

Reading *Je suis un écrivain japonais*

Je suis un écrivain japonais – A Contextualization

Dany Laferrière is one of the most celebrated contemporary Francophone authors in North America. Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and raised by his maternal grandmother in Petit-Goâve, Laferrière worked as a journalist before being forced to move to Canada in 1976 by the regime of Jean-Claude Duvalier and the murder of a journalist friend. Laferrière began his literary career in Montreal, where all of his novels were published. His first novel, *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985), was an immediate success and was made into a movie of the same name, released in 1990. While the novel is a meta-critical approach to racist discourse and imagery that plays with the limits of stereotypes, it has also been viewed with concern by critics because of its ambivalent tone, which can simultaneously be used to stabilize racist images (Daniel Coleman 1998, 52 ff.). The rather one-sided reception of the novel did indeed have an impact on his career as a writer, since Laferrière's fame at the beginning of his writing career, and despite many other subsequent publications, was almost exclusively linked to this book (Skallerup 2013, 9 ff.). In fact, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* was his first book after a long break from writing due to racist and ethicizing attributions and categorizations. In 2001, Laferrière published *Je suis fatigué* ([2001] 2005), a title alluding to the reception of his first novel and its enormous, lopsided popularity. In this publication, Laferrière declared that he would quit writing altogether because he felt tired of such simplistic readings (Skallerup 2013, 10). *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is therefore an important milestone in his career, almost seven years after this critical reflection, as it not only poignantly symbolizes a return to writing but also makes space for writing beyond (dominant and colonial) unintelligible gestures. In this sense, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is also a debut novel of a different kind.

Since his first work, Laferrière has published more than 25 novels. Laferrière's oeuvre is considered »une véritable fête de l'esprit et de la langue«, »pour tous les lecteurs francophones«.¹ This celebration of Laferrière's work has so far found expression in major literary prizes and acknowledgments, like the French literary *Prix Médicis* and the *Grand Prix du livre de Montréal* for his book *L'Énigme du retour* (2009); he has also been awarded the *Grand Prix littéraire international Metropolis Bleu* as well as *le Prix des libraires* among others. Since 2015 Dany Laferrière has been a member of the *Académie française* and thus

1 Cf. Les Éditions du Boréal (17.10.2022).

admitted to the French ((ex-?) imperial, self-celebrating) literary establishment (as the second Black writer after the internationally acclaimed Senegalese poet, writer and political thinker Léopold Sédar Senghor). In 2015, Laferrière was also awarded the prestigious Canadian *Prix littéraire Ludger-Duvernay* after the publication of his inaugural lecture at the *Académie française* (*Dany Laferrière à l'Académie française – Discours de réception*, 2015), which includes a response by the French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf, a fellow member of the *Académie*. In February 2022 a wax figure of Dany Laferrière was unveiled at the Musée Grévin in Paris, sitting in an armchair and holding a book of one of his favorite authors, Jorge Louis Borges.

Although Dany Laferrière considers himself to be an *American* writer, an understanding of *America* that, firstly, shifts the meaning of the term to encompass all parts of the continent and that, secondly, makes French an American language, decentralizing English, and, thirdly, to some extent, displaces and *denormalizes* France's (historically driven, colonial) grip on parts of the Caribbean, he is often stubbornly considered and discussed exclusively as a ›Haitian‹ writer.² Laferrière's novel *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, published in 2008, can thus be regarded as a work that problematizes this idea of the ethnicization of writers and the emptiness that such categorizations imply. Far from denying his Haitian origins but rather taking them for what they are, an unexciting, and unexotic, and yet an *intimate* and *dear* trait of (his) autobiography, Dany Laferrière's *claim to America* should be understood as a discursive intervention that, rather than essentializing presumptions, problematizes the idea of ethnicity and the vacuity that such categories imply. Instead of accepting the presumptions and monolithic assumptions of normalized academic, stereotypical, nationalist, discursive protocols, it discusses the value of writing and thinking beyond such narrow discursive, often supremacist categorizations and placements of the other. Laferrière's interest in the theme of ›Japan‹ reaches far beyond a proxy to discuss and question sanctioned forms of othering. *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is not the only work by Laferrière that deals with and depicts ›Japan‹ in its title. In two other novels, he also makes explicit references to Japan. This is the case with his second book, *Eroshima* (1987). The book meanders around the question of ›love‹, and in meditative ways negotiates questions of ›identity‹ and belonging against the backdrop of racist and stereotypical images, but it is also a book about trauma (Skallerup 2013a: 51). Furthermore, another of Laferrière's recent books, *Sur la route avec Bashô* (2021), also implicitly evokes and centralizes ›Japan‹ by using the name of the Japanese writer Matsuo Basho (1644–1694). In this book, wandering and wondering seem to be intertwined and used as forms of poetic and figurative contemplation. Laferrière here emphasizes and attempts to preserve the value of aesthetics and of wonder (Laferrière 2021, 4:48 ff.) by employing a poetic form as a tool for looking at things for their own sake and as a pleasurable as well as political and aesthetic form of the poetics of contemplation per se that transcends ›philosophy‹, reaching far beyond it and opening up another

2 Kirsten Dickhaut (2014), for example, is, on the one hand, well aware that Laferrière tries to complicate the meaning of identarian assignments but links this approach rather to a cosmopolitan Haitian trait in his attitude (Dickhaut 2014, 391; 392, 392, 399) and puts the word American in quotation marks (Dickhaut 2014, 393).

understanding of it outside of disciplinary and disciplined narrowness – maybe in the realm of theory.

So far, different aspects of his work have received scholarly attention. These include the various aspects of migration and diasporic life in Canada, the lyrical character of his prose, and the highly political and class-related forms of the different exploitative sociopolitical frames that Laferrière problematizes. However, the issue of humor, which also characterizes his work extensively and to which many critics allude in passing, has not yet been systematically discussed. In an interview, Laferrière claims that the use of humor in his work is underestimated. He reveals how important humor is in his oeuvre, that he uses it in an aware, intricate, affective way in his writing and that behind his »constant humor« there is »a kind of extreme despair. A few critics noticed, but many others failed to see that fundamental trait« (Laferrière 1999, 911). While Laferrière describes humor as »at the heart of the subversive intention« (Laferrière 1999, 912), his humorous style is often portrayed as an »ironique postmoderne à l'américaine«, and, moreover, accurately described as »[u]n style débridé et allusive« that »exploite les codes de la fiction sans qu'il soit possible d'assurer une base d'interprétation stable« (Alexandre/Schoentjes 2013, 13).

Je suis un écrivain japonais (2008) could not be more different from *White Teeth* in terms of its novelistic form and its narrative style. But in its complete difference, the novel shows other aspects of humor in its rhetorically, affectively, and discursively touching movements.

As with many of his works, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, too, does not follow a linear line of narrative (Mathis-Moser 2003, 2007) but indulges in reflections on the meanings of the sentence that is its title – a humorous genie in a bottle that he tosses into the sea of meaning. Laferrière's suggestive humor is thus already present in the novel's title. The plot(s), if there are any, are taken from the title, as it were, and fissured out and unfolded throughout the book to reveal their (many) possible meanings. In this way, the novel develops several overlapping stories, which are linked by the narrative voice in close proximity to an »implied author«/»real author« and thus always remains on the verge of metalepsis, which itself can be seen as a narrative tool that emphasizes a humorous tonality.

In principle, two main narrative strands and two organizing stories can be distinguished in the novel. On the one hand, there is the narrator, who thinks about how to write the novel. Their narrating voice can be heard throughout the everyday reflections while walking through Montréal. On the other hand, there is an underlying story and narrative thread of a super-star girl band around which they intermittently try to write the novel and which the homodiegetic narrator accompanies to an extent through Montréal.

Laferrière's work is often characterized by a complex, performative, scene-oriented quality in which an »audience« is invoked. This is also the case in this novel. Often this trait in his work is associated with *la lodyans*,³ a nineteenth-century term and literary genre in Haitian literature that, while initially and often humorously referring to traditional oral narratives, also encompasses written literature. It is often suggested that Laferrière evokes and uses such an »audience« while giving the concept a modernist trait. »C'est cette présence ponctuelle qui a pour fonction même de produire la vraisemblance, de

3 See for example Anglade (2006) and Dardompré (2013).

déguiser en témoignage ce qui n'est qu'imaginaire. Ce narrateur/témoin agit comme un journaliste qui apparaît brièvement devant la caméra pour présenter ou commenter son reportage» (De Luca 2018, 199).

Although *la lodyans* seems very close to the much later discussed European notion of an ›implied audience‹ in literary writing as a feature of the telling and showing aspects of narrativity per se, *la lodyans* is specifically characterized through »l'humour, la critique et l'actualité« that are employed »[d]ans une économie de mots et d'espace textuel« in which »tout est dit, tout est ex-primé en ›miniature« (Dardompré 2013). These are also aspects characteristic of Laferrière's *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, which are already implied and evoked in ›miniature‹ in the title.

The narrative is held in the form of monologic threads of thought, sometimes in a reporting tone that addresses such an ›implied audience‹. This emphasizes not only a performative but also a metaleptic trait of the novel. Instead of a stringent or coherent plot or story, the narrative evolves into a collection of scattered short chapters, ranging from half a page to five pages, resembling short prosaic poems and vignettes. They often contain speculations and bits and pieces of stories, narrative beginnings, and philosophical impressions as well as thoughts on what it might mean to be a *Japanese writer* in particular. Within these scattered speculations, however, a narrative discourse with a possible plot takes on a sketchy form. It consists of the wanderings of a homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ through Montréal and their wondering over the title of the very book they are writing/that is written. Here, too, Laferrière mixes the notions of reflection and travel.

The reportage, realist mood is emphasized by a narrator who seems to be the ›implied/real author‹ and protagonist. This overlapping of different narrative instances is a feature that Laferrière often uses in his work (Mathis-Moser 2003, 53). However, the novel is more than just ›referential‹; it rather amounts to reflections on different possibilities of writing this novel, whereby a diegetic level is nevertheless created. Through this structure, the text remains puzzling and amusing, and also evokes a state of thoughtfulness. The diegetic and extradiegetic worlds seem to intersect and give meaning to each other.

All the above elements can be summarized as characteristics of a *picaresque novel*. From the start, the narrator/›implied author‹ adopts a congenial outsider status with a twinkle in their eye: They are a Black émigré author as well as an author with a peculiar book title; the somewhat humorous-roguish trait at the beginning is also taken up throughout the novel, but in quite unexpected forms and without being bound to a specific linear plot. There is a homodiegetic narrator/protagonist and a genre mix that includes elements of crime fiction/mystery romance, and evocations of travel writing; it is partly social satire, interspersed with haiku and haibonic prose with intertextual elements. The narrative can also be read as a *haibunic novel* as the text shifts to impressionistic prose on almost every page and often concludes with a haiku poem. This prose corresponds to an allusive, allegorical, picturesque scenery and a contemplative, reflective rhetoric. It is as if the text were embarking on a journey, not only in the ›real‹ sense of being on the road, but also in the figurative sense of the process of thinking itself.

There is, on the one hand, the story of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ who tries to find an entry point to the chosen title of the novel, a search in which the

›real author‹, the ›implied author‹, the narrator as well as the protagonist coincide. What emerges is an »univers de frontières poreuses« (Mathis-Moser 2011, 72).

This search evolves into a reading of the work of Matsuo Basho (1644–1694), the Japanese writer and poet of the Edo period, especially of his work *The Narrow Road to the Interior* (*La Route étroite vers les districts du Nord* (published posthumously in 1702) and is programmatic for how the novel can be conceived. The narrator/›implied author‹, themselves wandering through Montréal, follows Basho's text and becomes a homodiegetic narrator within an evolving narrative discourse.

This path along Basho's script is set off visually from the rest of the text, written in italics, and marks the trail of inner, contemplative insights in close proximity to Basho: »Je suis dans le métro de Montréal en train de suivre les traces d'un certain Matsuo Munefusa, dit Basho. [...] Basho et Sora viennent d'arriver à la prestigieuse barrière de Shirakawa que tous les vieux pêtes évoquent avec émotion« (Laferrière 2008, 28).

Basho and his work seem to represent this Shirakawa barrier for the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, who tries to capture it in the novel with increasing affection.

It would still be difficult to speak of a frame narrative here and to decide which narrative threads can be seen as frames for which ones; rather, the title seems to be the main theme around which all others revolve; however, Basho's book has an important place in the novel, his writing being indirectly portrayed as what *really* matters and what is *really* relevant in the wor(l)d (poetic language/poetic (in-)sights). These reflections that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ undertakes along with Basho seem to be an implicit answer to what it means to be a *Japanese writer*. Perhaps the most accurate and meaningful depiction of this novel is, in fact, the cover of its Japanese translation: It shows an empty (men's) kimono (McQuade 2023, 204). As Shereen Kakish aptly observes »[d]ans ce cas, le seul référent qui reste est le texte. Dans cette perspective, on peut concevoir les frontières entre le réel et la littérature sont affranchies dans ce roman à l'étude. Tout se mêle; tout s'imagine et tout se passe« (Kakish 2019, 667). ›Reality‹ is thus revealed as a liminal space of contemplation in which the experiences of everyday life intermingle with the workings of poetry. That it is an empty *men's* kimono, however, underscores by absence the importance and role of subjectivity, even within critical thinking, *authorship*, and in(ter)ventions.

Within the diegetic level, the plot of the novel develops from the story of a writer who has the idea for a book entitled *Je suis un écrivain japonais* but has to figure out how to write it. The novel captures this distance between the title at the beginning of the book and its end, in which the homodiegetic narrator, in dangerous proximity to the ›implied‹ and ›real author‹, has to unravel a story. In order to do this, the narrator/›implied author‹ disassembles the title throughout the book, opening it up to look at its language- and discourse-related peculiarities.

While for *White Teeth* the rhetoric of humor and its affective economy is a way of dealing with and unfolding the evocation and deconstruction of meanings within an ethical quest, what guides the humorous and affective drive in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* may be a notion of *meaningfulness* understood in a political, aesthetic, and thus poetological sense – and as a form that must also be captured in a specific meaningful *style* as the outward

appearance, *the sound*, as it were, of this interwoven signifiability.⁴ *Style* in this sense is indeed one of the major themes the novel deals with and the theme that is discussed on a reflexive, almost-meta-level of the story, as well as within the narrative discourse. At the level of the story, it can be seen as *the* guiding question of the novel. It is evoked at the beginning, in the paratexts of the novel, and it is part of its complicated and delicate zones of reflection, and only there, almost imperceptibly, is it really addressed. These zones of reflection are written in a humorous tongue-in-cheek tone. They are part of the novel's rhetorical thread and are taken up in the midst of the development of the plot that evokes a complex aura of affectivity. The narrative voice seems to slide from the wonderings of the narrator to the solitary voice of the ›implied author‹, and in some instances, to that of the ›real author‹. This voice is imbued with a withdrawn inward gaze as if in dialogue with some ghosts of other times and places, or with the transparent presence of an ›implied audience‹ that may identify with its stance. And this absence-distance of address is what is actually discussed *as style*, as an inwardness that turns to the other; it is a form of address that signifies proximity within a vast infinity. This self-rapturous, multilinear and questioning movement of the novel can thus be seen as a trait of the novel's *style*. Humor, as an affective rhetoric, not only deconstructs meanings here but also ensures this specific contemplative aesthetic form. While the contemplative thread ponders the imageries and possibilities of ›knowing‹ and skill, the humorous note, more generally, fractures this tone into pleasurable other insights that also deal with the contemporary (and its linkages to the past).

Dany Laferrière indeed raises the question of style in a more recent text, where he, without directly mentioning this novel, relates it to issues that he also takes up here, emphasizing their importance for his work in general as well as for the act of writing:

›C'est Borges qui m'a signalé, à sa manière, la source populaire de toute culture. Un ami lui a envoyé un conte qu'il venait d'écrire. Borges, l'ayant particulièrement aimé, lui répond que sa fable est ›si merveilleuse qu'elle mérite d'être anonyme‹. C'est l'une des premières réflexions de Borges qui me soit tombée sous les yeux, et c'est celle qui m'a poussé à plonger dans son œuvre afin de découvrir la source de ce paradoxe. Borges croit que la littérature est faite par des gens qui ont une existence particulière, alors qu'il n'hésite pas à affirmer que ce qui est bien appartient ›au langage et à la tradition‹, c'est-à-dire à tout le monde. Cet individualiste forcené était donc pour le bien public. Je me suis longtemps demandé si Borges incluait le style dans sa réflexion. Le style m'a toujours semblé une affaire personnelle, jusqu'à ce que je tombe sur ce poème de Basho, peut-être le plus grand styliste japonais. Basho écrit:

›Les chants de repiquage
Des paysans du Nord
Première leçon de style‹

4 *Style* is, of course, itself a hotly debated topic and a central theme in literary theory as well as philosophy; however, Laferrière does not problematize *style* as a purely European and Western theme but attaches (touches on) other(-ed) sides of *style* that are not European or Western yet and part of the French language in its globalized echoes. For an overview about depictions and understandings of *style*, and the challenge to their Eurocentric understandings, see Robinson/Sheils (2022, 476 ff.).

Basho et Borges s'entendent sur ce point: il s'agit d'un fond porté par une forme. Il reste le travail du temps. Mais il y a des images si fulgurantes qu'on reste saisi par la vitesse avec laquelle elles nous ont traversés.» (Laferrière 2020)

By referring to Matsuo Basho and Jorge Luis Borges, Laferrière links the problem of writing as a singular act and yet collective resonance to an ›international‹ league of writers, making it a more global affair. *Style* appears as a question of *repiquage*, the way in which the unsaid is (*re*)used and enacted by an author for anyone interested in hearing it or listening to it. At the same time, in quoting Borges, Laferrière also invokes the meaning of *style* in these various political and ethical senses: in the sense of responsiveness, in the sense of social conventions of addressing a friend (and colleague), in the sense of a sociopolitical form of literary address, as a pivotal form of writing per se and of poetic form in particular. Laferrière also quotes the same poem in fact at the beginning of *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, raising the question of the limitedness of something called ›culture‹ and the vastness of the (global) ›culture of writing‹ as a self-sufficient mode of sensibleness that does not need interpretation or translation – but *poetical reading* in order to *understand*, which means to *remain in dialogue*. Thus *style*, as a poetological plane of *con-tact* may mean to *keep in touch*, to keep the other's touch.

The foundation of writing, according to Basho's poem, it may be concluded, is the *style* in the above sense with which an author chooses to raise the question of the said/saying within and without a (historically determined) sociopolitical context, a question that always seems to come from the other. The other who is far away, ›in the North‹, a position that Laferrière himself occupies, doubly so, seen from France, since he is related to both Haiti as well as Canada, so that a small and quiet smile seems to lurk in the corners of this ›North‹.

Against the backdrop of the geology of northern Japan and Canada *paysans du Nord* also refers to the coldness and harshness that come with the cold, with being an outcast, as well as with (the loneliness of) throwing oneself powerlessly into the abysmal not-knowing of writing. It also refers to the other, who is far away in the temporal sense of the past, but whose ›culture‹ in the Borgesian sense of what one ought to say may be very close and may *close* all the temporal and spatial gaps at the foundation that this question of *style* raises, in order to open it anew as the quandary of perhaps the quintessence of writing/meaning as such.

This sense and sensibility of *style* then, amounts to the subtle multifariousness of meanings that are enfolded in one another and that a writer enables without naming them. In this sense, *style* appears as the inversion of an infinite trace insofar as it marks a faculty to indicate different possibilities of exposure without disclosing anything in a straightforward manner, and without any intentionality in doing so. Such *style* lays out something from which something else is gained, like a *repiquage* of the chants of the *paysans* of the North, a chorus of voices of life-giving, creating people, from whose hands emerges something very small and yet essential and meaningful, like a grain of rice or the poetics of words within a poem in the vast palette of language.

Here, the humorous rhetoric also includes allegorical allusions that complicate the affective and temporal side of the text's tonality, giving it a more thoughtful weight, along with the rapturous pleasure of a smile. *Style* is not only defined in this scenography and

intertextuality that Laferrière brings into play. With its full and ample indications, it thus seems to line up a trace of what the task of the poet and the poetics of writing is or should be.

With the invocation of *style*, Laferrière taps into a poeology of poetics itself, indicating and adhering to an essential part of the occurrence of a poem, and more generally of (literary?) writing without stipulating what it should be. What comes into view, however, is something like a path, indicating meanings that emerge from it, like the trace of songs sung by unknown and untrained people in a place full of hardship – from the heart of a place driven by devastating (living) conditions, as Basho's poem could be read in the above lines.

Such an essential element of a poeology of poetics, if there can be one, recalls the question of liminality as part of Plessner's, Nietzsche's, and Fanon's thinking along humor/laughter as an insight into limits within not-knowing and powerlessness that allows for a space in the self as well as between that otherness out there (in time or space) and the self's living conditions. In all of these cases, *affective humor* can be understood as a form of touch that is produced by the illegibility of signs within a context experienced as pleasurable instructive. Although the affectivity that is evoked may be composed of various paradoxical traits, its pleasurable and insightful sites predominate.

With the title and within the novel, Laferrière also depicts a decolonizing, postcolonial *style* of critique that is formulated beyond postcolonialism and decoloniality and that in some ways echoes an approach of Edward W. Said in considering other forms of encounter beyond the known. In his essay *Politics of Knowledge* ([1991] 2012), in which Edward W. Said scrutinizes postcolonial criticism and the way it is sometimes uncritically understood as a ghettoized and narrow form of ›identity‹ politics, he pairs postcolonial criticism with the meaning of ›knowledge‹ and values that can still claim to be universal and meaningful. In this sense, Said redefines *style* as an author's signature:

»The paradox is that something as impersonal as a text, or a record, can nevertheless deliver an imprint of a trace of something as lively, immediate, and transitory as a ›voice‹ [...]. [S]tyle neutralizes the worldlessness, the silent, seemingly uncircumstanced existence of a solitary text. It is not only that any text, if it is not immediately destroyed, is a network of often colliding forces, but also that a text in its actually *being* a text is a being in the world, it therefore addresses anyone who reads.« (Said 1983, 33)

Style, then, is not only a property of writing, but also a quality of singularity, which, though not exhausted by it, also has a context.

While Laferrière says something very similar as Said in his allusion to Basho and Borges, and acts in these terms in his writing, he goes beyond Said. With Basho, Laferrière emphasizes that literature also beholds something *to itself*, not in order to confuse or sound mysterious but as a form of not-knowing as part of its reflections, beyond any power, which is poeologically set in motion (also inherent in Basho's poem) and which, instead of claiming a specific ›knowledge‹, makes ›knowledge‹ *clang* like a lyrical piece of music sung in the languages of the most ordinary and everyday enduring, *living* people that the poet must become in order to put their grain into the poetics of language. This, in fact, seems to indicate the power and the powerlessness of (poetic) writing. How this

grain develops, what poetic language *does*, always remains to be seen and experienced. This is the work of (good) literature, and this is what Laferrière's novel, with its allusive, amused and amusing and yet serious, rapturous title, seems to be trying to say – and perhaps to disentangle – *meaning-fullness* as the most elaborate form of *style*, in which humor leaves a sometimes sunny, sometimes rainy, glittering trace.

Humor in Laferrière's text is an elegant rhetoric of interruption, of relief and pause, but also of innovation, all at once and in a thoughtful way; it thus becomes itself what it wants to show and for which a *Japanese* form of writing stands symbolically: a ›wise‹ (unknowing?) *style*, in touching literary spaces, which joyfully and gently points to the bizarreness and complexity of things, in and of ›our‹ wo(r)lds, and in this way gives our material and discursive bruises and heartbreaks an aesthetically embellishing, soothing and healing flavor. This may be why Laferrière was affectionately nicknamed *the Basho of Montreal* after the publication of this novel (Marchand 2010).

This style of writing is also what frames the novel's paratexts, and it is possible to see and unfold their workings as a poetological framing of the story. The allusive title, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, becomes particularly vivid in conjunction with a work of art with a similar gesture: René Magritte's *La Trahison des Images* that depicts the painting of a pipe and beneath it the phrase *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (Marchand 2010; Dickhaut 2014). In both cases, the arts, which are regularly condemned as *mimetic* and of *secondary* quality to the spoken word, to ›nature‹, ›reality‹, ›creation‹ (and thought?), question their own work as well as its categorization in discourse as if to infer ›knowledge‹ from querying it or to doubt others, who think they know what they mean or who see ›more‹ in them than they supposedly show; in any case, they enter a dialogue with those who pass by and take the time to sneak a peek. This might stand for the power-less work of art. While Magritte's painting claims *not to be* what it *appears* to be, Laferrière's *Je suis un écrivain japonais* claims *to be* what it seems *not to be*. Derrida's favorite questioned question, the question of *being* (of certainties?), is thus again questioned and put into a state of (constant) flux. And *this*, art and Derrida, seem to echo – is it *really* ›reality‹ (or is it not?). Both ›texts‹ the painting and the novel, invoke what Derrida has in fact *humorously* (perhaps *ironically*) called *mimetologism* (Derrida [1972] 1981), the ancient (Western European) philosophical attempt to distinguish (and construe) itself by naming what it considers to be its other, poetic thought, *poetics* encompassing both the art (poetry, certainly) and the limitless ›knowledge‹ (and power) of art (poetry) – ›knowledge‹ about poetry as well as ›knowledge‹ that poetry comprises generally.⁵ Both ›texts‹, the painting and the novel, are forms of ›fiction‹ outside of any mimetologism and the place of this outside of mimetologism is precisely within the realm of the poetics of art/poetry, ›fiction affirms itself as a simulacrum and, through the work of this textual feint disorganizes all the oppositions to which the teleology of the book ought violently to have subordinated it‹ (Derrida [1972] 1981, 36). The poetology of the *textual feint*, is, at the same time, perhaps the unconscious, unknowing power-lessness of poetics that lies in this double structure.

5 Geisenhanslüke opens up the validity of this tradition by critically tracing its historical-discursive assumptions as well as its more contemporary receptions. His work may be considered as the critical continuation of a thread that was sparked by poststructuralist thinkers. Cf. Geisenhanslüke (2018).

Laferrière's rhetoric of humor not only unleashes affectivity but is also used as a technique of rapture that performs an *unterdes*, an unfolding of meanings within one and the same time as it interrupts, fragments, and opens up discourse, thus giving it a spatial timeliness through which attention is shifted to other insights and allusions that he gently and questioningly wants to (or not *explicitly* wants to) make known or just lay open before one's eyes, like a view or like an allegorical allusion, a »phrase qui s'énonce ne sait rien de son point final, la phrase suspend notre lecture dans le vide, collant au plus près de la vérité de l'existence – car l'existence ne sait rien et surtout pas ses avenir« (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 64).

In this way the invoked *style* is uttered as a *performative act*, firstly, as already mentioned, with the humorous title *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, which creates an ›implied audience‹ and transfers it to a state of cluelessness and vigilance, where the narrator picks it up to further open up the sentence. Secondly, this question of *style* is invoked by Basho's discussed haiku in the form of an epigraph: »Première leçon de style les chants de repiquage des paysans du nord« (Laferrière 2008).

Thirdly, it is invoked by addressing an ›implied audience‹ at the beginning of the text in the form of a dedication with the following sentence: »À tous ceux qui voudraient être quelqu'un d'autre« (Laferrière 2008).

In this way, two O/others are addressed simultaneously, and at the same time, an ›implied audience‹ is invoked through the dedication. All three addresses are intertwined, and many references in the course of the development of the novel refer to them by invoking them together or one of them.

The two O/others are, on the one hand, the dominant, ordering language within the historically conditioned sociopolitical discourse *from* which, *against* which, and *in* which Laferrière's narrator speaks: the language of the Other as empire, therefore, here with a capital O. On the other hand, the title takes up the question of the other, with a small o, which is the other that is othered within the symbolic regimes of the dominant language, that resonates in the picturesque discourses of *japonismes*, and that is invoked here in the designation *japonais*. In evoking the *japonais*, Laferrière's question of *style* touches upon the way the other of Western discourse and the other of its arts has been construed throughout European colonialism, in an economy of pleasure and unpleasure, and has served to create and engender an (enlightened and modern) European self. This other was (is?) always used as a mirror for structuring the ›homemade‹ European self.

The third tendency, indicated by the dedication, gives another impetus to the title; it poses the question of singularity and ponders the im/possibility of the freedom to *choose* one's ›identity‹.

On a fourth level, still, the title and the novel *are* indeed reminiscent of Japanese authors, such as Matsu Basho or Mishima Yukio. The different possibilities of meaning, as well as the question of *style* that the ›implied author‹ invokes at the beginning of the novel, already touch upon different allusions, making *style* per se a question of touch – the question of how one approaches an issue, and from a marginalized position, in order to be able to touch upon it and upon ›marginality‹. The *style, touch*, requires the adherence to certain (sociopolitical) ›laws‹ and in specific ways of tact and contact, in order to be heard, and in order to be able to say anything at all. Humor, with all its arousing affectivity and rhetoric is of such a *style* that enables and circumscribes the touch of contact.

Humor appears as the tone and rhetoric of touch per se, is »[u]n style rapide, intense, qui va à l'essentiel – dans les mots comme dans l'émotion« (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 61). The question of *style* also becomes a question how to touch things, how to name them, how to indulge in discourse, how to say something – before whom and in what language. In this sense, Joqueviel-Bourjea describes Laferrière's *style* as a *poetic meditation* rather than a *philosophical* one, in which the use of Japanese poetry plays a decisive role: »Laferrière privilégie *de facto* la poésie japonaise au détriment de la philosophie grecque« (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 70). That is to say, to contrast and to defer European/Western philosophy as a decolonial strategy of and through poetical writing, not so much to privilege it, indeed, such a conclusion would be too hasty (Laferrière's admiration for European writers, at least, remains irrefutable). But perhaps because its philosophical assumptions are too rooted in colonial images, imagery, and traditions and cannot be used steadfastly to say the most essential, and would not leave us »seul face à notre propre existence, auprès de notre propre parole« (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 75).

Style, in effect, is also what distinguishes philosophy from literature and is therefore at the forefront of radical philosophy, both in Derridean thought and in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. »Philosophy, Nancy contends, desires to be ›discourse, by definition, *without style*« (Long 2014, 1), which is not possible. The question of *style* rather exposes philosophy as a way of writing (*le mode*) with a mode (*la mode*) (Long 2014, 1). Like Borges, who critically distanced himself from Western distinctions between philosophy and literature, ›after Plato« (Long 2014, 2), Laferrière seems to follow and appreciate a Bashoean *style* because it does not distinguish between thought, reflection, pleasure, dreaming, sensuality, reason, ›knowledge« and ›non-knowledge« but instead speaks along their welded, overlapping borders.

At the same time, the ›implied author« also sets a specific *style* at work, which is precisely this many-formative, performative, subtle *speech act* (Felman 2003) that tackles different themes and levels of and in discourse and lets them vibrate in humorous evocations. All of this amounts to sociopolitical questions. On another plane, however, they also address the question of voice at the borders of the narratological and diegetic levels. The question of voice is the question of singularity but also the question of subjectivity, an author's *style*, *le mode* as well as *la mode* of their writing. On a meta-level of narration, the question of the author and the ›implied author« is raised. Who is speaking here? Who is touching upon these questions? This line of questioning, too, becomes part of the question of *style*, engendering an interruption and heightening the humorous bent that accompanies the theme of the title.

The humorous tonality within the novelistic text, thus, also evokes an affectivity, which can be related to touch as a form of *movere* that the literary work evokes as an *aura* (not in a religious sense though) and that revolves around reading as the inhaling experience of literature.

Furthermore, Laferrière's evocation of *Japan* is an indication of intertextuality within a broader world literature⁶ and of an intertextual globalization of literary texts as well as their shifted meaning production.

The amalgamation of different rhetorical devices raised by the text in a multi-dimensional way is loaded with humorous affectivity and emits different meanings, different nuances of the question of touch – in the proximity of the *O/other* as well as of othering. *Je suis un écrivain japonais* takes up the question of the *O/other* in French and Western literature and culture, questioning it, while employing it in another sense. Laferrière's novel, thus, speaks from a twisted, decolonizing postcolonial, discursive and geographical in-between space – but also beyond it.

To Be or Not to Be a Japanese Writer – On the Level of the Story

Je suis un écrivain japonais thus refers subtly, ironically, and critically to discursively produced processes of othering, to Africanisms, Orientalisms, and, here, to the orientalization of everything ›Japanese‹, and also to *japonisme*: After a period of blossoming Orientalism, Egyptology, and Chinoiserie, as well as *Indianism*, the ways ›India‹ was utilized for European thinking, ›Japan‹, was ›discovered‹ in the late 19th century in European art and academia as an exotic (and ›traditional‹ = inferior) counterpart to Europeanness. ›Japan‹ became ›Europe's other par excellence, the place to which Europe henceforth looked to find its *self* as well as another field of reference beyond itself. In philosophical contexts, too, this almost naïve, desperate search for otherness, for a *self*-affirming difference that, read against the grain, reveals the fragility of empire,⁷ was extended to ›Japan‹ and later influenced even postmodernist philosophies (Hottner/Trueper 2021). This Other as empire, was not extraneous, but rather necessary for forming regimes of ›identity‹ formation and a particular European ›identity‹ – that is, in overt and more

6 By referring to a manifesto signed by 44 writers in favor of considering francophone literatures instead of limiting French to France and a national understanding, which was also signed by Laferrière, Mathis-Moser places the novel in the context of a French debate on world literature (in French) (2011, 77 ff.). But Laferrière does not only want to expand the canon of (French) literature to include other literatures (and not only literatures in French). As Mathis-Moser also observes (78), he criticizes racialized and ethnicized stereotypes as well as structures of othering.

7 In its colonial strategies, ›Europe‹ sought to create a mirror image of itself by disparaging the unknown in order to define *itself*. The meaning of the productivity of these discursive and philosophical forms of othering, I think, beyond their military and strategic components, still needs to be further elaborated and remains a future task; the ambiguity that ensues from them rather exemplifies several things at once: – that the search for the other's inferiority is an ongoing process that is doomed to fail – that the world we live in is a product of such conglomerations and a web of cultural influences; – that it is possible to alter and change these images, and – that it may be possible to discern the worthwhile sites of such interferences, despite themselves, for the construction and enjoyment of a future world and history, as within this exoticization, there is also a lot of proximity. I wonder what would happen if we more or less intentionally began to read Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, or the imagery that is bound to ›the Orient‹ or to ›Africa‹, despite and beyond all the violence, in a reparative, affirmative sense, as forms of admiration and (affectionate) desire, dismissing everything else (– an experiment...).

covert ways, grounded in mechanisms of exclusion and images of superiority. *Japonisme* is in fact one of the main Western, *French*-style discourses, especially after colonialism in vast parts of Africa seemed to have lost its chic and no longer seemed appropriate as a mirror and source of inspiration for this very close Other. The *japonais* seemed untouchable, far away, exotic enough, endowed with a specific ›culture‹ and not really involved in the sordid parts of colonialism and its wars.

The ›implied author‹ in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* seems to be aware of this phenomenon and to allude to it. We can infer from the ›real author‹ that the novel is indicating here to an incongruous tendency. In its ironic allusion, the title of the novel, and with it the ›implied author‹, seems to say: »These days I am your Japanese« and »The days of *japonisme* are (unfortunately) not over, just have a look at the imagery that is part of language (yours *and mine*)«. This incongruity, and allusion humorously invites for thoughtful readings. Its playful rhetoric already creates a tension and suspense through the humorous tonality, through what the novel says by not saying, and unsays by saying.

The unsaid creates a space, an un-knowing field of appeal. It is marked by an expective affectivity mixing joy, anxiety, and a state of alarm that the critical side of the title silently also produces within the humorous rupture. The humorous tonality thus contains a power-less tension of non-knowledge, and poetically generates a liminal position from which it is possible to consider the development of the text's meanings beyond what it obviously seems to say. In addition to the pain and painful effects of the mechanisms of othering around which this humor revolves and which one must endure while reading, the novel promises linguistic, thought-provoking, and affective pleasure. Here, too, as in *White Teeth*, it depends on the subjectivity of the ›implied audiences‹ what is perceived as pain and where pleasure lies or could begin.

As Béatrice Rafoni argues, there is a more recent form of *japonisme* within ›French‹ culture, *néo-japonisme*, which may also be part and object of Laferrière's novel. *Néo-japonisme* coincides with anti-American sentiments in France, where, according to Rafoni, ›le Japon‹ is seen as an alternative to ›Americanization‹ and ›American‹ globalization. Against the backdrop of such anti-›American‹ attitudes and rivalries between (neo- and ex-?) empires, *le Japon* represents images that are »[...] capable[s] de supporter des projections pré- et post-modernes séduisantes que l'Amérique ne peut égaler« (Rafoni 2008, 271). ›Japan‹ signals antagonistic exoticized images of space *and* time, it can be conceived of as traditional, as well as modernist *and* futuristic within a space that is seen as both spiritual and highly technologized. Laferrière writes against both of these dichotomous images. He regards himself as *American* and criticizes the stereotypical images of Japan in French culture that are also part of (French) literature. The novel is thus also a critique of French stereotypical culturalisms as part of the French language, which he must also write against in order to make himself heard. In some ways, the novel's allusion to *japonisme* in this bifurcated form is reminiscent of the invocation of *japonisme* in the work of Marcel Proust.

As Jan Hotkonson notes, Proust uses the evoking *japonisme* of the time, of the late 19th century, the lust and ›love‹ for the *extrême-orient*, which to some extent displaces images of the *proche-orient*, not as a form of othering; Proust rather laughs at it as simplistic and naïve (Hotkonson 1999, 24 f.). Because of his Jewish heritage, however unknowingly ex-

perienced,⁸ (and perhaps also because of his illness), Proust appears to be receptive and sensitive to the other as an other self and as an other that he seeks within himself. Proust uses *japonisme* in *À la Recherche du temps perdu* to induce in his work a style that is aware of and attentive to details, to (the evanescence) of time, and to the otherness of others (and thus the fragility of the self), no matter whether these details are drawn from the image repositories of ›nature‹ or of ›culture‹.

