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The Reader, the Writer, and the Book in How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired by Dany Laferrière
Le lecteur, l'auteur et le livre dans Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer de Dany Laferrière

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Article abstract

Many critics have studied the relationship that unfolds between black men and white women in the novel How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired (1985) by Haitian-born Quebecois author Dany Laferrière. However, another type of relationship in Laferrière's work seems just as important, if not more important: the relationship between the aspiring writer and female readers as mediated by the book. This new angle allows for a rereading of the novel around a central axis—the idea of the literary Other, and the way it is articulated in the novel through the fictionalized book. This article first examines how, at the diegetic level, women own books, which makes them desirable to the narrator; in contrast, at the metadiegetic level, the terms of this equation are reversed, for it is now books, as mediators, which make objectified women attractive by being possessed by them. The relationship between the male reader (subject), the book (mediator), and the female reader (object) is then replaced by the relationship between the female reader (subject), the book (mediator), and the male reader (object), as the English-speaking white woman undertakes to judge the French-speaking Black (novelist) on the basis of books. In this context, the black male reader has no choice but to analyze the white female reader using her own book-based preconceptions. Indeed, whereas the white female reader judges the human subject based on his relationship to the book as an object, the black male reader uses the book to understand said human subject. It is therefore up to the aspiring black writer to help the white female reader rethink her relationship with books in general, and with literature in particular. This article shows that the narrator's objective (as a writer) is ultimately for his book to be read—in other words, to be possessed—by women, as he himself possesses women (as a womanizer).

Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada 60 (2023)

The Reader, the Writer, and the Book in *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired* by Dany Laferrière

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Abstract

Many critics have studied the relationship that unfolds between black men and white women in the novel *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired* (1985) by Haitian-born Quebecois author Dany Laferrière. However, another type of relationship in Laferrière's work seems just as important, if not more important: the relationship between the aspiring writer and female readers as mediated by the book. This new angle allows for a rereading of the novel around a central axis—the idea of the literary Other, and the way it is articulated in the novel through the fictionalized book. This article first examines how, at the diegetic level, women own books, which makes them desirable to the narrator; in contrast, at the metadiegetic level, the terms of this equation are reversed, for it is now books, as mediators, which make objectified women attractive by being possessed by them. The relationship between the male reader (subject), the book (mediator), and the female reader (object) is then replaced by the relationship between the female reader (subject), the book (mediator), and the male reader (object), as the English-speaking white woman undertakes to judge the French-speaking Black (novelist) on the basis of books. In this context, the black male reader has no choice but to analyze the white female reader using her own book-based preconceptions. Indeed, whereas the white female reader judges the human subject based on his

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relationship to the book as an object, the black male reader uses the book to understand said human subject. It is therefore up to the aspiring black writer to help the white female reader rethink her relationship with books in general, and with literature in particular. This article shows that the narrator's objective (as a writer) is ultimately for his book to be read—in other words, to be possessed—by women, as he himself possesses women (as a womanizer).

Résumé

De nombreux critiques ont considéré la relation qui unit les hommes noirs et les femmes blanches dans le roman *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985) de l'auteur québécois d'origine haïtienne Dany Laferrière. Toutefois, un autre type de relation dans l'œuvre de Laferrière semble aussi important, sinon plus important : la relation entre l'aspirant écrivain et les lectrices, telle qu'arbitrée par le livre en tant qu'objet médiateur. Ce nouvel angle permet une relecture du roman autour d'un axe central — l'idée de l'Autre littéraire et la manière dont il est articulé dans le roman par le biais du livre fictif. Cet article cherche en premier lieu à examiner comment, au niveau diégétique, les femmes possèdent des livres, ce qui les rend désirables aux yeux du narrateur; en revanche, du point de vue métadiégétique, les termes de cette équation sont renversés, car ce sont maintenant les livres, en tant qu'objets médiateurs, qui rendent les femmes objectivées désirables en étant possédés par ces dernières. La relation entre l'homme lecteur (sujet), le livre (médiateur) et la femme lectrice (objet) est alors remplacée par la relation entre la femme lectrice (sujet), le livre (médiateur) et l'homme lecteur (objet), puisque la femme blanche anglophone entreprend de juger l'homme noir francophone (l'auteur) en fonction de sa relation aux livres. Dans ce contexte, le lecteur noir n'a pas d'autre choix que d'analyser la lectrice blanche à travers ses idées préconçues sur les livres. En effet, alors que la lectrice blanche juge le sujet humain en fonction de sa relation au livre en tant qu'objet, le lecteur noir utilise le livre pour comprendre le sujet humain. Par conséquent, il

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incombe à l'auteur noir d'aider la lectrice blanche à repenser sa relation avec le livre en général, et plus particulièrement avec la littérature. Cet article démontre que l'objectif ultime du narrateur (en tant qu'auteur) est de s'assurer que son livre soit lu — autrement dit, possédé — par des femmes, tout comme il possède lui-même les femmes (en tant que coureur de jupons).

