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“Comique et Laid”: Bitter Laughter and Dystopia
in Francophone Caribbean and Urban Literatures

By

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Committee in charge:

Professor Karl A. Britto, Chair

Professor Thoraya Tlatli

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Abstract

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In spite of the flashy, highly consumable traits that have earned it considerable success in the last two decades, the work of literary dystopias is complex, engaging nothing less than the past, the present and the future. It is easy to forget that beyond the stunning special effects of its cinematographic productions, or the suspenseful, page-turning poetics of its literary expressions—in short, beyond its undeniable entertainment value—the dystopian genre, in its most recent iteration, aims above all to shake the world out of the dangerous complacency of late-stage capitalism. There exists a tension between the genre’s extravagant aesthetics and the latent threats it wishes to signal. Onscreen or on the page, protagonists vie for their physical lives in ostentatiously dangerous situations. These are metaphors for other, often invisible yet very real threats, including social death and cultural death are such threats. My dissertation explores specifically how authors of francophone expression seek to represent the experience of minoritized subjects by utilizing dystopian tropes that render these invisible threats visible.

I take as a point of departure that the *République universelle française* continues to be animated by a utopian ethos inherited from a perennial humanist tradition. Still in search of an essential, universal understanding of both Frenchness and humanity, it struggles to relate to those among its citizens whose ontological particularities resist its homogenizing impulses. In its new postcolonial iteration, France seems to envision itself as having achieved utopia: it purports to be a good place. But for those who do not comfortably fit within these ideological walls, this utopia is perceived as a dystopia: a bad place. To be sure, it is a soft dystopia, one that operates on lower frequencies, which allows it to continue to pass as a utopia. My dissertation contends that the presence of dystopian tropes in the literary and

cinematographic works I explore exposes the *République universelle française* for what it is. Fictional dystopia emerges out of and unmasks its real-world, underhanded alter ego.

The frequent presence of laughter alongside these dystopian tropes is striking, and calls for close consideration. How can one laugh in the face of cultural death? What is the function of this laughter? Does it serve to soften the moral indictment of the Republic? Does it serve to render the critique more vitriolic, tipping it toward the satirical? Does it constitute a self-soothing gesture for the writer or the artiste? Can this laughter also be complicit? Can it be the sign of the surrender of the self to the powerful appeal of utopia? The search for answers to these questions has brought the present work to the intersection of postcolonial critique, utopian/dystopian studies and laughter theory.

My first chapter takes up an essay written by Martinican thinker René Ménéil, a contemporary of Aimé Césaire, and contends that it provides an early theorization and illustration of this dystopian laughter. The essay, titled “Humour: Introduction à 1945,” published the same year, precedes the 1946 departmentalization of the *vieilles colonies*, meaning that Ménéil was still a colonial subject at the time of its writing. It is from this unbearable sociopolitical position, rendered all the more acute by the horrors of World War II, that Ménéil declared that since humor flourished in inhumane conditions, the colonies — where all manner of degradations reigned supreme — provided fertile grounds for the blossoming of laughter. He added, prophetically, “C’est bien, on le conçoit, sans aucune vanité déplacée que nous pensons n’être pas mal placés, aux Antilles, pour contribuer substantiellement à une littérature de l’humour” (146-147). The essay culminates with Ménéil illustrating his argument with a dystopian vignette, complete with all attendant tropes. In this chapter, I begin by examining the theoretical and literary foundations upon which Ménéil built his premise that humor can be weaponized against the status quo, paying close attention to his engagement with Charles Baudelaire, Sigmund Freud, and the Dada movement. I then conduct a close reading of Ménéil’s dystopian scene, highlighting how it provides a tentative blueprint for the particular type of laughter he asserts will be the staple of the literatures to come.

While it is true that France’s colonial empire has officially ended, it is also true that the dystopian laughter Ménéil envisioned has endured. I argue that this ongoing presence attests to the fact that the change in political status simply transformed and then camouflaged France’s untenable universalizing proclivities beneath a utopian veneer. In subsequent chapters, I examine the joint presence of laughter and dystopian tropes in later francophone works as a mode of exposition of this concealed form of domination. In my second chapter, I move forward five decades in time and read the *Trilogie Tropicale*, a series of three novellas

written in the 1990s by Martinican author Raphaël Confiant. Although these works are not designated as participating in the dystopian genre, I demonstrate that Confiant employs distinctly dystopian tropes along with humor to construct his critique of the *République française universelle*. I preface my readings of these works by showing the ways in which the Departmentalization act of 1946 and the idea of francophonie were conceived as utopian projects. Their subsequent partial failure naturally resulted in dystopian features in the Antilles (indeed, dystopias are often the result of poorly planned utopias). In these literary works, Confiant's excessive prose magnifies these features. I also contend that the author, however, is not against utopian thinking, but rather that the work of the postcolonial intellectual is to substitute good utopias for bad ones.

This continued desire to believe in utopianism stands in stark contrast with the message of Matthieu Kassovitz's *La Haine*, to which I turn in my third chapter. This 1995 film takes the French *banlieues* as its backdrop. Generally considered a drama belonging to the *banlieues* genre, many scholars have instinctively used the word dystopia to describe its somber universe. In this chapter, I offer a more systematic analysis of the film's dystopian tropes, and I demonstrate that each of them seeks to expose the failure of the postcolonial utopia. A largely ignored aspect of *La Haine* is the constant presence of laughter and joking. I use Salvatore Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humor to show that the film's ludic moments are tightly woven within the dystopian dynamic of exposition. Kassovitz's film, I contend, is not simply dystopian; its brutal, pessimistic ending suggests that it is also anti-utopian—that is, that it displays a loss of faith in France's utopian thinking altogether.

While my second and third chapters detail ways that laughter and dystopian tropes work in concert to craft a coherent critique of the postcolonial *République française universelle française*, my fourth and last chapter observes that laughter can also short-circuit the critical potential of the dystopian genre. It focuses on *Case Départ*, a 2011 film whose claim to fame is to be the first (and likely forever the only) French time-travel comedy about slavery. Violence — both physical and psychological — and domination are tropes that belong to narratives of enslavement just as much as to the dystopian genre. However, while laughter in the *Trilogie* and in *La Haine* always takes society and totalitarian thinking as its targets, *Case Départ*'s comedy often pokes fun at slaves just as much as at their masters. In this film, I argue, the use of dystopian tropes paired with laughter results in an amplification of violence rather than in a critique of it. The film's message seems to be that modern-day postcolonial France is a vast improvement over colonial times. Although that may be true, it diverts the viewer's attention from the problems that remain in contemporary France, deflating the sense of urgency they should elicit. Here, humor becomes a misguided instrument, a cloak beneath which a soft dystopia can continue to parade as an accomplished utopia. The film in itself does not

consciously participate in the critique I consider intrinsic to the dystopian genre; rather, it is through a rigorous analysis of its latent implications that we can apprehend the silent domination of the *République universelle française*.

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Introduction

Le vieux guerrier me laisse entendre: [...] Je te parlerai des trois dominations:
la Brutale, la Silencieuse, la Furtive... (*il rit*)...
Sacré rêveur, je te les rabâcherai sans fin,
comme le plus assommant des répétiteurs ! — Patrick Chamoiseau

In *Écrire en pays dominé*, Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau casts himself as an anxious poet seeking wisdom, hope, and inspiration from the ghostly figure of an old warrior. The old warrior tells him of domination and of its three manifestations through the ages: it was once *brutal* and ostentatious, as when its name was slavery; it became *silent* and diaphanous when it shifted from physical to ideological violence, as is the case in postcolonial Europe; today, it proliferates in a *furtively*, existing everywhere and nowhere at once, in “la zone aimantée d’une entité inlocalisable, un brouillard de valeurs secrété par l’ensemble des Centres dominateurs, et flottant-circulant dans le cyberspace” (297).¹ Chamoiseau, the *narrateur-marqueur-de-paroles*, asks,

Qu’ont, littératures, prévu pour toi ? [...] Ho, tu n’affrontes pas d’ethnies élues, pas de murs, pas d’armée qui damne tes trottoirs, pas de haine purificatrice... Tu n’es pas de ceux qui peuvent dresser des cartes de goulags, ou mener discours sur les génocides, les massacres, les dictateurs féroces. [...] Autour de ta plume, aucun spectre de censure ni de fil barbelé. Tout cela – domination brutale – est déjà d’un autre âge, même si de par le monde tu en perçois les soubresauts épouvantables, les futurs anachroniques, qu’affrontent encore, ô frères, des milliers d’écrivains. (20)

What is the role of the engaged author when his immediate spatiotemporal reality no longer looks conspicuously like a dystopia? For, without naming them as such, Chamoiseau deploys tropes that undeniably belong to the modern dystopian imaginary to conjure up a historical world that was never exactly his: barbed wires, dictators, and their armies, righteous wars in the name of purity, etc. The world whose absence he paints with words, we have read its likeness in the works of Yevgeny Zamyatin, Margaret Atwood, or Octavia Butler — all masters of the dystopian genre. Yet this world does not live purely in his mind; elsewhere, he tells us, other writers live right now in an anachronistic future. The future Chamoiseau speaks of is that of the dystopian genre, which tends to be speculative; in some places of the world, however, this future is anachronistic because it has invaded the present. Fiction has become a reality. But it is not Chamoiseau’s reality. He exists under a form of domination that oscillates between silence and furtiveness, one he calls “domination-qui-ne-se-voit-plus,” and that

¹ This negative space is the dark side of globalization and late-stage capitalism, the opposite of Édouard Glissant’s *Tout-monde*.

continues to quietly inflict unspeakable pain (25). Under these conditions, Chamoiseau suggests that it befalls the author to make the invisible visible, and what better tropes to make the world appear as bad a place as it truly is than those of dystopia — etymologically from the ancient Greek *δυσ-* “bad” and *τόπος* “place.” Accordingly, this dissertation is concerned with a corpus of works that make use of dystopian tropes to expose the silent domination of the *République française universelle*, and to speak of its effect on minoritized subjects.

In the epigraph of this introduction, the old warrior promises to tell the anxious young poet everything he knows about domination and its many forms. Throughout his musings, he sometimes cries, but above all, he laughs. He laughs often, and his laughter takes on the shapes of “troubled water,” “coal,” “lightning,” “rust,” “hot pepper oil,” “childhood crystal,” “oxygen,” and myriad others.² The nature of this laughter is intriguing. It emerges from an unflinching contemplation of the bad place I have evoked. But what compels it? Relief? Contempt? Something else? My work is thus not simply an exploration of dystopia or laughter, but of the distinct laughter of minoritized subjects, sneering from the margins of a dystopian world.

My interest in this laughter began with the discovery of a little-explored text that predates Chamoiseau’s by several decades. The essay in question was written by Martinican philosopher René Ménéil at the end of 1944, as the war’s outcome remained uncertain, and the world looked as dystopian as ever. Noting a quantitative relation between absolute degradation and the possibility of laughter, Ménéil writes:

Plus le sort fait à l’homme est inhumain, plus la protestation de la conscience se fait vibrante, plus l’humour approche des conditions idéales. Nul ne peut nier que, toutes chances égales d’ailleurs, dans ces pays du globe où nous vivons³ on risque de trouver une dégradation de l’homme plus grande qu’ailleurs. C’est bien, on le conçoit, sans aucune vanité déplacée que nous pensons n’être pas mal placés, aux Antilles, pour contribuer substantiellement à une littérature de l’humour. (146-147)

Throughout this essay, Ménéil speaks at length of the distinct laughter of what he calls humor. That laughter is not carefree. Ménéil calls it “Le rire amer de l’humour,” and it is that laughter that I recognize in Chamoiseau’s old warrior and in various modalities in the works of my corpus. But, one might ask, Ménéil predicted that this literature of humor would blossom in the colonies; aren’t colonies now defunct? How can that humor have survived their demise? I contend that although *colonies* are indeed a thing of the past, their ghosts continue to haunt their old stomping grounds, which are labeled differently today: *départements d’outre-mer*, Guadeloupe, Senegal, etc. Similarly, other spaces, such as certain neighborhoods in the

² “eau trouble” (42); “acide d’absinthe” (43); “charbon” (47); “éclair” (95); “rouillé” (158); “huile piment chaud” (195); “cristal d’enfance” and “oxygène” (350).

³ In the original text, a discreet number, following “où nous vivons” leads to a laconic footnote: “Les colonies.”

French *banlieues*, are populated by bodies that still carry the historical, psychological, emotional, and linguistic burden of colonial times. With that in mind, I deliberately use the spelling *postcolony* throughout my dissertation to imply that the postcolonial is a continuation of the colony.⁴ These considerations are crucial to my understanding of Ménénil's prophecy as being confirmed: I contend that the colony persists in the postcolony and that postcolonial spaces have contributed and continue to contribute to a literature of humor. My research focuses on laughter produced in French national spaces, but we may consider that the writings of Sony Labou Tansi in the Congo or Yambo Ouologuem in Mali, for instance, have validated Ménénil's claim. Closer to my concerns, various forms of that laughter are integral to the works of writers such as Maryse Condé, Gisèle Pineau, Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, to name a few in the Franco-Caribbean tradition. This bitter laughter is also frequently found in literatures elsewhere in the Caribbean (we may think of Frankétienne, V.S. Naipaul, or Junot Diaz). In the *banlieues*, the rise of standup comedy is yet another confirmation. The fact of laughter's constant presence in the artistic production of contemporary postcolonial spaces invites us to revisit Ménénil's text to better understand how it contributed to theorizing, imagining, and shaping future literatures of the postcolony.

I focus more specifically on three works in which dystopian motifs are saliently conjugated with laughter: Raphaël Confiant's *Trilogie Tropicale* (1994, 1995, 1997); Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995); and Lionel Steketee, Fabrice Éboué and Thomas N'Gijol's *Case Départ* (2011). But before teasing out the interplay of laughter and dystopia in these works, it is imperative to delineate how I understand these vast concepts since, overtime, they have acquired multiple and, at times, contradictory meanings. I will begin with dystopia.

BAD PLACES

The imaginary spaces I examine are, simply put, "bad places" or "dystopias." But nowadays, the term dystopia is used in multiple contexts, ranging from social, political and technological to literary, artistic, and theoretical. Because of this, it has accrued a variety of nuanced meanings, depending on whether it is applied to real or fictional worlds. In other words, something as axiologically simple as a *bad place* has become a tricky epistemological conundrum, complete with multiple fields of studies, within which contradictory terminologies vie. Over this section, I will focus on the concepts that will be useful in the close readings I perform in subsequent chapters.

⁴ As opposed to *post-colony*, which would suggest more radical a rupture, or *post/colony*, which would denote, as Kathleen Gyssels writes, a "transition parfois épineuse à détecter, voire très longue" (154).

1. Terms of dystopia

In the last fifty years, literary dystopias have been the focus of a growing scholarship, proposing diverse conceptual tools to facilitate their apprehension. Among these works, *No Place Else: Explorations in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction* (1983) edited by Erik S. Rabkin; Darko Suvin's *Defined by a Hollow, Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology* (2010); *Utopia/Dystopia : Conditions of Historical Possibility*, edited by Michael D. Gordin (2010); *Dystopia(n) Matters*, edited by Fátima Vieira (2013); *The utopia reader*, edited by Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent (2017); as well as *Dystopia : a natural history*, undertaken by Claeys alone (2017); and more recently, Corin Braga's comprehensive *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique* (2018). Browsing these titles, it appears that dystopia is often intimately associated with or sometimes entirely subsumed under the broader category of "utopia."⁵ This term is itself understood in two nuanced ways, depending on the etymology one ascribes to it:

- 1) OUTOPIA: If thought to be from the ancient Greek οὐ "not" and τόπος "place," it is understood to be a place that does not exist.
- 2) EUTOPIA: If thought to be from the ancient Greek εὖ "good" or "well" and τόπος "place," it is understood to be a good place.

In this dissertation, I tend to merge both etymological origins and think of utopia as a good place that does not exist.⁶ I will often propose that the *République française universelle* views itself as a utopia (in the second sense) but that it simultaneously continues to be animated by utopian thinking or utopianism⁷ — a spirit of perfectibility, aiming toward a utopia to come (in the first sense since it does not exist yet).

We find traces of this deep-seated proclivity for utopian thinking in all discourse surrounding the colonial enterprise — from its infancy⁸ to its end and its aftermath. From the *mission civilisatrice* to the abolition of slavery and the conception of the postcolony, it would

⁵ In fact, dystopias fall under the concerns of the Society for Utopian Studies, and there is not, to date, a Society for Dystopian Studies.

⁶ As did Thomas Moore in *Utopia* and Diderot, in *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* for instance.

⁷ Darko Suvin defines utopianism as "an orientation toward a horizon of radically better forms of relationships among people" (2003:187). The question always looms: Better for what people?

⁸ Though, as Ramon Grosfoguel ironically points out, "Une grande partie de la pensée utopique européenne s'est inspirée des systèmes historiques non occidentaux qui furent découverts dans les colonies et intégrés à la modernité eurocentrée" (133).

seem that it all began with utopian thinking.⁹ In *La cohée du Lamentin*, Édouard Glissant identifies utopia as a driving force of Western ideology and illuminates how it impels the desire to sublimate and harmonize:

L'Utopie, par tradition et en Occident surtout, dessine une forme parfaite et l'enjoint à une réalité que l'esprit se donne pour fin de réformer. Nous pourrions dire que son intention et son travail sont avant tout normatifs. Un objet à transformer (la Cité, la Société, les Humanités), une finalité de perfection, et une activité normative : la pensée de l'Utopie visait toujours à l'harmonie d'une Mesure. [...] Dans la quête de cette Mesure, le projet utopique a *fait l'économie* de ce qu'il croit être l'inutile, l'accessoire, le contingent. (141; emphasis mine)

Beneath Glissant's euphemistic "faire l'économie de," we read multiple forms of degradation, violence, and death that short-circuit the very idea of "goodness." It is hard to tell if the *République française universelle*, with its promise of equality for all, emerges as a failed utopia or as a utopia that works exactly as designed — just not for everyone within its purview. With the era of outbound conquest over, France now focuses this desire for unity inward, and its gaze is met with a racially and culturally diverse population born out of multiple waves of postcolonial immigration. However, as Jonathan Ervine asserts, "the concept of multiculturalism is seen as un-French due to being incompatible with Republican ideals of universality and the single and indivisible nation" (2). For those who are deemed "useless, accessory or contingent," as Glissant puts it, or "un-French," as Ervine suggests, this reality can only be perceived as life-threatening and dystopian.

Darko Suvin defines a utopia that turns out to be a dystopia as an *anti-utopia*: "It is a pretended eutopia — a community whose hegemonic principles pretend to its being more perfectly organized in any thinkable alternative, while our representative 'camera eye' value-monger finds out that it is significantly less perfect, a polemic nightmare. Thus, it finally also turns out to be a dystopia" (2003: 385). The texts and films in my corpus reveal precisely this gap between declared utopia and perceived dystopia, as it pertains to France.

We have reached a zone of conceptual discomfort within dystopian studies. When we say dystopia, what type of epistemology are we invoking? Poetics? Reality? When Suvin speaks of anti-utopia, for instance, it is not immediately evident if he is applying the term to the Soviet Union or to its fictional counterpart, Zamyatin's OneState. What I am suggesting

⁹ Titles of recent works devoted to the topic reflect this: Françoise Vergès' *Abolir l'esclavage: une utopie coloniale* (2001); or her collaboration with Nicolas Bancel and Pascal Blanchard, *La République Coloniale: Essai sur une utopie* (2003); or again a chapter in *Ruptures postcoloniales* (an immense opus co-edited by Achille Mbembe, Vergès, Blanchard, et al. published in 2010) authored by Gabrielle Parker, titled "L'utopie francophone. Grands desseins revus et corrigés."

here is that real-world dystopias do exist, though they are less readily nameable since no ideology sets out to be the worst ever.¹⁰ As Claeys astutely notes,

We do not normally speak of dystopianism, and we recognize no dystopian ideologies as such. The noun *dystopia* is often used synonymously with dystopian literature. However, as Ruth Levitas points out, ‘Dystopias are not necessarily fictional in form [...]’ The adjective *dystopian* implies fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevail. So there are non-literary, empirical usages of the term. (5)

One of the appeals of the term dystopia is that it has the rare distinction of designating both reality and a literary genre; this, of course, also complicates theorization. In this dissertation, I will alternatively use “concrete,” “historical,” or “real-world” dystopia, for one category; and “fictional” or “literary,” for the other.

I wish to add one more term to my literary glossary: counter-utopia — not to be confused with Suvin’s anti-utopia. Following Corin Braga’s classification, I will use the term to designate literary dystopias that are not simply concerned with representing anti-utopias, but that challenge the very idea of utopian thinking.

2. Dystopian Matter(s)

In spite of existing on radically different planes, fictional and historical dystopias are intimately linked. As Maria Varsam writes, “Concrete dystopias are those events that form the material basis for the content of dystopian fiction which have inspired the writer to warn of the potential of history to repeat itself” (209). Suvin calls *intertext* or *community* the real historical world from which a dystopian narrative emerges, which is also the world it contests. In his *Natural History* of the genre, Gregory Claeys notes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the intertext of many a dystopia was “the despotic collectivism associated with fascism and communism, and the domination of science and technology over humanity [...] and in modernity generally” (270). Totalitarianism and excessive modernity constitute overbearing intertexts in the genre, in no small part because they inspired the three quintessential dystopias of the Western literary canon: Zamyatin’s *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). After the 1960s, Claeys continues, “anxiety about totalitarianism gradually drops away as the confrontation of humanity with technology becomes increasingly central, with growing threats of the loss of humanity, of identity, and of free will, and then the possibility of our real extinction” (Ibid.). Even with this shift in concerns, existing scholarship continues to emphasize particular intertexts — late-stage capitalism, globalization, technologization, etc.

¹⁰ Nazism, for one, with its program of racial purity, never pretended to be good for all of humanity; it was nevertheless a utopian program for those of the Aryan race

In researching this field, I have often noted the glaring absence of a different set of crucial intertexts: slavery, racism, and colonialism. To illustrate this point, Corin Braga dedicates a scant 12 pages (of 735) to a section entitled, “Dystopies écologistes, antiracistes et anticoloniales.” That racism and colonialism would be treated alongside environmentalism suggests that they are blind spots in the study of dystopia. A major portion of the scholarship would have us believe that save for a few exceptions, the genre is reserved for white occidental authors grappling with white occidental issues.¹¹ My research contributes to the work of a small group of scholars who suggest otherwise — among these, Bill Ashcroft recently published an excellent book titled, *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (2016), which addresses the concept of dystopia; a short chapter of Claeys’s *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (2010), “Colonial and postcolonial utopias” (though it should be noted that slavery is only briefly broached here); and Varsam’s aforementioned chapter in *Dark Horizons*.¹² These texts have provided me with useful frameworks to conceptualize the dystopian genre vis-a-vis blackness and/or other minoritized ontologies, but they focus solely on anglophone works. My dissertation seeks to broaden that field of inquiry, by examining works by French nationals who mobilize the dystopian imagination and its tropes, and whose intertext is the *République française universelle*.¹³

As we have seen, literary dystopias are inspired by historical ones. Sometimes, they share a strong visual vocabulary with their intertext, but sometimes they do not. For instance, parts of Zamyatin’s *We* could very well have been lifted from real-life Soviet propaganda. Conversely, the landscape of *The Hunger Games* looks nothing like everyday America. Representing the *République française universelle* involves a similar poetic challenge. As Chamoiseau points out, France asserts its power through a “domination-qui-ne-se-voit-plus”; the challenge is then to represent the intangible. Put in the simplest way, the works in my corpus use the conspicuous tropes of the dystopian genre to represent a concrete dystopia that has gone silent, furtive, or undercover. Claeys lists many of these tropes in the introduction to his *Natural History* (3-4). Below are some that are also present in the works of my corpus:

¹¹ These exceptions include Octavia Butler and Walter Mosley. New authors from the Caribbean such as Karen Lord and Nalo Hopkinson, or African countries, such as Nigerian writer Nnedi Okorafor, also write dystopian fiction.

¹² It should also be noted that Afrofuturism is not necessarily dystopian, even though it is evidently speculative. For instance, in her *Afrofuturism : The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack only very briefly mentions dystopia.

¹³ The French science fiction magazine *Galaxies* published a special number, “Regards sur l’Afrique,” which showcased some francophone dystopias, alongside science fiction works. The nation-building aspects of their intertexts, however, as well as the still-visible violence they index, differentiate them from the texts of my corpus.

- ruin
 - death
 - destruction
 - swollen corpses
 - derelict buildings
 - submerged monuments
 - decaying cities
 - wastelands
 - the rubble of collapsed civilizations
 - cataclysm
 - war
 - lawlessness
- disorder
 - pain, and suffering
 - abandoned cars
 - machine guns and searchlights
 - grim streets dominated by giant portraits
 - roaring planes fly overhead
 - men in gas masks
 - teeming slums and immense skyscrapers which are separated by walls from elite compounds guarded by menacing security forces

One could very well argue that the above tropes belong to many other genres, such as the war film or novel. I propose that what makes these tropes dystopian within the scope of my research is their particular socio-political agenda. I will expand upon this shortly, but before doing so, I wish to address an important point of contention that could further trouble my reading of these works as dystopian.

3. Where is dystopia? And just when is it?

My reading of these works as dystopias is indeed problematic. First, although they comprise combinations of many of the tropes listed above, none of them claim the title of dystopia. Second, there is the problem of time. Indeed, dystopias are not just concerned with space (τόπος) but also with time. In thinking about what a dystopia is, one should ask, “when is it?” just as much as, “where is it?”

For some, dystopia is right here, right now. Suvin, for one, affirms that “All of us on planet Earth live in highly endangered times... We live morally in an almost complete dystopia — dystopia because anti-utopia — and materially (economically) on the razor’s edge of collapse [...]” (381). Suvin’s understanding here applies unambiguously to the real world, and the term dystopia becomes shorthand for critiquing the socio-political *état des choses* of our times. Going further, then, there is something profoundly satirical in the process of translating historical dystopias into fictional ones; indeed, the latter select, highlight, and indict the worst tendencies of the former. Beginning to point out the similarities between satire and dystopia, Braga notes, “La satire dit l’insatisfaction de l’auteur vis-à-vis de son monde, elle donne cours à une attitude désenchantée, à une dépression, à une névrose, un abandon ou à une révolte” (34). We see that dystopia and satire share the same critical program. But according to Braga, dystopias must acquire radically different space-time coordinates in order to distinguish themselves from satires.

Les origines littéraires des [dystopies] seraient à chercher dans la satire et l'ironie [...] En effet quelques unes des premières dystopies de la renaissance [...] ont un caractère satirique accusé, faisant le réquisitoire des tares de la société du temps. Ce qu'il faut pour que ces textes sortent du genre de la satire et rejoignent le genre utopique c'est que l'auteur mette en place, ne serait-ce que de manière conventionnelle, une distance fictionnelle entre le mundus¹⁴ et la topie négative : la satire s'applique directement au monde de l'auteur et de son public, les dystopies pratiquent une critique oblique, à travers un monde fictionnel autonome, situé dans un « ailleurs » géographique différent du nôtre. Les maux et les vices que les satiristes identifient dans la description de notre société sont transposés par les dystopistes dans une société des antipodes. (469)

Elsewhere, Braga proposes that projecting these utopian/dystopian societies through time and situating them in a more or less distant future can constitute another strategy for this required estrangement (625). Braga uses the term *uchronia* to designate these works. This gesture is common: dystopia is often considered a speculative genre, or a genre of anticipation. From that perspective, the question of “When is dystopia?” typically receives the answer, “Not today.” And the question “Where is dystopia?” should garner the reply, “Not right here.”

The spaces that interest me are oddly estranged: they are within reach, yet still beyond — beyond the Atlantic, for the Antilles (which are the backdrop of Confiant's *Trilogie Tropicale* and Steketee's *Case Départ*); beyond the *Périphérique*, for the *banlieues*. In this sense, these places abide by the spatial imperative evoked by Braga in that they are indeed situated in a geographical elsewhere, different from the dominant center of the intertexted world. The works in my corpus accentuate the perceived strangeness of their spaces by multiplying tropes that index distance: planes, trains, boats, desire for something that is out of reach, etc. Although time is a central concern of each work, *Case départ* is the only one that takes place in a temporal elsewhere — the past.

Braga's temporal caveat makes for thrilling new reading possibilities as fictional dystopias start reaching their expiration date. For instance, *Back to the Future 2*, which came out in 1985, features a jump to 2015 America, where everything has gone haywire in ways all too familiar in 2020. Skynet, the totalitarian A.I. of the *Terminator* franchise, went live in 1997. Jules Verne's *Paris au XXe siècle* (written in 1860, but published posthumously in 1994) also features a time come and gone for us 21st-century creatures, yet again eerily familiar. In Verne's 1960 Paris, mechanization has created lazy, apathetic bodies; universities have become privatized; and art is reduced to a grotesque spectacle catering to easily amused masses. A merciful end to this dismal civilization looms with a threateningly glacial winter. This Paris looks strangely similar to today's world. How, then, is a 2020 viewer or reader to engage with these works? As they might with a satire? In my proposed framework, *if* texts and

¹⁴ What Suvin calls the intertext, or again, the world as it is.

films feature some of the tropes listed above, *if* they deliberately stage a form of estrangement, and *if* they critically respond to the malaise generated specifically by the assimilationist utopia of the *République française universelle*, they too can be read through the dystopian lens — regardless of their temporality.

But dystopia is only one facet of my research. What truly fascinates me in the works that I examine is its relationship with laughter and laughter-related poetics such as irony, humor, and satire. In spite of their seemingly opposite concerns, I contend that dystopias and these literary forms often share the same critical program. Fredric Jameson, evoking Robert C. Elliott's legacy, asserts that satire and utopia, far from being antithetical literary discourses, "replicate each other such that each is always secretly active within the other's sphere of influence. All satire [...] necessarily carries a utopian frame of reference within itself; all utopias, no matter how serene or disembodied, are driven secretly by the satirist's rage at a fallen reality" (80). In the work that follows, I will explore the ways in which this statement relates specifically to dystopias.

FUNNY SPACES

If used expertly, language is a tool with which minoritized subjects can topple, humble and/or seduce the hegemonic powers that govern the French metropole's cultural landscape. Within that realm, language designed to make laugh has the paradoxical double power to bring together and tear apart. As Ervine puts it, "some comedians have sought to argue that the act of laughing itself constitutes a symbol of tolerance and integration. [...] However, it is important to acknowledge that humor has the potential to divide as well as unite" (2). To be commercially successful among their peers *and* the mainstream, minoritized creators of comedic projects must carefully dose authenticity, resistance, and sociability to amuse both the major and minor groups. The allure of studying laughter is that behind the guise of its lightheartedness, its success or failure reveal as much about the jokester as they do about his/her audience and society at large. Theorists tend to agree to disagree when it comes to the definition of laughter — and they have done so for millennia. What follows then is a necessarily cursory overview of laughter studies that will focus on aspects relevant to my dissertation.

1. Laughter is a serious business

Aristotle, Montesquieu, Charles Baudelaire, Immanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, Gérard Genette, and countless others have all devoted much thinking to the question of laughter. Still, no single theory prevails. The question of what makes us laugh remains elusive and continues to be treated with utmost seriousness. In the last few decades,

encyclopedias, journals, and conferences have been dedicated to the topic. Salvatore Attardo edited an impressive *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, published in 2014, and he is currently the editor-in-chief of *Humor*, the official journal of the International Society of Humor Studies. The latter has sponsored 31 International Humor Conferences since its inception in 1989. In 2014, the society founded a sub-society, the International Association for the Philosophy of Humor, whose 2019 conference even included a panel on Humor and Artificial Intelligence. Humor is a vast field of studies with a continuously growing breadth of disciplinary interests, ranging from the arts to the sciences via the humanities. Jerry Palmer noted that for a long time, “few specialists in their own disciplines bothered to read material deriving from any of the others” (3), but today, scholars of humor and comedy take on a more productive interdisciplinary approach (Ervin 12).

Excellent studies focus more specifically on regional or national humor. Sam Vasquez’s 2012 *Humor in the Caribbean Literary Canon*, for instance, examines how some Caribbean writers have appropriated literary works from the Anglophone canon to produce new and humorous works that enrich both the African diasporic and the Western traditions. These works, she argues, challenge the stability of sexual identities and hegemonic structures through the practice of lying and signifying, embodied by the figure of the trickster. Aimé Césaire’s appropriation of Shakespeare’s *A Tempest* is the only francophone work treated in Vasquez’s book. Conversely, Józef Kwaterko directed a collection of essays entitled *L’humour et le rire dans les littératures francophones d’Amérique* (2005), solely focused on works of French expression. This collection, whose corpus is constituted along geographic lines rather than thematic concerns, offers very diverse essays. Historically, linguistically, culturally and politically, much separates Québec from Fort-de-France, and as a result the humors they produce bear few similarities. Nelly Quemener’s *Le pouvoir de l’humour: Politiques des représentations dans les médias en France* (2014) examines the impact of comedians on race, class, and gender discourses over thirty years of popular television programs. Her study also includes considerations on the rise of postcolonial standup comedians, such as Jamel Deboze. More recently, Ervin wrote a monograph in English entirely dedicated to French humor: *Humour in contemporary France : controversy, consensus and contradictions* (2019). This excellent work offers a compelling study of how humor interlocks with France’s republican ideology and its difficulty in dealing with its extant multiculturalism. Like others, however, it focuses on standup comedians, as well as on *Charlie Hebdo*. My research adds to these conversations by treating the French Antilles and the *banlieues* together, and exploring humor — more explicitly dystopian humor — in film and literature rather than standup comedy.

2. Laughing Matter(s)

It would be an understatement to say that within the field of laughter theory, nomenclature is problematic. Theorists, philosophers, linguists agree neither on the cause of laughter nor on

how to speak about it. Linguists might say that humor is a ludic strategy, alongside irony. A sociologist will retort that it is a broad category of which irony is a subcategory. Is irony even funny? A philosopher will answer a resounding “no” to that. A primary operation consists in distinguishing the philosophical aspects of laughter from their linguistic and rhetorical manifestations.

Humor, irony, and satire are often associated with laughter. From a philosophical perspective, however, we will see that these three notions can belie a rather sour outlook on the world — like literary dystopias — and often concern topics that are not intrinsically funny. A deterring problem is that irony and humor are at times synonymous, and at others, two separate categories, depending on who is writing. Satire, however, because of its legible genealogy, which Elliott delineates in *The Shape of Utopia*, is a more circumscribed concept. Another discouraging reality is the sheer mass of scholarship produced on these principles, dating as far back as the classics, which would take multiple lifetimes to comb through. From that vertiginous pile, I will only extract what resonates with Ménéil’s conception of humor, which is central to my dissertation. I will provide here a preliminary framework that will help us understand why the Martinican philosopher chooses the term humor over the term irony; I will conduct a more in-depth analysis in the first chapter.

i. H.I.U.R.M.O.O.N.R.Y

What Ménéil calls humor is first and foremost an attitude — not a rhetorical strategy. It is an attitude of lucid detachment and a refusal to blindly play by the rules of society’s sordid game. The bitter laughter generated by the humorous attitude is a sign that one has unmasked the true decayed nature of one’s environment and a way to do something about it. At the same time, humor possesses a healing psychological component that prevents one from falling into a deep and irrecoverably negative despair in the wake of one’s coming into awareness. Inspired by Freud’s 1927 addendum to *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Ménéil conceives of humor as a mode of psychosocial survival.

For him, the fullest manifestation of humor was the Dada movement — an irreverent, short-lived, mostly European art movement. The latter expressed its detachment through highly self-reflexive artistic practices inspired by the romantics and their notion of irony as absolute negativity. It is perhaps because of his affinity for Freud’s work that Ménéil favors the term *humor* to describe an attitude that has been in the past — and is still today — more widely known as *irony*.

Søren Kierkegaard affirms, in *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, that irony is a qualification of subjectivity, much in the same way that Ménéil labors, nearly a century later, to demonstrate that humor is a supreme sign and expression of the lucid self. But in the wake of Hegel’s merciless indictment of the romantics and their indulgent navel-gazing tendencies, irony had become a four-letter word. As a result, we understand why

Ménil may have preferred the term humor (though he uses humor and irony interchangeably on three occasions in this text). Understanding irony as a positive attitude, if used with discretion, Kierkegaard attempts to rescue it from the romantics' infinite negativity and abstraction; it is a similar effort of recuperation that animates a large part of Ménil's essay dedicated to the Dada movement.

Poetry is the principal vector for Ménil's humorous attitude, and it must be enlisted for a greater objective: the advent and subsequent recognition of Antillean culture. He delineates this project clearly in a 1944 article published in *Tropiques*: "Notre tâche à nous qui voulons nous reclasser dans l'humanité, n'est-elle pas de toute nécessité, de porter tout notre effort sur la découverte en nous d'une nouveauté propre à apporter à notre vie un contenu digne d'être universellement pris en considération?"¹⁵ Thus the Caribbean artist's task is fourfold: 1) to negate a society that suffocates the identity of colonial subjects; 2) to spark the awakening of a Caribbean consciousness; 3) once awakened, to discover the specificities of a subjectivity that had ignored itself for too long; 4) to make this subjectivity intelligible to all of humankind via poetry. With these imperatives in mind, we further understand why Ménil chose the term *humor* over *irony*: rhetorically speaking, Kierkegaard's Socratic irony is not entirely adequate for the revelatory nature of the task at hand. The Socratic ironist, so concerned with sapping his interlocutor, seldom reveals much of himself; his preferred mode of expression is *aporia*, and his preferred accessory is the mask.¹⁶ But for Ménil, Caribbean subjectivity has effaced itself for too long. The task of his humorist is to project himself into and onto the world and to share his universally intelligible experiences in poetry. Much in the same way that Socrates sought to invalidate Greek culture's actuality as he saw it, the Caribbean thinker must indeed "demoralize" this society, discredit it, debunk it, shame it (146), but he must *also* make himself and the fact of his apprehension of reality's unactuality unambiguously visible. And he accomplishes this negation through violent identifications. Accordingly, his preferred mode of expression is the metaphor, a supreme sign of self-affirming subjectivity, and his preferred accessory is simply the body.¹⁷

Thus, under the term *humor*, Ménil synthesizes Freud's humorous attitude, Kierkegaard's Socratic irony, and Dada's ludic artistic practices to envision an unprecedented ethical and aesthetic code for the Caribbean author. Unlike Dadaist activity, however, this humor does not a-historically negate all actuality, but rather, like Socrates's ironic stance, it seeks to undermine a particular actuality, as it is at a particular time, in a particular space (in this case, the chronotope of the French colony), while affirming the eternal actuality of

¹⁵ "Situation de la poésie aux Antilles," *Antilles déjà jadis*, 124.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard notes that "it is the nature of Irony never to unmask itself" (48).

¹⁷ As Ménil writes elsewhere, "En l'homme les voies de la communion au monde passent aussi par le dedans, nécessairement. Par le corps humain, le seul pont jeté entre le monde et lui" (107).

subjectivity. With these considerations in mind, like M  nil, I will generally use the term *humor* rather than *irony*. Further, it becomes more and more evident that the humorist’s attitude is not so different from the dystopian author’s. Both have much to say about their contemporary society, and none of it is good.

I am aware that my reader thus far might wonder whether M  nil’s negative humor isn’t simply what we all already know as *dark humor*. That would be a valid question. As I will emphasize in my first chapter, M  nil was a close friend of Andr   Breton (he even facilitated the latter’s encounter with Aim   C  saire) and the surrealists. As such, he was likely familiar with the poet’s 1939 *Anthologie de l’humour noir*. In addition, his insistence on the relationship between degradation and humor is reminiscent of *gallows humor*. However, there is more at work in M  nil’s conception of the term. In her book *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, Glenda Carpio advocates for a radically different understanding of *dark satire* or *black humor* when it used by intellectuals of color. She argues that under the latter’s pen, the term is different from the way Breton understood it when he coined it to describe works that displayed the spirit of surrealist poetry;¹⁸ it is also different from its more recent postmodern acceptance. Quoting William Solomon, she explains that in the 1960s, it became “a term used to describe the work of a number of American authors, largely white, who wanted to explore ‘the vicissitudes of whiteness . . . the extent to which this social construct takes shape, by and large, in relation to hallucinatory impressions of blackness’” (24). Carpio defines her project as an exploration of “how different generations of writers and artists improvise on that tradition as they symbolically create redress for slavery” (Ibid.). In a parallel endeavor, in my first chapter, I will show how M  nil borrows from Breton and the surrealists to then constitute his own philosophy of humor; subsequent chapters will focus on how contemporary authors deploy this critical humor against the backdrop of the *R  publique fran  aise universelle*.

ii. Laughter

Thus, what M  nil calls humor is an attitude of contestation and revolt. Laughter is its witness. This laughter and its corrective value alert us to the fact that M  nil was likely in conceptual conversation with Henri Bergson’s 1900 *Le rire* — even though he does not directly refer to it. In *Le rire*, Bergson proposes that one laughs whenever one notices “une certaine raideur de m  canique l   o   l’on voudrait trouver la souplesse attentive et la vivante flexibilit   d’une personne” (10). For Bergson, this rigidity is a threat to society because it indexes a subject in the process of becoming isolated and eccentric. Society must respond to

¹⁸ *Spirit* is the operative word here, for the many authors and artists gathered in this anthology predate the surrealist movement, e.g., Jonathan Swift, Sade, etc.

this anti-social behavior with measure — corporal punishment, for instance, would be excessive. Laughter is the solution:

Le rire doit être quelque chose de ce genre, une espèce de *geste social*.¹⁹ Par la crainte qu'il inspire, il réprime les *excentricités*, tient constamment en éveil et en contact réciproque certaines activités d'ordre accessoire qui risqueraient de s'isoler et de s'endormir, assouplit enfin tout ce qui peut rester de raideur mécanique à la surface du corps social. Le rire ne relève donc pas de l'esthétique pure, puisqu'il poursuit [...] un but utile de *perfectionnement* général. (20; italics mine, unless otherwise noted)

A closer look at Bergson's wording reveals that his laughter participates in the Third Republic's utopian normative project, as outlined by Glissant.²⁰ That which is deemed eccentric (outside of the center that sets the norm) must fall back in line, as the Republic marches on to the harmonious beat of an always more perfect single measure. In comparison, Ménil's laughter challenges the status quo.

Ménil's recoding of the idea of laughter in opposition to Bergson's is a compelling reason to investigate his essay, but for the purposes of this dissertation and its investment with producing a clear, nuanced argument, I will not use the term laughter exclusively as the Martinican author understands it. In my work, the phrases *Ménil's laughter* or *dystopian laughter* will be synonymous with *humor* and will signify a socially disruptive intent. I will reserve *laughter* (alone) for the straightforward byproduct of laughing that can be heard or seen. In addition, I will use *laughter-driven strategies* to designate rhetorical moves that intend to produce laughter, such as jokes, puns, etc. By the same token, *comedic moment/event* will be the term I use to indicate a situation crafted to make the viewer or the reader laugh; *joke* will describe specifically an utterance that intends to produce laughter or that denotes the humorous spirit. Finally, I will use the admittedly cumbersome term *laughter-maker* as a shorthand for authors, filmmakers, comedians, etc., who produce work intended to make an audience laugh.

iii. Satire, humor, irony and other disagreements

In my effort to effect a terminological consistency within my dissertation that does not exist in the field with which I am in dialogue, I wish to bring in newer scholarship to further frame

¹⁹ In italics in the original.

²⁰ Bergson's earnest musings as to why one might laugh at a Black man further expose this normative thinking: "pourquoi rit-on d'un nègre ? Question embarrassante, semble-t-il, puisque des psychologues tels que Hecker, Kraepelin, Lipps, se la posèrent tour à tour et y répondirent diversement. Je ne sais pourtant si elle n'a pas été résolue un jour devant moi, dans la rue, par un simple cocher, qui traitait de « mal lavé » le client nègre assis dans sa voiture. Mal lavé ! un visage noir serait donc pour notre imagination un visage barbouillé d'encre ou de suie" (41). A close reading of this passage, which space forbids here, would reveal its profound universalizing assumptions and suggest that people of color could never aspire to equality within the Republic. Suffice to say that this theory of laughter would provide an easy excuse for the racist jokester.

what is at stake in using the term humor — vs. satire or irony — in the twenty-first century. While Freud and Ménéil spoke of humor as an attitude, Morton Gurewitch uses the term “temper.” For him,

Satire is concerned with the corrigible ridiculous; it traditionally mocks the modifiable manners, mentalities, and morals of humanity. Though it may be pessimistic, and even misanthropic, its focus is the mendable human in a changeable society. The ironic temper, on the other hand, is concerned with the irremediably absurd. It sheds illusions, ideal, misbegotten affirmations, and the flimsy stuff of human certitude, and instead views life, faith, freedom, reason, progress, justice and truth as inescapably collapsible into comedy.²¹

We see that the type of revelatory irony Ménéil calls humor has a corrective function and an end goal in sight, like Gurewitch’s notion of satire. Elsewhere in his book, Gurewitch distinguishes between the ironic and the humorous tempers:

When ironic attitudes, instead of darkening, appear to melt into an indulgence toward incurable follies and deformities, they approach the sentiment of humor [...]. A humorous temper is also skilled in fault-finding, yet it is characterized essentially by tolerance, good will, and compassion, qualities that may well act as dissolvents of both the satiric ridiculous and the ironic absurd. (128)

This type of tolerant, compassionate humor does not resemble Ménéil’s negative, cruel one. At the same time, Ménéil’s humor may be cutting, but it is prone to neither despair nor cynicism — rather, it is optimistic. Humor today is often understood in the generally pleasant manner Gurewitch suggests, which is why using the term as Ménéil conceives it can lead to misunderstandings. In speaking of Ménéil’s humor, I include satirical aspirations and somber ironic self-reflexive tendencies but exclude the conciliatory inclinations proposed by Gurewitch.

I have thus far discussed irony and humor within the epistemological realm of philosophy. What complicates their understanding today is that they also describe rhetorical strategies and intents. Although I find a deep issue with Bergson’s ideological deployment of laughter, his use of the terms to describe verbal configurations remain productive. Succinctly, for Bergson, irony involves producing an utterance in which the locutor pretends that the ideal is real; with humor, the locutor produces an utterance in which she pretends that the real is ideal. Further outlining the two rhetorical processes, Bergson adds:

Elles sont, l’une et l’autre, des formes de la satire, mais l’ironie est de nature oratoire, tandis que l’humour a quelque chose de plus scientifique. On accentue l’ironie en se

²¹ Cover copy.

laissant soulever de plus en plus haut par l'idée du bien qui devrait être : c'est pourquoi l'ironie peut s'échauffer intérieurement jusqu'à devenir, en quelque sorte, de l'éloquence sous pression. On accentue l'humour, au contraire, en descendant de plus en plus bas à l'intérieur du mal qui est, pour en noter les particularités avec une plus froide indifférence [...] L'humoriste est ici un moraliste qui se déguise en savant, quelque chose comme un anatomiste qui ne ferait de la dissection que pour nous dégoûter. (129-130)

For Bergson, then, satire is at work in irony and humor, which are rhetorical strategies. Since I use the term *humor* as Ménénil conceptualizes it to describe an attitude, I will use the term *Bergsonian humor* for the rhetorical maneuver by which one pretends the real is ideal — and as we will see, Ménénil and other authors in my corpus resort to Bergsonian humor to convey their humorous attitudes.

Shortly after beginning this project, I was describing it to a colleague who interrupted me to say: “You’re doing humor? That’s really easy.” I hope that this section has proven that slippery terminologies render my task more complicated than one might assume. To summarize, we may consider that although Ménénil’s humor nears the concept of irony, it offsets the latter’s total negativity with a large dose of satirical spirit.

iv. Three Theories of Laughter

No terminological efforts would be deemed serious without a reference to the three main theories of laughter. I report them here as briefly as possible while highlighting how they might be relevant to my analyses:

SUPERIORITY THEORY: This theory, most widely attributed to Hobbes, proposes that one laughs when feeling superior to another. Baudelaire, in *De l'essence du rire*, broadly subscribes to this notion, and we certainly also sense it in Ménénil’s text, in which the humorous spirit rises to contemplate the wretched society below. In some ways, Bergson’s corrective function of laughter taps into this notion: laughing is always done from a righteous stance. Bergson uses the example of someone accidentally falling as an illustration of the mechanical encrusted upon the living, and as Baudelaire had put it before him: “on trouvera au fond de la pensée du rieur un certain orgueil inconscient: *moi*, je ne tombe pas ; *moi*, je marche droit ; *moi*, mon pied est ferme et assuré. Ce n’est pas *moi* qui commettrais la sottise de ne pas voir un trottoir interrompu ou un pavé qui barre le chemin” (368; italics in the original).

INCONGRUITY THEORY: Here, laughter arises from the juxtaposition of two ill-fitting elements — an effect not matching its cause, for instance. Such a juxtaposition creates a surprise that catalyzes laughter. The incongruity theory thus rests in the gap between a concept and its sets of expectations, and its results or what actually

happens in the real world (it is in this sense the abstract parent of situational irony). Whether semantic, literary, or situational, this laughter is caused by a contradiction, and the one who laughs has registered it as such. With regard to our concerns, it could be said, with caution, that France's colonial practice is wholly incongruous: for instance, the purpose of the *Code Noir* was to promote a "fair" treatment of slaves; the assimilation doctrine implies that everyone is equal... but in practice, some are more equal than others. In all, the *mission civilisatrice* of the *République française universelle* is a long series of gaps between ideal promises and real outcomes, which can readily be (and are) mined for laughter.

RELIEF THEORY: Alternatively known as the psychic release theory, it corresponds to a psychological maneuver highlighted by Freud, whereby the childish, prone-to-drama ego transfers an affective charge to the super-ego, which in turn acts as a reassuring parent. For Freud, this is the motor of the humorous attitude, which "consists in the humorist's having withdrawn the psychical accent from his ego and having transposed it on to his super-ego. To the super-ego, thus inflated, the ego can appear tiny and all its interests trivial; and, with this new distribution of energy, it may become an easy matter for the super-ego to suppress the ego's possibilities of reacting" ("Humor" 164). While the idea of a psychic release of energy seems to be also at work in Kant's explanation that "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (254) the latter is often used instead to support the incongruity theory.

These theories are not hermetic: they beget laughter alone or in various combinations. In Confiant's Trilogy, the narrator certainly laughs from a superior vantage point while shedding light on the incongruity of life in Martinique, whereby external signs of wealth belie moral poverty. In *La Haine*, the gap between Vinz's Pacino-esque persona and the reality of his adolescent vulnerability is often a source of laughter, which can be explained through the incongruity theory. Meanwhile, Saïd's multiple attempts at making his comrades (and ultimately the audience) laugh against a generally disastrous backdrop aligns with Freud's relief theory. Finally, in *Case Départ*, the poor luck of being magically transported back to the times of slavery allows us to watch the film through the lens of incongruity. Laughter-driven strategies, however, spare the spectators from the anxiety of the brutal tropes of slavery (lashings or the Middle Passage). These theories will help us account for diegetic (within the texts/films) and/or extradiegetic (between the texts/film and their public) moments of laughter.

3. A methodology

To organize my close readings of comedic events, I will often make use of Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), which breaks down a comedic event into six categories called Knowledge Resources (KR):

Script Opposition (SO): Attardo states that all comedic texts (be they jokes, or longer works like films or novels) function chiefly on semantic or situational incongruity. This KR names the terms that are incongruous to each other.

Logical Mechanism (LM): This KR describes the pseudo-logical or frankly illogical mechanism by which the incongruous terms of the SO are put in relation within the economy of the comedic moment. This is the dreaded moment when the joke is explained; the moment when it loses its magic.

Situation (SI): This refers to what Attardo calls "the 'props' of the joke, the materials of the text that are not funny (so, in a joke about a dog in a pub, the background knowledge about pubs, such that they serve beer, etc is part of the SI)" (108). In our case, props will include the *banlieues* or the Antilles. Knowledge of these spaces — even cursory — contributes to understanding the comedic event.

Target (TA): The butt of the joke.

Narrative Strategy (NS): Attardo gives "the 'genre' of the joke, such as riddle, 1–2–3 structure, question and answer, etc.," as illustrations of this KR, which is not particularly useful for the analysis of longer works. Typically, unless otherwise noted, the NS will simply be "film scene" or "text."

Language (LA): Attardo considers "lexical, syntactic, phonological, etc. choices" (Ibid.) the matter of this KR. In the works of my corpus, the way the minoritized subjects represented in text or onscreen use language is crucial to the production of comedic moments. It is via language that they appear socially incongruous or that they point out social incongruities.

Attardo considers longer texts or films as *vectors* punctuated by comedic events, each of which can be analyzed using the GTVH. He names these interspersed comedic events *jab lines* to distinguish them from *punch lines*. The latter are the ultimate events that force us to reconsider the entire text/film. As far as authorial intent, much can be understood from the frequency of jab lines — a text with few isolated jab lines will not have the same impact as one where they are abundant. Attardo suggests that by looking at comedic events together, it becomes possible to tease out patterns and to derive a comprehensive understanding of the role of laughter within a work (111).

The mere presence of these comedic events against the dystopian background I have begun to sketch out is perhaps surprising. Often, discussions of the present project yield

questions such as “*La Haine*? What’s so funny about that?” Palmer proposes, however, that there are no intrinsically funny plots, just serious plots with comedic events (Attardo 112). Following Attardo’s categories for longer texts/films, I consider Kassovitz’s film a “Serious Plot with jab lines”; Confiant’s trilogy a “Humorous Plot with jab lines and punch lines” and “metanarrative disruptions” (the text is indeed highly self-referential); and Steketee’s film a “Humorous Plot, with jab lines and punch lines” as well as a “humorous central complication” (Ibid.).

