Literary tourism, littérature monde, and the ethics of conversation in Ernest Pépin’s L’Envers du décor

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Abstract
Advocates for jettisoning the term ‘francophonie’ in favour of littérature-monde argue that francophonie, as a word and a concept, represents the legacy of a colonial relationship that places France at the centre of the globe. One of the pernicious effects of such an organization is how the francophonie label prepares readers to approach the text as a sociological tract or an opportunity for literary tourism. This article focuses on this last problem: how can one shift the way that readers approach a text? In analyzing Ernest Pépin’s L’Envers du décor (2006), it suggests that Pépin offers one path for the transformation of tourists and by extension, of readers. Informed by Édouard Glissant’s theorization of la poétique de la Relation (1990), this reading of Pépin develops a theory of the conversation as a means of answering the question posed implicitly in the littérature-monde manifesto, transforming the relationship between readers and texts within the French literary sphere.

Résumé

Keywords
Ernest Pépin
Édouard Glissant
tourism
la relation
cross-cultural
conversation
littérature-monde
What characterizes a touristic approach to cultural readings? In the words of Anadine, one of the protagonists of Ernest Pépin’s L’Envers du décor/The Other Side of Paradise (Pépin 2006), the tourist impersonates clichés and seeks information about Guadeloupe only from guidebooks, ignoring the ‘beehive’ of memories. An act that portends personal risk as much as it does potential reward, the directive to look into the beehive requires looking into a greater diversity of sources as much as it does a different form of looking altogether. The guidebook – and the types of reading it encourages – preserves a set of prefabricated stereotypes. Written to provide a set of explanations tailored to the tourist’s frame of reference, the guidebook offers the possibility of acquiring knowledge and experience without much intellectual effort or growth. Furthermore, the guidebook is associated with textual production more broadly through the contrast between interpersonal eye contact and the phrase ‘lisiez, lisiez, lisiez.’ The critique is focused here on textuality and its connection to the tourist’s desire to consume cultural difference without any willingness to move beyond his or her own limited frame of reference.

In depicting the dynamics of tourism, Pépin offers an analogy for readerly reception in the context of literature labelled ‘Francophone’. For French Metropolitan readers of texts produced ‘outside’ of the Hexagone, the term Francophone and all of the publishing practices that accompany it function like the guidebook.1 As forcefully explained in the article, ‘Pour une littérature monde en français’ published in Le Monde and the collection of essays with the same title which followed it (Le Bris, Rouaud 2007), the literary designations that distinguish ‘Francophone’ from ‘française’ reinforce that Paris is the sole frame of reference to which all texts must be oriented.2 Moreover, the authors in the collection edited by Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud (2007) argue that the term francophonie is too redolent of colonial hierarchies to be of service to the writers who are grouped under its umbrella. That is, under the guise of inclusivity, the term creates an ever-widening literary ghetto into which so-called peripheral, non-hexagonal, immigrant, and/or formerly colonized writers are uncomfortably jammed. In this light, one of the problems with the label ‘Francophone’ is how it distorts and limits the realm of possible readerly engagements with the text.

This article takes the arguments against the term francophonie as a starting point for reflecting on the kinds of actions that may transform limited reading practices of cultural difference. For while the Le Monde article intimates that the change of terminology from francophonie to ‘littérature-monde en français’ will entail a change in assumptions about which perspectives are central and which are marginal, it does not otherwise offer a programme for how such a radical shift should be undertaken. In light of this lacuna, this study highlights and analyzes aspects of philosophy and fiction by Édouard Glissant and Ernest Pépin that map out different paths towards changing interpersonal relations that cross cultural differences. The theoretical framework for this discussion is Glissant’s philosophical work defining la relation and la poétique as tools for cultural intervention. These concepts amplify the concerns voiced in the argument

2. The manifesto opens by likening a shift away from the term ‘francophone’ to a Copernican revolution, highlighting the detrimental impact that this definition of the centre has had upon writers: ‘Le centre jusqu’ici, même si de moins en moins, avait eu cette capacité d’absorption qui contraignait les auteurs venus d’ailleurs à se dépouiller de leurs bagages avant de se fondre dans le creuset de la langue et de son histoire nationale.’
against francophonie and move the debate from the context of classification in the literary marketplace to that of global cultural exchange.