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How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired is the first novel by Haitian-born Canadian author Dany Laferrière. Originally published in 1985 by VLB éditeur, it has now become a classic of Quebecois literature. The novel is about two young black males who share an apartment in a poor neighbourhood of Montreal, the same city Laferrière settled in when he immigrated to Canada at the age of 22. The narrator is working on his first novel, *Black Cruiser's Paradise*, and spends the rest of his time accumulating female conquests, while his flatmate, Bouba, devotes all of his time to sleeping or reading the Koran: "There's nothing to it. It's about a guy, a Black, who lives with a friend who spends all day lying on a couch meditating, reading the Koran, listening to jazz and screwing when it comes along."[1] At the diegetic level, many critics have studied the archetypical relationship that unfolds between black men and white women throughout the novel;[2] however, at the metadiegetic level, another type of relationship seems just as important, if not more important—the relationship between the aspiring writer and female readers[3] as mediated by the book,[4] which is the metonymic representation of literature *par*

[1] Dany Laferrière, *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired* (Douglas and McIntyre, 2013), 37.
[2] On this topic, see Lori Saint-Martin, "Une oppression peut en cacher une autre : antiracisme et sexisme dans *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* de Dany Laferrière," *Voix et Images*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2011, pp. 53–67.
[3] Which is not surprising considering that on average, women read more than men, especially works of fiction. Western women also have the means to purchase books, whereas white women can contribute to legitimizing a Black male writer ignored by his white peers.
[4] Although many studies have been published on Laferrière's novel, the representation of the book in the novel remains largely unexplored, as Philippe Basabose explains. See Philippe Basabose, "La représentation du livre dans *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* de Dany Laferrière," *Nouvelle*

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excellence. This angle, which remains largely unexplored, is particularly promising insofar as it allows for a rereading of the novel around a central axis—the idea of the literary Other, and the way it is articulated in the novel through the fictionalized book. Many have written about the notion of Otherness in Laferrière's novel, be it between geographical areas (the West versus the East), cultures (French-speaking versus English-speaking), sexes (woman versus man), or races (white versus black).[5] However, the Otherness we are referring to here is twofold, since female characters symbolize not only the other sex, race, language, or culture, but also the other reader, the other literary genre, the other literary tradition, the other literature.

This article draws on the concept of triangular desire developed by René Girard in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* according to which the desire between a subject and an object is mediated by a third party (the mediator) who desires the object and, in doing so, makes the object desirable to the subject.[6] This paper will first analyze the way in which, at the diegetic level, women own books, which makes them desirable to the narrator; however, at the metadiegetic level, the terms of this equation are reversed, for it is now books, as mediators, which make objectified women attractive by being possessed by them (1). The relationship between the male reader (subject), the book (mediator), and the female reader (object) is replaced by the relationship between the female reader (subject), the book (mediator), and the male reader (object), as the English-speaking white woman undertakes to judge the black novelist on the basis of books (2). In this context, the black male reader has no choice but to analyze the

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Revue Synergies Canada, no. 13, 2020, https://doi.org/10.21083/nrsc.vi13.5735. Basabose, whose article focuses on the representation of the book, addresses this matter in a factual manner without seeing the book as the protagonist of a "story within the story." André Lamontagne also mentions some of the novel's metatextual comments, but without attributing any particular importance to the book as such. See André Lamontagne, *Le roman québécois contemporain : les voix sous les mots* (Fides, 2004), 159.

[5] For instance, the otherness that characterizes the Quebecois psyche (see André Lamontagne, *Le roman québécois contemporain : les voix sous les mots* (Fides, 2004) and Maria Fernanda Arentsen, "Le rôle – complexe – des stéréotypes dans le discours du narrateur migrant de *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer,*" *Dalhousie French Studies*, vol. 79, 2007, pp. 93-110) or the otherness between the sexes and races; see Saint-Martin.

[6] René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel. Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 4.

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white female reader by her own book-based preconceptions. Indeed, whereas the white female reader judges the human subject based on his relationship to the book as an object, the black male reader uses the book to understand said human subject (3). It is therefore up to the aspiring black writer to help the white female reader rethink her relationship with books in general, and with literature in particular (4). The narrator's objective (as a writer) is ultimately for his book to be read—in other words, to be possessed—by women, as he himself possesses women (as a womanizer) (5).

1. Women Are Readers

The narrator's interest in women is closely linked to his interest in books, to such a degree that one wonders which of the two he is most attracted to. An example can be found in the very lightly dressed girl coming out of the Hachette bookstore with a Henry Miller book under her arm: "I go down St. Denis to St. Catherine and turn towards Radio-Québec. The air is quivering with heat. Strike a match and all Montreal will go up. I walk slowly. Just ahead of me, a girl comes out of Hachette with Miller under her arm and almost nothing on her back. My temperature shoots up to 120. It's 90 degrees in the shade."[7] According to Vincent Jouve, two narrative focal points reflect the construction of meaning in a novel: "the semiotic-symbolic object (book, painting, and in general, any medium of communication) and the body (received through a behaviour and in its relation to a piece of clothing)."[8] In this particular instance, one wonders whether it is the girl's body that is fueling the narrator's desire ("the air is quivering with heat"), or the book she carries under her arm. Indeed, on first reading, it seems like the girl is the object of desire, but a closer look suggests that the desire for the book is just as strong, if not stronger. A

[7] Laferrière, 33.
[8] Our translation. Original quote in French: « l'objet sémiotique-symbolique (livre, tableau, et de façon générale, tout support de communication) et le corps (reçu à travers un comportement et dans sa relation à un habit). » Vincent Jouve, *L'Effet-personnage dans le roman* (Presses Universitaire de France, 1998), 103.

