported to Haiti then. I lived many sequences of the experience of Hilarious Hilarion, the protagonist, including his nightmarish wandering around Port-au-Prince on the night he is arrested for entering a bourgeois house and stealing a wallet. I felt his

des bêtes sauvages). In a vaguely parallel way, Kourouma's life resembled that of Depestre. His life as a young adult was that of a nomad who was never able to return and live for any length of time under dictatorship in his own country (that of Houphouët-Boigny, president of Côte d'Ivoire from 1960 to his death in 1993). Kourouma sets the scene of the novel as a ritual gathering of hunters, a six-day celebration in honor of the master hunter Koyaga, president and absolute dictator of the fictitious Republic of the Gulf (the novel is at once a satirical portrait of Gnassingbe Eyadema, who was president of Togo until his death in February 2005, and an exposé of the abuse of power and the public treasury by all the African dictators who played the West against the East during that 30-year period).

Of course, I am no closer to Kourouma's characters, in a sense, than I was to those of Dany Laferrière. Moreover, during the Cold War, I was more or less calmly pursuing my quiet career as a teacher of French language and literature, although feeling some of the prevalent apprehensions about another outbreak of global warfare. In a couple of ways, however, I was able to come much closer to feeling and experiencing the narrative I was translating. First, I understand and sympathize with the satirical exposure of the foibles and misdeeds of the dictator-presidents. Secondly, and perhaps more curiously, I found myself living each of the quite different traditional cultures that are evoked.

As a translator, you're writing and therefore you're a writer. Is there a point when the writer in you disappears to allow the writer you're translating come forth, using you as a vehicle of communications? What is the translating process for you? How often do you stumble, falter, and stop?

There have been poets who swore that they got up and wrote so many lines of poetry before breakfast—my recollection is that Paul Claudel claimed at least 20 lines each morning. I have never found that writing came easily (critical essays, lectures), or when it has seemed that way on occasion, I usually ended up trashing what I had written.

With translation, it is often a fairly mechanical and sometimes tedious task to get into the swing of the narrative. And at any stage of translating an entire novel, there are moments when technical jargon or even common expressions that do not flow easily from the source to the target language throw me into a tedious process of dictionary searching and painful recollection to try to find an appropriate equivalent. The problems may seem virtually insurmountable. For example, in my aborted translation of a novel by Jacques Godbout, there was a generous helping of popular swearing, perfectly appropriate in the angry dialogue of the 1960s. The anger of the Quebec working classes was primarily based, however, in their resentment against the Catholic Church. The shock effect of swearing by the Virgin, by Jesus, by the Holy Chalice, and so on, simply would not come out the same in American English with its majority grounding in Protestantism.

In the cultural context of Haiti, the translator, along with most non-Haitian readers, must cope with the reality that Vodou hovers in the background, even when it is not an explicit element of the text. In my second Haitian translation, *General Sun, My Brother*, Jacques Stephen Alexis actually describes a Vodou ceremony organized by the protagonist's mother to thank the spirits for protecting her son while he was in prison for an attempted robbery. Hilarion (the son) is actually a "ounsi," a fully initiated servant of the spirits, and yet this seems to be only an incidental aspect that is alluded to in his month of imprisonment. There are no further events where Vodou is overtly relevant in the second and third parts of the novel. However, when I was preparing the introduction to the translation, it occurred to me that the General Sun himself, clearly seen as a mythical figure of great power by Hilarion, is likely a figuration of Legba, the

primary Vodou spirit who guards the crossroads between the supernatural and the natural worlds.

Are you ever tempted to rewrite a passage, tempted to improve on the original: I can do this better, therefore, let me take the liberty to do so?

Ideally, the translator should not engage in antics to call attention to her or himself. One reason for "sweating blood" or "agonizing" to transport the story into another language is obviously the enthusiasm for communicating a great story, with its more subtle elements, into another language in order to make that author available to persons who cannot fully cope with the source language.

There are inevitably times when the translator cannot avoid making choices that the author did not face in her/his own language. I have to confess that I am increasingly intrigued by texts in which the author has profited from multilingual/multicultural knowledge. Alexis spoke Kreyòl and French, and he was more than a bit conversant with Spanish. He even inserts phrases in English, German, and ecclesiastical Latin at times. The use of phrases and even dialogues in Spanish and Kreyòl are one matter. In the first translation (*General Sun*), I consistently retained Kreyòl and Spanish words and phrases and offered a glossary. With the second Alexis translation (*In the Flicker of an Eyelid*), I moved toward the English style of my gentle collaborator, Edwidge Danticat, who, in her own writing, consistently offers an English version of Kreyòl expressions within her narrative. This practice is closer to what happens in actual conversation with a Haitian, who may use a Kreyòl expression followed immediately by the French (or English) equivalent. The necessity of looking down at a footnote or of turning to a glossary is mostly obviated, with little or no distraction from the flow of the narrative.