*L’Envers du décor* explores similar concerns through the vehicle of a fictional dyad, Anadine and Jean-Paul, and the process that enables them to develop a new model for intercultural dialogue. Poet, novelist, and public intellectual, Ernest Pépin’s work throughout the years has circled around the idea of Guadeloupe’s cultural and political autonomy. The plot of *L’Envers*, for example, focuses on the transformation of Jean-Paul, a young Frenchman who lands in Guadeloupe seeking the fulfilment of his touristic stereotypes and eventually learns to seek out a different form of engagement with the island’s people and culture. As a result, much of the novel describes Guadeloupe’s cultural traditions and thinks through various challenges for the island’s economic and cultural rejuvenation. The articulation of such challenges also forms the core of a recent provocative article Pépin (2009) published to galvanize conversations in Guadeloupe about its direction and fiction. Entitled ‘Quelle leçon tirer de Barack Obama,’ the article purported to tell Guadeloupe’s people their ‘quatre vérités’ and particularly stresses the need to redefine a relationship with France and take responsibility for their socio-cultural difficulties. Notably dovetailing with the issues that course through *L’Envers*, he also writes in the article: ‘Je constate que nous nous noyons dans le puits de la consommation. [. . .] Cela fonctionne comme une machine à broyer le passé, la culture (relégué au rang de tradition!), les manières de penser, de faire et de vivre’ (Pépin 2009). Pépin outlines how mass consumerism has led to the discarding of their shared, vibrant culture; in both this essay and *L’Envers* (2006), he not only asks Guadeloupe’s people to rethink their relationship to their own culture, but also suggests that its representation not be limited to a ‘tradition.’

Questions about the future of Guadeloupe’s culture and its relationship with France are inextricably linked for Pépin. *L’Envers* documents the difficulty of this trajectory from a vision of the island as pure ‘décor’ to turning that décor inside out and eradicating the role of culture as petrified ‘tradition’ – as the very title ‘L’envers du décor’ suggests must take place. The process that Pépin works out in his fictional thought experiment relies on the participation of both Jean-Paul, the tourist visitor, and Anadine, an Afro-Guadeloupean woman. This article identifies the process that Anadine and Jean-Paul develop together as a response to what the signatories of the ‘littérature-monde en français’ demand with regard to the transformation of cross-cultural reading practices; it then focuses on two of Pépin’s literary and conceptual strategies, the ethics of conversation and the ecstatic experience of music, as critical to the shifting of cross-cultural attitudes in both practices of reading and its categorization.

**Taxonomies and the act of defining the self**
The most convincing argument against the category of francophonie is the way it prepares the text for a very particular type of consumption. Texts labelled as such are too often appreciated for their capacity to provide sociological documentation of other cultures rather than for their aesthetic or imaginative value. As Abdourahman Waberi writes, literature is thereby ‘renvoyé au folklore et à la vulgate sociologique, à l’univers préhistorique
When the scope of the reader’s imagination becomes conflated with that of a tourist, the text is made to conform to a pre-fabricated set of ideas. Pépin encapsulates this attitude of intellectual myopia through one of Jean-Paul’s observations that ‘ici ou ailleurs, à Gosier ou en Thaïlande, flottant dans leur décor, poissons dans un aquarium, ils tournent dans leur bocal de mirages préfabriqués’ (Pépin 2006: 29). Jean-Paul indicts tourists who are uninterested in distinguishing ici from ailleurs and who thereby close their eyes to Guadeloupe’s specificities. Rather than expanding his or her vision of the world through travel, physical displacement only shrinks the world of the unthinking tourist to the size of a fishbowl or postcard. Likewise, framing the literary text as sociological document or as postcard of a foreign space reduces the challenges of encountering new environments and cultural specificities, flattening them out for a too-facile consumption. The idea that cross-cultural exchanges can require little effort on the part of the reader places the onus for communication entirely on the author who may feel pressured to distort the subject matter to fit within the reader’s comfortable frames of reference.

And yet, even in attempting to distinguish himself from the tourist approach, Jean-Paul has to admit that the texts he has read in preparation for his trip to ‘the islands’ have constructed a set of ‘images iréelles’ (Pépin 2006: 23) that he maps onto his first actual encounters with the landscape. Indeed, as soon as he steps outside the antiseptic airport, he sniffs in the air ‘une chaleur presque palpable, moite comme un sexe de femme, et qui demande son dû de sueur et de ferveur’ (Pépin 2006: 27). By projecting the stereotype of Caribbean hypersexuality onto the tropical weather, Jean-Paul begins to attribute his own behaviour as a response to the environment, as he describes himself as virtually helpless to the demands of the heat. That such a stereotype, which he intellectually knows to be unreal, should infect his interpretive capacities is a testament to the difficulty of extricating the imagination from the hold of tourism’s advertising images. Moreover, his physical and intellectual encounters are then framed by a colonial relationship in which everything in the colonized landscape is subject to his surveying gaze and his modalities of knowledge production. In Pépin’s portrayal, the context of tourism actively restricts the reader’s capacity to understand different cultural spaces as anything other than exotic.