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similar scene occurs soon after between the narrator and a girl at the post office:

> There's a long line at the post office. We're packed in like sardines. I check out the sardine in front of me. She's reading a book. This particular sardine is book-crazy. Whenever I see someone reading, I have to know what book, if it's good, what it's about.
> "What's it about?"
> "What's what about?"
> "Your book."
> "It's a novel."
> "What kind?"
> "Science fiction."
> "Is it good?"
> "It's okay."
> "You don't like it?"
> "I don't know."
> "What's wrong with it?"
> She brushes aside her red hair. Some women's eyes scare you. She's been over-cruised and she's sick of it.[9]

This scene is *a priori* a depiction of the womanizer flirting with a girl he likes, the book becoming a pretext to seduce the girl in question. Yet, the term "pretext," in its broadest sense, is defined as an apparent reason used to hide the real motive of an action. In my opinion, the fictionalized book is precisely that—the real motive behind the narrator's action, or, to put it differently, an expression of his interest in literature. The narrator does not say anything else when he describes himself as a "book-crazy sardine." It's the reader in him, and not the womanizer, who started this conversation with the girl—even though, when taken out of context, the following dialogue could very much be about the sexual act itself: "Is it good? It's okay. You don't like it?/I don't know." We can easily imagine the narrator asking these questions to one of his innumerable conquests; however, in this case, it is the reader (and, behind him, the aspiring writer)

[9] Laferrière, 34.

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who is trying to understand the nature of the female reader's emotions toward the novel genre. He is not seeking to understand the girl's feelings about him or, more precisely, about his physical performance.

René Girard explains that regarding triangular desire, "[t]he subject is less capable than ever of giving up the inaccessible object: it is on this object and it alone that the mediator confers his prestige, by possessing or wanting to possess it. Other objects have no worth at all in the eyes of the envious person, even though they may be similar to or indeed identical with the 'mediated' object."[10] At the diegetic level, the object of desire mediated by the woman is the book; however, at the metadiegetic level, the terms of the equation are reversed insofar as it is the book (as a mediator) which makes the girl-object desirable, simply by being possessed by her. This is illustrated by another scene that takes place outside the apartment, at the Faubourg Saint-Denis terrace: "I'm sitting outside at the Faubourg St-Denis, sipping a glass of cheap wine and watching the girls go by. A girl to my right is reading something by Miller. I lean over to see which one. One of my favorites: *Quiet Days in Clichy*. Miller's summer in Paris. You have to read Miller in the summer and Ducharme in the winter, alone in a cottage. Wouldn't you know it: here comes a girl carrying Ducharme's *L'hiver de force*, that's just come out with Gallimard. It's the hottest book around."[11] The narrator, sitting at a terrace, seems to only have one objective at this precise moment in time—that is, to watch girls go by. However, a second reading suggests that in reality, he attaches more importance to the girls' companions, namely the books, than the girls themselves, who are always described in relation to the object. The narrator's gaze moves from the possessing subject (the girls) to the possessed object (the book). While he does not have anything to say about the girls, he has a lot to say about the books. The first book is *Quiet Days in Clichy* by Henry Miller, published in 1956 in France and in 1965 in the United States. The novel is about Miller's life in Paris, more specifically his stay in Clichy, during which he shared an apartment with a

[10] Girard, 13-14.
[11] Laferrière, 64.

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journalist and wrote his first novels, *Black Spring* and *Tropic of Cancer*. This resonates strangely with the story of the narrator, who is currently sharing an apartment with another man of letters and writing his first novel, *Black Cruiser's Paradise*. It is interesting to note that this ambiguous relationship between the woman, the narrator, and the book is depicted outside the apartment—for example, on the street near the Hachette bookstore, at the post office, or on a terrace—and not inside it, as though to highlight the fact that the metadiegetic dimension of the novel can only be identified outside of the main narrative (the apartment shared by Bouba and the narrator).

It is useful here to make a distinction between what Vincent Jouve calls the "*lectant jouant*," whom he describes as the reader who "understands the character as a narrative pawn and tries to predict the movements on the text's chessboard," and the "*lectant interprétant*," defined as the reader who "understands it as the clue of a semantic project."[12] While the *lectant jouant* focuses on the narrator's interest in women, the *lectant interprétant* interprets the above excerpt as an opportunity for the novel to talk about itself through its fictionalized double. Indeed, it is at the very moment that the narrator evokes the novel *L'hiver de force* (1973) by Quebecois writer Réjean Ducharme that a girl walks by carrying a copy of the book in question. Is this a coincidence, or a semantic clue about the true role played by women in the novel, which is to make books look good? Here again, Ducharme's novel echoes Laferrière's; just like the book we are reading, *L'hiver de force* tells the story of two editors from Montreal who spend all day in their apartment watching movies on television, discussing them, and lazing around. The fact that the narrator mentions "real books" creates an association between the (black) novel we are reading and (white) literature, whether the said literature is written in English (Miller) or in French (Ducharme). In this respect, Joëlle Gleize explains that "[t]he presence of a book in fiction seems to invite the reader to put it in relation to the novel

[12] Our translation. Original quote in French: « [le] lectant jouant […] [qui] saisit le personnage comme un pion narratif dont il s'agit de prévoir les mouvements sur l'échiquier du texte […] [et le] lectant interprétant […] [qui] l'appréhende comme l'indice d'un projet sémantique. » Jouve, 92.