BAD PLACES & FUNNY SPACES

As I have suggested above, in its bold, laughter-driven, change-motivated critique of society, Ménil’s notion of humor also sounds like satire, which Robert C. Elliott defines as follows:

Satire, artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform.²²

Elliott traces the history of satire back to the Saturnalia, a Roman festival whereby the poor dined with the rich, drank, and spoke frankly. Their banter would take the shape of a sarcastic critique of the social order — gaiety and alcohol helping. In time, this raillery became more than a byproduct of the festive atmosphere; it became the central purpose of these yearly gatherings. During the brief space of the festival, a more perfect society would be achieved through collective laughter: an eutopia, whose referent was the Golden Age, a fictional time of abundance and equality. Concisely linking utopia and satire, Elliott writes:

To summarize: utopia is the secularization of the myth of the Golden Age, a myth incarnated in the festival of the Saturnalia. Satire is the secular form of ritual mockery, ridicule, invective — ritual gestures which are integrally part of the same festival. [...] Satire and utopia are not really separable, the one a critique of the real world in the name of something better, the other a hopeful construct of a world that might be. The hope feeds the criticism, the criticism the hope. (24)

Of the emergence of this particular satirical spirit into literary practice, Elliott writes, “Writers of utopia have always known this: the one unanswerable argument for the utopian vision is a hard satirical look at the way things are today” (Ibid). Literary utopias are also satires, and satires are animated by utopianism — a hope that by pointing out society’s flaws by laughing at them, we may transcend them. While that project seems reasonable enough, we have also already caught a glimpse of its more fearsome side, as theorized by Glissant and

²² Robert C. Elliott, “Satire,” in *Britannica*, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/art/satire>.

illustrated by Bergson. Ashcroft concisely describes the catch-22 in which we all find ourselves: “All achieved utopias are degenerate, indeed, become dystopias, yet without *utopianism*, without the spirit of hope, liberation is not possible” (40; italics in the original). Can engaging with the dystopian genre, then, be a way to critique society while remaining suspicious of utopias and utopian thinking? Can this be done while retaining laughter, which is endemic to satires and utopias? By taking into consideration Ashcroft’s contention, as well as the rise of laughter as a global currency,²³ my dissertation seeks to prolong the work of Elliott by demonstrating that satirical laughter *can* also be at work in dystopias, without suggesting that it always is. The title for this dissertation, “Comique et Laid,” is inspired by a verse from Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, itself inspired by a verse from Charles Baudelaire’s “L’albatross.” It captures the paradoxes, the intersections and the transcultural gestures that will be the objects of this work. Via the following four case studies, I investigate diverse sociopolitical implications of laughing from a bad place.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

My encounter with Ménéil’s “Humor: Introduction à 1945” is the true catalyst for the present project. Its merging of the philosophy of humor with dystopian aesthetics in 1945 is visionary. It is also prodigious in its scope: part history of art, part political commentary, part philosophy lesson, part new year’s resolutions, part prophecy, part warning, part prescription, and part battle cry, it manages to both announce and perform, in form and in content, a particular politics of aesthetics that is still at work in the literatures produced by francophone authors of the African diaspora. In this first chapter, I will closely follow Ménéil’s own meanderings through various epistemological spheres, and examine his engagement with Freud and Baudelaire and their conception of humor. I will then elucidate his lengthy and heartfelt homage to Dada and explain why he saw the possibility of social salvation in a movement that could not save itself. Finally, I will explore the implications of his deployment of a dystopian vignette that constitutes the poetic climax of his text. All in all, this chapter will not only seek to illuminate what humor means for Ménéil and the Caribbean author, but it will also attempt to re-inscribe Ménéil’s contribution to the theorization of francophone literatures.

²³ Many contemporary studies of humor underscore the central role of the laughter-maker. In the United States, the popularity of Trevor Noah, Stephen Colbert and many others indicates that the audience would rather get news from the real world with a heavy dose of laughter; in France, Ervine’s work suggests that “the performance of many contemporary French comedians has created ‘des rires qui reconfigurent le terrain de la francité [...]’. In other words, humor has taken on increased significance within the context of exploring national identity” (2). If the rise of laughter-makers is well documented at national levels, studies that consider the way new medias (Netflix, YouTube) have facilitated the exchange of laughter-driven works between nations have just begun. Ervine, for instance, discusses the influence of North American standup comedians on their French counterparts (17).

Chapter 2 will explore a set of novellas written by Raphaël Confiant: *Bassin des ouragans* (1994), *Savane des pétrifications* (1995), and *La Baignoire de Joséphine* (1997). These three works were gathered under a single title, *Trilogie Tropicale*, and republished in 2006. They have been the object of little scholarship, and it is easy to understand why: their plots are extravagant, and the narrator Abel is as despicable as he is unreliable. My reading of these texts through dystopian and comedic frameworks allows me to suggest that more than the cynical *pensées* of their narrator, they constitute, for Confiant, a self-reflexive pause in his creolist oeuvre. In this chapter, I will explain how the historical utopia that was the Departmentalization act of 1946, designed to bring equality and prosperity to the Caribbean people, yielded a soft dystopia lived as a series of cultural, identity and linguistic crises, which Confiant makes visible through the deployment of dystopian tropes.

In Chapter 3, by considering *La Haine* via the prism of laughter and dystopia, I perform a previously unattempted reading of the film. I start by thinking about its now-iconic opening: “C’est l’histoire d’un homme qui tombe d’un immeuble de cinquante étages” and I ask what type of text it is. I argue that this seemingly uncomplicated script provides the key to reading the film as humorous, as Ménil understands the term. Against the film’s dystopian backdrop — surveillance, heavy policing, violence, decayed urban spaces — comedic events abound. Yet far from operating apart from or in spite of the dystopian aesthetics, they support it and amplify it. At the same time, the film’s tragic ending, which fails to provide solutions or display Ménil’s prescriptive hope, will lead me to conclude that *La Haine* is a counter-utopia, that is a work that is suspicious of utopian thinking.

In chapter 4, I focus on *Case Départ*, a variation in a long tradition of time-bending films, the likes of *Back to the Future* and *Les Visiteurs*. The plot revolves around two estranged half-brothers (an ex-con and a government employee), who share a Caribbean father and a general disdain for all things Caribbean. Called back to the Antilles, at their dying father’s bedside, the two are told that their only inheritance is the treasure of the Grosdésir family: the act of emancipation of their ancestors. Unimpressed, the brothers figuratively and literally dismiss their history by ripping the document to shreds. As punishment, the two are magically sent back to the times of slavery. The film was an enormous success in France, attracting more than 1.7 million spectators. This success, however, is problematic. What does it mean that a comedy about slavery would attract so many? Did it force the *République française universelle* to confront its relationship to race? I argue that this film displays what Gurewitsch calls the humorous temper, adopting a much too conciliatory stance on the Republic’s dealings with race.

Chapter 1: The Long-Lost Antillean Messiah of Humor and Dystopia What We Didn't Know René Ménénil Taught Us in "L'Humour: Introduction à 1945"

I was recently at the annual conference of the American Comparative Literature Association, where I presented a close reading of one of René Ménénil's texts. After my talk, the room fell silent. I knew the question would come, and come it did: "Why have we never heard of him?" From the back of the room, a voice — not mine — offered the most insightful reason I had never thought of: "Maybe because he was never prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre?"

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Ménénil regretted never receiving the honor of a Sartre preface. A fiercely independent spirit who remained loyal to communism and avant-garde aesthetics long after both ideas fell into disrepute, René Ménénil (1907-2004) remains either a lesser-known or a controversial figure among the Martinican intellectual elite — depending on whom you ask. In my view, however, he is at the epicenter of the formidable shake-up that awakened Caribbean literature of French expression. First, he was one of the artisans of the short-lived but watershed *Légitime défense*, published in 1932²⁴ — well before Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. In *Lettres Créoles*,²⁵ Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant describe the journal as the first "non' magistral à l'aliénation culturelle et à la francisation forcenée" (155). They praise it for its boldness, calling it an "acte de marronnage [qui] s'est produit dans une relative indifférence" (154). They imagine the encounter of young Aimé Césaire with the journal, adding that it prepared "l'avènement d'une formidable tracée littéraire, celle du retour au grand cri de la cale: la Négritude" (155).²⁶ Beyond his crucial role in *Légitime défense*, Ménénil was later instrumental in the famous encounter between André Breton and Césaire. As Breton recalls in his preface to the 1947 reedition of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, he first laid eyes on Césaire's poetry during a brief stay in occupied Martinique, in a boutique where he hoped to find a ribbon for his

²⁴ Violently refusing to assimilate to the capitalistic, christian, bourgeois zeitgeist, the journal's only issue juxtaposed poems and political critique to condemn the French bourgeoisie (white and of color), and to awaken Antillean intellectuals to their potential. Its rhetoric is a force to be reckoned with; of the bourgeoisie, the authors wrote: "Nous crachons sur tout ce qu'ils aiment, vénèrent, sur tout ce dont ils tirent nourriture et joie" (2). Before *Légitime défense*, such a vehement critique had never been attempted by a collective of Black francophone intellectuals.

²⁵ A comprehensive meta-literary history of Franco-Caribbean literature published in 1999.

²⁶ Although this affiliation with the Négritude movement is fraught for reasons we will see shortly, this brief homage gives credit to Ménénil's seminal role.

daughter. There, his eyes fell upon the first issue of *Tropiques*,²⁷ and he was immediately mesmerized. The shop keeper was none other than Ménéil's sister. A quick word to her brother, and meetings were arranged. Of him, Breton will write, "Ménéil: la grande culture en ce qu'elle a de moins ostentatoire, la mesure impeccable mais en dépit d'elles aussi le nerf et toutes les ondes du frémissement" (79). What I am beginning to suggest here is that Ménéil might very well be one of the most important figures of Antillean thought we think too little about.

* * *

The cardinal events of Ménéil's life will sound familiar to those who have studied Franco-Caribbean authors. Born in Gros-Morne, a small inland village in Western Martinique, Ménéil was sent to Paris where he attended the Lycée Louis-le-Grand (as did Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, after him). He went on to complete his studies in philosophy, psychology, and sociology at La Sorbonne. During this time, he discovered the Dada movement and the writings of Marx and Hegel, which influenced his aesthetic, political, and philosophical trajectory. Upon returning to Martinique, he joined the faculty of the Lycée Victor-Schœlcher in Fort-de-France, where he taught philosophy for several decades, working alongside Césaire, who taught French and Latin. With others, they formed a group of educators whom Michel Leiris — who spent time in Martinique in 1948 — identified as being, "Au premier rang des intellectuels originaires dont la pensée exerce quelque influence sur la génération moderne" (82). Leiris credits Ménéil for being one of the first to theorize the processes of alienation at work in Martinican society: "René Ménéil expliqua historiquement l'origine de ce complexe [d'infériorité] en le dénonçant comme une conséquence de l'instauration dans la conscience des esclaves, à la place de l'esprit [africain] refoulé, d'une instance représentative du maître, instance instituée au tréfonds de la collectivité et qui doit la surveiller comme une garnison la ville conquise" (101).²⁸ Throughout his life, Ménéil remained faithful to Marxist principles. When many, including Césaire, turned their backs on communism in the wake of the troubling revelations coming from the USSR between 1953 and 1956, Ménéil stayed true to the spirit of the movement. After distancing himself from the Soviet Union, he and other members of *Légitime défense* founded the Parti Communiste Martiniquais (PCM) in 1957. Meanwhile, Césaire created the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais

²⁷ *Tropiques* was a trimestrial journal with a predilection for surrealism, published from 1941 to 1945. "C'est moi qui ai eu l'idée de fonder une revue; c'est moi qui lui ai donné son nom," recalled Césaire in a 1978 interview. This assumption of responsibility was brave at the time of the journal's publication; indeed, *Tropiques* appeared during World War II, as Martinique was suffering the exactions of the Vichy government, represented on the island by the Admiral Robert. The journal's thinly veiled anti-fascist rhetoric put all associates at risk of retaliation. Although Césaire stood as the face of *Tropiques*, Suzanne Césaire and Ménéil were its principal contributors.

²⁸ We recognize here the thematic antecedent for Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs*.

in 1958. Dissatisfied with the repercussions of the 1946 Departmentalization act, and judging that it had not yielded positive results for the people, the PCM began to focus on a program, in 1960, that would grant the island an autonomous federated status within the French republic. Ménénil never occupied a governmental post; instead, he concentrated his efforts on educating and informing the people through *Action*, a trimestrial journal that ran from 1963 to 1981, and that dedicated its pages to global sociopolitical issues with resonance in the Caribbean. In all, Ménénil's name is certainly present in Martinican historiography, yet he remains largely absent from contemporary discussions on art and literature.

Why should we talk about Ménénil today? I contend that he merits a greater place in the genealogy of Antillean thought. His body of work is concise, yet his contribution to the advent of a liberated Antillean consciousness is invaluable.²⁹ Nick Nesbitt, who dedicated a short section of his book *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant to René Ménénil*, situates his project of unraveling Antillean alienation at the source of a discourse that would eventually blossom into Edouard Glissant's *Antillanité* — and later into Chamoiseau, Confiant and Jean Bernabé's *Créolité* (100). At the same time, however, Nesbitt considers Ménénil's work to be “limited in its creative capacity to develop new conceptual apparatuses when compared to Fanon or Glissant” (100), and his critique of Négritude to be “harsh if somewhat unoriginal” (101). However, re-situated in its historical moment, Ménénil's work should not be overlooked. Nesbitt writes that Ménénil's understanding of ideology was traditional, simplistic, and inconsequential, and furthermore, that he was doing nothing more than preaching to the choir:

By the 1960s, *every* Martinican (and not just the intellectuals or the communists or even the communist intellectuals, in Ménénil's case) surely perceived that the island and its citizens were subject to underdevelopment, dependency, and a fetishization of France and French culture. No one in Martinique needed Ménénil to rend a putative veil of illusion. The point is precisely that Martinican culture has long *thrived* on this ambiguous relation to the metropolis: everyone knows the culture functions on the currency of alienation, and yet everyone (save a few hard-core *indépendantistes*) continues to affirm the relation. (Ibid.)

While that may be true, Ménénil's rigorous critique, social observations and watchful eye made for a crucial stance, however futile, against absolute assimilation. Not only did Ménénil tirelessly work to shed light on Antillean folks' identity-related anxieties, but he understood just as well as Glissant and the *Créolistes* (and before them) that art and literature were vital antidotes to the ongoing cultural crisis. At a recent lecture held in Pointe-à-Pitre at the Memorial ACTe,

²⁹ Ménénil published a single collection of essays, short stories and poems, published in 1981 under the title *Tracées*. The collection, augmented and republished in 1999, under the new title of *Antilles déjà jadis* earned him the Prix Frantz Fanon that same year. In 2008, his wife Geneviève Sézille-Ménénil compiled the remainder of his work — journalistic articles, interviews, non-edited writings, etc., — in the posthumous collection *Pour l'émancipation et l'identité du peuple martiniquais*.

French historians Pascal Blanchard and Benjamin Stora fielded uncomfortable questions on how to resolve this crisis. A vocal member of the audience noted that the solution to this *crise identitaire* likely did not lie in more political freedom, but on the recognition of Antillean culture as distinct and worthy. Her intervention shows that the warnings Ménénil formulated several decades ago remain pertinent, but it also serves to illustrate the strange predicament in which Antilleans find themselves with regard to the French republic. With political progress, the latter's domination has gone silent; it now asserts itself on abstract, affective planes. These lower frequencies are those of a soft dystopia.

It is, however, the much more ostentatious ancestor of this dystopia that Ménénil confronts in the essay that will be the focus of this chapter: “L’humour: introduction à 1945.” Written on the eve of 1945, in the midst of the febrile period following the retreat of the Admiral Robert but preceding the end of the war, the essay captures a moment of uncertainty and promise. Its concern with the philosophy of laughter and the dystopian genre offers a compelling and innovative framework for a literature of revolt that anticipates the poetics and politics of contemporary postcolonial artists. Part new year’s resolutions, part prophecy, part warning, part prescription, and part battle cry, “L’Humour” is in many ways the most complete and multifaceted blueprint of the literature to come toward which several of Ménénil’s theoretical interventions in *Tropiques* tended.

Extolling humor — of all things — as a quintessential literary mode of resistance, Ménénil prophesied: “Au front de 1945 fleurira l’humour,” adding that the Antilles had the potential to staff the avant-garde: “C’est bien, on le conçoit, sans aucune vanité déplacée, que nous pensons n’être pas mal placés, aux Antilles, pour contribuer substantiellement à une littérature de l’humour” (146).³⁰ This chapter explores this striking prophecy and its ramifications. Imagining how it would have been received by a readership composed of students and elite intellectuals on the little island of Martinique is both exciting and disquieting. At the time, Caribbean literature of francophone expression had been largely dominated by doudouism — a period of imitation of the French canon that yielded many pastorales (wherein palm trees supplanted pastures) and, with the exception of a handful of texts (mostly surrealist poems), no memorable works. Proclaiming — and with such wry rhetoric — not only that a literature of humor was a powerful weapon, but that Caribbean folks had the potential to wield it better than others was a radical idea that would have been perceived either as visionary or as bordering on madness.

Ménénil’s oeuvre is characterized above all by its meticulous reflection on the role of the intellectual and of poetic practices in society, and particularly as these concepts apply to the author of color embedded in a French mainstream that struggles to make room for subcultures. Ménénil was one of the earliest Antillean adopters and adapters of the surrealist

³⁰ Page numbers for all Ménénil citations from: Ménénil René. *Antilles déjà Jadis, précédé de Tracées*. Jean Michel Place, 1999. Print.

movement, which makes him a perspicacious observer of his times. He understood what a little-appreciated literary movement, decried for its levity and insolence, could accomplish in terms of illuminating and emancipating the distinct spirit of the colonized intellectual, and he grasped the political power of non-canonical poetics. His deployment of an intense dystopian vignette in “L’humour” suggests that he believed that other non-canonical genres could also participate in humor’s critical agenda. His usage of dystopia in 1945 is surprising; it was not a genre that would have appealed to Antillean authors at the time. Today, however, dystopias are ubiquitous and deployed to denounce myriad forms of domination — here again, Ménil’s visionary instincts proved to be on point. With this in mind, I go on to argue in subsequent chapters that postcolonial authors continue — more or less explicitly — to call upon dystopian tropes to illustrate what it is like to struggle under France’s utopian project of *République universelle*.

The close reading I propose in this chapter will follow Ménil’s own meanderings. With the nervous nonchalance of a resolute wanderer, Ménil painstakingly mobilizes multiple discourses — psychology, literary history, poetics and poetry, news, ethnography — in a text that constitutes more than an apology for humor, in that it also anticipates the polyphonic and multi-generic narratives of future Caribbean aesthetics. Furthermore, from each of these epistemological stations, Ménil gleans various elements that, taken together, sketch a blueprint for a poetics of revolution. I will first explore the sources of Ménil’s psychological and philosophical understanding of humor, and show how his conception is derived from his engagement with the works of Baudelaire and Freud, and then repurposed into an instrument of change for the colonized subject. I go on to examine Ménil’s defense of the Dada movement, which he lauds as the most shining example of the humorous attitude, and I explain how despite this, he ultimately uses Dada as a cautionary tale, one with disastrous consequences he vows to avoid. I then turn to Ménil’s use of dystopian tropes, which he unravels in a long hallucinatory metaphor that tosses together men and cabbages. I read Ménil’s deployment of the dystopian genre as a precocious authorization to adapt its tropes to combat other forms of alienation and domination. Like humor and with humor, dystopia and its motifs can be harnessed to expose how the postcolony is a continuation of the colony, and not the moment of rupture it purports to be. In the context of World War II, it comes as no surprise that Ménil would resort to using a warring vocabulary to define humor, often describing it as a *weapon*. In subsequent chapters, I explore whether humor and laughter can still be considered weapons, and if so, I investigate how they operate and at what they can or should be aimed.

In times that call for the decolonization of theory, Ménil’s formulations of and contributions to various socio-aesthetics concepts provide valuable alternatives to knowledge constituted in the West; I believe that the translation and analysis of his œuvre have the

potential to open up new avenues in Africana and Comparative Literature studies.³¹ It is with these all of these considerations in mind that we will now delve into Ménéil's "L'humour : introduction à 1945."

A CREOLIZED PSYCHOLOGY OF HUMOR

In the opening lines of the essay, it is apparent that Ménéil finds little to praise about 1945 — and that is precisely what makes it, according to him, such an ideal year for humor. Readers (contemporary to him and us) will hardly blame him: in January 1945, the month of the essay's publication in the journal *Tropiques*, the outcome of the Second World War is still uncertain; Metropolitan France is the stage of brutal battles; and Martinicans — particularly those of color — have been starved and besmirched by the Vichy government and its emissary, the Admiral Robert. Curiously, however, Ménéil's essay does not open with the grand-scale horrors of war, but rather with the baseness of contemporary society:

Dans *une* société où la vertu qu'on admire n'est communément qu'une pratique prudente et ignominieuse, où la beauté de l'âme est faite de futilités comme par exemple de donner 20 sous à un mendiant et le tour est joué, où, enfin, endormi sur les rails de l'existence comme l'abeille sur le fil de l'instinct, l'homme mâchonne des gentillesques qui dégradent — il risque de naitre pas mal de conflits entre l'esprit et cette *chose* que nous appelons la vie courante. Pour peu bien entendu qu'on se réveille. Pour peu qu'on s'éveille à cette vie comme le dormeur, soudain à ce qui l'entoure. (134; italics mine)

The unconcealed disdain of the author requires no further analysis, but what interests me here is how this opening subtly illustrates and introduces Sigmund Freud's theory of humor, predicated upon the idea of detachment. From the outset, society is contemptuously described as trapped in an oblivious slumber that desensitizes it to the suffering occurring elsewhere (or rather everywhere else, in 1945), as well as within. This thematic inertia is echoed by the passive voice (l'âme *est faite*, le tour *est joué*), and the pervasive use of the *on*, which precludes all assumption of responsibility. Furthermore man does not do his degrading bidding himself — rather, he lazily chews on false kindnesses that do it for him. I read here a critique of the falsely benevolent French humanist ideology. This unbearable society is the object of a systematic semantic and affective detachment operated by the author: it is not *our* society, but rather nothing more than *a* society; man amounts to no more than a small machine-like bee floating from senseless need to senseless want; and the quotidian is nothing but a *thing*. For any detachment to occur, distinctions must be made: one cannot detach in a

³¹ Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski have begun this work, translating 11 of Ménéil's essays, alongside writings by the Césaire couple, André Breton and others, in a collection of French and Caribbean critical works written in the 1940s, on the topic of poetics and surrealism. See Fijałkowski, Krzysztof, and Michael Richardson. *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*. Verso, 1996.

vacuum; one can only detach from a space or group, to inhabit a new/different space, alone or with a new/different group. Ménil manifests this dynamic detachment with the irruption of the *nous*, introduced by the mind (*l'esprit*), and immediately imbued with the intellectual agency of naming (*nous appelons*), which contrasts singularly with the passivity of what precedes. Two camps are formed: on one side, a sleepy society, an object of contempt (it is both contemptuous and worthy of contempt) whose diffuse agency is operated by the *on* ; on the other side, intellectually active and therefore awakened subjects, who act as *nous* and have recognized society's flaws. Thus if/when one is awakened, one becomes part of the *nous*, a pronominal change that marks the passage from slumber to awareness. The true strength of this *nous* resides in its essential call to complicity. It opens its arms to the reader, inviting her to join a growing community of detached thinkers, whose swelling numbers are symbolized by the many subsequent uses of *nous*. Having awakened and taken stock of the moral ruins upon which they stand, the detached attitude of these thinkers produces an unexpected result, which Ménil proceeds to illustrate with a near-hallucinatory vision:

Le temps d'un sursaut, *on* peut donc s'éveiller et l'*on* trouve la vie, la vie de tous, la mienne, la vôtre, la vie telle que par la force des choses, dans cette société, elle se détermine ici, à cette date. Vie si profondément prise dans l'accessoire et l'accidentel que les plus grands espoirs ne valent pas ordinairement qu'*on* fouette un chat [...]. Et sur la montagne de gestes et de paroles futiles qui font *cette* vie, *nous* braquons un moment les feux cruels de l'esprit et, en sort, infiniment solitaire et risible, une souris. (134; italics mine)

Built as a crescendo, this paragraph brings its readers along to the top of the mountain with the repetition of *vie* and the heap of aggregated elements that surround it (*de tous, la mienne, la vôtre*, etc.). Together, however, these elements create a tension that concludes not in apotheosis, as could have been expected, but in something altogether different: the apparition of a mouse, glorious in its absurdity. And it is here, Ménil writes, that laughter irrupts: "C'est alors qu'il arrive que convulsivement, pris de vertige, butant sur ce que *nous* étions, devant le vide et l'insulte, *nous* éclatons de rire. Le rire amer de l'humour" (Ibid.; italics mine)

This irruption of laughter seems to echo Immanuel Kant's theoretical foray into the matter. Indeed, in his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant posits that "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (254). Similarly in Ménil, when we would expect the three horsemen of the apocalypse to emerge with all their vengeful and destructive rage, or at the very least something akin to Achilles's despair upon hearing news of Patroclus's death, it is a mouse that appears. But if this clever sleight of hand, this sudden substitution of registers, from the sublime to the absurd, from the high to

the low, corresponds with the Kantian precept,³² what follows departs from it in significant ways. While Kant speaks of laughter as a ringing sign of physical health in a gay society,³³ Ménéil promptly dissipates potential expectations of uncontaminated pleasure: the laughter produced by this sudden unraveling of expectations is immediately described as *bitter*. But behind the fortuitous poetic consonances in [r] and [m] offered by *le rire amer de l'humour*, Ménéil is already qualifying the laughter in question, and signaling humor as a distinct laughter-generating form. Though this laughter may be produced by the same internal processes as those described by Kant (the aforementioned sudden release of tension), it is altogether different. For Kant, laughter is the result of a beneficial relationship between body and mind, and though the chain reaction begins in the mind, it is first and foremost a corporeal phenomenon that begets good health: “[It is] the vital bodily processes, the affection that moves the intestines and the diaphragm, in a word, the feeling of health (which without such inducements one does not feel) that makes up the gratification felt by us; so that we can thus reach the body through the soul and use the latter as the physician of the former.” (253). Quite to the contrary for Ménéil, laughter results from a sudden separation of the mind and the body (the physical body, but evidently also the social body), from an absolute and contemptuous detachment of the first, which rises with disdain above the second. The mind, he tells us, chastises us for not living up not to what we *could* have been, but what we *should* have been — a matter not of potential, but of moral duty, stifled by individual and/or social sloth — and proclaims its disavowal: “L’esprit clame bien haut qu’il n’est pas complice. Que si pareil à des pantins nous sommes courbés sous l’insultante autorité de tyrannies absurdes, l’esprit tire son épingle du jeu et montre qu’il n’est pas dupe de la mascarade” (135). He describes the body as a bogged down marionette and a kowtowing puppet (*marionnette, pantins*) engaged in a soporific *mascarade*. These images not only speak of its lack of agency, but also of the pathetic theatricality of lives poorly lived. In Ménéil’s framework, far from presenting a picture of good health, the body — and again by extension here, the social body — is nearly catatonic; and far from being its doctor, the mind extricates itself from it, declaring that it will most certainly not be its accomplice. For the mind, this detachment is an upward displacement, a return to the self, Ménéil tells us, but to the highest self (*le plus haut de soi*). It is on this elevated plane that reigns “an astonishing climate of salubrity” (*un étonnant climat de salubrité*, *Ibid.*). In all, Ménéil, like Kant, believes that laughter is caused by a sudden undoing of expectations. He departs from the German philosopher, however, in his theorization of the chief operating field of laughter: for Kant, laughter’s beneficiary is the body; for Ménéil, laughter is a balm for the mind, which situates it on an

³² Kant indeed suggests, “In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction)” (254).

³³ “The feeling of health produced by a motion of the intestines corresponding to the play in question makes up that whole gratification of a gay party, which is regarded as so refined and so spiritual” (253).

abstract plane. What becomes at stake then, for a Marxist such as Ménénil, is how this operation *of* the mind *for* the mind detached from its (social and physical) body can be translated into action in the material world. In other words: how can the humorous attitude effect tangible change? Ménénil begins to answer this question by turning to Freud, for whom detachment is also the *sine qua non* condition of the humorous attitude, as elaborated in the 1927 addendum of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

As we have seen, the bitter laughter of humor occurs when the high and the low suddenly exchange places in what Ménénil goes on to call a “magic transmutation of values” (Ibid.). This vertical permutation begins with a lateral transaction occurring within the psychic apparatus. Ménénil quotes here *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*: “L’attitude dynamique de l’humoriste consisterait en ceci qu’il a retiré à son moi l’accent psychique et l’a reporté à son surmoi. Au surmoi ainsi exalté le moi peut apparaître minuscule et tous ses intérêts futiles, et il devient dès lors facile au surmoi d’étouffer les réactions infantiles et passionnelles du moi” (qtd. in “L’humour” 135).³⁴ In this withdrawal from the ego and then subsequent transfer to the superego, intense affective objects lose their paralyzing effects.

For Ménénil, the psychological process of laughter does not culminate in nothingness, as the Kantian model would have it, but rather in a displacement and a reallocation of emotional goods, a shift of energy within one’s “subjective geography” (136). Ménénil describes this shift in terms of “investments”, “transfers”, and “transformations,” borrowing from the Freudian terminology. The yield of these fruitful transactions, however, is not quite pleasure or pleasurable. Freud explains, “It is true that humorous pleasure never reaches the intensity of the pleasure in the comic or in jokes, that it never finds vent in hearty laughter. It is also true that, in bringing about the humorous attitude, the super-ego is actually repudiating reality and serving an illusion” (166). Accordingly, Ménénil, who at the beginning of his essay spoke of bursts of laughter (*nous éclatons de rire*), re-calibrates his previous utterance and his laughter becomes a sneer:

L’humoriste ricane et ne rit pas : il se souvient de la vie rabaissée, engagée dans les barreaux de gestes saumâtres. Bien plus, il sait que cette soumission à une réalité compromettante dure encore et que la liberté qu’il affirme n’est qu’imaginaire n’étant que de l’esprit. L’humoriste, en effet, se rit de la réalité mais ne la change pas et ses flèches ne sont que des mots. L’humour, c’est le triomphe de la subjectivité frondeuse et une économie sur les sentiments. (134)

In truth, Ménénil prepares us early on for this apparent demotion from laughter to smile or smirk. Indeed, the homophonic nature in French of *souris* (mouse) and *sourire* (smile) may have motivated his choice of a mouse as the creature that appears from below the heap of social

³⁴ This is presumably Ménénil’s own translation. Biographical indications suggest he read German. The French translation of Freud’s addendum, published in the journal *Imago* differs slightly from Ménénil’s.

disappointments. Most importantly, both Freud and Ménéil link the qualitative and quantitative nature of this specific laughter — which Freud considers outright feeble (*ce faible plaisir*) —, with the humorist’s understanding of reality. The pleasure experienced by the subject cannot be superlative because it is tethered to a wretched reality. But paradoxically, it is the sordid nature of that reality that provides the best springboard for the mind to reach the heights of this distinct humor. It ensues that although the latter is a healthy attitude for the psyche, it appears caught up in a morbid game of self-perpetuation. For Freud, and seemingly at first for Ménéil, the products of humor live in the metaphysical and the illusionary, with no concrete action in the real world. Freud illustrates this with the anecdote of a convict who goes to the gallows on a Monday and exclaims, “Great way to start the week!”, all the while knowing that the noose will soon tighten around his neck. His humorous prowess will not result in physical liberation, but in an ultimate instant of emotional freedom, however brief. Ménéil echoes this when he asserts that “L’humoriste, en effet, se rit de la réalité mais ne la change pas et ses flèches ne sont que des mots” (ibid.). This would initially suggest that humor does not (cannot, will not or has yet to?) transform the fertile ground that nourishes it, though it is aware of the decayed corpses that lie below. As a Marxist, however, Ménéil could not be satisfied with that: To transform the world is the ultimate *mot d’ordre*. Freud is perplexed by the fact that the diminutive agency of humor in the real world and its mild pleasure yield do not appear to tarnish its value: “But (without rightly knowing why) we regard this less intense pleasure as having a character of very high value; we feel it to be especially liberating and elevating” (166). Ménéil begins to resolve Freud’s conundrum by suggesting, in the first part of his essay, that humor’s value resides beyond pleasure, in its other rich byproducts: revenge (*revanche*, 135), triumph (*triomphe*, 136), protection (*défense*, 136), dignity (*dignité*, 136) hope (*espoir*, 137), and the famous cry (*cri*, 137) that sprang from the pages of Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*. Thus a question arises: Does humor blossom for its own sake or can/should it be deployed for change? The reader begins to sense that humor can accomplish more in real life than the author initially let on.

Upon looking closer at Ménéil’s rhetoric in the first part of the essay, humor is given considerable agency: it *is* and it *does* — a lot. The author multiplies anaphoric variations on *l’humour c’est*, or simply *c’est* or *est*, *l’humour sera*. Furthermore, humor screams (*criant*, 137), suddenly comes out of nowhere (*soudain pointe*, p. 137), sneers (*ricanement*, p. 137), sees (*voit*, p. 137), and most importantly, it knows: *l’humour sait* (p. 137). The revelation of this ontology constitutes a climax for this first part of the text, wherein being and knowing merge through the homophonic qualities of *l’humour c’est* and *l’humour sait*. What humor *is* is a direct result of what it *knows*, what it has learned from observing the fallen society that surrounds it.

Et si, comme le savent aujourd’hui les sociologues, Dieu n’est qu’une transposition mythique de la société sur un plan imaginaire, étant donné que l’humour est une protestation contre la vie que la société nous fait, le ricanement de l’humour sera

irrégulier, satanique, cruel. Et aussi suprêmement clairvoyant. Car *l'humour sait*. Il est même suprêmement savant, ayant dépassé les accidents d'une vie pour atteindre à l'absolu de l'Esprit. (137)

With knowledge at stake, Ménéil pits sociologists against God, the scientific against the sacred, and the axiomatic against the unascertainable, in a performative display of humor. He even manages to extract a sneer from some of his readers by reminding us casually here, that sociology has demonstrated the nonexistence of God, and that it's yesterday's news. Implicitly embodied here as the snake of the Garden of Eden³⁵ (as further suggested by the many alliterations in [s]), humor feeds on knowledge, and is not simply knowing (*savant*), but also far-seeing (*clairvoyant*), and supremely so. Humor's function it is to monitor society, in real life, and to oppose what is godlike or dogmatic, on an imaginary plane, and as such, it cannot be univocal, Ménéil tells us. We understand also that Ménéil believes in its ability to effect tangible change. Humor is ambiguous and multifaceted, which explains why, after having already listed many things that humor is and humor does, Ménéil is only warming up. Having begun with a set of social and psychological considerations, informed by Freudian concepts while keeping an eye on a Marxist horizon, Ménéil switches gears and moves on to examine the literary realm of humor.

Before following Ménéil onto his next epistemological exploration of humor, I wish to specify that at no point during the first part of his essay does he particularly allude to his status as a colonized person; considering the place and time of the publication of this essay and who its readership would have been, this status is implied. Remembering these sets of conditions and giving them an explicit voice here, I want to underscore that the notions of detachment and action Ménéil outlines take on additional meaning. Detachment, distance and action are complexified by the colonized condition. Psychologically alienated, the Antillean people first struggle to form the *nous* required to take action. Césaire tells us as much in *Le cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, when he writes about “Cette foule qui ne sait pas faire foule,” or again,

cette foule crie si étonnamment passée à côté de son cri comme cette ville à côté de son mouvement, de son sens, sans inquiétude, à côté de son vrai cri, le seul qu'on eût voulu l'entendre crier parce qu'on le sent sien lui seul ; parce qu'on le sent habiter en elle dans quelque refuge profond d'ombre et d'orgueil, dans cette ville inerte, cette foule à côté de son cri de faim, de misère, de révolte, de haine, cette foule si étrangement bavarde et muette. (2, 4)

³⁵ The allusion to the Garden of Eden, though perhaps faint, harkens back to the original utopia, this ideal space that was the site of the very first fall. I will argue later that the Antilles and the *banlieues* were constructed similarly and were, too, sites of falls — falls that will be nonetheless fruitful for the production of a particular type of humor.

It is that same crowd that inhabits the society that Ménéil describes at the beginning of his essay. The awakening he prescribes would show the crowd how *to make* crowd. Making crowd and becoming *nous* is only the first obstacle; detaching from the material and affective conditions created by the Metropole is the second. As Frantz Fanon points out in *Pour la révolution africaine*, that task was particularly difficult and troubled during the war and in the wake of the occupation of the Admiral Robert:

Par un processus qui est facile à comprendre, les Antillais avaient assimilé la France des marins à la mauvaise France [...]. Il ne faut pas oublier que ces militaires étaient racistes. Or « il ne fait de doute pour personne que le véritable Français n'est pas raciste, c'est-à-dire ne considère pas l'Antillais comme un nègre ». Puisqu'eux le faisaient c'est qu'ils n'étaient pas de véritables Français. (34)

The occupation paradoxically renewed the Antillean's love and patriotism for France, and it made them forget that France, whether Vichyist or not, was the same imperialist nation that maintained them in the state of misery so well described by Césaire, and in the state of slumber evoked by Ménéil. To heal from the war, the Antillean had to believe in a distinction between a bad France and a good France. This forgetting precluded the need for detachment from what they perceived to be the good France — the utopia. Thus, the detachment Ménéil demands takes on a new dimension when theorized by a colonized subject at that particular time. Elsewhere in this essay, Ménéil writes, borrowing from Freud, “On voit assez que c'est par un brusque *retrait d'amour* que sont possibles l'irrévérence et l'ironie de l'humour” (135). If we re-situate Ménéil's essay in its socio-historical moment, we begin to understand that this love for whose withdrawal he is clamoring is the blind, patriotic love for France. The reality that must be repudiated is the dystopian one created by the latter's colonial endeavor. The humorous attitude would then be the result of a sudden withdrawal of love for the French humanist ideology, as well as the cure for it. Thinking ahead to the Departmentalization act of 1946, we understand that this withdrawal of love would take some time to occur. Still, conceptually and in 1945, in the midst of the war, Ménéil's theorization of humor and his adaptation of Freud's understanding of it in a colonial context is new. This encounter between an Austrian psychologist and a Caribbean intellectual produced a theoretical object I read anachronistically as *Créole*. This object precociously “laughs at the Universal”³⁶ and is an embryonic illustration of the *métissages* that will go on in the Tout-Monde.³⁷ Ménéil's endeavor is one of constant repurposing and creolizing (again, I use the term

³⁶ In *Éloge de la créolité*, Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant declare: “La littérature créole se moquera de l'Universel” (50).

³⁷ This classic Glissantian term will be further developed in subsequent chapters. For now, I simply wish to reinscribe Ménéil in its genealogy.

anachronistically), and it is in that same spirit that he looks to Dada, advocating for a recuperation of the short-lived movement in the service of colonized people.

DADA, THE DANGERS OF ABSOLUTE IRONY, AND THE ANTILLEAN AUTHOR

Having framed humor in relation to the psycho-social implications of the humorous attitude, Ménénil goes on to define one field whereby this attitude can operate for all to see: literature. This deployment of humor in literature, he explains, had been attempted before. He writes, “L’explosion littéraire de 1918 qui prit le nom de mouvement dada³⁸ a illuminé de sensationnelle façon l’attitude humaine appelée humour” (137-138). Ménénil, however, immediately lets us know that Dada’s tale will be a cautionary one. Just as he names it the paragon of humor, he immediately warns the reader that the movement was short-lived: “Rappelons les faits. Ce mouvement littéraire est né en 1916 et est mort vers 1921” (138). Still, Ménénil dedicates a long portion of his essay to singing the movement’s praises and to mourning its untimely demise. I read his intent as a wish to celebrate the movement, to recuperate its value, while strongly asserting that the Antillean literature to come will learn from its mistakes. In this section, I will discuss the political limitations of Dada and surrealism, as Jean-Paul Sartre denounced them in a contemporary text. I will then turn to the notion of irony as repeated madness to explain its dangers. In my introduction, I suggested that Ménénil adopted the term humor for what seems to be widely understood as irony. Many of the sources I will address here use the term irony as well. I will conclude that for Ménénil, humor is indeed irony, but it is a healthier, more sustainable form of it, and one that is indeed more suited to the Antillean author.

Ménénil begins by telling us that as a literary manifestation of humor, Dada sought to undermine the society that had been the artisan of World War I:

Il a été, pendant la Première Guerre mondiale et dans l’après-guerre immédiat, une protestation contre la sanglante faillite de la “civilisation” [...] L’action de dada fut une révolte permanente contre l’art, la morale et la société, valeurs dégonflées.[...] Le refus de toute la réalité ne pouvait se faire que par une dictature de l’esprit et c’est ce qui caractérise essentiellement Dada. (138)

This “civilisation,” trapped here by Ménénil between derogatory quotation marks, and its culture constitute the matrix of the French bourgeois society, although it is not explicitly named here. What follows is an anecdotal account of the movement, of its joyful birth, of its members, narrated in the nostalgic tone of one who remembers an old exuberant friend with a shared common enemy. But by foreshadowing the end, Ménénil compels us to mine for causes of the movement’s demise. For one, Ménénil describes it as a *révolte permanente*, as opposed to a

³⁸ Throughout his essay, Ménénil alternates between capitalizing and not capitalizing Dada.

revolution. Further, he calls it a dictatorship — a particularly dangerous word in 1945.³⁹ In all, Ménénil summarizes: “Une entreprise de démolition en gros, voilà dada. Une entreprise de dégradation et de destruction de valeurs” (138). The foregrounding of this absolute negation prefigures an imminent ending.

Ménénil felt a kinship with André Breton and the surrealist movements of the *entre-deux guerres* and of the 1940s, although as a communist he likely understood their shortcomings all too well. Merely a mourner at Dada’s funeral wake, Ménénil eschews the part of an executioner in his account of the movement’s ephemeral vigor, refusing to condemn it anymore than it condemned itself. To better replace Dada’s failure in a politico-historical context and in relation specifically to communism, I turn momentarily to a near contemporary text, Sartre’s “La situation de l’écrivain en 1947,” of which a large portion is a compassionless commentary on Breton and the surrealist movements.⁴⁰ Sartre’s counts of indictment are numerous, but in our discussion of the role of humor as a vector for change in the empirical world, we will focus on three interrelated points:

1) Echoing Ménénil’s preliminary remark that a humorist’s field of action is confined to the imaginary, Sartre lambasts the surrealists for not committing to tangible change. Citing Breton, who had proposed that “La réalité immédiate de la révolution surréaliste n’est pas tellement de changer quoi que ce soit à l’ordre physique et apparent des choses que de créer un mouvement dans les esprits” (qtd. in “Situation,” 187), Sartre notes that therein lies the problem: for all its destructive claims, the surrealist movement never actually destroys anything. “Ce monde, perpétuellement anéanti sans qu’on touche à un grain de ses blés ou de ses sables, à une plume de ses oiseaux, il est tout simplement *mis entre parenthèses*” (189). Yet in these particular times, real destruction is necessary, as Sartre points out later in his essay: “Je reconnais que la violence, sous quelque forme qu’elle se manifeste, est un échec. Mais c’est un échec inévitable parce que nous sommes dans un univers de violence ; et s’il est vrai que le recours à la violence risque de la perpétuer, il est vrai aussi que c’est l’unique moyen de la faire cesser” (286).

2) With an agenda that begins and ends with the destruction of the abstract fabric of society, the surrealists bow out of the historical process. According to Sartre, the surrealists’ objective was never to transcend the past or its destruction toward a new stage of history. Their goal was to repeatedly lift the veil on the world’s radical contradictions (between the

³⁹ It bears saying, however, that Ménénil does not use the word pejoratively. As a Marxist, he too subscribes to the temporary necessity of certain dictatorships, as transitional moments toward the advent of Communism — the “dictatorship of the proletariat” being a central concept. In this light, the dictatorship of Dada is the attack of the bourgeoisie on the literary front and a necessary takeover.

⁴⁰ Although he does not name Dada specifically, the movement seems collapsed under the broader category of surrealism, as Sartre invokes the name of some of Dada’s contributors (e.g., Vaché and Rigaut) in his expansive anti-surrealist diatribe.

objective and the subjective), regardless of political configurations. In short, “confusion,” writes Sartre,

et non synthèse : car la synthèse apparaîtrait comme une existence articulée, dominant et gouvernant ses contradictions internes. Mais le surréalisme ne souhaite pas l'apparition de cette nouveauté qu'il faudrait contester encore. Il veut se maintenir dans l'énervante tension que provoque la recherche d'une intuition irréalisable. (186)

This sidelines the communist ideal to which the surrealists had pledged allegiance, in what Sartre denounces as a hypocritical marriage of convenience. For him, should Paul Vaillant-Couturier's “Lendemain qui chantent” ever arise, the surrealists would likely challenge this new system in their philosophical addiction to aporia. This attitude implies an inexcusable desire to stand outside of history and ignore its dialectical march. It is a passive act of complicity with the status quo.

3) The movement's literary quest to equalize all dichotomies threatened to blur the revolutionary vision. Sartre reminds us that as Breton puts it, the surrealists' true objective is the discovery of a point where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, etc., collapse into one another.⁴¹ For him, this goal betrays the working class: “N'est-ce pas proclamer son divorce avec un public ouvrier beaucoup plus qu'avec un public bourgeois ? Car le prolétariat engagé dans la lutte a besoin de distinguer à chaque instant, pour mener à bien son entreprise, le passé du futur, le réel de l'imaginaire et la vie de la mort” (Ibid.).

The surrealists' prioritization of the subjective can only truly be achieved at the expense of all else, which is historically unforgivable in Sartre's eyes: future generations, he affirms, will not forgive it.⁴² In direct opposition to this form of self-serving literature, Sartre envisions what he coins *Littérature totale*, a literature of *praxis* that must strive to serve as a bridge between the oppressed and the oppressor — Richard Wright, he writes, is an ideal illustration of it. For Sartre, in their commitment to any other literary form and purpose, the surrealists act in bad faith, much as the *salauds* he denounced in his 1946 essay, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (85).

Illegible by the working class, and read by the bourgeoisie, which it despised, surrealism reached an inevitable crisis in the war and post-war years. Sartre concludes:

⁴¹ “Tout porte à croire qu'il existe un certain point de l'esprit, d'où la vie et la mort, le réel et l'imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l'incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d'être perçus contradictoirement... C'est en vain qu'on chercherait à l'activité surréaliste un autre mobile que l'espoir de la détermination de ce point.” (qtd. in “Situation” 189).

⁴² Sartre declares: “Et si l'on nous dit que nous faisons bien les importants et que nous sommes bien puérils d'espérer changer le monde, nous répondrons que nous n'avons aucune illusion, mais qu'il convient que certaines choses soient dites, fût-ce seulement pour sauver la face aux yeux de nos fils, et d'ailleurs que nous n'avons pas la folle ambition d'influencer le State Department, mais celle — un peu moins folle — d'agir sur l'opinion de nos concitoyens” (“Situation” 283).

Les surréalistes n'ont aucun lecteur dans le prolétariat [...]. Leur public est ailleurs, dans la bourgeoisie cultivée, et le P.C. ne l'ignore pas, qui les emploie simplement à porter le trouble dans les milieux dirigeants. Ainsi leurs déclarations révolutionnaires demeurent purement théoriques, puisqu'elles ne changent rien à leur attitude, ne leur font pas gagner un seul lecteur chez les ouvriers ; ils demeurent les parasites de la classe qu'ils insultent, leur révolte demeure en marge de la révolution. (192-193)

Ménil's judgement on Dada and the surrealists is more temperate. In 1945, Ménil still believed in the possibility of a surrealist revolution. For him Dada died of a broken heart, brought on by an acute case of irony, unable to leap out of a self-reflexive spiral at the heart of which it ultimately took nothing seriously: not politics, not inequality, not even itself.

“Why Dada, then?” we would be well within our right to ask. Why dedicate any ink to an ephemeral, politically limited movement that lived and died in the Hexagon? One would be tempted to simply answer as Ménil does himself: “Mais pourquoi pas Dada, s'il vous plait ?” (139). Dada's joyful spirit, its irreverent attitude toward reality, and its desire to lift the veil on the arbitrariness of conventions suited the Antillean project, similarly concerned with shedding the intellectual and socio-economic oppression of the Metropole. Racism, after all, is no more than an arbitrary convention — one that is more dangerous than others. As such, its energy was worth resurrecting to then be harnessed from the depth of infinite negativity and beamed into the concrete reality of life. So Dada, because it poked fun at the arbitrary conventions of the French bourgeoisie; but above all Dada, because it was a literary movement predicated upon the humorous attitude, which Ménil identified as crucial to the intellectual and cultural emancipation of the Antillean subject — but, to be viable and sustainable, its intrinsically self-destructive nature had to be transcended, which is what Ménil sets out to do.

I have thus far only hinted at the dangers of the humorous attitude. As we have seen with Sartre's comments on the surrealists, a preliminary critique was that the movement was predicated on too extreme a split between abstract thought and tangible world. For Sartre, this split was politically hypocritical, but it presents other dangers, which I wish to discuss even at the risk of a long digression (to which Ménil would likely not object). Since Dada, as a literary movement, was for Ménil the epitome of the humorous attitude, it becomes crucial to understand what led the movement to its premature end. The danger is intrinsic to the concept of irony, which stands in the shadow of what Ménil calls the humorous attitude.

What Ménil saw in irony likely filled him both with anxiety and wonder. In *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form*, Debarati Sanyal perfectly summarizes “irony's vexed relationship with critique” as well as its potential:

Traditionally defined as a rhetorical figure that intentionally creates two or more disparate meanings in a text, a dissemblance having a critical function in a context of

shared beliefs, irony's more recent identification with contingency, undecidability, and aporia has made it one of modernity's most pervasive modes of self-understanding. Paradoxically, the expansion of irony's relevance to political and philosophical thought on identity is met with skepticism about the viability of its insights for experiences existing outside the literary text. Particularly in the wake of deconstruction and its radicalization of irony as a constitutive indeterminacy of meaning, the contestatory function of irony (as satire) is threatened with irrelevance. (36)

To retrace step by step its passage from a rhetorical figure to a mode of self-understanding, we can point out that, as a trope intrinsically linked to appraisal — whether positive or negative — irony makes us particularly aware of our existence as bold, critical beings through language and text. For it is unquestionably asserting one's power over and through language to dare say one thing and mean another. Paradoxically, however, this power is acquired at the cost of destabilizing language itself. The very possibility of saying, "C'est bien beau!" to suggest exactly the opposite alerts us to the fragility of all signs. From here, all meaning becomes suspect; all relationships between signified and signifiers become a stage for the imaginative mind to explore. Thus we can see how irony journeyed from figure to figurehead for such movements as German Romanticism and Postmodernism, as Sanyal notes in her retracing of the term's history. Most importantly here, we can see how its power would be alluring to colonized subjects upon whose intellectual capacities Europe had constantly cast doubt, and who were bending under the weight of a mountain of arbitrary signifiers.

That is the alluring side of irony; to understand its dark side, I turn to Sanyal's discussion of laughter as trauma, looking particularly at her engagement with Paul de Man's reading of Baudelaire's "De l'essence du rire." We had begun our discussion on humor by identifying detachment as its principal catalyst. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man articulates this idea with the term *dédoublement*, which emphasizes that when rising above the constraints of the empirical world, the ironic poet acquires two distinct selves: one is dedicated to "reflective activity," while the other, which he calls "ordinary," remains "caught in everyday concerns" (211-212). For him, this notion of *dédoublement* is the vanishing point of Baudelaire's reflections on laughter. Naturally, enclosed in the term *ordinary* is the germ of a hierarchical order between the two selves, which will be extended to two forms of comic: the *comique significatif*, which, according to de Man, Baudelaire conceives as "a simple sense of comedy that is oriented toward others, and thus exists on the necessarily empirical level of interpersonal relationships"; and the *comique absolu*, a term corresponding to what Baudelaire calls irony elsewhere, according to de Man.

Elevating the *comique absolu* to the apex of the genre, de Man underscores that this self-duplicating ability is rare among humans, and specifically found in people, "who, like artists and philosophers, deal in language" (213). De Man calls language a "privileged category"; it is at once the material upon which the poet exercises her talent, the only way through which

she can become multiple, and the only realm within which her self-in-text can investigate itself and its self-in-world.

In his reading of Baudelaire, it is only from the misfortune of the self-in-world that the self-in-text can be born: “The ironic, twofold self that the writer or philosopher constitutes by his language seems able to come into being only at the expense of his empirical self, falling (or rising) from a stage of mystified adjustment into the knowledge of his mystification” (214). If we truly follow de Man, however, the self-in-text never reaps the fruit of its demystification; this satisfaction can only belong to the self-in-text. And even then, all that the latter can hope for is bleak: “The ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic” (Ibid.). The demystified subject lives in a state of jittery anxiety and carries on with a sense of impending doom, with the self-in-text compulsively observing the self-in-world and its own self as it draws closer still to the next “fall.”

So far, none of this seems particularly funny. De Man concurs: “It becomes evident that the disjunction is by no means a reassuring and serene process, despite the fact that it involves laughter” (Ibid.). What is more troublesome yet is that this watershed split is only the first in a series of progressively more powerful splits, at the end of which insanity looms. Even the self-in-text must split to reflect on its own textuality, for that is the very proof of its knowledge. Losing sight of it could put the self-in-text at risk of backsliding into mystification. As Sanyal describes this concern, “the temptation to lapse into renewed blindness can only be resisted by at once ironizing this very predicament, that is, by constantly renewing the rupture between the empirical and the ironic selves in a process of infinite specularity” (45). Within this dizzying and relentless process, madness, de Man tells us, is a grave concern:

When we speak, then, of irony originating at the cost of the empirical self, the statement has to be taken seriously enough to be carried to the extreme: absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself. But this reflection is made possible only by the double structure of ironic language: the ironist invents a form of himself that is “mad” but that does not know its own madness; he then proceeds to reflect on his madness thus objectified. (216)

The ironist must embrace the madness of the empirical self. He must produce this madness in words, and he must textualize the very production of this madness. From his perspective, the demands of irony start to appear mentally taxing, and even potentially harmful, for the subject must constantly recommit to maintaining the rawness of this tear between his two selves, for fear of relapsing into inauthenticity.

