

On the Commerce of Intimacy: Dany Laferrière on *How to Make Love to a Negro... and Heading South*

Michael T. Martin with Yalie Kamara

The Only True Sexual Relation is between Unequals.

—DANY LAFERRIÈRE, *HOW TO MAKE LOVE TO A NEGRO WITHOUT GETTING TIRED*
(COMMENT FAIRE L'AMOUR AVEC UN NÈGRE SANS SE FATIGUER)¹

Forced from his native Haiti into exile by Jean-Claude Duvalier's repressive regime in 1976, Dany Laferrière immigrated to Montreal, Quebec, where he transitioned from journalist to writer while employed in various factory jobs.²

Among literary honors, Laferrière was inducted in 2015 to the Académie française, becoming the first Haitian and second personage of African descent (the first being Léopold Sédar Senghor, 1983) to be elected to this prestigious literary council.³

Novelist, essayist, poet, journalist, and filmmaker, a raconteur of extraordinary insight and artistic achievement, Laferrière's fiction mines all manners of truth about the human condition, foregrounding such fraught subjects as migration and exilic/diasporic identities and the determinations of race and sexuality under conditions of postcoloniality—that thing called “desire” in its societally aberrant iterations. Indeed, ever more compelling, his writings and film adaptations unsettle, torment, as they embarrass, at once provoking denial, anger, admiration of literati, academics, and readers alike.

At the epicenter of Laferrière's fiction, and I should say convictions, is privileged and without equivocation, “imagination,” that irreverently challenges and debunks received notions about the “dynamic” of [heterosexual] raced encounters in such interstitial crannies of the postcolonial and cosmopolitan world; and, in doing so, sets himself apart, and at odds, with some of his literary kin. Which is to say, such contemporaries who elide the great social issues of the day in the cauldron of civilizational tumult and who traffic in the banalities of the everyday that surely matter to individuals but not history.



Figure 1. Dany Laferrière. Image courtesy of IU Cinema.

There is palpable tension distinguished by respect and humor in the following conversation which engages with the author/producer bound to and by the mechanics of an art form and its signifying intentions. One reading of this relationship, and suggested in the conversation, is Laferrière's insistence that his stories are fiction, however much they resonate the actuality of historical activity and gesture something more than the imagination of the writer. Restating what is a complex of ideas and personal investments is to recall the author/producer's privilege and right to not bear the weight of history.

And what I think is contested here in the exchange is both the historicity of Laferrière's fiction as it remarks upon race and sexuality and, too, the not unrelated, yet equally charged register and designation itself "black writer." In an alternately delightful encounter marked by humor and adherence to civil protocols, we engaged in conversation on the occasion of Laferrière's visit to the Indiana University Bloomington campus, 15–17 February 2017.

Michael T. Martin: *Mr. Laferrière, I would like to focus on a subject of sustained interest to you, the intersectionalities of race, gender, and sexuality and begin this conversation with a quote from your novel, Why Must a Black Writer Write about Sex?⁴ Your address of this subject is evinced in the exchange between the two black male protagonists, one who urges the other to accept a magazine's offer of a writing assignment.*

Here, one says to the other, “They don’t want some guy who’s going to turn everything into a black man–white man kind of thing.” The other responds, “Forget it then, because that’s the only thing that interests me.” The former man then says with a laugh, “You’re into the black man, white woman thing.” He replies, “That’s one way of examining the issue.”

So, with this exchange between the men as our starting point, two fundamental things appear evident: that whether or not white men are present, there is a power relationship in play between them and black men and that white women are a [the] means to understand that relationship and mediation.

Dany Laferrière: I don’t want to give the impression that this is a sociological book; it’s a novel. I wanted to find a way of approaching this subject that is at the heart of America. Also, one must not forget that it was written in French and in Montreal—a city that is a lot calmer [about race] than New York City is. I cannot speak outside of my own experience because I wasn’t at the center of the debate and part of that politics.