Some West African writers deliberately sprinkle their French narrative with expressions in one or another of the many indigenous languages without explaining them. I believe it is Alain Mabanckou (from Congo-Brazzaville) who observed that this practice is closer to the African reality, where few if any people always understand everything that is said or written, primarily because too many languages are in play in addition to whatever European languages might be used. Some translators follow that practice, but I am compulsive about tracking down the meaning of every word or allusion, whether or not I might deal with it or gloss over it in the translation itself.

You chose Haitian writers, and I would think you're in love with Haiti. Can you talk about the trajectory that took you to that nation and to its writers?

My first encounter with Haiti, to the best of my recollection, was the moment when Kenneth Roberts's *Lydia Bailey* appeared in the late forties. I was working in a bookstore in Oklahoma City when this historical novel appeared. The primary scenes take place during the Haitian Revolution, beginning in 1791. At that time, I knew nothing whatsoever

about Haitian history, but Roberts's narrative skill and the fascinating events of the revolution made me feel as if I were there, in the Haitian hills, experiencing the excitement and dangers of the moment. (Rereading the novel several years ago, I was shocked to discover what had escaped me earlier: Roberts had apparently hated Dessalines, in particular, and portrayed him in an extremely unfavorable light, in spite of the general's key role in repelling the French army.) I was so fascinated that I bought several other books on Haitian history (both fiction and nonfiction) and one small volume on Haitian painting. I did not realize that I was setting a precedent that I have always followed when I become interested in the work and culture of an unfamiliar author—the books and documentation that I have collected over the years (more recently on aspects of both Haitian and African literature, cultures, and history) have overflowed a basement office at home as well as my office at the university.

Going through a stint in the U.S. Army and then my doctoral studies and early teaching career, I allowed my early Haitian interest to lie fallow. In the seventies, I began to read Quebec literature—and Quebec was close enough to visit with moderate frequency. In the eighties, I gradually began to expand my reading to the wide range of writing in French by authors of various nationalities. I had the good fortune of meeting A. James Arnold, the founding editor of CARAF Books, and proposed to translate René Depestre for this series. Each Haitian translation that I did, beginning in about 1988, led me to widen my circle of Haitian friends (writers, historians, and colleagues in the academic world) and to read more Haitian history (which is fascinating through its 200-year evolution).

I might add here that each new novel I undertake becomes an overriding interest for some time. I am compulsive about immersing myself in the historical moment of each novel by learning everything I can about the political scene, the geography, the animal and plant life of the specific area(s) described, and seeking out the author's range of cultural and historical allusions (very extensive in the case of Jacques Stephen Alexis, for example).

Even as I have worked in several different areas of West Africa, Haiti continues to interest me, and I take personally every new failure to establish a stable government or to improve the economy.

Can you talk a bit about French and Kreyòl? Can you talk about writers who have chosen Kreyòl? Within the French-speaking world, how are the writers writing in Kreyòl regarded?

Personally, I have had little time to deepen my knowledge of the Kreyòl language as a base to dealing with the extensive body of literature in a more knowledgeable manner or to risk translating more extensively. I would stress the fact that an increasing number of Haitians are literate in Kreyòl and many younger writers are developing the literary language. The last time I was in Haiti, I was surprised at the large number of younger Haitians, some known, many little known,

who appeared at the launching of a double issue of the French journal *Notre Librairie*, focused on Haitian writers and literature. The publishing industry is pretty much limited to the efforts of individuals or small groups within the country. Works printed do not get wide distribution within the country, much less in France, Canada, and the United States.

In spite of the difficult economic situation and the lack of a stable system for editing, publishing, distributing, and critically recognizing Haitian writers, there are a number of writers who have chosen to work in Kreyòl (sometimes alternatively with work in French). Among the best-known writers of the second half of the twentieth century, Félix Morisseau-Leroy and Franck Fouché have been widely recognized for their theatrical works and productions. Syto Cavé, a writer and singer of a much younger generation, is continuing that tradition even now. Franck Étienne (Franketienne) demonstrates incredibly diverse artistic talents and is increasingly recognized on an international scale, although he has repeatedly refused publication by publishers outside of Haiti. He wrote the first entire novel in Kreyòl, *Dezafi* (1978). Fortunately, this groundbreaking novel has now been published in a new version using the standard Kreyòl orthography. Franck has also written, produced, and even acted in a number of plays in Kreyòl. Beginning in the fifties, Paul Laraque became one of the most widely known poets publishing in Kreyòl and many younger writers are following in his wake, with the result that a significant body of literature already exists in the Kreyòl language.

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