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he's reading."[13] In this case, the (real) novel follows some of its illustrious predecessors, such as Miller or Ducharme, and, in doing so, legitimizes its own existence by having renowned literary (fore)fathers.

2. The Western Female Reader's Literary Worldview

If women go hand-in-hand with books, the reader in them supports—for the most part—English-speaking literature written by women,[14] through which the black man is judged. One of the most telling examples is that of Miz Literature, an English-speaking student from Montreal with whom the narrator has sex on a regular basis and who is writing her PhD thesis on the medieval poetess Christine de Pizan at McGill University. The narrator meets her at a literary evening organized by the university: "She's some kind of girl. I met her at McGill, at a typically McGill literary soirée. I let on that Virginia Woolf was as good as Yeats or some kind of nonsense like that."[15] Miz Literature "belongs to a feminist literary club at McGill—the McGill Witches—whose mission is to restore the reputation of unjustly neglected poetesses. This year they are publishing a luxury edition of Emily Dickinson with ink drawings by Valery Miller."[16] As she is checking the narrator's books, Miz Literature cannot help but notice that his collection contains very few female writers:

> Miz Literature inspects my books.
> "You don't have many women authors."
> She says it nicely, but that kind of comment can hide the most wrathful condemnation.
> "I have Marguerite Yourcenar."
> Yourcenar, it seems, does not get me off the hook.

[13] Our translation. Original quote in French: « [l]a présence d'un livre dans la fiction semble inviter le lecteur à le mettre en relation avec le roman qu'il est en train de lire. » See Joëlle Gleize, *Le Double Miroir. Le livre dans les livres : de Stendhal à Proust* (Hachette, 1992), 18.
[14] Laferrière, quoted by André Lamontagne, states the following: "I usher into Quebecois literature—in the reader's world at least—young English-speaking girls" (« Je fais entrer clans la littérature québécoise — chez le lecteur tout au moins — des jeunes filles anglophones »). See Lamontagne, 172.
[15] Lamontagne, 20.
[16] Lamontagne, 28.

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> Too suspect, I don't have Colette or Virginia Woolf (unforgivable!), not even Marie-Claire Blais.
> "I have some Erica Jong poems."
> "Really!"
> Valery's face lights up. Vesuvius in eruption. Valery illustrated a Jong collection last year. As fate would have it, the book is on the table.[17]

A French-speaking male who does not read English-speaking female writers is automatically suspicious to the English-speaking female reader. This (Western) approach to literature is more ideological than based on aesthetic principles, for even the books of the Belgian female writer Marguerite Yourcenar do not seem to be good enough. Despite what she professes, the feminist reader values the sex of an author (women versus men) less than where they are from (America versus Europe) and, consequently, the type of literature they belong to (English versus French). Indeed, there is no indication that the narrator has read the poems of American author Erica Jong, but it does not matter, as possessing the object—and not necessarily understanding it—is enough to restore the narrator's image. The mere fact that the narrator possesses Erica Jong's book makes him desirable in the eyes of the white English-speaking female reader.

The same attitude toward books can be observed in Miz Cat, a girl the narrator meets at the Isaza bar:

> "In my country, people eat cats!"
> This time, of course, she heard. At that precise moment I realized I had just committed the gaffe of the century.
> "I don't, of course," I added as quickly as I could.
> Too late. What's done is done. She brought me my drink with a constipated look on her face, and bravely we tried to change the subject.
> "I bet you like to read a lot."
> "I do. I spend a fortune on books."

[17] Laferrière, 44.

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> She glances at her library. Maybe she's forgotten the incident. What man could love books on one hand, and on the other hand eat cats?[18]

What is meant to be a joke about the supposedly cannibalistic practices of black people is taken literally by Miz Cat, who still believes in the old stereotypes inherited from the colonial era, which books played an active part in disseminating. She perceives the black man as a savage, but the reader as respectable. Indeed, Miz Cat invites the narrator over after he acknowledges that he not only knows, but likes American writer Ernest Hemingway's books:

> We sit down at the bar on the high stools and order drinks. I ask her what she's up to these days.
> "I'm reading."
> "What?"
> "Hemingway."
> "Excellent."
> We finish our drinks. She asks me back to her place for coffee.[19]

Is it the man Miz Cat is attracted to, or the reader of English literature? The question deserves to be asked, since the narrator only becomes respectable when he establishes himself as a connoisseur of "good" books, namely those belonging to the North American literary canon. Let us note here that Miz Cat "has a yellow sofa and a tiny set of shelves which contain erotica only: J.J. Pauvert's celebrated collection, Miller's complete works (*Nexus, Sexus, Plexus*), *The Story of O*, the publications of Régine Deforges, Lucien de Samosate's *L'Œuvre amoureuse*, Aretini, Rachilde and Octave Mirbeau."[20] While the black male reader, as we will see in a moment, uses the couch to reflect on the book, the white female reader uses the couch to indulge in her senses through the book; mental and physical activities are in opposition here. The North American female reader's relationship

[18] Laferrière, 76.
[19] Laferrière, 74.
[20] Laferrière, 75.

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with European books is superficial, given that most of them focus on the body, but the "relationship to the senses" also refers to the sensual relationship between Miz Cat and her library. The novel overtly displays its literary ambitions through its fictionalized double, and readers who would content themselves with only a superficial reading of the novel (the story of a cruiser) run the risk of missing its true meaning (the story of a literature lover). Indeed, while the girl is interested in books because of her interest in the other sex (men), the narrator is interested in the other sex (women) because of his interest in books, as I shall discuss below.