MTM: *Yes, please speak for yourself and from your own experience.*

DL: *Why Must a Black Writer Write about Sex?* is a novel written twenty-five years ago by a young non-English speaking Haitian discovering life and searching for a good topic that would attract a readership. The narrator wants to be a North American writer and for that reason is trying to enter that space. And the subject was, how to talk about this type of relationship in a way that differs from how black or white American writers write about it. I was trying to invent another space where this is possible while avoiding the question of race. It is a question of distance—not philosophy or humor. I was not insensitive to race but rather motivated by something else. A writer must find a space in which to place their camera in order to do something that is new and original. There is an old cliché that “the belly of the woman is a way which you can enter into America.” I was trying to see if this works, if the relationship can be immediate and naked. By “naked” I mean, the bed. The bed is the only place that a man and a woman of differing [social] class and race can find [recognize] each other without intermediary. This is a hypothesis, a question. I was also evoking something you said earlier, which is true: that the absence of the white man is indicative of his presence.

MTM: *Is the bed, then, the site where the truth of a relationship is laid bare?*

DL: The narrator in my other novel, *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*, says that any relationship like that is a cloth of lies, but the physical relationship is a form of truth of its own. It’s not a relaxed relationship but rather one that exists in tension, which creates a powerful energy (see figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Miz Suicide and Man coupling. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro* (figures 2 through 8).



Figure 3. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

MTM: *However, in my reading of How to Make Love to a Negro and Heading South, the contrary is suggested: the contrary because, rather than a place of truth, the bed evokes the falsehood of raced sexual encounters [see figures 4 through 8].*

DL: *In both novels [and films], there is a freeness in the way the characters are not bound to each other, unlike two people of similar backgrounds where there may be the promise of a long-term relationship or marriage. In these texts, such prospects are absent.*



Figure 4. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.



Figure 5. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.



Figure 8. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

MTM: *But, particularly in Heading South, the exchange is material as well as intimate. The black men are the purveyors of sexual exchange for Helen, Brenda, and Sue [see figures 9 through 12].*⁵

DL: But it's not at all the same thing. In that situation, those women feel abandoned because they're no longer valued in their own society, so they go south. For example, Haitian women from the north of Haiti could have gone to the city and looked for sex there, or women here could have well been from the north of say the U.S. and gone to a little rural village for sex there.



Figure 9. Ellen and Brenda at the beach. Still from *Heading South* (figures 9 through 12).



Figure 10. Still from *Heading South*.



Figure 11. Still from *Heading South*.



Figure 12. Still from *Heading South*.

MTM: *And that's the point I want to make: The setting itself doesn't define or change the dynamic between black men and white women. In each encounter assumptions are shared and understood by both. The rules of sexual exchange, whatever the motivation(s)—material profit, compensation, retribution—such are the dynamics in play whether in a cosmopolitan setting, Quebec, or “underdeveloped area/country” is what defines the racialized sexual relationship.*

DL: This is not the same. In *How to Make Love to a Negro*, this takes place in the young man's head. It's political, right from the start. There are two scenes and the sexual one is not the most important. Readers expect these black men to be primitive, but to their disappointment, they are not. They are cultivated. They read the Koran, listen to jazz, and veer from the image of the primitive negro that is always trying to get laid ... (see figures 13 through 16)⁶



Figure 13. Consider counterpoint gestures in figures 13 and 14 from *Heading South* to figures 15 and 16 from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.



Figure 14. Still from *Heading South*.

Figure 15. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.Figure 16. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

MTM: *I get that. What I'm arguing is that each novel tells a story of a distinct circumstance, but what binds the two is the commerce of raced intimacy. For example, in *How to Make Love to a Negro*, the narrator claims as axiomatic that "in the scale of Western values, white woman is inferior to white man, but superior to black man. That's why she can't get off except with a Negro. It's obvious why: she can go as far as she wants with him."*²⁷

DL: For me, it's the opposite. It's the question of race that makes this exceptionally simple because there is no promise of anything going on over time. This is very interesting precisely because, as the writer, I don't see these connections between the two novels and now you're making me think about them (see figures 17a, 17b, and 18).



Figure 17a. Still from *Heading South*.



Figure 17b. Still from *Heading South*.



Figure 18. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

Eileen Julien: *You must have read Soul on Ice, by Eldridge Cleaver? For Cleaver, this is exactly the political relation that plays out in his sexuality. Even Fanon speaks of this in his writings.*⁸

DL: Yes! I'd also like to add that what is different about Fanon and Cleaver's writings is culture. By that I mean, while they are writing from the same political context, it's not a face-off between two cultures.

MTM: *But there is a face-off between two men: one black, the other white.*

DL: But not between two cultures. The narrator is not in political contestation with western culture. He is free. He reads [Arthur] Rimbaud because he's a good poet. He reads Norman Mailer and finds the beginning to be good, and the middle not much so. There is no "black writer," "white writer," thing going on. [James] Baldwin and Mailer are on the same level despite their race.