Proust's *japoniste* attention differs from Laferrière's, however, in that Proust evokes its subtlety while only superficially criticizing it as a form of Orientalism – or at least not consciously, and maybe there is also an *other* form of ›identity‹ search in *japonisme* for Proust, one that is precisely based on the othering and the orientalizing of the Jews, which Proust refutes, resignifies and *seeks* at the same time; however, for both Proust and Laferrière, *japonisme* is a question of the (proper) style, the style that is considered as most ›artistic‹ and the most accomplished, the most learned. And that is why both try to evoke it in their writing as well: Proust's *japonisme* ›is rather an affiliation with an entire aesthetic, and it is rendered as such in the novel [*À la Recherche du temps perdu*], in cumulative allusions and reflexive imports. Proust embraces particularly the evocative power of suggestion, the rendering of fugitive impressions, the crucial blanks or incompleteness – indeterminacies, opening imaginative possibilities (for narrator and reader), and the sensory appeal in swift delicate strokes of line and color. [...] Marcel is something like a pilgrim through his European heritage [...]. Proust positions the *Recherche* as the acme of European arts and Marcel as the literary innovator. The Japanese aesthetic appears intermittently, working like a counter-system to clarify the limitations of Marcel's inherited Occidental aesthetics. Proust's *japonisme* operates at two levels in the *Recherche*, in discourse and in the story [*histoire*]⁹, to use Emile Benveniste's terms. [...] Also, when the characters comically repeat the worst abuses of the Japanese aesthetic, as in the Verdurin's mawkish jokes about ›la salade japonaise‹, the narrator mocks mercilessly, as he

8 While Marcel Proust's Jewish background has often been overlooked and deemphasized or, on the contrary, taken to characterize his texts as ›unFrench‹ and as ›Jewish‹ because of the ›animated ›humor of the social scenes‹ (Edmond Wilson qtd. by Maurice Samuels (2015, 223)), more engaged discussion of Proust's ›Jewishness‹, or rather forms of othering that he experienced, and the various ways it may have influenced him, as well as the ways in which he gave shape to them in his work, still awaits its disclosure. See for example Julia Kristeva (2018). See also John K. Hyde (1966); Isabelle M. Ebert (1993).

9 Seymour Chatman (1978, 1990) uses the terms somewhat differently, even vice versa, which can be confusing. For Chatman *story* is the *what* that the narrative is about, and *discourse* is *how* it is rendered. But, of course, we have to think of both instances as not only intertwined but also as a plurality: Story and discourse may contain different framings or may entail more than one story/discourse, depending on what one reads in what relations. This may in fact be an essential characteristic of texts/literature/signs – they cannot be reduced to or frozen forever within one reading. However, for the narratological, formal, as well as poetic composition-analysis of the narrative (any narrative), as well as for the transparency of the reading, it seems worthwhile to me to use the words in these technical terms. In terms of *poetics*, the *story* would be *what* the text is about, *what it wants to say*, its poetological dimension, while the *discourse* would be the way in which it is narratologically and rhetorically rendered; the narratological and rhetorical levels of narrative supplement each other, rather than be mutually exclusive, and seem to build their poetic thickness in an intertwined way.

always derides the mere social uses of art. Like a code within a code, the comic targets are indexes of value and form a counter-discourse to the narrator's own aesthetic judgement and practice« (Hokenson 1999, 25).

Laferrière, too, works with a double gesture. He invokes *japonisme* to refute Orientalism and simultaneously, through Japanese literature and the evocation of Basho as an accomplished author, to create a space for an other image outside of it. The narrator in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* ponders and discusses Japanese literature and art as a (humanistic) epistemological proposition by and for a writer. Thus, Laferrière, too, tries not to repeat Orientalisms while emphasizing the dexterity of another literary aesthetics beyond dominant French. Within the discourse of the novel, he writes against Orientalist stereotypes by both invoking them and deconstructing them. What Jan Hokenson writes about Proust's use of *japonisme* in his oeuvre can also be applied to Laferrière's work, albeit in a way that emphasizes its colonialist and racist underpinnings much more strongly, while seeking to deconstruct its linguistic implications within rapturous, amusing, humorous, and, at the same time, thoughtful implications.

Hokenson writes: »At least, however, it is certain that in *À la Recherche du temps perdu* Proust uses the formal properties of the Japanese aesthetic contrastively to challenge outworn mimetic assumptions, and to point the way for new ambitions in French literature« (Hokenson 1999, 36).

Proust thus seeks to escape specific filters of mimetology and to remain open to an other imagery. The narrator in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* explicitly refers to Proust, and this should not be a coincidence since Proust, as mentioned above, not only appreciates what he considers and regards as *japonais(e)*, but, not unlike Laferrière, strives to make it part of his own literary reflections as a form of accomplished literary achievement. Laferrière may also see another proximity between his writing and that of Proust in that both, in a sense, belong to French language and literature, and yet as racialized (Jewish and Black) writers (though appropriated and valued) do not *properly* belong to it. The interdependence parallelism of antisemitism and various forms of racism has always been a matter of postcolonial thought and literature, where Jewishness, as in *White Teeth*, is often taken as an *urgestalt*, an archetype of racialized othering in European thought and history. »For Fanon«, too, »despite the difference in racial stereotypes and the distinctiveness caused by the inescapable visibility of the black man's blackness, as opposed to the Jew, who can pass for Gentile, the mechanism of racism are identical in both cases; [...] the French Caribbean *imaginaire* turns to the situation of another diasporic people in order to construct a representation of its own situation [...] these intertexts illustrate the interconnectedness of different diasporic cultures, and show how these connections are actively put to use in the structuring of individual and collective experience« (Britton 2014, 62). It is in this context that Proust's as well as Laferrière's problematization and use of *japonisme* needs to be seen and reflected upon; it can be understood as a form of bonding that constructs connections with the other othered and implicitly speaks of sympathy and solidarity. What matters may not be so much the ›diasporic‹ experience, but different forms of racism and othering as part of the different (internal and external) colonial histories.

Laferrière tackles *japonisme* from three sides; on the one hand, he distinguishes Japanese poetic achievements from *japonisme*, on the other hand, he criticizes different

forms of othering that he, at least as the ›real author‹ of this book, must experience and endure. Finally, he uses an allusive, allegorical poetic form to evoke an aura of immediacy, of contemporaneity, and infinity, in which time and space merge and seem to halt within one another, which seems characteristic of haiku poetry – a place where we can dive into the novel:

»C'est une guerre tenace entre le temps et l'espace. L'espace policier permet de l'identifier (Tu viens d'où, toi?). Le temps cannibale te dévore cru. Né dans la Caraïbe, je deviens automatiquement un écrivain caribéen. La librairie, la bibliothèque et l'université se sont dépêchées de m'épingler ainsi. Être un écrivain et un Caribéen ne fait pas de moi forcément un écrivain caribéen. Pourquoi veut-on toujours mélanger les choses? En fait, je ne me sens pas plus caribéen qu'un Proust qui a passé sa vie couché. J'ai passé mon enfance à courir. Ce temps fluide m'habite. Chaque nuit je rêve encore de ces orages tropicaux qui font tomber les mangues lourdes et sucrées dans la cour de mon enfance. [...] Et moi, fiévreux tous les soirs, en train de lire Mishima sous les draps. Et personne autour de moi pour me dire qui c'était Mishima. Je ne me souviens pas à qui appartenaient ces livres qui me semblaient encore en bon état. Que faisaient-ils dans cette petite ville endormie? Laquelle de mes cinq tantes s'était entichée, à un moment donné, de Yukio? [...] On ne sait pas toujours par quel chemin un écrivain arrive dans une famille. Et je le lisais pour quitter cette prison du réel. Mais je ne me réfugiais pas pourtant chez Mishima – la littérature n'a jamais été un refuge pour moi. Mishima, je suppose, n'écrivait pas non plus pour rester chez lui. On se rencontrait ailleurs, dans un endroit qui n'était ni tout à fait chez l'un, ni tout à fait chez l'autre. Dans cet espace qui est celui de l'imaginaire et du désir.« (Laferrière 2008, 23–24)

Humor here comes from the transformation and turn of a traumatic colonial and racist image, that of cannibalism, into something else. The narrator situates cannibalism within a process of the present, but not without historicizing it with the depiction of the *espace policier*. The *guerre entre le temps et l'espace* of which the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator speaks here is, of course, (colonial) history, and the way in which its images have materialized in racialized assignments. Time is in space, in the space of the Other, in the space of empire, where it eats you up; *le temps cannibale* is empire's time-signification in which the other with the small o, seems forever frozen, lost in its otherness. It is almost impossible to imagine a wor(l)d in which nationality and ›race‹ do not matter. The *cannibalistic time* always devours you already before any sign. And this is where the text with its painful humor, much in accordance with a Nietzschean *nevertheless*, tries, beyond the sorrow, from a more or less desperate state, to open up a space beyond this terrible history, to turn it upside down, as it were. On the one hand, the narrator/›implied author‹ wittingly reveals how the formation of ›identity‹ depends on the placement and racialization of bodies, which allows the question *tu viens d'où, toi?* to emerge and which would make no sense outside of this *historically driven logic* that *geo-graphizes* bodies and the earth. On the other hand, the humorous allusion plays with the formation of ›identity‹ and the institutionalized structures that regulate and sustain structures of othering, before one can think of placing and naming oneself in a self-determined way. This humorous aspect is intensified by the naively posed question *pourquoi veut-on toujours mélanger les choses?* as it, firstly, indicates a *mélange* where there seems to

be none, and, secondly, masks critical thinking as a playful, harmless pursuit. In this way, hope is also smuggled into the humorous inclination of the question that asks to be considered and pondered because there is something violent and hurtful in this form of cannibalistic identifying that the Other pursues through language and its regimes of seeing, its imagery. The humorous rhetoric thus differentiates between (self-)identity and being identified *by* the capital Other/and (structures of) power, touching upon ›the laws‹ of (imperial)ly fixed, seemingly immutable patterns of assignment. The passage also affectionately mocks Proust's bedridden confinement caused by his long illness and incongruously juxtaposes it with the childhood of the narrator/›implied author‹, depicting it as being in a state of ›running‹. The comparison *between* and image of two (very much successful), but, in any case, both *French speaking writers*, one lying in bed and the other running, is empathetic and amusing; it also makes one *think* what the comparison wants to evoke, maybe that it is not the condition of writing that is relevant, but the way one *looks at* things. Both activities, lying in bed as well as running, obstruct the view but perhaps open up something else, the absorption of impressions and images (and the tendency to *japonize* the wor(l)d around you, in order to be able to bear it). And in this sense, Proust and Laferrière's narrator are not so different from each other and thus can just be identified as *writers* (and, perhaps, as *Japanese writers?*). Humor is also aroused by the indirect implication of Proust as a Caribbean writer (*je ne me sens pas plus caribéen qu'un Proust*), since it is an unusual evocation and seems absurd. But it may point to the cumulative conglomeration of francophone literature (including works written in France) and French (colonial) history and thought, and resistances to it that can be found in different ways in the Caribbean as well as in France; it also reverses the common appropriation of the Caribbean as *French* territory and allows for the reverse conclusion – if the Caribbean is French, then France must also be Caribbean (yes, indeed!). And so, the text seems to ask, is it not time to equalize ›France‹ (and the French) in this sense as well, to *become* its other parts that it has wanted to be? (. . . for such a long time . . .), albeit through these others themselves?) The humor that makes no sense at first glance suddenly does not seem so senseless at second glance. Its affectionate trait also parallels ›Proust‹ and ›Laferrière‹ as two writers who had to endure different forms of othering, and thus also ›evokes a shared grief between the two, but also another form of understanding, historically differently produced but transcending time and space and an actual encounter.

The passage begins with Yukio Mishima (1925–1970) as a starting point to create a space of encounter and dialogicity within the signs of language (as Proust does by deploying *japonist* elements in his writing) to challenge and overcome mainstream imagery. This process of reading, of encountering beyond and against space and time, creates a timelessness through reading that is more immediate, more sensual and more contemporaneous, regardless where the author is from – a neighborhood reading. Time and space are deferred and sublated in the process of reading (and in a hidden way, behind the reading, in writing). What counts is only the space of encounter that is evoked within the reading process. Rather than establishing a past within history, it takes the experience of reading, the literary text, as a past, and *auto-bio-graphy* as the first touch of historicity – which is also very political. It is not so much where you come *from*, and *how* you are named by *whom*, but who you have *read* – and one could add, *whom* you were *deprived* of reading,

that gives impetus to your becoming and that forms your always incomplete ›identity‹. This humor, despite the tragedy that lies buried in history, takes a further step to open up another space within the cannibalistic historiography, through the immediate marking of normalized processes of signification and the fixation of bodies in the circles of discourse. It is a space for an other dialogue in the economy of power-lessness despite and beyond what is known and remembered. This space touches the unknown and touches a sentimental thread within the folds of the very space that it opens. The literary space, the text, here, with its humorous tonality in which signifying processes are tossed overboard, thus introduces an other rhetoric, which can give way to the possibility of other narratives without depoliticizing them – on the contrary. This space is also the space of and for a (long-term) resistance as it indulges in language and its imagery with the potential to transform it. It thereby also frees geography, the writing of the earth and the earth of writing, from immediate (colonial) gestures.

Space as such is not responsible for the formation of subjectivity and cannot give meaning to it, nor can historiography be an explanation for the singular subjectivity that is part of a subject's being (in the world); rather the spaces of attachment as spaces of *attachment*, reveal the composition of subjectivity and give ›identity‹ to the self through memory and memorization of which the experience of reading is a part. The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator‹ strips the process of signification from historiography and geographized,¹⁰ racialized thinking and offers to think about ›identity‹ through what can be called *reading auto-graphy*: The way literature as a meaningful way of understanding, and as understanding meaning, inscribes itself in the manifestation of the self and shapes ›identity‹ against the backdrop of a sensual, living experience of life in which the body and the mind are twisted and entangled. At the same time, the allusion to a time-space of war and cannibalism appears within this ›new‹ context as refurbished, differed. It enables the possibility of speaking (up) without being immersed in a colonizing narrative or ignoring colonial atrocities and their historical procedures. Thus, the humorous tone, evoked by the name of Proust and the confusion of things that must be imagined as not belonging together, such as the place of one's supposed ›origins‹ and the fact that one writes, are accompanied by an imagery that allows us to touch upon and shift the ground of speaking. This movement that amounts to an epistemological shift, at least for the moment of reading, shifts ›the laws‹ of a symbolic order that is arranged by history (and subsequent historiography). In this way, meaning can be configured differently, although nothing really changes as such; it is still the same ›implied author‹/narrator from the same Caribbean writing in French prose. *Or maybe not*. Now, indeed the question lurks as to why there should be a coherence between one's place of birth and one's profession? The politics of placing is deferred to a politics of displacing. It is a liberating question that elicits an affirmative: *Yes indeed, why?*

It also leads to other questions, such as what such a logic continues to indicate? And what it reveals? This humorous rhetoric forms part of a linguistic, affective, and rhetor-

10 At the same time, though, it is important to consider the spatial-historical geo-politics that are also inscribed in bodies and give them meaning. For a discussion of geopolitics as a category of analysis that sheds light on the ›fields of power‹ and ›patterns of exclusion‹ that are attached to them and give from to subjectivities, see Pabst (2006, 39; 42).

ical performance that harbors the ability to *move*. It is accompanied by a pensive quality, followed by those Basho-like still lifes that seem to hold a scenario in motion within a picturesque scene like a living photograph.

These instances are not only captured in adjectives that give meaning to the repetition and excitement of the amalgamation of time, memory, and the image of a little boy running – *fiévreux tous les soir* as well as the use of the present progressive (*en train de lire Mishima*). They are also caused by the description of the literary scenes. The description, thus, is not just a mere embellishment or a means of promoting realist scenes. It serves as a literary canvas on which a thoughtful image is painted, signaling the infinity of time and space or making them disappear. The humorous rhetoric, with all its stimulating affectivity, is part of the colors that frame this image and also move it smoothly to the next insight, the next image.

Much of this picturesque, allegorical, literary still life is, moreover, conjured by the evocation of a state of not-knowing, and not only that; not-knowing is even retained as an important component of this form of wandering, powerless, *knowing* that ›knowledge‹ is transferred to a sphere of non-knowledge, and is given over to a (smiling?) ›implied audience‹. It is construed through the rhetorical deployment of questions such as ›*Que faisaient-ils dans cette petite ville endormie*‹? This form of ›not-knowledge‹ that seems to know that there is ›knowledge‹ in the powerlessness of ›non-knowledge‹, is expressed most poignantly in the final, emblematic sentence of the passage: ›*On ne sait pas toujours par quell chemin un écrivain arrive dans une famille*‹. The humorous depiction of an author's path into a family alludes to the coincidence of reading and literature as a third voice and a third, in/visible kin or *parent*, which can send one in different directions and show one different angles of the wor(l)d, of tongues, of tastes, and this parent can be an ›international‹ parent, and sometimes, as in the case of the narrator, this parent is Japanese, which makes the adolescent reading narrator ›Japanese‹ as well; but this is a ›knowledge‹ that is formed much later when the adolescent is compelled to learn to distinguish human beings along different, intersecting categories and national(-istic) lines; there is so much comfort in the idea of reading as a process of becoming, of acquiring ›identity‹, through our ›international‹ parents and kinship across the world, time and space. And it is a process that is perhaps not all that utopian but rather a ›common‹ process of which one is only unaware, one that is relegated to the background of what is considered as ›knowledge‹ and ›identity‹. ›Nationality‹ and belonging become conceivable as cosmopolitan forms of a global *author-ized*, as it were, parenthood. It allows us to imagine the planet in a totally other configuration and structure of meaning. Its humor is liberating and pleasurable because of the new insights and images one gets. It unleashes a thoughtful, reflective scenario that *denormalizes* the way we perceive the world and ourselves and enables us to position ourselves differently. The phrase not only expresses a charming, powerless form of ›non-knowledge‹ that triggers the imagination in a different empowering way. It also contains a humorous tonality that is affective by touching some strings in the inner self, in long ago, almost forgotten, locked up memories (of adolescence). And it makes you *think* that there might be some kind of ›truth‹ in this *image*. ›Truth‹, then, is not presented as such, but is opened up as a possibility that can be further thought through. Here, the affectivity of humor is allegorical rather than ironic, and, here, too, it does not disrupt, does not enrapture but rather encourages thinking about

the possibility of some ›truth‹ that might be fleetingly present in what the sentence expresses, on an explicit but also implicit level.

Within this affective, humorous rhetoric that disrupts and deconstructs an image in order to shift meaning to other possibilities of understanding, the ›implied author‹, in close proximity to the narrator's voice, in fact speaks of a *space of encounter* in which both an ›implied author‹ and an ›implied audience‹ meet, a space without a place and without time; rather its temporality and spatiality are hidden in the pages, in the alphabet, and in what they invoke in-between the lines where one can unexpectedly be touched by the other in ways as delicate as harsh: *On se rencontrait ailleurs, dans un endroit qui n'était ni tout à fait chez l'un, ni tout à fait chez l'autre. Dans cet espace qui est celui de l'imaginaire et du désir.* And it seems to indicate a reciprocal form of touch, as the text speaks of an encounter that presupposes at least two entities. Since this encounter is one beyond time and space, within desire and imagination, its unfolding and reciprocity also unfurl in different ways within a temporality and spatiality that is immersed in the performatives of reading that go beyond the text, in ways that can give orientation to the acts and performative orientations of a possible ›implied audience‹.

This space that touches in different ways and that opens up between writing and reading, is a space that precedes and goes beyond any identitarian configuration. It is a space in which a relationship emerges and it is a space of relatedness within the textuality of the text, it is a space of touch that seems to be spread out like a terrace in a blooming garden, adjacent to a house that the literary work becomes, where a potential reader and a potential author seem to come together, out of the different configurations and affiliations to which they belong, to meet each other and others. Thus, Laferrière himself, with this book (and perhaps many others), unfolds this way of being touched, touching upon different dimensions and aspects that the experience of reading (with the other) produces in the context of one's own *auto-bio-graphy*, authorship and writing. This touch, although it is an experience within desire and imagination in the folds of a book, develops its further effects within different, existing temporal and spatial contexts via the possibilities and abilities of ›implied readers‹ who reside somewhere at the borders of this magic jewelry box called a book, which someone must have packed and left behind somewhere, like a bottle thrown into the sea of not-knowing. An *envoi* without a direct addressee. (I am not speaking of the market but of books that one encounters on one's paths, more or less by chance, which is another phenomenon besides the market. One must also think of a silent sea of books that could not be written or produced because of market values and structures of exclusion and inaccessibility, and then there are the unwritten books that can only be heard and listened to, which also silently shape us by their absence . . .).

Such a space encompasses different forms. It is a space in which different times and different ideas from distinct spatial configurations can come together to form possibilities, little insights, like first steps, dance steps, fighting steps, and give way to new ones. It is a performance between different subjectivities as well as different subjects who (perhaps) have experienced life differently and still have something to say to each other, endowed in a space of touch that builds and shifts perceptivity and epistemological scope and purview. The text, as it unfolds here, implicitly also captures the work of translation, and is also translation, independent of the languages, times, and spaces it crosses; but

it also forms translation in the more classical sense of *translatio* as an *allegorical transference* (Geisenhanslüke 2003, 10 ff.) that touches meaning faintly far away in the vastness of time, space, not-knowing, and a terrain beyond power. And even this allegorical sense of touch is opened up here by something in the poetics of language that lies in the humorous inclination, which configures the text.¹¹

Novels, and perhaps this can be extended to any text, can be seen, this seems to suggest, as such houses with terraces and different views and landscapes. They build a ground for the possibility of encounter, and also for the effect of the narratives themselves, where the people involved in them can meet in a space of imagination and desire. In this sense, this space seems to transcend time as well as language or any other possible obstacle. This encounter promises nothing, and there is no address where the house is located and where the dispatch should arrive, and no instructions as to what it should do there. Rather, the literary encounter itself seems to be a haiku-picturesque.

But the ›implied author‹ here could only arrive at saying this by circumventing all the possible stereotypical significations that are part of the *geo-graphies* and bodily inscriptions that form the imagery and imagination of the language and the space-time from which they speak; they could only speak by pointing to the space-police and the policing of space (when it comes to racialized subjectivities) that want to place them in certain rubrics, endow them with a specific, restricted travel document. So they first have to find the right password, a shibboleth, in order to move freely through the space. And *japonais* is the code name they give themselves within a humorous tonality that functions as such a *pass-port*, a fool's license, to enter the scene of higher literature and literary erudition.

While Basho could (supposedly) simply proclaim his haiku, the ›implied author‹ of this novel must first create space for this to happen. And they use humor as a tool, with all its affectivity, while the humorous rhetoric is the instrument of their disruption and the vehicle of transport, of the procession that takes place in the performativity of language and the performance it stages. From here, this terraced stage, a dialogue begins in which the ›implied author‹/narrator addresses their audience as if driven by the desire to make space once and for all for another process of signification, which shows that reading and writing have something in common that exceeds any classification of sense-making, that the signifier needs its freedom to unfold, that any notion of origins misses this point, that something more relevant emerges, something like an *elective affinity* that could also serve to consider being in the world and being part of the world differently, as other forms of what *humanism* might actually mean, beyond ideas of ›blood‹ or of ›race‹ or nation. The ›implied author‹/narrator of this book, however, once again begins with a plea not to be placed in another register of classification: They want to emphasize that this book, their novel, should not be read as another example of exoticizing, and certainly not as a mockery but as one that invites one to look, in a very literal, spatial way, *behind* meaning, as if *behind* a stage, *behind* the stage of language and signification, in order to arrive at different conclusions; they invite to a playful journey that promises to be pleasurable but does not guarantee that the ›audience‹ will return home in the same way that it left:

11 Irony, as a figure of speech in a wider sense is, according to Geisenhanslüke, itself seen as a form of allegory due to the incongruity that is seen as part of it; see Geisenhanslüke (2003, 12).

»Mettons-nous d'accord, je n'ai jamais été obsédé par Mishima. Adolescent, j'étais tombé sur un de ses romans au fond de la vieille armoire en même temps qu'une bouteille de rhum. D'abord une longue coulée de feu. J'ouvre ensuite le livre (*Le Marin rejeté par la mer*) et un essaim de voyelles et de consonnes survoltées me sautent au visage. [...] Et dans ce cas-là, on ne fait pas le tri. On ne regarde pas à la couleur. Le livre de Mishima ne s'est pas dit ›tiens, voilà un bon vieux lecteur japonais‹. Et moi, je n'ai pas cherché un regard complice, des couleurs reconnaissables, une sensibilité commune. J'ai plongé dans l'univers proposé, comme je le faisais si souvent dans la petite rivière pas loin de chez moi. J'ai à peine fait attention à son nom, et ce n'est que bien longtemps après que j'ai su que c'était un Japonais. Je croyais fermement, à l'époque, que les écrivains formaient une race bannie qui passaient leur temps à errer à travers le monde en racontant des histoires dans toutes les langues. C'était leur peine pour un crime innommable, Hugo et Tolstoï étaient des forçats. Car je ne voyais aucune autre explication pour écrire des romans aussi volumineux que je dévorais la nuit en cachette. Je les imaginais avec des chaînes aux pieds, assis à côté d'un énorme encier taillé dans le roc. D'où ma réticence à écrire plus tard des bouquins épais. Je ne voudrais pas effrayer les enfants. Je suis étonné de constater l'attention qu'on accorde à l'origine de l'écrivain. Car, pour moi, Mishima, était mon voisin. Je rapatriais, sans y prendre garde, tous les écrivains que je lisais à l'époque. Tous. Flaubert, Goethe, Whitman, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Cervantès, Kipling, Senghor, Césaire, Roumain, Amado, Diderot, tous vivaient dans le même village que moi. [...] Quand, des années plus tard, je suis devenu moi-même écrivain et qu'on me fit la question: ›Etes-vous un écrivain haïtien, caribéen ou francophone?‹ je répondis que je prenais la nationalité de mon lecteur. Ce qui veut dire que quand un Japonais, me lit, je deviens immédiatement un écrivain japonais.« (Laferrère 2008, 24–25)

There is a sense of delicacy in this passage, in the way it humorously touches and touches upon; the passage evokes a pleasure that resides in the opening of a book that one does not know. An image evolves as if it were picking up a known, fragrant memory, or so it seems, that gives way to a quiet, smiling, humorous tonality. The humorous tone is further intensified in three ways: On the one hand, through the representation of Mishima, whose well-disposed phrase is heard, a speaking ghost emanating from the book; on the other hand, through the evocation of the image of the adolescent as an old Japanese soul, sitting there with some rum, immersed in reading (without understanding much; apparently, the adolescent seems to enjoy the abundance of vowels and words that are thrown at their face) as well as, on the other hand, through the suggestion that follows from this image: That a literary work may be addressed to a specific readership, but that the book, the text, is *free* and can address anyone it wishes and the reader can be anyone who wishes to open it. The author, however real, or implied, or narrated, cannot control the text (nor can any authority . . .) and what it has to say, across and in spite of all wor(l)ds and continents (and political systems), as different eyes and ears may read it differently or precisely because of that. It is a liberating humor that can elicit a winsome chuckle (. . . provided the ›implied reader‹ is in a good mood ;-) . . .). Also tugging at the sense of humor that a seduced, ›implied audience‹ may be willing to reveal is the next sentence, which compares two seemingly incomparable sights and experiences as one and the same insight: the delightful pleasure one gets from reading the sea of words in a book and from swimming

in a nearby river on a hot day. In both cases, *swimming in the book* and *reading in the river* evoke the notion of sensitive and sensual impressions and come into existence in a close, physical sense, eliciting a humorous, jocular tone (as well as *atonement* for stressful situations one may have hoarded throughout the day . . .). Equally incongruous is the naivety and the maturity of the evoked image of writers as a group of banned people, a cult of wise, who go around the world telling stories (although no one seems to listen to them – no disrespect intended . . .), but without the humdrum and marketing politics of publishing and its pressures, which have no place in the fresh imagination of adolescence, where everything is still possible (or not yet forgotten?). The lost orchestration of exiled and banished writers emphasizes the humorous tonality, especially through the names of *real* writers or writers from something called *reality* who can be imagined in such roles as well as through the idea that they must have committed a crime – which illustrates the painful, hard work and perhaps also the compulsion that the *impetus to write* can have on such a ›sect‹. This is reinforced by the evocation of the image (or, indeed, an entire movie) of ›Hugo‹ and ›Tolstoy‹ as chained prisoners sitting at a seemingly never-ending, rocky inkwell. It also pleasurably plays with the different experiences of the different sides of the text: On the one, invisible, distant end of the text, still in the making, the author is imprisoned, condemned to write for their crimes (of enjoying writing? seeing? questioning? asking (for)? doubting? desiring? denying? discovering? touching?) – of disobeying the written and unwritten ›laws‹, – all of which is not so far removed from the precarious positions that writers around the globe still experience and can find themselves in, in many ways; and at the other end, the ›implied audience‹, who – untouched, exploiting and savoring – enjoys (and even mocks) the plight of the banished, homeless ›sect‹ condemned to non-belonging. Authors, in this sense, are given a (very benevolent, indeed!) marginalized position (hopefully they are not all male – and cis-normative . . .), but also appear as related to each other, as a family or ›tribe‹, which offers a meaningful image of what a family or ›tribe‹ could be, beyond (de-)colonial, nationalist(-ic) or geneological boundaries.

This is where this literary litany for change and transformation in a way seems to begin. The ›implied author‹/narrator speaks out against the formalization and categorization of writers (of color) along national(-istic *and* de-colonial) politics.

Instead of taking up this line and splitting it in two, they invoke the reciprocity of the encounter between the writer and a possible ›implied reader‹ by speaking of the visit sought by the *voyelles* and the *consonnes* waiting there, like jinns, to be seen, which seem to have no meaning as such but which an ›implied audience‹ is expected to find in the corners of the book and in the sights they evoke, conflating and merging them from beginning to end. The humor of the scene is invoked by the image of all those flying words fluttering into the surprised face of the teenager at a threshold age, an age when one begins to look at the world (and oneself) in a different way as if one had never seen either before. Again, a magical moment is invoked as if the book were recounting an experience of reading *Harry Potter* (volume I, where we have quite dangerous flying keys) or some other magical fairy tale instead of Basho or Mishima. The affectivity of this portrayal is heightened by the depiction of a realistic teenage memory with all the innocence and adventurous, secret and sacred feelings that each new ›discovery‹, each newly found crack in the walls and in the eagerness of one's lonely but full chest, entails. It is pleasurable

to think of and about such moments, and it heightens the attention to the reading process, as an ›aesthetic experience of the moment‹ (Ertler 2008, 72) in which the ›implied author/narrator not only evokes such memories but also offers other, similar ones that may be relived. The humor of the description is thus embedded in joyful sensations and an affectivity that lies in-between fulfillment, contentment, abandonment, ›watching‹ the teenager, and thus, in the *other* imagery that the book invokes, close to one's inner layers.

Mishima, Hugo, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Senghor, and Césaire (no female writers apparently, whatever that may say about our world, a lot, no doubt): The world seems to meet in the small worldliness of a formerly colonized, free space that is its richness; it does not suffer *from* the and *in* the poverty of a nationalist or continentalist subsidiary understanding of *who* matters and *what* one has to read. There are just books that one can grab and read. Real freedom. Those who tell the adolescent all these wonderful stories are thereby their ›neighbors‹, the ›implied author‹ seems to indicate.

Reading the other as one's neighbor creates a form of touch, imbued with a smile and a humorous quiet tone that induces silence – the aura that arises when something of (lasting) value appears. This neighborhood is more than a good turn. And it is not altruism either. Rather, what the ›implied author/narrator may invoke is the neighborhood of a ›village‹. A ›village‹ functions as a placeholder for an entire community, signifying a random group of (diverse) people, a cohabitation of the many that can be extended to include a city, a metropolitan area, or even a continent, or the world . . .). Village-neighborhood in this sense is more than what one knows and has power over. It also includes the other, whom one does not know so well, whom one cannot control but who can be considered part of one's living environment. The other, in this sense of the *village neighborhood*, is not so far away from the self and also does not need to be understood and studied first, checked out or presupposed as someone completely different, something to be classified and categorized first. Instead of becoming a fetish or an object, the other is just a (sometimes a little crazy or obscene) fellow from one's own village. Not unlike *White Teeth*, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* thus suggests here an other way of *looking* – one that frees the gaze from an inspecting, mechanized, radiographic appeal that wants to see through ›to the mallow‹ as the narrator in *White Teeth* called it (as if), thereby, shaking their head; it proposes to sublimate this gaze in the image of a convivial and, to some extent, mentoring encounter (implied by the book's author/narrator) that is part of living together (and learning from each other). The ›implied author/narrator here reveals the ways in which they use the name Mishima and the senses in which they call themselves a *japonais* writer. For them, ›Mishima‹ encompasses two names: On the one hand, Mishima stands for a long series of writers whom they consider important for their own becoming as well as for intellectual pleasure (here, too, it seems that no Black woman* writer or woman* writer of color could apparently make it into the avenues of fame and acclaim); *Mishima* is thus a name alongside Shakespeare and Victor Hugo, but also Césaire. The ›implied author‹ does not differentiate the authors according to their nationality or decolonial stance; they withdraw them from history and discourse in a direct sense, and at the same time implement the coloniality of our worldliness, of the contemporaneity, into (another, more global) history, by enqueuing Shakespeare, and Hugo in a list of important writers next to Césaire and Senghor. Instead of politicizing their names in a quite

familiar dichotomous way, they present them as writers of the same world, of a ›village‹ with different languages. This unusual enumeration, by its very unfamiliarity, evokes a humorous tonality of incongruity. The image evokes a pleasant alignment of people that touches, moves, because it groups supposedly antagonistic groups of authors, who are usually placed in a hierarchical (racialized) ranking, in a circle, in a family, and places them all in a setting – a place ›in Haiti‹, the place of possible, random, memorable memories. The usual hierarchical image is thus shifted and transformed into a vertical setting. Temporal time and history are not seen in a linear, successive way but as shared ›knowledge‹ in different shades and outcomes; one reads (and inhales) them while running (like a teenager) or while lying in bed (like Proust).

What emerges from the processes of reading, however, and this is the implicit allusion to the liberating workings of ›non-knowledge‹ and powerlessness, depends on the possibility and affiliation of the ›implied audience‹: *je prenais la nationalité de mon lecteur. Ce qui veut dire que quand un Japonais me lit, je deviens immédiatement un écrivain japonais.* By invoking the name *japonais*, the ›implied author‹/narrator, does indeed include the ›Japanese‹, as the one (reader) one does not know, *the* name for the ›implied reader‹ within the thought and within the world they invoke. ›The Japanese‹ is not only part of their past learning and *auto-bio-graphy* but also of their future encounter and becoming (a writer). It stands for and shows the infinite incompleteness of something called ›identity‹, of who we are (becoming) as human beings, as writers, as people who meet and get to know each other, who change and become the other of ourselves, an ongoing process with and without the makings and processes of ›history‹ and historiography.

Here then, there is both an immediate and a lingering, potential instance contained in the relation that indicates writing and reading as processes of encounter. And this image of encounter in writing/reading evokes another form of coming together, which is based on an almost mythical-ethical reflection of what could be called *erudite non-knowledge and non-power*, beyond any configurations of capitalist manipulation or a however pre-defined and pre-structured *education system*. The *japonais(e)* writer becomes a *japonais(e)* reader – a form of address that signals the self as the other, the unknown, – as the one through whom the self is read and defined in the reading. This expresses a surrender of the writing self to a reading other. In this sense, it is an address that signals a chiasm, a touching space, within structures of unknowing and powerlessness. So here, too, within the antagonistic frames of decolonizing discourses and language, and from out of literary reflections, within these reflections, an epistemology for global contiguity is established or at least seems to be called for.

There is, of course, first and foremost, and in a humorous way, a critique that is embedded in the title *Je suis un écrivain japonais*. At a more explicit level of the novel, the text gives the impression of being about questions of ›identity‹, which it inevitably is. It seems to say, and here again the ›implied author‹ would coincide with the ›real author‹, *I am what I am, and I am not reducible to the country of my origin or to a specific language. Rather, I determine what I am, and I am a Japanese writer.* Along *autobiographical* lines that reaffirm the singularity and thus the ›originality‹ of all experience despite history and the sociopolitical, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* proffers the imagination and the possibility of the imagination as a humorous, liberating counterweight to the imagery of representational and fixat-

ing forms of othering, in which the tragic, painful as well as determined and resolute conviction to create space for subjectivity beyond fetishism is affirmed.

From this point of view, the title sounds like a slogan for freedom, one that claims such a freedom, and one that the book seems to promise to unfold like a manifesto. It echoes and claims the right of a writer to be free and to belong everywhere and at all times, past, present, and future. It claims a position that, despite and because of its singularity, is ephemeral in terms of time and space. At the same time, it defines a (good) writer as someone who stands beyond time and space, or rather *place*, and as someone, and this is the political side of an artist's claim, who stands beyond *being placed* and objectified. The narrator seems to refuse to be placed in a discourse, as an artifact, symbol, or fetish of a specific history, culture, or language, although the question of ›origins‹, culture, and language remains, and it also remains as a complex and aporetic question of ›love‹ and affection, of one's past, of memories that are dear to one, which altogether belong to or are attached to a place and convey something about a writer. But it is a place that belongs to the writer and travels with them.

With this disposition, the ›implied author‹ enters the novel by approaching the narrator with the same inclination and desire. The overall question of a style *japonais*, while adhering to the picturesque denotations that it sets at work in the poetic instances of its prosaic oeuvre, is haunted by a form of writing that deconstructs the Japanese (writer) as a stereotype and yet *reconstructs* a style, *as* Japanese writing, as a contemplative question, on every page of the novel, in the sense of a sophisticated, thoughtful form of writing without reconstructing racist imagery but playing with its limits.

In this sense, Laferrière, while deploying his own *style*, circumvents platitudes and (identitarian) assignments, writes against them, and *reinscribes* other texts into what could be understood as a (world) literary canon – *on the move*. While exploring the meanings of a Japanese writer (and becoming one . . .), his narrator and ›implied author‹ lets themselves be guided by Matsuo Basho's journey, in the worldliness of Montréal, a space, which against the backdrop of the narrator's haunted musings, becomes ›Japanized‹ – just one of a billion ways of ›seeing‹ (the world) – which is to say, to wander around in wonder, wondering:

»Je ne sais même plus si l'angoisse vient du fait que j'envisage d'écrire un nouveau livre ou de devenir un écrivain japonais. D'où l'interrogation fondamentale: C'est quoi un écrivain japonais? Est-ce quelqu'un qui vit et écrit malgré tout (il y a des peuples qui sont heureux sans connaître l'écriture)? Ou quelqu'un qui n'est pas né au Japon, ni ne connaît la langue, mais décide de but en blanc de devenir un écrivain japonais? C'est mon cas. Je dois me le rentrer dans la tête: *je suis un écrivain japonais*. Du moment que je ne sois pas cet écrivain nu qui pénètre dans la forêt des phrases avec un simple couteau de cuisine.« (Laferrière 2008, 19; emphasis mine)

The humorous tonality comes from what seems absurd and therefore amusing; it is not only imbued in the meaning of the sentences, but is also made part of their rhetoric, through a contrapuntal use of conjugations, like ›*malgré tout*‹, or the invocation of a writer as a naked (male!) writer (*écrivain*) with a knife as a weapon, and of sentences as a forest in which they get lost. Its amusing senselessness also exploits incongruity: The very goal

of wanting to be a Japanese writer for a book or because of a book, seems so nonsensical, because it appears to be so clear what a Japanese writer is. But the ›implied author's‹/homodiegetic narrator's unlikely chitchat unleashes a thread of wise-cracking: Not only is it so clear what a nationality would have to do with writing (on the level of an essence of writing, maybe, if there is any), but they point out as well that there are also peoples that do not write. What does that mean for nationalities as well as for writing? (And it has meant something historically and has been part of colonial gestures towards the other). But the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator distinguishes colonial fantasies of supremacy from the image they invoke here by sending the writer naked into the forest of sentences; not only is this image funny and pleasurable, because of its unusual, surreal, almost cinematic imagery. There also seems to be some wisdom lurking in it, provoking possibly thoughtfulness and attentiveness: At least, we know now, that a Japanese writer is not a naked man entering a forest of sentences with a kitchen knife, which makes them a quite ›ordinary‹ writer; against the backdrop of this image, everyone else must be an ›ordinary‹ writer, and it also makes it clear how ridiculous it would be to consider a Japanese writer as different from any other writer. On the other hand, any kind of writing may begin exactly there, in the forest of written and unwritten sentences, before which one feels naked and equipped with nothing more than a kitchen knife – which makes all writers, in their desperation of not knowing where to begin, finding a way (in as well as out), alike. This, in turn, amounts to the fundamental question of what distinguishes a Japanese writer from any other writer. It is a question on the borderline of ›identity‹ politics, subject formation, and the willingness or resistance to deal with them – a sphere of interaction at the threshold of language, discourse, desire, and power, a state of unknowing and powerlessness – and how to navigate it that all and find one's way nevertheless.