If we believe de Man, we can begin to embrace with more confidence the hypothesis that the Dadaists succumbed to absolute irony. After introducing Dada via its dynamic efforts to discredit the supremacy of so-called reality, Ménénil invites the reader to witness the movement's finest moment, its baptism, that is, its birth into text as Dada. Ménénil reproduces here the jubilating account of this birth by "l'un des promoteurs du mouvement": "Je déclare que Tristan Tzara a trouvé le mot Dada le 8 février 1916, à 6 heures du soir; j'étais présent avec mes douze enfants lorsque Tzara a prononcé pour la première fois ce mot qui a déchaîné en nous un enthousiasme légitime" (qtd. in "L'humour" 139). The narration of this mythical birth has been attributed elsewhere to Hans Arp, a Franco-German sculptor, who was childless at the time. The presence of these fictitious twelve children, echoes of the twelve apostles — the ultimate fictional witnesses —, grounds the account in an intertextuality that is crucial to all ironic play. The laughter unleashed by the word Dada is the first division of the self that accompanies the first and exciting steps into a demystified reality. But it is rapidly followed by a second division, a reflection on text itself, as Arp adds, "Je suis persuadé que ce mot n'a aucune importance et qu'il n'y a que les imbéciles et les professeurs espagnols qui puissent s'intéresser aux dates" (Ibid.). Knowledge and its production into text immediately become the new objects of derision. Arp concludes, "Ce qui nous intéresse est l'esprit Dada et nous étions tous dada avant l'existence de Dada" (139-140). Thus Dada itself existed happily before, above and beyond text, which undermines the very necessity of text, or of communicability, which problematically already signals a wishful lack of interest in socio-historical processes. Underneath the elation of this birth into text and into freedom, Ménénil recognizes the malaise:

Le monde est nié ; l'esprit est retrouvé, libre. Mais l'amertume accompagne cette vision de saccage. Nous ne pouvons pas sans nous déchirer, rompre avec nos charnelles habitudes [...] Et puis, outre cette tristesse derrière le rire, guettait une suprême tentation. Si l'on allait rire de tout, absolument de tout, — y compris le rire ? Si l'on coupait de soi le dernier secours, la croyance en la valeur même de l'esprit, si l'on se moquait de l'esprit lui-même ? (140)

At work here, we recognize the split between the empirical self (nos *charnelles* habitudes) and the self-in-text or *esprit*. We also recognize the temptation to discredit laughter or *esprit* itself, that is to discredit the consciousness of non-consciousness itself. For Ménénil, it is here that Dada loses itself, hopelessly caught in the whirlwind of irony: "Avec la soif furieuse de négation qui habitait dada il fallait craindre qu'il n'en arrivât à se nier lui-même et, comme Dada prenait au sérieux l'esprit, une négation pareille équivalait à un suicide. C'est ce qui se fit" (140).

Can the subject ever withstand this cultivated madness? If we consider Dada, the answer is: clearly, not always. Even though the undoing of the empirical self is accomplished in text, repercussions in the real world do occur. The suicide alluded to by Ménénil is not simply

the death of Dada, but the very real death of some of its members, who, no longer able to bear “l’inutilité théâtrale et sans joie de tout, quand on sait”⁴³ (Ibid.), opt out of the ironic cycle altogether. Against the finality of these acts, Ménéil rhetorically asks: “On voit assez que l’humour est un fusil qui part. Mais contre qui faut-il le braquer? Serait-ce, ultime geste, contre soi-même?” These questions beg another: can we harness the power of humor without irremediably damaging the self? De Man would say no, lest we betray the ironic spirit.

For de Man, irony is a tyranny that must suffer no cure and no appeasement. De Man belittles all suggestions that art itself could be the cure for the self-in-world, arguing that while they are nice in spirit, they are misguided and ignore the true essence of irony. Quoting Starobinski, de Man writes:

Nothing prevents the ironist from conferring an expansive value to the freedom he has conquered for himself: he is then left to dream of a reconciliation of the spirit and the world, all things being united in the realm of the spirit. Then the great, eternal Return can take place, the universal reparation of what evil had temporarily disrupted. This general recovery is accomplished through the mediation of art. (qtd. in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” 217)

To this, de Man counters that though he may be foolishly tempted to do so, the ironic subject must categorically resist the impulse to save his “world-bound” self. Insisting upon exponential self-reflexivity as the crux of the ironic mode, he asserts that rather than exiting the reflective cycle and performing the peaceable return imagined by Starobinski, which he calls elsewhere “a common (and morally admirable) mistake” (219), Baudelaire demands that the ironic subject remain steadfastly in this detached state of textual demystification, ironizing its predicament *ad infinitum*. Proceeding any other way, de Man suggests, would result in what he calls “a degradation to an intersubjective level, away from the ‘*comique absolu*’ into what Baudelaire calls ‘*comique significatif*,’ into a betrayal of the ironic mode” (217). Yet what Starobinski proposes — a cure for the negative side effects of irony — is indubitably attractive, and if this cure constitutes a fall into *comique significatif*, this mode too then becomes equally alluring. At the core of de Man’s argument, however, lies the forbidding frontier he believes Baudelaire draws between the absolute and signifying forms of comic — the latter

⁴³ Ménéil gives these words to Jacques Vaché, a close friend and influence of Breton who died of an overdose of opium. The words of Jacques Rigaut resonate even more, and testify of an ironic journey taken to the extreme: “En 1920, Jacques Rigaut écrivait dans *Littérature*, revue du mouvement dada : « Il n’y a pas de raisons de vivre, mais il n’y a pas de raisons de mourir non plus. La seule façon qui nous soit laissée de témoigner notre dédain de la vie, c’est de l’accepter. La vie ne vaut pas qu’on se donne la peine de la quitter. On peut par charité l’éviter à quelques-uns, mais à soi-même ? Le désespoir, l’indifférence, les trahisons, la fidélité, la solitude, la famille, la liberté, la pesanteur, l’argent, la pauvreté, l’amour, l’absence d’amour, la syphilis, la santé, le sommeil, l’insomnie, le désir, l’impuissance, la platitude, l’art, l’honnêteté, le déshonneur, la médiocrité, l’intelligence, il n’y a pas de quoi fouetter un chat. » Quel lien rattache à la vie celui qui peut écrire ces lignes noires ? Aucun, n’est-ce pas ? Jacques Rigaut se suicida en 1929” (“Humour” 139). In this instance, perhaps better than in any others, we see that the awareness of the mystified state of the world does not prevent the philosopher’s fall at all.

form, he contends, not being ironic at all. It is this radical differentiation that Sanyal goes on to challenge, arguing that in privileging the absolute form, de Man may have been too quick in evacuating all irony from the signifying form:

De Man's theory of irony as a vertiginous madness is derived from an incomplete reading of Baudelaire's own essay. It relies exclusively on the category of the "absolute comic" in "De l'essence du rire" to develop a model of irony as a purely self-reflexive, pathological vertigo that can only retain its authenticity in its perpetuation. Baudelaire, however, clearly sets out two forms of laughter induced by comic art, one owing to the magic of the *comique absolu*, the other, to the more analytical trigger of the *comique significatif*. (46)

Indeed, in "De l'essence du rire," Baudelaire proposes that all laughter denotes this doubling: "Le rire est l'expression d'un sentiment double, ou contradictoire ; et c'est pour cela qu'il y a convulsion" (373). This convulsion is the result of man's delusions of grandeur clashing against the evidence of his baseness.

[Le rire] est dans l'homme la conséquence de l'idée de sa propre supériorité ; et, en effet, comme le rire est essentiellement humain, il est essentiellement contradictoire, c'est-à-dire qu'il est à la fois signe d'une grandeur infinie et d'une misère infinie, misère infinie relativement à l'Être absolu dont il possède la conception, grandeur infinie relativement aux animaux. C'est du choc perpétuel de ces deux infinis que se dégage le rire. (369-370)

The one who laughs is therefore not simply dual, but also sorely aware of his or her duality. To laugh is to feel a sense of superiority over whatever it is we deem lower than us while registering a deep shame or misery at the presumption itself — how cruel it is to feel so grand; what conceit. For Baudelaire, laughter is the symptom of a weakness of spirit: "Est-il un phénomène plus déplorable que la faiblesse se réjouissant de la faiblesse ?" (367).

For Baudelaire, the one who possesses the capacity to share in language the insight and the laughter gained in this *dédoublement* is called an artist or a poet and further "l'artiste n'est artiste qu'à la condition d'être double et de n'ignorer aucun phénomène de sa double nature" (387). *Dédoublement* is thus a constitutive property of all Baudelairean laughter, and if we agree that the poet is a philosopher who is able to communicate his experiences in duality, then *comique absolu* and *comique significatif* are two languages available to him.

Le comique significatif est un langage plus clair, plus facile à comprendre pour le vulgaire, et surtout plus facile à analyser, son élément étant visiblement double : l'art et l'idée morale ; mais le comique absolu, se rapprochant beaucoup plus de la nature, se présente sous une espèce *une*, et qui veut être saisie par intuition. Il n'y a qu'une vérification du grotesque, c'est le rire, et le rire subit. (375-376)

Because laughter is evidence of a subject's capacity to self-divide that partakes in the ironic attitude, it results that both of its languages, the *grotesque* and the *comique ordinaire*, can be fixtures of the ironist's arsenal. Therefore, as Sanyal puts it, "de Man's translation of the *comique absolu* into a paradigm for irony as epistemological trauma — at the expense of the *comique significatif* — is questionable" (47).

What de Man defines as irony is, in fact, the most extreme incarnation of irony, whereby the ironist falls in love with his compulsion, falls captive to the pleasure of demystification, and refuses the cure offered to him in the form of intersubjective literary and artistic practice. But irony does not always have to be that way, as Starobinski points out. The concept of *comique significatif* offers a healthier language that also relies on the principles of irony. It is also toward that particular version that Ménéil's humorous attitude tends. In doing so, he initiates what Starobinski calls the "great, eternal Return,"⁴⁴ which can only be mediated by art. It is that form of art as resistance that Ménéil imagines for the colonized person. This new function of art exists as the sinuous border between both forms of *comique*, integrating the necessary madness of the absolute form with the power to effect change of the signifying form, all the while being more than the sum of these terms. This endeavor, too, is (anachronistically) creole.

Why continue to embrace this madness, even partially? It is because the duality from which it results is constitutive of the Antillean person. In "Situation de la poésie aux Antilles," published in *Tropiques* in 1944, Ménéil had already specified that,

l'actualité poétique aux Antilles françaises ne peut être en somme que celle même de la France : nous voulons dire qu'elle ne peut être dans son expression que le moment extrême d'une évolution dont les points de repère sont pour n'en citer arbitrairement que les plus marquants, Racine, Hugo, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Breton. Chacun de ces termes étant le dépassement et la conservation des moments antérieurs. Le poète antillais sera qualifié à condition de comporter organiquement en lui, fondues par la vie, ces étapes marquantes et indispensables de la nécessité poétique française. (126)

Laughter belongs to those who are aware of this duality in themselves, who embrace it as a quality, and who mock those who are blind to it. For Ménéil, those who can and do laugh are poets; those who cannot and don't are not — they are the petty-bourgeois *mulâtres* mystified by the *République française universelle*; Ménéil's favorite targets. In another essay, "Laisser passer la poésie..." published in the first issue of *Tropiques* in 1941, Ménéil writes:

Le petit-bourgeois martiniquais ne peut pas faire un roman pour la bonne raison qu'il *est* un personnage de roman.

⁴⁴ It bears noting that Starobinski's formula sounds utopian. Although it follows Ménéil's essay by two decades, it corresponds fortuitously with the Martinican philosopher's utopian thinking.

Nous annonçons l'avènement de l'humour aux Antilles. De l'humour qui délivre sans trop amère douleur de l'étreinte de la bassesse [...].

Nous nous délivrerons de nos plaies par le rire amer car, vous le savez, *l'humour porte un masque double qui rit d'un côté, alors que de l'autre, il se tord dans les grimaces de la détresse.*

Ce faisant nous prenons simplement acte d'une exigence de l'histoire, car c'est par le rire amer qu'une époque se venge de ceux qui encombrant tardivement la scène et se sépare d'eux, en espoir, avant leur mort réelle. (116; emphasis mine)

We recognize in this text that precedes “L'humour” by nearly four years, the duality that Baudelaire identified between man's baseness and his greatness. This laughter is in the poet a consequence of the idea of his own superiority (over the petty-bourgeois) pit against the reality of his own misery (*détresse*). We thus find in this laughter a satirical quality, a corrective objective that likens it to Baudelaire's *comique significatif* — *l'art et l'idée morale* — that avoids falling into a Bergsonian universalism. Overall, Ménil saw duality — any form thereof, whether cultural, ontological, or poetic — as a gift, a productive and pleasurable *mélange*. As he wrote in “L'humour”: “Baudelaire, déjà, affirmait génialement que les deux qualités littéraires fondamentales étaient le surnaturalisme et l'ironie. Et à propos de l'ironie, il disait : ‘Le mélange du grotesque et du tragique est agréable à l'esprit, comme les discordances aux oreilles blasées.’” (139) Thus we can begin to understand that the constitutive duality of the Antillean person should find itself boosted by the duality of irony or the humorous attitude. This attitude, predicated upon duality, in fact, expressed better than others by the Antillean subject's own duality.

Ménil's Dada-related digression has allowed us to consider that, beneath the light-hearted veneer of laughter, the humorist entertains complex and often somber relationships with her world. Furthermore, it has given us a chance to frame the stakes of the political and artistic practice of irony, and how it could participate in the identity politics of the colonized Antillean person. The question that animates us now is how lessons learned from an extreme literary movement that died in its infancy a century ago can inform our reading of contemporary humor? Kierkegaard looked to the past, averting his gaze away from the Romantics and turning it toward Socrates, to find signs of irony's positive possibilities; Ménil, nostalgically leaving Dada and its failures behind, turns to the future, toward the colonial author to come, enjoining him to put humor in the service of the revolution, via poetry.

REHABILITATING HUMOR AS AN AESTHETIC PRACTICE

Having demonstrated the dangers of humor for humorists themselves (madness, suicide, etc.), Ménil undertakes the necessary task of rehabilitating the practice. For him, this endeavor must originate in text — at the dangerous site of madness. Humor, he contends, is not simply

paradoxically serious, it is in truth worthy of joining poetry at the apex of literature — poetry, in fact, *is* humorous. Furthermore, Ménéil points out that all contemporary political literature bears, in one way or another, the stamp of humor (139). Such a radical view troubles the sanctity of canonical literature itself, and for a Black Caribbean scholar, it is an act of dissidence. Ménéil goes on to undermine literary and artistic generic hierarchies and boundaries, and subsumes them under the umbrella of humor. Simultaneously, he inducts Black artists (his first reference to race, here) into the exclusive realm of fine arts while displacing the metropole's claim to cultural exception:

La poésie qu'elle soit surréaliste ou non pour peu qu'elle atteigne a une certaine *sincérité* est nécessairement, humoristique.

Humoristique, la poésie de Breton, d'Eluard, de Langston Hughes, de Césaire.

Humoristiques, les récits de Benjamin Péret, les romans de Faulkner ou de Steinbeck.

Humoristique le jazz de Duke Ellington et d'Armstrong.

Humoristique la peinture de Chirico et de Picasso.

En architecture le modern-style est baroque, etc. (142; emphasis mine)

Gathered around the linchpin of *sincerity* as authenticity (or adhesion to reality) are a cosmopolitan group of artists: Breton and Eluard are joined by Césaire and the African-American poet Hughes; Peret's prose is met by that of the Americans Steinbeck, the author of the down-and-outs, and Faulkner; Ellington and Armstrong dominate the domain of music with jazz; the Greek surrealist Chirico and Picasso, whose charmed encounter with African masks had begotten cubism, are the ambassadors of humor in painting; and finally, the anglicism *modern-style* represents humor in architecture. Separations are performatively eliminated with the symbolic fall of the comma after *humoristique* in the last two clauses. Ménéil remaps the world of arts by encompassing poetry, prose, music, painting, and architecture within the boundaries of humor, and this new world values diversity in nationality, race, and class, under the banner of sincerity.

Poetry is humorous, and humor, as Ménéil goes on to demonstrate in four points, is a poetic attitude:

1. Parce qu'il désensibilise le poète par rapport à l'univers et par là permet cette légèreté d'esprit indispensable à l'expression poétique. *Détachement de l'ironiste*. La passion, qui dramatise et alourdit les moindres événements, est un état anti-poétique. (Ibid.; emphasis mine)

With this first point, Ménéil confirms the primacy of detachment, which is not only a key component of humor but has, in fact, been secretly at work in all true poetic endeavors. This attitude is symbolically sealed as the privilege of the ironist with the performative, detached, non-verbal clause italicized above. Levity is cast against *passion* — the essential component of

tragedy.⁴⁵ This assertion might ring particularly odd amid an international conflict strewn with often futile tragic acts of resistance. The constitutive levity of humor establishes it as a quintessentially new, modern literary mode of confronting reality. Ménil continues,

2. Parce qu'il fait éclater les saumâtres fixités ou institutions qui immobilisent la vie (individuelle ou sociale) et, au travers de l'éclatement, surgissent les désirs illuminés!

With this second point, Ménil continues to underscore the concrete possibilities of humor through an embodied lived experience, reminiscent of a Baudelairian synesthetic vision: humor, he posits, can shatter the institutions that paralyze bodies and assail their senses of smell and taste with bitterness (*saumâtre*). This shattering (*éclatement*), in turn, liberates desires that engage the visual and the auditory as fireworks might (*les désirs illuminés*). Ménil insists again on the current immobility (*fixité*) of bodies (asleep on the rails of existence), both in their private and social spheres, and subsequently suggests that humor, *as* a poetic practice, has the potential to beget a long-awaited socio-political awakening that would not simply result in a *prise de conscience*, but in visceral changes for the people. He goes on,

3. Parce que toute vision humoristique est une métaphore. L'objet de notre perception est recouvert par une hallucination grandiose à côté de laquelle il apparaît minime, futile, impossible. Cette comparaison ou mieux, cette identification, met en déroute la logique habituelle pour donner le condensé poétique.

4. Enfin parce que cette métaphore, qui aboutit à une dégradation du réel lequel finit en pointe de chemise, déclenche une exaltation antithétique de l'esprit. A la chute des réalités correspond une ascension vertigineuse de l'esprit. (Ibid.)

Continuing the task of rehabilitating humor as a legitimate — if not superior — form of poiesis, Ménil delineates the constellation of relationships linking reality, perception, representation, and literary expression, that lies at the heart of humoristic processes. To elucidate the notion that all humoristic vision is a metaphor, we may turn to Peter Brooks's concise yet insightful reminder of metaphor mechanics:

Now “the same-but-different”⁴⁶ is a common (and if inadequate, not altogether false) definition of metaphor. If Aristotle affirmed that the master of metaphor must have an eye for resemblances, modern treatments of the subject have affirmed equally the importance of

⁴⁵ Ménil echoes here Henri Bergson's remark in *Le rire* that, “Le rire n'a pas de plus grand ennemi que l'émotion” (4)

⁴⁶ The notion of “same-but-different” not only illustrates the literary processes at work in poetry and humor, but it also provides as useful heuristic for issues of identity as they relate to racialized colonial and postcolonial subjects. Same-but-different encapsulates the amount of contradicting, paradoxical, and sometimes absurd, emotional, political, anthropological and social negotiations undertaken in dealing with the latter, and by the latter themselves. Importantly, it enables us to swiftly begin to conceptualize the ironic potential — in other words the potential for laughter — of France's impossible relationship to its othered subjects, for after all, how can something — or someone — be at once the same but different?

difference included within the operation of resemblance, the chief value of the metaphor residing in its “tension.” (280)

Via Brooks’s remarks, we can then sense that this tension-based mechanism appears as a rhetorical expression of the Ménélian notion of detachment previously outlined, whereby the humorist, to keep laughing, must nevertheless remain grounded in reality — lest, he or she, like the Dadaists, spiral into madness. The metaphor then is the quintessential rhetorical mode of the spirit, or self-in-text; the higher the elevation of said spirit, activated through an awakening to a deeply degraded reality, the more grandiose the metaphor (or *hallucination*). The object of our perception is not negated, but rather fully perceived and actively overwhelmed (*recouvert*) by a textual maneuver that denounces, in real life, the fallacy of investing it with an emotional charge. Ménéil insists that this process is not one of mere comparison — this is *like* that; rather, it is a disruptive, challenging, forced identification: this *is* that. It wages an assault not on any logic, but on *habitual* logic, that is, the one constructed by an already-fallen society.

For Ménéil, these four points constitute a methodical attempt to affirm humor’s poetic power. Concisely put, humor *is* poetry, for it entertains a similar relationship to reality, and it can even claim the quintessential figure of the metaphor as its exclusive rhetorical mode of expression. Further, borrowing from Freud’s conceptual vocabulary, Ménéil elaborates a scientific approach that underscores the material link between humor, literature, and reality. In addition to *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Ménéil is evidently no stranger to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), as suggested by the following affirmation: “On voit assez que l’humour procède par tous les moyens du rêve: condensation, transfert, hallucination, identification, *etc.*, qui sont ceux mêmes de l’image poétique” (Ibid.; italics mine). I suggested in my introduction that the metaphor was the rhetorical figure best suited to the work of the Antillean author. The latter’s objective, his utmost desire, is to affirm his subjectivity and to participate in a non-totalizing universal current as a worthy member. In all, with this section of his essay, Ménéil demonstrates why poetry, the humorous attitude, and the metaphor are his best instruments.

Ménéil’s repurposing of Dada echoes, prolongs, and validates the endeavor started by André Breton, in his 1932 essay *Les vases communicants* — itself an attempt to tap into the literary potential latent in the writings of Sigmund Freud. Much in the same way that this lesser-known of Breton’s surrealist apologies insisted on the movement’s wish to “lay down a conducting wire between the far too separated worlds of waking and sleeping, of exterior and interior reality, of reason and madness, of a peaceful knowing and love, of life for life and the revolution, *etc.*” (116; italics mine) — in other words, between the dream-world and reality —, Ménéil proposes to establish a similar working relationship between humor and the real, likewise using literature as a *trait d’union* between the two planes. Thus traveling the path previously paved by Breton (whose poetry he salutes by using it as a coda for this section) and

his work on dreams, both as an homage and a shortcut (even borrowing the poet's dilating "etc."), Ménil establishes humor as a full-fledged revolutionary literary mode.

Leaping from theorization to application, with the determination that makes his multi-discursive texts such adventurous reads, Ménil then transitions into his own illustration of a literature of humor: a dystopian vignette.

ONE MAN'S UTOPIA IS ANOTHER MAN'S DYSTOPIA

Having labored methodically to establish the revolutionary magnitude of literary humor, Ménil himself shifts gears from theoretical commentary to the meta-literary with a playful negation: "Ce n'est pas pour rire que j'ai parlé du rire mais bien pour définir, d'une part, ce qui à *cette date* mérite qu'on en rie et d'autre part, la façon d'user, contre le dérisoire de l'heure, de *l'arme dangereuse* de l'humour" (143; italics mine). Ménil carefully anchors his considerations in a historical time (*à cette date*) that is mired in war and demands an equally aggressive response (*l'arme dangereuse*) that can be delivered via humor. What follows is a somber semi-poetic assessment of the times, full of conspicuous symbols and rhetorical tricks:

Voici donc que par-dessus la grisaille des temps pointe l'aube de 1945... Et par les prairies de l'Occident pousseront cette année, avec les pâquerettes, les plus beaux choux du monde. C'est que ces choux auront été nourris avec un engrais nouveau. Un engrais excellent : l'homme. Vous n'y êtes pas encore ? Nous voulons dire, vous avez bien compris, que l'homme aura servi d'engrais et de fumure à ces choux. Car l'homme, voyez-vous, sur le marché mondial, à l'heure actuelle, après réflexion, on a vu que c'était, après tout, ce qui coutait le moins cher. Nous sommes au sommet d'une culture. La culture occidentale, catholique, orthodoxe, protestante, prudente, pratique, économe et spiritualiste. La seule culture, à ce qu'on nous assure. (143)

Opening with the grandiloquent entrance of 1945, which overcomes the dark clouds of the times, Ménil takes the reader on a rapid descent, over deceptively welcoming prairies (in fact, full of death, as symbolized by the daisy), that ends in *les choux*. In French, *finir dans les choux* is a colloquial expression evoking failure — this particular failure is superlative, as underscored by "les *plus* beaux choux du monde." Creating a brief diversion from any uneasy feeling the daisies might have conjured up, Ménil offers a deceptively soothing praise of agricultural know-how, before taking the reader frankly to the brink of horror: the brand-new, potent fertilizer is human-based. This non-verbal clause has the power and the makings of a punchline, which we can analyze through Salvatore Attardo's GTVH:

Script Opposition: Human worth/human insignificance

Logical Mechanism: Garden-path⁴⁷

Situation: A theoretical text about poetry in the midst of a war

Target: The butt of the joke is *la culture occidentale*, etc.

Narrative Strategy: Riddle-like

Language: The language used is both poetic and trivial (that is, figures of style are juxtaposed with agricultural discourse), which accentuates the tension between the terms of the script opposition level.

The reader vacillates between two possible resolutions of meaning: the French landscapes are strewn with the literal bodies of soldiers whose cadavers literary feed the earth or humanity is worth nothing more than *merde*. Maintaining the ambiguity, Ménil taunts the reader: “Vous n’y êtes pas encore?” to which he provides an answer that redundantly offers now two concrete terms for fertilizers (*engrais* and *fumure*), without offering a moral resolution to the dilemma (it is true that the dead bodies of soldiers will decompose and return to the earth; *fumure* and *engrais* are literally organic waste). This detailed redundancy evokes the mechanism of Bergsonian humor, as described in *Le rire* and previously evoked in my introduction: “l’humour affectionne les termes concrets, les détails techniques, les faits précis.[...] L’humoriste est ici un moraliste qui se déguise en savant, quelque chose comme un anatomiste qui ne ferait de la dissection que pour nous dégoûter” (130). This brand of moralizing humor is appropriate in this wartime era of calculations and deaths. With this, Ménil proposes a radical reframing of Black laughter that stands in stark contrast with the innocent laughter of the colonized subject, infantilized by the colonizer’s gaze.

In the aforementioned passage, Ménil rhetorically delineates who is laughing, who might laugh, and who the target of this laughter should be through a subtle play of pronouns that echoes the beginning of his essay. The awakened *nous* returns, hoping to jolt the *vous* into complicity (through humor’s laughter) against the elusive and ominous *on*, which has determined the value of man (*on a vu*) and keeps assuring us that all is well in the best of all worlds (*on nous assure*). Ménil also performs several other complexly intertwined rhetoric moves that call attention to the potential of wordplay. Variants of repetition yield an oppressive mood. Multiple anadiploses (or repetition of words at the end of a sentence, and then at the beginning the next) insist on the substantives *choux*, *engrais*, and *culture*. The pattern of repetitions itself evokes a labyrinthian space complete with a deformed chiasmus: *choux, [choux, engrais, engrais, homme, homme, engrais, choux,] homme, culture, culture, culture*. Furthermore, the word *culture* is the object of a pun, evoking simultaneously a means of production (the cultivation of *choux*), and a set of beliefs and social norms; this creates a humoristic tension between the concrete and the abstract, the menial and the hallowed. At the end of this

⁴⁷ Attardo defines “garden path” as a mechanism by which the hearer is led to believe the joker is speaking about one thing when he is in fact talking about another. See Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin.

paragraph, as another punchline delivered with an excessive accumulation of adjectives, Ménil names his adversary: Western capitalist imperialism.

What follows is the climax of the essay — at once a pause in its methodical tone and a performative demonstration. If by 1945, Ménil was certainly no longer the only Caribbean theorist to have noted that surrealism would be a fitting voice for Black folks, the following dystopian tableau constitutes, for a francophone thinker, a precocious — if brief — incursion into the political possibilities of another snubbed sub-genre: the dystopia.

Au sommet d'une culture, nous sommes. Jamais l'homme n'a été si bon, si utile pour la culture. Je ne sais si vous aimez la poésie mais à écrire ces lignes, je sens courir entre mes épaules la fleur grimpanche du frisson. On prend donc, disons-nous, l'homme : on le met dans un parc. Il y a une usine au milieu du parc et autour de l'usine, au loin, la fuite de beaux parterres. Tout est beau dans l'usine parce qu'on est cultivé et qu'on a du goût. Tout brille, tout est blanc, hygiénique. Il y a des appareils de précision qui ressemblent à de prestigieuses araignées ou à des fleurs de lumière et parfois ils vous font des signaux qui sont comme des étoiles électrifiées. Autour du parc, il y a des buissons où chantent aussi, sous un ciel admirable, des fleurs d'électricité. On prend l'homme, disions-nous, on le fait entrer dans une salle : on l'asphyxie doucement. Il y a tant de douceur dans l'air ! Et puis on le jette dans un four incandescent. Oh! rassurez-vous : on recueillera toutes ses cendres. L'homme est si bon qu'il ne faut rien en perdre. On mettra de l'homme dans des sachets bien imprimés à l'avance et on fera, avec de l'homme, ce beau printemps où le vent et les oiseaux feront des querelles aux arbres, où l'herbe, elle est folle cette herbe, s'avisera de pousser à côté des choux qui ne vaudront pas plus cher cette année, ces choux, car enfin, heureusement, dans notre civilisation, on a de l'homme quand on veut, tant qu'on veut, pour rien... (143-144)

With this new opening chiasmus (Nous sommes au sommet d'une culture / Au sommet d'une culture, nous sommes), Ménil confirms the passage to the other side of the mirror, into the realm of poetry and metaphor, as signaled by the shiver between his shoulder blades. Throughout this passage, the Kafka-esque *on* becomes ubiquitous, a faceless and nameless network with industrial and administrative reach. While the machines are both given organic properties (they become spiders, flowers, and stars) and personified (they sing and wave), man is overwhelmingly objectified (aside from two instances in which *l'homme* is the subject of the verb, it is mostly the object in this passage), and eventually asphyxiated, incinerated and bagged. In a final act of dehumanization, the definite article *l'homme* is replaced by the partitive *de l'homme*. The factory's spotless and serene perfection creates an eerie cognitive dissonance with its morbid activity. Its smooth operation provides a stark contrast with nature, which has gone mad (the grass is crazy, and the wind and the birds are in conflict with the trees).

In this detailed vignette, we recognize Bergson's notion that the humorist is a moralist turned scientist; we also see another property of Bergsonian humor, which suggests that this

rhetorical process enunciates the real as though it were ideal: “on décrira minutieusement et méticuleusement ce qui est, en affectant de croire que c’est bien là ce que les choses devraient être : ainsi procède souvent l’*humour*” (130). And indeed, Ménil punctuates this terrifying (yet all too real) scene with reassuring comments (the air is sweet, and not to worry, not an ounce of man will be wasted) that imbue the scene with a utopian quality: all is well in the best of all worlds. Glissant’s description of utopia as the quest for “l’harmonie d’une Mesure” befits the smooth operations of this factory (141). This scene also takes up several dystopian themes: the control and dehumanization of the human body, the rise of the machine, the marginalization of nature, and a despotic force, whose cruel oppression is veiled — as is often the case in dystopias — by a manufactured image of benevolence toward the masses (Claeys 290). This factory is an anti-utopia, as Darko Suvin understands the term — that is, a utopia that turns out to be a dystopia. I am interested in Ménil’s use of humor (Bergsonian and Ménilian) to unmask anti-utopian dynamics, and I contend that it provides a useful analytical framework for modern literary works.

Though utopias had long carved out a small but perduring niche, by 1945, literary dystopias had begun to gather increased momentum. As many critical works (notably, Gregory Claeys’s 2016 *Dystopia: A Natural History*, and *Dystopia(n) matters on the page, on screen, on stage*, edited by Fátima Vieira and published in 2013) have pointed out, within the fiber of even successfully planned and executed utopian societies, one often finds that the collective good is purchased at the cost of individuality, and that the specter of despotic collectivism looms close, though in a less conspicuous or disturbing fashion than in dystopias. In other words, one group’s utopia can very well become another one’s dystopia. In early twentieth-century literary dystopias, utopian movements such as bolshevism and communism are denounced as collectivist totalitarianisms, right alongside fascism and national socialism. This makes Ménil’s repurposing of the dystopian genre more complex and risky: he deploys here an aesthetic apparatus often used against his own ideology and attempts to redirect it at liberal capitalism. Indeed, if, on the one hand, the factory, the asphyxiation, and the incineration denounce the Nazi genocidal apparatus, on the other hand, the myriad machines present in this vignette evoke the prescriptive mechanization and industrialization of communist utopias — a prescription denounced in many anti-bolshevik dystopian works of the era through the leitmotif of oppressive machine-driven industrial spaces.⁴⁸ Similarly

⁴⁸ Of one such anti-bolshevik and anti-mechanistic work, titled *Wé* and written in 1924 by Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin, Claeys writes that it is “an early literary refraction of Leninism” whereby the dictatorship has a purpose, or at any rate a rationale, which goes beyond personal power and beyond politics. It is mechano-intoxication incarnate. It seeks the perfectibility of scientific rationalism. Collectivism does not seek only to promote a uniform devotion to the common good. Mechanical uniformity and precision have become the paradigm of human rationality. Society aims to create people as efficient as machines by making society machine-like. (342)

This reading, which illuminates an anti-communist work, applies just as well to Ménil’s anti-capitalistic vignette.

here, the machines are presented as deceptive foes, whose deadly purposes are concealed behind falsely benevolent star-like blinking lights, but Ménénil takes care to avoid all confusion by subsequently explicitly naming their signified:

Nous n'avons garde de situer ce *fait divers* en dehors de la civilisation actuelle tant chantée ici ou là par les poètes républicains. Nous ne saurions y voir que l'aboutissement prévisible de cette civilisation même. Bien fou qui verrait en ce mépris de l'homme un signe exceptionnel de la guerre ou de la bestialité d'un peuple bouc émissaire. La guerre ne change rien aux mœurs : elle n'est, selon la formule définitive de Clausewitz, que la continuation de la politique par des moyens militaires. Quelle autre issue que celle que nous venons de montrer pouvait avoir une culture dont toutes les idéologies s'inspirent uniquement, à l'analyse, du *culte sordide de l'argent* ? (144; italics mine)⁴⁹

But why this particular sub-genre? Traditionally set in a future where most things have gone wrong,⁵⁰ dystopias serve as warnings to those in the present. As Lucy Sargisson astutely notes, “Dystopias matter because they make us think. They help us to imagine and envisage how the present can change into something very nasty. They tell us what’s wrong with the now, and they imagine how things could (easily) become much worse” (Vieira 40-41). Ménénil, however, subverts this typical dystopian feature by insisting that *this* is not the future: not only is *this* the present (he repeatedly reminds the reader the year is 1945), but *this* is nothing but a *fait divers* — not even a breaking news story. On the one hand, this mild subversion calls attention to this rule of dystopia and in a way validates the sub-genre as an organized one; on the other, it demonstrates creative autonomy, which is not negligible for a francophone author, whose peers had been historically caught between doudouism and the imitation of European canons.

Ménénil’s dystopian tableau elicits a reflection on the relationship between the past, the present and the future, and the role of imagination in the failures of today and the planning

⁴⁹ Ten years later, Césaire will echo and amplify this indictment of capitalism in his crucial 1955 *Discours sur le colonialisme*. After having mercilessly stated that in every European bourgeois sleeps another Hitler, Césaire explains:

J’ai beaucoup parlé d’Hitler. C’est qu’il le mérite : il permet de voir gros et de saisir que la société capitaliste, à son stade actuel, est incapable de fonder un droit des gens, comme elle s’avère impuissante à fonder une morale individuelle. Qu’on le veuille ou non : au bout du cul-de-sac Europe, je veux dire l’Europe d’Adenauer, de Schuman, Bidault et quelques autres, il y a Hitler. Au bout du capitalisme, désireux de se survivre, il y a Hitler. Au bout de l’humanisme formel et du renoncement philosophique, il y a Hitler. (13)

⁵⁰ For instance, we may think of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) which takes place in the 2500s; Zamyatin’s *We* is staged 1000 years after the OneState achieved total domination of the world and as it is setting its sight on the rest of the universe, etc.

for better tomorrows.⁵¹ As he points out, the present he describes is the predictable outcome of this very civilization, which itself had begun, in the past, as a bourgeois utopia. It can be said that the latter had emerged as far back as the eighteenth century, birthing the revolution of 1789, midwifed by the Enlightenment. The latter's humanist thinkers envisioned a future whereby wealth and dignity would be equally accessible to all, and knowledge and science (and later technology) would be vectors to this end. Yet, although that particular poorly planned utopia led to a dystopian present, Ménil's enduring engagement with communism indicates that he still subscribes to utopian thinking. To escape said present, the times require revolutionary thinking, that is, the elaboration and instauration of a new utopia — implicitly stated in the present text, this utopia is that of a Marxist communist society. What Ménil does state explicitly here, however, is that humor as art, he goes on to prophesy, will be essential to ushering in the demise of the current status quo and the establishment of a new order: "L'art," he declares, "est capable de ce tour de force" (149). Under Ménil's pen, dystopia and humor emerge together as a device that can stimulate the imagination in the service of revolutionary social change. For if humor, as we have noted via Bergson, considers the real and pretends it is ideal, the observer is never duped. She knows and experiences through all of her senses that the real is not ideal. She can then be prompted to imagine a new ideal, one that she wants to make real. In doing so, she would subscribe to utopian thinking. "After all," as asserted by Gordin, Tilley and Prakash, "utopias and dystopias by definition seek to alter the social order on a fundamental, systemic level. They address root causes and offer revolutionary solutions" (8).

Ménil's use of a dystopian vignette implies more than it lets on, from a poetic perspective. By choosing this particular aesthetics, he tells us that because the reality of the colonized person is dystopian, it ensues that the literature he predicts will naturally include dystopian tropes. Those tropes are the materialistic indices of the colonized person's quotidian. This barbaric reality is precisely what catalyzes and feeds the humorous attitude. The work of the humorous attitude is to transform this dystopian reality into a poetic and metaphorical program. Ménil does so here by boldly using the gas chamber as a metaphor for colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and France's self-serving brand of humanism. This move is a poetic expression of what he explains didactically elsewhere in this essay, and what Césaire will go on to proclaim, outside of the poetic form, in his *Discours sur le colonialisme*. We see then that for Ménil, the dystopian genre and the humorous attitude are intimately linked. First, they participate in the same critical program of undermining the status quo. Second,

⁵¹ For a in-depth exploration of the historical value of dystopias and utopia as commentaries on particular presents, see Gordin, Michael D., et al. *Utopia/Dystopia: conditions of historical possibility*. In this volume, the authors state, "We hope to examine utopias (and dystopias) not for what they tell us about an intellectual construct in assorted individuals' heads, but rather for what they reveal about a set of abiding concerns and cultural formations that generated both the desire for utopian transcendence and the specific form that utopia/dystopia took. As such, utopias are not to be seen as referring to an imagined place at some future time; instead, we are interested in how the historian can use variants of utopian thinking and action to explore the specificity of a time and a place" (11).

the condition of their possibility is the recognition of the degraded actuality. Third, the real dystopia of the colonies can be converted into a poetics of dystopia, when animated by the humorous attitude.

Fast-forwarding to today, we know that Ménil's communist utopia led to yet another dystopia, eventually culminating in the fall of the Soviet Union, and China's particular brand of communism, which exacerbates the ills of Western liberal capitalism. The latter, which, too, began as a utopia, has also turned into another dystopia: the one we live in today. As Tom Moylan puts it, in his chapter in *Dystopia(n) Matters*:

We live in a world shaped by capitalism in its global stage, generally subject to authoritarian power (be it soft or hard, be it wrapped in an aura of democracy or served straight in varying degrees of overt control). In this world, nature (humanity included) is alienated, reified, exploited, oppressed and ultimately destroyed in some way or other. In this world, ecological, economic, political and cultural crises are increasingly the norm. The name of this world is dystopia (over against the misrepresentation of itself as utopia). (42)

What Ménil did predict correctly is the engagement of art as a commentary on, against, and enabled by a degraded present, and even more importantly, his own use of dystopia in 1945 anticipated today's widespread adoption of this sub-genre. The box office successes of films like *Avatar* (2009), *The Hunger Games* (2012-2015), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), and several remakes, such as *Blade Runner* (1982 and 2017) or *RoboCop* (1987 and 2014), indicate a thriving cinematographic genre. In subsequent chapters, I will be concerned with tracing the interplay of utopia, dystopia, imagination, and humor in contemporary novels and films rooted in the Caribbean and the *banlieues*, for it is in such anti-utopian spaces that Ménil prophesied that humor would blossom.

COLONIALISM AS UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA

The condition of imaginability⁵² of utopias and dystopias is as contingent upon temporality (past, present, future) as it is upon space. Accordingly, after having obliquely critiqued his own time by denouncing the global *état des choses*, the author zooms in more directly on his own corner of the world, as he initiates the last movement of his reflection on humor:

Plus le sort fait à l'homme est inhumain, plus la protestation de la conscience se fait vibrante, plus l'humour approche de ses conditions idéales. Nul ne peut nier que, toutes chances égales d'ailleurs, dans ces pays du globe où nous vivons* on risque de trouver une dégradation de l'homme plus grande qu'ailleurs. C'est bien, on le conçoit, sans aucune

⁵² This phrase, an adaptation of Michel Foucault's "condition of possibility," is coined in *Utopia/Dystopia : Conditions of Historical Possibility* (9).

vanité déplacée que nous pensons n'être pas mal placés, aux Antilles, pour contribuer substantiellement à une littérature de l'humour. (146-147)

In this passage, a discreet number, following *où nous vivons* leads to a laconic footnote: “Les colonies.” Once a utopia, whereby Europe would bestow knowledge, science, dignity, and democracy upon savages via the colonial endeavor, by 1945, the colonies have become dystopian spaces ruled from afar and where inequality runs rampant. The curtain had fallen, revealing that capitalism had always been at the helm of this falsely benevolent enterprise. This degradation, Ménénil predicts, offers the ideal conditions of imaginability for a prolific literature of humor (of which dystopia could be one aesthetics), and it is this intriguing prophecy that generated the impetus for the present work. A recent *prise de conscience*, likely brought about by the implacable rule of the Admiral Robert, provided the much-needed spark for the birth of humor in the Antilles, further fanned by Black writers’ discovery and subsequent adaptation of surrealist poetry. “L’humour, du moins l’humour conscient de soi et de ses moyens, vient à peine de naître sur notre sol mais il murira vite car il a pris les raccourcis ultra-rapides de la poésie,” Ménénil explained, before quoting a passage from Aimé Césaire’s already canonical 1939 *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (147). What then follows is a glorification of the Antillean peasant — who, although he may not be entirely aware of his own quotidian use of humor, according to Ménénil, has long displayed a detachment that more than often leads him to the heights of cynicism (*ibid.*) —, and a pitiless indictment of the Antillean bourgeoisie, whose lack of foresight and imagination, and whose ignorance of the potential of poetry and humor have prevented it from seeing the present for what it is (a nightmare) and from clamoring for a better future. This indolent population exists obliviously in what Édouard Glissant would later describe in *Le Discours antillais* as, “l’horrible sans horreur d’une colonisation réussie” (15). Hedonistic to a fault, this bourgeoisie has chosen happiness without freedom over freedom without happiness.⁵³ Ménénil, nonetheless, sees in these sets of conditions the auspicious grounds for the development of an engaged form of art that would bring about meaningful change, under the banner of humor.

Ménénil was also partly correct in predicting a change: French colonies now belong to the past — as a result of utopian thinking. A year later, Martinique and Guadeloupe would indeed acquire the status of *départements d’outre-mer*, through the law of March 19, 1946, and by 1962, Algeria would finally obtain the right to auto-determination. Yet I argue that, although colonies are defunct, asking whether Ménénil’s prophecies have come to pass or if they are, in fact, still at work in contemporary literature is not a futile exercise. Though their political status has been seemingly resolved (as historian Pascal Blanchard suggested in his lecture in front of a Guadeloupean audience), many French citizens still bear in their bodies

⁵³ This turn of phrase, quoted in Claeys, is excerpted from Zamyatin’s dystopia *We*, whereby it is delivered by R-13, a poet (Claeys 342).

and spirits the traces of colonization. The texts and films in my proposed corpus each use as backdrops sociopolitically and historically charged chronotopes — the Parisian *banlieues* and the Antilles — where individuals with conflicted allegiances and citizenships evolve. They may be afforded, in theory, the same rights as those of the dominant society, yet their status as outcasts confines them to the periphery. In these works, the psychological degradation they endure is symbolized by brutal physical desacralization (such is the case in Raphaël Confiant's *Trilogie Tropicale*, Lionel Steketee, Thomas N'Gijol and Fabrice Éboué's *Case Départ* or Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine*). These characters are often dissected, analyzed, and ultimately gazed upon as essentially different. Yet these traumas are mediated through the acts of laughing or producing laughter. The near-omnipresence of humor in francophone works suggests that Ménénil's prophecies have come true — or, at the very least, justify further investigation of their fallout.

THE END AS A NEW BEGINNING

In all, “L'humour: introduction à 1945” offers a series of voyages between rather diverse domains of knowledge. Each landscape adds a new valuable mode of understanding humor, but Ménénil never claims to exhaust this proteiform topic. At the beginning of his essay, the author often tells us what humor is not. He goes on to tell us what it can offer — chiefly hope and dignity. He then explains, through a psychological lens, that this attitude is born out of a sudden awareness of a degraded reality, and that laughter is both the sign of this awareness and the cure for the anguish it begets. Via Freud, we understand that detachment is the condition *sine qua non* of this laughter. From the demise of Dada, we learn that this detachment must be carefully controlled, lest it leads to madness and eventually, suicide. Through the sacrifice of Dada, from which a slightly more mature form of surrealism was nevertheless born (in spite of what Sartre thought of it), we catch a preliminary glimpse of the political power of poetry, or at least its capacity to stage an imaginary negation of the real world that could lead to a new reality. From there, Ménénil, delving frankly into the literary materiality of humor, proposes the metaphor as its quintessential rhetorical figure. Then through a performative escape into the literary with a bone-chilling vignette of the present, Ménénil implicitly invites us to contemplate the value of utopian thinking within the dystopian reality of his times. Capitalism is severely indicted, and with a last stop in the Caribbean, we come to understand that colonialism is the other side of the same coin (and as we have seen, Césaire says as much ten years later in his *Discours sur le colonialisme*). Importantly, in the human degradation witnessed daily in the Caribbean — a degradation that is the inevitable byproduct of the colonial endeavor —, Ménénil sees the ideal conditions for the blossoming of a literature of humor, which allows him to come full circle.

Revisiting the goals of this chapter, it would appear that a close reading of Ménéil's essay has indeed afforded us a multifaceted exploration of humor and allowed us to see how it hopes to effect change in the world and constitutes a valuable weapon that could be added to the *écrivain engagé's* arsenal. In my view, this repurposing of irony into humor challenges Nesbitt's conclusion that the Martinican philosopher was limited in his ability to create new conceptual apparatuses. It seems to me, rather, that naming new concepts was always a challenge for Ménéil. Perhaps Ménéil's *humor* needed a brand new term to correspond to a distinctly Caribbean ethos or one that sounded more radical. I am reminded of another one of his essays, written during his *Tropiques* days, in which he proposes to name the literature to come "Romantisme Antillais" (126). Admittedly, this creolized name (which suggested a synthesis of the occidental and the Caribbean) was somewhat clunky — clunkier than Négritude, which was the name given to that literature for years to come.⁵⁴ Ménéil, however, in his repurposing endeavors always brought multiple concepts together, and their aggregation was always more expansive than the simple sum of its terms. These concepts were seldom solely predicated upon race (as Négritude was) but on values that were both particular and universal. What makes Ménéil's understanding of humor appealing, is that it was adaptable to all oppressed people (all those living in a degraded actuality, whether in Europe or in its colonies), and linked them together in a transnational practice of resistance. It is also in that manner that I understand his deployment of the dystopian genre.

By way of conclusion, Ménéil leaves us with the following parting words:

Nous *réinventerons* dada mais, dialectiquement pour le dépasser.

Dada fut la négation absolue et se suicida selon une logique implacable. Il fit de son humour un court-circuit à l'intérieur duquel il se plaça lui-même et sa mort résulta de cette force électrocutante. Il s'isola dans le cercle désolé de sa subjectivité et mina par l'humour ce suprême îlot de la liberté imaginaire.

Nous, nous sommes des gens pour qui le monde extérieur existe et il n'est pas question que nous généralisions la moquerie jusqu'à faire un désert de notre foi.

Il est des questions sur lesquelles nous n'avons garde de plaisanter. La liberté, la vie, la poésie.

Et cette liberté nous en voyons l'image par-dessus la fausse actualité des temps.

Et cette vie nous la voyons poindre par-dessus la vie des chiens.

Et cette poésie brille à travers les yeux vivants de l'*Histoire*.

C'est bien fermement appuyés sur ces sur-réalités que nous *ferons* essayer, à tout le reste, les feux de salve de l'humour atroce. (149; italics mine)

Ménéil reiterates his warning against the dangers to which Dada had succumbed. In an emotional plea that constitutes a final homage, he proposes a resurrection of the movement, but one that would transcend its failures, go beyond total negation as an end game, and in a

⁵⁴ Ménéil, however, will never appreciate that term to designate Black poetry. He begins one of his essays, "Sens et non-sense," with a warning: "Il ne faudrait pas confondre poésie noire et négritude" (65).

dialectical movement, reach a new paradigm. With a triumphant *nous*, which has once and for all evicted the *on*, Ménil enfolds the reader in a final affirmation of complicity. The use of the simple future provokes a craving for the utopia to come, yet this utopia does not appear to be touted as the totalizing end of History. In his watershed essay, *The Shape of Utopia* (1970), Robert C. Elliott noted that “the attempt of utopian writers to freeze history — the fight of utopia against history — has prompted severe criticism of the whole utopian enterprise” (10). We find no such attempt in Ménil’s work, which instead gives History not only a capital letter, but also lively eyes through which poetry shines. Poetry itself is alive in these last words, which abound in figures of speech (metaphors, anaphors, hyperboles, etc.). But the hypnotic beauty of these concluding lines does not aim to lull. Ménil wants us to make no mistake: his is a battle cry (an echo perhaps of Césaire’s). Accordingly, he leaves us with the promise of the bursting staccato of humor’s salvo, which functions both as a coda to his reflection and a cackle intended to jolt us into laughing. While menacing, these parting words are undoubtedly instilled with a utopian spirit. What has come of this utopia and what has come of this laughter is the subject of the following chapters.

Chapter 2: Departmental Dystopia: The Soft, the Concrete and the Comical in Raphaël Confiant’s *Trilogie Tropicale*

Le monde ne va pas sans utopies. C’est là le moteur des énergies intellectuelles.
— Raphaël Confiant

Over the course of their 400-year shared history with France, Guadeloupe, Guyane, and Martinique have witnessed various expressions and reconfigurations of the colonial and postcolonial utopia. And because they are still tributaries of France, thus keeping its dreams of overseas presence alive, it could be argued that the Antilles are still caught up in the *République*’s utopia of *rayonnement planétaire*. Every new iteration of this utopia is conceived with governing perfection in mind. Each new attempt is designed to be better than the last, and in fact, to be *the* last one. But today, the Antilles are not in the state of plenitude one expects from a political status cast as utopian perfection. Instead, sporadic social unrest challenges the possibility of this telos.⁵⁵ As Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau testifies, “il y a une angoisse antillaise qui surgit de temps à autre en émeutes inexplicables, et qui rôde auprès des rutilantes automobiles, des politiciens dérisoires, des magnificences commerciales” (103-109). If we understand the decolonial utopia as a socio-political failure in the Caribbean, by some measure, and if we consider failed or poorly planned utopias to be dystopias, one could expect the dystopian genre to prevail in the Antilles. After all, would a subject/author living in a real-world dystopia not also turn to the dystopian genre to represent reality? Yet, at first glance, dystopia is not a genre readily associated with the Antilles. For one, *créolité* has dominated the literary scene for the past three decades, and its wish to recover the past through literature appears anathema to the dystopian genre’s concern with technology, futurity, and modernity.⁵⁶ But if we pay close attention, several Caribbean works of French expression do borrow tropes from the dystopian genre to construct their social critique — among them Maryse Condé’s young adult novel *La planète Orbis* (2002), Jean-Marc Rosier’s *Noir Néons* (2008), and Georges Cocks’s *Magnitude 8, Apocalypse* (2016). Rather than thinking of these works as exceptions, I contend that they are as Creole as any others. In typical Creole

⁵⁵ At the beginning of 2009, multiple workers unions and social collectives collaborated across *départements d’outre-mer* to organize a general strike that paralyzed Guyana, Guadeloupe and Martinique for more than a month. The movement began in Guyana, with protests against the excessive cost of fuel in the department. In spite of violent rhetoric — “La Gwadeloup sé tan nou, la Gwadeloup sé pa ta yo : yo péké fê sa yo vlé adan péyi an-nou” [Guadeloupe is ours, not theirs: They won’t do whatever they want in our country; translation mine] —, the riots occasioned only a few light injuries and one possibly unrelated death. In the end, France agreed to many of the collectives’ requests, including an adjustment of prices for fuel and food staples.

⁵⁶ The quest for a missing past aligns better with the logic of the detective novel, and accordingly both Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant have written in that particular non-canonical genre.

fashion, they draw from diverse literary traditions, validate them, transgress their rules, and creolize their tropes into a whole whose discreet parts are no longer distinguishable. In this chapter, I focus on Raphaël Confiant's *Trilogie Tropicale*, which I consider a creolist foray into the dystopian genre and an illustration of Ménil's literature of humor.

Raphaël Confiant was born in Martinique in 1951. His early years are marked by a growing disillusionment with respect to departmentalization — the 1946 act that transformed the *vieilles colonies* into full-fledged French departments.⁵⁷ In addition, the global socio-political changes of the 50s and 60s have direct effects on the island and its inhabitants: demonstrations and strikes organized by the local communist party, as well as murderous riots in December 1959, related to the mass arrival of *pieds-noirs* fleeing Algeria. It is in this anxious historical context that young Raphaël emerges out of childhood at the precocious age of 9, as he writes in his autobiographical novel, *Ravines du devant-jour* (1993). This international climate, returned to the brink of disaster too quickly, and an early sense of being culturally suffocated between Europe, Africa, and America affect Confiant's aesthetics, awakening a desire to find radically new ways of apprehending the world.