MTM: *I'm not talking about the novels but rather what they signify about interracial relationships in which women are at the epicenter of struggle between white men and black men. Whether it's foregrounded in the narratives or not, the conflict is mediated by women whether white men are in the frame or not, but always determinant.*

DL: The difference is that I am a writer. I cannot step outside of the book because [for me] this is not an ideological thing.

MTM: *Why not step outside of the book?*

DL: If I step outside of the book, I become a Black American, and I don't want to put on that outfit because I think that it would be more interesting to write a new type of story than to enter into the preexisting dynamic.

MTM: *But that dynamic is omnipresent as much in Haiti as it is Toronto or New York City. The dynamic is an integral part of lived experience.*

DL: No. I write outside of classic narratives and I've written stories outside of my own lived experience.⁹

MTM: *And yet you are a black writer who writes about sex in racialized contexts.*

DL: But I've also written twenty other books.

MTM: *I'm not in any way trying to pigeonhole you.*

DL: The real interest of the conversation is *not* the answers to the questions, but rather that I see things in one way, while you see them in another way, so that you can't enter into my dynamic and I can't enter into yours.

MTM: *Is there a construct and dynamic where you and I can converse in a way that recognizes each other's truths?*

DL: Though it would be interesting to see how each of our dynamics function, I think we know why we can't enter into each other's dynamic; it's history. I'm not a typical Haitian writer. Literarily speaking, I try to look at racial and social relations without being bound by them and with the greatest liberty. When I say "I am Haitian," it's not that I am inferring a superiority; I'm signaling that I am not part of *this* particular problem, which is situated in North America. I'm not in *this* problem, I'm just looking at it. And we can't compare the problems of Haiti to the problems of North America because Haiti has its own particular problems.

MTM: *Okay. Let's return to your book/film adaptation of How to Make Love to a Negro. What's in the names—"Man" and "Bouba" [see figures 19a and 19b]?¹⁰*

DL: I liked the sound of Bouba.

MTM: *I like that (laughs)!*

DL: I like to stay the furthest away possible from metaphors. Names don't contribute to the creation of metaphors in my books. They are natural, generically chosen.

MTM: *Are the two characters archetypes of a sort?*

DL: Everything is real and everything is fake. For instance, I didn't know anything about jazz, though the book is full of references to jazz. I bought a book on the history of jazz and took some names from there. And, I wanted the book to have a religious aspect, so I bought the Koran and used references from there as well.

MTM: *It was arbitrary?*

DL: It was arbitrary. This was in the eighties, and the Koran was less known back then.¹¹ The novel was written years prior to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.¹² Everyone knows the Bible. Citing these little verses from the Koran was still a relatively new thing to do.

MTM: *What does Man and Bouba's relationship signify?*

DL: In all my books, there is always someone who stays stationary/lying down, and someone who moves. In *An Aroma of Coffee*, it's my grandmother who stays in the petite gallery, and the narrator, the little boy, moves around.¹³ It's a way of creating motion. It's a literary technique. We cannot create movement without someone remaining immobile.



Figure 19a. Man and Bouba. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.



Figure 19b. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

MTM: *Do they signify something on a psychological or social level? Do they remark upon not just the condition, but together frame an idea of race?*

DL: First, and foremost, it's a friendship. When you go to a city and you don't know anyone, the biggest obstacle is solitude. When you go back to your house, there's no one to talk to. In this case, the narrator enters the room and has someone to talk with. The existence of this friendship or someone else permitting dialogue allows for a human dialectic (see figure 20).

MTM: *Is there another way of thinking about the relationship? Do they represent a polarity or counterpoint, one that works actively in the commerce of intimacy while the other reflects upon it?*

DL: There is a sort of division of labor. (laughs) This is interesting. We seem to be entering the same terrain. You are looking at the mechanics, and I am looking at it from the point of view of my writing because this novel is very complex on the level of writing. This is the only way that we can understand each other, and this understanding is of interest to me.

On a related note and beyond talking about the book itself, I want to show the mechanisms at work in my mind and my approach to creating *How to Make Love to a Negro*. If you are unaware that I don't know anything about



Figure 20. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

jazz or the Koran and that I've never been to McGill [University], you miss understanding a fundamental truth about my mind.