Because satisfying tourists’ desires is the foundation for the island’s industry, tourist commodification shapes both the spaces in which tourists
circulate and the island’s artistic production. In an effort to anticipate and fulfill tourists’ expectations, the resorts and areas of the cities frequented by tourists are transformed “from the world as Being to the world as simulacrum,” as John Frow phrases it (Frow 1991: 142). The dynamic processes by which cityscapes change are, in these areas, temporally frozen in order to resemble a static diorama of an exotic island imaginary. Moreover, the artists and craftworkers who market their goods to the tourist sector must create work that conforms to the viewer’s expectations and that provides a signifier of cultural difference that tourists often seek. Therefore not only does the context of tourism impoverish the reading experience, it also limits Guadeloupean artists.

When fiction functions as part of this tourist imaginary, which the Francophone label facilitates, the danger that presents itself is that not only do marketing practices encourage readers to see the object as a guidebook, but a desire to appeal to a tourist imaginary may encourage writers to exoticize their island spaces. In describing Francophone literature as ‘reprécé sur les marges, [ . . . ] variante exotique tout juste tolérée,’ the authors of the manifesto suggest that this literature is tolerated in spite of its exotic qualities. It is important to note that marginal literature also participates in the literary marketplace by virtue of its exoticism. That is, just as the demand that fuels the Caribbean tourist industry depends on a particular signifier of cultural difference, so does the demand for Francophone Caribbean writing that both creates a space for Francophone writers, but locates that space firmly and indisputably in the margins.

‘Pour une littérature-monde en français’ implicates the term francophonie as crucial to the creation of an exoticizing form of inclusion within the broader French literary marketplace and declare that the term will always limit the circulation of such texts to the margins of literary space. In response, Fabienne Kanor, for example, encapsulates the desire of many of the volume’s contributors when she pleads to be known as ‘un auteur tout court [ . . . ] d’une langue sans origine ni étiquette qui ne serait que celle de l’auteur’ (Kanor 2007: 241). Labels and ensuing discussions of the writer’s origins are a distraction from the writing itself, she suggests. While this erasure of identification might seem to resolve the problems signalled by the concept of francophonie, it somewhat problematically adopts the philosophy of a French Republican model of social relations that refuses ethno-racial identity categories. This model aims to stave off a fracturing communautarisme but it has not seen the disappearance of cultural and racial prejudice accompanying the absence of identity categories. The manifesto provides an important argument about the politics of the literary marketplace in France and how its colonial legacies are embedded in the very term francophonie. As a consequence, the manifesto’s signatories assert that the term – and the legacies it represents – must be abandoned in favour of a way of talking about literature that does not perpetuate such hierarchies. According to the logic of this demand, a change in terminology is needed in order to align the categories that organize our reading practices with the creative writing practices that are already flourishing. Nevertheless, the manifesto’s demands for an erasure of categories within the French literary marketplace does not propose an action plan that differs radically from a French tradition of integration politics.
Glissant was one of the manifesto’s many signatories and the call for a new taxonomy issued therein resonates with his broader concept of la relation. Throughout his body of work, Glissant posits that a new term is altogether necessary in order to displace the colonial reverberations in the term globalization with a new form of global connections. What is emphasized here, however, is that beyond the important initial step of naming a new set of relationships, with la relation, Glissant theorizes a set of actions by which such relationships might be brought about. In this regard, Glissant and Pépin concur: both amplify the littérature-monde manifesto by imagining a path that individual readers and writers might take towards transforming over-determined and exoticizing reading practices. Glissant specifically identifies poetics as the appropriate tool for bringing about la relation. Characterized as a type of politically oriented action and a form of investigation that works in tandem with the imagination, la poétique invests La Relation with its fundamental tasks of contesting universal norms and deconstructing traditional humanist notion of identity (Britton 1999: 9).

Throughout La Poétique de la relation/Poetic of the Relation (Glissant 1990), Glissant elaborates how la poétique as an operation can translate into a programme for writers. The citation below enables us to hone in on la poétique’s actions:

La poétique de la Relation (qui est donc une part de l’esthétique du chaos-monde) pressent, suppose, inaugure, rassemble, épargille, continue et transforme la pensée de ces éléments, de ces formes, de ce mouvement. Déstructurez ces données, annulez-les, remplacez-les, réinventez leur musique.

(Glissant 1990: 109)

Excerpted from the section entitled ‘Chemins’, the above citations map out the path that entering into la relation takes. In engaging with ‘les données’, Glissant argues against the taken-for-grantedness of our received ideas. Rather, he instructs those who use la poétique to: first, destroy and cancel out the knowledge about the world produced according to colonial frameworks and then, to reinvent this knowledge by replacing it with what he calls ‘l’esthétique du chaos-monde.’ In order to bring about this baroque aesthetic that emphasizes fluidity and constant motion, Glissant ascribes to la poétique a series of verbs that allow for a wide – even seemingly-contradictory – breadth of actions: it both begins and continues, simultaneously gathers together and scatters about, and locates the imagination in the intuition of foreshadowing and the intellect of hypothetical assumptions. This broad temporal, spatial and imaginative reach is a vital aspect of la relation’s political project to challenge the way colonialism stripped people of their capacity to define themselves. La relation is ‘d’abord la volonté, et comme la vocation, de comprendre l’ailleurs, le divergeant. La Poétique de la Relation éclaire et résume cette obligation qui nous est faite désormais, d’avoir à nous définir par nous-même’ (Glissant 2007: 11). Here, Glissant distributes responsibility evenly across the cultural exchange: each person is responsible to others in decentring his or her own frame of reference to accommodate the logics of different spaces and cultures. And, critically for the writers who engage with a poetics of relation, each person is responsible to his or her own self in articulating history and offering to others a definition of the self.
From struggle to utopia: models of interpersonal transformation