In the 1980s, Confiant, Chamoiseau, and linguist Jean Bernabé find this new path, which they coin *Créolité*. Together, the three Martinican write *Éloge de la Créolité*, published in 1989. Expanding Glissant's *Antillanité* beyond the Caribbean, the essay proposes a new way to “vivre le monde.” If this project sounds utopian, it is because it is, but its concern with multiplicity prevent sit from tipping toward the dystopian. Though I will not recapitulate the complete project, I will highlight one element that will help frame what distinguishes the *Trilogie Tropicale* from other creolist works. Starting with the foundational observation that Antilleans have been stricken by exteriority (they have come to see themselves through the European gaze), *Créolité* sought to offer an alternative aesthetic vector for the knowledge of the self and the world (25). Its first order of business was to fill a wide socio-historico-cultural void: “En littérature, mais aussi dans les autres formes de l'expression artistique, nos manières de rire, de chanter, de marcher, de vivre la mort, de juger la vie, de penser la déveine, d'aimer et de parler l'amour, ne furent que mal examinées. [...] Certaines de nos traditions disparurent sans que personne ne les interroge...” (25). Thus it falls to the Antillean author to resurrect this past and to substitute it for the history written by the Metropole. This resurrection is accomplished via a literature aesthetically freed from the constraints of French models, and whose objective is in part to “donner à voir les héros insignifiants, les héros anonymes, les oubliés de la Chronique coloniale, ceux qui ont mené une résistance toute en détours et en patiences, et qui ne correspondent en rien à l'imagerie du héros occidentalofrançais” (41). As a result, creolist works are often situated in the past. With this in mind, the *Trilogie* stands out: While Confiant's *Eau de Café* (1991) takes place in the 1970s; *Ravines du Devant-Jour* (1993), in the 50s; *Commandeur du sucre* (1994), in 1936; *Chimères d'En-Ville* (1995), in

⁵⁷ I will discuss the act and its aftermath later in this chapter.

1959; *La Vierge du Grand-Retour* (1998), in 1948; and *L'Archet du colonel* (1998), in 1935 and between 1789 and 1804; the three installments of the *Trilogie* take place in the 1990s — that is to say in modern-day Martinique. This appears to be a deviation both from the creolist project (which takes the past as a backdrop⁵⁸) and from classic dystopias (which tend to be set in more or less distant futures). I believe, however, that Confiant knowingly plays with the conventional temporalities of these genres, which he paradoxically validates while transgressing them. Overall, rather than considering these works as standing alone, apart from other creolist writings, I propose that they constitute a self-reflexive pause in Confiant's œuvre and a time to contemplate the effects of modernity (not only urbanism, as in Chamoiseau's *Texaco*) on the Antillean landscape and its inhabitants.

The *Trilogie Tropicale* is comprised of three novellas, *Bassin des Ouragans*, *La Savane des pétrifications*, and *La Baignoire de Joséphine*.⁵⁹ And *en guise d'en-allée* — the Caribbean alternative to the rigid metropolitan *en guise d'introduction* — it must be said that attempting to summarize these works is futile. Indeed, Abel, the misanthropic first-person narrator (an obvious avatar of Confiant himself), is by his own admission an unreliable *raconteur* prone to extravagant digressions. The result: a tentacular text wildly waving in all directions.

At the very least, it can be said that in *Bassin*, the first installment, Abel impatiently waits for his grandmother to die — which she vexingly refuses to do — so that he can inherit her legendary fortune and replace his old Autobianchi with a BMW. Confiant taunts us with a telos that becomes insignificant when a gargantuan hurricane heads straight for the island. In the end, Abel and the object of his unreciprocated desire, Anna-Maria de la Huerta, are seemingly the only survivors.

In *Savane*, Abel is summoned by fellow Martinican author Andrés Badlère to the neighboring bar *L'Impératrice*. Badlère wishes to urgently discuss the poor metropolitan reception of his latest collection of poems, *Les Pleurs du mâle*. What should be a simple walk to a definite endpoint is constantly postponed by various interruptions — one of them, a meeting of the *Mouvement pour la révolution socialiste*, which Abel attends only out of lust for an attractive woman he spotted in the street. As *L'Impératrice* finally nears, a massive earthquake troubles the plan. What's worse, it triggers another natural disaster: a slow petrification of the island and its people and things. Here again, Abel and Anna-Maria are seemingly the only ones spared by the cataclysm.

Finally, in *Baignoire*, Abel schemes against various family members to inherit the legendary wealth of his finally deceased grandmother while inquiring into various shadowy organizations to find Anna-Maria, who has been missing for months — among these nefarious entities, the apocalypse-preaching *Église universelle de la purification*. Here again,

⁵⁸ Paradoxically, the creolists, because of their glorification of the past, have been criticized for their nostalgic utopian tendencies — notably by Maryse Condé. See Nathalie Schon.

⁵⁹ Here after cited in the text, respectively as *Trilogie*, *Bassin*, *Savane*, and *Baignoire*.

catastrophe, but of a notarial kind this time: his cousin Micheline is named sole heir. After having scoured the island, Abel eventually rescues Anna-Maria from an old plantation house where she was not even held against her will.

Chaos is the operative word of the *Trilogie*. Formal chaos in the very texture of the narratives, which are also the expression of a world in/of chaos. Édouard Glissant contemplated the proliferation of this trope at the end of the twentieth century and problematized it as follow:

La question qui se pose est celle ci : ce chaos qui fissure l'être et qui divise le monde est-ce le chaos qui précède les apocalypses, les fins du monde, comme une certaine littérature le définit ? On peut le penser. Il existe toute une littérature de la catastrophe qui est assez importante dans le monde, aujourd'hui, quelles que soient les zones culturelles, et qui apparaît non seulement dans les expressions littéraires, mais aussi dans les expressions spirituelles. Les sectes religieuses de la fin du monde abondent, et on peut envisager le chaos de ce point de vue. ("Chaos-monde" 190)

The *Trilogie* presents literary and spiritual expressions of this chaos, but as we can already sense, the end of the world never takes place. Confiant's catastrophes never yield post-apocalyptic narratives: *Savane* does not begin on an island ravaged by a hurricane. The only reference to the previous events is an auto-reference by Abel to his recently published *Bassin des ouragans*, "seul ouvrage," he tells the reader, "dans lequel je fais montre d'une certaine sincérité envers moi-même et où je ne joue pas à l'écrivain" (79); and in *Baignoire*, the only reference to the petrification of the island is a mention of his previous "opuscule philosophique": *Savane des pétrifications* (65). What can we make of this chaos, then, if it does not beget the end of the world?

Chaos plays a nuanced disruptive role in the dystopian genre. In dystopian universes, the status quo is traditionally introduced as an accomplished utopia: socio-political perfection has been realized, but often at the cost of everything that could not be assimilated into the ideal society. What has the potential to be sublimated is reformed, organized, and harmonized. There can be no false note in utopian societies. What is a welcomed organization for those who *can* be harmonized becomes a nightmare, a dystopia (an anti-utopia, for Darko Suvin), for those deemed different, useless, or accessory. Chaos challenges this oppressive harmony. Far from being a negative force that announces the end of *the* world, it is a fruitful one that announces the end of *a* world. In the *Trilogie*, chaos and disaster birth text that always points back to itself and to its author in an ironic, self-reflexive pattern. In these works, chaos generates something other or more than destruction. In this chapter, I suggest that these novellas seek, in part, to instantiate Glissant's positive reformulation of the poetics of chaos: "Rien n'est plus beau que le chaos et il n'y a rien de plus beau que le chaos-monde" (Ibid.).

First, to understand how dystopian tropes might adequately figure the contemporary Martinican experience, we must re-inscribe the notion of utopia in modern Antillean history. There is, in recent history, a crucial utopian moment: the 1946 act of departmentalization. I will precede my analysis of Confiant's novellas with a discussion of that utopian moment of the decolonization process. This governmental change was tied to the promise of administrative reforms that were to lift the local proletariats out of their quotidian misery. Yet there is an affective hush over departmentalization. Growing up in Guadeloupe, I experienced this silence first-hand, or rather I experienced nothing at all. My family and teachers, all educated folks, never made mention of it. In the history book of my last year of high school, *Le monde de 1939 à nos jours* (Ed. Nathan 1998), there isn't a single mention of *départementalisation*, not even in the sub-section titled "Le boulet de la décolonisation." To explain this silence and justify my reading of the aftermath of departmentalization as a dystopia, I engage with Aimé Césaire's 1946 intervention in front of the *Assemblée Nationale Constituante*, wherein he argues for the change in status of the *vieilles colonies*, and I re-situate it within the framework of utopian thinking. I emphasize that within this optimistic speech is a warning that assimilation could yield a dystopian future. I then relate this moment to Glissant's conception of utopian thinking as a fundamental mechanism of the European universalist ideology that threatens Antillean culture. As Glissant puts it: "Il semble que de jour en jour le tour de l'effacement pour nous Martiniquais s'accélère. Nous n'en finissons pas de disparaître, victimes d'un frottement des mondes. Tassés sur la ligne d'émergence des volcans. Exemple banal de liquidation par l'absurde, dans l'horrible sans horreur d'une colonisation réussie" (*Discours* 15). Glissant sees writing as the only viable protest: "Il reste à crier le pays dans son histoire vraie" (Ibid.). In my view, these novellas are precisely a cry that signifies and resists the absurdity of this horror-less horror, with their particular blend of dystopia and humor.

I do not wish to suggest that the *Trilogie* claims to be a perfect dystopia — in fact, it does not claim to be one at all. Rather, I am intrigued by the way it shares the genre's central concerns with ideological domination, technologization, modernization, science and knowledge production, alienation, sex, and atavistic desires for simpler times.⁶⁰ Those are not arbitrary thematic choices, but rather embedded realities that Confiant must grapple with to authentically represent Martinique. At the same time, under his pen, France is hardly as terrifying as Big Brother; on the contrary, its emissaries on the island are more ridiculous than malicious. Confiant's mix of domination tropes and caricature produces an effortless satire, an incongruous atmosphere best described with the oxymoron *soft dystopia*. While all dystopias are humorous in spirit, they do not necessarily deploy laughter as their main poetic strategy. For Confiant, however, laughter is front and center, and his pages are filled with jokes, puns,

⁶⁰ These concerns are present in well-known literary dystopias, such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1920), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949).

sarcastic bouts, etc. It is the bitter laughter announced by Ménéil, and as Chamoiseau notes in the postface of the *Trilogie*, this laughter “ne fonctionne pas à contre-emploi, mais dans l’exacerbation d’une lucidité aiguë, d’un vouloir terrible, d’une conscience dégagee des brumes de l’illusion” (106). What makes the *Trilogie* compelling is that it merges dystopian tropes and laughter to critique the cultural imperialism of the *République française universelle*. In subsequent sections, I offer close readings of the *Trilogie*’s characters, themes, and plot points that will demonstrate their relationship to the dystopian genre, and I will analyze some of its jab lines using parameters from Attardo’s GTVH. The *Trilogie* has not been the object of much critical attention. It is indeed hard to know what to make of its excessive tendencies and its striking difference with other creolist works. Reading it through Ménéil’s framework of dystopia and humor’s productive self-reflexivity and Glissant’s notion of *chaos-monde* allows me to tease out what makes this text more than the rambling thoughts of a cynic.

AIMÉ CÉSAIRE AND THE DEPARTMENTAL UTOPIA

The fictional elements of literary dystopias find their signified in history, and that is where we begin, in an attempt to understand where it all went wrong. Among the threads that we will follow from history to fiction are the notions of assimilation, culture, and the universal, and it would seem that the epistemological slippages and misunderstandings that surrounded them in 1946 guaranteed that discussions about departmentalization would remain a *dialogue de sourds*. In the following section, I propose a unique reading of Aimé Césaire’s speech to the *Assemblée Nationale Constituante* that focuses on its rhetoric, and I suggest that it resonates with a poetics of warning that is characteristic of the dystopian genre. I go on to parallel the dystopian tension between the totality (totalitarian entity) and the singular subject, with that which exists between the *République française universelle* and its non-metropolitan subjects.

Utopias, whether literary or political, imply an alleged consensus around an organization believed to be equally beneficial to all — meaning what is good for one is not only good for all but is also good for *any other* one. Similarly, in his 1946 speech to the *Assemblée Nationale Constituante*, Césaire asserts that what is good for a citizen of Paris or Bordeaux is also good for any citizen of Guadeloupe or Reunion, and must thus be extended to them by the *République*.⁶¹ This purchase, he reminds his audience, had already been made by Antilleans, at the cost of their bodies, when in 1911, they demanded to be subjected to the *Service militaire obligatoire*. It had just been renewed in 1945 when they voted for departmentalization via referendum. With his intervention, Césaire demanded the long-overdue completion of this transaction, which had been initiated as early as the Revolution, at the behest of various

⁶¹ “Citoyen français comme l’habitant de Paris ou de Bordeaux, le Martiniquais, par exemple, se trouve à l’heure actuelle aussi peu protégé que l’habitant de la forêt ou du désert contre l’ensemble des risques sociaux” (“Rapport 520” 10).

actors on either side of the Atlantic.⁶² The citizens of the *vieilles colonies* had patiently waited out through despotic governments for France to make good on its promise. Now that it was ruled by a benevolent (leftist) government, it was time for France to deliver by granting them the full-fledged Frenchness they desired. As Cilas Kemedjio summarizes, “La départementalisation suggère, dans son intentionnalité législative, une ‘relation de fusion avec la métropole française’. L’assimilation des peuples précédemment victimes de la domination française dans l’*utopie de la citoyenneté française universelle* est revendiquée par les Antillais fatigués des misères du statut colonial” (345; emphasis mine). What made the departmentalization project *a priori* utopian was that it sought to bring ideal governance and social justice to a space where they did not yet exist. What eventually made this project *a posteriori* utopian is that its promises remained unfulfilled.

Césaire never uses *départementalisation* in his intervention in front of the *Assemblée*; *assimilation* is the key term of the debates. Césaire repeats it more than 20 times throughout his speech, equating it alternatively with integration and equalization. While departmentalization speaks strictly of a change in governmental status, assimilation opens up a constellation of human aspirations and concerns that also include governing. To avoid confusion as to how to apply a doctrine that would regulate so many aspects of more than a million overseas constituents’ lives, Césaire delineates two forms of assimilation, warning his listeners against one of them:

Nous ajoutons d’ailleurs que l’assimilation qui vous est aujourd’hui proposée, loin d’être une assimilation rigide, une assimilation « géométrique », une assimilation contre nature, est une assimilation souple, intelligente et réaliste.

Quand nous disons assimilation géométrique, nous pensons à l’attitude prise à cet égard par la Révolution française. Lors de la discussion de la Constitution de l’an III, Boissy-d’Anglas, rapporteur des questions coloniales, en vint à prononcer cette phrase caractéristique :

“Que les colonies soient toujours françaises, au lieu d’être seulement américaines ; qu’elles soient *libres sans être indépendantes* ; que leurs députés, appelés dans cette enceinte, y soient confondus avec ceux du peuple entier.” (“Rapport 520” 6; emphasis mine)

The above considerations recall and oppose, on one side, the rhetoric of utopias, underpinned by nature and reason (“supple, intelligent and realistic,” therefore based on observable lived experiences resulting from natural impulses⁶³), and on the other side, the

⁶² “L’intégration réclamée ne constituerait une improvisation. Ce serait l’aboutissement normal d’un processus historique et la conclusion logique d’une doctrine... La Constitution du 5 fructidor an II stipule que « les colonies seront soumises à la même loi constitutionnelle que le territoire de la métropole »” (“Rapport 520” 2-3).

⁶³ Here, we may think of Diderot’s *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*.

rhetoric of dystopias, rooted in scientific abstraction (“rigid, geometrical, and against nature”⁶⁴). The first form of assimilation is an application from the ground up; the second is imposed from the top down. Dystopian, too, is the paradoxical formulation of Boissy-d’Anglas: subjects caught up in a dystopian form of governance experience an oddly restricted form of freedom that does not preclude happiness but that imposes it, and which can best be described as “freedom without independence.”

Beyond justice, Césaire also sought a validation of the cultural practices of the peoples of the *vieilles colonies* and imagined a dialogue between them and the Metropole. As Katia Gottin writes, “Pour Césaire, la politique d’assimilation a pour but de favoriser le passage d’un rapport de domination implicite à l’idée de colonie, vers une certaine égalité de droit avec la France ‘métropolitaine’ républicaine. De même, ce qu’il définit par assimilation implique une interrelation, un échange entre deux cultures différentes” (213).

The place of culture, as Césaire relates it to assimilation, is a nebulous question. There exist two versions of the speech he delivered to the *Assemblée Nationale Constituante*. The one I have referred to thus far can be found on the Website of the *Assemblée Nationale*, on a page dedicated to Aimé Césaire. From this page, a link leads to a PDF, “Rapport N° 520,” visibly created from an original period document, as attested by the paper’s yellowed grain (*Figure 1*). That report is dated February 25, 1946. Curiously, there exists a second version of this speech, dated March 12, 1946, and published in Aimé Césaire’s *Écrits politiques*. Though stamped with two different dates, these texts are nearly identical, except for the following paragraph, absent from the first document:



Figure 1

Quant à ceux qui s’inquiéteraient de l’avenir *culturel* des populations assimilées, peut-être pourrions-nous nous risquer à leur faire remarquer qu’après tout, ce qu’on appelle « assimilation » est une des formes de la médiation dans l’histoire, et que *n’ont pas trop mal réussi*, dans le domaine de la civilisation, ces Gaulois auxquels l’empereur romain Caracalla ouvrit jadis toutes grandes les portes de la cité romaine. (30; emphasis mine)

In this paragraph is the only mention of the word *culture*, and it is accompanied by a reference to an obscure moment of Gallic history. In this digression, France’s planetary

⁶⁴ The utopia-turned-dystopia of Zamyatin’s ultra mathematical OneState constitutes a literary expression of this application. To emphasize the scientific dehumanization of the subject, the citizens of OneState are called Numbers, and named with a letter and a combination of numbers.

prestige is jokingly downplayed with a litotes: “Things didn’t turn out so bad for the Gauls after all.” What must we make of it? Is it to be understood as an analogy, whereby the colonized (those of the Antilles and Reunion) are predicted to culturally prevail over the colonizer (France), as the Gauls eventually did over the Roman Empire? Is this an act of cultural bravado on the part of Césaire? A threat? A Joke? Regardless, *culture* is curiously absent from the first document, and it is partly on the cultural front that the hopes of departmentalization will be disappointed. As Gottin concludes, “Cet échange n’aura jamais lieu”(Ibid.).

Fifteen years later, departmentalization was at an impasse.⁶⁵ By the early 1960s, unrest had risen among the newly departmentalized subjects, whose disgruntlement led to unprecedented independentist desires. For the Guadeloupean poet Paul Nègre, this assimilation was always already doomed because France never saw it as an exchange, but rather as a legitimization of its own righteousness: “[l’assimilation] s’appuie sur un système de références idéologiques et historiques d’accès et de maniements faciles. Une certaine paresse d’esprit y pousse. On considère comme démontrée une fois pour toutes la supériorité de sa propre organisation, de sa civilisation, de sa culture, de sa religion” (qtd. in Gottin 213). It is clear that assimilation meant something different for the assimilator and the assimilated.

What is at stake in these discourses and in dystopias is always more than political governance; it is the philosophical question of the universal, as it relates to singularity, culture, and the production of knowledge. Both Césaire and Ménélik subscribed to a Marxist materialist understanding of the universal, based on concrete lived experience. Furthermore, for Ménélik, art and artists were shamanic voices that linked the singular to the universal. In a 1941 essay titled “Naissance de notre art,” he writes:

Les particularités, basses ou grandioses, n’importe, qui font la vie individuelle ne sont pas des obstacles à l’expression universelle : ce sont des moments qui y mènent [...] [L’art] est expression de l’universel par l’expression de l’homme, enraciné dans son existence, mettons villageoise. Et l’universalité est atteinte non par la suppression de ce que l’artiste porte en lui de plus particulier, mais par l’expression des particularités [...]. (108)

By considering the concrete and discreet experience of inhabiting one’s own space as the primary access to the universal, Ménélik makes room not just for the Caribbean artist *en devenir*, but for everyone, regardless of village or origin. But dangerous slippages occur when the *universal* is transposed into *universalism* by a “village” that fails to acknowledge itself as a particularity among other villages. As Ramón Grosfoguel explains, “Si une vérité universelle est construite à partir de l’épistémologie d’un territoire ou d’un corps particulier (qu’il soit occidental, chrétien ou islamique) et de l’exclusion des autres, alors le cosmopolitisme ou le

⁶⁵ For various perspectives on the failures of departmentalization, see the aforementioned work of Katia Gottin, Cilas Kemedjio, and Lydie Moudileno.

projet global construit à partir de cette épistémologie universaliste abstraite sera essentiellement impérial/colonial” (130). Grosfoguel’s proposition can be applied to all famous fictional dystopias — Zamyatin’s OneState, Orwell’s Oceania — but it is also true for France, whether in its colonial, decolonial and postcolonial stages. Eventually, Césaire came to see that his understanding of the universal, which, like Ménéil’s, comprised a multiplicity of particularities, differed from Republican France’s for which the universal could only emanate from a white, European, masculine, heterosexual subject (Grosfoguel, *Ibid.*). Unable to recognize itself as a particularity, the *République* could only register non-Occidental subjects as particularities to either assimilate (i.e., absorb into its own notion of the universal) or maintain in a state of exotic otherness. Either way, other cultures are relegated to a subaltern position, with no equal place in the French utopia.

These preliminary remarks aim to lay the background for the idea of a contemporary departmental dystopia, resulting from the failure of the *départementalisation* utopia. This dystopia is particularly difficult to grasp because it is not exacted by a conspicuously brutal totalitarian government, but by an enduring ideology: France’s brand of universalism. One of the points of friction where this ideology grinds at Caribbean singularity is the idea of francophonie and its relationship to other cultures.

FRANCE, THE FRANCOPHONE UTOPIA, AND ITS OTHERS

Thanks to Gabrielle Parker’s excellent chapter in *Ruptures postcoloniales*, making a claim for francophonie as an anti-utopia requires very little labor. As Parker puts it,

Il est frappant de constater la fréquence de l’association des termes « utopie » et « francophonie » [...] Notion géographique floue et territorialité affective, impérialiste et imaginaire dans ses diverses acceptions et dès ses origines [...]. Quelle que soit la forme adoptée (littérature, histoire [...]), les utopies s’imprègnent de l’esprit de leur temps. Communauté idéale, pourvue de structures et d’un système de gouvernance, dotée d’un programme, animée de visées idéalistes, la francophonie est une utopie pérenne dont les sens successifs sont historiquement déterminés. (233)

This section will recapitulate and build upon some of Parker’s key points, to help us better understand why Confiant refers to francophonie as francocacophonie and repeatedly stages conflicts between non-metropolitan authors of French expression, and self-appointed gatekeepers of the French language and culture.

Onésime Reclus, a traveling geographer and writer prone to lyrical flights, coined the terms “francophone” and “francophonie” in a massive 1880 volume devoted to the French Empire, *France, Algérie et colonies*. Reclus’s work was infused with Republican France’s ideological blend of imperialism, universalism, and charitable humanism. He sought to transcend the issue of race by replacing it with the less contentious issue of language. He

declares, “Il n’y a plus de races, toutes les familles humaines s’étant entremêlées à l’infini depuis la fondation du monde. Mais il y a des milieux et il y a des langues” (qtd in Parker 235).⁶⁶ To add to Parker’s remarks, I look at Reclus’s position vis-à-vis Haiti as an illustration of his understanding of language as a force strong enough to remap the world and rewrite history. Thanks to and through language, the unbearable 1804 loss of Haiti (or Saint-Domingue as it was called at the time) is mitigated. Reclus writes, “Saint-Domingue, terre splendide [...] le soleil du Tropicque et la fièvre aidant [...] a conquis sont indépendance, *mais* ses 600 000 à 800 000 Noirs et Mulâtres jargonnet toujours le français créole, que parlent 1 500 000 hommes, aux Antilles, en Louisiane, en Guyane” (739; emphasis mine). In this fascinating re-imagining of France’s grandeur, the epic military disaster is attributed to unbeatable foes — tropical heat and fever — but because the island continues to provide the *République* with a linguistic stronghold (for lack of a national one), it can remain a splendid locale (as opposed to a site of embarrassing defeat). In the same breath, however, Reclus creates a linguistic hierarchy of French that continues to haunt non-metropolitan Francophones today. About this *français créole*, he adds: “ce patois plein de douceur, de langueur, et très ennemi des *r*, méprise la savante architecture du discours, qui est l’une des meilleures gloires de l’homme. C’est moins une langue qu’un babillage” (740). Behind the word *homme*, we recognize the white heterosexual European male subject, the only one capable of enunciating the universal. Also at work here is the infantilization (*babillage*) of the Other that goes hand in hand with the *République’s mission civilisatrice*. The voice of this paternalism oscillates between the benevolent and the martial, and the line seems thin between children and enemies. We perceive that the means of achieving linguistic domination can go from soft to brutal at a moment’s notice, tipping the utopia toward the dystopian side.

Parker too indexes this dystopian potential by highlighting what she calls Reclus’s “brusque désinvolture” in the following tirade aimed at Algeria and beyond:

1830 fut une heureuse année pour la France, qui vit s’ouvrir un nouvel et vaste horizon. [...] Car par l’Algérie, nous entamons ce vaste continent barbare, trois fois plus grand que l’Europe, cinquante fois plus grand que la France [...]. Bien avant l’an deux mil, l’Europe aura soumis, bouleversé, pillé, “retourné”, transformé, ce sol immense, dernier qui lui reste à dompter sur le globe où les Visages-Pâles ont l’empire. (236)

These words, which open Reclus’s chapter on Algeria, are chillingly echoed by the opening sentences of a literary dystopia, Zamyatin’s *We*:

⁶⁶ This is in stark opposition to Gobineau who writes, “le fait du langage se trouve intimement lié à la forme de l’intelligence des races, et, dès sa première manifestation, a possédé, ne fût-ce qu’en germe, les moyens nécessaires de répercuter les traits divers de cette intelligence à ses différents degrés” (182).

In another hundred and twenty days the building of the Integral⁶⁷ will be completed. The great historic hour is near, when the first Integral will rise into the limitless space of the universe. One thousand years ago your heroic ancestors subjected the whole earth to the power of OneState. A still more glorious task is before you [...] Your mission is to subjugate to the grateful yoke of reason the unknown beings who live on other planets, and who are perhaps still in the primitive state of freedom. If they will not understand that we are bringing them a mathematically faultless happiness, our duty will be to force them to be happy. But before we take up arms, we shall try the power of words. (1)

The recalling of past victories, the glorification of the present endeavor, and the thrill of the domination to come all constitute dystopian tropes. Moreover, both pieces of writing, fictional and non-fictional, speak of the power of language while flirting with physical violence, should “softer” means fail. On these early days of francophonie, Parker concludes: “Dès l’origine, donc, la francophonie [...] présente les attributs de l’utopie. [...] c’est une vision idyllique pour celui qui l’anticipe, et une imposition *cauchemardesque* pour ceux à qui elle doit s’appliquer” (237; emphasis mine). Here, the adjective *nightmarish* can be substituted for dystopian.

After Reclus, the concept of francophonie went dormant. Surprisingly, it was Léopold Sedar Senghor who resurrected it, in the wake of the African independences of the late 1950s. Under the term, he sought to create a platform for cultural and economic cooperation, built upon the networks inherited from the colony (Parker 239). He gratified this utopia with poetic flights: “La Francophonie, c’est cet humanisme intégral, qui se tisse autour de la terre : cette symbiose des ‘énergies dormantes’ de tous les continents, de toutes les races, qui se réveillent à leur chaleur complémentaire” (qtd. in Parker 241-242).⁶⁸ The Metropole, however, remained lukewarm to the project — perhaps because it emerged from a non-hexagonal locus (Ibid., 240).⁶⁹ Thus the disembodied entity that was francophonie remained an unrealized site of desire. France and its culture maintained global prestige, in no small part thanks to those international francophone intellectuals it denigrated. Soon, Césaire, who had first supported Senghor’s project, grew as disillusioned with francophonie as with departmentalization. In a 2005 interview, he proclaimed: “Un acte de colonialisme, tout simplement [...], un acte politique, presque une forme d’impérialisme, la francophonie” (qtd. in Parker 241).

In time, francophonie became a full-fledged organization, whose actions remain contentious — though I will not detail them here.⁷⁰ My interest in presenting this partial

⁶⁷ The Integral is an immense spaceship designed by D-503, *We*’s main protagonist.

⁶⁸ The lexical similarity with Zamyatin’s work is also striking here.

⁶⁹ As Parker notes, de Gaulle referred to francophonie as “ce machin francophone.”

⁷⁰ For more information on the current history of francophonie, I refer the reader to Parker’s complete chapter.

history of francophonie is to frame it as a form of domination. Authors who write in French from a non-metropolitan perspective perceive this utopia as a soft dystopia that affects their craft.⁷¹ In Confiant's world, the French *maisons d'édition* are the totalitarian institutions of the francophone utopia.

For Confiant, literature is at once a site of struggle *and* a weapon in the struggle. In his opinion, the author must oppose good utopias to bad ones. Returning to and completing the epigraph for this chapter, I note that for Confiant, utopian thinking and the francophone utopia itself are not to be discounted just yet: "Le monde ne va pas sans utopies. C'est là le moteur des énergies intellectuelles. L'utopie francophone doit s'inscrire résolument dans la créolisation et dans la diversalité" ("Créolité et Francophonie"). This necessity has become all the more urgent for a new universalism threatens to subsume all other particularities, including the French one: the Anglo-Saxon model of globalization — another central concern in Confiant's *Trilogie*. Against these pressures, whatever can be salvaged of the dreams of universal equality enunciated by *Les Lumières* must be unleashed. Instead of an unrealistic vertical model of diffusion that holds one linguistic norm (the metropolitan one) as ideal, Confiant offers a lateral model based on conviviality. Normative, rigid French cannot compete against the fun-loving fluidity of English. Its best bet, for Confiant, is to become an ally of the other languages — Creole, Kanak, Wolof, etc. — in its spheres of influence, which, for better or for worse, are the legacies of its colonial expansion. From a concrete perspective,

Le principal effort consiste à aider à la fabrication d'ouvrages scolaires dans ces différentes langues d'une part et à la réalisation de productions télévisuelles, cinématographiques et multimédias (CDROM, site-Internet). Tout cela risque de coûter très cher mais, on le sait, les *utopies* n'ont pas de prix. Il y va de la crédibilité même de l'*idée francophone*. (Ibid.; emphasis mine)

Confiant tries to save not the language per se, but rather "l'idée francophone." Domination can only breed resistance and lead to a weakening of French. Conviviality would ensure its survival against the culturophage Anglo-Saxon model. Confiant's francophone utopia, built upon the validation of multiple sites, would be a response to the dystopian sides of both late-stage capitalist America and the French *République universelle*.

Thus it is important to underscore that although I read the *Trilogie* as a dystopia, I do not wish to suggest that Confiant is against utopias or utopian thinking. This distinction is

⁷¹ Because the present chapter is concerned with texts written in the mid- to late 1990s, I will not spend much time on the Manifeste des 44, "Pour une littérature-monde en français," which was printed in *Le Monde*. This appeal speaks to the enduring domination of the Metropole well into the 21st century, and the urgency of resisting on the intellectual and cultural fronts. The 44 write: "Que les écrivains aient pu survivre dans pareille atmosphère intellectuelle est de nature à nous rendre optimistes sur les capacités de résistance du roman à tout ce qui prétend le nier ou l'asservir..." This sentiment of oppression is captured in Confiant's work and expressed through the dystopian echoes I will shortly present.

important because I reach an altogether different conclusion in the following chapter concerning Matthieu Kassovitz and *La Haine*. For *Confiant*, as for Glissant, utopia should not be discounted entirely, but rather it should be creolized and decolonized. Glissant observes:

Dans notre monde actuel, qui est un monde du divers, un monde des contraires, des opposables, l'utopie ne peut pas consister à choisir l'un des éléments de cette diversité ou de ces oppositions et puis à la perfectionner, à en faire un objet qui ne change plus, qui vit dans l'excellence. L'utopie pour nous aujourd'hui, c'est d'accumuler, sans aucune exception, toutes les beautés, tous les malheurs et toutes les valeurs du monde. ("Repenser l'utopie" 112)

Departmentalization, assimilation, francophonie, globalization... at first glance, these concepts do not evoke the acts of violence of totalitarianism. However, although they do not threaten the body, they beget a slow cultural and intellectual death that causes a perennial, low-level anxiety in the Caribbean people. To those who would dismiss the damages that such an anxiety causes, Chamoiseau replies, in the postface to *Confiant's* trilogy:

Un critique français s'exclamait [...]: "Les écrivains antillais écrivent librement à ce que je sache!..." C'est un peu court. Ils n'ont pas de chaînes aux pieds, c'est sûr, ni de menottes aux poignets, et leur pays croule sous l'abondance des consommables. Tout cela est vrai. Mais, hélas, il n'y a pas que les chaînes qui emprisonnent. J'ai vu (comme Abel) des âmes étranglées sans corde, des dignités rendues exsangues sans armes blanches, le goût de vivre s'étioler sous des frappes invisibles. Je dis qu'il y a une angoisse antillaise qui [...] rend muet plus d'un artiste potentiel, rend fous ceux qui ont gardé en souvenir l'idée de liberté. C'est dans ce magma que *Confiant* se lève, élève la voix, prélève son rire. (108-109)

And indeed, it is through laughter, as Ménil anticipated, that *Confiant* denounces and negotiates this soft dystopia, as we shall now see.

DYSTOPIAN STROKES FOR DYSTOPIAN FOLKS

The *Trilogie* is, like most dystopias, a story of friendship and love — and it's complicated. Its core characters are Abel, the narrator/*écrivain*; Victor Saint-Martineau, Abel's friend, rival, and according to Abel, the most famous mathematician from the Orinoco to the Mississippi; and finally Anna-Maria de la Huerta, the love interest, originally from Santo Domingo and allegedly the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of Christopher Columbus.⁷² In the following sections, I offer close readings of each member of this trio, that reveal how they

⁷² This triumvirate resembles, with variations, the one deployed by Zamyatin in *Wé*: D-503, the mathematician and the author of the records that constitute the novel; R-13, the lucid but complicit poet; I-330, the woman they both love.

participate in a dystopian aesthetics in ways so subtle that they might be easily missed by those unfamiliar with the genre. Each of these tropes magnifies distinct aspects of silent and furtive dominations, exposing that which is no longer or not yet seen. Together they paint the anti-utopian reality of the Antillean person.

Abel, a funny postlapsarian poet on the island

In an essay titled “Atavism and Utopia,” Rabkin observes that “we often recognize dystopias for what they are by virtue of their anti-pastoral, post-Lapsarian nature” (4). Abel, as his name indicates, is evidently postlapsarian.⁷³ A self-proclaimed “*mismartinicanthrope*” (*Baignoire* 32), he counts many enemies, “les Universalistes, les Féministes, les Afro-Centristes, les Homosexuelistes, les Césairistes, les Marxistes-Léninistes, les Trotskistes, les Sionistes et autres Humanistes chrétiens,” and few friends: “les Créolistes, les Machistes et une fraction des Écologistes” (Ibid. 49).

When it comes to relationships, Nathalie Schon observes that maternity is central to the creolist utopian project: “La figure de la mère est la référence première dans les récits de Raphaël Confiant et de Patrick Chamoiseau. C’est elle qui donne à l’enfant les clefs pour comprendre la société. Cette importance de la mère n’est guère surprenante, car la famille qu’elle symbolise est au centre du projet utopique”(277). In stark contrast, Abel’s mother is absent from these adventures, and similar to dystopias, in which mother-child relationships are typically undone,⁷⁴ the narrator’s familial ties are frayed. Abel’s rocky relationship with his grandmother, whom he irreverently calls “connasse” (*Bassin* 18), illustrates a generally problematic attitude toward family and filiation. In Caribbean society, which is systematically matriarchal, this disrespect indicates an antisocial behavior that borders on the heretical.⁷⁵ Abel’s (self-)alienation and tenuous link to motherhood are recurring themes that must be taken ironically in the *Trilogie*; rather than taking them at face value, they function as metonyms for Abel’s feelings toward the complicated relationship between the island and France. That impossible relationship is also taken up more directly throughout the *Trilogie*. In the early pages of *Bassin*, Abel, looking at a map of Martinique, thinks that it is shaped like a foetus: “... à l’évidence il s’agissait d’une grossesse extra-utérine, la maman hexagonale se trouvant à sept-mille kilomètres de là... Pauvre petit foetus abandonné...” (17). In *Baignoire*, Abel proposes a variation on the hexagonal mother, with a play on words arising from the homophony between *la mère* and *l’amère*: “L’amère-patrie hexagonale” (24). If the mother is a

⁷³ We may consider that Confiant, born in 1951, sees himself as postlapsarian, if we think of departmentalization as the fall.

⁷⁴ In Zamyatin’s *We*, children of OneState are separated from their mothers at birth, for instance.

⁷⁵ At the same time, this matriarchal system is perhaps a legacy of the *Code Noir* of 1685, which linked the status of the mother to the fate of the child. Disrespecting the figure of the mother could then alternatively be read as a jab at those unquestioned legacies of the colonial past.

central figure of utopias, inasmuch as she symbolizes family and sociability, we understand the leitmotif of the inaccessible mother in the *Trilogie* as a dystopian trope that critiques, in the modality of the ironic and the absurd, the impossible family proposed by the *République française universelle*.

As previously mentioned, Abel is a writer, a recurring figure in both dystopian fiction (that is the case in *Wé*, with R-13 and D-503, or again in *1984*, with Winston Smith) and in creolist novels. In both cases, it is often a tortured figure that experiences domination — whether totalitarian or cultural — more acutely than others. In the *Trilogie*, the depressing lack of recognition from the metropolitan publishing and critiquing apparatus is a non-negligible source of suffering for the Antillean writer. Confiant stages these pangs in *Savane*, whose plot revolves around the meeting requested by Andrés Badlère. The latter metaphorically translates the Metropole’s cultural domination into an organized dystopian governing body:

Dans la *République universelle des lettres*, grandiloquait Badlère, il existe un monde riche et développé d’une part et un tiers-monde de l’autre et la France étant la capitale de cette République-là, ses critiques littéraires en sont fort logiquement les ministres et secrétaire d’État. Leur intérêt est de nous maintenir dans l’arriération, le régionalisme, le folklorisme, le doudouisme, l’exotisme et le crétinisme indigéniste, aboyait-il d’une traite. (15; emphasis mine)

The Metropole’s desire to constrain Antillean literature is also given flesh and bones with the character of Pr. Garnier ⁷⁶ of the “université de Triffouillis-les-Oies,” a specialist of “littérature nègre”(41). Garnier’s happiness, Abel explains, used to rest on the simplicity of his object of knowledge, whose singularity could be easily apprehended: “Quand les *nègres* se proclamaient *nègres*, écrivait *nègre*, en un mot se réclamaient d’une écriture *noire épidermiquement*, *noire stylistiquement*, *noire sémantiquement* et tout le bazar, Garnier nageait dans le bonheur le plus parfait”⁷⁷ (Ibid.; emphasis added). This description comically contrasts the alleged simplicity and singularity of the object offered to the gaze of the critic (symbolized by the monosyllabic *nègre* and *noire*) against the inflated knowledge it generated (perceived through the lengthy adverbs). This blissful phase ends when a group of Antillean intellectuals (implicitly, the creolists of the *Éloge*) challenge the singularity of all identities, sending Europeans back to the epistemological drawing board: “Mais tout cessa d’aller mieux dans le *meilleur des mondes* lorsqu’une bande d’hurluberlus à peine quadragénaires décréta qu’en plus

⁷⁶ His name also recalls the Parisian Éditions Garnier. For Confiant academia and publishing houses are equally guilty key players.

⁷⁷ In Abel’s view, Négritude authors were complicit in this happiness, as they offered to the European gaze the singularity it longed for. Elsewhere in *Bassin*, expressed his disdain for the movement’s complacency by bitterly stating, “La négritude [...] n’est, comme chacun sait, que la manière noire d’être blanc” (41).

d'être nègres, ils étaient *blancs*, amérindiens, indous, chinois et levantins. Non mais ?" (41-42; emphasis mine). The dystopian is conjured up with the allusion to Huxley's *Brave New World*, whose French title is *Le meilleur des mondes*.⁷⁸ This seemingly innocuous detail invites us to read Abel (and his creolist comrades) as a dystopian hero, a purveyor of chaos who relentlessly challenges the falsely utopian order and its universalizing impulses.

Furthermore, Antillean intellectuals suffer from crises of the imagination — a typical trope in dystopias. For instance, in Zamyatin's *We*, the Numbers must undergo a procedure that removes their ability to imagine, because it supposedly breeds unhappiness (in truth, OneState's real fear is utopian imagination; not the kind that tends to totalize but its revolutionary, liberating counterpart). Similarly, in *Savane*, imagination is in danger. As the petrification phenomenon engulfs the island, Abel asks Saint-Martineau: "Crois-tu mon cher ami, que le phénomène de pétrification qui semble s'emparer de notre beau pays figurera également les brillantes idées émises par notre non moins brillante intelligentsia?" To which Saint-Martineau replies: "Quelles i-dées et quelle in-telli-gent-sia?" (54). We understand that imagination was always already in crisis. It is not the phenomenon that causes a crisis of the imagination, but the opposite. Abel is spared by the petrification phenomenon precisely because, as a writer, he can and does *imagine*.

Later in *Savane*, amidst wild speculations as to the causes of the petrification of the island, a geometrician holds a character named Amadeus César (one of Abel's foes) responsible for the phenomenon:

À mon sens, tout ça c'est la faute de la poésie ! Oui messieurs. De la poésie tellurique de notre vénérable et immortel poète, j'ai nommé Amadeus César ! Cette poésie est si tellurique, expliqua le con pétant, qu'elle en a bouleversé les entrailles même de notre sol martiniquais (à défaut des entrailles de ses habitants, pensai-je en mon for intérieur) et a dû réveiller, puis accélérer un processus de pétrification... (55)

Behind this extravagant name, which incongruously juxtaposes the artistic prodigy of Amadeus Mozart and the imperialistic thirst of Julius Caesar, we recognize Aimé Césaire — the central artisan of the departmentalization of 1946. We also recognize the rhetoric of the cult of personality that is often present in dystopias, and though Césa(i)r(e) may have inadvertently started a (cultural) cataclysm, the geometrician cannot withhold his unconditional admiration. Overall, *Savane* and the other installments gesture toward Césaire and departmentalization as the sources of all issues on the island, namely, the crisis of imagination. Aimé Césaire, as Amadeus César, is recast as a shadowy dystopian figure with unknown power, one that is not left unscathed by Abel/Confiant's bitter laughter. In all, in the *Trilogie*, Confiant re-imagines the typical creolist figure of the writer with Abel and

⁷⁸ We also recognize a reference to Voltaire's *Candide*.

combines it with dystopian tropes — i.e., censorship, intellectual figures that police writing, threats to revolutionary imagination —, real-world historical events and parody to denounce the departmentalization act of 1946 as a fundamentally anti-utopian moment of Antillean history.

Saint-Martineau and other scientists: the parody of scientific knowledge

Science and scientists are crucial fixtures of dystopias, and the knowledge they produce always tends to oppress rather than free. In *We*, science is presented as a religion and a political doctrine. I cite again one of the opening paragraphs: “Your mission is to subjugate to the grateful yoke of reason the unknown beings who live on other planets, and who are perhaps still in the primitive state of freedom. *If they will not understand that we are bringing them a mathematically faultless happiness, our duty will be to force them to be happy*” (1; emphasis mine). Neither this passage nor the rest of the novel is meant to amuse, yet the impossible juxtaposition of freedom, mathematical knowledge and faultless happiness, and the turn of phrase “our duty is to force them to be happy” are inherently comical (within the framework of laughter’s incongruity theory). Mathematics is front and center in *We*, with D-503, the narrator/writer, being one of the mathematicians in charge of building the Integral, the massive ship that is set to conquer the universe. Confiant borrows from this dystopian character type to create Saint-Martineau,⁷⁹ Abel’s foil. I contend that this character and other scientists in the series invite reflection on the ways that France’s scientific discourse justified racist policies that are still silently at work in the postcolonial anti-utopia.

Saint-Martineau is hyperbolically introduced early in *Bassin*, as an “illustissime mathématicien dont la réputation s’étendait de l’embouchure de l’Orénoque à la source du Mississippi” (9-10). From the onset, however, the relationship between science, knowledge, and literature is rendered as problematic: indeed, at the beginning of the series, Abel and Saint Martineau are no longer on speaking terms, because the latter enjoyed carnal knowledge of Anna-Maria, which she has refused to the former. This strong biblical subtext merged with Saint-Martineau’s function as a scientist evokes France’s religion-based and science-driven *mission civilisatrice*, subtly stressing that the knowledge and discourses produced by this endeavor are neither fair nor equally available to all.⁸⁰ As the two protagonists’ friendship resumes in subsequent installments, and throughout the *Trilogie*, Saint-Martineau is presented with many conundrums, each more absurd than the next. For instance, still in *Bassin*, Abel recalls asking Saint-Martineau to mathematically prove that Martinique had the shape of a fetus. The mathematician, however, explains that indisputably, the island is shaped

⁷⁹ His name indexes the religious as well.

⁸⁰ The question of sex in the context of dystopia will be treated in the section dedicated to Anna-Maria de la Huerta.

like a red bean. A parody of eugenics ensues, along with a critique of the type of auto-referential knowledge that enabled the worst colonial misdeeds:

De même qu'il existe une science qui étudie la physionomie des êtres humains, afin d'en déduire leur caractère et leur niveau intellectuel, pourquoi ne s'étendrait-elle pas au différents pays du globe? Ainsi la botte italienne serait le reflet de la bravacherie mussolinienne qui sommeille en tout Rital [...] tandis que la corne de l'Afrique, si bien nommée, expliquerait le tempérament rhinocérique des tribus somalies. (18)

Focusing on the Logical Mechanism of the GTVH, we note that it is a reasoning from false premises, which challenges the logic of eugenics discourses. At the Target level, which works in concert with the LM, we note that this jab line pokes fun at a historically Western drive to produce totalizing and dehumanizing forms of knowledge. Indeed, Saint-Martineau's cogitations seldom seek knowledge of the singular or the self; they consider populations over individuals — a recognizably dystopian concern. As Rabkin puts it, “no utopian work tries to proscribe all knowledge for the inhabitants of its narrative world. [...] What they are forbidden is the knowledge of self, the kind of knowledge that leads to the assessment of responsibility, that is, the knowledge that would be necessary for self-assertion and thus potentially for disobedience...” (6). Thus it is not only knowledge that is crucial here but the control thereof.

Two other characters illustrate the importance of who gets to produce knowledge: the Hexagonal Archeologist and the Departmental Archeologist. The first is an old white Metropolitan who completed the first archeological digs on the island and now manages the local museum. If the type of knowledge he produces does not seem to partake in any form of domination at first glance, we understand that though he has lived on the island for quite some time, he is not a part of it: his “teint rosâtre n'avait point été entamé par le soleil des Tropiques” (*Bassin* 31). This renders his credentials suspicious. The Hexagonal is rudely challenged by a young newcomer, a great-grandson of slaves (*Ibid.*), who vows to debunk his findings. Notwithstanding the fact that the young archeologist may be correct, he is painted as a maniac. Having completed his doctorate at the Sorbonne, for which he received a “très honorable” mention, he goes straight from the airport to the museum to present his gargantuan findings (“cinq tomes, pesant chacun deux kilos huit cent trois grammes, des deux mille sept cent quarante neuf pages de son doctorat”) and claim the post of the Hexagonal. If the origin of the one who produces knowledge constitutes a legitimate credential, Confiant complexifies the issue by asking if knowledge produced by an Antillean subject trained in France can really be freed from French ideology. The newcomer is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's *débarqué*, sketched in *Peau noire, masques blancs*. In an additional intertextual reference to Fanon, the young archeologist has visibly undergone a psycho-biological transformation while in the Métropole. In *Peau noire*, Fanon, evoking a study that found evidence of bio-chemical

transformation in the husband of a pregnant woman, adds, “Il serait aussi intéressant, il s’en trouvera d’ailleurs pour le faire, de rechercher les bouleversements humoraux des Noirs à leur arrivée en France” (41). Accordingly, Abel writes, of the young man:

Il avait la chance inouïe de faire partie de cette catégorie de nègres qui ne transpirent pas et qui peuvent, alors que leurs congénères portant chemises croulent sous des ruissellements de sueur, se pavaner au soleil des Antilles en costume trois-pièces et cravate sans que l’ombre d’un seul semblant de goutte de sueur perlât à leur visage. Il ne s’agit pas là de quelque disposition physiologique innée, mon cher Linné, mais d’une qualité acquise au cours de l’évolution du Nègre de céans vers ce nadir de l’humanité qu’est la civilisation blanche-chrétienne-occidentale, et non transmissible de père en fils malheureusement. (37)

These comical remarks can be analyzed with the GTVH:

Script Opposition: Quality/deficiency; civilized/uncivilized; white/black

Logical Mechanism: Faulty reasoning from fictional empirical evidence

Situation: Context of the story, which is a reflection on the (post)colonial

Target: Occidental knowledge and those who are mystified by it

Narrative Strategy: First-person narration

Language: Excessive, hyperbolic with long sentences

We note that here again, the LM based on faulty reasoning puts into question the validity of knowledge, in agreement with the Target level. This parody of scientific discourse is bolstered by linguistic play, with a quip at Linné, a forefather of eugenics: *inné/Linné*. Still parodying Fanon while also superimposing the dystopian trope of brainwashing, Abel/Confiant explains that for this physiological change to occur,

il fallait bien que l’individu en question ait subi dès ses premiers vagissements un *bourrage de crâne* intense de la part de son entourage. Du genre: « La France est le plus beau pays du monde » [...] À force d’ingurgiter ces propos [...] l’*Homo martinicensis* — du moins les plus doués de l’ethnie — subissait progressivement une transformation des glandes sudoripares [...] nos doctes médocastres n’ont jamais eu l’idée d’étudier cette surprenante mutation sudoripare ainsi que ces effets à long terme sur l’équilibre mental et la libido des individus concernés. (37-38; first emphasis mine)

In all, the young archeologist is torn: not simply between two ideological spaces, but though he tries to position himself as a thinking *subject*, he remains an *object* of science. We also understand that though he may be from the island, he is just as postlapsarian as Abel: he is no longer a pure site of knowledge production. Overall, scientific discourse is a recurring trope in the *Trilogie*; its logic is always fraught, and the language produced is often excessive, and burdened by graphic details and run-on sentences. In these descriptions that dissect (literally

and figuratively) Martinican society, we are reminded of the nature of the humorist as defined by Bergson: “l’humour, au sens restreint où nous prenons le mot, est bien une transposition du moral en scientifique” (130). The parody of science and scientists in the *Trilogie* rests in the minutely detailed, forced juxtaposition of the literal and the figurative, and the sacred loftiness of knowledge production and its unwitting ideological complicity. In taking up the central dystopian concern of knowledge — its production, access, and usage — *Confiant* opens up a new avenue for the creolist project. The presence of these scientists in the *Trilogie*, who differ from the typical creolist author/storyteller/ethnographer character, enables new discussions on knowledge, power, history, and ideology.

Anna-Maria de la Huerta and the impossible return to the Garden of Eden

As Rabkin noted, utopian writers attempt to rebuild, over and over again, the “old place, the lost Garden of Eden, our atavistic hope and home. But,” he adds, “there is trouble in paradise, and that trouble is sex.” Rabkin explains that the question of sex and sexuality cannot be ignored in utopias/dystopias:

We all know, from personal experience and as the myths remind us, that sexuality, and the knowledge of good and evil are destabilizing phenomena. The writers of utopian literature know this as well, and whether they are pointing up a bright future or a dismal one, they know they must deal with the power of sex and they often remind us of the paradise that sex once cost us. (3)

In the *Trilogie*, trouble has a name, and it is Anna-Maria de la Huerta. It has been difficult thus far to leave this character out. She is the third member of the trio, and though other goals seem to drive each installment of the *Trilogie*, she is, in fact, always Abel’s ultimate quest. The opening lines of *Bassin* are dedicated to her: “L’année où je vous rencontrai, chère Anna-Maria de la Huerta...”(9), and in *Baignoire*, she disappears, sending both Abel and Saint-Martineau off to pursue her. I argue that various utopian tropes and desires are mapped out on her body, but these aspirations, Abel’s mostly, are constantly frustrated in this departmental dystopia.

Her affiliation with the Garden of Eden is both obvious and stamped with impossibility: her last name is de la Huerta, meaning “orchard” in Spanish, but she is also postlapsarian, as she is allegedly related to Christopher Columbus, the purveyor of doom in the Caribbean. A native of Santo-Domingo, she left her island for Martinique after falling in love with a trumpet player who soon becomes unfaithful, which leads her to literally fall into Abel’s arms. Abel immediately desires her physically, though she never complies, arguing that he could not match her former lover’s sexual prowess. She, however, offers herself to many others, including Saint-Martineau and the Archéologue, under the gaze of Abel and whoever

else is present. In this manner, her character calls upon two different dystopian ways of dealing with sex and sexuality: banalization (it is available to all, as in *Wê*) and restriction (as in *1984*, wherein it reserved for reproduction). To make matters worse for Abel, she desires a child from him... but outside of the natural/pleasurable methods of procreation:⁸¹ “Je meurs d’envie d’avoir un enfant de vous, señor Abel, mais par les procédés les plus modernes de la science, c’est-à-dire par l’insémination artificielle” (77). She then praises the sanitary qualities of the process, from which all pleasure and sensual stimuli are removed: “ni sueur, ni mauvaises odeurs, ni ahanements, ni râles, ni gymnastique.” She concludes in the utopian *futur simple* rather than the conditional: “On fera le plus merveilleux bébé du monde” (78; emphasis mine).