I am different from those writers married to reality. *How to Make Love to a Negro* is a book of imagination, written like a documentary. It's snubbing the classic format of autobiography, the ones that are direct and explain everything that is happening in front of us. I am creating a type of parody and satire out of the documentary genre. These are the mechanical strategies of the writer.

So the question of the writer is fundamental in the analysis of the novel. This is why I didn't want to talk about ideology earlier before talking about what is, for me, the author as writer. In the novel, I am reclaiming the alphabet; I am playing with words. This is literature and the great revolution in this book is not about white people or the condition of black people. It is about turning over words and language.¹⁴

MTM: *Having said that, is Bouba, however, indirectly in conversation with white men because Man poses a sexual threat to them fucking every woman he possibly can who is white? Bouba, on the other hand, steps back and observes Man negotiating sex. Isn't this more than the inaction/action "literary technique" you referred to earlier?*

DL: Bouba doesn't go out, so insofar as reinforcing the fear of white men, it doesn't concern him because he doesn't even know white men. He's not interested in pretty girls, either—he's asexual. For Man, it's not just white women that he's having sexual conquests with, it's all women. It's not racial—they are students. He goes to seduce women at McGill University, which is far from their apartment. This is where Man finds women. It's like he's fishing in an aquarium, but not for Haitian women within his community because that would tarnish his reputation. He can't commit to anyone and has no interest in that. He is twenty-three years old. Other Haitians say that the white girls are hypocritical because they can come and live with him for a week, then leave. Man loves that, given his resistance to commitment; it's a convenient arrangement for him as well.

So the issue of color is inconsequential here. He seduces girls who share his sentiments about noncommittal relationships. These girls are interested in meeting a guy like Man because, in this moment of their lives, they are off to college, far from home, and have the opportunity to experiment.

MTM: *You have two roles in the film version of How Make Love to a Negro: one as the screenwriter, and the other is when you insinuate yourself as a minor character in the club scene. Were you being playful or alluding to something [see figure 21]?*

DL: Yes, I was being playful; it was a nod to Hitchcock who appeared in his films.



Figure 21. Dany Laferrière as clubgoer. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

MTM: *But is this also a cover for race?*

DL: I have a little story about this. I wrote a novel, *I Am a Japanese Writer*, but I've never been to Japan.¹⁵ I wrote this novel with this in mind: I've never been to Japan, but I can still write this. Someone in Japan caught wind of this and was astonished that a black person could pull this off. When published, the Japanese Consulate of Montreal invited me and prepared every dish that appeared in the novel at the dinner. For me, this is literature making real what begins in the imagination. And the book has been translated into Japanese.

MTM: *Within this imagined space the absence of black women is unremarked, yet at the epicenter of the story? Similarly, the absence of white men is evidence of their presence.*

DL: Yes, because when we eliminate someone, it's because we are aware of their presence. Though this was my first book, I wanted to give off the air that this was not. So, it is comprised of literary moves. What becomes of the first book? Generally speaking, there are three distinct books within the first book: The book that the writer would have loved to have written, but didn't; the book that was written; and the book that failed. In the first book, there are always lots of amateurish things, rookie mistakes, and this results from the writer's desire to have the largest possible readership to, as they say



Figure 22. Man and Miz Littérature socializing with a female friend. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

in Quebec, “cover all of the bases.” An accomplished writer (whose status I wanted to imitate, but didn’t achieve completely) writes a book that its readers are allowed to contest. I could have put in black women, but I wanted to provoke such a response. A young writer doesn’t want to be criticized, but I invited it. There was actually a young black woman who was reading the book and she asked the same question in every chapter, “Where are the black women?” Many other [black] people asked, “Why didn’t you put us in the book?” and my response was “because it’s just a book!”

MTM: *I want to bring the two novel/films in conversation with each other. You said earlier that you didn’t intend for there to be a relationship between them. In *How to Make Love to a Negro*, the narrator privileges white women, yet they are pawns in a combative arena between Man and the unremarked, although ever-present, white man. In contrast, you flip the script in *Heading South*, where the POV is from Ellen, Brenda, Sue—the white female protagonists in the story. Together, they work in counterpoint with what purpose in mind [see figure 22]?*

DL: When *How to Make Love to a Negro* was published in 1985, it was a strange object, one that was still hard to imagine in Canada. It was during the moment when feminism in Quebec was most salient. Why wasn’t it received as overtly macho, the worst Norman Mailer-esque writing, and torn to shreds? It’s because the novel was more complex than that. Do you know



Figure 23. Camera mediating Black body. Still from *Heading South*.

why? The women of McGill [University] were British and the Québécois didn't like them.¹⁶ Even the French feminists didn't like them. So what the French and Francophone women were saying about them was that it serves them right!