What the novel is attempting, then, can perhaps be compared to the narrator's observation of a cloud-laden sky they wonder about and want to dissect while sitting on a park bench:

»On examine ce ciel au ventre bas et lourd d'orages noirs. On se prend à vouloir ouvrir son ventre pour voir si ça se nourrit d'angoisses ou d'images« (Laferrière 2008, 15).

The title of the book can thus be seen as such concealed *orages noirs et lourds*, packed with meanings. And the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ sets out to unpack them slowly, without making it rain. A humorous rhetoric that underlies the narrative translates these images into a subtle meditation that is itself questioning and allusive rather than determining and defining, or outright funny.

The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ rather seems to stick to and be stuck by the self-posed question that comes with the title, namely: What is *un écrivain japonais*? What does that actually mean, and to what does it amount to? What is it (*un*)saying?

From here, the beginning before the beginning, the narrative is spilt into different problematizations, which develop their own paths, and yet, somehow, they all belong together, not so much as part of the story but as part of the contemplation of the narrating instance(s) that the title evokes. The story is thus part of the reflections that the title sets in work, not the other way around. These reflections also trigger the blossoming of an

inner diegetic world, always on a metaleptic level, which questions any diegetic separation between the real, actual world and the diegetic world. Rather, all these levels are represented as liminal and intertwined. This becomes apparent from the proximity of the protagonist, the narrator, the ›implied author‹, and the ›real author‹, but it can also be seen in the depiction of the realistic scenery and the allusions to other writers, such as Basho, Proust, Mishima, Kerouac, and Diderot, so that the text, at least at times, resembles a literary analysis framed as a poetic text. The conflation of these different zones that are ›usually‹ obeyed in the stringent world-making of the novel, arouses humor because the text appears restless and challenging, enhancing its performative and aesthetic qualities while simultaneously demanding the ability to think along the meanings of the text and beyond them.

This reflective mark of its humorous trait also becomes evident in another passage in a chapter quite at the end of the novel, which takes up the aforementioned scene of the narrator sitting on a bench in the park, contemplating the dark clouds. The chapter is called *Désir d'or*. *Désir d'or* seems to stand for the writer's desire and the art of literary writing:

»Quand j'ai trop lu à la bibliothèque, je vais me reposer dans le petit parc, juste en haut de la côte. [...] La littérature non plus n'aime pas ceux qui l'attendent assis comme un con en face d'une machine à écrire. Je sors prendre l'air. Deux hommes en train de décharger des caisses de bière. Un Noir et un Blanc. [...] Ils travaillent vite sans cesser de se raconter des histoires. Des pros. J'écris vite aussi. Peut-être mal, mais toujours vite. J'affirme être le meilleur sprinter de ma génération. On devrait me croire sur parole, car tout le monde ne cultive pas pareille audace. Dire qu'il est le meilleur. Dans les autres métiers, oui, mais pas en littérature. Les sportifs annoncent, sans trembler, leur désir de l'or. Les écrivains pratiquent le flou artistique quand on leur parle de palmarès. On devrait prendre exemple sur les enfants qui n'hésitent jamais à montrer leurs biceps. Le problème c'est qu'on se méfie de ceux qui s'avancent dans la vie à visage découvert. Et on croit naïvement que l'art ne se pratique pas dans un centre sportif. Faut s'entraîner. Me voilà déjà en sueur. Je me revois dans l'univers de Midori. [...] Je me revois en train de marcher dans les pas de Basho. La fête violette chez Midori. La dérive dans la ville. Le paysage bariolé de l'automne. Il fait déjà moins frais avec ce soleil si éclatant. Sa douce chaleur sur mon visage. Je pourrais rester des jours sur ce banc à regarder des jeunes écureuils grimper aux arbres. Je sens l'engourdissement du sommeil. Je frissonne. Un nuage, peut-être. Tout disparaîtra (ce qu'on a vécu comme ce qu'on a rêvé). Un avenir radioactif nous attend.« (Laferrière 2008, 203–205)

The passage subtly, playfully reveals the arbitrary order of the novel as willful and deliberate; this disorderly form is seen as constructed and as a scheme guided by the desire to form a narrative as valuable as gold, not necessarily in the sense of literary awards, but in a metaphorical sense of literary originality and expressiveness that requires a lot of hard work, training, and care, like the mining of gold. This effort, this *désir d'or*, is at the same time put into practice and shown as hard mental work, indicated by the break and sitting in the park, the sweating, the stress, the diverse thoughts and doubts that the writer has to go through. It is also shown as a sensual and physical undertaking and as part of everyday life and its experiences. Humor serves as the tool with which this form of writing

in the footsteps of Basho is put to work. The humorous tone humbles the text in a self-reflexive way, as in the image of children showing proudly their ›biceps‹, and prepares the ground for the final touch, the contemplative ending of the scenery. The humorous tonality is part of the reflection of the protagonist/narrator/›real/implied author‹. It is rhetorically evoked by the incongruity between the ponderousness of their thoughts, on the one hand, and the lightness of the scene they describe on the other, like the vision of contemplative, intellectual work that the protagonist/homodiegetic narrator/›real/implied author‹ seems to escape by sitting on a bench in the park, and the description of the scampering squirrels. The squirrels not only stand in liberating contrast to the heaviness and self-imprisonment of reflection but also seem to mock the seriousness with which reflection is self-congratulatorily endured by intellectuals (writers, philosophers, philosophical writers?). The fact that the writer finds solace and meaning in the description of the squirrels also shows how the squirrels ultimately ›win‹ as if the description were saying, yes, indeed, what is the act of writing and thinking compared to the beauty of ›life‹ as such, metaphorized in the image of these beautiful tree-climbing creatures? The description itself is thus transformed into a poetic inflection at the edge of a powerless unknowability. In addition to the humor inherent in the uneven comparison, there is another, pleasant, thoughtful humor in the liberating realization that one is merely part of the scenery one wishes to reflect upon, and in the realization that one does not really know anything, and that it may not be all that important to try so hard *to know*, against the backdrop of the infinity of things that the squirrels seem to symbolize. And yet, the scene evokes a silent humor because its questioning form, at the same time as it doubts itself, also evokes thoughtfulness and poetic writing. On the other hand, humor is evoked in the passage by images and metaphors that seem oddly apt, such as the comparison of gold mining with the work of a writer trying to fish for gold in the sea of language, or the comparison of physical work and training with the non-sweaty (but still physical!) mental work of writing, which corrects the idea of writing as not arduous (and not physical) but in fact as a stinking, unfunny proposition. The humorous tone of the passage, which derives from the descriptive character of the text, is elegantly unobtrusive, thus reinforcing humor as a seductive invitation to be enchanted and to smile along with these reflections. In this way, the passage reclaims its self-imposed goal of molding ›gold‹: mission accomplished, »Great writing!«, »Bravo!« as an addressed and invoked implied and abducted ›audience‹ may have to admit (with a satisfied smile).

To follow in the footsteps of Basho seems to mean working hard, despite the sober ›knowledge‹ that everything will disappear, the present and ›life‹ itself, with all its joys and sorrows. What remains is writing as a capsule in which the present and existence are encapsulated and archived, perhaps becoming a little nugget of ›gold‹, something of value for and in the future, which is why it may be relevant how a text is put into composition.

Basho's text in this sense appears to be such a valuable piece of gold. To be a Japanese writer thus indicates this metaphoric quest and self-expectation – here it takes the form of a soliloquy with a presumed ›audience‹.

In emphasizing this, the narrator/›implied author‹ almost becomes part of the scenery in the park they describe, part of the squirrel family – a passing summer day with a writer in the park. The haiku at the end of the passage though, unlike Basho's

poems, does not end in thoughtful harmony, but, rather, in a more political sense, summoning a dystopian aura, which is (still) not very far from the political reality.

Humor is here not only part of the rhetoric in order to evoke a pleasant mood, and thus part of the text's particular, targeted rhetorical and affective economy. It also produces a momentum as well as a spacing in which a disposition to be touched can set in. It is within this momentum, prepared by the humorous rhetoric, that the haikuian observation with its contemplative copious allusions can produce its affect-driven, thought-provoking impact.

To Be or Not to Be a Japanese Writer – Otherwise

The narrator/⟨implied author's⟩ quixotic musings about the production of this novel and productivity of the writing remain throughout the main narrative thread. While they ponder about *how* and *what* to write, and wander through the city of Montréal, always accompanied by this text of Matsuo Basho, they develop a narrative plot in which they also become a character in the novel. The narrative discourse that develops is about a Japanese girl band led by the singer Midori, whom they meet through a Korean-Canadian acquaintance. This female group of friends seem to be, at the same time, part of the homodiegetic narrator's/⟨implied author's⟩ (cis-male) fantasies, which the title may (have) spawned, pushing the boundaries of gender and gender relations in a quite sexualized way; (they are lesbian by the way (so no hopes or no worries), although almost at the limit of not withstanding the homodiegetic narrator/⟨implied author⟩ – yeah, well (cis-male) fantasies (McQuade 2023, 203), and some form of *contact*, indeed, *happens* with(-in) this group, but it turns out to be part of another story almost unrelated to the narrator/⟨implied author⟩, therefore . . . depending on what one wishes for, it might come out as frustrating or not). The novel, exploiting a realistic tone, does indeed refer to Midori and the other female figures around them as ›fake‹ characters that the novel could have developed while it evolves a story around them (Laferrière 2008, 199 ff.). Then there is a nearby Greek fishmonger's shop, the narrator's Greek landlord, their daughter (the impassive *Helena*) to whom they are attracted (to the point of ›madness‹), the Greek restaurant to which they are drawn (because of the souvlaki *and* *Helena*), and the Japanese embassy. While the attempt to build a story around the girl band is regularly questioned as a construct and dwindles, the Japanese Embassy, especially one of its employees, gets involved by taking an interest in the book project, and the Japanese intellectual media follows. A Japanization of North American culture seems to be taking place in French Canada within the context of quite questioning postcolonial gestures that try to free ›Japan‹ from frozen, colonizing Western prejudices and Japanist (*white* American) gazes, while touching upon other such stereotypes of Western culture, that of African Americans in particular. As in other of their works, ›the North‹ acquires thereby a notable aesthetic value, what Ertler calls a ›euphorization of space-patterns‹ (Ertler 2008, 84). In contrast to images of ›the North‹ that are often associated with ›the West‹ and the axiomatic latitude and longitude of empire, Laferrière's work evokes a different meaning of ›the North‹; it stands for the silence that comes with the snow, as well as for the solitude, and austerity that accompany its chill, and which also entails an ascetic flair. In this novel in particular, ›the North‹

is a connecting metaphorical element of proximity between Matsuo Basho's book and a journey to ›the North‹, and the homodiegetic narrator's/›implied author's‹ wanderings in the novel's cold, northern setting of Montréal.

Moreover, there are scattered memories in which the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ immerses themselves, memorabilia, as it were, of Haiti, of their family, of their home, of (Japanese) literature and a taste for reading, of a particular friendship that finds its way to Montréal, and of the homodiegetic narrator's ›real‹ ›life‹ within the diegetic world. The role of memory as a melancholic as well as epistemological enterprise that can also affectively illuminate understanding is a characteristic feature of Laferrière's writing (Imbert 2006; Ertler 2008, 72, 2013, 125).

Finally, there are ›chapters‹, half-page pieces of writing, lyrical-prosaic, vignette-fragments that are somehow related to the rest of the text, with titles such as *Le temps des mimosas*, *Des objets*, *Une mort Manga* or *Miss Météo* but without a clear or coherent connection, as is often the case in Laferrière's other novels (Mathis-Moser 2003, 2007).

Within this zigzagging journey, however, the titles of the disparate ›chapters‹ of varying length form a kind of connecting chain that holds the book together. As paratexts to the overall development of the story, they form a *chronology* as well as a *chronography*, linking the story and its narrative discourse, also linking the seemingly disjointed parts of the narrative, which meanders around and about a plot, sketching a possible plot, while the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ seems to be mostly on the move. The novel ends with a brief, contemplative rumination on a snowy Montreal night along the lines of Basho's insight. In all this, there is a quiet, almost imperceptible, humorous rhetoric that touches these themes and unleashes – with no less virtue – an affective touch:

»C'est pas facile de changer une idée en émotion. On est impatient, alors que ces transformations s'opèrent lentement. Le temps ignore notre impatience.« (Laferrière 2008, 15)

Writing is depicted as the transformation of an abstract notion into *émotion*. It appears as a form of internal translation between *idea* and *word* and thus in a deferred rather than straightforward meaning of *understanding* as a pivotal sense of touch that the novel attempts to show, that it perhaps wants to sensitize for; writing in this mode processes thought into affective, sensual units that have the capacity to move and, in doing so, to prompt reflection. The task of the writer is to translate words into layers of meaning that arouse affectivity, and only then, it must be concluded, does the text acquire meaning. For the writer, too, this is a consuming and seemingly frustrating process. And it is a process to which they are subjected and to which they must surrender, while *time*, like a (good?) parent or mentor, remains unyielding. The writer has to play along, is disciplined by *time*. The humor here comes from several sides. On the one hand, it is difficult not to forget the distinction between the narrator of the novel and the ›implied/real author‹ and not to take them for the ›real author‹. So, ultimately, one sees Dany Laferrière sitting on a bench in the park (where the homodiegetic narrator says they are sitting right now, on the bench above), almost motionless and seemingly languid and absorbed in a cloud of not knowing, powerless, waiting for some answer, some clue, as to what to write and how. *Time* itself is evoked as timeless and untouched, as a powerful wasteland in which an

overwhelming infinity of ›knowledge‹ resides and from which some form of ›knowledge‹ emerges once the writer resorts to it, unknowing and powerless as to what awaits them there. The figuration of time as a powerful, knowing agent on which the author depends and against which they are powerless, helpless, is, in a frustrating sense, amusing but also meditative, like the act of waiting itself that the narrator/›implied author‹ performs in order to be able to write. Waiting, as a powerless and not-knowing precondition of writing, is thus transformed into a performative act. It is a volitional act performed not so much by the writer as by the seed that *time* waters. The writer seems to be dispossessed in the process of writing, torn between the desire to write and the time that *time* needs to fill this desire in its own way. The short passage evokes humor by touching on depictions and reminiscences of eagerness and impatience that ultimately remain abortive; this, too, is an image that in its realization inevitably implies a discerning approval and a surrender to the evoked image, which elicits a state of amusement as an experience of the limits of one's will, willfulness and, finally, one's surrender to the other that *time* is.

In the developing narrative discourse, the homodiegetic narrator attempts to encounter a ›real‹ Japanese lifestyle. They meet the Japanese singer and pop star Midori, who is on tour with her band. They become friends, and the homodiegetic narrator occasionally accompanies her; at times it seems as if they are lovers (which is never fully resolved). There is also a photographer named Takashi, who accompanies the band, filming and photographing the group. The other women in the band are also named (Eiko, Fumi, Tomo, Noriko, Haruki, Heideko), and smaller episodes are rendered about the dynamics of their relationships. Later in the novel, for example, Noriko commits suicide out of jealousy in the apartment of the homodiegetic narrator (Laferrière 2008, 78), a crime in which they become involved. But then, in a later chapter, as mentioned, there is the subtle hint that Midori and her band could have been an example of how this book might have been written, a story sketched in the ›imagination‹ of the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator:

»Je crée quelque chose, et j'y crois après. Je ne peux plus me passer de ces filles. Elles sont plus vivantes que celles que je croise. Elles bouffent tout mon temps. Je ne pense qu'à elles. Je me noie dans leur monde. Je les vois au réveil, je les sens, comme si elles m'avaient happé. [...] Jusqu'à présent, j'ai pu les garder dans l'espace de la nuit. Si jamais elles se font voir le jour, je suis perdu. Je dois défendre le peu de lumière qui me reste. Alors adieu au monde de la nuit et de la solitude.« (Laferrière 2008, 109)

Here, the narrative levels in the passage evoke *affective humor*. They play on the edge of each other, never quite giving way to one another. This is suggested by the way the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author/real author‹ metamorphoses in and out of the textual and meta-textual instances. It is done in a humorous hub that is self-ironic but also includes and mocks the process of reading: The belief, the folly of believing, in fictional writing, taking it for ›real‹, and being seduced by its imaginative power. At the same time, the polyphonic narrative tone confides that it, too, is imbued with this folly imagining, which has taken hold of them and controls them, even consumes them completely. The ›implied/real author‹-instance thus admits that they, too, are seduced and overwhelmed by their own autonomous characters and undecidable plot.

It is pleasurable and amusing to see the author-instance as a vulnerable product of their own work, because it implies how ›real‹, affectively palpable, a narrative can become and how much fiction, as an instance of imagination and thought, affects not only the writing processes and reading possibilities, but also how much it leaves its mark on other processes of the body (insomnia, perhaps even self-neglect). At the same time, the passage seems to ask what ›reality‹ *really* is, whether it can be more than that? In other words, is ›reality‹ so different, and does it not also play in one's imagination, making the acting people around us figures of and in our imagination, in one's thoughts? (Although they might be completely different, even in the way they perceive themselves . . .). The narrative tone leaves a smiling, thoughtful trace in the text, a golden thread of the novel (on a meta-level) and in the novel (as a fleeting narrative trace). It also forms a fragile, unstable link between the ›real author-‹instance and an ›implied audience‹. This narrative voice is thus a hybrid voice composed of different authorial instances. On the one hand, there is a trace of a ›real author‹ in the process of generating an idea and plot for this book. On the other hand, there are the voices of the homodiegetic narrator of this fictional text, which also indicate an ›implied author‹ who is in a struggle with the very same characters as well as with the plot that the ›homodiegetic narrator‹ wants to talk about and portray. This second level can be called *the infra-narrative level*. It stands in contrast to the meta-narrative level, a hybrid voice of the several liminal and intra-diegetic narrative instances that mirror the voice of the ›homodiegetic narrator‹ and the ›implied author‹.

The humorous rhetoric allows to reflect on writing as well as on the grip of the imagination on ›reality‹ and vice versa, and to problematize the power of what is perceived as ›reality‹ on the imagination. But it also invites to reflect on the ›maddening‹ character of writing in which an author is left alone with imaginative labor, which must not be amusing at all and can amount to painful hard work. The passage thus can evoke different forms of ›laughter‹, or at least ›smiles‹, despite or because of its humorlessness as it touches on and problematizes different issues within a defenseless, surrendered form of implied address, through which a humorous rhetoric emerges between the lines: A desperate ›laughter‹, an amused ›laughter‹ of the author-instances, an empathetic ›laughter‹ for them, and perhaps also a ›laughter‹ of recognition. The humorous tonality evokes and facilitates the utterance as well as the willingness to reflect on it. In this way, the hardship of writing and the self-reflection with its thought-provoking allusions become more easily digestible. In addition, the humor comes from the tension created by the fact that the passage does not reveal whether ›Midori‹ and their friends are a construction or ›real‹. This adds to the wit, playfulness, and humorous enjoyment of the novel and heightens the suspense almost to the end of the novel.

In another chapter, ›Midori‹ is presented as a Japanese-Canadian female figure, a diaporic Japanese-Canadian woman who (must) imitate the stereotype of a Japanese woman, an exoticized role discursively imposed on her:

»En flânant ici et là sur le câble, je tombe sur Midori en Miss Météo. C'est un canal local où je ne m'arrête jamais. Je n'y connais personne. On regarde la télé pour revoir des gens qu'on a croisés sur d'autres canaux. Mondanité virtuelle. [...] Midori passe bien l'écran avec son kimono coloré et ses bâtons dans les cheveux. C'est un déguisement,

sinon elle est toujours en jean et T-shirt. En se déguisant ainsi en japonaise, elle devient moins Midori. [...] Midori ne les intéresse pas, ce qu'ils veulent c'est une geisha.» (Laferrière 2008, 124–126)

Even within this critical assessment of everyday culture, which depicts the niches offered to the other, mediative, reflective contemplation is aroused within a humorous inclination that simultaneously evokes a specter of affectivity: wonder, insight, contentment, thoughtfulness, and joy, but also sadness. Here, too, the narrative levels oscillate between the narrative discourse, its diverse narrative traits, and a metaleptic level, since it is the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ who penetrates the discourse both on the diegetic and the extradiegetic level and suggests references to the ›real‹ world and its discourses. The humorous tone itself seems to be a byproduct of the narrator's reflections rather than a skillfully crafted, intended rhetorical piece of writing. The reflective thoughts evoke humor by questioning the normalcy and naturalness of watching television, on the one hand, and by revealing a quite psychic trait of why we watch television the way we do, on the other. The tone of wonder is affective because it recalls the pleasure of being ›at home‹ (in a narrow sense, of sitting in one's dwelling), watching TV without a specific purpose. On the other hand, a contrasting sentiment is evoked because of the analyzing, observing tone of the narrator, which objectifies ›us‹. The narrative tone is thus alarmingly ambiguous. It evokes pensive pleasure but then becomes uncanny. The passage asks whether we do not often enough want to meet the same people on television (or now: digitally? Through social media or netflixing, for example?), and whether this virtual world has not already become a kind of substitute for the (affective) evocation of a ›family‹-relation (a pleasant one that we can safely end without much fear of hurting anyone). And it seems to ask whether it does not reflect the alienation of the self from itself, which does not even notice its normalized, exploited, burned-out loneliness? This is not a pleasant thought but one that nevertheless evokes a humorous trait of self-questioning and even consent. On the other hand, the sentences seems to ask whether the virtual world is really a form of alienation or another form of togetherness, one that imitates itself, that imitates sophistication, *mondanité*? A thought that is not so far away from ›reality‹ as it can be applied to the internet and remains meaningful when it is related to the digital world. Nevertheless, the other is also sought in these encounters, the other that, even in the virtual world, represents desire, erotic display and exoticism. The other is represented by the fetishization of a traditional Japanese piece of cloth and style as well as figurations of femininity*. And this silently emanating thought between the images of the sentence evokes a quiet humor in the process of contemplation, one that smiles at the trajectory of the thought and what it makes us see, and that changes into pensiveness by the last sentence, which reveals that it is not ›Midori‹ that people are interested in; ›Midori‹ as the other and as femininity* must always appear masked in order to be ›seen‹, ›recognized‹ and ›acknowledged‹, which means that ›Midori‹ can never be fully present, not even to herself*, but always in a disguised form. The tragic smile that sticks to the utterance, extinguishing itself, has an intensifying melancholy in the corners of its mouth, because the disguised ›Midori‹ also shows and mirrors the half-presence of the spectator, who must then ask themselves who *they* are if ›Midori‹ is not ›Midori‹ looking at them.

These narrative currents meet in the question and meta-question of narrative itself as a constructed, rhetorical device that depends on (historically influenced) language and discourse. ›Language‹ no longer seems to be so free and floating but very much bound to the meanings that its words, expressions and significations have acquired over time, and which do not solely lie in the faculty of ›language‹ alone; rather, these meanings have taken material form and have shaped ›reality‹ from where they also resonate in a self-affirming way. But this is not the ›message‹ of the novel, which is categorized as a *roman* on the cover; it is only the assessment that comes with the chosen title in the narrative discourse that is also the title of the actual book.

In another short ›chapter‹, which is half a page long, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ again muses about *time*. The chapter is called ›*le temps des mimosas*‹: Time is pre-figured here as an enclosure that tries to avoid being touched (lived?); it evokes the often-used English name for the mimosa flower, ›touch-me-not‹, so that the novel alludes to this translated and transposed English meaning of the mimosa, behind the image, as some form of aesthetic timelessness:

«Certains possèdent leur temps: ›J'ai tout mon temps.‹ D'autres se font posséder par lui: ›Je n'ai pas le temps.‹ Il y a aussi ›le temps manquant‹ du suicidé [...] À Tokyo, où je n'ai jamais mis les pieds, on converse, paraît-il, le temps, dans de jolies petites boîtes laquées. Si tu veux trois jours, on peut te les vendre. Contre de l'argent? Non, on n'achète du temps qu'avec du temps. [...] Je voudrais acheter du temps japonais avec des mimosas ruisselants de pluie. Basho donne l'impression de cheminer à côté du temps.» (Lafférière 2008, 123)

The humor here comes from playing with the meanings inherent in the poetological instances of language itself. These are shown in the multiple *senses* depicted by the use of *time*. As Vasile points out

«[L]e temps semble occuper une place particulière dans les ouvrages laferriens. En apparence, menacé d'inexistence [...], il s'avère, néanmoins, que le temps s'immisce dans l'univers laferrien sous des formes particulières et en rapport permanent avec le ›je‹ (narrateur et protagoniste) ou avec les divers personnages.» (Vasile 2008, 63)

In this passage, and in the novel in general, the meanings of *time* are opened up beyond their common denotations in the everyday: Possessing *time* and being possessed by *time*, as well as the thought-provoking notion of suicide as a *lack of time*, of being in a hurry and getting away, of saying goodbye to the scenery of life as soon as possible as if one were simply heading somewhere else, or ›home‹ – these instances are not only pleasant but also ambiguously humorous in that they hint at the senses and possibilities of meaning that one might not think of at first, and thus experience as insightful forms of surprise; they also have a decelerating effect because of their thought-provoking potential, inviting one to linger a bit longer, to savor the moment, and to reflect on the meanings evoked. Such haibunic-haiku insights are both amusing and contemplative, evoking a state of wonder. The joking reference to Tokyo, where the narrator claims to have never been,

plays, on the one hand, with the diegetic level of the novel and its claim (to be *japonais*) but also echoes colonial, orientalist schemata that report on the other and other places in order to inform empire about ›them‹ and thus create a dichotomous and binary relation between ›us‹ and ›them‹. There is also the incongruity of claiming to ›know‹ something one cannot ›know‹ even when one has been ›there‹. This ›knowledge‹ about Japan/Tokyo, while mimicking an Orientalist, exoticizing gaze, is also a self-ironic comparison of this text with the constructedness of Orientalist implications and academic ›knowledge‹. The self-irony allows the narrator/›implied author‹ to continue the little game. It constructs ›Japan‹ on a construction and surreptitiously exposes it as a construct; the passage appears like a bottle message and an exoticizing and sensualizing, mysterious flower. And yet the image of a mimosa drained in rain drops, which seems to lie behind this allusion, has a beautiful, sensual aesthetic. And this is the aesthetic that the narrator/›implied author‹ seems to see and seek in Basho's poetry – but they want to look at it carefully, beyond any exoticizing meanings, and they do so by first reflecting the very political meanings that the words carry, to carve out some space and time for them to be seen differently.

The poetic, often conclusive remarks that come in the form of haikus at the end of the haibunic prose are not only ornamental observations but function as a twofold critical reassessment and contemplation. On the one hand, an Orientalist image is ironized so that its meaning is deconstructed. On the other hand, once this image has been deconstructed by an almost imperceptible ironic tendency, it is *deexoticized* and taken to another place where it can be contemplated in a different, thoughtful, sensual way.

Often, the allusive allegorical reference seems to await an answer, hovering in the air that the text conjures up, attempting to repeat Basho in a different way, as in the phrase *l'impression de cheminer à côté du temps*. Here, then, is the other ›real‹ literary contemplation, beyond the naturalized meanings that have been established over time and that things, contemplation itself, have acquired. The poetic tone takes the form of a touching *insight*, evoked by the described image of the flower covered with raindrops, a concentrated close look that resembles a still life of *time*, and of *time* as wandering untouched outside itself, without being out of joint. This image not only remains in the inner eye, it also remains open what it could mean, what it conveys. This space is as much a space of affectivity and thought as it is a space of joyful contentment and wonder, touched by the other (the flower, the rain, being, sight, another power/creator). In this space of touch and close encounter with the other, both the self and the other become one, on one page; any distinction between observer and observed, subject and object, would destroy the evoked allegorical allusion that the poetic rhetoric entails and offers. Rather, what is emphasized is the relationality, the angle and orientation that this touch of the other induces and that lies in the observation, both within the self and between the self and the other.

The narrator's voice thus establishes a double role of narration and a double level of reflection that characterizes the novel. The doubleness of the voice is manifested by the reflections of the ›homodiegetic narrator‹ and, by the reflective zone that is more immediately adjacent to the voice of an ›implied author‹ and, it must be assumed, the ›real author‹ – a pleasantly confusing indistinguishability between the meta- and infra-narrative levels.

Both levels of reflection are constantly doubling back on each other, complicating the narrative as well as the decision as to whether something is happening in this book, or whether it is just a possibility of a possible plot-to-be that has not yet been worked out.

The resemblance of the homodiegetic narrator to the ›real author‹ of this book inevitably invites an implied image of the author, imbued with authorial intentions inferred from information about the ›real author‹, Dany Laferrière. The ›homodiegetic narrator‹, like the ›real author‹, is Haitian-Canadian. They are also (apparently male, cis-normative, and) a writer; this already generates a humorous tonality at the level of narrative rhetoric. In this way, a liminal space is created within the text, where the borders between fact and fiction seem to be erased and the narrative discourse and ›the real world‹ seem to touch each other but do not claim to do so, and instead claim to be completely different, namely *Japanese*, and yet ›real‹; the assertion of incongruity where there seems to be none is thus what evokes humor as well as suspenseful thought about what the homodiegetic narrator (or Dany Laferrière?) is up to. This liminal space that exists between the ›real‹ world and the narrative discourse not only blurs the distinction between the ›texture‹ of ›reality‹ and the novelistic text but also creates another space between the two that complicates the distinction we usually assume between literary writing and ›reality‹. The novel begins to write about itself while it is being written. This style provokes both amusement and attention:

»Quand on a le titre, le plus gros de l'ouvrage est fait. [...] Je nage encore entre le titre et le livre. Moment de flottement. Le temps de bien mesurer le chemin à parcourir. Pas pressé d'entrer dans le vif du sujet. On retourne dans sa tête les images qu'on voudrait voir dans le livre. On aimerait surtout qu'elles s'infiltrent dans notre chair, se mélangent à notre sang, pour qu'on puisse écrire avec notre pied, c'est-à-dire sans y penser. [...] Il en résulte une sorte d'angoisse diffuse qui nous accompagne partout, même à la poissonnerie. Le problème c'est qu'on ne sait pas de quoi se nourrit un tel monstre. On flâne. On s'assoit sur un banc de parc pour regarder passer les nuages. On s'amuse à voir une petite fille jouer avec son chien. On examine ce ciel au ventre bas et lourd d'orages noirs. On se prend à vouloir ouvrir son ventre pour voir si ça se nourrit d'angoisses ou d'images. On reste là, hébété. Ouvert. Tout peut entrer. Un moment d'accalmie. On hume l'air. On s'émerveille devant une simple feuille sèche qui vient de tomber de l'arbre. Le temps d'avant nous semble gorgé d'insouciance. Sale temps ce matin.« (Laferrière 2008, 15–16)

The supposed ease and wonder inherent in the art of literary writing evoke a pleasant humor, showing through the joking of the hybrid narrative voice the rather helpless, the unknowing power-lessness of the art form. Writing appears to be an initially haphazard endeavor, guided more by spontaneously picked up words that can form a title and allow the writer to imagine and construct a whole (other) wor(l)d. But then it shows how difficult the act of coming to terms with the dictate of words of a title is, and how it takes possession of the writer and dominates all their acts. It is presented as a thoroughly physical endeavor, from flesh to blood, to thinking, encompassing perception and movement; the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ is completely enmeshed by what the title demands and by the restless, trembling images it provokes.

Three different narrative levels representing the author figure seem to meet at the limit of a metalepsis. These are invoked by allusions to some of the chapter titles: While in the first pages the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ alludes to the literal title of the actual book *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, here the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ uses the chapter title »*Chez le poissonnier*« to indicate both their destination and their location. The words »*même à la poissonnerie*« seem to indicate the thoughts of an ›implied author‹ and seem to correspond to those of the ›real author‹, reflected in the performative act of a homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ (going to the fishmonger).

By indicating the titles, the ›actual‹ performance and the location of the homodiegetic narrator, the text comes very close to the voice of an ›implied author‹ so that we have to expect an ›implied author‹ in close proximity to the ›real author‹. In fact, the homodiegetic narrator seems to be a mirror image of the ›implied author‹, who is a mirror image of the ›real author‹, a *mise en abyme* of voices and possible ›lives‹, all of which are not only part of the diegetic world but also of ›reality‹, which is thus itself questioned as ›real‹, understood in a straightforward sense.

A humorous tone is also mirrored in the image of an author trapped by the self-chosen title of their book, a book not yet written; in addition, amidst the reflections, the passage unleashes amusing images, such as ›monsters‹ that might emerge from the unwritten novel or the image of the flow of writing that is incongruously metaphorized in the image of writing with one's feet. This image captures the flow of writing as something that writes itself, regardless of which part of the body does the writing; in fact, it suggests that it is unclear where the impulse and ideas to write come from. The humorous tone thus facilitates a sincere reflection on the writing process. At the same time, both writing and thinking about writing appear as everyday activities, evoking a specific lifestyle as an everyday scenery. This scenery, however, becomes flesh and blood through the descriptions given by the contemplating homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ who, just by uttering the words, creates an almost temporal standstill, a performative act that the narrator/›implied author‹ brings about, and which produces a kind of tranquillity. So it comes as a surprise when, after this still picture, a description of an everyday event, a haiku-like sentence suddenly appears, visualized here in a leaf falling from a tree. The description ends with the rapturous phrase: *sale temps ce matin*. Not only is the evoked aura captivating and contemplative, combining a vision with beauty, mystery, and paradox, induced by the sudden change of mood and the allusion to *sale temps*; the image elicited within this calm also entails a form of wisdom as inherent in our most immediate surroundings. It is found in the attention paid to the decay of a single leaf; the gaze, a synecdoche of body and soul, seems to be on a journey, wandering, finding a halt in the evanescence of life and its resemblance to mystery and aporia. This movement of the gaze, captured by the words, implies a form of touch, a resonance resulting from the attentiveness required by the description in its slow unfolding, which, at the same time, generates a subtle humorous tonality based on the contentment and the satisfaction implied in the place of the delicately described images.