Sex, desire, possibly love, or the lack thereof, can constitute a powerful force of social disruption in dystopias, as Rabkin points out (4). That is certainly the case with Abel: “... lassé de dévorer en vain du regard ton corps fabuleux, Anna-Maria de mon cœur, sans pouvoir ni le toucher ni le mignonner, que je pris la détestable habitude d’aller drivaiiller à la cour Fruit-à-Pain, à l’en-bas du Morne-Pichevin” (29). These locales, ironically tied to a “detestable habit,” go on to provide the material for many creolist novels. Thus Abel’s insatiable desire for Anna-Maria and the past she symbolizes catalyzes the creolist impetus, with its destabilizing force. Anna-Maria then single-handedly, though inadvertently, initiates the creolist quest, for which the Garden of Eden is a metaphor. This space is both atavistic and turned to a new beginning, desired at any and all cost, including the complete destruction of the island, which Abel greets with glee in both *Bassin* and *Savane*. In *Bassin*, the hurricane makes way for the re-creation of Paradise, destroying all signs of modernity and colonialism: “L’ouragan avait étêté les arbres, décoiffé les maisons, arraché les fils électriques et téléphoniques, noyé les cases qui avaient été, par imprudence ou je-m’en-fichisme colonial [...]. Bref, le monde était devenu un beau désastre. Un silence d’éternité y régnait et nulle créature n’osait pointer le nez au-dehors” (80). This diluvian parody anticipates a return to the pastoral. Confiant infuses the scene with the Bergsonian notion of humor, which consists in pretending that the real is ideal, and neither Abel nor Anna-Maria seem too troubled by the catastrophe: “‘Nous sommes les seuls êtres vivants,’ déclara Anna-Maria radieuse. Ému à mon tour [...] Je tremblais d’exaltation. J’étais enfin parvenu à mes fins grâce à cet ouragan sauvage qui avait éradiqué le pays entier mais m’avait apporté le bonheur que j’espérais depuis *et cætera* de temps...” (Ibid). If, as I contend, Anna-Maria represents a quest for utopia, it bears saying that one must ask what the creolists are willing to sacrifice for it.

The world resumes as it was in *Savane*, with its cortege of literary and sexual disappointments. The island, however, is yet again subjected to another natural disaster, which petrifies it instead of destroying it, leaving once again Abel and Anna-Maria the only ones alive. The final paragraphs of this installment ironically mimic the end of *Bassin*, but

⁸¹ This calls upon another typical dystopian trope — the mechanization of sexual reproduction as in *Brave New World*.

with variations: “On ne rêve pas ?” dit Anna-Maria d’une voix timide. Nous attendîmes dix minutes, une heure, trois heures. Rien ne se passa. La Savane des Pétrifications avait été définitivement arrêtée dans sa chevauchée fantastique” (90). This auspicious *tabula rasa* seems bound to give way to a new Babel: “*I love you mucho, mi amor*’, me fit ma Saint-Domingoise en spenglish” (Ibid.). Finally, concluding with multiple layers of intertextual clichés: “Et de se pâmer dans mes bras tendus, sa longue chevelure de jais virevoltant dans l’air limpide du carême. Nous étions bel et bien les seuls survivants du désastre et nous nous *marierons pour vivre longtemps et avoir beaucoup d’enfants*” (Ibid.; emphasis mine). This self-deriding ending juxtaposes utopias with biblical myths, apocalypse narratives, romance novels and fairytales, ultimately mocking them all, with a comical re-writing (in the utopian simple future, instead of the simple past) of “ils se marièrent *et eurent beaucoup d’enfants.*” Here, the second clause isn’t a natural organic result of the first, but an illogical consequence. The utopian impulse to freeze time outside of history is severely and ostentatiously challenged here, yet the utopian quest itself remains highly tempting. Through the character of Anna-Maria, then, Confiant proposes a nuanced commentary on utopian thinking that highlights its danger and its allure, all the while reflecting on the role of literature in circulating it. The utopia proposed here, however, is in direct opposition to the totalizing discourse of the *République universelle française*: it is generically and linguistically expansive. This time, it substantiates Confiant’s injunction to replace bad utopias by good ones.

Baignoire, the *Trilogie*’s last installment, ends with a reunion with Anna-Maria that is dramatically different from the previous ones. At its beginning, Anna-Maria has been missing for two months. This particular plot point is a pretext to venture into another non-canonical genre: the detective novel. Confiant had concurrently been experimenting with this genre with *Le Meurtre du Samedi Gloria*, published the same year as *Baignoire*. This generic drift is met with the type of self-deriding, self-reflexive quip we come to expect from Abel/Confiant: “Mince alors ! Voici qu’on était en plein polar, moi qui avais horreur de ce type de bouquin. En plein thriller plus exactement (films que j’abhorrais aussi !)” (31). The overlay of the detective genre initiates the same type of discovery as in *Meurtre du Samedi Gloria*, with Abel taking on the role of a would-be detective (he even dresses up as Sherlock Holmes to attend a masquerade). But instead of a murder in the past, it is a disappearance in the present that generates various encounters. In *Baignoire*, this functions as an occasion to bring the habitual creolist characters and spaces out of their nostalgic limbo and into the present:

Nous la cherchâmes pendant toute la journée à l’avenue Jean-Jaurès, à Pont-de-Châines, au Bord-de-Canal, au Calvaire, à Texaco, au Morne-Pichevin, bref partout à travers l’En-Ville, mais ni Félix Soleil le djoueur, ni Rigobert le crieur de magasin de Syrien, ni Solibo Magnifique le conteur, ni Philomène la péripatéticienne du Pont-Démonsthène, ni Vovonne Macommère, venue pour le week-end de sa Guadeloupe natale, n’avaient

aperçu la démarche féline et le regard empreint de fierté sarrasine de la descendante directe de l'amiral gênois. (12)

But none of these characters (all well-known to the readers of creolist works) produce the object of utopian desire: Anna-Maria herself. Much like Dorval, the detective of *Meurtre du Samedi Gloria*, the two friends find themselves hard-pressed to do any detecting, and it is only thanks to a last-minute tip that they head toward the Baignoire de Joséphine, where Anna-Maria has been spotted on an old plantation (91). Abel and Saint-Martineau creep onto the property of the old man, but far from finding any type of authentic experience, they stumble onto a strange simulacrum of plantation life:

Les néo-esclaves nous invitèrent à partager un verre de rhum dans leur case que Machin de Machin-Chouette avait fait retaper comme au bon vieux temps d'*Autant en emporte le vent* grâce [...] à une subvention de l'Agence territoriale du tourisme [...]. Désormais, lorsque la récolte battait son plein, des groupes de touristes venait photographier une plantation qui fonctionnait — se vantaient les dépliant — exactement comme en 1764. (97)

Here again, atavistic desires are problematized: to which past can we return? At what cost? It is in that space, nevertheless, that they eventually find Anna-Maria. When she reunites with Abel and Saint-Martineau, she exclaims rudely: “Sacré couillons ! [...] Fiche que vous m’avez fait attendre ! J’en avais marre de jouer à l’impératrice pour ce gâteaux de Machin de Machin-Chouette [the old plantation owner].” (Ibid.). This signals a lassitude on the part of this feminine character, whose body has been the depository for all manner of male fantasies.⁸²

Ultimately, the quests for Anna-Maria yield narratives that are just as transtextual and transgeneric as she is transnational, multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic. Through the character of Anna-Maria, utopias, as atavistic returns to the Garden of Eden, are always frustrated, mocked or dismissed. Her character, like many feminine characters in dystopias, teases then troubles the possibility of utopia. Yet she remains productive, each time propelling the narrative that ends up in the readers’ hands.

The *Trilogie* suggests that the return to the Garden of Eden is improbable and likely not the solution. By extension, it invites us to think that the creolist project is not a mere, thoughtless desire to return to older times. It seeks to re-inscribe a lost period, not to reinstate it. At the same time, Anna-Maria’s undeniable appeal reminds us that Confiant is not essentially counter-utopian — utopias, according to him, make the world go round. Overall, her character indicates that Confiant is meta-literarily grappling with utopian thinking as it relates to the past. Within the scope of the creolist project, utopia is both politically

⁸² Sexuality and gender, and their problematic treatment in creolist works, occupy a large part of *Penser la créolité*: Françoise Vergès, A. James Arnold, Thomas C. Spear, Gisèle Pineau, Madeleine Cottenet-Hage and Maryse Condé all allude to them in their respective chapters.

problematic and literarily productive. History and the contemplation of the past are a site of resistance against France's historical monopoly. But at what point does the quest for the past obfuscate the progress toward the future? This relationship must be constantly and carefully reflected upon, lest it lead to a mystified nostalgia and another anti-utopia. To me, the real function of Anna-Maria is to initiate and symbolize this reflection.⁸³

Fighting francophonie with francocacophonie

Attentive readings of Abel, Saint-Martineau, and Anna-Maria reveal that these characters are designed with dystopian tropes in mind, each corresponding to a commentary on the Antillean experience within the context of the Métropole's many forms of silent domination. Abel illustrates France's active cultural erasure of the Antillean author; Saint-Martineau and other scientists reveal the ideological side of scientific discourse; and finally, Anna-Maria invites us to think critically about the relationship between nostalgia and utopia, as well as which utopias can become anti-utopian and which ones might lead to a better future. Other dystopian tropes in the *Trilogie* constitute a wide-ranging critique of contemporary Martinican society and the way that it experiences various forms of domination. The facelessness of these powers makes them hard to register, and harder yet to dismantle. At the beginning of this chapter, I set up the historical elements of this soft departmental dystopia. I will now explore how Confiant metaphorizes and resists concepts like francophonie, modernity, and globalization in his satirical dystopia.

Language and particularly France's relation to it as an ideological instrument of domination is a crucial concern of Abel's. It is via language and particular linguistic choices, that the psycho-emotional degradation of the Martinican subject is registered. In *Bassin*, Abel notes that the young archeologist's alienation is indexed by his language: "Le zigoto m'apostropha en ces termes: « Eh, Abel ! Viens m'aider au lieu de bayer aux corneilles », complètement insoucieux du fait que cette variété d'oiseaux n'existât point dans le ciel azuréen et édénique des Antilles (Ah ! Quelle sacré tonnerre de misère que d'être *contraint* et *forcé* d'utiliser une langue d'emprunt !)" (60; emphasis mine). What *oblige*s and *force*s Antilleans to use this "borrowed" language is implicitly France's linguistic ideology. Several times

⁸³ It bears saying that although Anna-Maria is a symbolic catalyst for the creolist project, she lacks true agency (she needs to be rescued) and is problematically sexualized by the males on the island, regardless of race or creed. This treatment of women is a point of contention in many of Confiant's novels. But in *Baignoire*, in a moment of guilty lucidity, Confiant allows women to make Abel pay for his/their misogynistic tendencies. Indeed, Abel is chased by the *Comité des femmes bafouées*. His crime, to which he pleads guilty, is to have had the gall, "au cours d'une conférence littéraire [...], d'affirmer que pendant l'esclavage [...] la femme noire avait été final de compte moins maltraitée que son compagnon masculin puisqu'il lui suffisait d'offrir sa croupière au maître blanc pour qu'aussitôt il la dispense du rude travail des champs..." (25). Struggling to face his own misogyny, Abel wonders why he made such a "historically correct" but politically incorrect statement aloud. He blames it on the women themselves who, according to him, had lactified the island and sold themselves out for metropolitan luxury goods. Eventually, the group of women catch up to him, beat him and leave him for dead on a beach (62-63).

throughout the *Trilogie*, Abel inscribes the entire paradigm of Antillean alienation upon various characters' word choices, implying that all language is suspect. Unlike the young archeologist, Abel can recognize how his own use of language is a sign of his alienation, and he harnesses this same language to splinter this alienation. It is under the modality of humor, as Ménil predicted, that language is most efficiently and most ostentatiously weaponized against linguistic domination. Hence Abel's proclivity for puns, rhetorical irony and jokes of all kinds.

Language is a site of recurring struggle against ideological domination, but it is also paradoxically the object of a rescue mission. In *Bassin*, at a nail-biting moment when torrential waters sweep away Anna-Maria, Abel takes a seemingly inopportune pause to address it:

N'écoutant que la force de mom amour, et cela en dépit de ma caponnerie légendaire ("ma lâcheté"⁸⁴ si vous préférez, messieurs de l'Hexagone qui prétendez nous apprendre le beau langage alors que nous, ici, on connaît l'ancien français de père en fils et que nous n'avons en la matière, aucune leçon à recevoir de vous autres, qui ne connaissez plus, hélas, que le dialecte Ardisson-Dechavane parsemé de mots anglais, mal prononcés en plus)... (75)

Thus the rescue of Anna-Maria is not just the rescue of the love interest or the desire to return to the Garden, but it also symbolizes an attempt at saving French itself from the perils of the Anglo-Saxon linguistic domination. For all their decried atavistic tendencies, it is their regard for older times that might ironically elect Caribbean francophones as the saviors of the French language. These remarks are repeated in *Savane*, in a confrontation between Abel and Garnier, whom we have previously encountered.

Heu..., insista le négrologue, vous n'abusez pas un peu des créolismes et des néologismes? Par exemple, "rapièceté"... »
 — "Rapièceté" n'est ni l'un ni l'autre, fis-je brutalement. Chateaubriand écrit: "Nous cahotions dans notre calèche rapièceté."
 — Heu... admettons... mais qu'en est-il de... (il consulta son carnet de notes)... racontage?
 — C'est du Hugo, mon pote. Eh oui, du Hugo ! Il écrit: "Après neuf ans d'épiscopat à Digne, tous ces racontages, sujets de conversation qui occupent, etc." Vous voyez vous autres Hexagonaux, ne connaissez plus que le dialecte de TF1, alors, je vous en prie, cessez vos accusations linguicides à notre rencontre. *C'est nous les Zoulous qu'on va réanimer la langue française !* (60-61; emphasis mine)

⁸⁴ We may recognize here yet another jab at Césaire with the word *lâcheté* evocative of a famous verse of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*: "Ma lâcheté retrouvée" (53).

In the *Trilogie*, then, atavism, as it relates to language, is reframed as a positive value. Anyone familiar with creolist works knows that Garnier's accusation is not unfounded; the issue is that he is incapable of distinguishing antiquated words from new ones. Confiant's works are indeed replete with neologisms — he even goes on to publish a dictionary of *Néologismes Créoles* or *Pawol-Nef Kréyol* in 2000. Abel's self-identification as a Zulu, accompanied by a grammatical error that evokes the “Petit nègre” pidgin, accentuates the irony of the situation and calls out the totalizing tendencies of the European gaze, which is as blind to particularities as it is to its own (linguistic) history.

The localization and reformulation of idiomatic expressions to fit the geography and the reality of Martinican subjects accomplish the double gesture of producing new language and decentralizing the Metropole as the only site of language vitality. Just to cite a few examples, throughout the *Trilogie*, *culbutoire* is offered as an alternative to *garçonnière*, “comme on dirait en français de France,” (*Bassin* 11); *par mornes et par ravines* to *monts et par vaux*, “pour parler à la manière de ces clowns de la créolité” (*Bassin* 41); “En moins de temps que la culbute d'une puce (expression créole ringarde, remise à l'honneur, on ne sait trop pourquoi, par les tenants de la créolité dont la principale préoccupation semble-t-il est de déterrer des vieilleries langagières), en une fraction de seconde donc pour causer comme le veut le ministère de la Francocacophonie” (*Savane* 74), etc. Abel often underscores his use of alternative expressions so as to celebrate them. Perhaps his most satisfying neologism is the one that encapsulates the beautiful madness of the French language in the world: “Messieurs et dames de la compagnie, ô lecteurs des quatre coins de la *francocacophonie*...” (*Savane* 45), he declaims in one of the many addresses to his multiple interlocutors. This egregious gesture, in the end, reimagines the francophone utopia, all the while defusing its totalizing tendencies.⁸⁵

But, above all, language is the vector of the humorous attitude and the stage for all to witness the detachment of the author and his prowess. Like Confiant, Abel considers himself a “clown de la créolité,” and as such, he is precisely the author Ménil had prophesied. As a writer and first-person narrator, Abel has control over the language of the narratives, which he uses for power. The Superiority Theory (cf. the introduction of the present dissertation) is evidently at work throughout the *Trilogie*, which is steeped with sarcasm — whose etymology comes from the Greek *sarkazein*, meaning “to tear flesh like a dog.” Abel clearly wishes to maim with words. He is an expert in the art of the “complisult,” which could be described as an insult wrapped in a compliment or a compliment wrapped in an insult. For instance, all references to France's magnificence (e.g., “grâce aux bienfaits de la généreuse civilisation française,” *Savane* 34) are to be taken ironically and understood as critiques of the *République's* disdain for its overseas citizens. Conversely, when Abel pejoratively refers to himself and his

⁸⁵ It is interesting to note that classic dystopias often deploy neologisms. For instance, in Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, *doublethink* or *thoughtcrime* are neologisms passed from the top down. Inversely, Confiant's neologisms in the *Trilogie* originate from the people (or Abel rather); this contrasts with their use in classic dystopias and gives them a value of resistance.

creolist crew as “une bande d’hurluberlus à peine quadragénaires...” (*Savane* 41), he wants us to understand them as a group of courageous dissidents. Furthermore, just as Ménil modeled, his language is replete with metaphors and wordplays, and marked by a solid dose of Bergsonian humor, served with an excessive side of details. Central to the text’s ludic strategy is the manipulation of language, puns, syllabic substitutions, dubious neologisms, parodies, and other mistreatments of French. These wordplays are so abundant that they overshadow one another, giving the impression that they are innumerable and that they would resist any cataloging intent. Their hyperbolic number is baroque to the point of grotesqueness, yet they also symbolically perform the very idea of the *chaos-monde* in their unpredictability; they seem to participate in a poetics of errancy but also of beauty and excitement, as theorized by Glissant. To list a few examples, gleaned at random from either installment:

- Syllabic substitutions and transformations: Badlère (which might be a poor pronunciation of Baudelaire); *Pleurs du mâle* (for *Fleurs du mal*); écrivieur; alter-négro (for alter-ego); Jésus Crime; *God save the gouine...*
- Puns: con pétant (compétent); l’amère-patrie Hexagonale (la mère patrie hexagonale); “J’étais confiant” (a play on the adjective and the last name of the author, which is attributed to another author who allegedly stole the Goncourt from Abel/Confiant); grandes enjambées lyriques; “C’est ça, ton père est martiniquais et ta mère est partie niquer”...
- Parodies: *L’insoutenable grossièreté de l’être*; la tour de Bab-el-oued (tour de Babel + Bab-el-Oued)
- ...
- Neologisms: *homo martinicensis*; francocacophonie; mismartinicanthrope; écrivinité (vanity of writing); mulâtraille, négrologue...

These categories are loose, mutually permeable, and non-exhaustive. Beyond their apparent arbitrariness, I suggest that, like all wordplay, these are inherently meta-semantic and participate in a self-conscious critique of language (specifically French), which paradoxically posits its power while destabilizing it. In Confiant’s works, wordplays are part and parcel of a satirical, anti-establishmentarian poetics that consistently targets various aspects of the *République française universelle* (as made clear by the GTVH) — from the way with which it produces knowledge to its self-obsessive concern with its own literature. Abel/Confiant, however, does not spare himself — for instance, instead of *écrivain*, he pejoratively calls himself *écrivieur*; he puts the following words in another character’s mouth: “C’est Abel, un scribouillard de merde qui donne dans le genre humoristique” (*Baignoire* 63). In this manner, he engages with the literary self-reflexivity of the humorous attitude prescribed by Ménil. The question is whether he succeeds in circumventing Dada’s madness. At the end of this chapter, I suggest that he does.

Mechanical Anxiety

Technology, mechanization, and their interference on the body are essential tropes in dystopian literature. As Gorman Beauchamp notes, “The dystopian novel, in formulating its warning about the future, fuses two modern fears: the fear of utopia and the fear of technology.” Humans, he suggests, are faced with the awful choice to either give way to the machine or become it (56). Accordingly, machines occupy a prominent place in the *Trilogie*.

Perhaps the most ostensible object that signaled the islands’ entry in an era of modernity was the European car, whose introduction is fairly recent. Those of my generation have heard many stories of a time when there weren’t that many cars on the islands. I myself remember when there were but a few taxis on Les Saintes (a group of islands that is part of the Guadeloupean archipelago) and when scooters were the main means of transportation. Today, Les Saintes swarm with cars, and few people believe it is an improvement. Abel himself entertains a love-hate relationship with his old Autobianchi (an Italian brand of car that went defunct in 1995), which he wants to replace with a BMW. So powerful is the car as a symbol of modernity that it seems to be a blindspot for Abel. Ironically, he denounces other characters in the *Trilogie* for their unnatural relationship with their automobiles. In *Savane*, for instance, Abel decides to “égratigner une bonne fois pour toutes l’ego automobilistique” of one of his many enemies, a school director, by telling him that a third man claimed to have beat him in a street race. “Me défier moi avec mes seize soupapes !” yells the man, whose car parts are seemingly fused with his body. “Et le « dirèctère » d’école de foncer vers le canal Levasseur où il avait garé son char, charroyant sa tendre moitié...” (29). The director’s grotesque symbiosis with his vehicle is accentuated by the paronomasia between *char* and *charroyer*. Abel’s ultimate goal is to add a challenger for his project of a “championnat de Formule 1 en chaise roulante” (22), for thanks to the Antilleans’ obsession with their cars, there is no shortage of paraplegic contenders: “...il n’y a rien de plus taré au monde qu’un Martiniquais ou un Guadeloupéen au volant de sa BMW ou sa Kawasaki 500 cm³. Édouard Glissant a déjà tout dit sur ce syndrome-là dans un chapitre de *Malemort*...” (21). In distinctly dystopian fashion, this affinity for the sense of modernity offered by the car is framed as a disease leading to a strange form of paralysis that allows movement only by turning human bodies into cyborg-like beings.

Internet Troubles

Above all, modernity in the 1990s means modern forms of communications such as the television/mass media, the fax, and the Internet. These are prominently featured in the *Trilogie*, but far from being emblems of enlightened modernity, they are always comical sources of frustration or signs of Abel’s inadequacy. For instance, he often uses his fax for communications that would be best conducted by other means — like sending unrequited

love notes to Anna-Maria. The Internet is another troublesome modern convenience. In *Baignoire*, Abel turns on his Macintosh to check on his “*news-group*” (italicized and in English in the text) to see what kind of comments his post on O.J. Simpson’s trial outcome had garnered. He is only met with hate and confusion:

T’es qu’une vermine, un enfant de salaud ! O.J. et toi, z’êtes issus de la même femelle gorille
Bob Langston, Gary, Ind.

Bravo, frérot ! Tous des trouduc’, ces fromages ! Vive le PSG quand même !
Djamel, Garges-lès-Gonesse, Fran.

Très honorable correspondant, j’ai été horrifié devant le côté à la fois jésuitique et sophistiqué de votre argumentation dont je ne peux que reconnaître le brio tout en réprouvant le contenu. Recevez mille salutations de mon humble personne. Sayonara !
Higushi Yamamoto, Nakaido, Honshu. (67)

These comments, mediated by technology, confirm Martinique’s imbrication within globalization, but their wildly diverging registers and tones and overall lack of coherence prompts us to wonder whether this kind of exchange is productive at all. This virtual type of encounter differs from other significant ones in the series, whose physical nature is always exaggerated: Abel meets Anna-Maria and the young archeologist by literally running into them.⁸⁶ It would seem, at first, that the would-be utopian space of the chatroom — utopian because it cannot possibly exist in real life — is another disappointment. “Internet,” Abel concludes, “n’avait réussi qu’un seul et unique exploit : faciliter la circulation mondiale de la connerie humaine” (68). Yet it is hard not to be fascinated by Abel’s capacity to communicate with people far and wide, in a sort of multinational, socio-cultural Babel, whose transactions, though they are reported in French here, are presumably conducted in English. Another fascinating aspect of these messages is their negotiation (or lack thereof in the case of the first two) of the passage between the oral and the written. For Glissant, this clash of civilizations, augmented by the clash between the oral and the written, is the spark necessary for the *chaos-monde*. Though Abel is blind to it at that particular moment of the *Trilogie*, I will now show that he, too, can participate in its beauty.

Mass Media Blues and the Feeling Chechen

The news is an important purveyor of frustration and cognitive dissonance in the *Trilogie*. Each installment begins with the intrusion of catastrophic news from elsewhere, which links

⁸⁶ This repeated comedic trope honors and parodies the notion of “grande rencontre” so present in Antillean literature (we may think of the meeting of Césaire and Breton; the island as a site of cultural encounter, etc.), and is literally marked as having a more consequential impact.

everyone in collective misery. At the beginning of *Bassin*, Abel is distraught after reading in the international section of the only local newspaper that an eclipse in Peru and an earthquake in China caused multiple deaths. The first pages of *Savane* find him ranting against CNN, threatening to rescind his subscription to the channel, for being too selective about the horrors it shows — Abel wants to see all of it, everywhere, all the time. Saint-Martineau suggests that Abel send a strongly worded letter to both CNN and the *New York Times*, a recommendation Abel finds ridiculous: “Comment pouvait-il s’imaginer une seule seconde que les états d’âme d’un sous-citoyen d’un sous-pays lilliputien et doté d’une forme de pois rouge en plus !, même pas anglophone, vaguement francophone, émouvraient le directeur de conscience de l’univers entier?” (9). In *Baignoire*, Abel hears on *La Voix de l’Amérique*, the government-owned international broadcasting service of the United States, that “Boris Elstine avait décidé de donner un opéra sanglant en Tchétchénie avec des orgues de Staline. Ce matin là,” he adds, “je me sentais tchéchéne” (5). These ironically repeated overtures feature the type of centralized diffusion of information that constitutes a classic dystopian fixture, where the existence of a press is often confused with freedom of the press.⁸⁷ In the *Trilogie*, these recurring openings denounce mass information as a deceptive benefit of globalization, one that universalizes rather than diversifies. The cognitive dissonance they generate by ignoring local realities is further underscored in *Baignoire*, when Abel, listening to the radio hears, “Ici Radio Monte-Carlo, d’abord des nouvelles du temps qu’il fera. Sur le Poitou-Charentes, le Centre et le Limousin [...] Les températures seront comprises entre 1° C et 2 ° C le matin, et 8°C et 11°C l’après midi” (37). Nothing could be further from Caribbean reality.

In the postface of *Savane*, Laurent Sabbah writes that the television is responsible for the petrification of the island, which he reads as a general process of “bêtification.” For him, this process,

serait à mettre sur le compte d’un producteur en chef dont l’identité pourrait se résumer en trois lettres, CNN. Cette ‘World Company’⁸⁸ dans sa version petit écran et grande domination, aurait plutôt tendance à agacer notre « écrivain ». Le « Tout-Monde » labélisé CNN n’a rien à voir avec le « Tout-Monde » d’Édouard Glissant. Entre l’un et l’autre, il y a un espace gigantesque allant de l’universalité à la diversité. (Ibid.)

Sabbah highlights that globalization — as the rapprochement of nations and cultures — has two expressions that can be hastily confused if one is not careful: universality and diversity. But what chances for the latter in such an oppressive climate? What options of relation, if

⁸⁷ This central feature is also foregrounded in *Wé*, which also begins with the main protagonist reading the only newspaper available in OneState.

⁸⁸ A reference to the fictitious American organization spearheaded by M. Sylvestre, in a recurring sketch in Canal +’s *Guignols de l’info*. The company’s goal is to make money, regardless of the human or environmental cost.

any, are available to escape totalizing anti-utopian/dystopian universes? A sentence captures best the kinds of translateral gestures that can bypass an oppressive, vertical model of universalism: “Ce matin-là, en bref, je me sentais tchéchène.” I argue that this feeling Chechen, while initially seeming incongruous, comical or impossible for a Martinican, is an expression of Relation, diversalité, and Antillanité as defined by Glissant.

The fact that the *je*, Abel, is *métissé*, physically and metaphysically, is the condition *sine qua non* of this feeling Chechen. This *métissage*, as Glissant conceives it, is not an exclusive category (that would be opposed to purity), but what allows him to “affirmer qu’aujourd’hui s’ouvre pour la mentalité humaine une approche infinie de la Relation” (250). This *métissage* is not viewed as a closed identity, or an in-between two races or more, but rather as an opening and natural sympathy for all singularities. This affinity enables the possibility of feeling Chechen while being Martinican. This sympathy is endemic to the Antilles, which Glissant calls a multi-relation in essence (249). Abel’s *je*, as an Antillean person aware of his Antillanité, is already a self-aware Relation. Abel’s formulation is carefully nuanced; he does not suggest that a singularity is another. He was not Chechen: he was feeling Chechen. We understand then, that in the same way that “le Divers, c’est la différence consentie” (191) according to Glissant, Abel recognizes the difference between himself and the other, and accepts it not just as producing meaning but as essential to meaning production. In addition, the imperfect tense — *je me sentais* — further gestures toward “l’Étant” and not “l’Être,” an important distinction in Glissantian thinking: “l’étant (ce qui existe par totalité) se relaie” (251). Abel is not changing from one fixed state to another; rather, he is in Relation — that is, the “Étant” Chechen relays the “Étant” Martinican or perhaps vice versa. In all, Abel’s sentence is precisely an expression of the Divers, which, “signifie l’effort de l’esprit humain vers une relation transversale, sans transcendance universaliste” (191). It does not tend toward a longterm telos; in fact, it is anchored in a time, this morning, and a historical event, the Russo-Chechen conflict. *Je me sentais tchéchène* is a concise, effective and easily legible expression at the time it is uttered. It is Abel’s best way to manifest his set of emotions. Abel, in his quest to confound the silent domination that oppresses him, needs this Chechen alter-ego, not to dominate, but to relate. This very necessity is again a trait of the Divers. As Glissant puts it, “Le Divers a besoin de la présence des peuples, non plus comme objet à sublimer, mais comme projet à mettre en relation” (Ibid.). Just as one cannot “se faire trinitadien ni québécois, si on ne l’est pas” (Ibid.), one cannot make themselves Chechen, I might add. But the absence of Chechnya, in this case, would be felt as a void, just as “il est désormais vrai que si la Trinidad le Québec n’existaient pas comme composantes acceptées du Divers, il manquerait quelque chose à la chair du monde” (191).

Paradoxically, this feeling Chechen as a Relation is the result of a constellation of dystopian tropes: the mass media, symbolized by the Voice of America, and totalitarianism, symbolized by Boris Yelstin’s falsely benevolent post-communist government, whose brutal

methods are a continuation of the old regime's. What is put in Relation, here, are the passions — understood both as suffering and emotion — of two ontological subjects that relay one another in the “Tout-Monde.” Thus in many ways, the *Trilogie* stages a *mise en Relation* of all forms of oppression, to which it opposes some vertical (dominant/dominated) forms of resistance while effectuating a lateral gesture, a *mise en Relation* of all oppressed peoples.

Thus, this feeling Chechen, and the understanding of identity as composite and flexible it signifies, is a beautiful result of the *chaos-monde*. In one of his later formulations of the latter as it relates to identity, Glissant explains:

Les identités fixes deviennent préjudiciables à la sensibilité de l'homme contemporain engagé dans un monde-chaos et vivant dans des sociétés créolisées. L'Identité-relation, ou l'“identité-rhizome” comme l'appelait Gilles Deleuze, semble plus adaptée à la situation. C'est difficile à admettre, cela nous remplit de craintes de remettre en cause l'unité de notre identité, le noyau dur et sans faille de notre personne, une identité refermée sur elle-même, craignant l'étrangeté [...]. Mais nous devons changer notre point de vue sur les identités, comme sur notre relation à l'autre.⁸⁹

For all his cynicism, this is a sign that Abel embraces his belonging to/in the world. Ultimately, this feeling Chechen might be his saving grace.

READING SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND TIME IN THE DEPARTMENTAL DYSTOPIA

At the beginning of this chapter, I offered a tentative summary of the *Trilogie*. Though it could not possibly pretend to be exhaustive, at the very least, it presented these works as chaotic. Yet within this maelstrom, some rhythm does appear via the repetitions from installment to installment I highlighted. If it were a shape, the *Trilogie* would be a stretched spiral with three arcs ending in three loops — with each loop symbolizing a catastrophic upset. Taken together, the ironic repetition they perform gives the *Trilogie* its self-reflexive dynamic. Yet these works escape the madness and cynicism that plagued Dada by displaying a spiral that eventually stops turning unto itself in the final installment. As I noted, the latter features a disaster of another kind — a deviation. Furthermore, seemingly random plot points that act like jazz riffs from one installment to the next offer surprises in the last one. For example, all three installments feature a scene whereby Abel bestows completely unsolicited and uninformed betting advice on horse races. In the first two, furious bettors who lost their wagers physically assault Abel. In the last installment, Abel accidentally doles

⁸⁹ Frédéric Joignot. “Pour l'écrivain Édouard Glissant, la créolisation du monde est ‘irréversible.’” *Le Monde.fr*, 3 Feb. 2011, www.lemonde.fr/disparitions/article/2011/02/03/pour-l-ecrivain-edouard-glissant-la-creolisation-du-monde-etait-irreversible_1474923_3382.html

out sound advice to two new characters, who later bail him out of a tricky situation to thank him for their newfound wealth. In addition, the spiral not only functions as a sign of self-reflexivity, but it also corresponds to a distinctly Creole way of apprehending time, as Glissant suggests:

Nous avons une conception du temps en spirale qui ne correspond ni au temps linéaire des Occidentaux, ni au temps circulaire des Précolombiens ou des philosophies asiatiques, mais qui est une sorte de résultante des deux, c'est à dire avec un mouvement circulaire, mais toujours une échappée de cette circularité vers autre chose. ("Le Chaos-monde" 123)

To me, this structure supports, organizes, and amplifies Abel's musings on Antillean life, alienation, cultural effacement, artistic production, sexual frustration, love, and provides an interpretative key that saves the reader from the narrator's negativity. Through this structure, I read the *Trilogie* as a self-reflexive moment for Confiant, one that allows him to auto-critique the creolist endeavor as it is in its infancy in the early 90s, and to show that he is aware of its shortcomings, its nostalgic inclinations, its misogynistic tendencies, but also of its power, its originality and its contribution to a literature of humor.

FINAL DE COMPTE

Among the many things that make this set of novellas compelling, the most striking may be the fact that they manage to transgress both the rules of the creolist project and of the dystopian genre. What makes them transgressive within the rules established by the dystopian genre is that their temporal anchors do not signal them as speculative — they take place in their own present, and not in a near future. However, had they been written at the beginning of the 20th century and set in the 1990s, they would be classified today as classically dystopian, checking the boxes for most of the themes traditionally associated with the genre: grotesque mechanization of the human body, ideological domination (and its effects on artistic production), pressure on the singular to merge into a totalizing vision of the universal, longing for the atavistic as symbolized by the irruption of sexuality, etc. The apocalyptic scenarios they feature, albeit absurd, are hopeful metaphorical speculations that look toward the much-anticipated end of the Antilles' moral degradation and toward new beginnings. The *Trilogie* invites us to interrogate the temporality of the dystopian genre, asking us to think thematically instead of temporally.

What makes them transgressive within the parameters prescribed by the creolist project is that they do not tell us of those forgotten Martinican societies, but they contemplate how these societies fare today, in the aftermath of departmentalization. What Césaire originally warned the *Assemblée* against is a now quotidian fact. It did not conclude in a

totalitarian political crisis, but it resulted in crises of imagination and identity that are still relevant today.

The literature of the French Antilles, if it wishes to be reflexive and sincere, must address this contemporary reality, and this is what the *Trilogie* does. Furthermore, with its spiral shape, its deployment of ironic repetition, its particular brand of satirical and comical verve, Confiant's *Trilogie Tropicale* is unmistakably Creole. The bitter laughter of humor, announced by M enil, is present throughout, and in this sense, the *Trilogie* confirms his prediction.

Chapter 3: “Jusqu’ici tout va bien”: Laughter, Mirrors and Dystopia in Matthieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine*

C’est vrai puisqu’on l’a inventé.
— Matthieu Kassovitz, Festival de Cannes, 1995

C’est l’histoire d’un homme qui tombe d’un immeuble de cinquante étages. Le mec, au fur et à mesure de sa chute se répète sans cesse pour se rassurer : jusqu’ici tout va bien, jusqu’ici tout va bien, jusqu’ici tout va bien. Mais l’important c’est pas la chute, c’est l’atterrissage.
— Hubert

“Jusqu’ici tout va bien,” the iconic refrain associated with the opening and the end of *La Haine*, surfaces, even if just in passing, in much of the scholarship produced about the film. In its ironic repetition at the end of the film — whereby society is substituted for the man —, the complete utterance seems too late to be a warning (for the society in question is already falling); rather, its illocutionary objective seems to be to remind the spectators of their ongoing fall. At any rate, in this final retelling, the utterance serves as a somber coda that perfects the brutal story that had unfolded onscreen for the preceding 97 minutes. My concern here is to interrogate the kind of text this is in the opening scene, before any of the plot is revealed. Is it a cautionary tale about falling from tall buildings? Is it a joke? Neither proposition seems likely if we consider the context: it appears in a film titled *La Haine*, billed as a social drama whose intention is to pull the audience into the marginalized world of the *banlieues*. This text first occurs only one minute into the film, but the previous 60 seconds are packed with more heaviness than seems possible in such a short span: the film’s very first words, “Vous n’êtes que des assassins,” are hurled at a barrage of shadowy figures (the police) by an outnumbered and outpowered young man, whose unbearable viewpoint is forcibly shared with the audience — meaning that the viewer, too, is forced to experience the anxiety of finding oneself unarmed on this side of the barrage. Immediately after this scene comes the stark title card, *La Haine*, shocking in the brutal simplicity of its white lettering against the black background. Then, a dedication: “Ce film est dédié à ceux qui ont disparus pendant sa fabrication...” The sentence fades away on the screen, and the story of the falling man begins. It is immediately followed by the cracking of the drums and the thick melancholy bass line of Bob Marley and the Wailers’ “Burnin’ and Lootin’”. Thus on either side of the story that interests me, there is seemingly nothing to joke about. Yet “C’est l’histoire d’un mec...” is a classic joke setup, one that had been popularized in France in the 70s and early 80s by the comedian Coluche. At the height of his comedic career, Coluche would walk onto the stage, where he would stand in a palpably uncomfortable silence for what seemed an eternity, then

simply mumble, “C’est l’histoire d’un mec...” This alone was all it would take to send his audience into roaring fits of laughter.

In this chapter, I consider the utterance at hand as a joke, in its first and second telling, and I argue that it might very well contain the key to reading the film through the joint prism of humor and degradation prescribed by Ménil. I do not make the claim that *La Haine* constitutes a comedy — although, in a 2015 interview, Kassovitz specifically asserted that it was: “*La Haine*, c’est une comédie et c’est pour ça que ça a marché. Tu rigoles tout le temps ! Si ce n’était pas drôle, les gens ne seraient pas allés voir le film.”⁹⁰ Rather, I follow Salvatore Attardo’s classification as developed in his General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), and I approach the film as a “Serious Plot with Jab Lines.” With this in mind, I consider the film as a vector punctuated by diverse attempts at laughter (at times, successful, at others, not). This method enables me to suggest that together, these attempts go beyond mere comic relief, although taken separately, they may appear to function as such. While they indeed help the characters and/or the spectators navigate moments of crisis, I argue that they also express anxiety toward the *République française universelle* and its exclusionary tendencies, that they signal moments of self-reflexivity, and also perform the types of lateral gestures that I consider implicit in the dystopian genre. Thus in *La Haine*, humor (as expressed through jokes, play, and metaphors) and dystopian motifs work in concert to create a coherent discourse. I argue, however, that *La Haine* is not the same type of dystopia as that deployed in Confiant’s *Trilogie Tropicale*. Although it also indicts France’s universalizing ideology and the failed postcolonial utopia it begot, I view it as a counter-utopia, that is, as a work that challenges utopian thinking.

LA HAINE: A POSTCOLONIAL DYSTOPIA... WITH JOKES?

La Haine follows roughly 20 hours of the misadventures of three friends from a poor Parisian banlieue, Saïd, Hubert, and Vinz. The three are reeling from a night of rioting catalyzed by the hospitalization of their peer, Abdel, whose life is hanging by a thread after a *bavure policière*. Against this explosive backdrop, the cardinal functions are few: the friends spend the first half of the film wandering through their *cité*; in the second half, they roam the streets of night-time Paris, where they go in order to retrieve (unsuccessfully) money owed to Saïd. Whether grand or not, their actions are ominously temporalized by the ticking of a clock, which seems to count the minutes toward a tragic ending. The tension created by this device becomes akin to that of a time bomb when we learn that Vinz, the loose cannon of the trio, is in possession of a gun lost by a policeman during the riot and that he vows to use it to “rétablir la balance” if Abdel dies. The attentive spectator will notice that when Vinz is first introduced, he is seen

⁹⁰ Bouchareb, Inès. “Mathieu Kassovitz, 20 Ans Après *La Haine* : ‘Je n’aurais pas pu faire ce film aujourd’hui.’” *Konbini*, 17 Dec. 2015, www.konbini.com/fr/tendances-2/mathieu-kassovitz-20-ans-la-haine/.

wearing a Spider-Man t-shirt, and they might be reminded of the famous line associated with the comic book character: “With great power comes great responsibility.” We are made to wonder what Vinz will do with this power and whether the clock is ticking toward a violent act.⁹¹ Considered together, the space and temporality of the film function not just as a particularly volatile chronotope, but as a character with a trajectory of its own. We wonder how the *banlieues*, as both a space and a population, will react if Abdel dies. This question is the main preoccupation of the three friends, and it animates many of their conversations. To complicate matters, regardless of where they are, the police are never far, constantly restricting their movements and deciding when and where the youths are allowed to exist (for instance, when a curfew is mandated, or a rooftop party is broken up by the arrival of cops). When they are in Paris, Saïd and Hubert are unjustly arrested and tortured by two policemen for cruel didactic purposes: they want to show a rookie how to “question” “suspects,” without committing a *bavure* — a timely precaution, considering the repercussions of the recent one committed against Abdel. When Saïd and Hubert are finally released, it is just in time to see the last RER back to the *banlieues* leave the platform — the final act of torture and restriction delivered by the Parisian cops. Reunited with Vinz, who had escaped the arrest, the three consequently find themselves “*enfermés dehors*,” trapped in the vast but unwelcoming territory of Paris. Rejection (by bourgeois art gallery patrons) and danger (at the hands of a group of skinheads) await them at every turn. Paris, for all its riches, has nothing to offer them. When they finally get back to the *banlieues*, in the early hours of the morning, Vinz, cured of his violent desires, hands the gun to Hubert. Peace is restored, and Saïd prematurely suggests, “*On s’embrasse, on s’chante une chanson?*” This return to calm does not last long. As Vinz and Saïd part ways with Hubert, they are stopped by *banlieues* cops this time. In a ruthless moment of irony, Vinz is shot when one of the cops accidentally fires his weapon. Hubert, who had preached peace throughout the film but who is now in possession of the gun, rushes to his friends. In the last scene, he is locked in a standoff with the murderous cop, in a moment whose intensity matches that of the climax of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. The camera passes between them to frame Saïd’s face, as the opening script is repeated with the aforementioned variation (the man is substituted for society). A gun blasts (impossible to say whose) before the ultimate line of the film: “*c’est l’atterrissage.*”

In my retelling, I have thus far purposefully left out the ethnicities of the three protagonists: Hubert is Black of African descent; Vinz is white of Jewish heritage; and Saïd is an Arab of North African origin. These markers are central to their characterization, and together, the friends form the iconic “black/blanc/beur” trio, illuminated by the work of Mireille Rosello, amongst others. In the literary dystopian framework, there must be characters whose refusal or incapacity to conform threatens the established order. A brief

⁹¹ Those familiar with Anton Chekhov’s rules for drama expect this object to fulfill its function: “If in Act I you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act” (Rayfield 203).

overview of the long-standing stereotypes associated with Hubert, Saïd and Vinz will help further frame them as threatening and unassimilable elements, and support my reading the film as a dystopian text. In *Declining the Stereotype*, Rosello notes that conjuring up this racialized trio means conjuring up a set of inherited colonial and postcolonial stereotypes that, if they have evolved over time, are nevertheless enduring. Black bodies, according to Rosello, are still subjected to the stereotype of the childish (mischievous or obedient) African, inherited from colonial discourses. Perceptions of blackness, however, have become fragmented: Caribbeans, who have remained administratively French, fare slightly better than sub-Saharan Africans and their descendants, who tend to be heavily cast as undocumented immigrants, regardless of their actual legal status (4-8). It is under that last category that Hubert falls, meaning that he is subjected to a suspicious ideological gaze that constantly questions the legitimacy of his place in society. The Arab male migrant has also been subjected to a stereotyping gaze that has been constructed through the lens of France's colonial relationship to the Maghreb. After the independences, many North Africans, faced with high unemployment rates at home caused by the economic ruin France left in its wake, came to the Metropole in search of work. Confined to the peripheries of large cities, these men were typically employed as construction workers or in car factories, such as Renault's (see Mark and Stovall 2015). They lived in squalor, parked in overcrowded shantytown rooms. Due to these conditions, over which they had little control, these men came to be associated with illiteracy (which meant exclusion from France's hallowed culture), manual labor and filth, attributes that became part and parcel of their stereotyped identity. Since the 1990s, however, as Rosello explains, "the Arab living in the suburbs has been systematically suspected of being in cahoots with international terrorist organizations that are said to send emissaries, recruit youths, pack them off to military camps in Afghanistan, and then enroll them in their holy war against Western cultures" (3). Representations of Arab men on screen or on the page are invariably either affirmations or rejections of these stereotypes, but regardless of their objectives, they ensure the longevity of these images. Accordingly, Saïd is seen as a danger to the French way of life. As for the blanc of the trio, Rosello reveals that he often turns out to be a Jewish male. For the latter, stereotypical practices are less easily traced to colonial history, and for Rosello, they are in fact generally difficult to grasp altogether: "Jewishness [...] continues to remain an elusive signifier in French cultures." But, she warns, an absence of representation should not be mistaken for an absence of stereotyping. In fact, she asserts, "The lack of stereotypes can also be the expression of a stereotype of invisibility" (8). Yosefa Loshitzky proposes, however, that certain expectations are nonetheless inscribed on the Jewish male: "In the post-Holocaust Jewish imagination it is the Jewish male who is assigned to revenge Jewish victimization epitomized by the Holocaust" (138). She goes on to imply that a stereotype of the revengeful, angry, anxious Jew emerged in the wake of

the Shoah.⁹² To this, I add that this image coexists with a very different one that can be traced back to the *Code Noir* of 1685, whose very first article excluded all Jewish residents from the French Caribbean islands, summarily naming them enemies of Christianity. Behind this injunction was the rising concern that non-Christian subjects could dominate the economy. Three centuries later, when this economic success perjured in a devastated post-World War I Germany, it became a pretext for the Nazi genocidal machine. Images of Jewish men as money-driven infiltrators traveled well beyond the German borders. During the war that ensued, France yet again excluded its Jewish population, sending them to ghettos or to concentration camps. To atone for its part in the persecution of the Jews, France has since then taken a strong stance against antisemitism, but a recent rise in aggressions against Jewish people suggest that the hatred these stereotypes bred persists.⁹³ Thus we see that historically, the members of the black/blanc/beur trio have been marginalized and cast under suspicion. Whether Kassovitz carelessly deployed the racial trio or not is a question that has animated much of the scholarship about the film. Some believe he clumsily reproduced stereotypical images; others think that he shattered them.⁹⁴ In my reading of *La Haine*, I am not so concerned with whether Kassovitz avoids or stumbles into stereotypical pitfalls, though I believe in the importance of the aforementioned research. What matters here is the fact that the trio's racial and historical markers overdetermine its members and maintain them in radical alterity. Each of these figures comes with a long narrative of being cast out of the French utopia — this is particularly salient with the Jew being cast out of the French Caribbean islands, a utopian space by excellence. Because of this, we sense that the film would be entirely different, were its main protagonists White *Français de souche*. Their races, which have been the object of historical scrutiny within the colonial system and continued suspicion even within a postcolonial society, ensure that the protagonists of *La Haine* remain in the margins the *République française universelle*. In the economy of France's utopian normative project theorized by Glissant, these undying inherited stereotypical perceptions put the trio at risk of being considered “useless, accessory and contingent” (*Cohée* 141) — they can only fit in at the enormous cost of losing themselves. That is why for them the national utopia can only feel like a dystopia, a system that constantly tracks them, gauges them, and deems them dangerously different. In my reading of *La Haine*, Saïd, Vinz, and Hubert function precisely as the dystopian archetypes of the misfit troublemakers. Furthermore, Paris stands as the keeper of the utopian order, the site whereby supposedly universal norms are decided; the

⁹² Sadock, however, disagrees with this and asserts that, “l'image du juif en France ne le situe pas du côté de la violence physique”(70).

⁹³ See for instance, Le Cain, Blandine. “Actes Antisémistes En France : Des Hausses Souvent Liées à L'actualité.” *Le Figaro*, 14 Jan. 2016, 19:22, www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2016/01/14/01016-20160114ARTFIG00279-actes-antisemites-en-france-des-hausses-souvent-liees-a-l-actualite.php.

⁹⁴ For various responses to Kassovitz's treatment of stereotypes, see Sharma and Sharma, Loshitzky, and Sadock.

banlieues is where those who do not belong are relegated. In the controlled environment of Paris proper, the *République* can believe in its own utopia, but a look at the degradation that reigns in the *banlieues* reveals that it has been a dystopia for quite some time.

Kassovitz has repeatedly claimed that his was not a film about the *banlieues*, but about police brutality (Konstantarakos 161). This troubles my argument, which considers the *banlieues* as a dystopian space where the failure of France's postcolonial utopia is particularly visible. If it isn't about the *banlieues*, can it still index the postcolonial dystopia I suggest? If it is indeed a film about the police, I wish to underscore that this particular police force is evidently an arm of the postcolony.

First, it can be said that it is not difficult to consider the police's omnipresence in the *cité* as a dystopian trope. They are part of the aesthetics of surveillance identified by Claeys in *Dystopia: A Natural History*. The sheer number of uniformed policemen makes them hardly distinguishable from one another, and the fact that they are often filmed with traveling shots that glide over their facial features, or seen walking or standing with their backs to the camera, accentuates their shadowy, clone-like, ubiquitous nature. Going further, however, the police in Kassovitz's film constitutes an omnipresent repressive power apparatus deployed in a universe that is distinctly postcolonial and oriented toward oppressing unassimilable elements — elements that will not bend under the pressures of this particular utopia's harmonizing desires. As Johann Sadock points out,

La Haine montre de fait un monde coupé en deux dont la ligne de partage, la frontière, comme l'écrivait Fanon, "est indiquée par les casernes et les postes de police" et "où l'intermédiaire apporte la violence dans les maisons et dans les cerveaux du colonisé." Qu'on remplace "colonisé" par "marginalisé" et cette dernière phrase s'applique littéralement à l'intrigue de *La Haine*. (66)

The intermediary in question is the police. Its invasion of homes and minds is a fixture of dystopian power, but importantly, Sadock underscores here that there is a continuation from the colonial order to the postcolonial one — the colonized is the direct ancestor of the marginalized. The previous order and the one that succeeds it both bear the appearance of dystopias. For Sadock, however, the fact that the police in *La Haine* are themselves multiracial dilutes the film's value as a postcolonial commentary. She argues that the presence of these multiethnic cops would suggest that, "il y a donc des bons et des mauvais partout et jusque dans la police, elle-même mixte ethniquement" (67). Hanan Elsayed, on the contrary, suggests that "the ever-present violence of the police [is] inseparable from the racism of which it is the concrete realization. Further, the presence of Arab and African police officers does nothing to limit either the racism or the violence that, despite their intentions, they are compelled to enact by the sheer weight of the institution" (241). Elsayed suggests here that individuals do not matter, regardless of their racial heritage. From the moment that they lend

their bodies to the continuation and protection of the establishment, they are absorbed by it and become one with it.⁹⁵ Indeed, a closer look at those racialized cops indicates that they have been harmonized or indoctrinated, whether consciously or not. In a scene in which the three friends are denied access to Abdel's hospital room, a commotion ensues at the end of which a Black uniformed police officer falsely identifies Saïd, the Arab member of the trio, as the most dangerous one: "Ces jeunes gens ont commencé à faire du scandale. J'ai été contraint d'embarquer le chef." This egregious misjudgment seems comical since the spectator knows that Saïd is actually the least physically dangerous one (Vinz has a gun, Hubert has his fists, and Saïd has jokes), but it indicates that the cop has internalized the stereotype of the dangerous Arab, which dominated the media discourse of the 1990s (Rosello 3). On the other hand, the man's accent signals him as being of non-Metropolitan origin; it would seem then that some minoritized subjectivities can be assimilated — it isn't so much about race, as is it about each individual's capacity or willingness (or lack thereof) to question the source of his or her beliefs. A Maghrebi cop is among the ones who torture Saïd and Hubert in the Parisian precinct basement. He, too, has fused with the institution, and evidently internalized its colonial consumerist gaze. Discussing various types of hashish, including the bit he has found on Hubert, he declaims, parodying a scientific tone, "Le mieux, c'est Afghan: décollage, atterissage, sans problème. Black Bombay, pareil. Libanais, ça dépend, ça dépend des régions. Mais ça bon, je vais le garder, mais c'est vraiment de la merde." Furthermore, when this same cop has handcuffed Hubert to a chair, he orders him to pick up a switchblade lying on the floor in a manner that unambiguously recalls early colonial stereotypes: "Ramasse avec les pieds. Toi, dans ton pays, on ramasse avec les pieds." Finally, his questioning of Hubert's and Saïd's Frenchness upon looking at their identity cards ("C'est français, ça?") conveys that even if he is a Maghrebi cop, he acts like a French one, and if this is a film about police brutality, this particular police force is clearly an extension of the colony, regardless of their race. In the film, these racially predicated brutal interactions participate in a dystopian framework that invalidates France's postcolonial utopia. Thus, the indictment of the postcolony is neither a secret that needs to be revealed nor a latent text buried deep within Kassovitz's film. Rather, the latter is a drama about *bavures policières* that also naturally bears witness to the dystopian side of the French postcolony from which police brutality is inseparable.