How to Make Love to a Negro was like a bomb. In order to defuse it, one had to take it apart carefully. And this was all in my head when I was writing it. It's the reason Miz Suicide and all of those other women are British.¹⁷ It was a play on colonialism. It was a complex topic that was handled with what looked like naïveté. This is why I said earlier that it's better to enter the mechanics of the book before entering the ideology of the book. I could have added many more chapters that focused on sexual content. I could have even added a chapter on how exactly one makes love to a Negro without getting tired to satisfy readers. If I had done that, the book would have been well-known but not widely distributed. I thought the version I wrote was good and that it would have longevity; it's been about thirty-two years.

Since it was written, a day hasn't passed that I haven't had to talk about the title. Some people said "the only thing of substance in this book is its title, but after a month, you'll see that nobody will be talking about it," to which I'd reply "it's the opposite—even if we aren't selling the book, people are still talking about the title." This is what happens when a book has a literary motor and is fueled by imagination. By the reference to McGill and other little traps, it obliges/implores one to read it. I think the title made people think that they could condense the story to "black man, white women, youth," but you can't because when you read it, you see that it is complex.



Figure 24. Man in company. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

MTM: *In How to Make Love to a Negro you're wearing two hats as author and screenwriter. What challenges transitioning from writer to screenwriter?*

DL: Writing the screenplay was a mistake; it was a bad screenplay because the producer wanted to control the money and keep costs down. I think another screenwriter would have been better negotiating with the producer. It was also the director's [Jacques Benoit] first film. Another mistake was accepting a screenplay that didn't have the right vision. I was content that I had authored the book. If there had been another screenwriter, it would have been better because they would have only had to defend their screenplay.

MTM: *Had you been the screenwriter for Heading South, would it have been different?*

DL: Yes. I would have made it more sexual, visually speaking. The scenes would have been more explosive. The director, Laurent Cantet, is a man that has deep respect for Haitian culture and was very serious, which resulted in what came of it. Because of this, his filmmaking vision was more realistic than mine. I would have had greater engagement with fantasy and desire (see figure 23).

MTM: *Would the characters have been more sympathetic and interactive? Not in an equal sense because the commerce of intimacy defines relationships in terms of*

unequal exchange, but rather in terms of sentiment? Would the characters' interactions have gestured the underlying dynamic of race more explicitly between the black male characters and Ellen, Brenda, and Sue?

DL: Cantet made the best film he could. He was very discreet and not pushy. He made a magnificent film. He had great taste in music. His parents worked in Haiti as volunteers and had this long-standing adoration for Haiti. These experiences informed the film. He had a lot of respect for Haiti. I would have shown less respect, that's for sure.

MM: *Was Cantet being polite, respectful of Haiti and sensitive to interracial relationships?*

DL: He's a thoughtful man. I think he did what he wanted to do and what he could do to make *Heading South*. As a filmmaker, he has a disciplined practice and is extremely talented. A few years ago, he won a Palme d'Or at Cannes for *Entre les murs*, the story of black and Arab students in the suburbs of Paris.¹⁸ The film used real students instead of actors and follows along the lines of the general tenor of *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*.

MTM: *Are all interracial sexual relationships fraught, doomed?*

DL: I don't know because the girls in *How to Make Love* are not white girls; they are English, as I described them earlier. If had referred to them as white, I would have been called racist by the Québécois, or anti-Québécois. Anti-macho, it's all a game. That's why I wrote the book to not take part in the discourse around these questions about the human condition. I don't find them important. Human relationships are ambiguous. Whenever a sexual, interracial relationship ends, we always place the burden on racial differences (see figure 24).

MTM: *Perhaps because the setting of both novels/films gesture the transnational politics of location? North, Quebec and South, Haiti. In both sites, isn't the possibility of transcending race impossible? By situating the stories, intentionally or not, in the context of the global antinomy between North and South, race is determining and so too the conduct of desire. This is a question.*

DL: I'm stating an opinion. As I said before, the failure of interracial relationships is misunderstood and at a very superficial level. For example, it's one thing if you have a mischievous child but, if they were adopted, behavior is read differently. We look for the easiest scapegoat when relationships go awry.