At first glance, the title of the novel seems to reflect on authorship, but also on ›identity‹ (politics), which seems to be the major theme of the narrative. In fact, the novel explores the question of ›identity‹, the concept and the *limits* of ›identity‹. In this sense, it is a quite critical, philosophizing narrative, as much as it theorizes the instances of literary

narrative (implicitly, any kind of narrative, to which we would also have to include philosophical ones). In an interview, Laferrière explains this form of writing as a complex act touched by history, politics and thus by *auto-bio-graphy*, which also gives texture to texts:

»Il ne faut pas oublier qu'il y a toujours deux narrateurs dans mes romans. Il y a un narrateur singulier, qui pourrait être moi, qui utilise des éléments autobiographiques liés à ma perception du monde. Et ce narrateur est en lutte contre un dictateur qui veut lui imposer un mode de vie. L'exil est une conséquence de la dictature. On ne s'exile pas, on vous met en exil. Mais ce narrateur a toujours refusé de se considérer en exil, préférant plutôt se définir comme un voyageur.« (Laferrière 2011, 18)

Right at the beginning of the novel, on the first page, while we are being introduced to the somewhat narcissistic, very sympathetic reflections of a narrator and protagonist, who also happens to be a writer and who takes us to a meeting with their publisher, a sentence, a thought appears in the middle of a passage. This sentence seems to be out of place in the cheerful comedy that the ›implied author‹ (we are more or less forced to invoke them as we read, because of the aforementioned similarities with the ›real author‹) triggers in the immediate vicinity of the narrator's voice: *On devrait savoir, avec le temps qu'il ne se fait plus rien de nouveau. Mais on s'y accroche*. This thought-deposit, which in itself sounds humorous because it comes suddenly and in a rather seductive way, has the power to take one by surprise and to shift the humorous rhetoric of the narrator to a much more somber, other, affective instance – that of (a still smiling) meditation:

»Mon éditeur a téléphoné pendant que j'étais parti acheter du saumon frais. [...] Autrefois, je ne supportais pas le saumon. Quand j'en mangeais, je le vomissais dix minutes plus tard. La dernière fois, c'était chez une amie. J'avais mal visé le bol des toilettes. J'ai nettoyé sa salle de bains, me suis lavé le visage avant de retourner au salon. Je m'étais juré que c'était la dernière fois que j'en mangeais. Bon, ce n'était pas la première promesse non tenue. Je n'ai aucune obligation de tenir des promesses que je fais à moi-même – sauf peut-être celle d'écrire ce livre. La voix de mon éditeur me semblait bien aigre, malgré toute la chaleur qu'il a cru y mettre. Je le comprends un peu. Il ne m'avait pas vraiment tordu le bras pour écrire ce livre. J'étais le premier à hocher vigoureusement la tête quand il m'a dit qu'il fallait absolument que j'écrive un nouveau livre. Le mot ›nouveau‹ m'effraie toujours un peu. Pourquoi un nouveau livre? On devrait savoir, avec le temps, qu'il ne se fait plus rien de nouveau. Mais on s'y accroche. Le client veut toujours du nouveau. Je ne vais pas reprendre ce débat qu'il connaît maintenant par cœur.« (Laferrière 2008, 11)

The novel begins by evoking a realist and picturesque imagery, which prompts one to think of the everyday life report of its author: So it is not only the paradoxes of events (not being able to stand salmon and yet eating it (over and over again, by the way), being in conflict with one's desires and one's ability to fulfill them, being unfaithful to one's self and enjoying it, and thereby overcoming one's bad consciousness and the loud workings of the super-ego voice within one's own torn and broken self), which not only make one feel sympathy for the narrator (and most likely the ›implied author‹); the pleasant humor they unleash is thrilling. Their humorous tendencies are relieving and pleasant, and they

also increase the willingness to continue listening to the musings of this speaking homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹. The humorous tone thus prepares and facilitates the ground for identification with the narrator. Moreover, it comes across as playful and therapeutic, and in its vulnerability and down-to-earthness, as a limit of touchability, as untouchable, as almost sacred, (innocent) anti-power rhetoric. Touching on such issues themselves, evoked in the passage, makes the text in a way almost untouchable, giving impetus to an understanding of its affective economy that is not logocentric but remains in the poetological specter of touch, knitting together reading, sensuality, and cognition. In the midst of the humorous tendency, there is suddenly a much quieter, indeterminate voice that seems to skim over another narrative level, and another narrative voice, presenting time as eternity, represented in the phrase mentioned above: *On devrait savoir, avec le temps qu'il ne se fait plus rien de nouveau. Mais on s'y accroche*. The text thus touches on an *insight* that goes beyond the narrator's supposedly naïve portrayal and their everyday humor; a thoughtful trait invokes time as infinite in contrast to one's own finiteness, and the evanescence of all existence. The unknown that combines life and death refers to more than the writing of a book. It refers to the experience of life as such as an interval, as simultaneously always old and new, with its share of good and bad times, its pain and losses, subtly set to work by the expression ›rien de nouveau‹ (on this earth). The narrator's former joking and disobedient tone takes on a different flavor; its taste is more bizarre, more strained. And the humor that accompanies it changes into a different attentiveness on the edge of sorrow as if a line had been drawn in the distance, between a crazy, loud ›laughter‹ and a silent, crying grief. It is a small, unobtrusive and yet strong interlude in the text that changes the tonality of the whole passage, unleashing an affectivity of vulnerability, of anguish. At the same time, it gives a foretaste of the entire narrative, evoking suspense and a state of alarm. The experience of the everyday and ordinary is given a deep structure, like a cellar full of unspoken things. It is as if it were reaching out to touch the secrets and discrete spaces of an ›implied audience‹, or to imply and mirror them, rather than to reveal any mysteries that no one would know. However, the novel's narrative style also has a realistic, almost chatty, reportage undertone. In the following pages, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ readily and without mystification explains how the title of the book came about and what it supposedly means. But before this explanation, as if mocking an academic language of ›truth-‹ seeking (and philosophy?), the narrator points out the importance of titles in general as well as the importance of the title of this book in particular. At first glance, the passage reads like a truism:

»On ne peut pas imaginer le nombre de bons livres qui circulent clandestinement à cause de mauvais titres. Dans les librairies, les rares commentaires que j'entends d'un livre, c'est à 90 % à propos du titre. Les lecteurs me demandent souvent comment tel titre m'est venu à l'esprit. Je ne sais pas, moi. Je reste assis un long moment, et subitement le titre vient. Pas même le temps d'y penser dix secondes, le titre était déjà là. Comme s'il m'attendait au tournant. Tu cherches un titre, toi? On ne peut rien vous cacher. Alors il me saute à la gorge et se retrouve étalé sur la feuille blanche. Je dois le contempler longtemps, le tourner dans tous les sens. Chaque mot, que dis-je, chaque syllabe, chaque lettre doit être à sa place. Quel que soit le livre, ce sont ces mots qui le

représenteront. Ce sont ses mots que l'on verra le plus souvent. Pour les autres, il faudra ouvrir le livre. Alors que ces mots seront toujours là sous nos yeux. Ils contiendront tous les autres mots du livre. Pas besoin de relire le livre de Garcia Márquez, il suffirait de dire *Cent ans de solitude* ou *À la recherche du temps perdu* s'il s'agit de Proust (on dit encore Proust? Ce titre n'est-il pas connu de tout le monde?) et toutes les images du livre défilent alors devant nos yeux éblouis comme un rideau enluminé qui nous sépare de la déplaisante réalité. Et le temps de la lecture (les jours dans les cafés, les nuits près de la lampe), caché dans les replis de notre mémoire, remonte instantanément à la surface avec son cortège riche de sensations inédites. Un bon titre: quel fabuleux mot de passe!« (Laferrière 2008, 12–13)

At second glance, there may be more to this passage than the humorous small talk of an unnerving narrator. The platitude is transformed into an assessment of the excitement of reading, which is not only a form of immersion in the world of the other but also an enriching, intimate, affective, and sensual experience within the self, in a quite solitary way; this solitude and devotion to the (other's) text is reinforced by spatial and temporal invocations: Even in a probably very loud and/or crowded café, one remains absorbed in the other's text, and not even the darkness and seclusion of a late hour can disrupt the connection, which is even reinforced by the soothing complicity of a lamp. Here, too, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator seems to speak and reach out to the possible ›audience‹; they may thereby trigger, touch faintly, somewhere, intimate memories. Again, this skill, coming from a humor of approval, has a disarming effect that leads almost imperceptibly to a state of affective and sensual attentiveness, not only to the text but also to this experience of reading that is being described. It thus amuses with an insight that seems to come from within, within the dialogicity that the text offers, by inducing a memory of an internal state in the self as the sensuality of a reading experience. Moreover, the truism of the book's title appears as a teasing rhetorical technique, a detour to the entrance of the spirals of affectivity of amusement. With this humorous excitement the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator indicates how important titles are to them, at least, and that they therefore do not choose them at random although they cannot say and do not know how they come about. This state of power-less unknowing, behind the words, however, seems to open them up to what might come. Agency is left to the other, to the text that may find answers. But this happens in a kind of state of tacit mutual colloquy: They weigh ›chaque mot‹, ›chaque syllabe‹, and ›chaque lettre‹ ›doit être‹ ›à sa place‹.

What this enumeration suggests is that the title has a meaning, a meaning, though, that remains to some extent unknown even to the (›implied‹) author. What this passage also suggests is that, while it is not possible to remember all the details of a text, what remains lodged in the folds of memory are the affective and sensual effects of a textual reading sensation as a reminiscence and perhaps even its essence. The title functions here as a password, a *mot de passe*. It is a shibboleth,¹² a test word, to access not only the un-

12 Redfield speaks of the shibboleth-effect and defines it as an »[...] insistent foregrounding of words that grant, forbid, delay or simulate access to other scenes, voices, and signifiers: words misspoken, forgotten and returning, errant, promiscuous, at work in the arrière-scène, punning across languages, having letters purloined, coming unglued« (Redfield 2021, 11). Derrida's famous examination of the term is based on and inspired by Peter Szondi's reading of a poem by Paul Celan.

known contents of the book but also the known and unknown pages of one's self. *Mot de pass*, however, signals more here; it can be read as a password, a shibboleth that allows an authorship to take shape within a specific authorized canon, it allows entry and recognition into such a canon, it signals affiliation to a specific (literary) space with its ›laws‹; it is a shibboleth that makes an author part of an archive, the sphere of socio-cultural power. The password is a sign of crossing borders. It is a passport that, to a certain extent, also decides on survival and death, also in a sociopolitical sense. The title is thus a shibboleth for the (net-)workings of power and the flaw of un/touchability: It defines whether one is livable as a writer or is an outlaw. It marks the border between center and periphery. A shibboleth title allows you to survive as an author (who never stands alone but represents certain other affiliations, (elective) affinities and political sentiments), and it allows you to think about other titles to be vocal and *heard*. In this way, the title is the entrance into a world system and an order of signifying senses (in both senses). A politics of reading is thus entangled in the title, marking what is allowed and what must remain secret (and read in clandestinity). It involves a strategy of subversion and resistance. Titles, as passwords of passages and borders, are also demarcations of identitarian politics in different senses and of different forms of identification. As a test word, finally they are thus, an »*Erkennungszeichen* [an identifier], a sign that polices an order« (Redfield 2021, 10) of non-belonging.

The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator seems to complicate such an invisible, unwritten thread by exploring the emergence of their own title and what it sets in motion within themselves and and perhaps also others:

»Quand on avance un titre qu'on aime bien, il faut y aller prudemment. Généralement, l'éditeur veut vous entendre sur le contenu. De quoi s'agit-il? On pose encore de pareilles questions idiotes. Pas le genre de mon éditeur qui se détache un peu de sa table sans cesser de sourire. J'en profite pour regarder quelques titres autour de moi. Rien de bon. J'ai donc lancé négligemment le mien par-dessus la pile de manuscrits. Quoi? *Je suis un écrivain japonais*. Bref silence. Large sourire. Vendu! On signe le contrat: 10 000 euros pour cinq petits mots. Dans l'euphorie, je raconte à l'éditeur l'anecdote de Vonnegut Jr. On parle déjà d'un bandeau: ›Le plus rapide titreur d'Amérique‹. Mais on a vite laissé tomber, par pudeur. Voilà le problème de l'Europe: une trop grande conscience du ridicule. Ce n'est pas le ridicule qui nous tuera, mais sa peur. Si on a laissé tomber ce bandeau, c'est aussi à cause de l'ambiguïté du mot ›titreur‹. La grande majorité des lecteurs auraient lu sûrement ›tireur‹ au pire, ›tueur‹. En fait, on a été lâches. Revenons au titre. Il l'a pris dans ses mains comme un briquet dans un espace interdit aux fumeurs. Il l'a retourné dans tous les sens. Mon titre a gardé sa force à chaque fois. Subitement, il se met à l'écrire sur la nappe. C'est assez banal, tout compte fait – sauf le mot japonais. Dans mon cas, ce n'est pas une plaisanterie, car je me considère vraiment comme un écrivain japonais.« (Laferrrière 2008, 13–14)

Derrida's undertaking, therefore, itself appears to me as a poetological discussion and entry into a theory of historiography and of shibboleths that separate what is allowed and what is foreclosed from thinking and thinking *about*. It thus becomes a password to the politics of (experienced and enacted) violence that also determines language and thinking.

The humorous tonality of the text takes up another facet of the dilemma of the title and of writing. It first shows the resurfacing of a title as the ultimate idea for a new book; its quasi initial point of departure is a whim even though it remains a secret, it fore-closes even the author from knowing how it comes about and finds its way out. The one who authorizes it has no authority over it. This mysterious weight borne by the humorous tone, adds a thoughtful nuance to the text, increasing suspense and proximity to the speaking voice of the ›implied author‹/narrator. The closeness is built on the experience of not-knowing as an effect of the everyday as one's own actions, in which one feels to be caught, which triggers humor. Even what we say the text, seems to suggest, often happens without our ›knowledge‹ and power, and supposedly without any specific meaning. (As we shall see, it is this sapping nonsense that *Je suis un écrivain japonais* wishes to reflect upon . . .). The passage, then, in its fluffy and charmingly winning chatter, refers to two momentous processes that give meaning to writing and its interrelations and contexts. The tone of the humorous slant is incongruous with the serenity it evokes. The book is then presented as a product of and for a market. As such, it depends on the needs of the market and is regulated, at least to some extent, by the workings of capital, which always works in tandem with the values and meanings of a (historically given) culture and its politics of meaning production as well as structures of power. This cultural location of the book's title, indeed its market value, is implied in the broad smile of the publisher, who does not even know what the book is about, and the meaning it may harbor, but he knows: It is going to be a probable bestseller, which is indicated by the look that supposedly accompanies the publisher's smile, and to which the text gives contour with the exclamation ›Vendu!‹, and an accompanying exclamation mark, to make sure that the weight of the title is understood.

The title suffices to tell the publisher what a good deal it seems to be. The passage even suggests a sum for these *cinq petits mots*. In this descriptive scene about the title, therefore, there is also an implied criticism. Beneath the humorous tendency, it describes a serious defining condition of a network of historically determined sociopolitical workings in which an author is embedded as well as the emergence of a cultural narrative, a seemingly harmless one, a novel.

This realistic tone, moreover, not only blurs the distinction between the novel and ›the real‹. It also functions as a self-humorous portrayal that, in the moment of describing a great success and approval, laughs at it by implying its absurdity and also its tragedy. Its tragedy depends, on the one hand, on the description of the publisher, which is humorized above all by evoking a small and dirty scene of (everyday) not very heroic subversion of regulations, *Il l'a pris dans ses mains comme un briquet dans un espace interdit aux fumeurs*. On the other hand, a contemplative tragic side is evoked as part of the little adjective *japonais* as the ›implied author‹/narrator indicates with an almost resigned gesture that the title is all very banal, except for the little word that indicates otherness: *tout compte fait – sauf le mot japonais*.

This is followed by the most important shift in the novel, which determines the further orientation and double angle of the narrative. It happens on two levels, on the level of the story and on the level of narrative discourse. The ›implied author‹/narrator adds to this tragic-humorous scenery a decisive reflective side, which they bring into play

throughout the text by stating unambiguously that they really consider themselves to be a Japanese writer and that this is not a ›joke‹.

Thus, the dumb humor that might arise, an imagery that hangs on the corners of racist implications and visions and that feeds on the notion of the ›implied author‹ of the novel as a Black writer, and the title *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, which can be considered as a paradox, is unhinged. And this, perhaps, is what the ›implied author‹/narrator wants to reveal, the stupidity of a ›knowledge‹ that does not know, and an ›implied author‹/narrator, who is trying to find out what such a claim might mean. They follow the possibilities of the question on a double level, they track its meaning at the level of the story with implications for meta-understandings. And they pursue its possible meanings and outcomes at a discursive level within the narrative form of the novel.

At both levels, an *affective humor* is at work that touches and is touched by different matters, with the potential to touch and move and orient an implicated ›audience‹ with all its ethical repercussions.

L'anecdote de Vonnegut Jr. is also such a double signification inside and outside the text. It reinforces the quasi realistic-journalistic narrative of the ›implied author‹/narrator. A page earlier, ›the implied author‹/narrator quips that Vonnegut Jr., a reference to the real U.S. writer Kurt Vonnegut, has labeled them the *plus rapide ›titreur‹ d'Amerique*:

›Kurt Vonnegut Jr aurait dit à sa femme qui m'a rapporté le propos (je parle comme un journaliste maintenant [...])‹ (Laferrrière 2008, 12).

Kurt Vonnegut had just died in 2007, the year before the publication of *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, so it can be assumed that his name as an acclaimed author, which he is considered to be, carries some weight here in two ways: On the one hand, the ›implied author‹/narrator humorously presents themselves as an important author mentioned by Vonnegut, making themselves, with a wink, part of the American canon – and extends that canon to include not only North America but *l'Amerique* as a whole, including Canada and the Caribbean (later they mention the importance of García Márquez and thus Latin America). The ›implied author‹/narrator reminds us that ›America‹, encompasses more than the U.S. (Mathis-Moser 2003; Ertler 2008; De Luca 2018), and ipso facto introduces what a powerful and defining power the book market in the U.S. is. With this humorous tone, they also perform a critique of such a system of sanctioned neglect.

On the other hand, the ›implied author‹/narrator not only ironizes this status of an author and the importance they attach to their name by humbling themselves as a journalist. And this humorous humbling, in turn, comes across as sympathetic, because it is not meant in a derogatory sense since the ›real author‹, Laferrrière, was a journalist before their migration and diasporic life in Montréal. The humorous tonality is therefore not ironic and not incongruous with what they are saying but may rather resemble a melancholic memory of a different life *back then*, in time and space, which must carry some grief (Ertler 2013, 125). Again, I am reminded of a space somewhere in the remoteness of the text, where a string is stretched between joy, sorrow, and misery. The affectivity of their humor, as well as the humor itself, remains undecidable, ambiguous, oscillating, and must remain so as it carries the burden and meaning of different things at different times and places at once, all of which are backpacked and laid out in this short passage.

This style of thoughtfulness that somehow remains in the air, amidst the humorous allusions, evoking affectivity in relation to infinity and presence, thus is *doing time*: It pro-

duces and presents presence in the midst of the transience of time in all possible directions (past, future, not-knowing), like a narrated still life. The literary text appears like a painting, and not-knowing becomes not only a wide space and distance but also a form of unpredictable and extended (ocean of) *time*, laying there bare (power-less).

The humorous tonality changes its shade again into a more bitter humor, which cynically leaves a presumed ›implied audience‹ out there, in the niches of the narrative, confused by the neologism *titreur* with *tireur* and *tueur*.

Not only does this shift painfully associate murder and violence with the image of the racialized other, putting a finger on the wound that racism inflicts on living bodies even when they are recognized writers (which means that class does not necessarily protect against racist hate speech and images), it also ironically and with a disguised critical humor points to a false political correctness that is hypocritical in that, instead of discussing racism, sweeps it under the rug by claiming that it is not funny.

The ›implied author‹/narrator, here, explicitly addresses it as ›*le problème de l'Europe*‹ which is ›*une trop grande conscience du ridicule. Ce n'est pas le ridicule qui nous tuera, mais sa peur*‹. It depicts humor as a platform of anxiety as humor can prompt us to think about taboo sociopolitical issues that we do not want to touch; not laughing and not using humor thus becomes, in this sense, a way of avoiding being touched by an issue as well as by (the issues of) the other. It indicates a form of power that is also disguised as a fear of error. This form of closure guarantees the preservation of the existing ›laws‹ of touch, of sociopolitical and discursive impenetrability, and of the (historically determined) axis of power (also of writing and speaking). By using the pronoun ›nous‹, the ›implied author‹/narrator, on the one hand, protects themselves from resentment, while at the same time they announce their criticism and repair the borders of touch that they have just dared to transgress. On the other hand, they point out that they, too, are nolens volens part of this ›Europe‹ and therefore (should) have the right to bring up and discuss the things that literally *kill* ›them‹ on a daily basis.

In this way, and probably without knowing it, the ›implied author‹ asserts their literary skill, their tact and ability to touch and to touch upon different issues, which is manifested in the invocation of different matters and sentiments in the nutshell of some tangible humorous allusions that transcend nationalisms, ›reality‹, ›the non-real‹ (what ever that might be), the world on a broader, global level and its entanglement, in thought, in sensuality, and in the imagination.

Je suis un écrivain japonais – On the Level of the Narrative Discourse

Point of Entry – In the Metro with Basho

The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator begins their quite solitary journey into the forest of writing by taking Basho with them (Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1702)), and they enter the diegetic level of the story understandably with the subway (it is a fairly big city):

»Je suis dans le métro de Montréal en train de suivre les traces d'un certain Mastuso Munefusa, dit Basho.« (Laferrière 2008, 28)

Here, on a narrative level that remains in close contact with the assumed voice of the ›implied author‹, a plateau of reflection is opened up, and the question of (literary) writing as reflection, as philosophizing. This state of more or less endless contemplation also goes beyond a trait of world-making while it is worldly in Said's sense and a written metamorphosis of what it means *to be in the world*, a property that both shows and sutures its *brokenness*; this reflective specter seems to transcend continents, history, and national borders or colonial concepts like ›race‹, to open up a plateau for the possibility of touch and being in touch that may be fertile for thinking humanity and being human differently. Touch appears, not only as ›the laws‹ of the unsayable but also as the threshold where sensuality and imagination meet and from where it may become possible to think the world otherwise.

»Un Basho dont j'avais lu quelques bribes, mais jamais un texte complet. Le poète raconte son voyage à pied dans le Nord du Japon. Je le lis dans le métro. Je suis en train de suivre les péripéties de Basho à la recherche de la barrière de Shirakawa dans un métro en mouvement à Montréal. Tout bouge. Sauf le temps qui reste immobile. Trop absorbé par tous ces télescopes de temps et ces croisements d'espaces pour m'intéresser à mon entourage immédiat. Sauf cette fille en face de moi qui me regarde sans sourire. Longue et mince. Des yeux noirs – un trait de pinceau. Elle doit s'appeler Isa. Dès que quelqu'un traverse mon champ de vision, il devient un personnage de fiction. Aucune frontière entre la littérature et la vie. Je replonge dans le livre. Basho prépare son dernier voyage avec minutie. Il n'en peut plus de son quotidien étouffant. Le temps file aussi. ›*Les jours et les mois s'égrènent passants fugaces*: murmure sans amertume le poète vagabond. Il lui faut de nouveau se mettre en route, retrouver les zigzags du hasard.« (Laferrière 2008, 26–27)

With Basho, *thinking* is presented here as reflective moments of undoing, through a conjunction of contemplation at the level of discursivity and discursive critique; this reflective style shows thinking as writing, and writing almost *filmographically* (since the picturesque scenery is always in motion) as both, being in the world and as going beyond it. This contemplative thinking, which remains in dialogue with a prosaic poem, across time and space, can be regarded either as an alternative to philosophic thinking or as philosophic thinking per se (which would amount to considering philosophy as a specific (haibunic?) literary branch), depending on where one wants to or dares to draw the line between the two forms of thinking, one made into a discipline (power) of knowledge-seeking, the other more free (but virtually placed in a madhouse of power-less unknowing? Where it is happy anyway, spreading its critical emblem?). (Fictional) writing, moreover, is shown to be embedded and implicated in the everyday, a limitless and fluid flow of thought that touches the limits of sensual experience and becomes an abstract concept-metaphor in touch with reality, as in the emblematic names (of Basho as well as Isa). The naming of names in this simple way brushes aside an alleged paradox of fiction and shows its entanglement and complexity within ›lived experience‹. The humorous tone is further emphasized by this playful play on names, which, however, hides the thought-

provoking claim of the ›implied author‹/narrator, tilting the boundaries between ›real life‹ experience and fiction. Thought itself, reflection, is real and yet not, it is untouchable, but it is there – touchable, maybe, in the way we act and in the way how we perform, a double mark of how we are touched and how we touch. The text itself appears as an intertextual but also as a sensual trace of the reading experience in the external and internal world, full of concentrated affectivity that is part of the contemplation and of the experience of time as arrested and infinite, whereby the external world is also imbued with the textuality in the strict sense of other texts that is signaled by reading Basho. A light humor carries the tonality of the contemplation. It arises from the evocation of a typical *métro*-encounter, when the eyes of people facing each other suddenly meet for a moment and give rise to fugitive thoughts around the person, possibilities, narratives, questions who they might be, why they seem tired, and how random and accidental life seems to be and so on. The scene generates a moment of recognition and not only blurs any borders between a fictional and a realistic incident but challenges them.

Yet Basho is more than a companion. The narrator seems to embrace Basho as a mouthpiece. Instead of enumerating thoughts in a trail of internal monologue, they speak with and through Basho, making him their master poet. In this way, the two different languages, spaces, tongues, and affective and intellectual insights intermingle and become one. In quoting Basho, the narrator becomes Basho and vice versa. Basho appears as the *ur*-voice of poets in general. And poets, regardless of time, space or nationality, become a family of wisdom-seekers, who seem to know and to report on the delicate experience and the liminality of the aesthetics of beauty, which seems to linger on the threshold of being alive and being dead, of living and dying. They are captured through intense close and contemplative gazes that are translated into a poetic language within instances of infinite forward-moving repetitions. Time appears as a space in motion; it is allegorized twice here, it is allegorized as a journey *à pied*, as it used to be in Basho's *time*, and it is allegorized as the trip with the *métro* in the contemporaneous *time* of the narrator. In both cases, it is a journey to the *North*, which not only generates space *beyond* (linear) time and is not only the *north* of a place (Japan/Canada), it can also be understood as symbolizing the living path to death, and in effect, to heaven – a space without time and sensuality, at least, in the living form we (do not) know, but a form of unknowledge and powerlessness, which we can picture as something worthwhile, at least in the abstract of the text and imagination. These are also the characteristic features of the rhetoric through which the narrator portrays their search as a ›Japanese writer‹, trying to find the ›essence‹ of writing itself:

»Je lève la tête. Isa, toujours là. Rien n'a bougé, sauf le train. Je retourne donc à Basho. Matsushima! Cela fait un moment que nos voyageurs en rêvent. Enfin, ils y sont. [...] La mort le frôle près du fleuve Kitagami où se jette la rivière Koromo. [...] Et Basho toujours soucieux de bien situer le lieu où il se trouve afin que d'autres poètes puissent refaire le même chemin. C'est cela le grand jeu auquel on joue depuis des siècles. Basho tente de nous faire comprendre que les poètes ne font qu'un et qu'un seul souffle les anime. Et ce chemin, qui est le même pour tous, mais que chaque poète emprunte à sa manière. Et en son temps. Le train s'est arrêté sans que je m'en aperçoive. À peine le

temps de voir Isa de dos dans la foule pressée. Long cou fragile. Nuque triste (je projette ma tristesse sur sa nuque). Le train recommence à bouger.» (Laferrière 2008, 28)

The claim of the ›implied author/narrator to be a Japanese writer slowly gets contours and appears more transparent. Its contemplative ›murmuring‹ is eliciting a spectrum of affectivity from sighing melancholy to sorrow and then back to joyful reflective recognitions of possible similarities with the realistic imagery that the narrative inconspicuously employs and that plays pleasurably between realist and contemplative fictional strolls. It also shows the ways the ›implied author/narrator themselves are touched by Basho's writings. The narrative reveals the instances of influence and erudition via the implicit and yet essential working of reading itself – across time, space and different languages. In an interview with Adam Leith Gollner, Laferrière evokes the image of border crossing as a movement inherent in writing:

»A writer is someone who crosses frontiers without being stopped, and without getting caught, both in the imaginary sense and in reality. To read is to be able to change centuries. That's the power of literature. It erases borders. They say you can't be a Japanese writer if you don't know Japan. So I chose a country that I didn't know that is far away and I said, there: I am a Japanese writer.« (Laferrière qtd. in Gollner 2020, 39)

Translation, in turn, functions as the bearer and the archive of wisdom within the nutshell of poetic language, as the ulterior *touch* of the other across the limits and limitations that are set by time and space, life and death, and the different *tongues* that can still touch and teach each other, which is reflected in the poetic reverberations of the ›implied author/narrator, who evokes those ancient traces and teachings in their prose. Touch, in this sense, appears as a form of bonding and inner affiliation that can surmount all boundaries and obstacles, and that looms within the poetics of literary dexterity, which itself one must be able to *read*. In this sense, touch also appears as a language between writers, between poets, in translation, and thus seems to be a shibboleth to enter this inner circle of punditry and wisdom. The passage explains and performs this touch and conveys it with a humorous tongue that plays and keeps the balance between the tragic and the joyful borderlines of life. It is depicted here within a cis-normative gaze as the fragility of a female *nuque triste*, the nape of the neck, which can be *the* epitome of ›love‹, but also of vulnerability, loss and death, of power-lessness. This ›observed‹ instance that evokes a delicate glimpse and perhaps a cautious smile at the silkiness and value of life, not only constitutes a touch in itself, but also emphasizes the effectiveness of the narrator's earlier moving comments within a relieving, sensual, and bodily everyday episode. Translation, too, becomes a mechanical part of this everyday life and is shown as a passion, as ›love‹ and as an unappreciated but relevant occupation of being alive. The ›implied author/narrator refers explicitly to translation. In one scene, in the narrative discourse, on the threshold of a metalepsis, they depict a personal meeting with an English translator of Basho, Nicolas Bouvier (1929–1998). Bouvier is portrayed as someone who is literally on the verge of different journeys within seemingly, infinite border crossings, not only in his writing but also in ›real life‹. Indeed, Bouvier was famous as a traveler-writer per se (Détorie 2020). Here, however, he is also portrayed as a beleaguered person,

out of time, not only due to his importance as a translator and writer, but because this timelessness and overwork also corresponded to a ›market value‹ that was *attached* to him, that he seemed to be exposed to and that stole his time until he found his way back to Basho, as the passage seems to indicate:

»J'ai rencontré Bouvier à Toronto, il y a quelques années. On a pris un café ensemble. Si plein de vie et épuisé à la fois. Sa valise au pied de la table. Dialogue rapide entre deux aéroports – il filait à New York. [...] Son taxi est arrivé. Je regarde ce profil presque basané et en sueur. Déjà absorbé par ses notes. La voiture filant sous une pluie fine. Les années sont passé. Sa légende a déraisonnablement grossi. Une petite coterie en a fait une sorte de saint. Le voici de retour en traducteur de Basho.« (Laferrière 2008, 26)

Thus, for the narrator, the name of Basho seems to embody not only a specific form of poetry, but also a specific form of ›being alive‹. His poetic style corresponded to his lifestyle. Poetry, the ›implied author‹/narrator seems to say, also means a specific form of seeing, of sensuality and sense-giving, of leisure.

This metalepsis threshold is also deployed in relation to the novel itself that has not yet been written. It emerges in the process of reading, dissolving any boundaries between narrative time and real time, narrative space, the ›world out there‹ and the diegetic world. And it seldom appears as a play with instances of reality and world-making. Rather, an ethical trait is evoked around the task of the writer and the economy of writing that seem to be at odds in the absurdity of capitalist modernity. This is for example the case when the ›implied author‹ is called by their publisher from a Swedish hotel, where they notice by chance, while watching a documentary, that *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is about to be translated into Japanese (although, the book has not yet been written):

»Je sens surtout la présence de mon éditeur quand il ne se manifeste pas.
– Allô!
– C'est votre éditeur.
– Justement, je pensais à vous.
– Je suis à Stockholm pour un colloque sur Andersen.
– Mais il est danois.
– Les Danois détestent Andersen qui les a fait passer pour des monstres capables de laisser mourir une petite fille dans le froid! [...]
– La télé était allumée, et subitement votre visage en gros plan en face de moi ...
– Mais qu'est-ce que je foutais à la télé à Stockholm? [...]
– C'était un reportage de la télé japonaise. Vous marchiez dans un parc à Montréal. J'avais vraiment l'impression d'halluciner quand j'ai entendu parler de votre roman Je suis un écrivain japonais. [...] Je vous le dis tout de suite, mon problème n'est pas l'alcool, mais le manque d'alcool. [...]
– Mais qu'est-ce que c'est que cette histoire! Je n'ai même pas encore reçu le livre qu'il est déjà traduit, et en japonais. Je suis l'éditeur ou quoi?« (Laferrière 2008, 152–154)

A sensual, tangible, confusing effect of reality, is thus created in the rhetoric of the text; interwoven within its layers is a pleasurable, roguish humor generated through the repeated naïve form of its humorous tone. This playful humour also paves the way for an

openness to think about the evoked scene and the rather helpless humorous dialogue, in which the ›implied author/narrator as well as their publisher become figments of their semi-diegetic world. This quasi-metaleptic insertion also evokes the incongruity of time, space, and of desire (however mediocre), all of which further evoke the persuasiveness of the situation and of everyday reflective ruminations. Moreover, through the rhetorical form the passage develops a *performative trait* in which an ›implied audience‹ is invoked to witness the scene as a paradox of fiction, which may also enhance an effect of touch from within the text, playing with the limits of a non-fictional text. In this way, the text makes the touch of the imprint and impression of a described situation even more ›real: The text appears almost as an unmediated immediacy, as presence. Moreover, the scene seems ›real precisely because of its paratext, its title, blurring any distinction between the literary and the non-literary. In doing so, the text invites reflection on the validity of this distinction as well as on the notion of a paradox inherent in, or arising from, fiction. Every literary text appears as an imprint of experienced life. It also echoes a form of globalized mediatization of ›culture‹ and ›literature‹ that squeezes time and space into another realm of experience, one that is ›real‹ but takes place in the synecdochic ›unreal‹ of medial representations.

This is a trait that, since its postmodernist ›discovery‹ has grown into the immediacy of the internet, the digital translation of algorithms, and translation as algorithm, and is therefore, in its appalling and fascinating, seemingly all-encompassing velocity still significant and important to touch and reflect upon – and its (im/possible) controlling effects.

It is a form of humorous globalization that is distinguished in the novel from another form of planetarity and ›humanity‹, which is invoked with the name of Basho and imploringly echoed in the title and text of the novel, where the ›implied author‹ not only poetically follows in the footsteps of Basho but also reinscribes their footsteps in their text, incorporating Basho into their oeuvre:

»Je jette un bref coup d'œil sur Basho penché, lui aussi, sur un petit cerisier.

Basho examinant ce petit cerisier qui commence déjà à fleurir. On est toujours étonné de tomber sur la vie à certains endroits. Giflé par le vent glacial de l'hiver, il n'a pas oublié de fleurir au printemps. Quel courage! Il semble là tout seul, ignoré de tous, sauf de Gyoson qui a écrit une strophe à la gloire des cerisiers solitaires.

[]e reprends ma lecture. Je picore ça et là. J'ouvre le livre, je lis une strophe ou j'accompagne Basho un bref moment, puis je le referme doucement. Regard rêveur. Cette capacité qu'a Basho d'être immédiatement vivant, à chaque fois. Il n'y a que Whitman ici pour avoir une pareille énergie. Me voilà de nouveau en phase avec Basho. Au moment où je sens revenir mes douleurs de dos, je tombe sur ce passage où Basho se plaint du même mal. C'est souvent dans les douleurs qu'on se reconnaît dans l'autre. [...] Basho envisage la marche comme une façon des se laver de toute la crasse de cette réalité. Le haïku n'est qu'un petit savon bon marché.« (Laferrière 2008, 61–62; emphasis in the original)

Reading Basho seems to give way to a value, an ›essence‹. Whether this is the ›essence‹ of poetry or the ›essence‹ of wonder remains unclear. But there is a similarity even in the bodily movements that accompany this reading process, which appears like a chore-

ographed dance, touching the reading process and visualized in the same bodily movements around the streets of a metropolitan city. This poetic re-rendering of the words of an ancient poet mirrors understanding as movement that goes deep into the body-mind apparatus. It is expressed in the form of psycho-physical gestures. The words *doucement*, *regard rêveur*, and *un bref moment* evoke a paused, slow contemplation. Basho's book seems to represent *la gloire des cerisiers solitaires* that is cherished here by the ›implied author/homodiegetic narrator just as the cherry tree as a sight of wonder and beauty is cherished by Basho, and before him by Gyoson.

What is evoked here is not only a sequence of wonder and wandering inherent in the words, the sights, and in poetry, but also a form of devotional meditation in which poetry becomes part of the nature described, and part of the devotion and wonder at beauty, and the beauty of wonder as a form of reflection. Poetry signals not only withdrawal and surrender to and wonder at beauty, but also the beauty of wonder as a form of reflection. These cross-references evoke a form of humor that is conveyed by a wit bound not only to the faculty of ›reason‹ and wittiness (as parts of reflection) but also to the affectivity and expressiveness of contentment, satisfaction, and fulfillment. In its unfolding, it educes a touching energy that, like the description of Basho's poetry itself, simultaneously opens and fills desirous spaces in the text and within the reading self. This touching energy can be observed in the satisfaction that the reading of the ›(implied) author‹/narrator echoes within the (implied and ›real‹) reading process and seems to mirror the experience and impression of reading that the ›implied author‹/narrator takes with them on their journey, along with an ›implied audience‹, just as Basho is accompanied, in his book, by his friend Sora. Humor is also evoked in a sensual as well as a material form, in the references to the body, to the *skin*, and in the meaning of poetry as a *bar of soap* with which one washes the soul¹³, and frees it from the *crasse de cette réalité*.

The cheap price of the soap does not indicate that it has no value, but that it is quite easy, simple to obtain. In a world where commodities seem to reign, poetry appears as a secret and luxurious, undervalued artefact that only a few fortunate people seem to know about. Basho also stands here for slowness, the slowness of the dreamy and visionary gaze that contrasts with the acceleration of a pragmatized time in a capitalist society. In this way, the novel seems to take up an anti-capitalist, critical tone here, that, in its desolation, almost resembles a naturalistic, realist novel, as if it wanted to distance itself from a purely idealistic or mystified understanding to avoid being misunderstood, categorized and read as such a form of representation. It shows that it is well aware of the other ›reality‹ of systematic and systemic sociopolitical neglect, but that it, precisely for this very reason, is not interested in concentrating on portraying its glumness. Again the hand of a ›real author‹ seems to intervene to ensure that the novel is steered in the right direction. Poetry, then, is evoked here in a touching way as a pain that unites (human) experience – a form of ›humanity‹ that, in its simple, naïve, and yet existential understanding, generates a contentment-related affectivity that borders on humor, which is also aroused by the reference of the ›implied author‹/narrator to this ancient poet and his writings and sufferings as if they were following a parental figure like a chick. However, the novel here also takes up the sociopolitically ›dirty‹ side of this haiku-world, of

13 On the role and meaning of lyric as (world) theory see Popal (2024a).

›the North‹, of Montréal, showing that poverty, in all possible senses, is also a characteristic of the (post-)industrialized, (still) imperial northern hemisphere. The almost ritual purgative power of Basho and poetry is further underscored by the evocation and reference to the everyday of such squalid places and harsh encounters as a repertoire that people must endure on a daily basis, throughout their lives. ›Soap‹ and ›skin‹, as the largest bodily organ, and ›veins‹, which *geograph* the body and its struggles, are the synecdochic terms that symbolize such lived experiences in contrast to the healing process of Bashoan poetry. The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator enters a restaurant on rue Saint-Laurent. The waitress whom the ›implied author‹/narrator calls ›Suzie‹, the name embroidered on her apron, arrives promptly. ›Suzie‹ is introduced as the prototype of a kind of lost and desperate *white* working-class female migrant from the country to the city, struck by poverty, disillusionment, and social decline, with all its material and physical effects that have transformed her into a restless, alienated *machine humaine* as the short chapter is also called (Laferrière 2008, 60):

» J'étais encore avec Basho quand elle s'est assise en face de moi.
 – Qu'est-ce que tu fais là? – [...]
 – Je termine mes frites.
 – Tu lis quoi?
 – Basho.
 Regards suspicieux.
 – C'est qui lui?
 – Un poète japonais.
 – Tu te moques de moi ?
 – Non.
 – T'es japonais?
 – Non.
 – Tu n'es pas de la police par hasard?
 – Même pas. – [...] – Pourquoi je serais de la police?
 – Les gens viennent ici pour manger ... En dix ans, je n'ai jamais vu quelqu'un avec un livre ici, et toi tu lis un livre en japonais.
 – C'est une traduction. [...]
 – Tu peux finir des frites, mais après du pars.
 – Je ne savais pas que c'était un club privé.
 – J'acceptes qui je veux ... Tu perturbes la clientèle ... Rejean est parti ... Les gens que tu vois là viennent ici depuis au moins vingt ans. C'est leur dernière station avant la rue. Je dois les protéger ... T'as compris là?
 Elle retourne à la caisse où un vieil homme est en train de compter sa monnaie depuis un quart d'heure.« (Laferrière 2008, 62–64)

The passage reads like an Edward Hopper painting brought to life from an intersectional and socially disadvantaged perspective to shed a different light on North America at night. While the scene may play with images of Blackness and Japaneseness and the marginalized experience of reading as such that seems to come across as ›exotic‹, on the one hand, and ›Suzie's‹ misinterpretation that shows her as illiterate on the other, which has its own tragic traits, the underlying incident within this dialogue is

sociopolitical marginalization and downward social mobility on an intersectional level, and the grief that must accompany this form of historically conditioned and politically sustained deprivation. The situation is comedic while it hinges on grief as there is no comprehensible reason why reading must come with external categorizations. It shows how the margins of the literary possibilities of reading, as well as the margins of the sociopolitical, are invoked differently in the figure and embodiment of the othered. The supposed strangeness, furthermore, seems to stem from what is perceived and connoted as an incongruity: Reading literature is controlled by historically conditioned and transparent, unwritten sociopolitical ›laws‹ of ›nationality‹ and ›belonging‹ – which are queered by literature as well as by the literary imagination, for which this novel stands as well. Literature, especially in its unexpected form of ›world literature‹ (all literatures in the world always appertain to the whole world, does it not?), is regarded as a threat and with suspicion.