3. The Female Reader's Biases

According to André Lamontagne, the previous examples suggest that in this novel, white women perceive black men through preconceived ideas, unlike the narrator, who seeks to understand white women from the inside.[21] However, the same can be said about the narrator, who filters white female readers through Western book-based biases: "Miz Literature left her scent in the bathroom. In his journal (*Le Retour du Tchad*), Gide writes that what struck him most in Africa was the smell. A smell of strong spices. A smell of leaves. The Negro is of the vegetable kingdom. Whites forget that they have a smell too. Most McGill girls smell like Johnson's Baby Powder."[22] The narrator is no longer a simple reader, but a writer who uses Western books to deconstruct the myths spread about black people by his literary forefathers and their female readers. Indeed, just like the French writer discovering Africa noticed a distinctive smell in the air which reminded him of strong spices and leaves—rejecting (supposedly illiterate) black people into a state of nature—black writers discovering North America can say the exact same thing about the people who live there, especially the (infantilized) local girls who smell of baby powder. In doing so, the aspiring writer, like Gide before him, does not hesitate to stand up against a certain colonial worldview propagated by his literary

[21] Lamontagne, 169.
[22] Laferrière, 21.

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predecessors. The narrator emphasizes this point during a conversation with Miz Literature:

> "Why do the dishes now?"
> "Am I disturbing you?"
> "Not really."
> "You're reading! Oh, I'm sorry."
> And believe it or not, she really is sorry. Reading is sacred in her book. Besides, a Black with a book denotes the triumph of Judeo-Christian civilization! Proof that those bloody crusades really did have some value. True, Europe did pillage Africa but this Black is reading a book.[23]

The anthropological study of the Western woman must be done through the book, for the definition of civilization rests upon the book and its mastery. Indeed, books have played a crucial role in the creation and dissemination of a distorted image of black people,[24] and were used to justify the colonial enterprise. The said colonial enterprise was therefore worth it, since it enabled the black man to access books—and, through them, the very notion of civilization—by turning him into a reader. There is a fine line between the idea of civilization and the book, which the narrator crosses by calling into question the inversion of values that characterizes the modern Western world. While the narrator uses the book to form an opinion about human beings, Miz Literature forms an opinion about human beings based on their relationship to the book.

The narrator gives another example during a conversation between Miz Literature, a friend of hers, and himself at a bar called Aux Beaux Esprits. He manages to convince the two girls that he spoke with the French writer Marguerite Duras during a private screening of one of her films:

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[23] Laferrière, 28.

[24] See Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Indiana University Press, 1988) and Léon Fanoudh-Siefer, *Le Mythe du nègre et de l'Afrique noire dans la littérature française (de 1800 à la 2e Guerre Mondiale)* (Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1968).

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> "If I remember right—I'd had a little bit to drink, I don't know if you've ever been to a party at Straram's—anyway, I think she was having problems with the soundtrack. In the end she took the soundtrack from another film and edited it onto India Song. I think it was from a documentary, that's right, a documentary on Hokusai."
> And when you consider that these girls were sent to a serious institution like McGill to learn clarity of thought, analytical capacity and scientific doubt! But they're so full of Judeo-Christian propaganda that when they get around a Negro, they immediately start thinking like primitives. For them, a Negro is too naïve to lie. But they didn't start the ball rolling; before them was the Bible, Rousseau, the blues, Hollywood and all the rest.[25]

The (black) novel is using (white) book history to settle the score with the literary tradition it comes from,[26] which conveyed a false image of black people. The Bible and Rousseau's books not only served to portray black people as primitives (through the curse of Cham and the myth of the noble savage), but also participated in building Western civilization, the modern version of which is itself very much primitive, as illustrated by the two Western girls who have difficulty thinking for themselves. This also applies to Miz Sophisticated Lady, a young woman from Sir George Williams University with whom the narrator and his flatmate, Bouba, go to dinner one night:

> But a half hour after the meal, I spotted her sneaking a little brown leather book from her Gucci bag:
> "Are those Chairman Mao's sayings?"
> "No."
> "A book of Eastern prayers?" I guessed again.
> "No," she answered sharply.
> "Oh, of course! It has to be the Bhagavad-Gita."
> "You're cold."
> "In that case it's an abridged version of the Kama Sutra."

[25] Laferrière, 65.
[26] On this topic, see János Riesz, *De la littérature coloniale à la littérature africaine* (Karthala, 2007).

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> "Sorry," she said with a weak smile. "It's a booklet that tells you the number of calories for different kinds of food."[27]

The black reader ironically assumes that the book possessed by the white girl can only belong to an Eastern literary tradition carrying with it philosophical, if not metaphysical knowledge (Mao's book, Eastern prayer books, or the Bhagavad-Gita). In light of Miz Sophisticated Lady's repeated denials, the narrator is forced to lower his literary expectations and suggests another Eastern book containing purely physical knowledge (the Kama Sutra). He is wrong again and cannot imagine that the girl's readings are even more superficial than that, and yet, her little brown leather book indicates the number of calories for different kinds of food. The cult of the body (content) is coupled with an algorithmic perspective on the world (form), considering that the booklet (not even a real book) consists of a lengthy list of ingredients and their corresponding calorie counts. It is therefore up to the black male reader to help the white female reader rethink her relationship with books in general, and with literature in particular.