I suggested above that Kassovitz was deliberate in choosing the races of his protagonists and that their inherited status as outsiders was central to the film's logic. But I believe there is something else at work. Let us imagine, once more, how different the film would be if the three protagonists were solely of African descent. What if the three of them were

⁹⁵ I am reminded here of the main protagonist in Zamyatin's *We* who blushes at the thought of his individuality: "I shall try to record the things I see, the things I think, or, to be exact, the things *we* think. Yes, "we"; that is exactly what I mean, and *We* therefore shall be the title of my records" (3). The fact that the governing entity in *We* is called OneState reinforces the idea of absorption into a monolithic notion of universality.

Jewish? Or Maghrebi? Here again, the film's message would be different. While some have proposed that their friendship was "somewhat unlikely" (Sharma and Sharma 105), or "'designed' perhaps in the spirit of the united colours of Benetton" (Loshitzky 143), I consider that the significance of the black/blanc/beur trio resides in its (re)presentation of a *mise en relation* of *étants*, as Glissant conceives of the term. These *étants* are each the products of cultures that have been put in relation with France but also with each other, on the distinct terms of the colonial enterprise. I see the three of them as embarked on the dystopian side of the history of the French postcolony, but also simultaneously caught up in the maelstrom of globalization and the cultural encounters it enables. In the midst of these forces, the characters perform the types of vertical and lateral gestures that I understand to be constitutive of the dystopian genre and that concomitantly participate in what Lionnet and Shih describe as a transversal practice of identity formation:

This cultural transversalism includes minor cultural articulations in productive relationship with the major (in all its possible shapes, forms, and kinds), as well as minor-to-minor networks that circumvent the major altogether. This transversalism also produces new forms of identification that negotiate with national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries, thus allowing for the emergence of the minor's inherent complexity and multiplicity. (8)

The identities of Saïd, Hubert, and Vinz are just as much the result of their vertical (conflictual) relationship to France, as they are the result of their lateral or transversal relation to one another and to other minorities worldwide.⁹⁶ This multi-directional dynamic is palpable in the following dialogue between Saïd and Vinz:

SAÏD: Et tu vas vraiment tuer un keuf si Abdel il meurt?

Vinz: Et alors qu'est-ce tu crois, toi? Tu veux être le prochain rebeu à te faire fumer dans un commissariat?

SAÏD: Non.

VINZ: Et ben alors, tu crois quoi? *Moi non plus.*

SAÏD: Toi non plus tu veux pas être le prochain rebeu à te faire fumer dans un commissariat?!

VINZ: Exactement. Tu vois, toi, les mecs, *ils* croient qu'on gole-rit, tu vois, mais moi sans déconner, Saïd, j'te dis la vérité, j' gole-ris pas.

⁹⁶ The influence of American pop culture on the youth has been noted by many (Loshitzky, Sharma & Sharma, Siciliano, etc.). I will expand upon how hip-hop, particularly, exemplifies a transversal model of identity formation and self-representation in *La Haine*.

Within the geography of this scene, set in a bathroom as Vinz gives Saïd what we already suspect will be a disastrous haircut, Vinz's comment could simply appear humorous and incongruous — a *lapsus* identified as such by Saïd himself. Yet Vinz uttered it seriously and deliberately: as he goes on to repeat it, he isn't laughing. This self-identifying gesture, which is simultaneously serious and comically incongruous, also functions both as a vertical act of resistance against *them* and a transversal act of minor-to-minor solidarity that circumvents the dominant culture by bypassing its strict ethnic and racial categorizations.⁹⁷ This discourse is relayed by a constellation of similar moments in *La Haine*, whereby comic utterances such as Vinz's are juxtaposed with a dystopian aesthetic of violence, while simultaneously eschewing France's harmonizing tendencies by putting diverse minoritized subjectivities in Relation.

Together and separately the members of the *black/blanc/ beur* trio have been the objects of an excess of epistemological discourses, which give their presence in *La Haine* multiple signifying layers. We may also remember that an earlier version of the trio lived, with variations, in joking: "Trois hommes sont dans un désert, un Noir, un Arabe et un Juif, etc..."⁹⁸ In many ways, *La Haine* can be read as an endless series of such setups: "Un Noir, un Arabe et un Juif sont dans la banlieue, à l'hôpital, dans le métro, à Paris, au poste de police, dans une galerie d'art, etc." In these types of jokes, the ethnically marked protagonists are always the targets — the butts of the jokes. Is that also the case in *La Haine*? I believe that rather than offering his heroes as targets (of jokes — they are evidently targeted in all other ways), Kassovitz refracts and diverts the power of these jokes, and ultimately weaponizes laughter to construct his social critique of contemporary France, as we shall see in the following scene.

Toward the end of the film, we find the trio stranded in Paris, unable to return home after missing the last RER. After aimlessly walking through the streets, the young men take shelter in a Parisian art gallery. There, once again, the presence of multiple ethnicities might lull us into thinking that the postcolony embraces multiplicity — for instance, a mixed-race Black woman attracts the eyes of Vinz, Hubert, and Saïd. But a closer look at the artwork displayed provides evidence of France's cultural whitewashing: the Pop Art pieces of the gallery exhibit are comprised of miscellaneous modern objects (plastic bottles, manufactured toys, gloves, lightbulbs) completely painted white. The conspicuousness of their desire for signification is underscored by the black and white aesthetics of the film. The amateur art critic might be tempted to simply reduce them to a critique of modernity and its mundane objects, but this modernity is also clearly associated with whiteness, purity, and harmony, as symbolized by the chromatic uniformity of the pieces. In any case, the art is entirely opaque

⁹⁷ It echoes Abel's feeling Chechen, in Confiant's *Trilogie Tropicale*.

⁹⁸ This model of joking was so prevalent in France that it is now the object of meta-jokes: "C'est deux allemands, un italien, un juif, un arabe, le pape, trois gendarmes, une pute et un gay qui rentre dans un bar et il y a le garçon de café qui fait: « C'est quoi ça, c'est une blague? »" (blague-humour.com)

for the trio, who find themselves unable to articulate a worthwhile critique of the work. Their incapacity to belong to the city and engage with its cultural offerings is compounded by their inability to play by this bourgeois crowd's rules of sociability. Indeed, Saïd's clumsy attempts at flirting culminate in the three of them being expelled from the gallery, with the owner (played by Kassovitz's father) regurgitating a widespread media catchphrase: "Le malaise des banlieues !" This scene is comical in many ways. The young men's very presence in the gallery is incongruous, and their commentary on the artwork leaves much to be desired. We see that, intradiegetically, the discomfort experienced by all present is briefly negotiated through uneasy laughter — the young men and women they accost laugh as the tension among them rises and the discussion veers into an altercation. Yet at the same time, the most significant laughter that might occur here resides extradiegetically, in the viewer, that is, the cinema-goer and enjoyer of cultural offerings who might look at the youths with a tinge of superiority and say, "I understand modern art. I do not get expelled from art galleries." This moment sheds light on the interpretative ambiguities of certain comic events in the film. At that particular moment, the young men laugh to mediate the embarrassment of the incident, but we as viewers must interrogate the source of our own laughter. As Jean-Philippe Blanchard points out, speaking generally of comedic banlieue films, "Il est parfois difficile de comprendre si le film porte à rire *de* ou à rire *avec*" (109). The answer will, of course, vary from one spectator to the next, and one director to the next. In my reading of *La Haine*, however, I observe that no matter what comical situation or social space the trio is thrust into, we often learn more about that space and its ideological entanglement than about the characters themselves. Although at times we do laugh at the protagonists' expense, overall Kassovitz redirects the violence of joking toward society itself.

The trio maps out precisely the types of intersections between dystopia and humor I am interested in. It simultaneously tells us a story about the failed utopia of the postcolonial stage of the *République française universelle*, illustrates the type of transversal gestures between oppressed people that I associate with the dystopian genre, and it is repeatedly deployed to produce complex moments of critical laughter, which perform the social indictment Ménil had announced. Having made the preliminary case for my reading of the film as a postcolonial dystopia, one that is not anesthetized by humor but rather reinforced by it, I will first analyze Hubert's recurring joke and tease out its multiple implications and role in orienting a particular reading of the film. I will then bring together jokes that are syntagmatically distanced in the film (mostly Saïd's and that of the man referred to as "Monsieur Toilettes" in the opening credits) to show that they are paradigmatically related. Focusing on the character of Saïd, I will suggest that his role as the Jester of the film participates in a delicate poetics of self-reflection that further makes the case for the centrality of humor (as conceived by Ménil) in *La Haine*. Turning to the topic of topias, I will consider Michel Foucault's notions of heterotopia and utopia, developed in his essay "Des espaces

autres,” and I will focus on the recurring trope of the mirror within the film. I argue that *La Haine* is a mélange of both ideas, which according to Foucault is also true for the mirror. As a film invested in representation, and particularly in the dystopian genre, *La Haine* is a utopia, which Foucault considers as a fundamentally unreal space. At the same time, the *banlieues*, as the concrete historical dystopian space that forms the basis of Kassovitz’s cinematographic dystopia, are a heterotopia that has much to tell the audience about the *République française universelle*. Overall, I concur with Katya Zisserman and Colin Nettlebeck who argue that “what is at work in the film is that [sic] we might then call a ‘transformative’ aesthetic, in which inflection of various communicative strategies in the construction and composition of the work is designed to produce change in the audience’s way of seeing and experiencing social reality” (93). Within this perspective, I contend that humor and the poetics of dystopia are two central communicative strategies of *La Haine* and that they are woven together to emit a highly aestheticized moral judgment on a fallen society. The image that is reflected back to that society in Kassovitz’s many mirrors is poetic, precisely because it is mediated through the “grandiose hallucination” of humor as described and prescribed by Ménil.

“C’EST L’HISTOIRE D’UN HOMME...”

A full analysis of the joke remains to be done. In this section, I will examine its complex paradigmatic layering and show how in a few short words, it contains a critique of unbridled dystopian urbanization, a lateral gesture to other sufferings, and a significant decentralization of knowledge production — all themes that also resonated in Confiant’s novellas.

As a point of departure, I would like to consider another time and space where this joke unfolded on the big screen. And that time, it did garner laughter. It was told in 1960 by Steve McQueen’s character, in John Sturges’s *The Magnificent Seven*:

VIN TANNER: This reminds me of a fellow back home who fell off a 10-story building.

CHRIS ADAMS: Yeah what about him?

VIN TANNER: Well as he was falling, people on each floor kept hearing him say, ‘So far, so good. [click of the tongue] So far, so good.’

THE OLD MAN: *Chuckles

This scene shows that this story can certainly be uttered as a joke, that is, a text, whose illocutionary goal is to elicit laughter; in fact, in *The Magnificent Seven*, it is met with a perlocutionary success: The Old Man does laugh — or rather chuckles. As a joke, it seems to fall under the category of gallows humor and is reminiscent of the quip Freud attributes to a “criminal who was being led out to the gallows on a Monday [and who] remarked: ‘Well, the

week's beginning nicely" ("Humor" 161). Much like the criminal of the anecdote, Vin Tanner relishes a moment of pause before certain death. To be effective, humor needs not to be superlatively funny. The pleasure produced from the humorous attitude, Freud writes, "never reaches the intensity of the pleasure in the comic or in jokes, [and] never finds vent in hearty laughter" (166). The quality of this kind of humor does not reside in its cleverness. Freud continues,

... the jest made by humour is not the essential thing. It has only the value of a preliminary. The main thing is the intention which humour carries out, whether it is acting in relation to the self or other people. It means: 'Look! here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children — just worth making a jest about!' (Ibid.)

That is why the old man can only chuckle: he knows that so good only goes so far, and that further is another story — there might not even be a further. His chuckle seems to be a sign of recognition and gratitude for the temporary repudiation of reality and the illusion kindly served by Tanner's joke. His reaction suggests that he feels, if only momentarily, liberated and buoyed, like the criminal who walks toward his death, or the man who falls toward his.

The story begs a set of questions: who is the man falling? Why is the man falling? Where is the man falling? He is falling elsewhere, "back home," presumably in a large American city where 10-story buildings exist, and stand in stark contrast, then, with the wide-open desert south of the Mexican border where the action of *The Magnificent Seven* takes place. In spite of various distances (cultural, spatial, ethnic, perhaps also economic), the Old Man's plight is put into relation with that of the man who falls. Finally, we can assume that Tanner heard the story from those who witnessed the man's fall or from acquaintances of acquaintances of theirs — obviously not from the man himself, who likely did not live to tell it. Perhaps in its initial recounting, the story was not a joke, but rather a tragic tale. This implies that one script can evolve and be deployed with various intentions and results. As Bergson might say, it depends on whose parish one belongs to.

In *La Haine*, three variations of this story are deployed at distinct moments, each with different results. As previously mentioned, it first appears within the first minutes of the film. It is uttered by a disembodied voice, which we only recognize later to be Hubert's. It is superimposed over a highly metaphorical vision: an image of the Earth, which according to the film's script "n'est qu'une photographie collée sur un panneau publicitaire" (Favier and Kassovitz 17). Toward it, a lit torch falls (yet another fall) and sets it ablaze upon impact (*Figure 2*). This suggests a story whose implications reach well beyond the confines of the

banlieues. Against France's universalism, a universal story is told.⁹⁹ With the *Magnificent Seven*'s echo, it is now multiple falls that are put into relation.¹⁰⁰



Figure 2

This end-of-the-world image invites an apocalyptic reading of the film and reminds us of Édouard Glissant's remarks about the ubiquity of such tropes. Though *La Haine* certainly offers a vision of the chaos-monde, and though it certainly aestheticizes this chaos-monde (the sublime overhead shot of the *banlieues*, or the handsomeness of the trio), it resists depicting it as a promising future, as Glissant does. David Castillo and Brad Nelson provide a useful framework for thinking through the poetics of apocalyptic images, via Jacques Derrida's reading of Kant:

[Derrida] begins his analysis of Kant's critique of the increasing prevalence of "apocalyptic tone" in eighteenth-century philosophy with a classical etymological explication: "Apokalupto: I discover, I uncover, I reveal the thing that can be a body part, the head or the eyes, a secret part, the sex or any hidden thing, a secret, what must be hidden, a thing that cannot be shown or said, that perhaps signifies but cannot or should not be made directly evident." (4)

⁹⁹ In the previous chapter, I define universalism as a desire toward uniformity, which I contrast with the universal, as understood by Ménéil, Césaire and Glissant, which is comprised of multiplicities.

¹⁰⁰ For Zisserman and Nettlebeck, this image also suggests a "disaster of planetary proportions" (91), and furthermore, because it is identified as an advertisement, "the attack on it is a violent statement of the film's choice, from the very beginning, against commercialism" (92-93). Moreover, for Sharma and Sharma, the choice of Bob Marley and the Wailers' "Burnin' and Lootin'", which immediately follows the explosion, "seeks to connect to connect these acts of resistance and rebellion to wider post-colonial struggles against racist state terror and social injustice" (104).

This etymological reminder encourages us to consider what this end-of-the-world image invites us to discover — something that lies beyond what is given in the film. It encourages us to read hidden meanings and compels us to discover, or at least attempt to discover, the signification of this opening text.

Parallel to the apocalyptic vision of the beginning, there is another evocation of the poetics of dystopia. First, I reiterate here Rabkin's notion that all dystopias are necessarily postlapsarian. By placing this story and this abstract image of multiple falls at the beginning of the film, Kassovitz squarely places us in a postlapsarian logic. In addition, the story has evolved from its telling in *Magnificent Seven* in a way that references the increasing alienation of modernity, a recurring dystopian motif. The fact that the building has now grown to be 50-stories tall gestures toward the excesses of urbanization. It is interesting to note that in France, there were only two such buildings in 1995: the Tour Montparnasse (59 floors, built in 1973) in the 15th arrondissement, and the Tour First (52 floors, completed in 1974), which stands in La Défense, a business district right outside of Paris proper. Both of these constructions are emblems of a capitalistic system to which neither member of the trio can hope to belong. This story is already implicitly one of exclusion. Importantly, in this retelling, the man who falls has also lost his witnesses. He falls alone and seemingly unseen, necessarily outside of the building from which he has been suddenly excluded for unknown reasons. To palliate his loneliness at such a crucial time, he narrates his own fall, and puts it into poetry, with the rhythmic repetition, "Jusqu'ici tout va bien." Each repetition keeps him alive through words. Becoming silent would mean he is already dead.¹⁰¹ At the same time, he constructs his logic outside of the system, and though it may be flawed or incomplete, this logic and linguistic production, against all odds, constitutes an act of resistance against the exclusionary system itself. Thus, he performs the role of the jokester for himself, but in addition to showcasing Freud's humoristic attitude, this repetition suggests that it is also caught up in the dynamic of irony's repetitive blindness, as defined by de Man. He refuses to see the "atterrissage." The reality of the latter is only given to us by Hubert. Because the film ironically folds upon itself through the repetition of the story, it seems that it is bound to repeat itself. It remains alive through this repetition, albeit in a catastrophic way. This puts the film in danger of succumbing to the maddening irony that plagued Dada.

The text is repeated again, 1 hour and 26 minutes into the film. "Trapped outside" in Paris, at 2:57 in the morning (as exactly indicated by the film's merciless clock), the three friends light up a joint and get redundantly high on a rooftop. Having reached the elevation of the spirit afforded by the height of the rooftop and the marijuana, the three partake in the

¹⁰¹ As Tzvetan Todorov writes, "L'absence de récit signifie la mort" (87).

expected humorous (and pseudo-philosophical) banter.¹⁰² The tone of joking is prevalent in this scene, with Saïd composing an epigram against le Pen:

SAÏD: Ecoute le poème: Le penis de le Pen, à peine il se hisse.

His quip is followed by a round of laughter. It is, then, in this resolutely comical atmosphere that we hear Hubert tell the story once more, but this time, intradiegetically, that is, within the action of the film. After a moment of silence:

HUBERT: Eh, Vinz. Tu la connais l'histoire du keum qui tombe d'un *building* de cinquante étages? Et à chaque étage, pour se rassurer le keum, il s'répète, "Jusqu'ici tout va bien. Jusqu'ici tout va bien. Jusqu'ici tout va bien."

VINZ: (Chuckles) J'la connaissais avec un rabbin.

Vinz's chuckle validates the joke as one, but his remark also implies that this joke circulates and acquires variations according to its diverse settings. This retelling has also acquired variations from its initial form. (In Vinz's withheld version, which would feature a rabbi, the specter of the Shoah looms in the distance. Is that version a Holocaust joke?) Using Attardo's method allows us to better understand how this script operates within the film:

Script Opposition: Death/Life; Pessimism/Optimism; Folly/Clarity

Logical Mechanism: The man is both correct and wrong. Though it is true that so far, it is still good, it is also true that it is overall too late. This is an example of reasoning from false premises, yet it is justified by a desperate need to cling on to every inch of life still available. Hubert resolves this opposition, at the beginning of the film, and once more shortly thereafter, with a phrase whose sober wisdom gives it axiomatic weight: "Mais l'important c'est pas la chute, c'est l'atterrissage."

Situation: A dialogue between Hubert and Vinz, who are under the influence of hashish.

Target: The butt of the joke is ambiguous. Is it the falling man? It would seem, however, that his situation is brought upon him through no fault of his own, but is rather the result of society's exclusionary tendencies. The last telling of this script, whereby society takes on the role of the falling man confirms, in retrospect, that it is the joke's target.

Narrative Strategy: This is a *Tu la connais celle de...* joke.

¹⁰² The elevation of the spirit Ménil associates with the humorous attitude seems to be doubly thematized here.

Language: The lexicon is marked by verlan (*keum*), but also by the usage of the word *building*.

The Language level invites us to pay particular attention to the transcultural, transnational, and transversal valences of the words used in this instance (this contrasts with the generally standard language of the script's first iteration in the film). The verlan — *keum* (for *mec*) — is introduced. It is also crucial to note that Hubert uses the word *building*, in English, recalling the strong presence of American culture in the *banlieues*, and again gesturing toward multiple forms of oppression — cultural, linguistic, racial, and political.¹⁰³ Thus we have a repetition, but this time, with a broadened context. In *Le Discours Antillais*, Glissant thinks of repetition in yet a different way. After viewing a documentary on Martin Luther King, Jr. and the modalities of discourse amplification through audience repetition, he notes, “Comme dans le texte tragique, la répétition n’est pas ici tautologie. Il y a là une économie de la parole” (250). This applies as well in this second telling of the joke, which now has acquired richer meaning. It is given a dialogic conclusion that travels between particular and universal suffering, through comparisons:

HUBERT: Tu vois, c’est *comme* nous à la téci. Jusqu’ici tout va bien. Jusqu’ici tout va bien. Jusqu’ici tout va bien. Mais c’est qui compte, c’est pas la chute: c’est l’atterrissage.

Vinz responds in kind:

VINZ: Putain, j’m sens *comme* une fourmi perdue dans l’univers intergalactique.

The cinematography reinforces this moment of poetry. Hubert and Vinz are filmed from behind, with a close-up. The background is dark and out of focus (*Figures 3 and 4*), with no recognizable spatial markers, accentuating the feeling of being lost in the universe — or in a universal sentiment. Furthermore, Lionel Kopp, the colorist in charge of developing the film’s reels, confirms Kassovitz’s attention to the universal, noting that it partially motivated the choice of the Black and White aesthetic:

Au départ, Kassovitz voulait tourner en N & B pour une raison assez simple : l’histoire se passait dans des banlieues glauques et très laides et le N & B donne une stylisation immédiate même si on filme des barres d’immeubles peintes dans des couleurs moches qui n’apportent rien à la dramaturgie. Le N & B nettoie tout ça et permet de travailler le

¹⁰³ Furthermore, tall buildings are commonplace in America, and their presence in France and in this joke evokes those imports whose flamboyant veneer belies injustice, inequality and exclusion.

contraste. Kassovitz souhaitait donner à son film une dimension universelle, transposer le fait-divers, le sortir de l'anecdotique et le N & B aide à cette universalisation.



Figure 3



Figure 4

This second telling of the joke is an echo of the first one. It creates a bridge (the term Attardo uses to denote “the occurrence of two related lines far from each other” [111]) between the beginning of the film and its middle. But we sense that this bridge is also metaphorical: it symbolizes the Relation (as understood by Glissant) between the universal fates of all those who are marginalized by or expelled from a system — like the man who is falling and the people of the *cité*. Humor, Ménil tells us, is poetry. In this particular moment of *La Haine*, the cinematography comes to reinforce humor as joke as poetry.

Finally, in its ultimate retelling, the story has entirely lost the comforting aspect of Freudian humor and veers more toward the cruelty of Ménil's. The human subject has been entirely evacuated, and it is now society itself that is falling. It is no longer falling from anywhere specific, yet we understand that it is responsible for its own demise. But as I mentioned previously, the film offers no hopeful way out of this tragic ending, and in that sense, it diverges from Ménil. Discussing the dystopian genre as a whole, Nelson and Castillo suggest that, “Against the divisive demagoguery and authoritarianism of wall-erecting, fear-mongering nationalism and Messianic Imperialism, the poetics of dystopian tragedy urge us to rediscover and fight for ‘the spirit of humanism and dignity,’ in the words of Erich Fromm” (13). Here, no indication is given that this fight will succeed; this impels the categorization of the film not just as a dystopia but as a counter-utopia, which entirely rejects utopian thinking.

MUSIC: A UTOPIAN INTERLUDE IN A DYSTOPIAN PIECE

In their essay, Sharma and Sharma present *La Haine* as “a dystopian text of despair and anger,” where brief glimpses of hope can be gleaned through the film's few musical interludes: “It is across the discursive site of music — as a social force and practice — that

this film desires to articulate an agency for its main characters and the possibility of imagining a utopia”¹⁰⁴ (111). I concur that *La Haine* is overall a dystopian text, and I agree that its characters do nourish utopian desires, but I contend that this should not lead us to believe that the film is itself utopian or optimistic. In the film, utopian aspirations are often quickly squelched. For instance, Hubert, who seeks to escape the dystopian universe of the *banlieues*, shares his hope with his mother:

Hubert: J'en ai marre d'la cité, j'en ai marre. J'veux partir d'ici. Putain, c'était pas pareil avant.[...] Il faut qu'je parte. Faut qu'je parte d'ici, putain.

Mother: Mais oui. Si tu vois une épicerie en route, ramène-moi une salade.

His evocation of a better past corresponds to the work of utopias and dystopias, which, as previously mentioned, have a nostalgic component that looks longingly to prelapsarian times. His mother, however, comically deflates this lofty utopian wish by incongruously juxtaposing it with the trivial task of stopping at the grocer's. Returning to Sharma's and Sharma's contention that music partakes in this desire for utopia, I am interested in their engagement with Paul Gilroy's politics of transfiguration. For Gilroy, this politics is fueled by utopian desires, and “it points specifically to the formation of a community of needs and solidarity which is magically made audible in the music itself and palpable in the social relations of its cultural utility and reproduction” (37, also qtd. in Sharma and Sharma 111).

This politics of transfiguration, according to Gilroy, operates on a subtextual plane, or precisely the type of “lower frequency” upon which music travels, “because words... will never be enough to communicate its unsayable truth” (37). Music and songs, however, can also partake in what Gilroy calls a politics of fulfillment: “The notion that a future society will be able to realise the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished.” This discursive mode, “though by no means literal, can be grasped through what is said, shouted, screamed or sung” (Ibid). To Sharma's and Sharma's argument, I would then add that some songs (The Gap Band, Marvin Gaye) in *La Haine*, partake in a politics of transfiguration and others (NTM, KRS-One), could be better understood as exemplifying a politics of fulfillment, for they constitute highly legible indictments of a broken system. Both modes can be said to reference utopian thinking, but not necessarily through the utopian genre. For instance, NTM's and KRS-One's songs deploy a dystopian rhetoric that advocates for liberation through violence — a distinctly non-utopian trope. At the same time, their presence in the film suggests yet again a dystopian lateral gesture of *mise en relation* of plights — here, more specifically, of the plights of Afro-Black

¹⁰⁴ Although it is interesting that none of the main characters pursue musical endeavors or produce music of their own, which would make a more direct link between music and utopia in Sharma and Sharma's argument.

diasporic subjects.¹⁰⁵ For Gilroy, this politics of transfiguration offers a verdict on art that is in line with Theodore Adorno's propositions in the wake of the Shoah. Adorno writes:

Art's utopia, the counterfactual yet-to-come, is draped in black. It goes on being a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real; it is a kind of imaginary restitution of that catastrophe, which is world history; it is a freedom which did not pass under the spell of necessity and which may well not come to pass ever at all. (qtd. in Gilroy 38)

The notion of Art's utopia, however, seems again different from utopian art. And the fact that it is draped in black evokes a somber aesthetics that departs from the lightheartedness of utopias themselves. Furthermore, neither the utopian nor the dystopian genre can afford the freedom to escape the spell of necessity, for their very politics compels them to make a stand. Still, *La Haine* does provide this critical edge against the real, and it certainly makes a direct commentary on the catastrophe that is world history, and more specifically, France's role in that history. The very existence of the film and its pessimistic perspective seem to espouse the opinion that freedom from the necessity of making such engaged works of art — Art's utopia — will never come to pass.

Providing another take on the relationship between music and utopia in Kassovitz's film by relating them to nature, Fahim Amir states that "There are utopian spaces knitted into the fabric of the seemingly pessimistic film *La Haine*" and that "These are always connected to music and occupy places that are either deeply hidden from the surveilling eye of police and media [...] or occupy high grounds." He goes on to astutely remark that the camera adopts a pigeon vision during a fascinating sweeping overhead shot of the *cité*, precisely as the sound waves of Cut Killer's mashup of KRS-One, NTM and Edith Piaf engulf the space. He also interprets Vinz's repeated hallucinatory cow sightings as subconscious desires for a time before the *banlieues*, when the land was devoted to agricultural purposes. For him, the music, the pigeon perspective, and the cow are all signs that "Nature, as the expelled other of high modernist architecture, 'creeps back.'" Like the man falling, nature too is brutally expelled from the trappings of modernity, but momentarily regains agency through ironic repetition and returns — small reminders of what used to exist there but will eventually cease to be all together. Overall, it would seem that the characters are given to utopian thinking, but the film itself constantly interrupts and denies this hopeful political imagination. In an important scene during which music temporarily gathers the

¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Ruth Doughty and Kate Griffiths highlight that this *mise en relation* is a crucial part of the film, and find further examples of it elsewhere: "...the Black Power Olympic poster hidden in the background of Hubert's room suggests, the specific interest of this film in America lies with the Black American community and its heritage. That the dilapidated American ghettos with their problematic relationship with the police, unemployment, substance abuse and inescapability serve as powerful reference points for the inhabitants of the depressed housing project, is perhaps unsurprising. The boys borrow from Black American culture in order to reinforce their own racial identities" (121).

three free friends and the community around a group of breakdancers, trouble comes in the form of a siren (a dystopian sound interrupting a utopian one), and the last dancer is left spinning in silence. If music, allied with nature, symbolizes utopian desires, I underscore that the music always stops. Glaringly, it is again refused at the end of the film. Indeed, following the final gunshot, the end credits roll over an unbearable silence, which no music relieves as would be expected in films. This would again gesture toward reading the film as a counter-utopia, offering no relief.

“C’EST PAS TROP MORTEL, ÇA?”: SAÏD AS THE JESTER OF *LA HAINE*

In describing the everyday practices of Saïd, Hubert, and Vinz, Sharma and Sharma write that “They pointlessly hang out and tell humorous though meaningless stories to each other”(106). I would contend, however, that these stories are only meaningless on the surface. Together, they provide a coherent picture of the dystopian background against which they emerge. Though it would be impossible to analyze each joke and comedic event featured in *La Haine* in the present work, I propose a visual representation of them that highlights their continuous presence and allows me to consider the film a serious plot with jab lines, according to Attardo’s categorization.

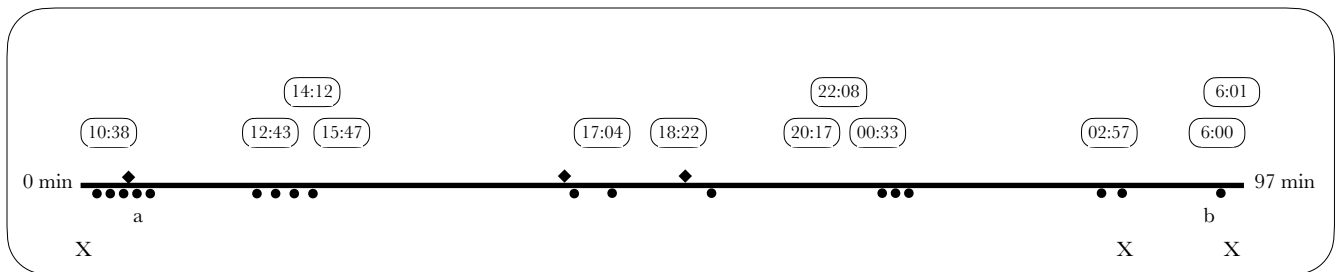
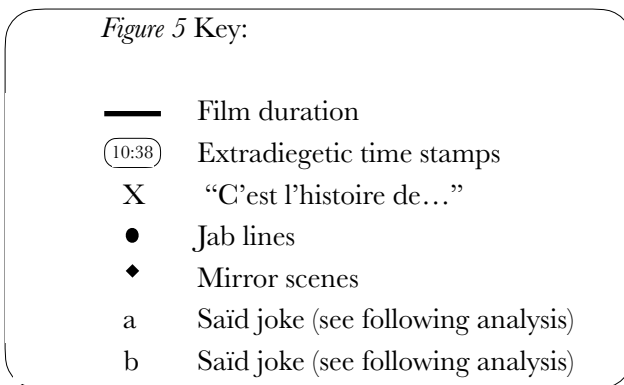


Figure 5



The timeline presented in *Figure 5* reveals a perhaps surprisingly well-balanced film run through and through with jab lines (represented by dots).¹⁰⁶ As Attardo points out, the overall distribution of comic lines in a text can reveal much about it.

Some of these comic events are designed to make the viewer and the characters laugh, while others are only for the benefit of the viewer — that is, the characters are not laughing, or are laughing for other reasons, e.g., the art gallery scene. Another such example is the now-classic dialogue between Saïd and Vinz’s sister, within the first few minutes of the film:

SAÏD: Vas-y dis à ton frère de descendre.

SISTER: Pour quoi faire?

SAÏD: Dis-lui d’descendre!

SISTER: Pour quoi faire?

SAÏD: Mais dis-lui d’descendre!

SISTER: Pour quoi faire?

SAÏD: Eh ho ho ho, tu t’es crue dans un sketch à la télé.

This dialogue first appeared in a famous sketch by Les Inconnus, a comedic trio from the 1990s. This widely popular routine targeted *banlieues* youths, indexed by the moped and the use of *verlan*. Whether it is restituted here as an homage to or as a critique of Les Inconnus is hard to tell. The last line, however, is ironic, as this routine was indeed televised, and it is here again brought to the screen in the film. Overall, Saïd is responsible for a number of the film’s jab lines. His speech is peppered with *yo mama* references and other sarcastic lines, but importantly, he delivers multiple jokes. In this section, I examine two of his jokes that bookend the film and analyze them using Attardo’s GTVH.

I begin with the first of Saïd’s direct jokes (a), which occurs shortly after the 10th minute of the film.

SAÏD: Tu vois le mec, qui arrive comme ça et il fait: “J’crois que j’ferais n’importe quoi pour de l’argent. J’crois que j’tuerais même des gens.” Alors son copain il le r’garde comme ça et il lui fait, “j’crois qu’j’tuerais même toi pour de l’oseille.” Alors l’autre carrément, il pé-fli. Il lui fait— il lui dit: “Tu sais quoi? Mais non, j’rigole: toi, t’es mon ami. J’tu tue pas pour de l’argent! J’tu tue gratuit!” C’est gratuit! C’est pas mortel comme phrase, ça? Le mec il lui dit: “J’tu tue gratuitement!” [...]

¹⁰⁶ Doughty and Griffiths note that this equilibrium underscores the film’s desire to espouse the symmetrical aesthetics of mirrors (120). I agree with their conclusions, though I offer a different reading of mirrors in the following section.

VINZ: Ça va! J'avais compris la première fois! (To someone else:) Toi, dis à ton frère qu'il vienne me voir.

SAÏD: C'est pas mortel comme phrase, ça? Le mec il lui dit, "Moi, j'te tue gratuit."

VINZ: Vas-y, arrête de parler.

Analyzing the joke through Attardo's model allows us to immediately note that there is nothing random about it, but rather, that it seems to partake in an act of foreshadowing:

Script Opposition: Killing randomly/Killing a friend; Taking life/Giving death; Violence/Conviviality; Not free/Free

Logical Mechanism: He would kill anyone for money, but between friends, the rules of conviviality would imply doing favors, including monetary ones, i.e., at a friend's price, therefore for his friend, he would kill for free. Of course, the friend is not in the market for purchasing his own death, so the premise is absurd. This is an example of reasoning from confused premises.

Situation: A dialogue between two friends, framed within a dialogue between two friends in the film. Money is central to the joke, and we also know that it is something the two protagonists do not have much of, which makes the joke not so random but subordinated to their environment.

Target: The butt of the joke is ambiguous. Is it the would-be killer? His friend? Their anonymity and lack of salient characteristics make them uninteresting individual targets. Rather, the joke seems to indict the kind of society that subconsciously undoes friendship.

Narrative Strategy: Though we do not have access to the beginning of this conversation, which occurs offscreen, we may assume that it is a "C'est l'histoire d'un mec," joke.

Language: The lexicon is marked by colloquialisms, including verlan (pé-fli for flipper) and slang (mec, oseille, mortel, etc.)

Vinz does not laugh, which echoes the undoing of conviviality, itself present in the joke. It would seem that the latter was not appropriate on some level and that it caused a rupture between the jokester (Saïd) and his audience (here, Vinz). While Saïd may have assumed that the occasion was appropriate for such a joke, Vinz's "Withholding laughter may therefore be seen as rejection of this implicit claim and therefore as disapproving (once more, among other options which include failure of noticing and/or understanding the humor)" (Attardo 116). Vinz understood the joke as one (illocutionary success) but did not laugh (perlocutionary failure), despite Saïd's repeated invitation to do so: "C'est pas mortel?" The terms of this very invitation are, of course, themselves loaded: though *mortel* is a popular way

of positively qualifying something, loosely related to “mort de rire,” its connection with death is nevertheless probing.

The second joke (b) occurs at the end of the film, as the young men finally make it back to their *banlieue* in the early hours of the morning. The men are exhausted, but for the moment, they are at least in familiar territory.

SAÏD: Tu connais l'histoire de la bonne sœur? C'est un mec bourré, alors comme ça il sort d'un bar, et il voit une bonne sœur sur le trottoir d'en face. Tu sais les bonnes sœurs avec les grandes capes noires, là? Et PEUF! Il lui met une grosse cacahuète dans les dents. Et PEUF encore une autre. Et au bout de cinq minutes, quand il l'a bien, hahahah, au bout de cinq minutes quand il l'a bien bien lynchée, il la regarde comme ça et il lui fait: “Eh, j'te croyais plus fort que ça, Batman!” C'est pas trop mortel, ça?! Une bonne sœur avec une cape comme Batman!

VINZ: J'ai compris, mais moi, j'la connaissais avec un rabbin.

Script Opposition: Piety or Charity/Violence; Reality/Fiction; Physical strength/Weakness

Logical Mechanism: Because we know that it is a nun who is being attacked, we are initially led to believe that the man would beat a nun. This act of violence would be shocking alone, but it is not so far-fetched in the context of the film, where innocents are routinely victimized. As it turns out, this is an example of situational irony: though we know his victim is a nun, the man casts himself as a supervillain who believes he has subdued a superhero. If the man really believes he is beating up Batman, his violent act can be pinned on the desire to assert his physical strength and thus be remotely understandable; still, it remains an evil act. This is an example of action from false premises.

Situation: A dialogue between Saïd and Vinz, at the end of a long night of violence. This omnipresence justifies the joke.

Target: The butt of the joke is once again ambiguous. Is it the nun or the drunken man? Again, their anonymity makes them uninteresting as targets — thought the nun could gesture toward religious or gender violence. Here again, it would seem that the implied target would be a society where people are desensitized to such violence.

Narrative Strategy: This is a *Tu la connais celle de...* joke.

Language: Here again, the lexicon is marked by slang (mec, bourré, cacahuète, mortel, etc.), but also by more evocative vocabulary, such as *lyncher*.

This time, Saïd's joke is met with faint laughter, which can be explained by the night's exhaustion. Regardless, the jokester succeeds. The fact that Vinz repeats that he knows the joke with a rabbi is both comical and ambiguous. It would seem that many jokes, regardless

of content, can substitute a rabbi for a character. However, though it is likely that here the rabbi would be in the role of the nun, it is unspecified. In addition, the repetition of “j’la connaissais avec un rabbin” constitutes another *bridge* (in Attardo’s terminology) to the middle of the film, which again creates a *mise en Relation* that operates both within the film and beyond it, by relaying the victims of multiple forms of brutality — the rabbi and the nun and the *cit * and the man falling. Furthermore, together, these jokes form a *strand* (a series of lines that share at least one knowledge resource, according to Attardo), in that they all seem to have violence or death in common at the Script Opposition level, and a society that excludes and deconstructs humanity at the Target level.¹⁰⁷ Finally, the Logical Mechanism level, always driven by reasoning from false premises, is not unlike that of this particular society that continues to uphold a universalist ideology that has long proven to be untenable.

Saïd’s jokes thematize the trope of senseless and faceless violence that is present in all dystopias, but I believe that his role within the film is more complex than that of a comical dystopian oracle. I propose, on the one hand, that it also evokes the poetics of humor’s self-reflexivity announced by M n l, but, on the other, that it refuses to subscribe to its optimism. I have thus far referred to him as a jokester, but I would like to reformulate this appellation. While Michel Est ve calls him the “bouffon du Roi” (6), and Sharma and Sharma think of him as the trio’s “hustler” (106), I would like to merge these two ideas and suggest that Saïd constitutes the literary archetype of the Jester, the one who negotiates life’s degradations and his subaltern position within the social order through joking. Although Saïd tends to be overshadowed by Hubert and Vinz in the scholarship produced about the film, I argue that his figure is capital and that it underpins Kassovitz’s highly literary and highly self-reflective narrative strategy. This reading of Saïd is, in no small part, justified by the fact that he, as the Jester, is the only one left standing in the final frame (*Figure 7*), which ironically reverses the first post-credits shot (*Figure 6*). Following the prologue, the narrative begins and ends with him.



Figure 6

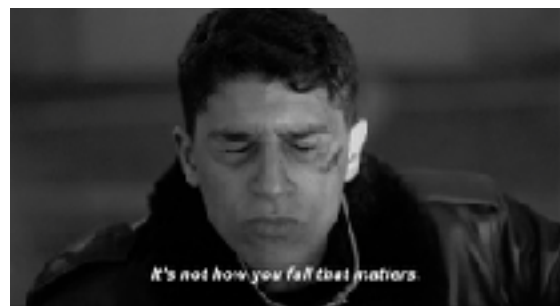


Figure 7

¹⁰⁷ If we remember that Vinz wears a Spider-Man t-shirt at the beginning of the film, we may wonder if this is a commentary on a society that frowns upon vigilantes who might carry out a justice other than the one it upholds as the only logical one.

Thus through the role of the Jester, the film folds in upon itself. By doing so, it rejects the hope of Ménil’s humor, and willingly short-circuits itself into an endlessly negative loop that recalls Dada’s predicament, as well as de Man’s understanding of Baudelaire’s *comique absolu*, as repetitive blindness — Saïd’s eyes refuse to watch and see (*Figures 6 and 7*). This rejection offers no other option, no other world than this dystopian world, no alternative utopia to this dysfunctional utopia. Interestingly, it is under Baudelaire’s ironic gaze — which stares straight into the camera’s eye, and by extension, the viewer’s — that the final scene takes place. Saïd is directly aligned with the figure of the poet, who seems to spectrally emerge from him (*Figure 8*).



Figure 8

Many have noted that the film draws its title from multiple sources. The popular expression “j’ai la haine” — which, in its more recent non-transitive form, signifies an amalgam of disappointed emotions — likely contributed to its title. But Baudelaire’s phantasmagoric presence leads us to believe that the film’s title may also refer to his poem “Le tonneau de la haine.” In the first tercet of the sonnet, the poet writes,

La Haine est un ivrogne au fond d’une taverne,
 Qui sent toujours la soif naître de la liqueur
 Et se multiplier comme l’hydre de Lerne. (*Fleurs du Mal* 140)

Hatred is personified and then metaphorically pathologized through the tragic figure of the drunkard, whose psychological and physiological functions are repeatedly and hopelessly impaired. In addition to the Hydra of Greek mythology, the poem conjures the tragic figures of the forty-nine Danaïdes, whose murderous desires saw them cast to the underworld and condemned to fill a pierced barrel for all eternity. Hatred is excessive; it is a repeated, cyclical, endless gesture. It breeds itself and ironically feeds upon itself. It is a similar ironic loop that gives the film its dynamic. It is this ironic and seemingly contagious blindness that gives Hubert the film's most lucid line, "La haine attire la haine," before compelling him to draw a weapon against the cop in the film's final seconds. Crucially, laughter, as Baudelaire defines it in "De l'essence du rire," partakes in precisely the same paradoxical logic, and is also "l'explosion perpétuelle de colère et de souffrance." He adds,

....comme le rire est essentiellement humain, il est essentiellement contradictoire, c'est-à-dire qu'il est à la fois signe d'une grandeur infinie et d'une misère infinie [...]. C'est du choc perpétuel de ces deux infinis que se dégage le rire.

It is this same shocking and contradictory laughter — one that seems to defy all expectations — that I identify in *La Haine*. For all his metaphorical blindness, the Jester is the only one who can bear witness to this story of degradation, whose brutal ending he had foreshadowed through the recurring violence of his countless jokes. In all, the place of humor in *La Haine* has generally been ill-explored. Reflecting on Kassovitz's film and others of the genre, Blanchard asserts that "le cinéma de banlieue de la seconde moitié des années 1990 n'accorde qu'une place réduite à l'humour dans ses récits"(100). My reading has underscored that at least in the case of *La Haine*, humor not only occupies a vital space but it, in fact, provides the film with its philosophical backbone.

MIRRORS AND MONSIEUR TOILETTES

If in *La Haine*, Saïd is the ambassador of humor's self-reflexivity, its symbolic object is the mirror. Much has been written on the presence of mirrors in *La Haine* (these scenes are noted with diamonds in *Figure 5*); they have been taken up to think through notions of identity, authenticity, self-reflection, and performativity in the film.¹⁰⁸ Yet those scenes have seldom been read together: the focus is either on Vinz's imitation of Travis Bickles — the protagonist of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* — or on the scene situated in a Parisian bathroom, with the enigmatic "Monsieur Toilettes." These analyses tend to problematize Jewish representations. Saïd's mirror scene, if it is treated at all, is always addressed in passing. Yet considering these three scenes alongside one another, we see that the mirror, in its non-metaphorical, material

¹⁰⁸ See Doughty and Griffiths, Estève, Konstantarakos, Loshitzky, Siciliano, etc.

form, is always the site of a comic event or a jab line, and we note that they all take place in a space of temporary passage and vulnerability, particularly propitious for childish humor: the restroom.

Vinz's brutal posturing in the mirror is inseparable from bathroom dynamics. While Scorsese's scene situates Bickles in front of a full-size mirror that reflects and thus magnifies the dilapidation of his New York City apartment, Kassovitz places Vinz in front of a medium-size bathroom mirror, which finds him tending to rather mundane tasks of self-care: he brushes his teeth and attends to an invisible pimple. The juxtaposition of these trivial gestures and the violence of his performance provokes a comical incongruity that operates through the forced cohabitation of the trivial and the sublime.

Saïd's scene seems to be a spontaneous addition and is absent from the original script. It begins with an extreme close-up as Saïd, peering directly into the camera (which is then becomes a small hand-held mirror), takes on the persona of what seems to be an amalgam of several fictional characters: James Bond, Inspector Canardo (the eponymous character of a series of comic books by Belgian author Benoît Sokal), and Donald Duck. The incongruity created by this composite is prolonged by a series of comical juxtapositions and confusions centered around yet another benign act of bodily care: Vinz is giving Saïd a haircut. Upon being warned by Saïd not to mess up (which would reduce his chances to score with unlikely romantic partners), Vinz responds that he will do his best, but that he isn't Paul Bocuse. This turns out to be a nonsensical reference since Bocuse is a culinary chef and not a famous hairstylist. Seconds later, Saïd, who is now handling the gun Vinz found during the riots (out of place in the bathroom), jokes that he will shoot his friend should the haircut go awry. Here again, a comical gap between the magnitude of the threat and the triviality of the task effects a moment of laughter.

Both of these scenes foreground a logic of incompatibility between reality, action, discourse, and purpose (after all, it is during the second mirror scene that Vinz, a young Jewish man, asserts he won't be the next Arab gunned down by a cop). These two scenes figure as a rehearsal for the longest mirror/bathroom scene, which occurs shortly past the film's halfway point. Before delving into this particular scene, I wish to frame it through Michel Foucault's essay, "Des espaces autres."

In this essay, Foucault suggests that space has replaced time, as as the greatest concern of our era. More specifically, he is interested in those spaces that "ont la curieuse propriété d'être en rapport avec tous les autres emplacements, mais sur un mode tel qu'ils suspendent, neutralisent ou inversent l'ensemble des rapports qui se trouvent, par eux, désignés, reflétés ou réfléchis."¹⁰⁹ Foucault divides these spaces into two categories: utopias and heterotopias.

¹⁰⁹ The public restroom is such a space. It can gather people, regardless of race or class on an egalitarian footing radically different for societal realities.

Il y a [...] des lieux réels, des lieux effectifs, des lieux qui sont dessinés dans l'institution même de la société, et qui sont des sortes de contre-emplacements, sortes d'utopies effectivement réalisées dans lesquelles les emplacements réels, tous les autres emplacements réels que l'on peut trouver à l'intérieur de la culture sont à la fois représentés, contestés et inversés, des sortes de lieux qui sont hors de tous les lieux, bien que pourtant ils soient effectivement localisables. Ces lieux, parce qu'ils sont absolument autres que tous les emplacements qu'ils reflètent et dont ils parlent, je les appellerai, par opposition aux utopies, les hétérotopies.¹¹⁰

For Foucault, utopias are “emplacements sans lieu réel. Ce sont les emplacements qui entretiennent avec l'espace réel de la société un rapport général d'analogie directe ou *inversée*. C'est la société elle-même perfectionnée ou c'est l'envers de la société, mais de toute façon, ces utopies sont des espaces qui sont fondamentalement essentiellement irréels” (italics mine). Without particularly specifying it, Foucault emphasizes the fictionality of these spaces. To me, Foucault's utopias are unreal because they are imaginary or textual, like literary utopias or dystopias (which is how I interpret what he means by “inverted”). In that sense, the space of the *banlieues* within *La Haine* is a literary dystopia, an inversion of society — in the poetic economy of the film, Paris is the synecdoche of that society, and the *cit * its inversion.¹¹¹ But the *banlieues* as real-world spaces are also evidently heterotopias. As that which exists outside of the city (*hors de tous les lieux*, or in this case, outside of the normative space that is the city) all the while being easily locatable, the *banlieues* “talk” (to take up Foucault's expression) about the way France inducts subjects into its concept of citizenship, or excludes them from it. The French suburbs tell just as much about themselves, as they do about Paris and the *R publique fran aise universelle*. It is this multivalence that confers upon them the possibility of being understood as heterotopias. Foucault proposes that heterotopias are subjected to six principles; I will consider the Parisian suburbs through three of them. The *banlieues*, as an unambiguous site of alterity — it is *absolutely othered* —, is a space of deviation (Foucault's first principle of heterotopias) in the sense that the behavior of its inhabitants “est d viant par rapport   la moyenne ou   la norme exig e” — a norm that elevates leisure (to which *banlieues* youths do not have access) and frowns upon idleness (which is their only option). Alongside Foucault's second principle — which states that society can assign different functions to these spaces overtime, as determined by cultural and historical pressures — the perception and function of the suburbs have also evolved with France's economic history and provide a visual scar of its downturn. Initially conceived as a vast improvement upon the shantytowns that

¹¹⁰ Michel Foucault. “Des espaces autres.” Conf rence au Cercle d' tudes architecturales, 14 mars 1967, in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuit *, no 5 (1984): 46-49. All citations accessed online at <https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.fr/>.

¹¹¹ Myrto Konstantarakos notes that this metaphorical understanding of the *cit * vs. the city is reinforced by cinematographic choices: the *cit * is shot during the day, in stereo, while the city is shot by night, in mono. Furthermore, she writes, “Short focal distance was used in the *cit * scenes, in order to integrate the characters in their surroundings, whereas Paris is shot with long focal distance to detach them from their surroundings” (163).

surrounded Paris, the *banlieues* once spearheaded France's booming industrial economy. By the mid-70s, however, the effects of the economic slowdown, accompanied by an ill-timed influx of immigration from former colonies, followed by high unemployment rates in the industrial sector, were most legible in the infrastructural degradation of the *cit  *. Once a symbol of pride, it evolved into a conspicuous symbol of failure. Foucault's fifth principle enunciates a paradoxical aspect of heterotopias that also fits the *banlieues*: "Les h  t  rotopies supposent toujours un syst  me d'ouverture et de fermeture qui,    la fois, les isole et les rend p  n  trables. En g  n  ral, on n'acc  de pas    un emplacement h  t  rotopique comme dans un moulin." Foucault adds that these sites "en g  n  ral, cachent de curieuses exclusions; tout le monde peut entrer dans ces emplacements h  t  rotopiques, mais,    vrai dire, ce n'est qu'une illusion : on croit p  n  trer et on est, par le fait m  me qu'on entre, exclu." The *banlieues* function similarly: entering them means entering the metropole, but it does not guarantee a true welcome; in fact, those who are relegated to this space find themselves systematically excluded from most others. The very etymology of the word *banlieue* — as a place (*lieu*) of banishment (*ban*) — evokes this fifth principle. Overall, the *banlieues*, as a heterotopic space, indeed represent, contest and invert the society to which they are attached.

Maria Varsam reminds us that historical dystopias, which she terms "concrete" dystopias, provide the foundation for their fictional counterparts: "Concrete dystopias are those events that form the material basis for the content of dystopian fiction which have inspired the writer to warn of the potential of history to repeat itself" (209). On one hand, the *banlieues*, as a heterotopian space, are a concrete dystopia. On the other hand, *La Haine* as a fiction, which takes the *banlieues* as its backdrop, is a utopia that offers a negative or inverted vision of society to the viewer's gaze, that is, a dystopia. *La Haine*, like all dystopias, is a distorted version of the real world, one that accentuates its ugliness. The heterotopia provides the material basis for the utopia, but in *La Haine*, the *banlieues* are both. In both cases, the *banlieues* — which are a result of colonial and postcolonial practices established by and for the *R  publique* — force the viewer to think of the relation between the *R  publique's* and its othered subjects. The *banlieues*, as dystopias and as heterotopias, are an oblique reflection of the *R  publique*. Considered this way, the trope of the mirror in *La Haine* — a mirror that sends back images of erosion or degradation — participates in the film's dystopian poetics and politics. Ultimately, Foucault believes that some spaces can offer a mixed utopian and heterotopian experience, and it is in that manner that I consider the *banlieues* in *La Haine*. For Foucault, the epitome of such mixed spaces is precisely the mirror. I will now explain Foucault's understanding of the mirror alongside an exploration of the third and longest mirror scene in *La Haine*.