The ethics of mutual responsibility that Glissant locates in the workings of la poétique are precisely what drive L’envers du décor’s central relationship between a white Frenchman and an Afro-Guadeloupean woman and their discussions about Guadeloupe’s disappearing traditional cultures. Pépin’s novel imagines the tasks and experiences that each reader of unfamiliar cultural texts might undergo as he or she shifts from a self-centred and self-centring frame of reference to one that allows the interlocutor to establish the grounds of their conversation. The novel presents the story of Jean-Paul Lebon, a Frenchman who, disillusioned with life, decides to start over with his wife in Guadeloupe. Rather than fulfill their dreams of a life of ease, their new location creates strains and difficulties that are all the more attenuated in contrast to their expectations of paradise. Eventually finding himself destitute and alone, Jean-Paul wanders the streets until he is essentially adopted by Anadine, a Guadeloupean sorbet-maker. She takes on Jean-Paul’s rehabilitation, in the hopes of convincing this one unlikely personage of the worth of preserving Guadeloupe’s fading Creole traditions. Over the course of their conversations, Anadine and Jean-Paul together take up the charge Glissant issues in defining la relation and its poetics: to destroy Jean-Paul’s first impressions and received ideas about the Caribbean islands and to replace them with a much more nuanced sense of the culture and Afro-Creole community. In tracing the evolution of its protagonist, L’Envers du décor plots out one individual path that gestures to a much-needed transformation among readers in the French literary sphere – one that the signatories of the littérature monde manifesto advocate but do not elaborate.

Critical to Jean-Paul’s transformation as a cultural reader is his initial loss of economic status. Under Anadine’s guidance, Jean-Paul’s changed economic status ushers in a slow renunciation of white and colonial privilege. Indeed, the Afro-Caribbeans around him immediately recognize that his destitution compromises his white privilege. Jean-Paul, however, initially wishes to rebuild himself according to colonial models. For example, when Anadine asks him to clear an abandoned lot of overgrown sugar cane to make it fit for human habitation, Jean-Paul reverts to a colonial fantasy while engaged in the back-breaking work: ‘il se sentait là comme un premier colon’ (Pépin 2006: 51). Only by imagining himself in the fifteenth century can Jean-Paul represent to himself his newfound relationship to the Guadeloupean land with terms such as ‘domestiquer’ and ‘conquête.’ His unconscious desire to re-establish colonial dynamics is all the more telling given the historical association between enslaved and emancipated people of African descent in the Caribbean and his own cane-cutting. The ironic disjunction of this moment is captured by the observations of the Haitian migrant workers who witness him at work. Rather than envision him as a colonizer, they classify him as ‘un Blanc marron’. By using this term, the workers in a sense diminish his whiteness by colouring it. In another sense, they generously attribute to Jean-Paul the resistant qualities of the maroons, runaway slaves who escaped the social death of slavery and constructed their own communities and identities. That is, long before Jean-Paul begins to consciously reject the social structures which privilege his white skin, the Haitians see a white man cutting cane as an individual who is trying to rewrite the role assigned to him by racist social structures.

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The repository of historical narratives that condition Jean-Paul’s initial reinforcement of colonial racial dynamics illustrates the difficulty of shifting his interpretation of Guadeloupe’s landscape and social interactions. Moreover, the radical and irrevocable nature of the economic change that is built into the plot of L’Envers provides an important, if drastic, example of the kind of abdication of personal privilege that Pépin implies is necessary to becoming a better reader of different cultures. This process requires that one not impose his own stereotypes on others or demand that they meet his prefabricated expectations. Nevertheless, by the novel’s utopian conclusion, Jean-Paul has become the ideal audience or reader for the narrative of Guadeloupe that Anadine offers him. Upon observing Anadine in the context of her collection of objects representing different aspects of Guadeloupe’s heritage, Jean-Paul is suddenly able to see the island’s history of ethnic creolization in her face. In an instant, observation of her otherness becomes recognition of himself in her:

[... ] je reconnus dans son visage les mêmes yeux marron clair, presque transparents, pétillants de malice. Anadine, ma mère! Ému par cette révélation, je suis tombé dans ses bras. Je venais de naître.