4. Teaching the Western Female Reader How to Consume Books Differently

This is Bouba's mission. Bouba, with whom the narrator shares a filthy apartment on St. Denis Street near Carré St. Louis, spends all his time drinking, reading, eating, meditating, or fornicating. Unlike Miz Cat, who uses books for her own sexual needs, or Miz Sophisticated Lady, who uses them to know what to eat, for Bouba, the consumption of books constitutes a basic physiological need in much the same way as thirst, hunger, or sexuality.[28] On this topic, the narrator remarks: "When we came into possession of this meager pigsty, Bouba settled on the couch with the collected works of Freud, an old dictionary with the letters A

[27] Riesz, 45.
[28] Abraham H. Maslow defines the five basic physiological needs as follows: breathing, hunger, thirst, sexuality, sleep, and defecation. See Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1943, pp. 370-96.

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through D and part of E missing, and a torn and tattered copy of the Koran."[29] The fact that Freud's books and the Koran are Bouba's bedside table books is significant, for the black man living in Montreal embodies a form of syncretism between the spiritual dimension of the book, which still prevails in the East (the Koran), and the psychoanalytical dimension of the book, which dominates in the West (Freud's works). Bouba uses the Eastern literary tradition—or the Western one inspired by the East—to understand the Western female reader's psychology: "He brews endless cups of tea on an alcohol lamp and reads rare books on Assyrian art, the English mystics, voodoo Vévés and Swinburne's 'Fata Morgana.'"[30] By leveraging Eastern wisdom, he undertakes to explain to the Western female reader how to read her own literary tradition. This is particularly true with Miz Suicide, a skinny flaxen-haired girl who is obsessed with the idea of suicide, whom Bouba "unearthed […] at the Esoteric Bookstore on St. Denis, across from the Bibliothèque Nationale."[31] Their relationship immediately bears the hallmark of a book-based metaphysical knowledge (Esoteric Bookstore) as opposed to a Western one (National Library), with Miz Suicide carrying a copy of the bestselling book by Lebanon-born writer Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet* (1923),[32] everywhere she goes. Bouba becomes Miz Suicide's literary psychoanalyst and has books sessions with her every Tuesday and Thursday from 4:00 to 4:45 pm: "Bouba is sitting on the couch like an ancient bhikkhu deciphering Li Po ideograms, with Miz Suicide at his feet, drinking in his words."[33] The narrator continues: "In his guttural, mystic voice, he reads the slender, precious book by the bearded poet Li Po on the correct manner of drinking tea."[34] The reader comes to wonder which of the two is used to quench the female reader's thirst: tea (which is what Li Po's book is about), or the book itself (the content of which Miz Suicide indirectly drinks in).

[29] Laferrière, 14.
[30] Laferrière, 16.
[31] Laferrière, 40.
[32] Which is famous for combining Eastern and Western spirituality in a poetic form.
[33] Laferrière, 40.
[34] Laferrière, 40.

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At first glance, Bouba's lesson is about the correct way to drink tea; however, in reality, it seems to be more about how to drink (read) the book: "First you must learn," Bouba explains, "how to breathe the tea before proceeding to drink it."[35]

By confronting the character with the object that is the human body (how to drink) and the book (how to read), the novel(ist) is speaking to the *lectant interprétant*, whose hermeneutic competency is requested.[36] The fictionalization of the book therefore invites us to a treasure hunt, the goal of which is to unveil the meaning of the novel itself. In this context, the female reader is invited to "breathe" the book before reading it—in other words, to immerse herself into it—using her soul and not her mind. This is demonstrated by another session between Bouba and Miz Suicide, which this time features the Italian writer Giovanni Papini's book: "'You see,' Bouba begins, 'this Papini was an Italian writer, a totally disillusioned man. In one of his books, he tells the story of a German who wanted to commit suicide.'"[37] Looking for the best way to take his own life, the German decides to let himself waste away both physically and morally, which Miz Suicide does not find very original. Bouba then adds: "'The difference is that he did it methodically.'"[38] This seems to be a direct reference to the book *Le Miroir qui fuit* (1978) by Papini, which contains a short story called "Une mort mentale" ("A Mental Death"), the content of which is very similar to Bouba's tale. Is the character trying to draw a parallel between a Cartesian approach to life and a form of mental suicide? In doing so, the novel also reveals its view on literature, by comparing a type of literature that is purely physical in both form and substance to a type of literature that is metaphysical in essence.

The narrator takes on a similar role and teaches Miz Literature how to consume books differently, even though his *modus operandi* differs quite substantially from Bouba's. He takes advantage of an outing at the Hachette bookstore in her company to teach her his technique:

[35] Laferrière, 40.
[36] Jouve, 103.
[37] Laferrière, 41.
[38] Laferrière, 41.