The evoked ›translation‹ from the Japanese seems to be an explanation as well as a bridge that interlinks paths in time and space, in thought and language, but also in realism, ›reality‹ and a future im/possibility that the literary text opens up, touching on the accessibility of and *belonging to* and *for* the other.

The waitress is suspicious of the protagonist/homodiegetic narrator's reading of a book, and all the more so of reading, non-English, ›Japanese‹ poetry; she feels deceived. ›Suzie‹ suspects them of belonging to her ›enemies‹, either an elite social class that has the privilege of reading, or to ›the police‹, who, in fact, because of the uncertainty of power abuse, are also often seen as the ›enemies‹ of racialized, and more often than not, criminalized Black people and people of color. But the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ not only shows sympathy for her, as *c'est souvent dans les douleurs qu'on se reconnaît dans l'autre*, be this other Basho or ›Suzie‹; they also let ›Suzie‹ speak back. At the end of the dialogue ›Suzie‹ emerges as a tragic heroine, who despite all her misery tries to protect those she knows and who, as she knows, remain defenseless. The passage also shows that reading (literature – all the more so poetry) has become a luxury and a sign of social class, pointing to the exploitation of others. The comic of the scene on the edge of the tragic, thus, unfolds and plays with various asymmetries of power in which gender, ›race‹, and class are intertwined and overlapped in their layers of meaning; it all appears as a ›reak‹, ›authentic‹ scene in a Canadian metropolis near a subway that does not take one away very far from underprivileged conditions; a scene, which enhances its tragedy at the same moment in which its comical side is grasped. However, the scenery may also ask if reading may be an answer to this desolate state, at least to a different kind of poverty and deprivation? Would the world be different if much more books from the shelves of world literature, even if in translation, were read (and remembered, taken to heart)? Would ›Suzie‹ be different, if she had (had) the chance to read Basho and find some form of comfort and shelter in his literature? Perhaps she would.

What distinguishes this humor from ›mere‹ satire, though, and gives it a more empathetic, thoughtful quality is the way the ›implied author‹/narrator approaches both ›Suzie‹ and Basho. While they consider ›Suzie's‹ ›life‹ circumstances and empathically note her lost dreams as well as her self-determined heroic acts, despite being victimized by discursive and material structures, Basho is not just any treatise for them. For them Basho's text is full of (existential) wisdom and, in this sense, a text with which they can

identify, another more fulfilling discourse. Identification, too, is thus transferred to another understanding. This understanding of ›identity‹ is not based on a capitalist, racialized, and national understanding, but on the idea of suffering that seems to have become an internal, *deep understanding of relatedness*, which, rather than having to be explained or rather than to being alienating, is echoed through the appreciation of the other in all their supposedly bizarre acts, and the allegories of the poetic allusions to ›beauty‹ and a ›beyondness‹, in which the ›implied author‹/narrator can find themselves and *chooses* to place themselves through literary imagination rather than the ›real‹ world but *as the* ›real‹ world. And it is from there, the literary world, that they can perceive the external and internal world differently, with *that other kind* of understanding beyond the *skin* while looking at the other's salient *veins*.

On a sociopolitical level, the passage indicates barriers. The vivid realistic scenery depicts ›laws‹ that the passage and the novel as a whole touch on and open up; the only contrast to this experienced everyday life is Basho's poetic writing as well as thinking/writing in this poetic form; the realistic scene as well as the educative role of the ›implied author‹/narrator emphasize the text's references to different ›truths‹ and possibilities that the passage conveys and performs. At the same time that the ›implied author‹/narrator is aware of the problem and analyzes it (by portraying ›Suzie‹ and giving her a name), and also by their delicate reading of Basho, the novel shifts this ›reality‹ into the possibility of another reading of ›reality‹, which is also a ›real‹ understanding of Basho as well as the refusal to place, to be placed, and to accept the workings of (discursive and ideological) naturalized and racialized, fixed role-playing and silencing, and thus to open up the texture of the wor(l)d to the other and let them speak.

The materialized workings of ›race‹ and class, as well as the danger and threat that emanates from ›the police‹, are explicitly invoked in another chapter, where the ›implied author‹/narrator must endure police harassment in their very *home*, their apartment; Even the most private place cannot serve as a shelter.

After Noriko, one of Midori's close friends, who always accompanied her, commits suicide from the narrator's appartement, driven by ›love‹, jealousy, and mental struggles (Laferrière 2008, 80 f.), the narrator receives visits from two police officers, the second time just for harassment.

A humorous tone, nevertheless, frames this scene at the beginning of the chapter, which is conveyed in a lighthearted manner:

»Bof, avec la police, il faut simplement attendre. C'est ce que je fais. Je m'assois. Le concierge en bas doit être dans tous ses états. Non seulement il déteste la police comme tous les immigrés, mais il se demande s'il va être payé avec toutes ces histoires. Eux continuent à circuler sans ménagement chez le contribuable. Ils vont ici et là. [...] Je les attends tranquillement. Il faudra bien qu'ils me parlent à un moment donné. Les voilà qui viennent se planter devant moi. Deux policiers et un Noir dans la chambre crasseuse d'un quartier mal famé de Montréal, ça craint.« (Laferrière 2008, 117)

The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator speaks in an ironic, *knowing* way that may be a kind of self-reassurance. The humorous rhetoric provides relief from the tension, which they must experience in the presence of the two police officers. It also unleashes a

specific, elaborate, and sophisticated assessment in the midst of an unbearable situation. Even here, or maybe especially here, despite the horrors that the scene inevitably evokes, humor adds a subtle tone to the passage, an (*in*)direct inclination towards the illegitimate and racialized condition that *tous les immigrés* have to suffer and have learned to fear; and amid the brutality that is part of this almost always presumed clash, resides a ›laughter‹ on the verge of ›madness‹ about how ridiculous this is, a game of and with ›identity‹ and belonging within fantasies of superiority.

The inverted critical pose not only increases the observing and witnessing stance, it also prevents the victimization of the speaking voice as it is this voice that delineates the event, and it does so in an unperturbed tone:

»Ils sont simplement venus voir s'il n'y a pas de coke qui traîne ici. La seule chose que j'ai à faire c'est ne pas bouger. Ne rien dire. Ne rien faire. D'un autre côté, j'ai de sérieux doutes que cette histoire s'est passée dans la réalité. Paul Veyne rappelle que: ›les vérités étaient elles-mêmes des imaginations.‹ (Laferrière 2008, 118)

Different affective evocations haunt each other in this very short passage. On the one hand, the voice of the ›implied author‹/narrator is sensible; however, it is the scenery as such that shows the exposure of Black, Indigenous, and people of color, especially of Black men in this case, to police brutality and the rule of racist arbitrariness; here, another ›law‹ seems to reign: Right in the center of state authority, there resides the potentiality of lawlessness and the emergence of *bare life*. The scene generates an aura of menace and captivating anxiety. Yet the passage interposes a humorous tendency, both on the diegetic level and on a meta-level, when it touches on the question of ›reality‹ and ›fiction‹ in a fictional writing in the form of an almost *auto-bio-graphical* report (Mathis-Moser 2003; Ertler 2008; Lessard 2014).

It is not, however, this space of touch between ›reality‹ and ›fiction‹ that the ›implied author‹/narrator might want to point to, nor an urgency to critique the determinism of subjugating subject formations within language and discourse, these might just be side effects of the narrative structure that is employed. Rather, the focus is on the ›irony‹ itself, an ›irony‹ that arises not from an incongruity but from a congruity: that police brutality is indeed a threatening problem, especially for BIPOC. This at least does not seem so alien to the homodiegetic narrator, who has learned to play along, to deal with it, and to remain calm, since there is no other shelter to lean on, to complain to, or to find protection in, as they soberly point out in another passage:

»Je viens de comprendre que sa descente est une initiative personnelle. Il a vu mon dossier avec mon adresse. Il est venu m'intimider, sachant que je ne suis pas assez stupide pour porter plainte. (Laferrière 2008, 122)

Pas assez stupide pour porter plainte is the expression that prosaically signifies this normalized intractability of the traumatic everyday threat. State brutality functions as a reference to ›reality‹, implicitly pointing to the other tragedy that indeed *invokes a reality effect*, and the ›knowledge‹, and to an extent maybe resigned, sad humor that must accompany it: The *risus purus* that interlinks Nietzsche, Fanon and Beckett:

»The bitter, the hollow [...]. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh [...] the laugh of laughs, the risus purus [...] the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy« (Beckett 2009, 40).

The scene addresses two other important points. On the one hand, it shows how police harassment often comes with sexualized threat, ensconced in the performance of a combat of male masculinity. On the other hand, it displays the performative resistance that such harassment and brutality will always have to figure and face:

»– Essaies-tu d'insinuer que des policiers de la Gendarmerie royale du Canada ont volé des bijoux d'une prostituée? lance-t-il à la ronde tout en pressant son bâton, cette fois, sur mon pénis. Le bâton est le prolongement de sa main. [...] Et moi, toujours quelque part dans le vieux Japon. J'ai arrêté de faire partie du cirque qui se déroule sous mes yeux. [...]

Un temps. C'est ce temps qui doit être bien rythmé. Un interrogatoire, c'est un tempo spécial. Trop vite, on est en mode confrontation. Trop lent c'est de l'impertinence. Je bats la mesure discrètement avec mon pied droit. Cela fait un léger mais insistant frottement contre la cuisse du policier.

– Merde!« (Laferrière 2008, 120–121)

As Coleman points out, »[p]erhaps Laferrière wants to expose the smug Canadian hypocrisy that dismisses racism as a phenomenon unique to populations south of the forty-ninth parallel« (Coleman 1998, 79). From a threatening position the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator still finds a way to defend themselves in a covert form. They speak of the right time and the *rhythm* that accompanies the thread; resistance may often resemble a micro-warfare (civilized and civilian, that may be its clue, its power and ›knowledge‹ within an economy of power-lessness and non-knowledge) – in a well-plotted and careful way in which the asymmetry of power is unmentioned and the asymmetrical power relation, is not touched on the surface. *Le vieux Japon*, perhaps a code word for an accomplished, poetic form of thought-place, beyond such unbearable situations, does not denote a ›foreign culture‹ or a space *far away* or a literary work for entertainment. Rather, it appears as a psychic support, a heterotopic island, that offers an (other) view, another possible possibility of looking at ›life‹. What provides hold, then, is not only the ›knowledge‹ that emerges from the poetic text, but its aesthetic form through which not-knowing and power-lessness are evoked as safe spaces and as states of wonder, pause, and thinking. Poetry thus seem to awaken a form of vigor. The narrator speaks from an almost distant, contemplative space within their self as if they were in the company of Basho. The poetic text reads almost like a *comforting balm* and at the same time like a *plan of action*. Basho's text echoes here as an inner shield and protection from the brutality of the structures of historically driven ›reality‹.

While the older police officer is in the bathroom, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator is able to strike up a brief conversation with the younger policeman, whom they believe to be more open and less corrupt, in the hope that it will maybe become part of an alternate, transforming, memorized memory of them:

»— Vous venez d'où? Un moment d'hésitation. — De Gaspésie. — Je connais Trois-Pistoles. Son visage s'éclaire. — Ma mère est de Trois-Pistoles . . . Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé? Pourquoi vous a-t-il frappé? — Je ne sais pas.« (Laferrière 2008, 122).

So, as it turns out, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator knows a town in the region to which the officer has a personal connection. This creates a space in which a virtual touch, an encounter can take place. With this more personal questioning that the narrator initiates, they seem to remind the policeman of their common ›good‹, of an ethical responsiveness. A space is thus created between the two in which a dialogue ensues that has the potential to engender the possibility of a ›real‹ encounter: the perception of each other as equal partners in a dialogue, in the presence of the wondrous strangeness that ›life‹ seems to be. In this dialogue, a common link, a common ›knowledge‹, emerges and creates a bridge for responsiveness. The passage closes with an open thread that gently points to the familiarity that lies in ›the humanness‹ of people, even in asymmetrical power situations, as a potential for other possibilities of imagining, of becoming, of togetherness (. . . of another world . . .).

It is the sociopolitically ›weaker‹ position that initiates this path to what could become a healing process, and in this way also maintains the sovereignty of African American subjectivity in the midst of racist structures (within and without discourse). The passage transcends the mere representation of racist police crimes, offering a self-determined route to *transformative justice*, a path to an ethically informed possibility of change. As if to say, »May I remind you . . . of your own touch/ability . . .?«.

Moreover, this space is where humor emerges as a reflection of inner powerlessness and not-knowing, a quiet smile that transcends time and space.

As discussed earlier, power structures narrative in subtle as well as blatant ways (Abbot 2021, 61). The whole idea of the novel, already evoked in the title, reflects how power structures the discourse against which this narrative is written: What ›identity‹ is and how it works is deeply embedded in language and ›culture‹. To denormalize such conventionalized structures, humor is invoked as another way of thinking. Humor, in this sense, is not only part of the narrative rhetoric of the text but appears as a ›natural‹ byproduct of any deliberation that seems different from the way language and discourse are defined by historically driven imagery and presuppositions, as ancillary parts of thinking and discourse that evoke different sensualities, preferences, and affectations. *Affective humor* as the deconstructive, notknowing and powerless power and ›knowledge‹ of rhetoric, can reveal such historically based deep structures, the rhetoric of power, with its dispositives and microstructures; it is thereby part of the question of who is speaking and whose voice is structuring rhetoric at any given moment, and thus the question of subjectivity. The ›author‹ may be dead with regard to Roland Barthes' very political declaration out of the authoritarian political circumstances from which he spoke, but ›authors‹ are still needed for texts to be generated within discourse and language, and it depends on the corner, space, distance, entangled positions of *subjectivity* from which language and discourse are taken up, arranged, and form a text, and whether and how this position is renegotiated in the process – or not. Does it conform to how it is placed, or does it transcend its usurping determinations? Basho stands out as an alternative way of encountering and identifying with another. *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is therefore not about ›identity‹ but about the acts

and performatives that result from its understanding, it is about *identification*. But not only that. The novel is also about the epistemological and poetic possibilities of writing and reading, of wondering and wandering in the search for an (inner) home:

»Parfois, je lis, toujours le même livre. Je l'ouvre pour me retrouver dans un haïku de Basho. C'est là que j'aimerais vivre, dans un vers de Basho.« (Laferrière 2008, 129)

To become part of a poem, to live in it, captures well the notion of the text as a space in which the self and the other meet and develop relational ties. These ties arise from the text's manifold faculties to touch and touch upon, which are invoked by the text's rhetoric that relies on the affectivity of the humorous tonality from which different meanings are addressed. Within these instances of touch, the poem seems to morph into a place, a lieu, that can be filled, a place that is absorbing, accepting, and welcoming. The other's poem can thus have the connotation of ›warmth‹, of becoming a ›home‹.

This wondrousness of the ancient literary text seems to establish a kind of untouchable place for the ›implied author/homodiegetic narrator‹, an absolute limit within the self to which no one from outside has access, but which is itself structured and nourished by an other from the very outside space, a spacing that a non-apprehension has left in the self. It is a spacing, a heart feeling, according to Husserl, *ein Herzgefühl*, that comes from memory, the memory of a touch, a familiar and yet forever lost ›home‹ and childhood, a *time perdu* that is somehow traced and retrieved in the process of reading Basho, poetry, and writing along their evocations, as the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator recalls:

»Je me vois remonter la rue ensoleillée de mon enfance en tenant la main de ma grand-mère. Un dimanche en province. Un homme tranquillement assis sur sa galerie devant une large table couverte de livres, tous ouverts. Il était penché vers eux, comme devant un buffet riche et varié. Ce gourmand passait d'un livre à un autre avec la même excitation. Rien ne semblait exister autour de lui, à part ces mets appétissants [...] Ma grand-mère m'a alors glissé à l'oreille: ›C'est un lecteur!‹ Et j'ai tout de suite pensé: c'est ce que je ferai plus tard. Je serai un lecteur. [...] Sur mes rares photos d'adolescence, j'ai toujours un livre en main. [...] Ni le soleil, ni la lune, ni les filles, ne m'intéressaient alors. Seul le voyage que permet la lecture. Je n'étais jamais rassasié. Je rêvais qu'un jour, j'entrerais dans un livre pour ne plus jamais revenir. C'est ce qui m'est enfin arrivée avec Basho.« (Laferrière 2008, 68)

Memory, a figure that signifies this *ur-touch*, this space of spacing in the self, can be understood, on the one hand, as the ultimate space of touch and, on the other hand, as the absolute, sacred space of untouchability, perhaps as the vulnerable space of dignity that remains unreachable however atrociously outward corporeality and corpus may be violated. This is evident not only in the way the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator seeks refuge in the power-less non-knowledge of Basho and the reading to which they can devote themselves once the terror is over and even as it is happening. This is also expressed in their memories of the absent-minded *lecteur* and their apparent devotion to books. The sight of the *lecteur*, reading, has become not only a piece of memory, a valuable sight to be memorized, but also represents the relevance of the act of reading and

the value of reading as an instruction, as a model for *devotion*, for living ›life‹. The *lecteur* is absorbed by the wor(l)ds and possibilities that the books apparently open up before their eyes. It gives them sheer joy, and they remain undecided where to begin, in which pool to dive first.

The passage captures this sensual and affective arousal of an all-encompassing procedure, of *begreifen*, of *touch*, that is part of the reading process, with the metaphor of *mets appétissants* and the image of *un buffet riche et varié*. This sensual and affective meaning of the philosophic-theoretical, performative, transformative, and cognitive features of *the act of reading* is rhetorically deployed by the humorous symphony of the passage that itself carries an empathic, affective angle towards the description of the *lecteur*. And it may also be a ›love‹ song to, an appreciation of, an almost imagined ›implied audience‹, in the act of writing, as a figuration on which the book, the author depends in some way, to whom they write in a first, perhaps unaware instance, to countersign and receive their statements. Not only a nuance of affection is aroused here but also an ethical touch at the sight of someone so distant and withdrawn – in other wor(l)ds. It is also a gaze that shows and tests the limits of the permission to look at the other, to touch them while they seem to be withdrawn, which is evident in the way the protagonist's grandmother behaves: She *whispers* to her grandchild so as not to disturb the scene and the *lecteur*, out of respect, and as if she were sharing a secret or as if she were in a sacred ambience where the other is and is not.

The scenery also shows the other in a touched, moved, transported state, an intimate instant in which one is particularly vulnerable. It is a sight that can evoke different kinds of humor and a specter of affectivity (depending on *who* is looking), and it itself leaves a form of touch within the self, evidenced by the detailed remembering of the day and the scenery. Such touching/reading comes with a form of humor that is also withdrawn and imperceptible, the way Derrida describes it, and the way Schlegel describes it as the long repercussion of humor that unfolds in the future in unforeseen ways.

Reading appears as a form of being deeply moved, (taken away), cognitively occupied, *working, somewhere else*, with all the senses, though the body remains in place, a state that might well be captured in the German word *Ergriffenheit*. Moreover, this image-memory of the *lecteur* is a picturesque imprint of the division, in Helmuth Plessner's sense, between the fissured form of being in the world, the staying body, and the wa/ondering mind. Engaged reading thus appears as an example of different self-parts. It may represent the dissipation in Plessner's vivid notion of brokenness (*Gebrochenheit*). But this kind of division is not only shown as a self-refuge, it just seems to be most evident in such cases. At the beginning of this chapter, brokenness is indeed felt and described in a joyful, humorous tone, in a moment of solitude and intensity; it is experienced while the protagonist/homodiegetic narrator is taking a bath, and as if the text knows and follows Plessner's ideas, brokenness appears as the status quo of the human (?) *experience of being per se*:

»Mon corps au fond de la baignoire. Mon esprit au plafond. De temps en temps, ils se rejoignent. Et je remonte à la surface, au bord de la noyade. Un spasme de vie.« (Laferrière 2008, 67)

Brokenness surfaces in this description and appears as an experienced part of the self-sense and of being in the wor(l)d; it almost seems to be a *reflex of staying sane* despite all the destructive ways in which the surrounding ›reality‹ is composed. It gives way to inner spacings and heterotopic withdrawals as a response to the sensual, cognitive, affective desire to be (and to be in an other's wor(l)ds). But it can also be employed as a movement, as an inner way to flee from the terror of destruction that can result from (the invented, constructed, and materialized) ›reality‹, and that can become an egress (or a withdrawal to one's inner ›home‹) from those experienced forms of physical, mental, or epistemological violence. Brokenness as such an understanding includes reading and its reciprocal act of writing as an orientation to the other, as the opening of a space in the self for an encounter with an other, and as a readiness for dialogicity. Brokenness in this sense would not only be a condition of being in the world, but would also include a (willed, intended, produced) desire and capacity to be with the other and to cherish and anchor the reciprocity of the touch. Brokenness, thus, can be regarded as the synecdoche of a bigger coherence of cohesiveness and relationality that is imbued with and is part and parcel of a touching space.

This internal spacing within the self is invoked by intimate moments of memory which are also mirrored in intense instances of reading and writing as a kind of depository and sublation of the self. It signals both postponement (dealing with the matter in another time, and already being shifted to another time-space) and shelter (a shift to a safe other-inner-space).¹⁴ Plessner's understanding of brokenness can thus be seen as reversing the relation of imagination and ›reality‹. The safe and ›truer‹ space in this

14 There is an affinity between Helmut Plessner's idea of brokenness and the concept of dissociation in psychoanalysis, a concept that is linked with trauma. While dissociation, though, means the division of the mind in unbearable situations as a pathologized technique, that, in effect, establishes ›mad‹ minds and ›normal‹ minds, and that, in this way, is part of the hitherto scarcely critiqued, institutionalized and institutionalizing power of psychoanalytic hermeneutics and treatments (also of literary texts), which often hold a decisive, but by far not always positive, and still stigmatizing power on lives, (which should be challenged, especially in light of intersectional, informed, socio-historical, also literary, analysis), Plessner's concept shows the composition of the human being as utterly fractured, and as a part of an outer (historically driven) environment. This approach, it seems to me, to be much more effective in understanding the workings of the psyche and the relations of the body and mind, material and immaterial, animated and unanimated, formulated and unformulated. See for a discussion of ›dissociation‹ and the hermeneutics of psychoanalysis see Donnel B. Stern (2003); in another work literature (and *Japanese* literature!) is taken as a resource to show the workings of dissociation and its handling in literary works; from a more critical approach, I find it problematic though, to impose psychoanalytic findings on literary works, instead to regard these themselves as other forms of narrative analysis, which are informed by philosophic as well as psychoanalytic traits and ›knowledges‹ that in fact may exceed the realm of these sciences, and also formulate, and open up, psychic processed experiences of temporal and spatial relational fragmentation of *being*; nevertheless, I find it stimulating to problematize ›dissociation‹ (or rather brokenness) by reading literature, not to gain insight about a ›nation‹ (the question again: what is ›Japanese‹ or ›French‹ literature), but to rethink singular experiences of the mind, to gain access to an *other* approach of conceiving the human being – maybe as a fractured element of a (historically driven) ›environment‹ and how this is mirrored or established in (the) writing (pad); see David C. Stahl (2018).

distinction between ›madness‹ and ›sanity‹ is not ›reality‹. ›Reality‹ with its brutal structures appears (and is experienced) as unmitigated lunacy; rather, *imagination*, as that which occurs in the mind (but can be materialized, for example, in the form of a ›book‹ or in the act of reading and writing), seems to form the space in which ›truth‹ can be protected. The experience of brokenness can become a space of shelter without forcing one to get ›out of touch with reality‹, and can still take place when one does not have the possibility to get out of it. The touch, as the trace of the inner encounter with the other in the self, is a heterotopic place that, although abstract, remains most palpably felt and organic (within the body).

Reading/writing, in this sense, thus appear as the figuration of the freest form of freedom that, in Hannah Arendt's sense, captures both a freedom *from* as well as a freedom *to* (Arendt 2017). And freedom can also be seen as a form of affectivity that can be most elaborately perceived in humor, with all its delicate rhetorical and performative possibilities and workings of rupture, displacement, and escape from social or epistemological, inner or outer or both, confinements.

Reading and writing, moreover, become indistinguishable, merging into one another, in a way that effectuates closeness rather than detachment. The gaze that emanates from the text is not objectifying but comes in the form of a presupposed understanding, of proximity, which, however, must also be sensed:

»Je termine le voyage de Basho dans le Nord du Japon pour découvrir que ce moine rusé voyageait plutôt en moi. Mon paysage intérieur inventorié par un poète vagabond. Mes veines lui servent de sentiers qu'il emprunte seul (›*Chemin solitaire, nul pas que le mien dans la nuit d'automne*‹.)« (Laferrière 2008, 74)

At the end, though, there seems to lurk something like an alternative view of things, or at least an ending that the work offers as a *dernier voyage*:

»Je traverse la rue. Neige lourde et molle. Le soir tombe doucement. [...] Une jeune femme [...] sourit en me croisant. [...] Un homme m'accroche en passant. Je titube. Il se retourne pour s'excuser mais je n'entends déjà plus rien. Je continue mon chemin sans jamais reprendre tout à fait mon équilibre. On me klaxonne de partout. Musique urbaine. Je perçois à travers un brouillard cette dame qui me hurle quelque chose, avec les yeux et la bouche grands ouverts. Entre les voitures, je cherche la fameuse barrière que Basho fut si heureux de franchir pour prendre la route ›étroite et difficile‹ qui mène vers les districts du nord.« (Laferrière 2008, 212)

It is difficult not to be drawn into the melodic aura of the text, which seems to signal an end but also a beginning, indicated by the tranquility of the scene as if waiting patiently for the next turn once the road has been crossed. The scenery, evoked as a final journey, is already touching by its allusive title. It seems to imply not only a road at the end of the last scenery of the diegetic world, and thus a farewell. Its moving moment also derives from the apparent lostness of the ›implied author‹/narrator generated by focalization. They are shown in a vulnerable, dispersed state, out of touch with themselves, in a state of division and brokenness. The *final journey* also evokes Basho's text and implies an affini-

ity to his text, the *father text*, as it were, which also has a touching quality as the ›implied author/‹narrator cannot let go of the figure of Basho as a guiding figure holding his hand, and let themselves be pulled and drawn by this hand – drawn by someone of whom we do not know if he would have returned the ›love‹ – or perhaps he has already returned it as part of his text and in-between its sentences, holding the ›implied author/‹narrator in an embrace like *the avenir* Derrida suggested, an already realized future coming from the past; in this sense, the scene may also be touching because it evokes that inward humor, deep in the heart, which may not even elicit a smile, maybe a sigh, and which would allegorize that *neverthelessness*, that kind of desire, ›love‹, and admiration that is not tied to settlements and payoffs. Instead, it loves incurably, entrusting itself to this other, powerless and notwithstanding not knowing. Maybe it would not be so far-fetched to assume that *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is also about the idea of choosing one's ›origins‹, beyond nations and nationalities, that it is about an *other*, ancestral form of *elective affinities*. Such a perspective would question ›identity‹ altogether, as it is hitherto conceived, and would invite to restructuring, to imagining, and to naming oneself differently and freely. It would give another liberating impulse to subjectivity and subjecthood (and give rise to new professions, such as *kinologists*, who would advise people on which ancestral, familial, and identitarian paths to take, based on how they experience *attachment* and indebtedness to others). This would also challenge psychology and allow it to be defined and understood otherwise. It would also allow us to reread Freud in this other sense, and to relate his approaches and his return to those ancient Greek texts as a way of fleeing the latent racism and antisemitism that determined his life. *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, then, is indeed a rapturous statement that can evoke another world in which different people form loose yet deep connections and *attachments*, affinities, and gatherings across the planet, across time and space.

The title, *Le dernier voyage*, finally alludes to an end on the road of life, an end as death, as coldness and darkness, as another name for not knowing and powerlessness and what is ahead of us (and maybe also behind us . . .). Not finding one's balance again, in this silence dictated by the snow and the cold, may transcend the moment of narrative time and narrative discourse. It may also encompass the ways in which the rapturous events *in* life, which can be translated as such jostlings, inscribe themselves as perceived, permanent bodily and psychic imbalances.

While the text invokes this picturesque landscape, it also reflects upon it, giving it meaning beyond the text. As Joqueviel-Bourjea writes of Laferrière's work in general, »Laferrière est un peintre en écriture comme certains peintres sont poètes de/dans la couleur« (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 14)¹⁵ and not without a tacit humor that may evoke a smile. It emerges here amid the melancholic reflections and wanderings, emphasizing them, even deepening them, like an exclamation mark, through the verb *klaxonner*, described somewhat ironically but also empathetically, almost tenderly, as *musique urbaine*, which not only signals a vivid incident but also makes it audible, inevitably bringing one back to life again; it can be grasped as an interruption, a *différance*, a *clang*, reminiscent of Der-

15 See also Romuald Fonkoua (2016) on the role of painting in Dany Laferrière's work, which also recurs in this book.

rida's *Glas* (1974),¹⁶ which harbors so many instances and lifestyles of a big city, probably most familiar to an ›implied audience‹, a familiarity that also in its chaotic and colorful liveliness evokes a humorous scene out of memorized instances, a bag full of affectivity: joy, anger, stress, strain. The humorous tone also implies a kaleidoscope of other sensations. It is quiet, thoughtful and at the same time funny as it alludes, in the midst of thoughtful wanderings, to the merciless and anonymous atmosphere of a city that lives difference and where everyone seems to be in tune, to understand each other and to belong together – a small village full of anonymous neighbors from all over the world (or so it could be).

and Off. Stereotypes – *Abbrüche* and Deconstructions

While both *White Teeth* and *Je suis un écrivain japonais* depict stereotypical images not in order to repeat them but to dismantle them and rewrite them within other meanings, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* deals more explicitly with stereotyping. Stereotypes are kindly taken for a ride. This is especially the case with the allusions that the title already evokes. The novel comes across as an outburst and an imprint of a wedge in which writers are discursively implicated according to the logic of the book market. As we have seen, this is one of the main characteristics of the novel and its title. Instead of clichéd images of writers, it offers a placelessness and yet a universal belonging of authors. The novel challenges racist stereotypes about ›the Japanese‹ while also addressing those about ›the Black‹; here, too, the ›implied author‹ links a position they inhabit with the ancient figure and the *true* protagonist of the novel, Matsuo Basho, freeing them both from such constraints and biased thinking.

Peter H. Abbott defines the stereotype from a narratological point of view in relation to character types in narratives as »[a] kind of character that recurs across a range of narrative texts«; he speaks of a ›stereotype‹ »[w]hen a character is composed without invention, that is by adhering too closely to type [. . .]. Stereotype can also be used more broadly« he continues, »to refer to any literary cliché« (Abbott 2021, 263). In Abbott's definition there is thus a narrower meaning of stereotype that he associates with ›character types‹ and to fiction, and a broader understanding of stereotype as quasi the stereotype of the stereotype. What this convoluted relation ultimately suggests is that there are neither ›real‹ and uninvented types ›out there‹, nor that it is possible to distinguish between stereotypes and clichés. What he may be suggesting with this distinction and the adjunct description ›without invention‹, however, may be the notion of singularity – the *new* that emerges through the repetition, whether explicit or implicit. But there is more to the ›stereotype‹. Stereotypes are not only part of narrative strategies; they are also sociopolitically relevant and evaluative forms to designating different ›people‹ according

16 In the new English translation of Derrida's *Glas*, David Wills and Geoffrey Bennington in fact translate the French *glas* as *clang*. Bennington and Wills describe *clang* as the enactment and signature of a reading, typical of Derrida, that pays attention to the *différance* within the text, resonating from it; see Derrida (2021, xii). *Clang* as a form of reading interrupts any sublation in a dialectical Hegelian sense and rather affirms an *other*. These traces also endow *clang* and its quasi-material sound, *klaxonner*, also with dis/continued and de/composed pasts, reminding the self consistently of the other.

to a historically driven ›typology‹ of sense-making within structures of dominance and meaning production. It depends, thus, on whose narrative is told (by whom), and which narrative is *retold* or *destabilized* in a text. Hence, the question of authorship and subjectivity needs to be revisited again and again. In Laferrière's text, clichéd versions of sociopolitical stereotypes are invoked to be destabilized. While Abbot depicts the stereotype within a quite *deideological* layer of narrativity, Homi K. Bhabha, drawing on Said's theorization of *Orientalism* (1978), discusses the stereotype within the circulation of colonial discourse and the *manifold effects* that its repetition regulates and evokes when he writes:

»My reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible (plausible) through stereotypical discourse. To judge the stereotyped images on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its effectivity.« (Bhabha 1994, 95)

The effectivity of the stereotype is what is raised as well as displaced in Laferrière's novel through a tonality of humor, which comprises affectivity and unfolds its rhetorical resonances within the poesies of the novel's performative conjunctions. Laferrière's approach to the stereotype, however, also laughs at itself. It pays attention to the writer as a stereotype and to the stereotyping of the figure of the writer. As Spivak points out in relation to Derrida's understanding of deconstruction, a deconstruction of othering cannot halt at the images of oneself as well as the images of coloniality that the (speaking) subject thereby offers:

»In answer to the question ›Could you expand upon that statement concerning your primary interest in literature‹, Derrida asks the interviewer to situate his own ›stereotype‹ of himself; and engages in a textual weaving of the production of his preferences in adolescence and early career, that would be as decisive as any tracing [...]. This is where Cultural Studies must forever rehearse the cultural subject's politics of exodus: middle passage, exile, indenture, migration? From where do you stereotype yourself? How is this different from historicizing in that there is never a closure here. The trace is also an effort to indicate intentionality (*tenter d'indiquer la visée*), not a cause or effect.« (Spivak 2000, 24)

The ›stereotype‹ is seen here as a trace rather than a consumable *cause* or *effect* in the production of meaning. Such an approach allows us to see its inscription in history and at the same time to free ourselves from its grip. This is what Laferrière does through a rhetoric of humor. The affectivity that is part of this humorous rhetoric prevents it from becoming mere abstraction, or from ignoring the materialized reality that stereotyping inscribes in the body (and the mind). By evoking a humorous, at times ironic attitude toward his own authorship, he also attempts to shift and displace any evocation of an ›essence‹, using instead, on the one hand, Basho as a writer and, on the other, *auto-bio-graphical* instances in which ›implied readers‹ may find themselves implicitly evoked. In this sense, the self is always related to a *vanishing otherness* from which it must understand and form itself

within a performative specter of affectivity and its linguistic, discursive, and imaginative poetics.

There are two levels of stereotypical representation and deconstructive moves in the novel: The text operates on a discursive meta-level to dismantle stereotypes, and the novel depicts stereotypical images in order to deconstruct them within the narrative discourse. At this level, the dismantling of stereotypes seems to be more difficult than at the meta-level. The novel practices this deconstruction of stereotypes, yet not by replacing them with a ›correct version‹ or by pitting some stereotypes against others, but by taking the stereotype as a signifying entity, opening it up and putting it into play like hand puppets. The text thus never loses its performative trait – unless Basho is taken up. The figure of Basho, and the reflections that the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator makes along Basho, stand like a mountain or a ramified cherry tree against these historically driven representations of representations, which are complex and revealing in their signifying practices, but simplifying in their epistemological quality. The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator simultaneously ridicules the possibility of a ›correct version‹ or ›essence‹ of the other. Signification, deconstructed through a rhetoric of *affective humor*, appears as a vexing and and disordered institution. The novel is therefore illuminating – on cultural-critical, meditative, poetological, and epistemological levels by reconsidering ›truth‹ and ›falsehood‹. As the text meanders about meaning and the production of meaning, rather than weaving together a consensual narrative discourse and characters in more or less harmony, it also operates on this level of the text, on the edge of a meta-level, always mocking and unfastening a naturalized and fixed imagery – again, except when it indulges in thoughts about Basho and, apparently, the essence and meaning of poetry, signaling that these may lie beyond such signification regimes.

The humorous tone of the text is varied, and its affective economy corresponds accordingly to a multitude of different sentiments and sensations.

It is as if the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator wanted to free Basho, as well as themselves, from the imprisonment of any pre-conceived notions; but what would be at stake? Is there an ›authentic‹ ›author‹ and authority behind the writer, once stripped of the stereotype? In *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, at least, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator is not convinced of the notion of ›authenticity‹:

»Pour moi, c'est simple: tout est sérieux, et rien ne l'est vraiment. C'est ainsi que j'avance dans la vie. Même moi, je n'arrive pas à démêler chez moi le vrai du faux. C'est que je ne fais aucune différence entre ces deux choses. Pour dire vrai, ces histoires d'authenticité m'ennuient à mourir. Je parle du fait concret de mourir. Quand on évoque les origines en ma présence, je perds littéralement le souffle. On naît d'un endroit, après on choisit son lieu original.« (Laferrière 2008, 21)

Different layers of the meaning of ›authenticity‹ are evoked in this passage; on the one hand, there is the differentiation between ›reality‹ and fiction, which is not deferred but sublated in the expression *tout est sérieux*. Both approaches to ›life‹ (and thus meaning?), whether it be how one indulges in ›reality‹ or how one writes about it, appear to be equally important; the two spheres are not separated but presented as interwoven by the next sentence, which describes this approach as an attitude *within ›life‹* as well as *towards*

›life‹, *c'est ainsi que j'avance dans la vie*. The next statement ridicules the often naturalized duality, and in this way evokes humor based on expected incongruity (one differentiates very much between ›truth‹ and ›falsehood‹); the statement also evokes attention to the text, an implicit issue that the narrator centralizes. Then the angle of the difference between ›true‹ and ›false‹ is changed. The passage digs a little deeper and reveals other presuppositions that are not necessarily related to factuality but are regularly invoked as such, namely the notion of ›authenticity‹ with regard to the ›realness‹ of human beings. This notion of ›authenticity‹ involves hidden assumptions about human ›types‹ as part of a structurally embedded, often racist, culturalist, ethnicized imagery. In this way, the humorous tendency points to the cause-effect of ›authenticity‹ narratives. Not only does ›authenticity‹ produce and refer to ostensible *origins* of an idea, a thing, a culture, a subject by simplifying a bunch of different influences and narrative threads, it also gives these narratives a causality-effect. ›Authenticity‹ becomes a sequential, successively structured master plot (Abbott 2021, 53) that is naturalized as a kind of culturally embedded and self-evident historiography. It is also linked to categorization. Categorization, while seemingly innocent and a harmless site of scientific classification, is in fact the placement of human beings within the imagery of the colonial concept of ›race‹ and its evaluative and geographized mappings (or, in other places, along other degrading and ordering categorizations according to structures of dominance that stabilize specific ›truths‹ and generalize them, which is harmful and problematic as it leaves others vulnerable); rather than an innocuous way of grasping things at an elementary level, categorization combines a list of presuppositions with power relations and solidifies them in a retrievable virtual drawer from which the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator attempts to fish them out, dismantle them, and place them in the out-of-use drawer.