–Tu as compris maintenant!
–Oui, Maman! (Pépin 2006: 171)

A conversion that Anadine phrases as a new understanding, Jean-Paul narrates in terms of a creation story. That is, the capacity to understand a different culture by taking on a different perspective is offered up as so radical a change that it necessitates a rebirth or reconstruction of self.

The metaphor of rebirth expressed here with a saccharine sentimentality represents the culmination of Jean-Paul’s experiences with Creole culture. While this moment taken on its own seems to dwell entirely in utopian fantasy, it is supported by the intellectual labour that Jean-Paul has devoted to reshaping his perspective and frame of reference throughout the novel. For instance, in two other scenes, we see examples of the labour-intensive encounters that enable Jean-Paul’s illumination, encounters that reveal the long and painful process required for the reconstruction of self that is absent from the scene of utopic rebirth. Each of Pépin’s depictions of the approaches Jean-Paul takes to develop a new perspective on Guadeloupe dovetail with Glissant’s theorization of la poétique as an operation that requires both destruction and reinvention. In the first instance, Pépin stresses the intellectual efforts that both Jean-Paul and Anadine devote to pursuing an ethics of conversation. In a more surreal episode, the narrative focuses on Jean-Paul’s engagement with music, how this experience allows him the sensation of exiting his own body, or ex-stasis, and the philosophical consequences of his ex-stasis. Both moments offer examples of the effort that cultural readers must invest in order to decentre francophonie’s exoticizing frame of reference.

The ethics of conversation and ecstasy: the praxis of interpersonal transformation

The term ‘ethics of conversation’ as used here is drawn primarily from the philosopher Alisdair McIntyre’s work on how a group of individuals can
pursue in concert what they have determined to be a common good. Such conversations are pushed forward through disagreement, according to McIntyre, by ‘aiming at conclusions that emerge from being tested by the most powerful counter-arguments available’ (McIntyre 1999: 136). That is, internal conflict produces the intellectual creativity necessary for imagining the widest possible range of detractions to any given plan of action and improving it. In one example of the ethics of conversation presented in Pépin’s L’Envers, the end goal is to devise a plan for reinvigorating Guadeloupe’s creative culture. Anadine narrates how, one night at a ‘lewoz,’ a rural jam session, Anadine and Jean-Paul discuss Guadeloupe’s cultural and political history together: after recounting all the traditional practices and foodways Jean-Paul has learned, Anadine reproduces their exchanges and her assessment of their emotional attitudes. In this case, Anadine’s and Jean-Paul’s creation of a mode of conversational and cultural exchange is as important to this plan as the solutions they devise. Given that both parties begin the conversation with a number of stereotypes about the other, they must develop a form of disagreeing that nevertheless expresses a sense of respect for one another because of, not in spite of, the differences between them – one of the crucial aspects of Glissant’s relation. Following McIntyre’s phrasing, ‘[they] enquire together about how it would be best for them to act, so that some good can be achieved’ (McIntyre 1999: 133), the conversation sequentially precedes the action of achieving a common good. The ethics of conversation that Pépin maps out integrate the achievement of a common good into the act of conversation itself.

In transcribing the many conversations that Anadine and Jean-Paul share, Pépin consistently emphasizes the openness with which each approaches their dialogue. In these conversations, they expose the prejudices and lacunae that are part of their life histories. To return to Glissant’s definition of la relation, they must take responsibility for offering a self-constructed definition of their selves as they narrate various accounts of who they are and who they might become. There is no one history or presentation of self that either Anadine or Jean-Paul can present that will suffice as an explanation and that, as the tenor of their conversations develop over the course of the novel, it becomes evident that an openness to changing their opinions and attitudes is a crucial component to their mutual work. Moreover, this attitude in itself is something they must create together. Early on in the novel, for example, Anadine accuses Jean-Paul of participating in tourist idealizations that perpetuate an oppositional dynamic between residents and visitors: 'L’émerveillement n’est pas pour nous. Il vous appartient, vous venus pour l’enchantement des îles' (Pépin 2006: 47). In her articulation of the basic unfairness surrounding questions of the island’s ownership, Anadine sets up irreconcilable perspectives about Guadeloupe, matching them to the exclusive positions of nous and vous. This initial salvo in their continuing conversation, which sets up an oppositional dynamic between them and seems to offer no possibility for a meeting point or shared agenda, demonstrates the initial attitudes of suspicion and exclusion at which they began and from which, as the novel traces, they depart.