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> "What are we going to read?"
> "We're here to steal. When you rip off a book, you must choose only the best. When I want to read a bad book, I buy it. Getting caught with a lousy writer under your shirt is the greatest humiliation."
> "What are we going to steal?"
> "Suit yourself."[39]

The narrator is instructing Miz Literature on how to break the rules literally (through stealing), but also figuratively (by claiming ownership of the best books). The best books should not be consumed in a conventional way. On the contrary, their acquisition, which influences their consumption, requires the reader to take a risk, to put themselves in danger on behalf of and for the book. The "how" must inform the "what," and the narrator leaves the book selection up to Miz Literature ("Suit yourself"). His method differs drastically from those of the people inside the bookstore, who, according to him, have no intention of buying anything, but are simply taking advantage of the air conditioning:

> The bookstore's full.
> "Look at the crowd!"
> "It's because of the air conditioning. Most of them don't have the slightest intention of buying a book. They're here for the cool air."
> "What are they reading?"
> "Cookbooks, macrame, diet, horoscope, great outdoors, sports."[40]

The readers' self-interested attitude ("They're here for the cool air") coincides with their readings (practical books). This would have certainly been Miz Literature's fate if not for the narrator, thanks to whom she is having the time of her life:

> Miz Literature is all hot and bothered. The biggest adventure in her life. Theft. Corrupting an Outremont girl is practically a BA in itself.

[39] Laferrière, 74.
[40] Laferrière, 56.

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> "How many do you have in your bag?"
> "Five or six, I don't know."
> "That's a day's work. Let's go. Give me your bag. Go ahead, I'll follow. Don't look at the cashier. I'll take care of everything."[41]

The thrill caused by the act of transgression is also related to the consumption of quality books by an informed reader. Corrupting the Outremont girl's relationship to the books can be seen as a good deed, because the girl does not consume them with her heart, but with her head. We can therefore better understand why Miz Literature concludes this episode outside the bookstore by saying:

> "You know, I made a wish back there."
> "What's that?"
> "One day we'll come here and steal your book."
> I close my eyes. And picture, with a dash of perverse pleasure, an old lady slipping a book unnoticed into her purse: *Black Cruiser's Paradise.*[42]

Miz Literature's comment introduces the relationship between the female reader and the narrator's first novel, *Black Cruiser's Paradise*, which he is in the process of writing. It is precisely this relationship that is so strongly desired by the novelist, who wants his book to be possessed by its readers—in other words, to be read with passion. According to Maria Fernanda Arentsen, women in Laferrière's novel are not only objects of desire, but also desiring subjects.[43] Following this logic, if the narrator's book ever gets stolen, it is because the female reader considers that it is worth it, both literally (stealing is not exactly a walk in the park) and figuratively (the book's content is of high quality).

[41] Lafferière, 57.
[42] Lafferière, 57.
[43] Arentsen, 104.

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5. The Aspiring Writer Wants His Book to Be Desired

The narrator's fantasy is for his book to be possessed and read by young women such as Miz Literature, which is why he tries to turn her into a real reader and not a mere book consumer. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the narrator describes the novel he is writing as "fantasies":

> Valery Miller makes a beeline for the couch with a big bouquet of lilacs sparkling with rain. Miz Literature puts her flowers in a vase and the vase in a corner of the window ledge. She watches me type for a moment. Valery Miller is wearing a green and yellow Sonia Delaunay-style dress.
> "What are you writing?"
> "A novel."
> "A novel!"
> "Fantasies, really."
> "Fantasies!"
> In the Western world the word "fantasy" is the next most powerful thing after the atom bomb.[44]

The term "fantasy" itself refers to the novel's metaliterary dimension: at the diegetic level, the *lectant jouant* interprets the narrator's answer literally, since the novel is, after all, a story of fantasies, namely the narrator's sexual conquests. At the metadiegetic level, however, the *lectant interprétant* sees this as the narrator's confession of his deepest desire (as a writer)—that his book be possessed by young Western girls in the same way he himself possesses girls (as a man). Laferrière himself explains: "my books are an autobiography of my emotions, my reality and my fantasies."[45] The book becomes the embodiment of its author, as confirmed by the narrator himself in a dream in which he is walking past the Hachette bookstore. Having noticed his book in the window, he decides to enter the bookstore: "My book is positioned between Moravia and Greene. Good company.

[44] Laferrière, 43.
[45] Our translation. Original quote in French: « mes romans sont une autobiographie de mes émotions, de ma réalité et de mes fantasmes. » Jimmy Thibeault, "Je suis un individu: Le projet d'individualité dans l'œuvre romanesque de Dany Laferrière," *Voix et images*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2011, pp. 25–40 (28).

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That book, holding its own, with that red and yellow cover and jazz look—that book is me. Completely me. I am those 160 tight little pages."[46] The fate of the book the narrator is writing is intrinsically linked to his future readers, as an author only becomes a writer when he can boast readers. This is why, in his dream, the narrator asks the bookseller whether his book sells well, to which the latter replies in the affirmative. It is from his office that the narrator calls his publisher, who confirms the success of his novel and tells him he had been invited to the radio show "Noir sur Blanc" (Black on White) on Radio-Canada with Miz Bombardier. During the taping of the show, the journalist, who introduces him to the audience as "a young black Montreal writer,"[47] starts by telling him that she read his novel, *Black Cruiser's Paradise*:

> "I read your book and I laughed, but it seems to me you don't like women."
> "Negroes too."
> Miz B. smiles. I won the first round.
> "But you do go a little far…"
> "When people reveal their fantasies, you'll usually find something for everyone—or against everyone. Let me point out that for all intents and purposes there are no women in my novel. There are just types. Black men and white women. On the human level, the black man and the white woman do not exist."[48]

The narrator, who is now a successful writer, insists on the phantasmal dimension of his novel. While Miz Bombardier interprets the book literally ("you don't like women"), the writer defends himself by explaining that his book is not about sexes ("there are no women in my novel"), nor races ("the black man and the white women do not exist"). The answer to the question "what is the novel really about" is to be found somewhere else, not at the diegetic level, but at the metadiegetic level, where the black

[46] Laferrière, 81.
[47] Laferrière, 84.
[48] Laferrière, 84.