They thus touch on ›the law‹ of ›authenticity‹, questioning its availability and givenness in discourse and language. The text points out that even the evocation of ›names‹ comes with a repertoire of presupposed attributes. ›Authenticity‹ appears as a myth within the economy of representation and as a fundamental discursive basis for placing and structuring the economy of ›truth‹. This is indeed an arduous and daring undertaking, since there is not much space for critiquing and questioning ›authenticity‹ without evoking an abject trait of affectivity such as rejection, fear, discomfort, and the risk of losing an ›audience‹. It touches a limit not only within discourse but also within the affective household it calls upon. The ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator of the novel uses humor as a rhetorical vehicle to lodge their critique. Within this disjunctive poetics, the rhetoric of humor functions as a pleasurable, soothing, and healing olive branch that opens discourse as well as narrative discourse to the sphere of non-knowledge, relying on the power of powerlessness. In contrast to *White Teeth*, where a more Bakhtinian, carnivalesque performing narrative discourse takes the lead, in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* this ›resolving power‹ plays on the level of discourse itself. The entities remain sketchy and mostly at the mercy of the voice of an ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator while there are also some minor instances of repulsion on the part of the characters. In the following, I will look at some terms that play a relevant role in the novel and are repeated in order to further examine this point, which forms a constitutive element of the novel.

›Japan‹ – L'Asie

Je suis un écrivain japonais thus also begins from the repertoire of colonial stereotypes. The novel untangles it from the texture of the cultural text, from the literary text, and resignifies it as a cultural product, however intended, of colonial discourse within the racializing geopolitics in which ›whiteness‹ as a social construct of domination (and a form of disjunctive power) is written in the tinted transparent color that unmarks specific subjectivities.

The novel thus orbits a space that not only encompasses Montréal, but is also organized by the idea of the importance of art in a global encounter in different contexts of coloniality. The search for what it means to be a (›Japanese‹) writer becomes an excursion into the violence of language as a minefield of stereotypes, and a search for how to circumvent them while using the same language and inevitably evoking the same images. But language is not only a matter of stabilizing power, not only a repository of colonial views but also a resource for change. It matters who writes, what subjectivity speaks from what angle. »From Yeats to Achebe [...] it is the deterritorializing and creative potential of language that signals the ability of postcolonial literature to disrupt the dominant forms of colonial discourse« (Bruns 2012, 11).

In this way, different images are presented and challenged. One of these stereotypical images is ›the Japanese‹ as well as ›Japan‹ and also ›Asia‹ and the orientalizations that are part of their evocations.

The title of the chapter *Une Asie de poche* already alludes to this as if to say that all that is ›known‹ about *Asie* is no more than what one finds in a ready-made handbook, it is meager, reduced to a few ›facts‹. And that *Asie* is seen as a distant place of tourist attraction, that it is in fact an island in the ocean of non-knowledge. This alludes to ›knowledge‹ itself as a constraining entity, captured in small paperback books, collected in libraries that have grown over the centuries, which can only touch on *the possibility of ›knowledge‹*, and which stand in contrast to the infinity of non-knowledge. The title, therefore, already contains a humor that questions ›knowledge‹ and the ›knowledge‹ that images of ›Asia‹ arouse.

In the chapter titled *Une Aise de poche*, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator tries to seek out and find an ›authentic Japanese‹ writer in the ›real‹ world. They do so by trying to have a ›real‹ ›Japanese experience‹. This desire has a cis-normative face and means, at first glance, meeting a ›Japanese woman*‹. Femininity* serves as an allegory of capture and conquest but also of lust and adventure within cis-normative, male masculinist thought – just as ›the world‹ was perceived in European conquest and empire; but the homodiegetic narrator/protagonist does this through another related image, that of ›Korea‹ – they ask a Korean-Canadian acquaintance for help. In this way, they locate ›Japan‹ within the larger space of ›Asia‹ (and also Canada) and relate it to another country that has a difficult history with Japan; the text thus shows that ›Asia‹ is not a homogeneous entity but a continent with an ongoing, complex history:

»Je ne connais personne qui vient d'Asie. Je suivrai n'importe quelle fille qui se prénomme Asie – on dirait de la soie. Asie me fait penser aussi à une arme blanche. Un cou tranché si vite. Un collier de gouttelettes de sang. Une rapidité dans la mort qui

rassure. Je pense à ce continent comme un explorateur du XIX^e siècle. Je m'en fais une idée à partir ma chambre. Je connais pourtant ce type qui traîne souvent près du square Saint-Louis. Je ne sais pas trop d'où il vient. L'Asie est si vaste. Lui, le sait-il aujourd'hui? Quand quelqu'un n'est pas retourné chez lui depuis si longtemps, son origine perd de la pertinence. À quoi sert d'être d'un pays dont vous ne parlez même plus la langue?

– T'es pas japonais par hasard

– Corée. Je suis coréen.

– Japon, Corée, c'est pas pareil, ça?

Il me jette un coup d'œil furieux.

– Pourtant, dis-je, j'avais l'impression que vous aviez quelque chose en commun.

– Quoi?

– L'Asie.

Décidément, j'aime ce mot. C'est le continent le plus proche d'Amérique. L'un est trop vieux; l'autre, trop neuf. Et les deux commencent par la lettre A. J'ai devant moi un être de chair et de sang, et je me confie dans la sémiologie. C'est mon côté européen.

– Que veux-tu au juste ?

– J'aime eras vivre une expérience japonaise...

Le Coréen n'est pas trop sûr que je sois sérieux. Je garde mon sérieux. [...]

Soudain le type semble comprendre ce que je cherche.

– Kama-sutra.

– C'est l'Inde, ça.

– Je sais, mais tout le monde croit que c'est japonais.

– Je ne suis pas tout le monde.

– Que veux-tu au juste?

– Être dans les parages ... Les odeurs, les couleurs, les frôlements ...

– Je connais un jeune travesti ...

– C'est mieux que ce soit une fille.

– Et deux jumelles chinoises?

– Je n'ai pas dit la Chine.

– Tout ça c'est l'Asie, vous venez de le dire.

[...]

– Je peux te poser une question? Ça fait combien de temps que tu n'es pas retourné en Corée? C'est la question qui combine l'espace et le temps.

– Je ne sais pas ... J'ai perdu mon passeport.

– Et où tu le gardes ton pays?

– Là, dans ma poche.

Ses yeux brillaient étrangement. Je me dirige vers la petite librairie du Square où j'avais fait commander un livre (La route étroite vers les districts du nord de Basho).«

(Laferrrière 2008, 20–22)

In this extended passage, several images related to ›Asia‹ are both evoked and de/constructed. First, the passage deals with the Orientalist image of Asia in a homogenized and generalized way as an ›outdated‹ space. ›Asia‹ seems to be a steppe-like area beyond history and time. In this outstretched, seemingly passive mode, ›Asia‹ functions like a colonial archive of hidden desires and illicit dreams. In its functionality, it resembles the unknowable and uncanny space of the psyche, reflecting a site of the (colonial) self. *Asie* stands for eroticism and violence, and these terms also evoke cinematic images of ›Asia:‹ ›Asia‹ is what we see and grasp as ›Asia‹ through the performative imagery of (Kong Fu)

films, the clean cuts at the throat and the silence of fighting sport on the edge of art, where it meets the silence of erotic ›love‹ as art. It does not matter whether this art is called ›kama-sutra‹ or some other name and which niche of ›Asia‹ it represents. These quasi-filmic, doubly culturalized images of ›Asia‹/›Europe‹ (or ›the West‹ and ›the Rest‹) derive from such generalizing colonial fantasies and not only that, but also from the accumulation of ›knowledge‹ as a *cultural capital* that has grown out of colonial encounters and scholarly learning, of *un explorateur du XIXe siècle*, which is itself imbued with desire and violence towards the other(-ed) space – a desire and lust that differentiates and separates because it wants to understand it([s]-self). The notion of ›knowledge‹ that these absurd images imply for ›Asia‹ is sexuality and corporeality; the space of the other is the space of passion, irrationality, and sensuality, and it is here that ›Asia‹ is allowed to be an expert, in a way – of things that ›Europe‹ has left behind but which it randomly seeks for pleasure, like the legendary erotic plays of the ›Kama-Sutra‹, and strictly speaking it does not matter from which corner of ›Asia‹ these come. *Asie* thus represents the place of (a self-injured) ›Europe‹, a mirror image of what ›Europe‹ has stripped from itself in order to look at it from a yearning distance while it has imprisoned *Asie* in the grotto, behind the mirror with the Rest (of the world). (What ›Europe‹ cannot know is that *Asie* and the Rest of the crew talk in their own languages, sometimes (well often unfortunately) at war with each other, sometimes (seldom unfortunately) having a good time (but maybe things will change eventually and move in the opposite direction . . .). The grotto is, in fact, another universal dimension of which this book is a random sign . . .).

Secondly, the function of difference in discourse is brought up and demonstrated in this way. Difference within the phallogocentric grammar of coloniality and its discursive aftermath functions as a legitimation for alleged ›knowing‹, revelation, and discovery fantasies within colonial regimes. At the same time that empire claims this self-image, it conceals and obscures its other motives and drives, making them unknowable to itself and projecting them onto the other. This is how the (colonial) self and the (colonized) other are born. Empire seeks ›truth‹ through violence and silencing. The other no longer has to speak; it is already evoked and represented by the colonial image, which, through its scholarly rendition, knows it much better than it knows itself. But even in this state of assumed passivity, *Asie*, thirdly, as a signifier of geographized otherness per se, like Derrida's *Psyche*, is not inert. It touches the imperial other and leaves its mark through this imagery, which reveals much more about empire than it does about *Asie*.

This becomes palpable in the encounter between the homodiegetic narrator and their Korean Canadian acquaintance. Both characters know that ›Kama-Sutra‹ stands for ›India‹. Although the narrator initially speaks in the language of the colonizer, who is, at the same time, a (male) scholar, *un explorateur*, they do not take this language for granted either but rather look behind it, and this is a ›knowledge‹ that both characters also share. It is evoked in the angry, reproachful look of their acquaintance, which tells the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹: »*Pardon me?* You come with the same images? You know better, I know (and I also know that you know) that you are part of a very similar and related imagery. So, what is your problem, man?«. And the homodiegetic narrator answers quickly: »*Pourtant*, yes, of course, I know, it's all prejudice and colonial language and so on, but there is, *pourtant*, still something that ›Korea‹ and ›Japan‹ share as signifiers of colonial imagery, you know? And that is the evocation of the

images that the word *Asie* brings into being, right?« The Korean Canadian acquaintance understands, of course, and comes up with, »Ah, Kama-Sutra«, that is what you mean – that all of *Asie*, and in fact the whole world, is reduced to how empire wants to see it, mirror image, eh? To make it pleasant for itself, to have some pleasure, the poor guy, hey, and you are, in a different way, on the same journey, eh? I understand. You want to have ›another experience‹, an ›adventure‹ with *Asie* out of friendship, so to speak, eh?«.

Since he cannot know the ›real‹ motives of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, their acquaintance suspects a sexual experience (which may also lurk somewhere in the ›implied author's‹/narrator's inclinations toward charming and arcane *Asie* (– what kind of a mirror image may this be?).

Nevertheless, the exchange takes place on an equal ground, they both *know* that ›Kama-Sutra is Indian‹, but that when it comes to *Asie*, it is all the same anyway, and ›Kama-Sutra‹ becomes Japanese (don't *they* have something similar?). Some other form of frivolous (and perhaps more fulfilling (*damn!*) sexual techniques one should learn?)

Fourthly, buried in the folds of colonial language, another ›knowledge‹ and *language* becomes visible and audible in the encounter between the ostensible subjects of empire, a ›Korean‹ random guy from the street and a Black writer-character-narrator who has something to say by claiming to be *Japanese*: This is the knowing language of the other(-ed), the nightmare of the colonizer, who already suspects with an uncanny feeling that they might be thoroughly mistaken. The humorous rhetoric of the passage is not evoked by incongruity. It is an orchestrated and allusive dialogue with an ecliptic rhetoric that has a *lexic*¹⁷ signifying effect and that has inspired the above hidden exchange between the characters. The humorous tonality, moreover, is carried out through interrelated, equally ecliptic, silent gestures of mutual understanding, *un coup d'œil furieux*, and the understanding of this gaze by the prompt reply of the narrator, which signals both concession and belated explanation. The humorous rhetoric is thus produced by what is not said rather than by what is said, by the deliberate *gaps* in their dialogue as signs of rapprochement. At the same time, the humorous tonality, on the quiet, mirrors and ridicules racist signification and produces an incongruity with regard to the normalized appeals of the images associated with it. In this way, it also produces a pleasurable affectivity. It derives from the recognition of the clichés, on the one hand, and from being caught *in flagrante delicto* on the other: An ›implied white (?) audience‹ may find itself caught, nolens

17 *Lexic* is a slightly different suggestion of Roland Barthes' understanding of the term ›lexia‹, which he uses in an earlier work within a structuralist analysis of texts. In *S/Z* (1970, 13), Barthes speaks of *lexia* as units of reading and signification through which he proposes to encode a work according to the *five codes* he makes out in the novel. Barthes's *five codes* refer to five positions that a reader can take in order to read, in a more or less exhaustive way, different sediments of a text, which include a hermeneutic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural code. But it is difficult to differentiate between these codes as they are intermingled and interconnected and, moreover, reduce the work of reading to a rather mechanical understanding, from which Barthes later distanced himself. Nevertheless, *lexia* still can be understood as *chunks* of words that contain meaning and thus can engender a specific reading. Such an understanding of ›lexia‹ confirms Barthes' more deconstructive understanding of texts according to which ›everything‹ is already in the text, and it may help to shed further light on the poetological understanding and analysis of literary texts through a close reading *for* and *of* such *word chunks*. See also Abbott (2021, 32 ff.).

volens, in these images but may also feel a sense of ease and relief (from the guilt of participation) that these images are being taken apart, and the other has finally found a way to speak back. It is a joyful humor that laughs along with the text. Humor is also generated in the performative instances of the passage, for the text shows that those spoken about have not only already figured out how they are represented in the imperial imagery of language and discourse, but that they have also made up their own minds about it (enviably understanding each other on a completely different level) and about empire, which also creates a thoughtful site of humorous affectivity. In this way, humor shifts and moves sense and sensuality, while, at the same time, it contains a space for thought, a dwelling place for longer reflection on what has been said, and where humor unfolds its after-effects, its *Nachwirkung*. The rhetoric of humor creates and displays the confrontation of a decolonial praxis of signification that comes with a deconstructive move. In this rattling and shifting of meanings, another possibility of togetherness is also evoked. It is generated by the affective deconstructive movement inherent in the humorous rhetoric that puts everyone on the same level, touching and healing colonial scars and wounds on all possible sides.

The colonized subject shows and shares with empire a ›love‹ for *Asie*, but one that goes in a detrimental other direction, albeit it is still a ›love‹ for *Asie* and the desire to find oneself. Although at first glance the passage mimics colonial fantasies by evoking a sensual desire, which is deictically indicated by the desire of *être dans les parages – Les odeurs, les couleurs, les frôlements*. But then, the conversation returns to *Asie* as an idea for ›home‹ and the notion of ›authenticity‹, not in the senses of a passport, or national belonging; rather it is indicated by a tapping of the chest, the place of the heart, an inward bodily place, the place that symbolizes ›love‹ as well as memory. Suddenly, the chapter's title *Une Asie de poche* obtains another meaning and flavor: It is an *Asie* that is in the heart and the path that leads directly to it. *Asie* is not seen in a geographical sense or in the sensation of exoticism but within and through poetic writing, here through the writing of Basho, also *un livre de poche*, as it were – a book that comes from the heart, touches the heart, and is a touch of the heart that is also preserved there. The passage thus proposes, as an alternative to previous (colonial) understandings, to try to understand, to know, the other through the allusive images that poetry evokes within the self. The passage purports a form of ›knowledge‹-production out of this vast array of non-knowledge and powerlessness in which literature resides and from which it speaks, and begins to reflect with ›the heart‹ as the spacing and the alphabet of the early encounter with the O/other of oneself rather than with the logic of the passport. The way and philosophy of understanding that the passage offers is thus a deconstructive understanding of discourse and language (if that is possible) and the poetics and poetology of the lyrical work.

The implicit other imagery that emerges in the dialogue between the characters in the narrative discourse as well as on the meta-level between an ›implied author‹ and the discursive fringes of colonial meanings show that the other does of course know and can read how colonial language operates, but that this ›knowledge‹ does not necessarily free them from the coloniality in which the wor(l)d (in Canadian French) operates. Only within their ›own‹ signifying practices, like the production of this novel as well as the performance of the encounter and exchange that the narrative discourse makes possible, can they detach themselves from this imagery and make room for their own language(s) and

knowing ›knowledge‹ that nevertheless, too, remains within the vast sphere of not-knowing, where they unpack and release imperial meanings, like caged birds. The power that comes with it thus remains within the constraints of power-lessness. Its touch in this sense is manifold and empire in fact anticipates it; this is where imperial discourse falls within an affectivity of discomfort, sulking and vulnerability – against which it guards itself by the untouchability of its ›laws‹ and positions of speaking. This colonial relation is shown here within a more modern(-ist) thread, by conjuring up ›America‹ and ›Asia‹. A twofold meaning is unfolded here. On the one hand, the text uses colonial imagery that is best captured in Hegel's philosophic classification of the continents in a linearity of time, by speaking of ›Asia‹ as the old continent and of ›America‹ as the new one, referring to the narrative of America's ›discovery‹ as well as to ›Asia's bygone, past glory‹. On the other hand, there is a quite affectionate juxtaposition of the two continents. This is another ›America‹ that encompasses all parts of the continent and not only North America. This other image depicts the two continents as somehow related to each other, as germane, as neighbors. Again, the image of the world as a village is thereby invoked (– hey, and let's not forget, by the way, that *Asie*, although unmentioned here, on its other end, is close to *Afrique*, so – this makes Asia very interesting indeed – what a continent! Blossoming, beautiful. . . which makes the world quite round, wherever you go, you come out at the same place somehow. . .).

The passage is furthermore humorous not only because of the rhetorical technique of personifying the continents, but also because of the allusion to their first letters, (which they share with other continents (›Africa‹, ›Anarctica‹, and ›Australia‹ – but anyway) and by a manifold ironic allusion: *J'ai devant moi un être de chair et de sang, et je me confîne dans la sémiologie. C'est mon côté européen* (Laferrière 2008, 21).

Not only is the boundary between the novel and ›the real‹ world undone by the invocation of a blood-and-flesh encounter, which may make one pause for a moment. There is also a quick reference to ›semiology‹ as a method of reading, but perhaps also as a limited venture of understanding, one that overlooks the immanent and lively, sensual, touching elements, which, too, reside in meaning and give meaning to the becoming and being of the self and its relation to all things. Lastly, it refers to this quite abstract *understanding of understanding*, not only as European but also as their own European side. They, thereby, not only mock ›Europe's engineered approach to ›knowledge‹, but empathically admit to be influenced by it as well – a major influence within power-lessness that is the organizing, central, critical trait of the novel: The mockery, is self-mockery but also a critical stand to its own validity. By deconstructing their own standpoint while practicing it, they take a slight shift outside the box – akin to Basho's style – by organizing meaning through the allegories of *différance* offered in poetry, poetics, and the work of literariness. And again, it is the comic, the humorous rhetoric, what people in ›high theory‹ (Schlegel, de Man, Derrida, Spivak) sometimes call ›irony‹, that is deployed here to make this sound, in close proximity to Basho (and without employing philosophy ›proper‹).

Against an understanding of difference that legitimizes colonial violence with its supremacist discourse and language, the novel proposes to bring in a poetological approach that begins a journey from the heart by adhering to the allegorical understanding of the poetic work. In this, it resembles Derrida's decolonizing notion of and adherence to *différance*, the observation that *différance* is too manifold and too dynamic to be taken

for any sense or essence, that there is no essence/sense that could be captured once and for all, and that the desire to do so in fact reveals the deeply buried unknowing, unconscious, powerless space of the self. In a way *différance* also calls attention to psychic mechanisms of not-knowing and powerlessness as well as to the intrinsic, immanent, silent, yet dynamic, unruly, and un-knowable space of non-knowledge (*NichtWissen*), which, in its inaccessibility and vastness, also remains the repository of all powerlessness (*OhnMacht*). Coloniality and imperial imagery, thus, manifest nothing less than a (caught) space in the powerless unknowable, within a historically and ideologically formed basin, from out of which and from out of where the self acts. And this self, too, is a double self. It encompasses both the colonial self as well as the colonized self, both of which are placed in the theater of a permanent struggle. The novel, with its deconstructive moves and evocations, touches this performance and shifts it to another setting. The rhetoric of humor sets the structure of this other stage. On this stage, suddenly, the sobriety of the learned philosophy of coloniality appears as absurd. It is a willful staging that the rhetoric of humor not only shifts, but with which it disassembles the stage into its components. The Other and the othered are forced to face each other in an open space, from which it seems possible to go off in other directions, alone or in each other's company. The ›implied author/homodiegetic narrator in fact does both. They embark powerless on an unknown journey, unknown even to themselves, and they take with them an ›implied audience as well as Basho. Within the narrative discourse, this encounter, rather than representing a journey, becomes a space of dwelling; it dwells on the threshold of language and discourse, untying and fraying their historically loaded meanings. The historically driven basin of meaning and meaning production is thus challenged, even performatively transformed within the rhetoric of language and its discursivity. The novel as a product as well as what it unfurls in its narrative discursive in the rhetorically induced affectivity of a humorous tonality poses such a challenging, *trans-per-formative* rereading of what is regarded as ›knowledge‹ and power. It holds up a mirror to the mechanisms of empire and the effects of its language and discourse. It is done with empathy rather than ridicule, almost dying of, or at least shaking with, ›laughter‹, laughing about the configurations of our understanding, going beyond their tragic components of silencing by looking out for Basho for help, and a place to let go. As if saying to discourse and how it occupies language: *U know what u doin, man?* (Yes, ›man! Mostly ›man! There is a specter of (at least: cis-)masculinity inherent in it that cannot be denied), while at the same time acknowledging the contamination and complicity of any decolonial project with the ongoing reconfigurations of various systems of coloniality.

The Japanese Writer and ›the Camera‹ (obscura)

The novel thus writes in a modality of deconstruction, deconstructing itself, deconstructing the title, the plot, the genre, and it also comes close to a deconstruction of deconstruction indeed, insofar as it touches upon the limits of the historically, spatially, and sociopolitically caught meanings in language and discourse. In doing so, it shows that deconstruction, as crucial as it is as a power-critical and ethically sensitive lens of reading, remains in the custody of language and discourse rather than being a liberator of other(-ed) meanings and possibilities – as opposed to this, literary writing itself seems to be

offered as an alternative vehicle of deconstructive critique in transit within open-ended possibilities.¹⁸ The novel also exploits stereotypes of ›the Japanese‹ to demonstrate the

18 Laferrière's *Je suis un écrivain japonais* can be read as a response to a quite well-known text of Jacques Derrida. It can be read not only like an application of deconstruction within a literary setting but, to an extent at least, also as a deconstruction of one of Derrida's approaches. In one of his texts, in which Derrida alludes to deconstruction, he does so in the form of an address, of a letter. The letter is written to another scholar specialized in Iranian and Islamic Studies, a Japanese scholar, in fact, Toshihiko Izutzu. In this text that was first published in Japanese, Derrida explains deconstruction in an instructive form in preparation of its Japanese translation. Although it is not a fictional letter and Derrida explicitly addresses it to Toshihiko Izutzu, in its published form it comes with a title, and the title is called *Letter to a Japanese Friend (Lettre à un ami japonais* ([1985] 2008). But why not just *Letter to a Friend*? Derrida may have wanted to emphasize the tone of an address and thus the invocation of a *friendship*. However, in the French and English versions of the text, at least, the questions that Toshihiko Izutzu may have posed and the possible exchange between the two are not mentioned, nor anything about the occasion of their encounter or why Toshihiko Izutzu took interest in the approach of deconstruction, why he wanted to translate deconstruction into Japanese or what possibilities, pitfalls, and problems a Japanese translation of the term would involve. It would also have been interesting to know, why Toshihiko Izutzu came into contact with Jacques Derrida, and in what way he saw connections between his field of study and deconstruction and in which ways. It is striking that this letter is the opening text of the second volume of Derrida's *Psyche – Inventions of the Other* ([1987] 2003) – as if it were asking about the limits of philosophy and the sphere of psychology with regard to the very concept of deconstruction. How is deconstruction to be situated within philosophy, especially as it seems to open up psychology for thinking (otherwise)? Perhaps deconstruction can only be demanded, *ordered* within philosophical thought, perhaps it cannot work independently here as in philosophy there seems to reside an assessing, centralizing desire (to find something?), no matter how elegantly it is formulated or set into work. This might be philosophy's core element, if it should have any, that separates it from ›literature‹ in the sense of literariness, or writing *ohne Zweck*. Although deconstruction is not a formula, as Derrida always emphasized, as part of a philosophical undertaking, there is still a gesture discernible in its design that requires something to be *undone*, something to be *achieved*. This may be why Derrida, too, seems not interested in what his friend found so interesting about deconstruction and why he may have wanted it to be transposed into Japanese? The gesture of philosophy/academic work seems always accompanied by the desire towards power, of finding and saying words that can ascertain themselves by (philosophic discursive?) enactments. Perhaps this is why philosophy remains so important to Derrida as a field, *the* field of signification, the field of power, and why it seems so necessary to begin here to change things for good. In this text, Derrida, in one passage, describes deconstruction as follows:

»All the same, and in spite of appearances, deconstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique*, and its translation would have to take that into consideration. It is not an analysis in particular because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a *simple element*, toward an *undecomposable origin*. These values, like that of analysis, are themselves philosophemes subject to deconstruction. No more is it a critique, in a general sense or in a Kantian sense. The instance of *krinein* or *krisis* (decision, choice, judgement, discernment) is itself, as is all the apparatus of transcendental critique, one of the essential ›themes‹ or ›objects‹ of deconstruction« (Derrida 2008, 4). Through this non-definition Derrida already sets defaults and a guideline. He thus structures his understanding of deconstruction in specific ways, *within* and *without* philosophical presumptions, authorizing something without authorizing it. Literature, or literariness, as perhaps the *actual* field of deconstruction, cannot, even if an author wanted it, claim any authority (although a literary text may have/gain authority); philosophers can allude to an external position, and must even do so, if they want to speak from a philosopher's position. The only way how such a position of speaking could be

racist and arbitrary nature of the images that surround the word: Somewhere very early in the novel, while the ›homodiegetic narrator‹/›implied author‹ are strolling through Montréal on their journey to find themselves as a Japanese writer, they stumble upon an often depicted and ridiculed image, that of the Japanese tourist with a camera, or at least that is how the emblematic title of the one-and-a-half-page chapter *Le Japonais de la tour Eiffel* could be read; the meanings that are evoked play dangerously on the borderlines of the racist, stereotypical image:

»Je n'ai jamais eu d'appareil photo. C'est que je ne comprends pas tout à fait son usage. [...] J'en ai déjà un qui fonctionne très bien. Cette boîte crânienne où j'ai classé cinquante ans d'images dont la plupart se répètent jusqu'à former le tissu de ma vie ordinaire. Cette vie quotidienne faite de minuscules explosions successives. Une vie électrique. []Je peux les décrire avec une précision telle qu'elles finissent par défiler devant leurs yeux. Mieux, je parviens à transformer ces images en sentiments. Je sais raconter un instant sans décrire les personnages présents, en évoquant simplement l'énergie qui donne vie au moment. Sur une photo, on voit rarement cette émotion qui constitue la trame de l'histoire qui se déroule devant nous. [...] Je garde toutes ces photos dans ma tête où elles s'enracinent. Et où les images se piétinent, voulant passer toutes au premier plan. Quant au Japonais qui ne cesse de photographier le monde: le voit-il? [...] La tour Eiffel est là pour témoigner que cet homme est passé un jour à Paris. Mais en faisant le même sourire large et impersonnel devant tous les monuments de la Terre, celui-ci annule le caractère intime du moment. Le Japonais devient lors aussi intemporel que la tour Eiffel. On pourrait croire que c'est la tour Eiffel qui se fait photographier derrière un Japonais souriant.« (Laferrière 2008, 35–36)

At first glance, the humor invoked here is a (racist) grin that relies on the self-perpetuating stereotypical image of ›the (male) Japanese tourist‹. Moreover, it seems to ridicule a clichéd lifestyle as ›Japanese‹ that is actually quite Western and (European) (tourism) and could be understood as a performative mimicry of it. As the text unfolds, however, its meanings and humorous bent become more complicated. The passage suggests that the stereotypical nature of the image of the ›Japanese tourist‹ has itself become a decolonizing tourist attraction in its own right, and the Eiffel Tower is content to be photographed alongside it. The ›Japanese camera‹ appears as an invincible weapon of resistance that seems to mock the phallic imprint of imperial architecture. The grand architecture of the *Tour Eiffel* suddenly appears preposterous against the backdrop of people utilizing it to take selfies. Thus, the big Other appears as if it were *used by* the other(-ed)

deconstructed, may be the rapturous rhetoric of humor (that Derrida like Nietzsche often enough uses); would that not mean that deconstruction, if one feels obliged to take it seriously – and one should, can only lead to an opening up of philosophy to join (*to mean*) the unlimited field of ›literature‹ (and its affective smile) as the vast field to philosophize? Does deconstruction mark the limits of philosophy, the limits *in* philosophy, and must philosophy be transferred (back?) to literature, where it remains infinitely entangled in meaning? (This would be anything but chaos, or arbitrariness within a political system or on a political agenda – far from it. It would just open up the field of thought). Literature can only speak by exposing the limits of its own speaking. And this is what *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, more than anything else, appears to stand for. And does that not also pertain to Derrida's thinking?

to give impetus and importance to the stations of their own lives rather than to honor or accept the monuments' significance as a sign of (political) power and influence. Furthermore, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ compares their humorous writing to the image of the smiling ›Japanese tourist‹ in a contest of sorts for ›authenticity‹. In taking and making their own pictures, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ disassembles and smiles at both, at the emblematic meanings and constructions of the *Japonais souriant* and the *tour Eiffel*. They confidently and self-ironically regard themselves as the more ›authentic‹ Japanese *photographer/writer*, in the sense of remaining more ›truthful‹ to the details and affective expenditure they observe and depict in their writing while trying to look deeper at things and the ways in which a wor(l)d is made up. For the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, writing and photography are the same, »[...] *au fond, c'est la même chose*« (Laferrière 2008, 145). Since, according to the stereotype, the Japanese are »[u]n peuple de photographes souriants« (Laferrière 2008, 144), the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ becomes a *Japanese writer-photographer* by employing humor in their writing sketches — in a witty, tacit joust. Underneath the humorous allusions that playfully tug at the limits of meaning lies a serious admonition not to take images and meanings for granted as self-sufficient entities. The passage also centralizes relationality and alterity rather than *autonomy*; neither the monument nor the tourist would have a significant and actual meaning without the relation that is part of their functionality. This recalls Derrida's notion of *auto-bio-graphy* as the chiasm of a historically driven touch and as the relation of a self to an other but goes beyond that by taking into account the affective and sensual momentum of singularity. Singularity understood thus pays attention, not only to the self-other relation, nor only to the repeatability and mimicry of the singular and the generalizability of its meanings, but also to the affective and sensual economy of a (foregone) moment and its future afterlife. The comparison between writing and photography problematizes the dynamic that lies between the singularity of a sensually experienced instance repeated in writing and of *photography as a still life*, as a promise of such an act. Although the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator generates a kind of competitive comparison between photography and writing, both photography as well as writing appear as archival depositories of affective and sensual ›knowledges‹ and powers. Both not only encompass untouched ›knowledges‹ and powers in the layers of their texture while operating at the borders of non-knowledge and powerlessness, which are implicitly depicted here by *the act of comparison*. Photography and writing as well as the relation between the *tour Eiffel* and the *Japonais* are compared. Comparison appears as a threshold, hinging-movement, the back-and-forth movement of contemplation between knowing and not-knowing, power and powerlessness. At the same time, comparison appears as a movement in touch and of touch: In addition to contemplating and touching upon the qualities of the two faculties and art forms, comparison embraces the senses and affectivity, as well as time and space. This movement of touch and of touching contained in the moment of comparison is also framed by an instance of singularity and a historical context, its *trame de l'histoire*.

Trame de l'histoire refers to both history and the writing of history, as well as to stories and their writing; in both cases, narratives and narrativities are involved. *Trame* specifically echoes the historically driven presumptions of discourse and meaning production, but it also signals the framing of a story, of the novel, and the *auto-bio-graphical*, as well

as the singularity of subjectivity – memory, remembering and recalling. These constitute the threads of various levels of texturing, which are enmeshed within writing/photography, within the materiality of the arts (and historiography), and within language and discourse, where they construct and interweave loosely connected spaces of touch and thus touching spaces. By comparing the act of photography, the graphology of the camera lens to writing and alluding to tourism within a postcolonial setting and colonial discourse, it becomes blurry who ›the Japanese‹ is: The ›homodiegetic writer/implicit author‹ of this narrative discourse or the stereotype of a colonial discourse. It also becomes ambiguous whether it is colonial discourse that sets meaning, or rather the decolonizing act of ›the Japanese tourist‹, who keeps smiling at the alleged accomplishments of the (imperial) world's monuments.

In another chapter titled *Un œil froid*, this image is amplified within a subversive rhetoric that again remains close to the stereotype and cliché. This rhetoric opens up the image's meanings and further interlinks photography and writing as similar art forms. (Joqueviel-Bourjea 2017, 83). The text begins with the sentence »Bon, l'appareil photo a connu un vif succès chez les Japonais surtout« (Laferrrière 2008, 144), a declarative sentence that introduces a normalized and familiar stereotype. The fact that it is a known stereotype is indicated deictically at the beginning of the sentence by *bon*, all right, this expression also entails a conditioned assent, as if it also said, ›ok, let's assume‹, ›let's start from the assumption‹ or ›fine and good, we all know that‹; it thus does not repeat the stereotype as such and takes it for granted as a fact but invokes it already as an assumptive *belief*. This is not only a racist stereotype; besides its derogatory meaning, it serves a purpose. Hidden behind the stereotype is an objectification of ›the Japanese tourist‹ as a kind of ridiculing souvenir, which has an inferiorizing effect on a discursive and visual level. As noted above, it distracts from and normalizes *white* European tourism by rendering it transparent. The stereotype declares ›the Japanese tourist‹ implicitly to be ›strange‹, ›different‹, and ›artificial‹, all of which are evoked with the words ›camera‹ and ›smile‹; by implication, European tourism appears to be the ›right‹, ›legitimate‹, ›original‹ one (with and without the camera – jolly for sure, but not smiling – all very serious business – gazing at. . .). The second sentence of the passage, however, moves beyond the stereotype. It gives agency back to ›the Japanese‹ by shifting the stereotype into a witty other meaning that makes the presumed inventors and users of the stereotype look bad, under target, challenging the power asymmetry in saying: »Pourtant, je les ai longtemps soupçonnés de ne pas mettre de film dans leur appareil« (Laferrrière 2008, 144). *Pourtant* introduces this other understanding that the homodiegetic narrator/implicit author implements. In both cases, the first and the second sentence, the direct evocation of the stereotypes already hints at the humorous play they evoke; ›the Japanese tourist‹, it says, only pretends to take photos. They make fun of you. It is a decolonial disguise. What is ridiculed and focused on in this way is the stereotype itself as the racist pillar and effect of colonial language and discourse, which is revealed as void. It is on this discursively signifying meta-level that the novel depicts the stereotype rather than attempting to establish a counter-image that would ultimately fall prey to the dominant structures of meaning production within the conventionalized language and discourse. That critical approach frames the further meaning of the pas-

sage and gives impetus to understanding the rest of the short chapter, where the shift is further expanded:

»Si on tombe, un jour, sur ces montagnes de photos, on risque d'avoir l'impression que la Terre n'était peuplée, à l'époque, que de Japonais. Il n'y a pas un seul monument digne de mention, sur cette planète, qui n'ait pas été colonisé par eux. C'est une conquête mondiale. Le regard universel. Alors pour devenir un écrivain japonais, je dois vite me procurer un appareil photo. Je préfère encore ma machine à écrire. Au fond, c'est la même chose. On décrit tout ce qu'on voit. Je voudrais être non pas un photographe, mais simplement un appareil photo froid et objectif. Juste regarder l'autre. Est-ce possible?« (Laferrrière 2008, 144)

Le œil froid as the title announces, depicts ›the paradigm and value attributed to something called *objectivity*, an attitude that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ doubts, by questioning it. Implicitly, this rhetorical question also indicates that the camera/writing never comes by itself, but that it is given ›life‹, that it is *moved* by someone behind the camera, someone who operates it, much like the epistemological presumptions that work behind the stereotype, as well as writing. *Juste regarder l'autre* as the emblem of modern European science and epistemology, appears to be mere nonsense, a fantasy. And it cannot be done without the other gazing back. What one sees, it is suggested, is never some naked ›truth‹ or things as they *are* but rather, things as they are *made to be seen*, as desire, frozen in the economy of power; this is evident in the use of *décrire* – writing/photography as an act of describing rather than of writing, which, especially in its more poststructuralist understandings, is often defined as an authorless, subjectless, *writing out*, (which, by the way, is not so far from the Cartesian ideal, since in both cases, the subject is made transparent, albeit in different ways). There are no objective gazes but only gazes, *le regard universel* – that is, the gaze of someone starring, which always remains epistemically colored. (This does not mean, of course, that there are no ›truths‹ and no ›facts‹; it just invites us to be cautious of our most normalized beliefs and what they may serve.) The text thus performatively displays a displacement of writing and photography, of ›being‹ and ›not-being‹, and the workings of a defining gaze. Humor provides the frame within which the deconstructive shift takes place.

Not only does it implicitly create space for the reconsideration of this and other stereotypes in an implicit way; the humorous unfolding also has a pedagogical effect: Next time, it may not be that easy to look at such images without the shift that was also triggered by their deconstruction and thus, to ›see‹ them in this double meaning of colonial rhetoric and political functionality. Humor also unleashes a seductive charm, inviting the disposition to be attentive to what the text alludes to. The thought-provoking aftereffect of the hidden meaning creates a spacing through which it becomes possible to regard the other as (one's) self. In its repercussions, the humorous deconstruction contains a potentially touching, moving effect. Inherent in the re/production of the (racist) stereotype is also the consumptive desire to *know* the other *entirely*, in order to be able to *place them* in the world and in discourse, and thus to mark the boundaries of what and how meaning is touchable or untouchable and to infinitely draw boundaries between oneself and the otherness of the other that marks this self. Not only that,

but this *epistemeophilic drive*, the will to know the other entirely by fixating it in an aura of ›authenticity‹ and ›identity‹ may be what the stereotype perpetuates and what the novel revises.