Much later on in the course of their discussions and their relationship, Anadine and Jean-Paul return to this discussion of Guadeloupe’s current problems and possible futures. Anadine is no less strident about the

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damage that she sees done to Guadeloupe by its (neo-) colonial status, yet she involves Jean-Paul in the conversation with a different approach. In the course of the discussion, she explains how Guadeloupe’s economic dependence vis-à-vis France has culturally subordinated Guadeloupe and directed the goals and desires of its residents towards Europe:

On nous a baillé une égalité coloniale. Une égalité de bâtard. Il y avait moins d’argent pour nos écoles, nos hôpitaux . . . En plus, on a pompé la Guadeloupe avec le BUMIDOM, on a rempli la Guadeloupe avec les VAT. On enlevait nos boyaux pour mettre de la paille. (Pépin 2006: 129)

At this later stage, Anadine retains the nous to tell Guadeloupe’s recent history, personalizing it by including a corporeal metaphor to describe the structural inequalities grounding its uneven relationship with France: a body with its vital organs replaced with straw. However, she does not use the vous that would implicate Jean-Paul as part of the monolith of French state policy towards the DOM-TOM. Instead, she shifts to the impersonal on – the grammatically intermediary space between nous and vous, the on that here represents historical, non-present, actors. This move from accusation to explanation sets up Jean-Paul’s capacity to change his own perspective.

Indeed, in his reply, Jean-Paul begins by expressing some measure of sympathy for the past that Anadine argues has hamstrung the people of Guadeloupe’s capacity to move forward productively. Nevertheless, he points away from the structural inequalities and towards what he assesses as a failed sense of personal responsibility: ‘Je comprends, mais il faut s’en sortir de cette histoire. [. . .] vous vous jetez, comme les enfants de l’enchanteur Merlin, dans une eau qui vous noie: la consommation! Parce que pour vous, tambour au loin a beau son! (Pépin 2006: 131). By returning to the use of vous, he asks Anadine, elsewhere positioned in the text as a guardian of Guadeloupe’s Créole traditions, to explain the turn to mass consumerism they both see as problematic. In his emotional accusation, his choice of metaphors – one that draws from European mythology, the other alluding to the Caribbean’s gwo-ka drum – reveals his changing set of references. Even within their disagreement, Jean-Paul adopts the language of Anadine’s cultural context.

The metaphors and comparisons Anadine and Jean-Paul use in their verbal sparring are important on various levels: for Jean-Paul, they establish relationality with Anadine, while not attempting to hide their disagreement. Their conversation exposes different pitfalls of transitioning from a colony to nation, pitfalls that only their different perspectives can access. However, more important is the attitude with which they listen to one another in the midst of their argument. When Jean-Paul listens to Anadine, he is not listening defensively, waiting to pounce on a perceived flaw that he can contradict in his retort: ‘Jean-Paul m’écoutait. Pour la première fois, il touchait une lumière qui nettoyait un coin d’ombre. Une autre Guadeloupe entrait dans ses oreilles’ (Pépin 2006: 131). The openness in listening on multiple occasions allows for each person involved in the continuing conversation to first, shift positions vis-à-vis the other, and second, to define themselves anew as they proceed. The willingness to listen openly to multiple iterations of their stories is critically important to the intellectual labour of transforming the way they engage across cultural difference.

9. Colonialism echoes not only in the form of equality but also in the BUMIDOM, or ‘Le Bureau pour le développement des migrations dans les départements d’outre-mer’, a domestic policy that resulted in massive migration from the overseas departments to supply France with its workforce between 1963 and 1982. Anadine’s verb choice of ‘pompé’ aligns this policy with the colonial aim to use the colony’s resources solely to benefit the Metropole. Having drained Guadeloupe’s capacity for a full-fledged economic production and forced the island to import many of its consumer products, the value-added taxes on imported goods, or VAT, add increased financial pressure. Anadine implies.
Anadine likens these conversations to ‘remu[er] nos dominos. Nous gagnions ou nous perdions. Ce qui comptait, c’est que nous jouions ensemble’ (Pépin 2006: 132). People tend to play domino matches one after another, in a continuous fashion. The metaphor lends her comments the atmosphere of a long-standing set of conversations, rather than a one-time debate. Moreover, as she perceives it, the conversation is not a debate that will anoint one perspective as the truth. Rather, this ethics of conversation allows each participant his or her own moment to act and involves both equally, becoming a project of their co-construction. Unlike Glissant’s theorizations which consider how la relation can play out on a global scale, Pépin’s descriptions of the ethics of conversation that Anadine and Jean-Paul develop are on the smallest scale, that of two individuals. In this way, the conversation between Anadine and Jean-Paul resonates with Judith Butler’s theorization of ‘giving an account of oneself’. First, in order to give an account of oneself, one requires an ‘Other’ with whom to hold a conversation. Secondly, Butler argues that this conversation requires the kind of open-endedness that characterizes Anadine and Jean-Paul’s relation when she states that ‘by letting the question [of who the Other is] remain open, even enduring, we let the Other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it’ (Butler 2001: 28). Turning the conversation away from the desire for a full and final answer allows those in dialogue to continue telling their stories, engaging in conflict, and bringing their perspectives sometimes into sharper distinctions, occasionally into overlap. The way in which Pépin (2006) develops the shifting dialogue between Anadine and Jean-Paul over the course of the novel theorizes an ethics of conversation alongside both Glissant’s global concept of la relation (1990) and Butler’s elaboration of how an individual can speak across difference.