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aspiring writer is trying to win over the Western female readership. According to Lori Saint-Martin, the white woman's body in the novel is similar to a "battlefield where Blacks would be fighting with white men,"[49] but the real fight seems to be primarily between the narrator (who is *de facto* outside of the Western literary canon as a Black man and a young writer) and other writers. Miz Bombardier herself focuses on this aspect of the novel when she summarizes it as follows: "I read your novel. It takes place around the Carré St. Louis. In a nutshell, it is the story of two young Blacks who spend a hot summer chasing girls and complaining. One loves jazz; the other literature. One sleeps all day or listens to jazz while reciting the Koran; the other writes a novel about their day-to-day experiences."[50] As she emphasizes, for the second time, the fact that she read his book (second reading), Miz Bombardier gets closer to the novel's metaliterary dimension (second level of interpretation). Indeed, she is now highlighting the narrator's role in the novel, which is first and foremost to write his novel. The novel itself can therefore be read as a twofold "*mise en abyme*":[51] the story of the author who writes the book we are reading, and the story of the book within the book.

Conclusion

The fictionalized book meets the two criteria which, according to Lucien Dällenbach, define the *mise en abyme*: namely, its reflexive nature and its metadiegetic dimension,[52] which is linked to the meaning of the novel

[49] Saint-Martin, 64.
[50] Laferrière, 84.
[51] Arentsen writes on this topic: "The protagonist narrator is a writer who is working on his manuscript *Black Cruiser's Paradise*. The novel is built as a '*mise en abîme*': it's the first-person narrative of a young black writer who is giving an account of his existence while writing the story we're reading." Our translation. Original quote in French: « Lui, le narrateur protagoniste, est un écrivain qui travaille son manuscrit *Le paradis du dragueur noir*. La construction du roman est donc une mise en abîme : il s'agit de la narration, à la première personne, d'un jeune écrivain noir qui rend compte de son existence pendant qu'il écrit le récit que nous lisons » (95).
[52] Lucien Dällenbach, *Le Récit spéculaire. Essai sur la mise en abyme* (Seuil, 1977), 62.

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itself.[53] I would like to illustrate this last point by going back to the conversation between the narrator and his publisher in the bookseller's office. During this conversation, the narrator's publisher tells him that somebody called for him, a woman called Carole Laure, which causes the narrator's heart to skip a beat:

> "Oh yeah, someone called and asked you to call them back."
> "Carole Laure."
> "How do you know?"
> "I just know."
> Carole Laure. Carole Laure. CAROLE LAURE.
> Carrel Or. What am I going to say to CL? I wrote a book with my guts to get a call from CL. And it worked—she called. What are you supposed to feel at a time like this? I can't feel a thing.[54]

According to the narrator, Carole Laure, a successful Quebec singer and actress who was 37 years old when Laferrière's book was published—a woman whose photograph he carries everywhere with him and who he imagines living by his side—is the reason he started writing his novel.[55] It is clear that he succeeded, since she invites him for dinner on Prince-Arthur. The circle is complete: the book played its role as a mediator perfectly, as the black writer, in desiring the white woman, becomes desired by her in return thanks to his book. While the black "cruiser" finds his paradise in the white female reader, the (French-speaking) writer finds his own paradise in the "bookmaker" embodied by the (French-speaking) female reader: "Will this honest, conscientious black cruise artist never find his paradise? I want Carole Laure! I demand Carole Laure! Bring me

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[53] Indeed, as Basabose remarks: "the book doesn't appear in *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired* as mere allusions but as a real structuring pattern. […] We must recognize that behind the apparent chaos is the conscious intention to write a book on the book." Our translation. Original quote in French: « le livre n'apparaît pas dans *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* à titre de simples allusions mais comme un véritable motif structurant. […] on se rend à l'évidence que derrière le désordre apparent se trouve l'intention bien consciente d'écrire un livre sur le livre. »

[54] Laferrière, 83.

[55] "I never go anywhere without my little photo of Carole Laure. […] Carole Laure starring in my bed. Carole Laure fixing me a tribal dish (spicy chicken and rice). Carole Laure listening to jazz with me in this lousy filthy room. Carole Laure, slave to a Negro. Why not?" (Laferrière, 21).

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Carole Laure!"[56] Whereas the "cruiser" reads books to seduce girls, the narrator writes them to seduce female readers—or, rather, to be loved by them—and to enjoy his successful "artist" status which directly stems from it.[57] As Laferrière himself confesses: "I've always wanted to be a writer so that young girls can point their finger at me in the street while whispering behind my back: 'It's him, the writer!'"[58]

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[56] Laferrière, 69.
[57] I make a distinction between the writer who publishes and the author who writes. Although all writers are authors, not all authors are writers.
[58] Our translation. Original quote in French: « J'ai toujours voulu être un écrivain pour que les jeunes filles surtout puissent me pointer du doigt dans la rue en chuchotant dans mon dos : "C'est lui, l'écrivain !" » Thibeault, 25. The Quebecois singer and actress Carole Laure was 37 years old when Dany Laferrière's novel was published.