The novel approaches this embankment, takes up the stereotypical words and attributions as artifacts of the historical context that produced them, looks at them out loud and puts them back in the masonry but their contemplation has already changed the way they are put back into the wall. This, at least, seems to be the point of the passage and the novel as a whole. In this way, the novel shows and emphasizes that it *does not* use and *does* use the ›Japanese writer‹ as a label or allegory but that it actually means what it says (in all possible senses). A playful, ridiculous, humorous drama is born from this conviction, which does not stop at national borders, even in the virtual-cultural sense. It emerges from the firm stance of the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator on the one side, and the convincing display of diplomatic vigilance that tries to steer things in a different, (national), politically more desirable direction, on the other side. While the Japanese embassy tries to talk to the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator, they repeat that *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is merely the title of a book to be written. »Je ne suis pas un écrivain japonais . . . J'écris un livre dont le titre est ›Je suis un écrivain japonais, ça ne fait pas de moi un écrivain japonais‹ (Laferrière 2008, 95). The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ thus slips into the role of the ›real author‹ who just wants to pursue their next project. At the same time, on another meta-level, the novel shows the entanglement of literature with constructions of nationality as an ongoing process in which art becomes a tool, and which the novel and its title write against as well. The novel attempts to disentangle literature from notions of ›identity‹ and ›national belonging‹; literature should not be essentialized and imprisoned within any political superstructure, the tenor seems to resume, and that while literature remains political, and must remain so, it should float freely, like a written verse on a page. A few pages later, however, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ specifies this *affirmative negation* in a chapter called *Métamorphoses* (and Kafka's famous little story is ultimately evoked), in a dialogue with Midori, who tries in vain to make them see how Japanese nationalism (like all nationalisms) confiscates everything considered ›Japanese‹. To this the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ replies: »Je n'ai pas dit: ›Je suis l'écrivain japonais, J'ai écrit: ›Je suis un écrivain japonais.‹ Ça peut être un mauvais, ça peut être un bon« (Laferrière 2008, 164). But that is not the point, Midori tells them. It is not a question of quality or method. The question of nationality concerns dis/possession.

The novel thus seeks to free the word ›Japanese‹ from any conformist, narrow nationalist understanding. This movement that is a quasi-extended touch towards the word ›Japanese‹ as a national signification, also embarks on national self-stereotyping and queries any kind of self-sufficient ›authenticity‹ and ›identity‹ on this shelf as well. Within the narrative discourse this national image and desire that the word ›Japanese writer‹ may invoke is disassembled by the depiction of Japanese diplomacy (and, as will be seen, ›Greek culture‹): The planned book has aroused the interest of the Japanese embassy and the Japanese media. Although it has not been written yet, and the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator is still roaming the streets of Montréal in search of answers to this other space within themselves, they are haunted by what the title seems to declare. The Japanese embassy, alarmed, gets involved.

The embassy invites the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator to lunch and a dialogue evolves around the expectations of what it means to be a ›Japanese writer‹.

The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ is indignant:

»Je n'ai pas fait tout ce déplacement identitaire pour me retrouver avec des Japonais dans un restaurant japonais. En tout cas, cela en dit beaucoup sur la capacité à imaginer le monde de personnes pourtant payées pour être plus curieuses que les autres. Pour elles, l'univers se réduit à leur espace mental et à leurs petites combines diplomatiques. Elles comptent mourir là où elles ont chié pour la première fois. Cela se sent que je suis de mauvaise foi ce matin. Dieu! Tout un plat pour presque rien. Je chiale mais ce n'est pas fini« (Laferrière 2008, 87).

So, ›reality‹ is not only exploited here but is literally churned and taken apart until it finally wakes up and makes room for its good side, imagination: »Voilà une autre chose que je déteste: l'authenticité. Le vrai restaurant. Les vrais gens. Les vraies choses. La vraie vie. Rien de plus faux. La vie est un concept d'ailleurs« (Laferrière 2008, 89).

›Reality‹ is thus nothing but invented, and ›the diplomats‹ are just paid guards in service of this (long forgotten) mission. Their work resembles a call to duty, the opposite of freedom and free choice, and maybe the opposite of what art, literature is supposed to achieve. »Tokyo ne s'intéresse qu' à l'économie – dix-sept personnes dans ce secteur. Vous voyez, on ne fait pas le poids« the vice-ambassador says. The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ remains unblinking, they know only too well:

»Je savais que la littérature comptait pour du beurre dans le nouvel ordre mondial. Il n'y a que les dictateurs du Tiers-Monde qui prennent les écrivains au sérieux en les faisant régulièrement emprisonner, ou fusiller même.« (Laferrière 2008, 92)

The biting joyous ›irony‹ is grievous for the grain of ›truth‹ that is invoked and held up here on the surface of the text. (A kind of ›truth‹ always remains as an excess of literary writing, perhaps, rather than as a reduction). Does literature not count in ostensibly democratic states, but only its market value? What is good literature? The passage seems to ask. Humor, in this sense, is also a pained rhetoric to account for this despair, a cry at the limit of political silencing, which occurs more or less by consent. This makes democracies worse for writers than dictatorships, as they are abolished in another sense, doomed in the speechless and meaningless valley of lost souls. For the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ it is not only about literature, and literature does not come of its own accord. It is also about the writer: »Des qualités que j'aimerais avoir en écrivant: un style classique nourri par un feu dévastateur« (Laferrière 2008, 173) – a passionate writer free from the constraints of any nationalism that the novel attempts to invoke, but in whose traps it becomes entangled, for there is no nationalism that is free of nationalist thinking. And this is where the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ despairs and why they become so defiant, not against ›Japanese diplomacy‹ but against the barriers and imprisonment that the notion of ›national belonging‹, ›identity‹, and ›authenticity‹ pose and of which here ›Japanese diplomacy‹ is the emblematic representative. Their defiance takes on a pouting, naïve charm that is funny in its obviously contrived performance yet thought-

provoking and touching in terms of the questions it raises. Where indeed is the place of literature, and even more so of ›world literature‹, in the capital- and data-accumulating globalization? An implicit, suggestive question at the fore of academic knowledging that can only leave one in ill-humor, this is what the novel stages here – the *mood* that is part of a kind of tragic drama whose effects are unknown to us and against which we may be powerless yet whose affectivity is already at work, unknowingly, somehow, which may also be its power:

»J'ai décidé de garder ma mauvaise humeur encore un moment. Ils ont l'air perdus. C'est vrai que cela peut causer un certain problème dans un resto japonais si on n'aime pas le sushi.

– C'est que je n'aime pas le poisson (ce qui est faux).

[...] – Heureusement qu'il n'y a pas que le poisson dans la cuisine japonaise, murmure M. Mishima. « (Laferrière 2008, 89)

Their own mistrust thus becomes biased, prejudiced, and injurious (with regard to the food), and it is the (power-less) calm of Mr. Mishima's voice that points this out to them (even though it is gentle – whether this comes from a pained and yet solidary understanding between men of color or from the power of Mr Mishima's *diplomatic* function remains unresolved), a calm, a whisper, which they repeat, as it were, and which remains speaking for itself, beyond the portrayed scenery.

Again, the humor rests on the threshold of the tragic-comic, between ›laughter‹ and crying, invoking Plessner's evocation of a liminal experience yet both effects in one humorous rhetorical stroke and performative staging. But the two diplomats, Mr. Mishima and Mr. Tanizaki, continue to question them about their book in a kind of inquisitive quest for ›knowledge‹ to find the kernel of ›truth‹ in this enterprise and to alter it according to what might be *representable* in a national sense while the ›homodiegetic narrator/implicit author‹ continues to insist that it is not a book but a title and that it is an invented *Japon*; but this in fact poses the problem as well as what the book seeks to problematize: Every bit of meaning, especially national(-istic) meanings, is nothing but invented, every *Japon* (and every nation) is in this sense an invention, only imagined, ›un-real‹, an un-factual fact that has given structure to our (invented) ›realities‹ :

»– C'est mon assistant qui a entendu parler de vous.

– Ah oui ...

– Vous êtes écrivain?

– Pas en ce moment.

Ils rient.

– Vous êtes en train d'écrire un livre?

– Oui et non.

– Nous sommes très intéressés par votre livre. «

[...]

»Je n'écris jamais sur autre chose que sur moi-même. « [...]

– N'y a-t-il pas un rapport quelconque avec le Japon dans votre nouveau livre? [...]

– C'est un Japon inventé qui ne regarde personne d'autre que moi. [...]

On sait que vous ne l'avez pas encore transcrit sur papier, mais il est dans votre tête, dit M. Mishima avec un air entendu.

– Tokyo est, pour une fois, intéressé par un de nos projets, ajoute vivement M. Tanizaki. Si vous voulez visiter le Japon ... D'ailleurs on a un bon guide pour la piste de Basho. [...]

– Mais je ne veux pas visiter le Japon ... Quelle idée!« (Laferrière 2008, 91, 93–94)

The scene is comical both for its presumed reference to the ways we perceive ›reality‹ and for its evocation of a cinematic imagery. It is reminiscent of how, indeed, *diplomats*, at least in a movie, would take over from some stage, and it is possible to picture them in a ›Japanese‹ restaurant all in an uncomfortable gathering. But even this diplomatic trait has its exclusions. Here, it is culture and literature that seem to be marginalized within the structures of diplomatic mission itself – what a waste, the passage seems to say. In the dialogue the ›homodiegetic narrator/IMPLIED author‹ appears as somehow misplaced, out of joint, *mad*. Their supposedly irrational attitude of not knowing Japan and apparently *not wanting* to know it, and yet writing about it, evokes zany fun, it goes against any rational thinking, mimicking colonial discourse (and ›area studies‹) in being ignorant about a place and owning power over it through some form of constructed ›knowledge‹ while the two *diplomats* appear as the desperate, not-knowing, powerless guardians of order, (universal, decolonial) rationality, and diplomatic, loyal responsibility. Through this humorous invocation, the novel reflects back to ›the West‹ (and ›the Rest‹) – its rationalist stance and that it does not make sense against the background of literary ›knowledge‹ and the freedom of thought, the power of imagination, that resides in literary writing.

But there is more to the scene. In a sense, the novel takes place on two stages: It is performed on an *open stage*, more or less directly in front of an ›implied audience‹ and it is also performed on a secret, *hidden stage*, which the ›audience‹ can discover for itself if it cares enough. In fact, the novel problematizes the *secret* in a chapter that hangs loosely and without any reference or coherence to the rest, right at the end (Laferrière 2008, 201 f.), and even emphasizes its secrecy by calling it *un secret oublié*, a secret that is unknown even to oneself, and against which one is powerless, powerless against its possible workings. I would like to ponder about this secret a bit before we return to the analysis of the above passage. *Un secret oublié* makes one wonder whether and where the ›implied author‹ has hidden the guiding secret in the text (where one's own may lie), and where its threat is, it heightens suspicion and alerts the senses but also summons a pensive awareness.

The secret is thus defined as an ambiguous something that is read against itself. It is not taken for itself or in an allegorical sense, as a deconstructive, Benjaminian, or Derridian approach would suggest. Rather, the secret is introduced within a rhetoric that is reminiscent of Bakhtinian grotesquery and that, instead of implying the unknowable possibilities of futurity, hints at the corporeal, relational, and political effects that instances of unknowability, and thus powerlessness, are also made of, their historical, material, and political sides. While the evocation of the secret is understood as allegorical per se, here the ephemeral constancy of the body and its politics are emphasized and made part of the literary text:

»À quoi sert un secret s'il reste caché au plus profond de quelqu'un? Peut-on l'oublier? Est-ce un secret si on l'a oublié? Où vont les secrets oubliés? Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'un secret? Une chose qu'on brûle d'envie de hurler sans pouvoir le faire. Un virus mis en quarantaine. Il n'appartient pas uniquement à celui qui le détient. Où le cacher? Quelque part dans le corps. Surtout pas dans le cœur, déjà bien occupé avec les passions. L'enfourer dans la chair. Le fameux pacte de ne jamais le révéler. [...] En confiant son secret à l'autre, on lui donne un pouvoir absolu sur soi. Mais on se lie à lui aussi. D'où l'aspect sexuel du secret. Quelqu'un se livre à un autre. Se dénude. Le fait entrer dans son intimité par la porte de derrière. L'étroite porte du cul. On ne cache pas un secret dans son cœur mais dans son cul. D'où le cri, juste avant de parler: »Je suis dans la merde.« On veut surtout attirer l'autre dans sa merde. Nous sommes de l'autre côté de la scène – obscène. Là où tout semble plus vrai. En fait, on est dans le cérémoniel le plus codifié. Rien de plus réglé que l'atmosphère du secret. [...] Un secret en cache toujours un autre qu'on veut vraiment cacher. Il y a des couches de secrets. Quand tout est secret, on se demande bien ce qui reste de vraiment secret. Un geste spontané, peut-être.» (Laferrière 2008, 201–202)

The passage not only conveys the secret but also invokes it. And it does so in a gripping, provocative, and suspenseful way, through a witty and tragic-humorous rhetoric, which plays on the boundaries of obscenity and sexuality by evoking ›shit‹ and ›ass‹, by having a secret and being deep ›in shit‹. Defecation, ›love‹, violence, danger, and objectification, as it were, form part of *long-forgotten secrets* that dwell deep within the flesh and form part of the bodily-mental experience of pleasure, pain, and abjection, although as such they cannot be touched. Such secrets, much more than the allegorical allusion to which Derrida may be pointing, are here transformed into historically and materially effective entities within the flesh, in the *chair*. In contrast to the heart, the ›ass‹ indicates the ›screwed‹, painful, vulnerable aspect that the secret can also entail even when it is understood in a more allegorical, epistemological sense of unknowing, powerlessness, and longing, for it means to be potentially subjected to hopelessness and a disenchanting experience of unattainability, or of not knowing, not knowing about any origins or causes, in a spiral of thoughts, and powerless against it while any attempt at understanding remains a construct. But this unreachability also manifests itself in its affective and corporeal household as an agonizing prick within the flesh. In this sense, the secret is not only evoked in this encompassing, abstract as well as material way but is *revealed* as the most *intimate* element of the touch of the other per se and the aporetic touch that resembles it in ›real life‹.

But the point I am making is that the passage seems not only to be a meditation on the secret it invokes and sets into work; there seems to reside a subtext beneath a straightforward understanding in the novel. Here, the text invites an ›implied audience‹ to participate in a contemplative dialogue in a self-reflexive way but *secretly*, by implication. It displays its own poetics of secrecy and is itself a poetological ramification of its poetic endeavor. It enacts what it theorizes: The meaning and operation of the secret, the novel as a secretive display, the performance of a novel as the performance of an other – in many different senses – unwritten story.

In the above passage, too, a secret is at work. It is displayed on the other, hidden stage of the narrative performance. It can be seen in the dialogue between the homodiegetic

narrator/›implied author‹ and the two ›diplomats‹, which can also be understood as a dialogue of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ with *Japanese* literature and the *Japanese* literary canon. Would this ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator with such a title have a chance of being accepted by the (national, ›real‹) *Japanese* literary canon?, the passage seems to ask. M. Mishima (1925–1970) as well as M. Tanizaki (1886–1965) are at least the names of the two most elaborate authors of modern Japanese literature.¹⁹ Both authors depict notions of nationalism, ›identity‹, and coloniality in their writing. The ›diplomats‹ thus symbolize the guardians of not only *Japanese* but in a more general sense even *national* literatures and *national* understandings, which remain faithful to the ghost of *national belonging* but also decolonial resistance for which literature is often enough a tool and playground.

This secret is hidden here, behind the discussion of the secret as such and behind the names of the two diplomats. Like the secret that the text defines in *un secret oublié*, this secret, too, is set at the very end (*cul*) of the text, rather than in its middle (*cœur*), and it is placed deep down in the flesh of the novel and is therefore meaningful for the whole novel. If it had been revealed from the beginning, it would have given away power (and play) and placed it in the reasoning hands of the Other (an ›implied audience‹, perhaps), and would have been a direct violation of the relation within the assessing dynamics of a novel between the author and the reader on the two far ends of the opened field who rather always miss each other. Inherent in this novelistic self-reflection is also the function of a literary work and its difference from a non-literary one (but can there be texts that come with no secrets and do not hide them as well?). In a more specific sense, the secrecy of the novel can be itself taken as a shibboleth function to decipher the above diplomatic performance. Here, the novel depicts a quite carnivalesque, satiric as well as grotesque form that critiques the politics of national literature by parodying it as the politics of the border and the guarding of ›the law‹ of the archive in a Derridean sense (Derrida 1995, 1–6) (or, at least, this is how I would read it), which the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ touches on by putting *the secret*, the never fully revealable sting of otherness, into its flesh. It also wonders about the place of literature in diplomacy, which amounts to zero (and might have been so fruitful for ›real‹ exchanges), and the place that literature is given to the structuring of ›national identity‹, which utterly exploits literature and narrows it down to a politics of functionality.

Within this ›diplomatic endeavor‹, other aspects of a Haitian, Canadian, Japanese, American-Asian postcolonial as well as decolonial encounter are also depicted. They give way to other geographical, ethnicized, and ethical traits of touch by humorizing the colonizing stereotypical imagery and plucking at its racist ingredients.

Of course, within the economy of racism and postcoloniality the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator also discusses racist implications entangled with a book called *Je suis un écrivain japonais* written by a Black writer and ›*Japanese* responses‹ to it. They conclude that it would have been different, of course, if the structures of exchange, dependency, and history had been different but that on the surface of it, at least, imported racist implications flicker around the idea. As Mr. Tanizaki sadly explains, not all people but some

19 For a more detailed discussion of these two authors and their work in Laferrière's oeuvre, see Desorby (2020, 333).

would think »que le pays est tombé bien bas si l'on doit payer un Noir pour qu'il accepte de prendre l'identité d'un écrivain japonais« (Laferrière 2008, 133). This would go so far that ›people in Japan‹ would suspect the Japanese embassy had invented this story in order to arouse interest in Japanese literature. The reflection of racist presumptions and representations are tacitly mentioned on all sides regarding Japanese and Black people, but they are placed in a humorous frame that may make them sound less aggressive, and yet they remain untouched, in the air, like a heavy, hanging cloud of tension that the passage seems to produce despite itself. The humor of the passage thus also evokes pain on both sides of the postcolonial world.

The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ does not hold back their partly humorous prejudices with regard to ›Japan‹, either; they all lead back to the racist imagery they find already prepared and consumable in language: »En fait, je répète ce qu'on dit généralement à propos du Japon, je ne fais aucun effort de recherche. Je suis un parfait écho. Mon oreille ramasse tout. Mon œil capte tout. Et ma bouche avale tout« (Laferrière 2008, 130).

This painful dialogue is also accompanied by a postcolonial exchange, followed by a closing of ranks. Mr Tanizaki bitterly problematizes ›Japanese identity‹, which was almost lost in the coloniality of the wars with the U.S., and why questions of ›identity‹ are so important in ›Japan‹, and why this novel is therefore so important *for* ›Japan‹:

»Tout le monde s'excite. Un étranger qui n'est pas spécialement emballé par tous ces objets qu'on fabrique, ni ce poisson qu'on pêche en quantité, je leur ai dit que vous n'aimez pas le sushi, et tout ça les a intrigués. Vous ne voulez pas non plus de notre yen, ne de nos geishas, etc.

– Oh là! Ne parlez pas trop à ma place. Pour le yen, je n'ai rien contre. Pour les geishas, on verra.

Il rit de bon cœur.

– Vous vous intéressez à ce que nous avons de plus fragile et de plus intime, à notre poésie, et j'ai raconté aussi pour Basho.« (Laferrière 2008, 132)

There is much naivety as well as romanticism in this humorous and ironic display of stereotypes. These are performatively changed into other meanings and thereby also touch a meta-level of writing beyond the narrative discourse. All the things Mr. Tanizaki mentions are, of course, images that stand *for* ›Japan‹ in a representative way and are not only reductive object-images but also objectifying. ›Japan‹ itself becomes in this way a thing for consumption. Mr. Tanizaki actually points this out in another passage, gagging our homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ for the first (and only) time (in the whole book): He urges not to take Basho as the only valuable equivalence for Japan and (please) not to reduce and essentialize Japan, this time in a melancholic way in the past tense (in the Orientalist mode of being outside of time and space): »Je voulais diriger votre curiosité sur autre chose que les clichés sur le Japon« (Laferrière 2008, 134).

Notwithstanding this understandable, very much postcolonial desire, the passage also reveals something else here, beyond the text: As Coleman based on Freud's ›joke theory‹ that presupposes three addressees, a teller, a listener, and one ›the joke‹ is about, and Sedgwick's analysis of cis-normative signification processes in male settings points out

how the figure of ›woman*‹ becomes a sign of solidarity between cis-men. This is also the case in this context with regard to Laferrière's male figures. The exchange between the two racialized cis-normative men, the homodiegetic narrator and Mr. Tanizaki, not only fulfills a male racialized solidarity, but also a phallogocentric, cis-normative desire for ›ascendency over women‹ (Coleman 2013, 74 f.). At the very least, it can be argued that in this passage, ›the geisha‹ represents a code word for cis-normative male sexuality while at the same time it is itself muted and fetishized. Freud's analysis of ›the joke‹ as a triangular form of exchange seems not only met in the literary text but also extended to build a square as it also anticipates an ›implied audience‹ beyond the diegetic level and Mr. Tanizaki. But the text also inevitably construes a critical space beyond the square from where it can be catcalled. In this way, the square also becomes a cage for the display of such sexualized references in cis-male masculinist representations, which can be pointed out and interrupted, but only on a meta-level of the text. On the level of the diegesis, the figure of woman* remains, in relation to two cis-normative male voices, a muted and sexualized object of male desire, signifying a fetish for pleasure (but also ›capital‹, wealth) – (however, I think, whether in the novel or beyond, ›she*‹ does not really care about that and just keeps on doing her* thing, much work to do, goals to achieve, plans to realize . . . so, there has to be a wor(l)d beyond discourse and (male masculinist) representations . . .).

Thus, while ›the geisha‹ creates a bond between the two, Mr. Tanizaki's speech is quite touching in two ways. Despite its obvious playfulness and entirely contrived comedic character, to which the profane and perhaps all-too-human (?) mention of ›money‹ and the objectification of an iconoclastic ›Japanese‹ depiction of femininity* contribute significantly, there is a tone of mutual appreciation in the passage. It emphasizes a ›real‹ Japanese evaluation of the ›implied author's//homodiegetic narrator's‹ motives for writing this book. In this sense, the chiasmic handshake and the touch of the (writing) hands represent more than mutual understanding; they represent indebtedness as such, a reciprocal thank you (*bro*). A moving thread is further established in the text as it returns to poetry. Poetry is portrayed as the most fragile of all cultural/national artifacts. Fragility also implies grace and value. In this sense, poetry is held up as a contrast to consumer culture and as an immediate and precious object to be marveled at, protected, and cherished, something to be carried in one's pocket, in the heart, the place of memory, as the narrator's Korean acquaintance had pointed out. One's ›home‹ is thus in one's heart, it is one's memories, perhaps most clearly discernible in the fragility of verses, the branches of a poem. Poetry, the passage seems to indicate, is the *real*, the actual, representative of ›identity‹ and *belonging* (of being and longing).

The ›implied author‹//homodiegetic narrator, out of the instantiated performative moment, also echoes a more technical problem of ›representation‹ by saying that they do not want Mr. Tanizaki to put words in their mouth. Who puts words in whose mouth (and who does not?). This is what the ›implied author‹//homodiegetic narrator also does with their Japanized character and author. But can we be so sure? Maybe the words just came out of the character once it emerged and took shape and began to speak on their own? So whose voices are they? And perhaps it is also a gentle warning to the future literary scholar or other figure outside the novel not to think *they know* what the ›(implied) author‹ or homodiegetic narrator may or may not *know*, have power over, or not have power

over? In this way, the passage also elegantly plays with the sphere of non-knowledge and powerlessness that is part of any form of reading (and writing), celebrating and amplifying it rather than eradicating it.

Asian-African-American Touches

As mentioned above, other such Asian-American touches are evoked through more realistic (historical) encounters that also revolve and take shape around affect-laden, ›life-defining and ›life-changing (con-)textual effects. All three cases, which I will briefly discuss here, are embedded in a rhetoric that navigates with the humorous-tragic limits of experience in specific (historical/historicized) contexts, which are also living *environments* in Plessner's sense.

The novel hints at Asian/Black entanglements by evoking a Japanese African American character who appears rather shadowy yet given a vivid voice and story. They have, of course, heard about the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator through the media and apparently seem to be searching for their father (figure). Since they ›do not know their father‹ (in a symbolic way?) they, too, have to deal with the repertoire of stereotypes they find inscribed in the meanings of (racist) images and words. Nevertheless, they have to forge their path through these injurious forms of ›knowledge‹ through which discourse and language are formed historically. The chapter benignly (and quite innocuously) titled *Peau douce* alludes to the search for and desire to find one's ›identity‹ in the absurd mix of racist and culturalist images and meanings already inscribed on the body. In contrast to these manifestations of racism, the title evokes the image of *soft skin* as a symbol of gentleness, care, and ›love‹ – and the vulnerability of the skin as an outward, exposed organ.

As is to be expected at this point, the character is called Haruki Murakami – a name that references the famous and much celebrated contemporary Japanese writer. The encounter thus begins with an allusive, humorous eye twinkle (Laferrière 2008, 146). With this humorous display, the (reading and) ›implied audience‹ should be all theirs. All ears agog, big smiles. A stage has been inaugurated, which indeed also suggests that Haruki Murakami, because of their popularity in North America, could in fact be perceived as a Japanese American author. But the short chapter takes up another Japanese American biography, that of a Black Japanese American character, and while it evokes them with a humorous allusion to the name of the famous writer, it gives them a mournful and momentous relevance, taking them off the shelf of exoticism or melting-pot celebration and placing them in the context of an autobiography, of singularity – that also becomes an *otobiography* in Derrida's sense (Derrida 1985), an admonition to *listen* to the story of the other. The scene depicts a phone call by this character from New York. The young caller talks about their father, who was stationed as a soldier in Tokyo, (where he met their mother), but who apparently later left them and Japan, not least ostensibly because of their mother's ›loving‹ and yet racist and exoticizing approaches:

»Elle le suivait partout dans le magasin à cause de son odeur [...] Elle pouvait passer des heures, la tête sous ses aisselles. Mais, lui, ça l'énervait. Ce n'était pas un homme violent, mais il pouvait être irritable. [...] Et pourtant, ce qui me touche c'est la peau ...

Il y a des peaux qui sont d'une telle douceur ... On dirait une peau de souris. Quand je rencontre un homme comme ça, je fonds littéralement.

– Un homme ou un Noir?

– Je ne regarde pas d'autres hommes.

– Vous cherchez votre père.

– C'est ce que dit ma mère, et elle croit que c'est ça qui m'a rendu homosexuel ... Mais moi, je sais ce qui m'a rendu homosexuel: c'est un type de Harlem, un tueur psychopathe, qui avait une peau de bébé. J'étais seul à le savoir. Je pouvais passer des heures à le caresser dans la pénombre de cette maison abandonnée où on se cachait. [...] Il avait toujours son revolver à la main, et me menaçait de me faire sauter la cervelle. Je m'en foutais du moment qu'il me baisait. C'est simple, j'étais amoureux de lui.

– Il aurait pu vous tuer.

– C'est lui qui a été tué ... Et quand on l'a tué j'étais à Harlem, chez un ami. Cela faisait une semaine que je ne l'avais pas vu. [...]

On ne peut pas avoir une peau si douce sans être doux ailleurs. [...]

J'ai entendu un coup de feu, ce soir-là. C'est la musique de Harlem. [...] J'ai dit à mon ami: cette balle est pour Malcolm. [...] Je savais où il se tenait, j'y suis allé, et je l'ai trouvé dans son sang. Malcolm est mort comme un chien. Je l'ai nettoyé, et j'ai appelé son père. [...] J'ai erré pendant des jours et des nuits dans Harlem. Je voulais me faire tuer aussi. J'ai tout fait mais la mort n'a pas voulu de moi... Mais pourquoi je vous raconte tous ça ?

– Parce que vous ne me voyez pas.

– Je n'arrive pas à aller voir un psychologue.

– Et pourquoi ?

– Je suis un fan de Woody Allen, d'ailleurs mes amis m'appellent ainsi en japonais. On a le même physique. [...]

– Mais vous n'avez jamais pensé que vous étiez un Noir.

– Jamais.

– Après tout votre père est noir.

– Ou mais je suis un homme, pas mon père, je veux dire je suis une femme, pas un homme.

Il a dit ça en un seul mot, sans prendre le temps de respirer. J'ai entendu un bref sanglot. Et il a raccroché doucement. (Laferrière 2008, 146–149)

This Haruki Murakami portrays the dystopia of the everyday from the other side of ›reality‹, from the middle of a hell, built of constructed bricks of historical injustices, an embodiment of ›lostness‹ – often mistranslated in depictions of ›violence‹ – and violated. The accusation of ›violence‹ is contrasted with apprehension and sympathy within a bodily metaphor that of the *softest skin* – an oxymoron. *Soft skin* depicts the inscription of *bare life* as a body part and as the body's – and perhaps the soul's most delicate, exposed, most vulnerable yet most tangible part: a transparent, overlooked envelope. The skin tells stories when caressed, it can speak (up) to an O/other, in the most tactile, melodious tacit tunes. The skin functions as a multiply coded symbol, of subjugation and subversion, of racist violence as well as counter-power that becomes a piece of art, of music and poetry. The organ of touch per se touched upon in striking and stroking ways in every possible extreme sense, is turned into a speaking tongue. Though Laferrière repeats such extremes, he shows their absurdity and pain, in a humor that can be described as an affectively

loaded, meditative, poetic »expérience de pensée« qui produit des correspondances entre le passé et le présent« (Farah 2011, 42).

This other poet named Haruki Murakami has the rare ability to listen to the poetry that *the skin* tells and to see through to the deep grief in the heart of the one they are touched by, the one they ›love‹; they feel connected to them, because they can read the pain that comes from *the softness* of their injured, not-*knowing* inner skin; the echo of this pain is inscribed in power-lessness, metaphorized as skin, and a silently speaking body. *Listening* as a deep form of being in touch, and touch as a listening form of *con-tact* as the most immediate and ensconced affectivity of touch is deployed here in the vanishing monument of care/ing. ›Malcolm‹ also represents the name of Malcolm X, both as the historical figure of Malcolm X and as the symbolic figure of the brutality, violence, and atrocities of The Middle Passage and its catastrophic aftermath, with millions of deaths. But ›Malcolm‹ also stands for the other side of this brutality, for the un/told and barely audible songs, the other placid music of Harlem, its recurrent renaissance of musings and rhythms of marginality. That may be something this Haruki Murakami, shares with the Rest of the wretched in all corners of the earth. To be *wretched* is not a natural phenomenon but is a state that is brought about. How can we account, the passage seems to ask, for these forms of brokenness that are unseen but archived in the vulnerable softness of *the skin*?

On ne peut pas avoir une peau si douce sans être doux ailleurs. The whole chapter, seems to circle around this sentence. The roguish humor with which the chapter begins, opens up into the ocean of a silent and deep question that life and *history* seem to be, with all the tantalizing unuttered and unacknowledged replies and resonances lying buried underneath its surface. The passage illuminates African American history, for which the evocation of Harlem, the name ›Malcolm X‹, experienced violence and state neglect are the signifiers. The passage looks at it from a global perspective, the implicit evocations of The Middle Passage and the Japanese African American character, giving more resonance to the idea of the *écrivain japonais*, emphasizing that this is not fantasy. The chapter shows the interconnectedness of African American history with the wor(l)d, as world history, bringing it home in two senses: Firstly, it shows where the roots/routs of this brutality lie – in the interwoven U.S.-American colonial history, and, secondly, it places ›home‹ right there, but as a space attacked, under fire, in war. »And yet, his text is an assertion of freedom, a creative insubordination, that takes the form of impiety, a refusal to enact what some might consider to be categorical imperatives, a refusal to enact the role of an ›appropriate black subject‹. Moreover, the humor suggests a pattern of laughing to keep from crying, as it were, for the perpetual laughter in the face of adversity does not entirely mask a weariness and despair. Laferrière's is an ambivalent, impious, yet politically charged representation [...] in American and African American social contexts [...]« (Pabst 2006, 38).

The skin, as the most tangible and most exposed organ of touch, bears witness to and speaks back to this violence. Racism can be grasped in this way as the most systematic form of denying the other the right to speak. In its soundless and insidious traces, racism inscribes the other's *skin*, declaring it a zone of war and destruction. The other comes from this zone of destruction and begins to tidy up the rubbish, deconstructing the system's systematic tidiness. This is as true of Derrida's que(e)rying, deconstructive texts

as it is of the intersecting queerness of this passage. It emphasizes, on the one hand, the ineffable *softness of the skin*, which cannot be felt or grasped without affectivity and without affecting as well as with and without touching matters of history, *auto-bio-graphy*, and biopolitics – the general as well as the singular. *The skin* appears as a synecdoche for what is at stake: the limits of tangibility that lie between two ends, two possibilities, two entities, a material spacing, inside and outside. It can become a place of coming together as well as of falling apart within the self as well as between the self and the other, as two figurative formations of subjectivity as well as of something that can be called the most essential of ›humanity‹, of *touch* in its most elaborate, incomplete, Sisyphus-like, nevertheless sense.

The humorous inclination of the passage develops into a stage on which the effects of colonialism (American militarism from where the *touch of love* in the figure of the Japanese African American character speaks for itself, speaking *to* and *of* the possibility of another future), and the writing of decolonization are performed in intersectional ways, touching on the tragedy of this form of neglect and opening up a discourse, or at least asking the ideal ›implied audience‹ to listen carefully to what is happening behind the things right in front of them. The chapter does not close with representations of masculinity, however, but alludes to queerness and thus to multiple forms of violence and ascriptions that interrupt any straightforward modules of signification, so that at the end the section has to be reread in order to be understood, as it is also a search for ›gender identity‹, which would not make any sense *without* the violent, determining, and confining definitions of ›gender‹ and ›gender politics‹ that remain vexed within exclusionary, binary oppositions. These are undone by a sentence in which ›gender binaries‹ are coalesced into a non-binary, infinite utterance that resembles an infinite journey:

»– Ouimaisjesuismamèrepasmonpèrejeveuxdirejesuisunefemmepasunhomme.
Il a dit ça en un seul mot, sans prendre le temps de respirer. J'ai entendu un bref sanglot.
Et il a raccroché doucement.« (Laferrière 2008, 149)

The ›homodiegetic narrator‹/›implied author‹ seems to understand and expresses their empathy by holding on to the silence of the phone call, standing by until their caller hangs up. It gives an almost instructive response to this call by being there and by echoing it back to discourse. The vignette-like episode explores the intersections of ›race‹, class, gender, and sexuality, emphasizing singular histories and thus accentuating the ethical impulse within an individual encounter with the other's *voice* as a placeholder for a Levinasian ›face‹. This voice that Laferrière invokes appears as an anonymous name, a historical name, and a contemporary, singular name. Its ethics illustrates the idea of general and collective responsibility and its singular apparition. For the literary text, this is not just an example of abstraction, but an individual, ›human face‹, a *voice* that should have *the right to vote, to choose, to be* for themselves.

In the folds of the novel there is also another form of touch, gently, almost indiscernibly, laid out, to which I will refer only briefly here; it may be a secret, one that the novel both entailed and produced; and so perhaps it should be left as such, untouched.

But it may also be possible to read it along the only form in which it is presented in the novel, in a seemingly disguised way. Here, too, the incident performs the secret it entails.

The implemented humor, while incongruously accompanying the sobriety with which the narrative rhetoric is told (as if it were all ›true‹), comes into full play after the encounter and the memories it contains are digested. Maybe it is a humor at the rims of wittiness but without the coldness that resides in the wit's play with reasonability. It opens up only slowly, like a slow-motion picture in the rhetoric arrangement of the narrative discourse and displays a specter of affectivity by engendering a complex space of touch, but only *after* everything is (allegedly) laid out and said. It may be a humor of afterwardsness in Freud's sense that comes in conjunction with a pensive contentment: a suspended humor.

Towards the end of the novel, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, irritated by all the fuss about their unwritten book, decides to leave their home and to live the life of a modern nomad, of a vagabond in the streets of Montréal, still following and imitating the footsteps of Basho whom they cannot help but be influenced by and to admire, looking for and slowly miming a humble ›life‹ on the surface, and a rich ›life‹ within, full of wanderings and wondering about all the small and detailed little marvels they seem to stumble upon.

One day, while the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ is quite exhausted and drenched in the ›perfume of poverty‹ (*le parfum du pauvre*) as they call it (Laferrière 2008, 170), they meet a friend they know from a long time ago, from *that other* country they have memorized in their heart; maybe they both symbolize alternative threads, alternative selves, other paths that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ could have taken but maybe the possibility has left behind at least the desire to become a *Japanese writer*. The humorous tone that ostensibly lends the book its (spontaneous) title (which may not have been spontaneous at all), may not have been the ›real‹ reason for the novel, but a secret that may lie behind it, all hidden even from the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ themselves.

The novel shows these two possibilities as two lives, the life of a forlorn, romantic poet, lost in poverty, and the life of their counterpart, the ›friend‹ they meet, who is a successful and wealthy stockbroker, but who may be impoverished within. Although there is much ›love‹ between the two (›friends‹), the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ also remembers that their ›friend‹ *loved* them so much, he wanted to become them, to *be* them: »Il veut tout me donner: sa maison, sa femme, sa voiture. Là aussi, il n'a pas changé. Il a toujours voulu être moi« (Laferrière 2008, 173). (We note and record that ›voiture‹ and ›femme‹ are apparently two entities that can be given away and used almost interchangeably in a sentence). The ›friend‹ is happy to see them, overwhelmed even, and takes them out for an evening walk, introducing them to his circle of new friends, taking them to his apartment, and presenting them to his wife. »J'avais l'impression de lui appartenir. Avec sa mémoire prodigieuse et si généreuse, il s'était accaparé ma vie. J'étais dépossédé de moi-même. Méfiez-vous de ceux qui vous aiment« (Laferrière 2008, 274). This ›friend‹ is married to a Japanese woman, their apartment is filled with Japanese art and artefacts. The name of the ›friend's‹ wife is Shonagon, a name she shares with the famous Japanese female writer from the 11th century, Sei Shonagon.