This third restroom/mirror scene constitutes a liminal moment between the *cit  *, which the three friends have just left, and the city, where they arrive at dusk. Hubert and Vinz are at odds over the latter's desire to kill a cop. In the space of this public restroom, which



Figure 9

nevertheless makes provisions for physical privacy, Hubert and Vinz leave the doors to their private urinals open, in defiance of the usual code of conduct. To the left, a mirror that covers the length of the wall picks up the men's images; the vulnerability of their position now seems doubled. Once done urinating, Vinz launches into a violence-justifying tirade. The presence of the mirrors in this scene is forceful, disorienting, and calls attention to the film's self-reflexive poetics. Though the viewer may be tempted to look at these characters in their non-reflected iteration, it is in the mirror that they are often better seen, even in their sometimes-fragmented rendition. But for Foucault, the mirror is a utopia, because it is a space without a place: "Dans le miroir, je me vois là où je ne suis pas, dans un espace irréel qui s'ouvre virtuellement derrière la surface, je suis là-bas, là où je ne suis pas, une sorte d'ombre qui me donne à moi-même ma propre visibilité, qui me permet de me regarder là où je suis absent — utopie du miroir." The mirror here gives Vinz a utopian site (*Figure 9*) to be the violent social equalizer he hopes to be, but certainly is not:

VINZ: Vas-y, Vas-y, gole-ri. Moi, j'en ai plein le cul de subir ce putain de système tous les jours comme un connard. On est là, on vit dans des trous à rats comme des merdes, et quoi? Est-ce que tu fais que'que chose, toi, pour changer que'que chose? Tu bouges pas ton cul, toi non plus. Alors moi, j'vais vous dire un truc parce que vous êtes mes amis, ok: tu sais quoi? Moi, si Abdel, il y passe, j'vais rétablir la balance et j'vais te shooter un keuf. Comme ça, ils vont bien comprendre une fois pour toutes, que c'est fini, on tend plus l'aut' joue.

Vinz wishes to cast himself in the role of the messiah, and momentarily, on this reflexive surface, he sees himself there (in that sublime role) but he is only here (a marginalized youth in a restroom). As a fundamentally unreal space, the mirror doesn't always tether one to his authentic self. There is room for the subject to imagine himself differently, and possibly better or worse. Similar is the work of literary utopia or dystopias. On the other hand, Vinz also projects society as it is in this mirror, with its systematic oppression. This calls attention to the heterotopian discourse in *La Haine*, the one that thinks of the *banlieues* as a revelatory space for the *République*. It becomes meaningful that this heterotopian aspect of the *banlieues* is presented in front of a mirror, which, as Foucault points out, is also a heterotopia — a real object. This object throws the self into a momentary crisis since the self feels temporarily absent from the place it occupies in real life to find itself where it is not, but it is also in this moment of spacial crisis that it can best apprehend itself in its own space. Foucault writes,

À partir de ce regard [...] je reviens vers moi et je recommence à porter mes yeux vers moi-même et à me reconstituer là où je suis; le miroir fonctionne comme une hétérotopie en ce sens qu'il rend cette place que j'occupe au moment où je me regarde dans la glace, à la fois absolument réelle, en liaison avec tout l'espace qui l'entoure, et absolument irréelle, puisqu'elle est obligée, pour être perçue, de passer par ce point virtuel qui est là-bas.

The mirror then is a space whereby that which is unreal can best inform that which is real. Similarly, *La Haine*, which is a fiction, positions itself as being best suited to return to society a compelling image of itself. It is in that sense that I read the quip by Kassovitz that constitutes this chapter's epigraph: "C'est vrai puisqu'on l'a inventé." There is a delicate process of displacement at work in these scenes and the distance between the real and the unreal is constantly interrogated. For Zisserman and Nettlebeck this displacement and this feeling of being split in two (between the here and there) are central to the film's dynamic: "*La Haine* is very much a contemporary construction that makes use of dislocation and fragmentation to engage its viewers in the processes by which it makes its meaning" (96). To their reading, I wish to add that the mirrors in the film symbolize the importance of poetic mediation. They invite us to think just as much about how the film views itself in the way it produces meaning, as it does about the meaning it produces. At the same time, this splitting of the self in two is also a paramount condition of humor, as Freud, Ménil, and de Man conceive it (cf. Chapter 1 of the present work). It becomes all the more significant that mirrors, which produce this doubling, are the site of humorous meditations throughout the film. The third mirror scene brings together the concepts of dystopia and humor, in a moment that renders their interplay in the film highly visible.

At the height of the argument between Vinz and Hubert, almost exactly halfway through this 5-minute scene (which occurs nearly halfway through the film), the camera turns

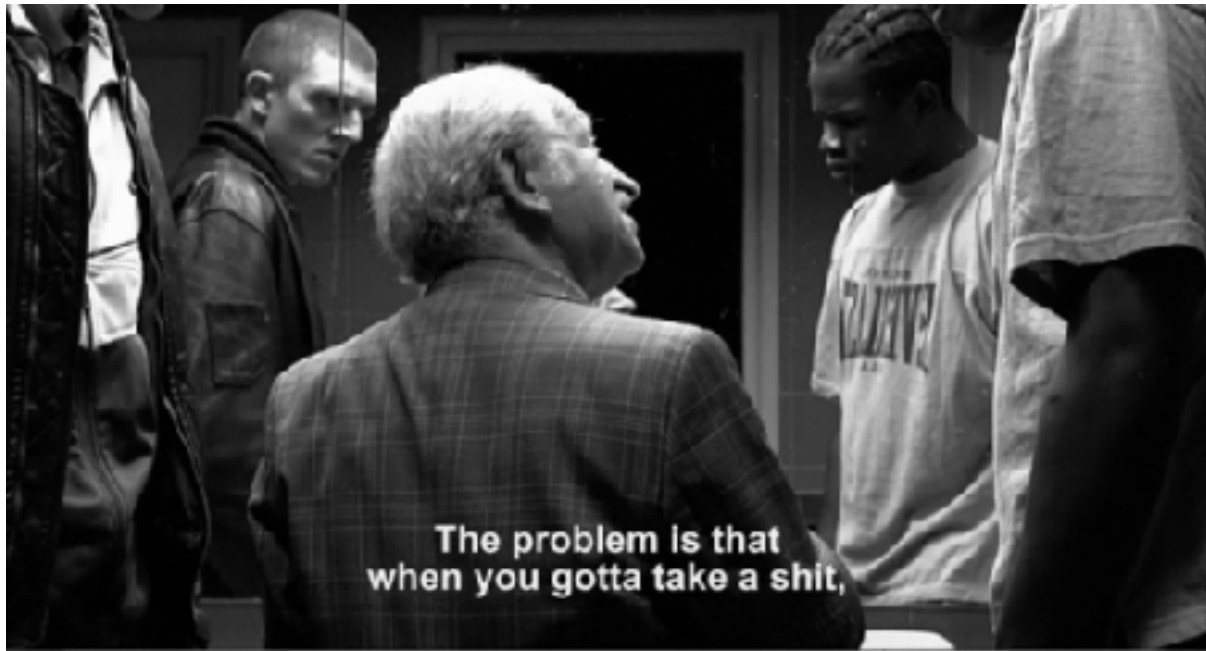


Figure 10

to a door, on which the onomatopoeia “prout” (fart) is scratched. The door opens, seemingly on its own, to reveal a void. The camera must tilt down to capture the figure of a short elderly man, who exclaims, with a heavy Yiddish accent: “Ça fait vraiment du bien de chier un coup.” The sublime of Vinz’s posturing is immediately undone by this trivial comment, and the comedy of the moment is doubled by the look on Vinz’s and Hubert’s puzzled faces as they turn around, first, to find no one, before synchronously looking down to discover the man who had in fact always been there. Without missing a beat, the old man asks, “Vous croyez en dieu?” before immediately providing the answer to his own question: “Il faut pas se demander si on croit en dieu, mais si dieu croit en nous.”¹¹² The shape of this answer, itself a chiasmus, signals that it is part of the self-reflective poetics of this scene. The story he goes on to tell — about a friend, Grunwalski, who froze to death because he refused to relieve himself among his comrades in suffering on their way to a Siberian working camp — is a cinematographic enigma; a true interruption. As Todorov puts it, “L’apparition d’un nouveau personnage entraîne inmanquablement l’interruption de l’histoire précédente, pour qu’une nouvelle histoire, celle qui explique le « je suis ici maintenant » du nouveau personnage, nous soit racontée.” (82). Thus what to make of this interruption? Is it an indulgent digression on the part of Kassovitz? A script faux-pas? An inside joke? As Loshitzky writes, “The careful

¹¹² Interestingly, in the script, this is followed by an already puzzling explanation: “Moi, je pense qu’il croit en nous, car Dieu nous aide et fait pousser le caca, vous saviez ça? (115)” This line is later recycled and given to Hubert, when he gets “high” on the rooftop.

attention given by Kassovitz to the *mise-en-scène* of this ‘narrative digression’ shows that he attributes enormous significance to what seems on the surface to be a narrative slippage” (140). She goes on to explain why one would be remiss to read this passing character simply through a realistic framework: “...the little Jew is seen not as a reflection in the mirror, but only as an image on the screen. His figure thus attains, on the one hand, a certain quality of reality, but on the other hand, it gains a certain quality of phantom surrealism, because in a room full of mirrors he is not reflected at all” (Ibid, see *Figure 10*). Like Loshitzky, I regard this scene as a self-conscious narrative gesture, and more specifically as an *enchâssement*. The presence of the mirrors in this scene makes such a reading even more compelling. Todorov explains why an author might stage such a complication: “l’enchâssement est une mise en évidence de la propriété la plus essentielle de tout récit. Car le récit enchâssant, c’est le récit d’un récit. En racontant l’histoire d’un autre récit, le premier atteint son thème fondamental et en même temps se réfléchit dans cette image de soi-même (85). In this scene, then, Kassovitz’s mirrors augment the reflexive function of the digression, or *enchâssement*. The mirrors here function as a site of encounter where multiple constellations of reflections — narrative, historical and social — converge and converse.

The other question that interests me here, is what kind of script is the Grunwalski anecdote? Can it be considered a joke? And if so, whose joke is it? Monsieur Toilettes’s? Kassovitz’s? Or both? Can Attardo’s GTVH help resolve this question?

Script Opposition: Death/Life; Dignity or pride/Shame

Logical Mechanism: It is understandable that Grunwalski would like to preserve his dignity or pride, but it becomes absurd to do so if it means death. Some would beg to differ, however, and argue that dignity is in fact more important than life. And it is then perhaps at the level of the LM that the joking nature of this script is contestable.

Situation: A story told in a quintessential space of shame, the communal bathroom. To understand this as incongruous, one must know that this is not a place where one spends much time, let alone tells stories to strangers, and even less, serious stories about life and death.

Target: The target would seemingly be Grunwalski or people who place an unordinary amount of emotion on pride.

Narrative Strategy: I have a friend who...

Language: The old man’s dignified appearance (he wears a three-piece suit) contrasts sharply with his language, which makes a shocking use of the slang term *chier*.

If Attardo’s model seems to provide an inconclusive response to understanding this script as a joke, it allows us at the very least to note that this jab line is part of a strand, in the sense that

like the others, its Script Opposition deals with death. But a more important clue as to how to read the Grunwalski story is in the telling itself. Attardo reminds us elsewhere that,

laughter does not always follow jokes: laughter, far from being exclusively a reaction to humor, is used by speakers to signal their humorous intention [...] speakers may “invite” laughter from the hearer, using a “post-utterance completion laugh particle” or, in other words, laughter at the end of what they say. By showing that laughter is an appropriate response to what he/she has just said, the speaker implicitly validates that response. Another technique involves “within speech laughter,” which is the delivery of an utterance interspersed with laughter. (116)



Figure 11

In no ambiguous way, the old man, by peppering his story with his own laughter, invites the youngsters to laugh as well (*Figure 11*). For a brief moment, Vinz and Hubert do smile (*Figure 12*). This results in their reconciliation, which is the most significant impact of the old man's joke.¹¹³ However, a rupture occurs when Saïd asks what happened to Grunwalski, and the old man replies: “Rien. Grunwalski est mort de froid. Au revoir. Au revoir. Au revoir.” Following these parting words, the men's smiles are replaced with confused looks (*Figures 12 and 13*), which Saïd aptly verbalizes with a question: “Hey... Pourquoi il nous a raconté ça?” Ultimately, the effect of the old man's verbal offering could be understood as being similar to Freud's analysis of some extreme nonsensical jokes:

¹¹³ A classic example of comic relief, though this is not the only way to interpret the joke's objective.

These extreme examples have an effect because they rouse the expectation of a joke, so that one tries to find a concealed sense behind the nonsense. But one finds none: they really are nonsense. The pretence makes it possible for a moment to liberate the pleasure in nonsense. These jokes are not entirely without a purpose; they are a take-in, and give the person who tells them a certain amount of pleasure in misleading and annoying his hearer. The latter then damps down his annoyance by determining to tell them himself later on. (*Jokes* 190)

The old man's pleasure in telling the joke is legible on his face, and his utterance's victory is complete when nearly nine hours later, in the film's chronology, the three men are still talking about it — it becomes their story.



Figure 12



Figure 13

If we recall that the scene takes place in a room full of mirrors and that there is, however, an impossibility to fully catch the old man's reflection in these mirrors, and if we consider that this coexists with the inability of the trio to understand the meaning of his joke and gratify it with laughter, then we understand that something else must be gleaned from this moment. We recognize humor's wickedness and its potential for blindness. Just because the young men fail to make meaning out of the story does not mean it is inherently meaningless. The mirrors, and particularly the realization that they, too, have their blind spots, return us to society, the total relations of which are reflected on their surface — both imperfectly and in their own imperfections. For Loshitzky, the young men's failure to understand the old man's story symbolizes “the blindness of postcolonial Europe to read its present in light of its near past. Europe's failure to understand the consequences of racism and to treat its postcolonial and [sic] minorities justly, even in light of the aftermath of the Holocaust, is the tragic point where the Holocaust and the postcolonial meet” (140). Though I largely agree with her argument, it is important to add that, though the specters of the Third Reich and of the French Empire certainly loom heavy in this scene, it is in fact the totalitarian communist regime that is directly evoked. And as Claeys suggests, Stalinism and Nazi Germany are the two “colossal tragedies,” with which dystopia has been most identified, in both historical and literary works. Thus by choosing to include a gulag anecdote rather

than a perhaps more obvious Holocaust one, Kassovitz makes a conscious gesture that resonates with the transversalism I have previously highlighted, further refracted via the trope of the mirror. The man has survived multiple horrors at the hands of several oppressors. He reminds us that to engage with the dystopian genre is to reflect upon all forms of oppression and to bring into dialogue the suffering of many. From his encounters with power, Monsieur Toillettes has emerged with a story to tell and a shocking smirk. His survival and the transversal, transnational and transcultural value of his anecdote explain his “je suis ici maintenant,” as Todorov puts it. Still, his survival mostly implies that he lives to tell his death-stricken joke another day, in an infinite loop, in a way that is paradoxically self-reflexive and repeatedly blind.

CONCLUSION

La Haine participates in many ways in the poetics and the politics of dystopia. The inescapable presence of the police, which is a conspicuous apparatus of the *République française universelle*, the desolation of the *cité*, the exclusion of elements that cannot be harmonized in the postcolonial utopia, the ubiquitous violence or threat thereof, the apocalyptic beginning and the positioning of the film in a post-lapsarian logic are elements that authorize a reading of the film as a work of the dystopian imaginary.¹¹⁴ Against this background, humor and comic events seemingly come to relieve the oppressive atmosphere, yet upon closer analysis, we understand that this humor is instilled with the violence of its surroundings, against which it levels an equally violent critique in response. Whether this critique is effective remains a point of contention. A whole generation has passed since the film’s release, yet it is still an inexhaustible source of interest for scholars of various disciplines, ranging from film to sociology. Some, like Sadock, tend to read the film as a near documentary. It was even reported that Alain Juppé, the then-Prime Minister of France, required his cabinet to watch it, as a way to better understand *le malaise des banlieues* (Konstantarakos 161). Others, like Zisserman and Nettlebeck who view the film as an artistic mediation of reality, are more willing to laud its formal qualities, and to suggest that it is precisely this poetic form that best conveys the truth of the situation at hand. Regardless of one’s way of reading it, it is indisputable that *La Haine* sought to make waves, and carefully crafted its message with a particular audience in mind. As Zisserman and Nettlebeck point out, that audience is not made up of *cité* spectators, but comprised of those who “would in fact pay for his work and give it its social and cultural justification.” They continue, “The question of how to ‘reach’ that audience — to transform it, to subvert its commercialism, to make it see what had to be seen and feel what had to be felt — is as much about ethical integrity as it is about technique or artistry,” before concluding that Kassovitz left enough clues to exonerate himself from the

¹¹⁴ Moreover, Kassovitz would go on to fully delve into the genre 13 years later, with *Babylon A.D.*

charge of having indulgently, gratuitously created an over-stylized film, complicit in the exploitation it pretended to decry (92).

In the end, *La Haine* is no more a classic dystopia than it is a classic comedy. Although it initially shows some evidence of the humorous detached attitude prescribed by Ménil, this humor ultimately looks more like Dada's iteration of it: absolutely and hopelessly self-reflexive and blind. I have argued that Kassovitz's film is a counter-utopia, in the sense that it refuses to offer a way out of the violent system for which it is a violent metaphor, and in this sense, it responds perhaps best to Adorno's notion of art: "It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads" (80).

Chapter 4: “Take some place bad, make laugh”: Disarming the Poetics of Dystopia in *Case Départ*

When René Ménil included a dystopian vignette in his 1945 essay dedicated to humor, he widened the poetic aperture through which the Caribbean author could mediate colonial reality. The vignette blended poetry, prose, and mimesis and bound them in linguistic play; it merged the here of the Caribbean and the there of Europe; and it created relations between all those oppressed by totalitarianism — whether that totalitarianism is called colonialism or nazism. His intervention juxtaposed the elements of the dystopian genre and those of the type of humor he prescribed to show that ultimately the two share a critical program. Together they aim to shame reality and awaken the reader to the moral bankruptcy artfully concealed behind the harmonious veneer of exclusionary utopian ideologies. Ménil’s intervention demonstrated that if conscientiously allied, humor and dystopia could work together to produce an explosive melange of laughter and shock. When it comes to laughter and dystopia, as we shall see, proportions are key: if the first is too lighthearted, the sense of urgency is diluted; if the second is too gloomy, despair sets in. This chapter is concerned with the effect produced by the juxtaposition of comedy and dystopian tropes in *Case Départ*, France’s first — and thus far the only — comedy about slavery.

My second chapter examined how Confiant infused dystopian elements in his humorous novellas to structure his satirical critique and unveil the silent anti-utopian aspect of the *République française universelle*. In my discussion of *La Haine*, the objective was to demonstrate that the humorous attitude and laughter worked effectively with heavy dystopian motifs to create a coherent critique of society and its destructive exclusionary utopian tendencies. With *Case Départ*, a different question imposes itself: can humor, and more specifically an excess thereof, counteract the critical potential of dystopian tropes? In *La Haine*, we had noted that the jokes shared a target (as defined in Attardo’s GTVH), and that society was always in the crosshairs. As a result, the message, though at times metaphorical, was always legible. In *Case Départ*, however, the message comes out partly garbled, as though heard through an old transistor radio: at the crucial moment of the punchline, which should reveal the butt of the joke, an ironic static hiccup emerges instead. In *Case Départ*, it is not always clear at whom and at what spectators are laughing, and at times much less clear with whom they are laughing. This lack of clarity leaves room to ask if the film suggests that it is time to get over slavery. Beneath its nonstop comedic events, its fantastic plot, its apparent courage, the film left me with a sense of malaise. The chapter seeks to move beyond this visceral affective reaction to effect a critical reading of *Case Départ*.

Released in 2011, *Case Départ* is the co-directorial debut of Fabrice Éboué, Thomas N’Gijol, and Lionel Stekete. The first two gained notoriety as standup comedians in the late

2000s, as frequent guests of the Jamel Comedy Club.¹¹⁵ Both of Cameroonian origin, the two comedians' individual routines never shy away from race-related content that makes generous use of stereotypes. For instance, one of N'Gijol's best-known sketches, "Un superman noir," ends on the punchline: "En fait je me dis que le seul point positif avec un superman noir, c'est que pour une fois, on aurait pas eu honte de voir un Noir voler." In a different register, Éboué, in a 2010 skit in Montreux, jokes that Obama would easily win in a race against Sarkozy, because of his Kenyan blood, and would further shame the French president in the locker room, for reasons that Éboué mimes by dangling one arm between his legs. For his part, Steketee had been assistant director on projects such as *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), and two dystopias: *Immortal, Ad Vitam* (2003) and *Lost in Space* (1998). His interest in historical fiction and the aesthetic of the dystopian genre likely made *Case Départ* an enticing project. Together, this trio concocted a film that took on the shape of their interests in race, history, and comedy.

Case Départ follows the harebrained misadventures of Regis and Joel, two twenty-first-century Black Frenchmen, who are sent nearly two-and-a-half centuries back to the times of slavery. The two are estranged brothers who share a Caribbean father and absolutely nothing else: one is an (ex?)con, the other is a municipal employee who fully adheres to the principles of the *République*. Upon learning about their father's impending death, the two reluctantly fly to "Les Antilles" and find themselves reunited at their father's bedside. With his last breath, their genitor solemnly declares them the heirs to the treasure of the Grosdésir family: the manumission act that freed their ancestors. Unimpressed by the document's historical and affective significance, the two mischievously tear it to pieces, under the outraged eye of their aunt. As the stereotype of an elderly Caribbean woman would have it, she is a pipe-smoking adept of black magic. To teach them a lesson about disrespecting the past, she uses her supernatural powers to send the pair back in time to 1780 — well before the first French abolition of slavery in 1794. Once there, they are quickly captured and sold as slaves to Mr. Jourdain, who, despite his last name, bears no similarity to the Molière character: he is a soulless slave owner who runs his plantation with an iron fist. Joel and Regis spend the rest of the film trying to get back to France and the present.

Before going any further, it bears saying that *Case Départ* is a groundbreaking project that is audacious in many ways. First, it deals with slavery, a topic so fraught with collective guilt and ideological anguish that its gravity has likely dissuaded more than one would-be or

¹¹⁵ Jonathan Ervine recently published a compelling monograph on humour in France, in which he spends much time on the *Jamel Comedy Club*, created by well-known comedian Jamel Debbouze. Recounting its emergence, in the mid-2000s, he explains that "the club sought to provide increased exposure for aspiring French comedians, many of whom shared with Debbouze the fact that they were of foreign descent and/or grew up on the periphery of a large city" (16). Ervine notes that the club celebrated difference and showed that "humor and identity can be associated in positive ways that promote tolerance and unity," but that its engagement with stereotyping and its treatment of lower profile minorities has also been problematic (Ibid.). Ervine speaks at length of N'Gijol and Éboué, but focuses on their standup routines, only mentioning *Case Départ* in passing.

even seasoned French filmmaker. Indeed, slavery has been egregiously ignored by French cinema, an industry not otherwise particularly averse to period films.¹¹⁶ This near-absence is all the more noticeable when considering the comparatively large place slavery has occupied in American film, and it is nothing short of shocking, given the tremendous impact of the slave trade on France's history and economy. Not only does *Case Départ* tackle this generally shunned subject matter, but it does so comedically. This doubly risky formula proved wildly successful: with its € 6,000,000 budget, the film grossed \$16,241,028, attracting 1,746,405 spectators.¹¹⁷ The positive response to this gambit would initially confirm that art has the power to initiate difficult conversations and suggest that the French are finally willing to engage broadly with the history of slavery. To the optimist, its release could be interpreted as a *signe avant-coureur* of the long-awaited redemption of the culture industry; however, I contend that while the encounter between the public and history certainly occurred, as evidenced by this comedic commodity's financial success, the depth of that dialogue remains to be assessed.

Case Départ abounds with comedic moments that fuel its unbridled pace. Both *La Haine* and *Case Départ* employ affectively charged socio-historical chronotopes as their backdrop (respectively, the banlieue and the slave colony), but because of the omnipresence of laughter in the latter, the two films fall under different categories in Attardo's GTVH model. The first is a serious plot with jab lines, while the second is a humorous plot with jab lines and a humorous central complication (a return to the past). This means that in *Case Départ*, laughter takes centerstage, prioritizing entertainment as pleasure.¹¹⁸ But the constant stream of comedic events means that they also inevitably find themselves paired with moments of violence such as lashings and branding — historically realistic fixtures of the dystopian plantation universe.

What kind of commitment is required of the viewer when he or she is prompted to laugh when presented with edulcorated images of some of the worst atrocities of slavery?¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ The Guadeloupean director Christian Lara took on the topic with *Vivre libre ou mourir* (1979), *Sucre amer* (1998), *1802: L'épopée Delgrès* (2004) and *Esclave et courtisane* (2016) — the latter staging claustrophobic encounter akin to *Huis Clos*. For his part, Martinican director Guy Deslauriers made *Les oubliés de la liberté* (1989) and *Passage du milieu* (2000), whose screenplay was authored by Patrick Chamoiseau. Bernard Giraudeau's *Les Caprices d'un fleuve* (1996) takes place in 1780s Sénégal and centers around the experience of a white man who falls in love with a young slave. Tony Cocoviloin's short film, *Le Cri des Neg'Mawon* (1993), was shown at a few festivals in France, Guadeloupe and Martinique. On TV, the mini series *Tropiques Amers*, broadcast on France 3 in 2007, stands alone. Of note, Jean-Claude Barny, its director, is a long-time collaborator of Mathieu Kassovitz, who gave him the responsibility of casting *La Haine*. For a comprehensive picture of international films dedicated to slavery, see Olivier Barlet, *Contemporary African Cinema*. Michigan State University Press, 2016.

¹¹⁷ "Case Départ." *IMDb*, IMDb.com, pro.imdb.com/title/tt1821362/boxoffice.

¹¹⁸ This is at least true for Éboué, who asserted in an interview shortly after the film's release, "Le seul mot d'ordre pour moi est de continuer à prendre plaisir à faire les choses, à les faire par envie de délirer, de rigoler et pas autrement."

¹¹⁹ The blood and gore that would have been part of these scenes of violence are withheld in the film.

What physical, psychological, and social reactions are expected of them? This public may be tempted to believe that merely attending a film about slavery constitutes a taboo-shattering act and a momentous affirmation of freedom and resistance. Theodor Adorno, however, would suggest that these viewers are duped, and that in fact, they are nothing but playthings at the hands of a false society. The rhythm of *Case Départ*, with its continuous flow of cruelties, is not unlike Adorno's description of cartoons, whose fast pace, he contends, paradoxically results in inertia: "Insofar as cartoons do any more than accustom the senses to the new tempo, they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous friction, the breaking down of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society" (110). Like the Donald Duck of the Disney cartoons, whom Adorno references, the two protagonists of *Case Départ* spring right back into action after enduring the worst degradations — they become "worthless object[s] of general violence" (Ibid.). For Adorno, if a lesson is to be learned from witnessing recurring acts of brutality in a non-threatening environment, this lesson is of a totalitarian nature: "Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment" (Ibid.). Thus pervasive images of violence latently undermine the spirit of resistance that could destabilize the status quo. Anti-utopias, whether historical or fictional, deeply coerce minds until they become unaware of their complicity. With this in mind, I contend that the filmmakers may very well have fallen under the *République's* utopian spell and that their juxtaposition of laughter and violence short-circuits desires for social change. Adorno is highly skeptical of all things fun or funny — the principal commodities of the entertainment industry — and would likely be even more so of the violence-based fun featured in *Case Départ*. Seventy-five years later, his remarks are more relevant than ever in a society that has continued to cultivate its hedonistic tendencies along with its taste for violent entertainment.

Because of this proximity of violence and in laughter, *Case Départ*, like Roberto Benigni's *La Vita È Bella* (to which it is understandably often compared), resurrects the age-old question: is anything off-limits when it comes to laughing? Gerard Genette contemplated the question not so long ago, in his essay "Mort de rire." After a series of illustrative jokes and other incongruous anecdotes, Genette pauses: "Ces diverses 'classiques historiettes' me semblent poser, à leurs façons diverses, la non moins classique et douloureuse question: 'Peut-on rire de tout ?' À quoi la bonne réponse pourrait bien être cette autre question, pour le coup vraiment philosophique : 'De quoi d'autre voulez-vous qu'on rie?'"¹²⁰ The act of asking the question implies, of course, that the answer is not self-evident — if it were, the question would not need to be asked. Topics like slavery (alongside genocide and all forms of racial, sexual, economic, physical, and emotional violence) are precisely the reasons why Genette's

¹²⁰ Gérard Genette. "Morts de rire." *Figures 5 (Poétique)*. Seuil, 2002. Kindle Edition.

question will always remain *d'actualité*. But if we agree with him¹²¹ that every topic is game for laughter, and that one can laugh at or around slavery, many other questions must follow: what/who can authorize this laughter? Should this laughter serve a purpose beyond pleasure? Would everyone be permitted to laugh? These questions resonate further in the anti-utopian context I take the *République française universelle* to be. Via their juxtaposition of humor and dystopian tropes, Ménil's essay, Confiant's novellas, and Kassovitz's film all actively seek to draw awareness to France's silent domination. A close reading of *Case Départ* reveals that it is complicit with this silent domination, but signs of this complicity can only be apprehended on a latent frequency, drowned out as they are by the omnipresence of a distracting conciliatory laughter.

COMEDY, HISTORY, CONTROVERSY

Aside from its undeniable success at the box office, *Case Départ* divided its critics. Some, like Olivier Barlet, highlighted and then gently pardoned what he identified as the film's faults and praised its bold intentions:

Chaque personnage a droit à sa séance de rattrapage en humanité : le but n'est pas de condamner qui que ce soit mais d'user de dérision pour alléger la mémoire tout en la restaurant dans l'espace public. L'exactitude historique est laissée de côté dans cette plantation un peu trop propre : le film n'est qu'une porte d'entrée vers des prolongements pédagogiques ou la recherche personnelle. (237)

Initiating such a difficult dialogue, Barlet implies, requires a soft touch to avoid offending those who might finally be willing to wade in dark historical waters. Laughter provides that softness. Others believe that approach to be reprehensible. Joby Valente, a Martinican actress and the president of the *Mouvement pour une nouvelle humanité*, fervently disapproves of the film's tone, finding it potentially dangerous:

Il n'y a pas encore eu de film français sérieux sur le sujet et voilà que de jeunes humoristes s'en emparent... Ça banalise et ils sont encouragés... Peut-être ne le savent-ils pas. Ils ne sont d'ailleurs pas vraiment concernés puisqu'ils n'ont pas d'ancêtres

¹²¹ Although his question-answer belies an uncertainty.

déportés.¹²² Si ça commence comme ça, le discours va glisser. Rigoler avec l'esclavage alors que la mémoire n'est pas encore reconstituée...¹²³

Éboué replied to Valente's accusation in kind:

C'est complètement irrecevable ce que cette dame dit. Vous savez qui Joby Valente représente au fond dans le film ? C'est le personnage de Joël tout au début (ndlr : Joël est celui qui est au chômage ; être noir, selon lui, est la cause de tous ses échecs puisqu'il serait tout le temps en butte au racisme). C'est terrible à dire mais pour moi, elle entrave l'avancée du peuple noir, et je dirais même de l'humanité en général... (qtd. from Ibid.)

His response does not shy away from polemic; it even gladly stokes its flames. It suggests that the comedian believes that the only thing Black people are victims of is their own persecutory delusion. We hear utopianism at work in his last sentence, the optimistic promise of happiness for all humans... if all Black people could only get with the program.

In short, *Case Départ* polarized the parts of the African diaspora that took an interest in it: at one extreme, some, like Serge Romana, president of the CM98,¹²⁴ found that the film successfully brought together a diverse public, and that “On peut rire sans complexe [...] Mais enfin et surtout, ce n'est pas un film sur l'esclavage, c'est un film sur le racisme” (Ibid.). At the other extreme, a netizen proposed that the film's title erroneously insinuated that slavery was the starting point of Black history, before calling for “un boycott intelligible et intelligent.”¹²⁵ Although *Case Départ* certainly set the internet and the press abuzz, very little has been written about it in scholarly circles.¹²⁶ This could be attributed to the fact that works

¹²² Here, Valente points out that by virtue of their Cameroonian origins, N'Gijol and Éboué do not come from an enslaved lineage. She implicitly asks if these men have the necessary credentials to make such a film in the first place?

¹²³ Fxg. “*Case Départ*, Les Polémiques Des Békés Et Afrocentristes.” *Le Blog Fxg Paris Caraïbe*, 7 July 2011, www.fxgpariscaraïbe.com/article-case-depart-les-polemiques-78736095.html. Valente underscores the difference between *Case départ*, and *La vie est belle*, with which it shares the decision to treat a painful topic via comedy: “Ce film a été fait après de nombreux films sérieux et après que les faits soient établis.”

¹²⁴ According to its Facebook page: “Le Comité Marche du 23 mai 1998 (CM98) est une association mémorielle antillaise dont l'objectif est de : Réhabiliter, honorer et défendre la mémoire des victimes de la traite négrière et de l'esclavage des ex colonies françaises; Faire connaître l'histoire de la traite négrière et de l'esclavage colonial, ainsi que les spécificités des sociétés post – esclavagistes; Participer aux luttes contre toutes les stigmatisations et les discriminations de population du fait de leur origine, leur genre, leur culture, leur religion ou leur histoire.” See <https://www.facebook.com/ComiteMarche98/>

¹²⁵ qtd. from *ibid.*

¹²⁶ In a chapter dedicated to film in his book *Africa and France: Postcolonial Cultures, Migration, and Racism*, Dominic Thomas only writes, “The film features the actors Fabrice Éboué and Thomas N'Gijol (both have at least one Cameroonian parent), playing brothers who travel back in time to the era of slavery. Recourse to comedy has perhaps helped alleviate tensions while providing a forum for discussion and debate on key social issues” (109). Charles Forsdick published an article in *Contemporary French & Francophone Studies* that briefly argues that the film “ultimately contributes to the ongoing dilution and trivialization of reparations debates in France”(426). These scholarly interventions are among the handful that mention the film in passing.

that appeal to wide audiences and foreground laughter are seldom taken seriously. It could also be because non-Black scholars are hesitant to pick apart the first French comedy about slavery.

LAUGHTER-MAKING IN *CASE DÉPART*

As a comedy tapping into the time-travel genre, *Case Départ* makes much use of anachronisms, which constitute a major part of its laughter-producing strategy. In the sense that they operate by juxtaposing two elements that could not possibly exist on the same temporal plane, anachronisms are inherently incongruous, and the more egregious, the better, when it comes to comedy. To that end, Joel and Regis are made to be creatures of their spatiotemporal environment, and they are transported to the past with all of their accompanying accessories — clothing, cell phones, etc. On the one hand, these items highlight the pair's out-of-place-ness, which creates comedic moments; on the other, they point to a failure of modernity to make sense of the past or to provide the adequate tools to transcend it. When they first land in 1780, the brothers experience an understandable crisis of spatiotemporal recognition: they are lost in every possible sense of the term. Joel immediately resorts to his cell phone, which the audience knows to be useless and allows them to laugh from a position of superiority; when he wails about the lack of service, Regis quips, “Mais quel pays de merde !” understandably failing to correctly blame the time period rather than the space. Shortly thereafter, the two men find themselves captured and thrown into a cage. Here again, Joel resorts to his phone to film his captors, a tactic widely used by Black folks in the twenty-first century, as protection against police violence. With his raised fist, a well-known transnational sign of the Black struggle, he exclaims: “C’est pour mettre sur Internet ! Pour que le monde entier voit comment les Noirs sont traités par la police !”¹²⁷ His precautions, however, are entirely out of place in 1780, and this futile reliance on technology is comical in part because Joel automatically reaches out for the quintessential object of modern comfort, when something else entirely is required. For Henri Bergson, laughter occurs when one witnesses “du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant,” and it is the characters’ rigidity — their stubborn reliance on modernity — that prevents them from recognizing their predicament (one that, in all fairness, is too far-fetched to be immediately identifiable), and that produces a comical effect. Later, the two men appear on the slave auction block, wearing nothing but chains and fashionable cotton boxer briefs — a stark and incongruous contrast with the other slaves’ attire (*Figure 14*).

¹²⁷ This particular remark predates the murder of George Floyd, at the hands of a white cop. As I re-read it today, in June 2020, I note that the presence of this gesture in the midst of a comedic moment has become tasteless. Part of this scene’s comedic value rests on the fact Joel fails to recognize that these are not cops, making him the butt of the joke. But recent images have shown that the gestures of these slaves hunters look exactly like those of twenty-first century cops.



Figure 14

It is crucial to note that these anachronisms — regardless of the laughter mechanism on which they hinge: incongruity, superiority, or the mechanical encrusted on the living — function to diffuse and distract from the tension intrinsic to the early traumatic moments of the slave experience: the capture and the sale. Similar anachronistic gestures¹²⁸ recur throughout the film, continually working to reinforce the detached attitude with which the spectator undoubtedly came predisposed.

Just as the standup comedy goer walks into a venue expecting to laugh at traditionally serious topics (depending on the standup comedian), the film's spectators arrive poised to laugh as a community at situations more or less loosely related to slavery and by extension institutionalized racism. This double dynamic resonates with Bergson's remarks on laughter's need 1) for a momentary suspension of affect, and 2) for a community to echo and amplify it. First, Bergson observes,

Signalons maintenant, [...] l'insensibilité qui accompagne d'ordinaire le rire. Il semble que le comique ne puisse produire son ébranlement qu'à la condition de tomber sur une surface d'âme bien calme, bien unie. L'indifférence est son milieu naturel. Le rire n'a pas de plus grand ennemi que l'émotion. Je ne veux pas dire que nous ne puissions rire d'une personne qui nous inspire de la pitié, par exemple, ou même de l'affection : seulement alors, pour quelques instants, il faudra oublier cette affection, faire taire cette pitié. (4-5)

¹²⁸ Another illustration of how anachronisms disarm cathetic topics occurs in the scene with a Jewish merchant, who offers his hospitality to Joel and Regis, during an escape attempt. The three men engage in the perennial argument between Blacks and Jews: which of the two people have suffered the most? As the debate escalates, the brothers speak of Hitler and the Shoah under the perplexed look of the merchant — Regis even goes as far as making a Hitlerian salute, almost absent-mindedly. This debate, which was very much still alive in the early 2010s, is diffused for the spectator, by Regis' anachronistic arguments and gesture, which attempt to create a comical tension between slavery and the Holocaust.

The success of *Case Départ* specifically relies on establishing and sustaining a temporary insensitivity among its spectators. Laughter in the film works to make us feel less about something that typically makes us feel intensely as a collective socio-historical body. Secondly, by its very nature as a social event, the film's laughter finds itself augmented by its audience. Bergson writes,

On ne goûterait pas le comique si l'on se sentait isolé. Il semble que le rire ait besoin d'un écho [...] Si franc qu'on le suppose, le rire cache une arrière-pensée d'entente, je dirais presque de complicité, avec d'autres rieurs, réels ou imaginaires. Combien de fois n'a-t-on pas dit que le rire du spectateur, au théâtre, est d'autant plus large que la salle est plus pleine ? (6)

If we believe Bergson, the film's essential nature as a shared experience further contributes to its success as a comedic product.

The pacing of comedic events is essential to ensuring that the anguish associated with the subject matter does not regain the upper hand, and accordingly, *Case Départ* deploys its gags and jokes in rapid succession. The tone is established within the first minutes of the film, which focus on Joel and Régis's lives in contemporary France. The action begins in contemporary Paris, where we meet Joel, casually strolling in a suburban mall. From the onset, he is portrayed as a quintessential good-for-nothing bad boy: fresh out of prison for stealing an old lady's purse, he refuses a friend's offer for a job that would facilitate his rehabilitation, arguing, "Ah laisse tomber, avec ma gueule, ils veulent pas d' moi." Then in a hearty moment of dramatic irony, he adds, "Et puis c'est bon: travailler pour des Français, c'est fini l'esclavage." The comedy in these first few minutes rests on multiple superimposed jab lines.

Script Opposition: work/slavery; productivity/idleness; outsider/insider

Logical Mechanism: This particular jab line operates via two mechanisms. First, it is clear that Joel does not want to work and uses racism, a collective, historical atrocity, as a personal excuse for laziness; he collapses work with slavery, which do belong to the same semantic field (i.e., labor), in order to justify his non-participation. Second, this script employs dramatic irony since the viewer knows that the young man will soon enough understand the difference between work and slavery.

Situation: The first scene of the film

Target: The target is Joel, but also persons of color, particularly Black folks, who are stereotypically assumed to be work avoidant.

Narrative Strategy: film dialogue

Language: Joel's use of slang and colloquialisms signal him as minimally educated.

Joel is immediately established as a laughable character type. His non-normativity, that is, his refusal to be a productive member of society, sets him up as systematically incongruous within his environment. This incongruity is exacerbated by his foil and half-brother Regis, who is his exact opposite. Together, this unlikely duo consistently generates value clashes that produce laughter. By contrast, Regis is exceedingly productive and deeply embedded within the fabric of the *République*: he is an accountant who also works in the housing office of a Parisian middle-class suburban city hall. His superior, the mayor, is a racist and a homophobe. Whether he boasts of not being able to pronounce the name of his Maghrebi gardener and calling him *Cacahuète*, or kids about opportunistically putting a homosexual on his next electoral poster, his subordinate acquiesces with a complicit chuckle. When we first meet Regis, he is in his municipal office, condescendingly telling an abandoned Cameroonian mother of five that she should have followed her husband back “home.” Reciting every stereotype associated with citizens of African origin, he assumes that she is unemployed (she is not) and frowns upon her number of children. When she pleads that her children are French, and that he should understand since he too is of African descent, he abruptly corrects her: “Je suis originaire de Normandie, madame. Je suis né à Caen.” This introduction to Regis can also be read through the GTVH:

Script Opposition: birth/origin; exclusion/solidarity

Logical Mechanism: Denial

Situation: The first scene featuring Regis

Target: The target is Regis, but by extension, persons of color, particularly Black folks, who reject their origins. The viewer sides with the Cameroonian mother, whose opinion of Regis can be read on her expression.

Narrative Strategy: film dialogue

Language: Regis’ linguistic choices are cold and bureaucratic, evoking at once Bergson’s *mécanique plaqué sur du vivant* and the mechanistic speech of those who enforce order in dystopian societies.

Looking at both of these jab lines, which introduce the protagonists, we note that only the targets are similar: postcolonial subjects.¹²⁹

These introductions foreshadow the two men’s future roles, respectively, as field and house slaves. Joel, as a Black man, situates himself clearly outside of and against French white society. Though he seems to believe in that moment that slavery is over, he registers its

¹²⁹ It bears saying that a viewer familiar with the processes of self-alienation exposed by *Légitime défense* in 1932, and later reiterated by Frantz Fanon in *Peau noire, masques blancs* would know to incriminate the *République*’s assimilationist and exclusionary practices for the men’s behavior. But can such knowledge be expected of the mainstream viewer? I do not think so.

lingering exclusion and alienation upon his body, his *gueule*, and he uses the biological inevitability of his race and face to excuse his apathy. Meanwhile, Regis enjoys the status of an insider (further underscored by his role within the municipal housing division), and his position is reminiscent of those policing cogs in dystopian systems (later in the film, he is even given the responsibility to oversee other slaves). Neither in possession of full power nor fully destitute, he is a go-between who mechanically parrots the dominant ideology's racial discourse inherited from the times of slavery. He figures as a variation of the *arroseur arrosé*, one who thinks of himself as dominant, but who is in fact dominated; it is on those terms that his persona creates laughter, for the audience knows that his power displays are hollow. However, the viewer is often reminded of his intellectual and cultural superiority over Regis. After the two men are transported to the past, they reflect on their predicament during their first night in captivity:

JOEL: 1780. Mais comment on a fait pour arriver en plein Moyen Âge?

REGIS: (shakes his head and looks at him disapprovingly): —

JOEL: Renaissance?

REGIS: Mais qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?!

JOEL: Je sais! 1780: Louis XVI!

REGIS: Tu veux pas chercher une solution à ce qui nous arrive au lieu de refaire l'histoire?

In this comedic moment, Regis's cultural knowledge is pitted against Joel's ignorance of French history. If Regis is often the butt of the joke, his education and cultural capital place him a notch above Joel, who lacks redeemable traits by comparison. The decision to make the light-skinned character smarter than his darker counterpart is deeply problematic in the context of France's long-standing racial ideology.¹³⁰

It could be argued that the film's refusal to take into account melanin-based racial hierarchies can be excused because it also pokes fun at whites and racism. Indeed, the slave owners are also often targets of laughter. These characters voice the absurd racist ideas that circulated in Europe throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in order to justify the *mission civilisatrice* and the enslavement of African people. These prejudices provide the fodder for many comedic dialogues that hinge on their incongruity and absurdity:

VICTOR: Père, pourrais-je apporter les restes de notre repas à nos esclaves?

MR. JOURDAIN: Victor, je vous ai déjà dit plusieurs fois que je ne voulais pas vous v o i r trainer près du champ de cannes.

¹³⁰ For additional background on skin-color politics, and attendant diverging ideological perceptions of Antilleans and Africans, see Frantz Fanon, "Antillais et Africains" or Mireille Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype*.

MME JOURDAIN: Et puis vous savez bien que les nègres n'ont pas la même alimentation que nous.

PRÊTRE: En effet, Mr Victor! Tous ces mets sont trop raffinés pour des nègres. Ils ont besoin d'une nourriture simple, qui leur ressemble.

GENDRE: D'ailleurs méfiez-vous: à trop les approcher, c'est peut-être vous qu'ils finiraient par manger!

TOUS: Rires

MME JOURDAIN: Les nègres d'Afrique sont-ils vraiment cannibales?

PRÊTRE: Bien sûr! D'autant plus que si vous êtes perdu dans la brousse, il est bien difficile d'échapper à un nègre. Leurs naseaux très larges leur confèrent un odorat bien supérieur au nôtre. Ils peuvent sentir votre présence à plusieurs lieues à la ronde.

This dialogue is representative of most interactions between the masters, and evidently highlights the outrageous lack of logic of racist discourses. Furthermore, these conversations function as the predecessors of the mayor's words, and participate in a *comb-strand*, according to Attardo's GTVH nomenclature, composed of multiple jab lines that share colonial ideology and racism as their targets. Taken together, these dialogues certainly do suggest that colonial racism survives in the postcolonial era. Thus, as we see, racialized and racist characters alike are the targets of the film's equal-opportunity laughter. This explains why Barlet proposes that the film condemns no one, but a closer look at these comedic events reveals that *Case Départ* actually condemns everyone. In a context in which there are clear victims and clear perpetrators, this gesture is hardly defensible.

While the examples above each have distinct targets (whether they be postcolonial subjects or racist ones), others in the film go as far as mocking both at the same time, in a way that further blurs the distinction between victims and executioners. After a botched escape, Joel is bound to a pole, and his back is offered to the whip of Mr. Henri, the plantation's foreman. Everyone — masters and slaves alike — is in attendance. During this scene, the slave owners casually make wedding preparations. The cruelty of the practice does not bother them, and the lightheartedness of their banter creates a comical *décalage* with Joel's suffering; together, these elements amount to a parody of historical images of slave whippings. To the sound of each lashing, Joel begins reciting: "Liberté... Égalité..." At the third lash of the whip, which would be expected to be followed by "Fraternité," Joel screams: "Nique ta mère !!" To better understand how this jab line operates, we may again use Attardo's GTVH framework:

Script Opposition: Respect/disrespect

Logical Mechanism: Transmogrification: while one would expect the word *Fraternité*, it is replaced by a curse; incongruity: evidently cruel corporeal punishment does not index the values stated in the Republic's motto.

Situation: A lashing regulated by the French *Code Noir*.

Target: A part of the audience may consider the target to be France's ideological system, which prescribes corporeal punishment within a framework of liberty, etc. Another part of the audience may laugh at Joel's crassness.

Narrative Strategy: Film scene

Language: A combination of a hallowed formula and curse words.

The transmogrification of France's national motto creates a comical effect that functions at several levels. At the Language level, it hinges on the wide gap in registers, between the sanctity of the motto and the crassness of the insult. At the Target level, if we agree that Joel's quip indicts France's ideology and its hypocritical disrespect for liberty, equality, and fraternity, (all the more ostentatious in this violent moment) then this particular jab line is perhaps the most directly engaged of the entire film. But the scene ends with an indignant Regis, ever the defendant of the *République*, scolding his nearly unconscious brother: "Liberté, égalité, *fraternité*. FRA-TER-NI-TÉ." In this scene's coda, it is again Regis, as the assimilated member of the French *République*, who is the butt of the joke. His mechanical desire to hear France's motto in its correct form outweighs his outrage at the horror he just witnessed, making him an object of laughter as Bergson conceives it. While one brother disrespects France's motto and the other defends it blindly, the scene's sarcasm¹³¹ is unjustifiably shared between the *République* and its postcolonial victims.

The comedic events and characters I have described thus far, along with the film's generic blending (at the intersection of the time-travel genre, the neo-slave narrative, the period film, fantasy, dystopia, and comedy) and its frivolous treatment of chronology and history, put *Case Départ* in the broad category of postmodern fiction. It displays many formal features of the latter, as Brian McHale defines it. For him, when it comes to spotting the difference between classic historical fiction and postmodernist historical fiction, it boils down to the "seams." While historical fiction aims to camouflage the seam between fiction and reality,

Postmodernist fiction [...] seeks to foreground this seam by making the transition from one realm to the other as jarring as possible. This it does by violating the constraints on "classic" historical fiction: by visibly contradicting the public record of "official" history; by flaunting anachronisms; and by integrating history and the fantastic. Apocryphal

¹³¹ Considered here with its etymological meaning from the Greek σαρκάζειν (*sarkázein*) meaning "to tear flesh and sneer."

history, creative anachronism, historical fantasy — these are the typical strategies of the postmodernist revisionist historical novel. (90)

Case Départ fits these criteria very closely with its juxtaposition of real historical events, objects, and places (e.g., institutional slavery, *Le Code Noir*, les Antilles), and flashy fantastical elements and anachronisms. Furthermore, its subject matter suggests that it fulfills the postmodern imperative of restoring “‘lost’ groups (the peasantry and working-class, women, minorities) to the historical record,” which McHale identifies as a crucial concern of our times (91). For Loredana Di Martino, the “parodic arbitrariness” of postmodernist fiction is “an ethical project that consists in the simultaneous revisitation and critique of the totalitarian narratives that shaped the public imaginary” (590). In the film, the focus on the act of manumission of Regis and Joel’s ancestors can be seen as calling attention to France’s totalitarian stranglehold on Historical records and archives. While some consider that this ethical project alone is worthwhile, many criticize postmodernist fiction failing to go beyond this critique. Di Martino reminds us that for Marxist critics such as Fredric Jameson, the playfulness of postmodern works, their parodic verve, and their intrinsic duplicity are symptomatic “of a lack of depth and a commitment to anarchy that makes postmodernist texts complicit with the ideology of late capitalist society” (590). Di Martino writes that detractors of postmodernist irony chastise it for failing to “offer a way out of the cultural impasse,” arguing that “its ambiguity is a form of institutionalization, a way to surrender to fragmentation and the power mechanisms of global capitalism” (Ibid.). The murkiness that surrounds *Case Départ*’s laughter and its targets subjects the film to this kind of critique.

Often, however, those who do not believe in postmodernism’s subversive potential still agree that when it is paired with elements of postcolonial ethics and poetics, its critical edge is sharpened, and its socio-political commitment comes into clearer focus. According to Di Martino:

The social engagement of postmodernist irony comes to the fore particularly in works that are located at the intersection of the postmodern and the postcolonial [...]. Here, parody creates a disjunctive narration where history is told neither from the viewpoint of the oppressor nor merely from that of a disenfranchised minority, but is constructed, rather, as a hybrid text of cultural in-betweenness that promotes the awareness of shared differences or, as Homi Bhabha (1994/2004) argues, of the “otherness of the people-as-one.” (592)

Case Départ, because of its form, its use of parody, and its subject matter, would initially appear to be a work located at said intersection. Furthermore, since the film takes as its target both the oppressed and the oppressor, it appears to adopt neither viewpoint. But while its generic multiplicity could tell a story of expansive hybridity, its lack of actual representation of Antillean culture, which is reduced to a handful of stereotypes, does not map out a

cultural in-betweenness that would promote an understanding of shared differences. If the latter gesture is the expected result of the coming together of the postmodern and the postcolonial, and if *Case Départ* fails to accomplish it, we may begin to wonder if it is a postcolonial work at all.

For Kathleen Gyssels, the mere fact of a work's engagement with postcolonial topics and/or of its creation by persons emerging out of postcolonial spaces it is not enough to declare it postcolonial: "n'est pas 'postcolonial' tout auteur né dans une ex-colonie. La condition minimale requise reste de règle : un travail réussi tant au niveau du fond, de la forme et du style, avec en plus, une leçon, si ce n'est une question" (162). To gauge the postcolonial value of a work, she writes, the critic must shift focus from broad conspicuous elements to hone in on discreet narrative elements:

l'approche postcoloniale est synonyme d'une attention accrue au texte dans ses représentations plus ou moins explicites de rapport dominé/dominant. La façon de pratiquer la critique littéraire s'en est sensiblement altérée, quitte à démêler l'indicible et l'inédit, de questionner l'ébranlement des consciences représentées dans la narration... (159)

As I have already suggested, laughter in the film blurs the distinction between the oppressed and the oppressors, and this blurring is a sign that can be interpreted both within and outside of the logic of the film. Adopting the critical postcolonial approach prescribed by Gyssels requires going beyond how the film blurs these boundaries to ask what this blurring symptomatizes. Gyssels also enjoins the critic to pay close attention to character arcs; in subsequent sections of this chapter, I will argue that the protagonists' consciousnesses are not as shaken as one would have hoped. Within this analytical framework, we already begin to sense that *Case Départ* only checks few of the boxes required to justify a designation of "postcolonial" as Gyssels defines the term.

For Gyssels, what truly sets a text outside of the postcolonial sphere is its approach toward the past. She points out that some things are sacred to postcolonial authors: "quelqu'un des ex-colonies ne badine jamais avec le passé colonial" (163). Play is not necessarily anathema to the postcolonial objective, but making light of the colonial past itself is. The distinction is subtle. To illustrate it, we may think of the function of laughter in Benigni's *La Vita È Bella*. In the film, the protagonist is all too aware of the horrors that surround him, and the goal of his laughter is to shield his child from registering them at all. Comparatively, in *Case Départ*, laughter does not quite hide the atrocity of slavery (though, as I have mentioned, the film withholds graphic images), but rather allows the viewer to register it without experiencing its pain. In its totality, the film does not go "beyond the mere academic joke" and while it superficially shows an "ethical desire to make sense of the past," it does not avoid, "the dominant viewpoints of masters, despots, and colonizers," which is a

fundamental imperative of postmodernist parody according to Di Martino (590). Furthermore, the function of parody in *Case Départ* does not pose “an overt challenge to power relations,” nor does it subvert “the type of metaphysical thought that generates them” (592). Although in the film masters and mayors are objects of ridicule, they remain in power, and the universalist ideology that bestowed that power upon them is never questioned. Ultimately, the utopian claims of the *République française universelle* remains unchallenged. If this laughter is not quite postmodern and not quite postcolonial, then what is its nature? What is its purpose?