The question remains—what causes a relationship to fail? In *How to Make Love*, the women are not interested in having relationships and it's for this very reason that feminists didn't attack me. There is a liberating wind that circulates through the pages that enables women the freedom to come into

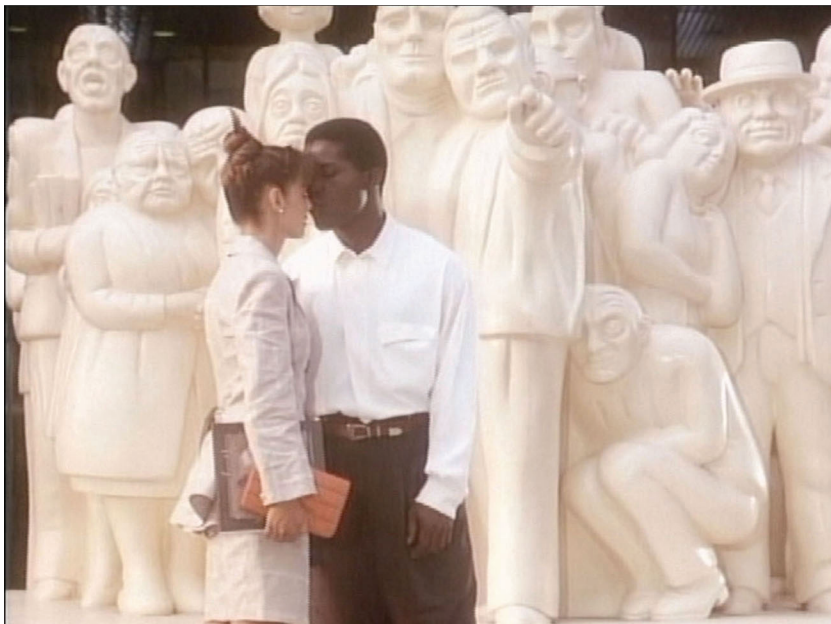


Figure 25. Man performing the rules of engagement. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

Man's room because it is a space of liberty. He's a "black guy" but reads Freud. He's poor, but they don't care to notice it. Because of his difference, he appears to be *outside* of history, transcending tropes and not tied to a racial story.

Also, there are two "minorities" in the book in the sense of social conditions—women and black [men] people. It's interesting to see them juxtaposed in the same story. I could have made it a type of praise song but that would have put us all to sleep and we would not be talking about it now.

MTM: *Since the publication of How to Make Love to a Negro and release of the film, has your take on race, gender, sex changed?*

DL: In spite of the fantasy, when distilled to its purest form, it is about solitude, aloneness; a universal solitude, no matter what young man or young woman. But in this story, a young man arrives to a big city, doesn't know how things work, nor does he understand the social codes of the country. The only code he knows is the rules of engagement with women (see figure 25).

MTM: *Are you defending Man?*

DL: No, I'm not defending him. He is an invention, a mechanism of the book. When I say "invention," I mean that we are in the world of the book. This



Figure 26. Man and Miz Littérature in privacy. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

makes me think of the readers who believe that I am Man/Vieux! I've lived with my wife for forty years and people think that I'm Man!

I would also add that together my books constitute what I call the "American autobiography." There are two about sex, five about dictatorship, four about death, two about return, and three about childhood. Thematically speaking, this is a complete landscape. When students research my writings, they refer to it as the "literature of women" because they are populated by the presence of women, from my grandmother and aunts to young women. There is an infinite number of women in my novels, including American women.

Another example of this thematic is in *A Drifting Year*, in which a young man arrives and sees the urban, difficult, coded city.¹⁹ This story is a recounting of his first year living there. Since his mother isn't close-by, he trusts any woman that comes his way. It's the first book that trusts in women. I am sure someone is unnerved by this. As a matter of fact, I once met a woman who said: "Listen Dany, I am a white Canadian and my sweetheart is Jamaican. He doesn't speak French and each night I translate a chapter of your book aloud, and I do it, so he knows that I know! (see figure 26)"

MTM: *There is I think a distinction to be made between a black writer's ontology and a writer's ontology. Can you, as a writer who happens to be black, step outside of your own skin?*

DL: I think that literature is the unveiling and tearing apart of appearances. I think that a black person has the ability to become a writer, but he must jump through hurdles in order to achieve such. However, what is immediately said of a white American or German writer is that he is a good or bad writer. He doesn't have to fight to be a human being, first and foremost. For me, this is extremely difficult and the battle of my life, in spite of my work's uniqueness. I am always seen through a geographic or racial optic, which means it's extremely difficult for a black person to become a writer.