They remember their youth in Haiti. The chapter's title, *le moment magique*, may be a telling allusion to the *secret oublié* – a touch that remains encapsulated in the heart and orient ›life‹ (and writing), a touch that may be so serious and deep that it can only be discerned and evoked within a humorous play, so it can remain a secret. The humorous rhetoric thus is also a technique of dis/closure, a performatively dis/closing within the narrative rhetoric, Derrida's secret/touch.

It turns out that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ and their ›friend‹ had a common acquaintance back then, a Japanese woman, Miss Shikibu Murasaki, who became the interpreter for a group of Japanese journalists while they were under cover during the Duvalier regime. Both were in love with her but while the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ was busy with *their* first ›love‹: literature, ›Diderot‹ at the time, to be precise, their ›friend‹ and Miss Murasaki began a love affair, ›[d]ans la vie, on prend toujours le mauvais chemin au bon moment‹, our homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ contemplates, creating a paradox that challenges our understanding of language and ›life‹ (Laferrière 2008, 179), a melancholic reflection that sets in, after their drunken ›friend‹ tell them during this reunion that they started the affair just to outdo them:

»François marmonne des mots que je parviens difficilement à capter. Comme quoi il n'a jamais aimé Mlle Murasaki, mais que voyant mon intérêt pour elle, il s'est précipité sur elle. Il n'allait pas me laisser aussi le terrain des femmes. Moi, c'était les livres. Après, tout s'est enchaîné, ajoute-t-il, et je me retrouve dans une banlieue montréalaise avec une nouvelle Japonaise.« (Laferrière 2008, 179)

Different layers of meaning can be discerned here; the humor resides in the layering but also the meanings that ensue form the immediate narrating tone. On the one hand, a pensive humor ensues from the idea of the two paths taken by their ›friend‹ and themselves, and the hidden allusion to an alternative self that is placed right in front of the, at least first, unsuspecting ›implied audience‹. On the other hand, there is the implicit comparison between being in love with someone and being in love with literature. This comparison displays the affective attraction the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator feels for literature, personifying it, and giving flesh, material to its flavors, showing its ›reality‹, from which an empathic humor may also derive.

Then there is the evocation of *une banlieue montréalaise* and the implicit critique and comparison with *Paris*: Those (willed?) neglected suburbs and spaces, the city as a locus of biopolitics, in which the other, marginalized, is made to reside in specific, preprogrammed ways – a phenomenon not only of *Paris*, as the novel critically suggests, but also of *Montréal*. This allusion, moreover, symbolically reveals the bruised affective state of the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator, which leads them directly into such a neighborhood. Implicitly in fact this queer conjunction also asserts a connection between the experiencing of violence and finding oneself living in a *banlieue* between Montréal and Paris.

Furthermore, Shikibu Murasaki is also the name of a Japanese woman poet and novelist from the 11th century, so that the novel here, too, silently and winkingly, plays with the interrelation of ›authenticity‹ and literature as a matter of ›reality‹ in this double

sense of a literary writer and their phantom in a literary work. The passage plays, moreover, with the meanings of memory and remembering as poetic events. In both instances it is this relational touch, the encounter with an other that gives impetus and orientation and that later unfolds as memorized precursors and principles for how one acts ›in life‹ and what steps one takes, it seems to say. It also surfaces in the pages of a book and the spaces in a narrative or novel, the passage implies. The *moment magique* is a moment in which one dwells in or can move in time, time after time, but which can also become a prison: »Tout reste circonscrit dans cet espace émotionnel. Il n'a jamais voulu quitter le moment magique« (Laferrière 2008, 179).

The memory/remembering of this first ›love‹ apparently led their ›friend‹ to his second ›love‹, his wife Shonagon with whom the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ identifies, playing again on the falseness of ›authenticity‹ and the deceptive meaning of ›origins‹ that they try to shift:

»C'est à présent qu'il me parle de sa femme. D'abord les origines. Elle est espagnole par son père et japonaise par sa mère. Elle tient des deux, le feu des Espagnols et la sobriété dans le goût des Japonais. [...] Des qualités que j'aimerais avoir en écrivain: un style classique nourri par un feu dévastateur.« (Laferrière 2008, 173)

Again, the text shows how specific qualities are ascribed to nationalities that they attribute to themselves and to the instance of writing, as an amalgamation of a perhaps planetarian intertextuality that resides not only in the citation and ›knowledge‹ of texts, but in the unfolding of writing as a space of and for affectivity, ›non-knowledge‹ and powerlessness as well as an effort that is set into being by an other's touch: Shonagon later calls them, not because she is attracted to them, but because she wants to *know* something about her husband that would be a mirror of them, rather than the all-encompassing image of the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator. Our ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator comes up with the image of their ›friend‹ sleeping on a bench in the park, with some birds sitting on his chest, and how they hesitate to go closer so as not to disturb him and wake him up (Laferrière 2008, 188); the scene they describe evokes an earlier scene in the novel, a bench in the park where the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ begins to think about what it means to be a *Japanese writer*, some birds around them. The scene is touching in terms of both ›friendship‹ and ›love‹ as a search for intimacy (Ertler 2008, 82), and how both terms are interchangeable in this sense. Here, too, a humorous tonality may silently be evoked at the end of a cognitive realization that the text sets in play.

However, although the names of both Sei Shonagon and Shikibu Murasaki are mentioned, they appear as nothing more than tamed *femmes fatales* who live for ›love‹ (their male spouses or some other socially predetermined ›life‹); the figure of ›woman*‹, along with all its affectionately mentioned images of ›the geisha‹, ›manga character‹, ›pop star‹, ›obedient wife‹, ›whore‹, ›weirdo‹, ›nice grandma‹ remain all oddly empty and, even in the novel, apparently only there to please and arouse some male, cis-normative erotic or other sensation of ›love‹ – and lastly left blank. Alas, it »remains relegated to the phallic sign of male identity« (McQuade 2023, 203). The humorous tone and touch/ing allusions

thus become therefore quite prescriptive, but they may also echo the stereotypes of female* stereotypes back into discourse *as* stereotypes.

With this unhinging movement, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ returns the clichés to male cis-normativity and may reflect the consistency of its desire:

»Je ne vais pas commencer à lui mettre des barrières. Surtout que je réfléchis sur des miettes qui tombent de la table de Pascale. Le cliché sse situe bien au-dessus de la morale. Il est là, rond, mystérieux, éternel. Il nous regarde en souriant. Aucune utilisation personnelle d'un cliché n'est possible, sauf le renvoyer à l'expéditeur.« (Laferrière 2008, 83)

The ›laughter‹ that these and other female* stereotypes evoke is Medusa's. It is beyond *risus purus*. This ›laughter‹ does not touch, it lets everything crumble (... *beware* ...). Here, one should read the novel against itself, using its boomerang effect from and within a postcolonial feminist reading.

(An inaudible, congratulatory ›*Touché!*‹ must be written here somewhere in the pages of the novel. *Cheers!*)

Greek Culture with Capital Letters

There is one other important ›nation‹ that is evoked in the novel and that repeatedly fills a role at the threshold of a parodic and ironic play, and that is ›the Greeks‹. ›The Greeks‹ stand here, on the one hand, for the figuration of the ›Greek Culture‹ and the importance it still plays for what is conceived as ›Western Culture/Philosophy/Civilization (per se)‹, and, on the other hand, ›the Greeks‹ are evoked as a miserable diasporic people, not much different from any other marginalized diasporic people (›reality!‹ *in real*), and thus as ›folks‹ with whom one identifies and lives in good and fighting neighborhood.

Interestingly, the stereotypes presented as *clichés* are thereby linked as such with ›Greek Culture‹ as a code name for Western philosophy/epistemology as a whole, its cradle, it seems to suggest (oh wait, wasn't that *the Orient*? I am getting confused myself ...), mirroring an image that ›the West‹ as the Western Civilization (civilization par excellence?) regularly reproduces itself. The stereotype works here as a kind of boomerang, coming back to where it all began, but the boomerang is *Made in Japan*. The novel at least seems to suggest that there is a consumerist culture of objects and images, impelled by Japanese cultural and industrial productivity that plays with (Western) ›Greek clichés‹, turning them into purchasable items, and sending them back ›home‹ again:

»Je me suis demandé devant mon souvlaki, la seule trouvaille grecque depuis la démocratie (je dis ça pour énerver mon concierge [qui est grec]), ce qui peut bien faire la modernité japonaise tellement à la mode depuis la mort de Mao. À part la capacité du Japon à changer tout ce qu'il touche en cliché. Ce cliché dont on sait si peu de chose, et dont on se demande parfois si ce n'est pas une variété contemporaine du mythe grec. Est-ce d'ailleurs les Grecs qui ont appelé leur cliché ancien un mythe grec? Le french kiss existe partout sauf en France.« (Laferrière 2008, 82)

The interjection of high theory as raised by the codeword (and identarian (self-)assignment) ›Greek‹ is wittingly juxtaposed with things *japonais* and the image of Japan as *the* consumerist counter-export-nation of objectified ideas and desires. In the middle of the disintegration that the two ›civilizations‹ of high prestige must endure here, ›democracy‹, at least, roguishly survives, which also makes it possible to take the critique seriously and to allow for what it might want to suggest and open up: that we are apparently living in a world ruled by clichés in which everyone is involved on all ends of the world, from North America to Haiti, from Greece to Japan (not to mention China, which, being aware of the misery, could not stop it?).

The affective economy of the passage is a thoughtful one, which can stroke some rays of honest despair and dismay, at least a little, as if to ask anxiously: Quo vadis world? An allegorical, haibunic opening that carves out space for further dialogue, giving the Bashoean prose style a modern touch.

Funnily enough, the homodiegetic narrator's/implicit author's Greek *poissonnier* is the first to learn that their next book will be called *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, and, as if their ›Greek friend‹ were a lawgiver or overman*, points out to them that with this book title they may indeed offend juridical boundaries at the national frontiers:

»Le poissonnier, un Grec, me touche l'avant-bras en me remettant le saumon bien ficelé dans un papier brun.

– Êtes-vous en train d'écrire un second livre?

J'ai écrit quatorze livres, mais lui, il en est resté au premier. Cela fait vingt ans qu'il me pose la même question. Ma réponse ne l'intéresse pas. Déjà passé à un autre client. Je lui lance, au moment de partir, pour voir sa réaction:

– Je suis un écrivain japonais.

Son regard revient vers moi.

– Comment ça! Avez-vous changé de nationalité?

– Non, c'est le titre de mon nouveau livre.

Un coup d'œil légèrement inquiet vers son assistant, ce jeune homme occupé à emballer les achats. Mon poissonnier ne regarde jamais directement la personne à qui il s'adresse.

– En avez-vous le droit?

– D'écrire le livre?

– Non, de dire que vous êtes japonais.

– Je ne sais pas.

– Avez-vous quand même l'intention de changer de nationalité?

– Ah non ... Je l'ai déjà fait une fois, ça suffit ...

– Vous devriez vous renseigner là-dessus.

– Où?

– Je ne sais pas, à l'ambassade du Japon ... Vous ne voyez pas me lever une nation et lancer à mes clients, que durant la nuit je suis devenu un boucher polonais?

– Je penserais plutôt à un poissonnier polonais, vu que vous êtes dans le poisson.

– Surtout pas un poissonnier polonais, fait-il en se tournant déjà vers le prochain client. Un type qui donne son avis sur tout finit toujours par vous planter une aiguille d'inquiétude dans le crâne. Je vais quand même appeler mon éditeur là-dessus. Cela ne devrait pas poser de problème.« (Laferrière 2008, 16)

At first glance, the scenery seems comical in a subtle way. It portrays an asymmetrical mockery of someone who appears inferior in terms of social class and education, and comes off as patronizing: a fishmonger against a writer (although the fishmonger may be (much) richer than the writer in every possible sense but within the narrative of social and class interpretations of deprivation, let us stick with this image for the time being). On second thought, however, the dialogue at the *poissonier* can be read allegorically. It can be understood as a mockery of the *white* Western European supremacy imposed on everyone else by seduction and consent (eating a delicacy one cannot stand) through the channels of ›knowledge‹ and ›learning‹ (Gramsci, Foucault, and Said seem to be the successive background chorus here): The self-identificatory and invented glory of a crushing ancient (European) ›Greek‹ culture (*for* and *on* others, to be sure) appears metaphorized in the ›Greek‹ fishmonger (in diaspora, though, – this is what diaspora does to people – a loss of power, a muddling of all norms and symbolic sign systems, but for the evocation of a (melancholic) past allure the reference to ›glory‹ and ›good old times‹ seems to suffice).

The symbolic ›Greek Culture‹ as ›Western‹ ›culture‹ per se, at any rate (how dare I, I thought it all came from ›the Orient‹ ? I mean it, this time for *real* . . .) wants to keep the nations apart within its catalog of classifications, and thus refers to ›the law of the judges‹ for permission to touch on these matters. As a diasporic Greek neighbor though, it is touching that the fishmonger seems to be doing this out of concern (*un coup d'œil légèrement inquiet vers son assistant*), which may be partly because he sees his customer as another diasporic ›fellow traveler who will never arrive‹ – just like ›himself‹. In diaspora, one's village is the world. Is the ›implied author/homodiegetic narrator‹ telling us that they prefer the concept of ›diaspora‹ over that of ›the nation‹ and recommend it for further reflection?

Maybe. (Doesn't seem so bad, after all, aren't most, if not all, places in the world, ›diasporic‹ anyway? The problem is still how to create equity, how to shed light on power structures – and here we go again – . . . but still, would make a difference from ›the beginning‹ . . . I think. But let's read/listen and see . . .).

The Greek fishmonger thus plants his philosopher's doubt in the ›implied author/homodiegetic narrator's‹ thoughts, who prefers to follow in Basho's footprints. Where does ›true‹ ›knowledge‹ come from (and where does it go?), the novel seems to ask, from the fierce, ever-ready doubt of the philosopher who seeks power over it, or from the tranquil powerless ›non-knowledge‹ of poetry? From ›the West‹ or ›the East‹ or any other point of the compass? From philosophy or from literature? From ›the self‹ or from ›the other‹?

The novel seems indeed to elusively allude to the village of the homeless and the wanderer as a possible answer – the entangled space of all those who are always in search, always on the run, always an alleged threat, always threatened, always suspicious, always suspecting, always looking for some space for rest and serenity: Diaspora thus appears as an alternative to the stickiness of ›nations‹ that, in a figurative sense, remain wor(l)ds apart. In contrast to this, the world as such, beyond national borders, appears as a (diasporic) (village) space to approach (con-)›texts‹ and to gain ›knowledge‹ from this querying, wondering, nomadic non-knowledge, trenched in other forms of powerless-ness yet to be spelled out.

However, read that way the dialogue reveals this amusing alley of thought around ›ancient Greek culture‹, just like the magic wall in the backyard of the *Leaky Cauldron* pub reveals *Diagon Alley* to the astonished and delighted Harry who can hardly believe his eyes in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997).

The allusive, magical postcolonial alley that may be revealed and revealing here is, on the one hand, the proclamation of the *poissonnier's* ›Greek origins‹ and, on the other hand, the other, an incongruity of the mind, as the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ is allergic to salmon but buys and eats it anyway. ›Greece‹, then, stands for more than (an economically exploited, impoverished, and perpetuated) European country: it also comes with the flavor of ›Athens‹, alluding to the indebtedness of French language to ›Greek‹ philosophy, which does not seize to influence the French-speaking ›implied author/›homodiegetic narrator‹ even in diaspora – they still have to buy their salmons there. ›Salmon‹ becomes the inner-psychic shibboleth for entry into the literary canon and its high institutions of learning, representation, and marketing. This is the spacing that the Other other has left behind in this other self and that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ cannot quite digest and has to throw up again. The ›Greek fishmonger‹, however, is so absorbed in his own wor(l)d (making), he does not even look at the ›homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ and has not taken note of their achievements and success as a writer, but feels obliged to tell them where to look for any disregard of ›the law‹ (of meaning (production) – a politically invested, silent, ›civil war‹ over the ›knowledge‹ of non-knowledge and the power of power-lessness to define (and as to who defines) may be staged here.

In its humorous tendency, a relational space of affectivity is invoked, a querying one that, along with its critique and amusement, also opens up space for contemplation.

It is not only the meaning of nationality, ›identity‹, and belonging that is critically examined. In the midst of this performative scene lies the question of the meaning of art. For the ›Greek fishmonger‹, embracing another nationality also means changing one's work/profession/art into something else, as depicted here in the allusive transformation of the ›Greek fishmonger‹ into a ›Polish butcher‹ that he would become, if they decided (overnight, which means, arbitrarily (*and maybe freely?*)) to be ›Polish‹. Often enough it can also signal the diasporic, refugee experience par excellence: If one is lucky enough to find one's way to the shores of the other wor(l)d, one is forced to take on any possible (nationality. . .), profession, any possible ›identity‹ (and still remain the same person, shifted inside). But back to the fishmonger. What else can the transformation of a fishmonger into a butcher refer to? These may be small differences, but with very different results and different investments of violence against very different entities (or so it seems). What does this mean? Does it mean, in a more literal sense, that there is a difference between killing/selling/eating fish or cattle (beef)? Or in a more derived sense that each language/nation has its own horrors? That every language/nation (therefore) creates a different form of art? That a language/nation is untranslatable in the way it is understood? While the humorous rhetoric plays with the incongruity, distress, and nonsense invoked here – it does not seem to make sense why a fishmonger would become a butcher by changing their passport/›identity‹, especially in the privileged sense that the ›implied author/›homodiegetic narrator seeks to do. The text is playing with the incongruous amalgamation of the tragedy of being-on-the-run, homelessness (and

killing/getting killed), which means pleasure for the Other ((great dishes)), inherent in the two professions and one's own non-vegetarian contamination with them; it also allegorically conjures up essential questions of belonging, ›authenticity‹, art, translation, and the translation of signifying processes, alongside the straightforward, surface meaning of an utterance and the inevitable misunderstanding of ›the refugee‹ (not on the ›the refugee's‹ side of course – *they* understand very well).

Looking at the novel itself, which reflects upon itself, the ›Greek fishmonger‹ seems to be right. Although the book is based on a Bashoan poem, the text has not become the same; it has emerged with its own traces – but this is where its kinship with Basho and every other author/novel lies – which would, perhaps, mean that in the end it makes sense why a ›Greek fishmonger‹ should become a ›Polish butcher‹, it is because he would have to change his focus and ultimately his destination.

What comes across is a decolonial understanding of a ›Japanese writer‹. On the one hand, it is free of any constraints of meaning; on the other hand, it can be seen as part of the coloniality inscribed in our current understandings and language(s), especially maybe in the West and in French as one of its alleged representatives.

These two epistemological movements are carried out by a humorous rhetoric, accompanied by a deep, almost hidden, and inflected affectivity – an affectivity that, instead of being straightforward, becomes billowy and melodious. It changes from harsh tones to softer ones and vice versa, making one think of a heartfelt quilt, stitched by all kinds of people.

Not unlike the *poissonnier*, other terms referring to ›Greekness‹, too, appear as heavy with meaning. This is also the case with the homodiegetic narrator's/›implied author's‹ Greek landlord (*concierge*). The ›landlord‹, someone who owns the house they live in and who governs over all its rules, is the one to whom the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ owes rent. This can be read as an ironic, humorous bent on the coloniality of the present; the world, and more specifically North America (the house) is in the hands of European philosophy and an epistemology (at the moment, if at any at all) that privileges a supposedly European heritage. It is so much part of the everyday praxis that few people are aware of it. While their landlord is always worried about not getting the rent, the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ further irks him by always giving him the rent at the very last minute of the deadline, »Je passe la nuit dans un bar miteux à régler l'heure tout en imaginant mon concierge en train de tourner en rond comme un animal en cage« (Laferrière 2008, 99).

Not only is this play with roles and words striking, there is also another phantom friend, invented by the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ with the all too familiar name ›Plato‹ – a name, however, that in its philosophical meaning and decisive role is completely unknown to their Greek landlord:

»Je suis sorti par l'escalier de secours pour éviter le concierge à qui je dois deux semaines de loyer. Il est grec, d'où mes petites blagues sur les liens nécessaires (même un philosophe doit manger) entre Platon et le souvlaki. Il ne sait pas qui est Platon. C'est un homme de la mer, son intérêt aurait été pour Ulysse. Je m'en fous qu'il sache ou non qui est Platon. C'est pour équilibrer le pouvoir dans nos rapports.« (Laferrière 2008, 98)

The homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ not only makes it clear that they are not interested in ridiculing the *concierge* for his lack of education (okay, maybe just a little bit, yet not out of harassment – does not some form and residue of affection, solidarity also reside at the corners of it, from this other side of experience that equalizes them?) They also mock the nationalized form of education indicated here by the portrayal of the landlord as *un homme de la mer*, which would make him a more accurate reader of *Ulysses*. Maybe one's inclination and interests should determine what one learns rather than the desire to sustain national belonging through education? (Which would speak for diaspora . . .). This acknowledgment of the *concierge's* interest also shows their respect for him (as a diasporic fellow) despite the unpleasant elements that adorn their relationship. Furthermore, there is a double allusion to power-lessness at play here, one that points to the structure of power in the narrative discourse between the ›homodiegetic narrator‹ as a not-quite-wealthy tenant and their landlord as a wealthy but dependent tenant; and another one that points to the power relations on a meta-level, indicating the colonial asymmetry between ›the West‹/European Culture represented by the ›Greek landlord‹ and ›the Rest/all other cultures‹ depicted in the diasporic figure of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ as well as to the fact (!) that the wealth of the ›landlord ‹/the West depends on the payment and exploitation of the other(ed). But this exploitation is accompanied by resistance, which however futile it may appear, at least satisfies the power-less double ›knowledge‹ of the (privileged and complicit) colonized subject.

With these allusions, the passage touches on the unwritten political ›laws‹ that give way to different relations of power-lessness, which structure not only what is considered as ›knowledge‹ but also what is unknowable, and against which one is powerless. ›Non-knowledge‹ thus appears not only as the ultimate and vast sphere in which everything is already immersed but also as a constructed part of ›knowledge‹ itself that is made up out of political reasons (even if its ultimate cause and origins may have been lost) – a resigned form of ›knowledge‹ and powerlessness that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ *knows* all too well: »Je peux bien me moquer, c'est lui qui finit toujours par avoir le dernier mot. C'est qu'à un moment donné, il faut cracher le fric. Et là Platon ne fait pas le poids« (Laferrière 2008, 101).

Again, a double allusion seems to be at work here, one that depicts the everyday of a (white) landlord and a (Black) tenant, and one that points to the meta-level, and the text, and meaning production of a Black/postcolonial writer, and how their text is perceived and placed within the literary canon and its discourse(s). The only thing that this writer can do is to chip away a little at the discourse itself even if they may end up losing out to it.

On the diegetic level, this relationship shows the asymmetrical encounter between the narrator and the landlord; but the narrator/tenant generate their own methods in order not to succumb to the default power-relation.

›Il résiste toujours un bon moment avant de venir rapper à ma porte. J'ouvre, et je lui sors du même coup une citation de Platon, l'intello-star de la Grèce antique. Il ne sait même pas qui c'est, croyant qu'il a affaire à un des clochards qui traînent dans le petit parc en face. C'est quand même un Grec, ce concierge, il devrait avoir entendu au moins une fois dans sa vie le nom de Platon. Je suis presque fier de connaître un Grec qui ne

sait pas qui est Platon. Je déteste, bien sûr, toute cette propagande faite autour des philosophes grecs, leur préférant les poètes japonais plus énigmatiques.

– Je ne pourrais vous payer que plus tard, je lui fais sans ciller, car Platon doit passer me rembourser une dette, d'une minute à l'autre.

[...]

Il part sans un mot puisqu'il ne pense qu'à l'argent. Je suis riche de mots, moi. Je peux lui payer en mots tout de suite son loyer jusqu'à la fin de l'année. Dix minutes plus tard, je l'entends remonter précipitamment l'escalier, sûrement pris d'un soudain malaise – ma cassette, ma cassette.

– Ton type, là, il a intérêt à te payer, dit-il à bout de souffle.

– Quel type?

– Ton Platon.

– Bravo, ça marche dans les deux sens ...

– Quoi?

– Regardez: Ton Platon, ça marche à l'envers comme à l'endroit ... Vous devriez vous lancer dans le rap ou dans le slam.

– Qu'est que tu veux me dire?

– Écoutez ... tonplaton ... Maintenant, je le dis à l'envers: tonplaton ... Vous voyez là? Je l'écris pour lui sur un morceau de carton: tonplaton.

– Es-tu devenu fou?

– Mais je ne vous l'aurais jamais dit si c'était vrai ... C'est à vous de juger si je suis devenu fou. Peut-être que oui ... Peut-être que non ... Peut-être que oui ... Peut-être que non

...

Je danse autour de lui. Il s'en va encore plus furieux qu'à son arrivée. « (Laferrière 2008, 99–100)

Both traits of the passage are humorous: that the ›landlord‹, contrary to our expectations, does not know Plato, and that the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ invents this spectral ›Greek friend‹, doubling the first incongruity. Furthermore, while ›Greek Culture‹ is often presented as the epitome of ›knowledge‹ per se, its importance in the self-constructions of the ›West‹ is here marked as ›propaganda‹ (Greek culture, nickname: Plato); by calling it ›propaganda‹, the ›implied author‹/homodiegetic narrator points to the constructedness of the self-image of ›Western culture‹ and its discourses, and moreover criticizes the way ›the West‹ regularly treats all other (not *that* harmless) ›nations‹ and especially those who are critical of ›Western culture‹ (but there are also those ›powers‹ – or rather *power-seekers* – who instrumentalize such critique, which is another form of ›propaganda‹ in a fabricated postcolonial decoloniality we should not forget that either – and where a lot of vicious seductive ›energies‹ are at play – and at a loss ...). The humorous insertion heightens the attention to the text but also creates a space of touch since its laughing side is at once disarming and contemplative. The humorous insertion is also accompanied by an epistemological allusion. With Plato, the passage seems to say, ghosts are everywhere, without our awareness even if we ›own‹ the house. The ›origins‹ of colonial mapping and the mapping of discourse are not remembered and long gone, and yet they have not ceased to dominate the wor(l)d. This is emphasized at the end of the passage, where the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, in a rather quixotic, maddening allusion, plays with the ›landlord's‹ words by echoing them back: tonplaton, ton-

platon; whether one reads it as ton-platon, from left to right, or as tonpla-ton, from right to left, it makes little difference, the *rhyme* remains the same; as if the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, in a state of ›madness‹, were, on the one hand, giving, assigning, Plato back to him, and, on the other hand, asserting that, whether one reads words from their end or from their beginning, or in whatever script, one cannot escape Platonic thinking, which is in fact quite ›maddening‹. ›Madness‹ seems here to be more reasonable than the unconscious acceptance of meanings with which, for example, ›the landlord‹ marches through ›life‹, busy counting his money. And it is interesting that ›the landlord‹, although unaware of his unawareness, accuses his tenant of being ›mad‹ – which is very applicable to relations of domination and exploitation, and what is normalized by it and what is marginalized as *unnatural*, but also how it is misused and abused in other political regiments – a *risus purus*. Again, the humorous tonality, however hidden, links an instance of narrative discourse with an epistemological analysis on a meta-level. It is also the textual space in which the poetic and poetological validity of the passage resides. A sphere of non-knowledge is triggered here and laid out through an affective, humorous rhetoric in which a Nietzschean state of Dionysian intoxication as well as a Freudian emphasis on the unconscious come into view, contributing to the ›maddening‹ meaning of the passage, where meaning is constructed in the same instance in which it is deconstructed.

Humorous rhetoric appears as a technique for bringing something into view – a process by which something significant in the production of meaning comes to the fore, something one need not necessarily have experienced but learned unconsciously. *Learning* and *reading* seem to have the same result (to make one unconscious or ›insane‹), which is why what is learned and constituted as part of ›knowledge‹ seems so meaningful. But this is not meant in the sense of the effects of ›knowledge‹/power. The homodiegetic narrator's/›implied author's‹ ›knowledge‹ does not actually increase their *power* over the landlord. The text does not change the social hierarchy, nor is the goal to be superior. Indeed, in an early interview, Laferrière claims that he regards Plato as a writer who is important to him (Laferrière 1999, 915). But the display of a specific ›knowledge‹ (of ›Platon‹/›Greek‹ philosophy) and the deconstruction of this ›knowledge‹ (there are other ›knowledges‹ and these may also be meaningful: Bashō) makes visible the strength of another power-lessness – the double non-knowledge within the (othered) self in a situation of power-lessness: In this way the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ *knows*, or rather experiences themselves as informed and educated, on the one hand. On the other hand, they do not give much weight to this ›knowledge‹, they use it, but they also seek other paths, other ›knowledges‹ to which they are attracted, other voices that seem to resemble those of a super-ego (those of the ›enigmatic Japanese poets‹). This inner power-less non-knowledge, which unfolds here in humorous allusions, is both empowering (speaking back) and liberating. Its liberating side is evoked in the reference to other realms of ›knowledge‹, the non-knowledge and power-lessness of (evocative?) poems around the world. There are, it seems to say, other open and questioning approaches to language that search the vast ocean of non-knowledge that Plato tries to codify and claims to *know*, which do not claim *to know* and instead accumulate what they gain from their observations and insights in the verses of poetry. Poetry, the allusive, non-binding poetry of haiku, appears as another form of philosophy, or even as its most

accomplished form. Bashoean poetry also stands against a philosophy that is compatible with ›power‹ and capitalist thinking. It is the philosophy of the wondering wanderer, the poor ascetic. Against this poverty, the passage invokes the richness that resides in words, the richness of poetry and poetry as wealth, which unleashes an empathetic side within the humorous tonality of the passage. The humorous effect of the passage is further heightened again by the swaggering, self-assertive claims of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹, who themselves are apparently intoxicated by their own humorous play, and who perhaps ask for some respect maybe (in general for the poet/writer?), when they say that they are rich in words. That this touching side of the passage may come over as ›empathic‹ shows the need, the spontaneous openness and susceptibility to the possibility of notions that differ from the normalized workings of consumer society. It also may reveal where a reorientation towards alternatives can ensue.

Furthermore, it is possible to interpret this text in two ways: on the level of narrative discourse and on a meta-level. It is unclear whether this duality was intentionally inscribed into the text by an ›implied author‹ via the ›real author‹ or if it should be understood as a kind of unconscious guerrilla war against the imagery and historically conditioned hierarchies that regulate language and discourse. But this doubling of layers also shows how the epistemology of the world, the way it is structured and represented, also works within everyday ›life‹. In the narrative discourse, the passage alludes to the Greek landlord, who is mocked by another diasporic figure, not for the purpose of ridicule, but perhaps in retaliation for their dependence; however, it also reflects a struggle within the self. The violent, striking touch of a (dominant) Other, in the sense of established structures of power, shows itself here against which a willful combat is waged that does not aim at offending the ›landlord‹ but at working against internalized impositions. The ›landlord‹ only marks its symbolic epitome. It seems to be against this inner Plato that *les poètes japonais* work, in order to make space for other possibilities of acquiring ›knowledge‹ beyond the routes of the ›known‹ and the austere regulations, which platonian philosophy seems to offer. In the narrative discourse, the ›landlord‹ is also depicted as a ›victim‹, as there is nothing he can gain from ›Platonic thinking‹, not even (national) glory. The power asymmetry, however, exceeds the possibilities of the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹; what rules is money. It might therefore be appropriate to see the ›landlord‹, too, as a figuration of someone who has lost everything – not only the illusion of a great past (of which he does not even know anything about), but also a more recent history that must have something to do with the diasporic situation, which might be the reason why he clings to money, the only thing that seems to matter when everything else has disappeared; ›knowledge‹ does not make much sense, and the void that non-knowledge and powerlessness may signal is rather dreaded?

To see Plato as a vagabond sleeping in the park is only derogatory within the parameters of the narrative discourse, according to the social standards and the eyes of the ›landlord‹; within another layer invoked in the novel, situated on the border between the meta-level and the narrative discourse, a *vagabond Plato* does not have a pejorative sense; although it may be amusing to imagine Plato as a vagabond because of the high level Plato occupies in the history of European thought, here, on the contrary, the ›vagabond life‹ is cherished. Basho, whom the homodiegetic narrator/›implied author‹ holds in high esteem, and the ›vagabond life‹ they themselves embark upon in Basho's temporally and

spatially displaced footsteps, appear as an ascetic as well as aesthetic search in this precious void of power-less not-knowing. It thus contains an epistemological dimension for the acquisition of what could be counted as ›knowledge‹. This appreciation of ›the vagabond‹ – is it also an appropriation of the ›vagabond?‹ – and the shift in meaning that results from it, would unleash an openness if it carried a space of empathic, caring affectivity (for the other(-ed) ›real‹vagabond). This would come with a willingness to dwell a little further on the meanings that unfold and to listen to what is said and unsaid in its implications.

In this way, the passage encompasses and offers a banquet of elements that work together to produce mesmerizing and pleasurable effects. Within its affective economy, however, pain is also evoked in two ways, both of which are linked to questions of subjectivity and (political) positioning. From a critical position and postcolonial subjectivity, pain becomes palpable in the ›mad‹ humor, where forms of discursive silencing and the desire to restructure discourse appear. In terms of *white* subjectivity (or dominant subjectivity more generally), the pain might be in acknowledging that there may be something wrong with one's perspectivism and self-definition. But the joy in both cases lies in the possibility that things can be changed, as well as in the humorous rhetoric that, through its affective work, space of and for togetherness and conviviality may be created, a naivety perhaps, that would have the possibility of seeking together other shores.

In this thought-provoking and amusing confrontation with ›Greek culture‹, a female figure is also invoked. Her name is, as mentioned earlier, ›Helena‹. Given the ambiguous role that ›Greek philosophy‹ plays in the novel, and the fact that ›Greece‹ is *almost* equated with ›the Middle East‹ in contemporary European and political contexts, – *almost* an other within – and given the distinct standing of ›ancient Greece‹ in its global dimensions – a field that still requires further exploration in critical approaches – it remains uncertain whether ›Helena‹ can be considered a *white* subjectivity or rather a subjectivity of color here. In any case, her attitude is portrayed as a kind of psychic withdrawal, enchanting, and intoxicating rather than supremacist, though this is not further touched upon.²⁰ She is the daughter of the narrator's ›landlord‹ and works in the ›Greek restau-

20 This portrayal is not in line with what is usually said about Laferrière and the transgression of colonialist boundaries through intimate representations between *white* subjectivities and subjectivities of color, especially regarding cis-normative relationships: »Montréal devient pour lui lieu de carnaval, où la truculence permet de faire apparaître la critique d'une société qui se croit libérée de toute affectation colonialiste ou raciste tout en fonctionnant selon les mêmes vieux mythes. Dany Laferrière les dénonce en mettant en scène l'espace des relations sexuelles [...] perçu traditionnellement comme lieu de transgressions [...]« (De Luca 2018, 197). In this novel, Laferrière mostly ignores this issue, concentrating instead on different relations between subjectivities of color; what I find problematic, however, is when *white* feminist critics more or less accuse Laferrière of sexist images (of *white* female figures) and thereby draw on and use the work of Black feminist thinkers, emphasizing the interconnectedness of sexism and racism, without acknowledging and critiquing the problematic position of often enough supremacist *white* feminist discourses. Such a move, moreover, may lend itself to an appropriation of intersectional studies and may emphasize an essentialist (?) ›feminist struggle‹ and an uncritical universalization of *white* feminist stances, rather than to illuminating, problematizing, and acknowledging racism. This is, for example, a critique that can be seen in the work of Lori Saint-Martin (2011, 55 ff.). What may become obscured and silenced in this way are articulations of anti-racist critique by Black male* writers, as well as

rant. In keeping with Greek myth, ›Helena‹ is portrayed as very ›beautiful‹ – and very silent and unresponsive. Whether it is this aloof attitude or her silence, she is portrayed as a true heartbreaker who (how could it be otherwise?) seduces the poor male customers by making them addicted to her ›beauty‹ and absent-mindedness (so much for (cis-normative) male rationality) (maybe ›Helena‹ just does not want to be stared at or talked to? Maybe she is already in love with someone (– possibly a woman*? or someone dead?), maybe she specifically dislikes flirting? Maybe she is a philosopher or a writer and concentrating on her texts while helping out in the restaurant, as her family is already complaining about her actual job (writing) that does not earn her much money, none at all in fact, so she is trying to make up for it, this way? Whatever). But no. What is rather presumed – as is usually the case throughout history and textuality, and no less so here – is, at best, only available as a mythologized silence that leads us directly to a nearby park. It is in this park that a number of the restaurant's customers, who have gone ›mad‹ and call themselves by the names of Greek mythological figures – Ajax, Achilles, and Agamemnon . . . – gather, where they throw away their second and third souvlakis (Laferrière 2008, 110 ff.), to the delight of the park's other inhabitants (who are not in love with ›Helena‹ but apparently cannot afford a meal, the ›reak, not chosen, ›vagabonds‹).

›Helena‹, as another female figure, is again invoked to represent male, cis-normative desire, and perhaps to illustrate ›Western‹ disinterest in the (male*) other. But nowhere is there any indication of why ›Helena‹ appears to be so abstracted or whether there is more to her disinterest. ›Helena‹ is perhaps both a mockery and a sign of the (long gone?) sexy sides of ›the West‹ and its seductive powers, from which it still seems impossible to protect oneself?

However, we will never know what ›Helena‹ may be thinking, or how she defines herself. Here, the novel pushes us into the realm of myth, mocking European self-constructions and -representations. ›Helena's‹ inner withdrawal may also represent the unavailable²¹ sight of myth – as the allegory of non-knowledge and power-lessness, a sphere that lies in the untouchable layers of the poetic. Within the scope of this study, the figure of ›Helena‹ may also foreshadow the limits of humorous rhetoric and its touching affective economy, that is, when the tragic side that underlies *affective humor* remains unspoken and unreceived in which case no humor and no touch may emerge. In such moments, humor seems to dissipate, leaving behind unpalpable, somber traces.

Black feminism and feminisms of color; this is particularly important because especially Black, but also other people of color, have been overrepresented in sexualized, often violent, racist narratives in which *white* women have been seen as victims of, particularly, Black male sexuality and male sexualities of color – a colonial image and legacy. To ignore this colonialist, racist trait by suggesting a general ›feminist struggle‹ – does that not amount to a categorical repetition of discursive violence and colonialist imagery? Laferrière has responded to representations of Black masculinity, and Black writers, and the expectations of mainstream society. I think, for example, of his book *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?* (1993), a title that is perhaps more accurate in its English translation *Why must a Black Man Write about Sex?* (1994); see also Goller/Laferrière (2020). For a critical analysis of sexism, racism, and class, see, for instance, Angela Davis's still relevant, seminal text *Women Race & Class* (1983, 172 ff.).

21 Cf. annotation 19, p. 45.