This verbal encounter between Anadine and Jean-Paul is only possible because Jean-Paul’s physical encounters with Caribbean music have preceded and paved the way for his shifted cultural attitudes. Each time Jean-Paul engages Caribbean music, listening leads him through an ecstasy that shifts his scopic and interpretive perspective. As we will see, Jean-Paul’s trance-like dance prepares him to take part in the conversation with Anadine. To return to Butler’s explication of the philosophical implications of giving an account of oneself to an ‘Other’, ‘The possibility of the “I”, of speaking and knowing the “I”, resides in a perspective that dislocates the first-person perspective whose very condition it supplies’ (Butler 2001: 23). That is, in order to tell one’s own history to the Other, one must step outside of the first-person perspective and speak to the perspective of the Other: Jean-Paul must be willing to enter into the temporarily disintegrative experience of being placed outside of himself in order to take part in the ethics of conversation with Anadine; it is the ecstasy of dance as Pépin describes it that trains him to move outside of his perspective first corporeally and then intellectually.

The definition of ecstasy as being outside of oneself links the trance experienced through Caribbean performance practices and the ethics of conversation that require a perspectival displacement. Pépin’s depiction of Jean-Paul’s first encounter with the compas,10 however, also suggests that the ecstatic is not simply a state of mind or change of perspective, but a

10. Nemours Jean Baptiste, who created and popularized the form of the Haitian compas, adapted from the Dominican tipico, is credited with the metaphor that the compas is like a top in that no matter how you throw it, it will ultimately turn on its head, that is, return to the main musical sentence.
corporeal withdrawal from the body or, as we will see, a core transformation of that body. This citation is only one instance in Pépin’s writing which transmits a sense of the surreal language that he mobilizes to introduce the changed forms of knowledge production to which Jean-Paul accedes upon entering this revised relation:

As Catherine Khordoc has noted regarding Pépin’s earlier novel Tambour-Babel, Pépin embeds his prose with a poetic quality particularly when describing performance events, such as drumming on the tambour-ka or,\textsuperscript{11} as is the case here, Jean-Paul dancing to a compas. This is particularly notable in the second part of this citation, where over the course of four sentences, he develops a rhythm that relies on a tri-partite set of descriptions. While these sets of verbs describe Jean-Paul’s active body, the passage begins with a description of his ecstasy that, unlike the intensive effort he puts into his relationship to Anadine and Guadeloupe, is markedly effortless. Particularly in the phrase ‘Il devint léger, léger, et voilà’, Jean-Paul seems to be devoid of agency. Instead, his body is acted upon by the surrounding music while he remains in a helpless, dream-like state. This ecstatic trance provides a contrast to the conversation, which requires both intensive effort and a conscious decision to depart from his own perspective as he attempts to expand his capacity to read cultural difference outside of a tourist attitude. His seemingly easy corporeal responsiveness to the encounter with music allows him to move through the air with grace, free from gravity’s rules, held aloft by the music’s strength.

Embedded within this ecstatic elevation is a description of Jean-Paul’s transforming body. It is not the outward appearance of the body that changes, but its interior liquid matter. Developing a different reading practice and relational mode vis-à-vis Guadeloupe does not require him to shed his white, French outer shell. Jean-Paul’s transformation is an internal one, based in his emotional and psychic composition. The pus that symbolizes how the body fights off infection marks the end of a battle within the body as it drains out. Here, the battle between mourning his lost privileges and the new possibilities for knowledge – as played out in his narrative of cutting cane – is embodied as a disease that has exchanged the blood flowing through his veins with misery. More emphatic than draining, ‘lâcher’ implies an active, bodily release as Jean-Paul lets go of his
desire to control the racial paradigms by which he can read himself as dominating the Guadeloupean landscape. Once all the dense liquids that had weighed him down have dissipated, Jean-Paul can float, like the oiseau foufou, lightly above the earth, supported by the music’s rhythmic wing-flaps. As the verbs shift from passive formulations such as ‘devenir léger’ to the active verbs that describe how Jean-Paul as a dancer affects his environment, the release of his attachment to a sense of privilege transitions to the conscious choice of following the music’s lead. To return to the language of Glissant’s instructions for how to operate la poétique de la relation, Jean-Paul destroys his own investments in colonial frameworks and replaces it with the physicality of the metaphorical bird whose flight provides him with a new frame of reference.