People say "Oh, he's exceptional! He's the best Haitian writer! He's the second black person to be inducted to the Académie française." I never hear "He is a writer." There is a barrage of adjectives to elide having to call a black person a writer because doing so would presuppose that he was being treated as a human being who has the right to have an imagination.

Since the beginning of this interview, I have used the term "mechanics" to demonstrate that I am a writer. *How to Make Love to A Negro Without Getting Tired* has one agenda and that is to be seen and consumed as literature. Black and white people ask me the same question: "Am I a black writer or am I a writer? Do I write from the perspective of a black writer or do I write from the perspective of a writer?" After these interrogations, I still have the same request: I just want to be seen as a writer (see figure 27).



Figure 27. African sculpture as inescapable mirror of self. Still from *How to Make Love to a Negro*.

Another example to illuminate what I am talking about is to think about the phrase “I love you.” There are no other words needed after “you” to communicate this sentiment; to add something else would be to invalidate its essence as would adding an adjective before “writer” does. Furthermore, it’s an affront to both my power and ability to imagine the world the way that I want to.

This is why we’re still talking about *How to Make Love to A Negro* thirty-two years later because it’s a book predicated on dreams, dreams that the mechanics of the book have allowed to be strategically embedded in the story. These mechanics cannot become the dreams represented in the book. They show that literature is full of strategies and when I come across them, I have to have them. But we don’t necessarily want the strategies to speak for us. We want our presence and emotions to be acknowledged as pristine and original. Maybe what I am saying is not true. Maybe I am not speaking of my personal pain. But I have the right to dream and to create my own world because these rights are those afforded to human beings. And that’s it. That’s why I’ve chosen to stay within the book itself.

MTM: *Thank you Mr. Laferrière.*

Notes

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1. Dany Laferrière, *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired / Comment faire l’amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010), 41.

2. Referred disparagingly as “Baby Doc,” Jean-Claude Duvalier succeeded his father and dictator François Duvalier upon his death in 1971.

3. In 2014, he received the International Literature award by the House of World Culture for his novel, *The Return / L’énigme du retour* and the same year was appointed to the National Order of Quebec, followed the next year by the Order of Canada.

4. Dany Laferrière, *Why Must a Black Writer Write about Sex? / Cette grenade dans la main du jeune Nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993).

5. Dany Laferrière, *Heading South / Vers le sud* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009).

6. In counterpoint, consider the narrator’s take in “The Great Mandala of the Western World,” *How to Make Love to a Negro...*, 13–16.

7. *Ibid.*, 41.

8. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967), and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

9. See, for example, *Érosshima* (1987; reprt. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1992).

10. Both are the black protagonists in both novel and film by the same title, *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired...*

11. He is referring presumably to Western readers and non-Muslims.
12. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Random House, 1988).
13. Dany Laferrière, *An Aroma of Coffee / Lodeur du café* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993).
14. Laferrière elaborates this working principle in an interview with Words Without Borders saying, "I really don't distinguish between fiction and nonfiction. I believe my issue is style, my thing is style, and for me style is not about mastering language, it's about the *posture* of language, how you carry yourself in the world, at what angle you're looking at the world, *how* you look at the world, see <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/the-narrator-never-dies-an-interview>.
15. *I Am a Japanese Writer / Je suis un écrivain japonais* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009; 2010).
16. Canadians of presumably British descent; and Québécois, refers to French-speaking Canadians of the province of Quebec.
17. Each reference to a "Miz" in the narrative infers a distinct archetype in *How to Make Love to a Negro*, including "Miz Literature," "Miz Sundae," "Miz Beauty," "Miz Piggy," "Miz Sophisticated Lady," "Miz Clockwork Orange," "Miz Snob," "Miz Punk," "Miz Security," "Miz Mystic," "Miz Bombardier," "Miz Gitane," "Miz Alfalfa," "Miz Cover Girl," "Miz Zodiac," and "Miz Cat".
18. *The Class / Entre Les Murs* (2008) follows the lives of a teacher and students in a working-class district of Paris.
19. Laferrière's sixth novel, *A Drifting Year / Chronique de la dérive douce* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1994; 1997).

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