BLUNTING THE DYSTOPIAN EDGE

My contention thus far is that beneath its postcolonial and postmodern appearance, the laughter in *Case Départ* does not achieve the subversive agenda associated with these aesthetic currents. I will now focus on how this laughter also deactivates the critical potential of the dystopian tropes present in the film. I will first make the case that, while works that confront slavery tend to be read through a postcolonial lens, slavery itself is a concrete dystopia. With that in mind, works that deploy its imagery are necessarily dystopian and can be analyzed through a dystopian framework.

In remarks that echo Édouard Glissant’s proposition that utopia is the driving force behind Europe’s universalizing impulse, Lucy Sargisson reminds us that concrete dystopias are often the dark side of utopia:

We all know that utopianism has its authoritarian aspect. I’ve argued that this is connected to a totalizing impulse. We all know that horrors have resulted from the drive for Utopia. The murder of European Jews was part of the realization of a certain utopia. Ethnic cleansing, the Holocaust, genocide and inhumanity have all formed part of the map of Utopia. [...] Atrocities are enacted daily and globally in the name of various utopias: accumulation of capital, love of God, protection of trade, et cetera ad nauseam. (25)

In line with Sargisson’s remarks, we observe that French history is saturated with moments of factual horror and terror that are the fallouts of utopianism. The monarchy, Robespierre and the Revolution, the Enlightenment and its border-expanding humanism, Napoleon’s empire, the Third Republic, etc., were all enterprises born out of utopian thinking, but their dark sides were unambiguously dystopian, manifesting in slavery, famines, wars, the Terror, mass killings, and territorial, political and cultural domination. In all, from the colony to the postcolony, the ideology of a few has long been imposed upon those it deemed intractable via methods of domination that ranged from enslavement to exclusion, and from alienation to execution. This dynamic is the cornerstone of all dystopias, whether historical or fictional, and by virtue of being a film about slavery and racism (both in the past and in the present),

Case Départ inevitably showcases it. Fully making the link between the dystopian genre and narratives that are concerned with the representation of slavery, Maria Varsam succinctly proposes that “On the level of content, then, the concerns of dystopian fiction often coincide with those of slave narratives in their discourse on freedom, inequality, and the nature of domination” (210).

Formally, the film also performs many gestures that resonate with the dystopian genre. Corin Braga suggests that what is necessary to set utopias — negative or positive — apart from satire is a form of displacement or estrangement from the real world, either spatial or temporal (cf. introduction of the present work). *Case Départ* operates displacements along both axes: the spatial (toward the Antilles¹³²), and the temporal (toward the past). This double displacement is strikingly similar to another dystopia, Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred*, in which the main protagonist, a Black woman living in 1976 Los Angeles, is repeatedly sent back to early 19th-century Maryland, whenever her ancestor, a white slave owner, is in danger. At the same time, the omnipresence of laughter and the ridiculing of various social character types in *Case Départ* certainly give the film a satirical leaning. Jane Donawerth explains that such blending is not uncommon for utopias and dystopias:

The borders of utopia and dystopia as genres are not rigid, but permeable. These forms absorb the characteristics of other genres, such as comedy or tragedy. In this sense, dystopia as a genre is the ideal site for generic blends. Conservative forms are transformed by merging with dystopias, a merge that forces political reconsideration, and traditionally conservative forms can progressively transform the dystopian genre so that its pessimism shifts from being resigned to being militant. (29)

The confluence of these two heavily critical genres should lead us to believe that *Case Départ* belongs unambiguously to a current of engaged films. Still, despite the dystopian tropes that are undeniably present in *Case Départ*, it is difficult to affirm that the film embraces the critical program of the genre. Further, I contend that these tropes, rather than representing and condemning the violence intrinsic to the plantation universe, reproduce it.

Varsam points out that, “On the formal level, dystopias such as *Handmaid* ‘borrow’ from the classic slave narrative, and in [Octavia] Butler’s critical dystopia *Kindred* slavery forms the main *raison d’être* for the novel’s narrative” (210). Tropes of alienation, confinement, and fear of pain or death are the hallmarks of both genres, and works that converse with slavery and dystopia necessarily engage in a poeticization of violence, which is always a risky proposition. In what follows, I explore instances of psychological and physical violence in *Case Départ* and examine how the film navigates the thin boundary between representing and reproducing violence.

¹³² I note that the choice of the name *Antilles* (as opposed to a specified island) creates a dreamlike vagueness that contributes to a de-realization of the space.

After being transported to the past, captured and displayed on the auction block, the two brothers arrive on the plantation, where they immediately suffer their master's first act of aggression: they are renamed. Regis becomes Gaspard; Joel, Gédéon. In her essay "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman details the violence of renaming and how this practice participates in the enterprise of wholesale dehumanization that is slavery. It is with these imposed names that enslaved humans enter history via the archive. This archive, however, is a necessarily non-representative, non-wholesome receptacle for these lives, for it only records their "encounter with power," as Hartman insists, quoting Foucault. Then the shards of stories found in these archives

are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property [...], an asterisk in the grand narrative of history. (2)

In *Case Départ*, the violence of this symbolic act — this forceful introduction into the archive — is quickly and comically diffused, as the brothers childishly fuss over who is who. The characters do not register this psychological brutality; they do not understand that they have become property, a part of someone's inventory, and that they have entered history through an archive that thereby records and ratifies their loss of freedom and agency. Their failure to grasp the gravity of this instant spares the viewer from this affective charge (in line with Freud's understanding of the primary function of humor).

Within the economy of the film, the destruction of the manumission act at the hands of Joel and Regis is considered the ultimate form of disrespect of the past. The men's aunt views it as a reproduction of violence, and for her, the gesture is so odious that it justifies enslavement as punishment. At the same time, outside of the film, this gesture could be viewed as a desacralization of the archive itself, an act of revenge against the violence of renaming. The document, written by a master, bestowed upon a man and a woman whose true names we will never be known, inevitably speaks of their former status as slaves, with all the misery that status implies. By destroying the act, the brothers destroy the record of past violence and become themselves the only living proof that their ancestors were free and perhaps even prospered outside of the degradation of slavery. They strip the archive of its totalizing power and introduce the possibility of life outside of it. But while it is possible to interpret this act as a deliberate vandalization of the archive, the film itself fails to reconstitute the lived experience of enslaved people outside of the archive. It omits the life of Isidor and Rosalie, the brothers' ancestors, or that of any of the slaves on the plantation. These characters are given little depth or agency. They remain trapped in a state of represented slavery — one that even more problematically fails to capture its true horror. Ultimately,

Isidor and Rosalie remain lightly sketched-out figures of whom we know little more than the fact that they once were enslaved. By not giving these characters a greater voice, the film avoids engaging with a profound representation of the slave condition. It delights in showing some of its cruelties but does not give the viewer a much more in-depth portrayal of the emotions involved. In this sense, it operates much like the archive itself and reproduces its violence.

The symbolic act of renaming is only the beginning of a series of psychological and physical degradations. As previously mentioned, whipping, branding, torturing, and killing are all part of the plantation universe's controlling apparatus, as well as typical fixtures of dystopian spaces. Another way that bodies are degraded and controlled is through sexual oppression. Sexual regulation and the oppression of bodies are recurring tropes of both slave narratives and dystopias. In dystopias, sexuality is either eliminated altogether in favor of artificial means of procreation or, as in slave narratives, it is highly organized for reproductive purposes. Rape and other forms of non-consensual coupling appear in many works of both genres: *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Kindred*, but also Harriet Jacob's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* all feature this particular type of degradation, as Varsam points out. We also find these tropes in *Case Départ*. But while in slave and neo-slave narratives sexual cruelties are often perpetrated by or at the behest of white owners, either male or female,¹³³ in *Case Départ*, it is the protagonists themselves who stage a defiling sexual act involving two other slaves: their ancestors.

Out on the sugar cane field, Joel mistakenly believes that he sees Isidor, whom he knows to be his forbear, performing fellatio on a fellow slave. Isidor, however, is only sucking the juice out of a sugar cane stalk. This misunderstanding leads the brothers to think that in order to get back to the present, they must return Isidor to a heteronormative path, and force him to start the genealogical lineage of which they are the (disappointing) results. Under this misguided premise, Joel and Regis plot a sexual encounter between him and Rosalie. One night, they steal rum from the masters' reserves and throw a party in the slave quarters. This is the occasion for the film to restate stereotypes about Antilleans: they love to dance lasciviously, drink excessively, and be promiscuous. When both their ancestors are drunk and unconscious, they bring them to a secluded place and begin to couple them in a scene whose length purposefully accentuates the discomfort. All four characters are lying down, with each brother huddled against one of his ancestors. The two protagonists begin moving their bodies and their forbears' in ways that enable the sexual act.

In the frame, the faces of Isidor and Rosalie are plunged into obscurity, which accentuates their anonymity and effaces their humanity (*Figure 15*). While Joel (left), who is behind Isidor, is visibly uncomfortable and asks his brother to stop making eye contact, Regis

¹³³ See Stephanie Jones-Rogers and Thomas A. Foster in Berry, Ramey & Harris, M. & Burnard, Trevor & Camp, H. & Doddington, David & Downs, Jim. *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas*.



Figure 15

(right) is aroused and even slaps his ancestress's backside several times. Regis, propped high on his elbow, dominates the scene and derives unambiguous pleasure from his superior vantage point; at this moment, it is not only Rosalie's body that he oversees but also those of Isidor and Joel — the rape's collateral male victims. The gender imbalance of this scene raises questions as to the status of the typically heterosexual representations of the colonial enterprise. Julin Everett takes on this topic in a book titled *Le Queer Impérial*, which asks among other questions: "if the domination and colonization of black Africa by white Europeans was a primarily homosocial activity in a space which "was definitely a man's world" [...] why then do we traditionally refer to this symbolic rape of Africa in heterosexual terms? [...] How do African and European women figure into a male homoerotic dynamic?" (5-6). This line of inquiry is particularly relevant for *Case Départ*, whose treatment of gender manages the paradoxical feat of giving female characters remarkable agency while evacuating them of any substance. Indeed, it is Corinne, Regis's (white) wife, and Joel's African mother who force the two to go pay homage to their father in "Les Antilles," thus setting the action in motion. It is the mystical aunt who then sends them back to the past. At the end of the film, the protagonists' daughters commit an act that threatens to reinitiate the entire adventure (I will return to this later in this chapter). While these female characters effect the film's pivotal moments, they only exist insofar as they serve a purpose. Once the purpose is served, they are swiftly cast aside. A full reading of the film's gender politics falls outside of the scope of this dissertation, but these brief remarks suggest that it would likely be productive. To return to the violence of the sex scene, Regis, who is well integrated into the fabric of the *République française universelle*, does not appear remorseful in any way. For him, the end justifies the means when it comes to ensuring futurity. This reasoning is in line with the logic of the Republic in

all of its colonial and postcolonial endeavors. Because of its duration (more than a minute and a half) and its grotesque elements, this scene partakes in the film's comedic dynamic. In the end, however, Black bodies are re-objectified and re-commodified. To make matters worse, the main protagonists fail to acknowledge that they have made themselves complicit with the system that oppresses them by replicating its most violating biopolitical methods.

That scene never fails to generate laughter, whether visceral or social, when I show the film to students. Some find it essentially funny. Others laugh out of discomfort. There are those who laugh because others are laughing. There are also those who stay quiet, sensing perhaps that the scene brings sexual violence to the forefront without condemning it explicitly; in fact, it makes light of it and implies that it can even be justified, under the right circumstances. This absence of condemnation drags the spectator into a strange dance of complicity: in this scene, we are asked to root for Joel and Regis, even though we know that their violation is unnecessary and based on false premises since Isidor is not homosexual.

The violence of representation and the reproduction of violence are recurring pitfalls in *Case Départ*, which, as I have previously mentioned, makes much use of stereotypes — which are themselves a form of violent constraint. Among the targets of the filmmakers' jokes are Antilleans and homosexuals — and sometimes, both at the same time. Specifically thinking about the standup works of Éboué and N'Gijol, Ervine notes that these comedians' use of stereotype is often ambivalent and potentially dangerous. Reflecting on one particular routine in which Éboué, declaring his love for France's multicultural society, adds that French people of all races should unite “pour niquer la gueule aux Asiatiques,” Ervine proposes that in one way, the comedian makes himself the butt of the joke by making such a paradoxical comment. At the same time, Ervine continues, “context is key,” and there is a

danger that this sort of humour can also appeal to those of a different standpoint, who view diversity and multiculturalism much less favorably and prefer to simply laugh at the evocation of a recognizable stereotype. Indeed, Eric Macé argues that one of the main challenges involved exploiting stereotypes with jokes is ‘savoir comment rire des stéréotype sans que l'ironie ou le second degré ne soit pris pour du racisme ou de la stéréotypisation. (118)

Ervine suggests here that the relationship between the joker and the deployed stereotype is important, implying that suspicion is reduced when the joker belongs to the group whose stereotype he or she repeats. From this perspective, the fact that N'Gijol and Éboué are cis-heterosexual Cameroonians performing stereotypes about Antilleans and homosexuals is troubling, and leaves room for questioning the extent to which they have internalized the stereotypes they rehearse or whether they have considered that their own use of stereotypes might be reproducing the Republic's heteronormative violence.

To illustrate how stereotypes are at work in *Case Départ*, I now turn to the two protagonists' estranged father. As previously mentioned, he is a Caribbean man about whom little is known. When the brothers arrive at his bedside, they find a room full of women. Upon asking, "C'est qui ces meufs?" Joel is told that they are his sisters. As an explanation, the men's uncle seriously offers the following humorous euphemism: "Votre père a beaucoup voyagé" in the place of the more obvious, "Your father was a player." The moribund, aptly named Grosdésir (or enormous desire), corresponds to the stereotypical image of the promiscuous Caribbean man, complete with a litany of illegitimate children, for whom he plays the non-demanding part of the absentee father. Half-conscious on his deathbed, he begins to string a chain of signifiers, presumably the names of his innumerable female sexual partners ("Il voit sa vie défilier," explains the uncle): "Arlette, Josiane, Joséphine, Gladys, Muriel..." The heteronormative list of names, which are different-but-the-same, in the sense that they are all different female names, is interrupted by the male name, "Bernard," which unexpectedly introduces the taboo of non-normative sexual orientation. The brothers and uncle's comical shared glance lets the spectator know that this is taboo for them. Despite the dramatic circumstances, the body language of the characters and their overly exaggerated facial expressions tell us that this is a jab line. To better understand how it operates, we may use Attardo's GTVH framework:

Script Opposition: expected/unexpected; normal/abnormal; heterosexuality/homosexuality

Logical Mechanism: Surprise; Replacement of a word by an unexpected one

Situation: A man on his dying bed

Target: Papa Grosdésir, and by extension men who desire men.

Narrative Strategy: film

Language: The linguistic choices are not relevant here.

At the Script Opposition level, we note that the seemingly endless number of female partners possessed by Grosdésir is fully normalized, even though it is exorbitant. In contrast, the irruption of a single male name is considered shocking. At the Logical Mechanism level, it is this irruption, which comes as a surprise, that gives the jab line its dynamic. At the Situation level, it is important to note that this is the only scene featuring the father; this character is quickly discarded, and this jab line diffuses any pathos that could have derived from his impending death. Looking at the Target level, we note that the father's possible homosexuality is the target, rather than the society that arbitrarily finds this behavior abhorrent. In the end, however, whatever anxiety is experienced at the utterance of the masculine name is quickly eased by two factors: first, the mysterious name, *Bernard*, ends up being the start of a new chain of signifiers of male names: *Bernard*, *Joel*, *Régis*. The

implausible scenario that Bernard is a family member (perhaps another son?) is nevertheless adequate enough at the time to resolve this tension. Second, while the question of homosexuality creates a momentary malaise, the dying father's overacted death throes immediately distracts from it. This moment occurs early in the film, but jests constructed around latent non-normative sexual desires go on to abound in *Case Départ* to such an extent that homosexuality emerges as a central theme.

We have seen that the presumed homosexuality of Isidor leads to an act of sexual degradation. Meanwhile, the possible bi-sexual desires of Papa Grosdésir are meant to shock the audience into laughing. In addition to this, other male characters display attraction for the same sex and are regularly the targets of jokes. For instance, Mr. Henri, the plantation overseer, is heavily associated with homosexuality, and he bears no redeeming features. He is a rugged man whose obsession with Black men's genitalia is the only trait for which we come to know him — most of his lines are variations of “Toi et ta grosse bite.” His cruelty operates at the intersection of the objectification and the sexualization of Black male bodies, and his sadistic and objectifying gestures always reveal homoerotic tendencies, which as Everett writes, are integral to the project of colonization: “Othered bodies represent erotically-tempting objects of domination” (2). Within the film's social grid, however, Mr. Henri appears to be an outlier who fits in with neither masters nor slaves, yet he is an essential part of the plantation universe, which would not function without his terror. In the dystopian space that is the plantation, he represents the threat of death and physical and sexual violence. Pairing these threats with repressed homosexuality is a risky move the filmmakers never quite flesh out. Mr. Henri's desires for Black male bodies amount to no more than a handful of crude jokes.

Mr. Henri is merely a peripheral character, but Joel is also a target of jokes about homosexuality. After mating their ancestors, the brothers believe that they are heading home. They decide to stage an altogether tame act of rebellion: they go to the master's house, crash his daughter's wedding party and knock a few people and things around — but they remain stuck in the past. They are arrested by Mr. Henri and sentenced to hang the next morning. While in jail awaiting death, the two brothers confide in each other. Both in tears, they embrace. In Regis's arms, Joel confesses that when he was in prison, he had an erotic encounter with his cellmate: “C'était juste quelques caresses... mais y a pas eu d' pénétration.” At the height of this emotional moment, the melodramatic score that had swept over the scene abruptly stops. The two men are left in a comical silence. Regis slowly and awkwardly steps away from Joel, in a silent act of homophobic rejection.

In this film, whose central concern is supposedly slavery and racism, the presence of these three examples makes homosexuality a major theme. Yet the filmmakers do not explicitly condemn homophobia, which makes the use of comedy related to homosexuality appear gratuitous. In his entry on “Representation of Homosexuality” in Attardo's

Encyclopedia of Humor Studies, Carlos M. Nash explains that by virtue of its non-participation in a heteronormative totalizing narrative, homosexuality is a recurring target of humor: “As a topic, homosexuality is contrasted against heteronormative ideology, which produces the element of incongruity required in humor” (342). Thus for some segments of a heteronormative public, homosexual behavior might always be perceived as incongruous and therefore, funny. Furthermore, Nash adds, “humor is a performance that has social functions; it establishes and reinforces group boundaries. It can frame homosexuals as stigmatized and undesirable individuals, thus allowing for heterosexuals to display a sense of superiority while diminishing the social face of homosexuals” (343-344). In this sense, laughter surrounding homosexuality can be theorized not only along the incongruity paradigm but also along the superiority paradigm. Finally, as Nash points out, “Laughing at non-normative behavior also maintains group boundaries” (344). This laughter then performs two simultaneous gestures of inclusion and exclusion. Interestingly, this particular function of laughter reproduces an intrinsically dystopian trope: it creates a suspicion of the other that unifies members of the anti-utopian society against an imagined enemy. Taken together, Nash’s comments suggest that homosexuality provides easy laughter-producing material for the average heteronormative viewer. Overall, in *Case Départ*, the alienation of homosexual individuals operates not only between characters but also between the film and its heteronormative public, and we are left to wonder if the work’s highly problematic treatment of homosexuality is designed for cheap laughs and shock value or if it is a sign of deep-seated assimilationist bigotry.

If we agree with Genette that everything is fair game when it comes to laughter, we may nevertheless desire an identifiable gesture of solidarity with the targets of jokes. Joking about race or sexual orientation always reproduces a form of violence by simply referring to it. On such shaky grounds, the only thing that separates jokes from hate speech is the clear positioning of the joker on the matter. *Case Départ* never performs that positioning gesture when it comes to homosexuality. After his confession, Joel never revisits the topic. That event is conveniently bracketed in the past. Jordan Mintzner, a French correspondent of *The Hollywood Reporter*, highlights the issue with this lack of resolution on the topic of homosexuality:

If the moral of *Case Départ* seems to be that contemporary French blacks have it a lot better off than their forefathers, it’s nearly lost amid such outsized and often moronic behavior, even if certain jokes manage to hit their marks. And though it’s encouraging that the filmmakers use laughter as a means to present this seldom-seen side of Gallic history, the blatant homophobia of certain characters could lead one to believe that for Eboue and N’Gijol, there may be fates worse than enslavement.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Mintzner, Jordan. “Case Depart: Film Review.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 16 Aug. 2011, www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/case-depart-film-review-223187.

Although I do not agree with Mintzer's conclusion that spectators may be led to weigh the evils of heteronormativity against those of racism upon viewing the film (are they not both symptoms of the same illness anyway?), I agree that the overarching message is difficult to decipher. *Case Départ* is representative of the society from which it emerges. Whether knowingly or not, it reproduces France's silent exclusionary dynamics with respect to subjects who cannot be fully harmonized, either racially, culturally, or along the lines of sexual orientation. Overall, in *Case Départ*, slavery, sexual oppression, and physical domination co-exist with more subtle ideological expressions of the *République française universelle's* historical utopianism and harmonizing aspirations. Because they are always paired with the lightheartedness of comical elements, these themes may easily be overlooked as dystopian. The film fictionally represents a historical dystopia (the plantation universe) as a space to escape, but it fails to explicitly challenge the concrete soft dystopia that constitutes its referential matrix (contemporary France).

DISARMING THE POETICS OF ESCAPE

The plots of fictional works that feature universes regulated in various ways by ideological oppression will often be driven by their protagonists' recognition of said oppression, and their subsequent desire to do something about it. It ensues that escape emerges as a prominent motif in both slave narratives and dystopias. As Varsam notes, in both of these fictional universes, "The only possible escape, however, apart from death, is to step outside the boundaries of the particular dystopian world in order to experience life in a different geographical space" (217). Quoting Heidi Macpherson, she adds, "Escape, with all its various meanings, is an important part of the dystopic tradition and any slave world is necessarily dystopic" (Ibid.). In *Case Départ*, the protagonists have the double imperative to escape not only from the geographical space in which they are trapped, but also from the time in which they have been shipwrecked, and as a result, escape is one of the film's central themes.

A slave's desire to escape the plantation — and the way this desire might overpower one's body — is an emotion that is not readily available to us; no accounts focusing on this distinct experience exist outside of the archives. The way we have come to know escape attempts is through their consequences, recorded as bodily punishment for recaptured slaves, or as prescribed by the *Code Noir*:

XXXVIII. L'Esclave fugitif qui aura été en fuite pendant un mois, à compter du jour que son Maître l'aura dénoncé en Justice, aura les oreilles coupées & sera marqué d'une fleur de Lys sur une épaule, & s'il récidive un autre mois, à compter pareillement du jour de la dénonciation, il aura le jarret coupé, & sera marqué d'une fleur de Lys sur l'autre épaule, & la troisième fois, il sera puni de mort.

Poetry and narratives have provided an important medium to re-humanize this experience, and to approximate the intense emotional maelstrom it must have been. One can only imagine what a slave's run to freedom might feel like — something that is at the intersection of the sublime and the terrifying. Its magnitude will always elude us. Reflecting upon what possibilities are available to those who wish to grasp the emotional reality of the slave experience, Hartman asks, “How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?” (3). Her inquiry contains an implicit warning: representation must not and cannot be hastily conflated with respect. Dusting the historical cobwebs off an event does not automatically equate respect of those who lived it. The danger is that it can lead to a new violation or to an inauthentic farce. To fill the void that is the slave experience, Hartman offers up the concept of “critical fabulation” as a means to undermine the power of the archive and give another voice, albeit imagined, to the slave. In so doing, critical fabulation intends “to make visible the production of disposable lives [...], to describe ‘the resistance of the object’ [...], and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity” (12). Speaking of her own work, she continues:

By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices. The outcome of this method is a “recombinant narrative,” which “loops the strands” of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future [...] in narrating the time of slavery as our present. (Ibid.)

In French literature, the works of Patrick Chamoiseau are perhaps the most heartfelt expressions of critical fabulation. Novels such as *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse* (1997) or *Un dimanche au cachot* (2007) offer deeply poetic and abstract mediations of the slave experience. They religiously attempt to recreate those emotions and sensations that can never be restituted, such as the feeling of being confined or of escaping. In the first of these two works, Chamoiseau merges the past and the present, and accomplishes precisely the confusion between narrator and speaker Hartman evokes with an abrupt change from third-person narration to first, midway through the novel. What interests me most here is the way Chamoiseau describes the impulse to escape as a mystical experience he calls *décharge*:

Je vais vous parler de la décharge. Les vieux esclaves connaissaient cela : c'était une mauvaise qualité de pulsion vomie d'un endroit oublié, une fièvre fondamentale, un sang caillé, un dé-sursaut pas-bon, une hélée vibrante qui vous déraillait raide. On allait désarticulé par une impétueuse présence en soi. La voix prenait un autre son. La démarche s'ourlait grotesque. Une vibrée religieuse vous tremblait les paupières et les joues. Et vos yeux portaient les marques de feu coutumières aux dragons réveillés. (38)

Chamoiseau reconstructs this experience as a divine calling that takes hold of every part of the enslaved person's body. Every molecule of the DNA becomes moved by this sacred impulse. Comparatively, in *Case Départ*, the trope of the escape is treated with a radically different offhandedness. If we agree with Bergson that “Le rire n’a pas de plus grand ennemi que l’émotion,” we understand that within the scope of a comedy, that trope must be emptied of its emotional excess. Then the wider the gap between what the experience might have been and the way it is represented on screen, the more successful the attempt at creating laughter will be. In other words, the sublime must be replaced by the trivial. Accordingly, the trope of the escape is deactivated early on in the film. Shortly after waking up in a field in (what they do not know yet to be) 1780, the brothers see two Black men running for their lives. After a brief moment of hesitation, Joel urges Regis to begin running: “Cours! [...] Quand on est noir et qu’on voit des noirs courir, on court — c’est une règle de survie.” Regis refuses, arguing that he has done nothing. What’s worse, when the two white slave hunters accost him, he immediately points them in the direction of the runaways: “Ils sont là-bas, deux grands noirs, torse nu avec un auto radio —” His sentence is interrupted by a blow to the face. Unaware that his social status and his light-skin privilege do not function in the past as they do in the present, his actions eerily foreshadow the widespread accounts of white people calling the authorities against innocent Black folks of recent years.¹³⁵ Joel is captured shortly thereafter. Thus from the onset, escaping, at least as far as the two main characters are concerned, is an enterprise doomed to comical failure. This first attempt is soon followed by a second one. On their first night in captivity, Regis and Joel naively believe that they can simply opt out of slavery and decide to casually step out of their shack into the night. The clash between the intuited sacredness of the escape and *Case Départ*'s banal representation of it might cause the viewer to laugh, but the trivialization of the escape trope raises concerns about the role of fiction in salvaging missing essential slave experiences. During this first attempt, out in the jungle, the brothers are childishly startled by every sound and soon run right back to the relative safety of their shack. Slavery then appears better than the unknown. In another part of the film, Joel, who is out in the field while Regis is in the house, is seized by a feeling seemingly close to Chamoiseau's décharge. To the sound of Jimmy Cliff's iconic, ironic and anachronistic “Many Rivers to Cross,” he starts running with abandon. The scene is filmed in slow motion to comically exacerbate its pathos. Joel's flight abruptly comes to an end when his head hits a wooden bar. He collapses to the ground with a comical noise.

In their fourth attempt to escape, Joel and Regis are helped by a Jewish merchant (whose presence would have been either illegal or unlikely since the 1685 *Code Noir* had banned all non-Christians from the colonies). Unable to stay with him, they take to the forest

¹³⁵ In the years 2019 and 2020, many videos of real-life people calling the cops on Black people have gone viral. The names BBQ Becky or Amy Cooper have become shorthand for this type of anti-Black racist profiling.

with the two slave hunters in hot pursuit. They reach the island shore where they find a boat and decide to try their luck out on the ocean. They are ironically apprehended by a slave ship. Once aboard, they go below deck and find themselves among survivors of the Middle Passage. This moment is a powerful one that deserves a brief mention, as it offers a rare glimpse into this catastrophic part of the slave experience. Though it is important to commend the film for engaging with the memory of the Middle Passage, which again, with the exception of Guy Deslauriers' film, has been largely ignored in French cinema, *Case Départ's* representation is softened. Joel and Regis, who have not endured the painful crossing of the Atlantic and whose slave experience begins by magic, are not shackled with the captives, but freely walk among them. Because of his lighter skin color, the other captives do not recognize Regis as one of them and call him *Diable Blanc*. In a short-lived surge of racial consciousness, he tells them that he is one of them, but his declaration, which sounds more opportunistic than sincere, is met with a deluge of spit, to which Joel contributes, calling Regis one last time *Diable blanc*. The scene ends here. Soon, the brothers are back on the auction block, where the slave hunters await them. On route back to Mr. Jourdain's, they are rescued by a group of *nèg mawons* — runaway slaves who live on the margins of the plantation system, and who have become hallowed figures in the Caribbean literary canon. The rebels take them in, but eventually expel them, because to the question “Est-ce que vous êtes prêts à massacrer tous les blancs ?”, Regis answers: “Faut pas exagérer non plus. On peut juste les embêter un peu...” Out of options, the two return to the plantation, where they are branded on the buttocks with a *fleur de lys*.¹³⁶ What we thought to be an escape, turned out to be a parody of it: a mere escapade concluding with a willing return.

The conditions of their return to the correct time and space are hardly rebellious. As they are waiting to be hanged publicly, Victor, Mr. Jourdain's son, is heard falling into the nearby river, causing everyone in attendance, safe for Mr. Henri, to rush to his rescue. In a sudden and inexplicable surge of agency, Isidor, who had hardly been given any substance until then, knocks Mr. Henri unconscious and allows Joel and Regis one new attempt at escaping. As the two take off running, they hear Victor struggling downstream and decide to forego escaping once again to save him. This selfless act causes Mr. Jourdain to put an end to their bondage. Once more, they refuse their freedom and pass it on to Isidor and Rosalie. It is this final sacrifice that eventually sends them home — but not before the magic ritual is performed: Mr. Henri, who has mysteriously come into possession of the aunt's pipe, lights it, and blows smoke on the brothers, which is what returns them to their time. The pipe then takes on the mystic properties of the peace calumet. Ultimately, it is by surrendering their freedom that the brothers' deepest wish is fulfilled. The protagonists' return to the present is their final return to a captivity they desire and welcome.

¹³⁶ This is not entirely in keeping with the *Code Noir's* prescriptions, which included cutting an ear and branding on the shoulder as punishment for running away.

This repeated parodying of the trope of the escape may culminate in laughter, but it certainly does not offer the blueprint for a true way out. While we can recognize this work's formal success as a comedy, we can also interrogate its positioning with regard to the social responsibility of art and the entertainment industry. In the twenty-first century, do we really need a film that repeatedly implies that escaping is a futile endeavor for the Black man? Laughter, in *Case Départ*, rather than signifying the detachment of Ménéliian humor functions as a means to soften the reality that escaping is impossible. This humor is much closer to Morton Gurewitch's conciliatory understanding: "A humorous temper is also skilled in fault-finding, yet it is characterized by essentially by tolerance, good will, and compassion, qualities that may well act as dissolvents of both the satiric ridiculous and the ironic absurd" (128). This laughter suggests that escaping is not at all necessary, because after all, things are not as bad as they used to be. By disarming the trope of the escape within the film, the filmmakers also disarm it outside of the film.

Among the points that make this work an interesting case study within the scope of this dissertation is that it deploys the poetic elements of fictional dystopias, while simultaneously being complicit with a soft, yet concrete dystopia — this is different from the other works in my corpus. This suggests that even though the dystopian genre is intrinsically critical, it can be co-opted by laughter if the latter is deployed heavy-handedly. The fact that a film such as *Case Départ* can deploy critical poetic tools while stopping short of delivering a full critique of the status quo is a paradox that can be explained by the conflictual social and affective positioning of postcolonial subjects within the Republic. Gyssels perfectly captures this dilemma: "L'héritage colonial, la transmission de valeurs franco-françaises à travers une politique assimilationniste hante l'auteur qui se trouve toujours en conflit, tiraillé entre deux identités, deux appartenances, et vit donc un paradoxe politique et esthétique" (154). For *Case Départ*, this emotional conundrum results in a film that does not deploy laughter to topple the anti-utopia that is the *République française universelle*, but rather to ensure its longevity.

PAST < PRESENT AND PRESENT < FUTURE VS. PAST > PRESENT AND PRESENT > FUTURE

Maria Varsam observes that fictional dystopias must participate in a dialogue across time to unlock their full critical potential. The purpose of both fictional utopias and dystopias, Varsam notes, is to save the future by issuing a warning in the present, "but only dystopian literature expresses the warning that what once happened, or took place to a limited degree, may happen again" (209). Considering the works of Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler, Varsam writes that dystopias "effect not only what Frederic Jameson calls an apprehension of 'the present as history', but also of the past as present, and the present as future. As a result, the experience of oppression and its effect on the present is reformulated in order to

understand not merely a historical event but a living present” (210). It is with this notion of the past as a living present that I had observed earlier that Joel and Régis’s introductions prepared us for their future status as field and house slaves... in the past. Such complex temporal dynamics are part and parcel of the time-traveling genre. In the film, it is by taking a detour via the past that the spectator might understand how the brothers’ attitudes in the present are legacies of the plantation system. For instance, at first glance, Régis’s treatment of the Cameroonian mother may seem to simply lack compassion, but sifted through the past, we understand that the scene illustrates how the plantation system divided Black bodies according to skin shades, and how this system’s legacy perdures. For Régis, the town hall is a contemporary version of the master’s house. For Joel, the fields are the ancestors of the prison designed to keep him on the margins of society. By juxtaposing the eighteenth-century plantation with contemporary France, the film seems to recognize a continuity between the past and the present, or that the past lives on in the present, to an albeit diluted degree.

The question is “What does it all mean for the future?” When Joel proclaims that slavery is over in the first few minutes of the film, it is not long before he realizes that slavery is never quite over since one can be returned to it. This means that returns to the past or to past states loom over possible futures. Furthermore, if a century and a half of freedom have not fully succeeded in erasing the effects of 200 years of slavery, and if we understand a seemingly long-gone past as a living present, it is hard to know what to hope for the future. The film grazes the surface of this question and leaves it mostly unanswered. Jumping to the very last scene, we find the brothers, who bonded over the course of their misadventures, back in France and enjoying a family dinner together. A commotion is heard offscreen. The brothers’ two daughters rush in, blaming each other for having torn a piece of paper in half. The piece of paper is, of course, the act of manumission of their ancestors. In the last frame of the film, we see the two brothers comically frozen in mid-run as they rush over to their daughters. Their voices can still be heard screaming, “Nooooooooooooo!” as the end credits begin to roll, and the viewer is left to wonder if history is bound to repeat itself. Such doubt is precisely what dystopias seek to instill, but the elements of comedy of *Case Départ*’s ending, and the happy notes of the end-credit music leave the viewer with a sense of relief. Those who are not Black, whose ancestors weren’t tangled in the archives of slavery, and who do not have an aunt with magic powers, have very little to worry about.

Continuing on the theme of temporality, I emphasized in previous chapters that dystopias tend to be atavistic; this tendency is ostentatious in *Case Départ* since it effectively sends its protagonists back to the past and puts them in relation with their ancestors. But while the past is often viewed nostalgically in dystopias, it is not the case here. In fact, it is the present — which in a time-disruptive, postmodern, ironic maneuver is simultaneously the future and the past — that becomes the object of nostalgia and desire of the protagonists. Yet this present, far from being perfectly utopian, is in fact anti-utopian, and in Chamoiseau’s

terms, it is marred by silent domination. The latter is experienced differently by both protagonists but palpable for the spectator who perceives the totalizing utopianism of the French Republic as oppressive. The Black municipal employee is the new house slave; the Black ex-convict is the new field slave. New titles, same deeply rooted racist ideology. At the same time, it is evident that being a slave — in the field or the house — is a condition much worse than the ones the protagonists occupy in the present. As a result, even if the present appears dystopian to some, it is undeniably a soft dystopia, and it becomes even softer when contrasted with the past. By putting the past and the present in such direct conversation, the film seems at first to want to provoke a “reflection that leads not to a nostalgic desire for a better future along similar parameters with the past, but to a critique of the past and its continuing legacy in the present,” which, as Varsam suggests, is a habitual gesture of dystopias and their atavistic tendencies (210). But by the film’s end, modern society as we know it turns out to be the more perfect utopia: it becomes the past’s future utopia. This prosperous time is even prophesied by young Victor, who declares to the master’s entourage after talking to Regis and Joel: “Et bientôt la monarchie absolue sera abolie. La France sera une démocratie et les représentants seront élus par le peuple au suffrage universel. Il n’y aura plus d’esclaves ni de nègres. Un jour un noir sera président de la première puissance mondiale.” This description, which fits our real-life historical moment, undeniably sounds better than 1780. The protagonists are grateful to return, and though they have changed in small ways, the present has not. At best, it can be said that Regis regains a sense of dignity within the system and learns to limit his own degradation at the hands of others; at worst, we notice that Joel assimilates to the system a little more. Upon their successful return to present-day France, we encounter them again in Paris, where Regis takes a stand against the mayor’s racist jokes. When the mayor asks whether his father’s funeral started on time, joking at Caribbean folks’ stereotypical tardiness, Regis responds with a stern look. The following dialogue ensues:

MAYOR: Ben quoi? C’est une blague. T’as laissé ton sens de l’humour là bas, ou quoi?

REGIS: Non, c’est juste que sortant de ta bouche, j’trouve pas ça très drôle.

MAYOR: Comment ça, tu me tutoies maintenant?

REGIS: Ben tu me tutoies, j’te tutoie. J’suis pas ton nègre, j’suis pas ton larbin. Okay?

Regis then turns around, pulls down his pants and shows the mayor where he was branded on the buttocks, and concludes: “Alors à partir de maintenant, faudra apprendre à me respecter, okay?” This marking on his body signifies that he has now accepted and acknowledged the history of his ancestors, and that this history entitles him to respect. But his gesture — obviously incomprehensible for the mayor — is a far cry from a complete rupture.

Regis bids him goodbye by wishing him a good weekend. He will be back on Monday. For his part, Joel finally gets a job as a construction worker, and we meet him again as he is signing a contract with a foreman — a smiling Asian man, who warmly exclaims, “Bienvenu chez nous!” Upset at the low pay, Joel whispers a racial slur under his breath as he walks away.¹³⁷ This scene illustrates all at once the racial diversity of the Republic and the latent racism it instills in its subjects — even its racialized ones. If Regis gained something from their time travels, that lesson is partly lost on Joel, who has now added his voice to the chorus of France’s racist ideology. Still, the present seems so much better than the past and is greeted with such relief, that it hardly feels anti-utopian at all anymore. Yet nothing is dramatically different; the revolution did not take place, and the system has not been radically challenged. Overall, the dialogue thus initiated with the past constitutes a warning for the future in the basic sense that it is a reminder that slavery is an inhumane system to which no society should ever aspire again. With regard to the present, however, it suggests that it is not such a bad place after all. I want to reiterate my previous question here: what does it all mean for the future? If we follow the film’s broad understanding of France’s history as a narrative of progress, the future looks bright. The present is better than the past, and because of this, we can safely assume that, even with little intervention and with no revolution, the future will be better than the present. After the release of *Case Départ*, Éboué said in an interview: “C’est en remontant dans le passé et en montrant le chemin accompli depuis trois cents ans que ce film prend toute sa portée [...]. L’histoire dessine une trajectoire sur laquelle nous sommes déjà bien avancés mais qu’il faut poursuivre.”¹³⁸ Éboué voices his trust in the success of a dialectical process whereby France slowly but surely expiates its colonial sins, without the need for strong intervention. Because neither the characters/subjects represented nor the directors of the film show any sign of dramatic reversal of consciousness (what Gyssels calls “un ébranlement des consciences”), what is required of the spectator is ambiguous or even null. As Éboué puts it, “[*Case Départ*] est un film optimiste : on dit qu’il faut essayer de vivre les uns avec les autres, et on y arrive de mieux en mieux en France.” So what is left to do but laugh?

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I showed that *Case Départ*, like the other works in my corpus, enjoined us to expand our notion of what a dystopian fiction could be to include works that grapple with the French postcolony and its new brand of domination. Indeed, it presents a set of bad places (both in the present and in the past), complete with multiple forms of alienation and

¹³⁷ This scene echoes Éboué’s comedy routine that takes Asians as the butt of stereotype-based jokes. Here again, however, there is potential for the joke to be coopted since N’Gijol does not belong to the target group (cf. Ervine).

¹³⁸ “*Case Départ* - Festival « Lumières D’Afrique ».” *Festival Lumières D’Afrique*, www.lumieresdafrique.com/les-editions/2012/seances-speciales/804-case-depart.html.

violence, and it features several tropes of the genre, including escape and sexual oppression. A crucial gesture of the film is to shatter the silence that reigns around slavery by packaging it in a vehicle palatable enough to be consumed by many — comedic anachronisms, jokes, and a very far-fetched plot. In this sense, it seems to respond at first to the postmodern ironist's objective, as defined by Di Martino, who proposes that by

mixing the highbrow with the lowbrow, combining intertextuality with enjoyable plots, the postmodernist writer constructs fictional worlds that foster “worldly” connections, narrations that allow many different types of readers to negotiate some kind of meaning and witness a transformative experience that will impact their understanding of the world. (591)

In the end, however, the announced transformative experience does not take place on a broad level. The film's treatment of dystopian tropes in the modes of comedy and parody culminates in the disabling of the film's critical potential. I concede that the film does produce a satire of postcolonial France: racists and racism are ridiculed and condemned, but the emotional anguish of colonial and postcolonial subjects is simultaneously minimized and trivialized. These subjects are told to get over it and to “faire France” by falling back in line. At the beginning of this chapter, I had also asked if such a film could be the long-awaited redemption of the culture industry. Instead, its appeasing program confirms Adorno's remark that “Fun is a medicinal bath” that “the pleasure industry never fails to prescribe.” Adorno continues,

It makes laughter the instrument of the fraud practised on happiness. [...] In the false society laughter is a disease which has attacked happiness and is drawing it into its worthless *totality*. To laugh at something is always to deride it, and the life which, according to Bergson, in laughter breaks through the barrier, is actually an invading *barbaric* life, self-assertion prepared to parade its *liberation* from any scruple when the social occasion arises. Such a laughing audience is a parody of humanity. Its members are monads, all dedicated to the pleasure of being ready for anything at the expense of everyone else. *Their harmony is a caricature of solidarity*. (112; emphases mine)

This totality and its harmony partake in the distinctly European utopian desire that Glissant had warned us about in *La Cohée du Lamentin* (a desire that masquerades as civilized but that is, in fact, barbaric in its methods). The liberation of the ancestors, which allows Joel and Régis to return to their present, provides the type of feel-good ending that numbs the need to challenge the status quo. As I have noted, with its ending, the film loops back into itself in a postmodern ironic move, yet it fails to operate any form of self-reflection on the role that art might play in the destabilization of totalizing historical narratives. Ultimately, the film's ending offers nothing more than a murky warning directed only at racialized postcolonial

subjects, letting its mainstream (white cisgendered heteronormative) audience off the hook. For all its problematic aspects, *Case Départ* speaks of a noteworthy turning point in France's willingness to confront its historical entanglement with slavery, but it also tells us that in 2011, the desire was to fold this history into a narrative of progress that spoke of the nation's successful transition into its postcolonial phase. Lastly, the film testifies that laughter can be co-opted by the ideology of the society from which it emerges. If Ménil was correct in predicting that (post)colonial subjects would contribute significantly to a literature of humor, it is doubtful that he anticipated that this laughter might not always aim to demoralize society, but instead that it could strive, against all odds, to give it a good conscience.

Coda

In the years it took me to research and write this dissertation, I carried it with me to Guadeloupe, France, the United States (San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, Portland, Or.), and Brazil. It began with the discovery of René Ménéil's text. At the time, it was like no other work by a Martinican theorist I had ever read before. While I had already taken an interest in humor, irony, and laughter as these notions concerned early to mid-century thinkers and poets — Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, and the surrealists — these concepts were ultimately underpinned by a distinctly Eurocentric ideology. Bergson was the most conspicuous of them all, and I suspect that many a scholar of color, like myself, can never forget the first time they read his matter-of-fact question, “Pourquoi rit-on d'un nègre ?” The debonair tone of his answer was even more troubling. Ménéil countered Bergson's understanding of laughter as a means of social harmonization with his own theory of laughter as a quintessential weapon of resistance against the status quo. That reformulation was in itself refreshing, but the fact that he theorized it in 1945, before the end of World War II, made it all the more significant. The laughter Ménéil was calling for was not intended to make light of the times. It was not comforting, but instead, it sought to respond violently to violence. Further still, Ménéil's use of dystopian imagery made the essay all the more eccentric for its space and times. It must be underscored: the dystopian genre was always concerned with modernity, technology, and power — all terms that rarely concerned Antillean authors, who, save for a few, were writing doudouist pastorals. Before Ménéil, it is doubtful that any Antillean authors had written the words “usine,” “appareils de précisions,” “tout brille, tout est blanc, hygiénique,” and “étoiles électrifiées” in the same paragraph. Ménéil, a keen observer of his times, gleaned images from the real contemporary historical dystopia that was Nazi Germany and transformed them into tropes to create a poetic critique of capitalism and European imperialism. The encounter of Ménéil's new understanding of humor and dystopian tropes produced a text that continued to resonate through time, but that has become even more pertinent in recent weeks.

When I began work on this dissertation, I had already been struck by the similarity between Ménéil's dystopian vignette and the plot of the 1973 film *Soylent Green*. The story takes place in a dystopian New York City, where the downtrodden and the exhausted can opt out of life thanks to institutionalized euthanasia clinics. Like Ménéil's factory, these clinics are pristine, and their air is sweet. After death, the bodies are taken, bagged, dissolved, processed, and transformed into food for people — Soylent Green. In the years since, the idea of dystopia has continued to flood several discursive fields, from the political to the literary, with increased insistence. The word is now a catchall term for all of our woes: capitalism, cultural imperialism, suicidal environmental policies, globalization, and all forms of oppression. And

because art is the fruit of the environment in which it is produced, the resurgence of the genre makes sense. It can certainly be argued that the genre never went away — Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood’s careers each span several decades from the 60s to today — but high-budget film and television projects, such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Hunger Games*, has revived its appeal. These projects, of course, emerge out of the United States, but in twenty-first century late-stage capitalism, popular culture’s boundaries are nebulous, and these products are avidly consumed by a French public. Furthermore, French directors are beginning to delve more directly into the genre, as is the case with Thomas Cailley’s *Ad Vitam*.¹³⁹ On the francophone literary front, conversations are arising that gesture toward the reframing of the colony and the postcolony as dystopias. First, texts that were typically read through a postcolonial or historical critical lens are now reexamined through a utopian/dystopian framework. A 2019 academic volume titled *Utopies et dystopies coloniales* re-reads literary works from and about the Indian Ocean and Eastern Africa spanning the eighteenth to the twentieth century through this new critical mode. Second, the French magazine *Galaxies* dedicated two issues to works that take Africa as a backdrop, and merge science fiction aesthetics with dystopian tropes. The thin line between utopia and dystopia is precisely the focus of *Black Panther*, which enjoyed planetary success. The utopia that is Wakanda titters on the brink of dystopia, both with its perennial closed-border policies and then under the possible reign of Killmonger. This literary and political climate makes Ménil’s 1945 essay appear ever more visionary and continues to justify my interest.

Meanwhile, the acts of laughing and producing laughter in the twenty-first century have become increasingly serious. Both in the United States and in France, regular people enjoy consuming world news with a dose of laughter. On stage, minoritized standup comedians speak about race and social justice. As Gérard Genette observes, “Mourir de rire est une façon de vivre.” Far from a carefree, hedonistic pursuit, laughter has, in many ways, evolved into a fashion statement. Laughter is undeniably the new black. Ménil had predicted this deployment of an engaged type of humor in 1945. What we learned from him is that a particular type of humor can emerge from a dystopian world, and that subsequently, the poetics of laughter and dystopia can come together to apprehend and then transform this world.

In recent months, I watched fiction become a reality in all of the places where this dissertation was written. First, a global pandemic forced us all to adopt face coverings that made us look eerily like the dissidents of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, whose lips had been stapled shut. Then George Floyd was murdered, and the images of his death (disseminated on millions of screens worldwide) were not so different from scenes from *La Haine* or *Case Départ*, or from slavery imagery, in which Black bodies are tied, immobilized and suffocated. Then

¹³⁹ See “Ad Vitam ou comment faire de l’anticipation made in France.” *Premiere.fr*, 9 Nov. 2018, www.premiere.fr/index.php/Series/News-Series/Ad-Vitam-ou-comment-faire-de-lanticipation-made-in-France.

came chaos, riots, and “uniforms of brutality” — and Bob Marley’s dark, dystopian anthem “Burnin’ and Lootin,’” (which opens *La Haine*) is again a fitting anthem for our times. And then came the curfews. Darko Suvin’s comment that “we live morally in an almost complete dystopia — dystopia because anti-utopia — and materially (economically) on the razor’s edge of collapse [...]” (381) feels both correct and incorrect: in the days immediately following Floyd’s death, the world has lost its utopian façade — its anti-utopian quality. It gave up pretending; now it simply looks like the dystopia that it has always secretly been, as in the cruelest of all ironies, massive protests denouncing police brutality have yielded even more police brutality.

These events in the United States reverberated throughout the world, and in France, they brought the name of Adama Traoré back into the news cycle. In 2016, the young Black man died of asphyxiation on his 24th birthday, while in the custody of suburban Parisian cops, in circumstances that remain mysterious. “Justice pour Adama” signs joined “Justice pour George Floyd” ones, in protests throughout France. Traoré’s death is significant for multiple reasons. Patrick Chamoiseau’s Old Warrior suggested that French postcolonial subjects no longer lived under a brutal form of domination, but under a silent one, a *domination-qui-ne-se-voit-plus*. We understand now that this domination in the *République française universelle* is not always silent; rather, it coexists with an actively concealed form of brutal domination. How many bodies are brutalized out of sight in police station basements, as were Adama Traoré in real life, and Saïd and Hubert in *La Haine*? It is under the burden of this unknown that the works in my corpus — save for *Case Départ* — operate. These works do not claim to be dystopian, but I contend that they plant dystopian tropes within their fabric that await to be read as such. The same type of detecting must be effected for the anti-utopian reality of the *République* — a space that also does not claim to be dystopian — to be unmasked.

Authors who conscientiously deploy dystopian tropes necessarily take a stance against the hegemonic powers that threaten to bring the world to the brink of collapse. That is the genre’s bottom line. My dissertation has reflected more specifically on how works deployed these tropes alongside laughter-producing strategies. In the case of Ménil’s essay, Confiant’s novellas, and Kassovitz’s *La Haine*, I highlighted how humor bolstered these authors’ critical endeavors. My reading of *Case Départ* demonstrated that humor can also function counterproductively, to flatter the utopian aspirations of the *République française universelle*. This tells us that we must commit to new modes of reading to distinguish the subversive from the complicit. Exploring dystopian laughter, as it blossoms within the contradictions and impositions of the *République française universelle*, offers new ways of analyzing works produced by minoritized French authors.

In dystopian times, dystopian fiction. And whether laughter-driven or not, dystopias are animated by the critical spirit of the humorous attitude as Ménil defines it. Today, when

authors choose to create in the dystopian genre, they tap into a discursive tradition that is transnational, transcultural, transhistorical, and transmediatic. This tradition not only links various forms of oppression throughout time and space, but it also creates networks of solidarity between victims of oppression. From the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, from Swift to Zamyatin, from Russia to South Africa, from *Brave New World* to *Les Saignantes*, from *The Handmaid's Tale* to *Adventures in New America*, from novels to podcasts, dystopias deploy tropes that resonate from one medium to the next, from one era to the next, from one space to the another, and from reality to fiction. Thus in many ways, the study of dystopia as a literary genre is necessarily comparative.

Whether speculative or not, dystopias act as warnings. They are intrinsically linked to history, which they caution us not to repeat. Throughout this work, I have insisted that dystopia is the dark side of utopia. I have argued that the works of the authors in this corpus reveal — whether consciously or not — that the *République française universelle*, in its humanistic quest for what Édouard Glissant calls “l’harmonie d’une mesure” (*Cohée* 141), is a utopia that ignores its dystopian side. Standing firmly on the legacy of *Les Lumières*, confident in the loftiness of its ideology, France struggles to find the harm in its socio-cultural practices. It is surprised to discover that the side effects of these practices are racism, bigotry, violence, and in the case of Adama Traoré, death. Fictional dystopias, especially those that focus on othered bodies, have the potential to make that reality graspable. But if dystopia is the dark side of utopia, can it also be the case that utopias are the other side or the afterlife of dystopias? *La Haine*, as we have seen, concluded with a pessimistic ironic loop, offering no way out. This gesture speaks of a justifiable distrust in utopianism, which has historically proven to be suspect. Confiant, on the other hand, chose to end his *Trilogie* with an opening, a sliver of hope that perennial patterns can be changed. If Ménil taught us to use dystopian humor to destabilize and to shame dangerous, totalizing utopian narratives, then Confiant and Glissant have taught us that a new epistemological understanding of utopia — one that replaces the singular with the many — can lead to a better world. As Confiant put it, “Le monde ne va pas sans utopies. C’est là le moteur des énergies intellectuelles.”

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