Shortly after Jean-Paul is able to take flight, he leaves the cabin and surveys first the Guadeloupean and then the Caribbean landscape. Transported out of his body, he has access to different vantage points that ultimately results in a new frame of reference from which to read and interpret Guadeloupe’s cultural and geo-political landscape. His bird’s eye view allows him to see Guadeloupe as much richer than the postcards with which he had previously associated it: the river’s rocks bespeak the writing of Guadeloupe’s poets and the shape that the islands form – hands unsuccessfully straining to reach out to one another – explain some of the failures of Caribbean geo-politics. In this final moment of his flight, his ecstasy is a form of prophetic inspiration: the perspective he gains as the oiseau foufou allows him to contribute to the conversation with Anadine about Guadeloupe’s future. He is able to see her blind spots and prejudices with as much clarity as she can see his. Jean-Paul’s role, therefore, is not as passive recipient of Anadine’s stories, framed as exotic folklore; rather, the ethics of conversation that demands both Anadine and Jean-Paul be critical listeners and co-constructors of knowledge.

Conclusions
Through this analysis of what changes over the course of the novel in Jean-Paul’s and Anadine’s capacity to listen across their cultural differences, an expansion along both temporal and spatial axes has surfaced in Pépin’s writing. In developing an ethics of conversation, the protagonists recognize that their conversation must be extended beyond a one-time confrontation, and must even become continuous. The lack of completion to the conversation generates the perpetual engagement that allows them to change their positions and their perspectives over time. This shifted sense of time means that their attitude changes from aiming to score points in a short-term debate to trying to explain the complicated and often irresolvable foundations of broad arguments. This temporal expansion corresponds to the expansion of their spatial range as each of them must dislocate his and her standpoint in order to speak to the other, as Butler states explicitly. The act of stepping outside of one’s own person, either corporeally or in the imagination, has the doubled effect of a terrifying disintegration of the self and a greater understanding of what lies beyond the purview of personal experience. Another way of defining the element of expansion that characterizes the two methods of shifting cultural reading practices as Pépin depicts them in L’Envers du décor is, in the

Literary tourism, littérature monde, and the ethics of conversation in...
sense of both willingness and expansiveness, the risk and the reward of generosity.

The type of reading that Jean-Paul and Anadine practice is a cultural, not literary, one. Indeed, throughout the text, both characters express a suspicion of books, stating that literature cannot capture Guadeloupe’s cultural expression. Yet, within the bounds of a novel that strategically uses Créole, idiomatic expressions, and an antiphonal narrative structure that resonates with an African-based storytelling tradition, such an accusation seems to highlight how this novel differs from literature with an ethnographic bent that ultimately commodifies the culture it represents. Indeed, both the topics of discussion in which the protagonists engage and the formal properties of the text are concerned with how to best represent Guadeloupeans’ living cultural expression. Moreover, the context for this formal and topical preoccupation is not only the representation of culture, but also the representation of cultural differences and how one might speak – and listen – across such differences. The meta-structure of the novel also bolsters the analogy between cultural and literary reading that this article proposes. As every chapter ends with a parenthetical, italicized comment or question addressed to the novel’s reader, the painful difficulties of two aspects of Glissant’s relation – constructing one’s own story as well as learning how to listen productively to the stories of others – emerge in these asides in which the unnamed narrator reflects on the process of creating this story and imagines the reactions and identifications of a wide readership. In this light, L’Envers du décor takes up the same questions that motivate the signatories and writers who participated in the ‘Pour une littérature-monde en français’ project: how to broaden the range of writing included within French literary and cultural sphere and, simultaneously, how to undo the linkage between what is culturally different and what is relegated to the margins.

In this regard, Pépin’s and Glissant’s theorizations of the conversation as a crucial aspect of la poétique offer a model for reading cultural difference that amplifies and fills in the critiques of francophonie and the advocacy for a littérature monde. Pépin’s case study works out through the imagination how two people might train themselves to undo the received ideas that the manifesto-writers demand be eradicated from the French literary marketplace. Ultimately, what Pépin’s novel contributes to any possible programme for transformation that will emerge from the initial impulses of the desire for a new way of thinking about French writing, is the laborious nature of the process. The novel ends on a note of possibility due to Jean-Paul’s successful transformation from myopic tourist to champion and supporter of Guadeloupe’s traditional Afro-Creole culture. However, in the backdrop of Anadine’s and Jean-Paul’s developing relation, there is the presence of yet another Other to their dyad, an abject group of persons whose exclusion from the conversation highlights the complex and generous relation that Anadine and Jean-Paul undertake with one another. Let us briefly return to the scene of Jean-Paul’s ecstatic transformation: Pépin’s vocabulary emphasizes the unlikely nature of Jean-Paul’s change by comparing his curving body to drawing from an equally unlikely vocabulary to describe his movements: Jean-Paul’s curving body to curvaceous but static objects – volute, boucle, and lasso – objects that
are not supposed to move into dance and movement. Authenticating his transformation, despite its unlikely nature, are his unnamed migrant Haitian companions. None of these men are ever given individual names or characterizations; rather, Haiti’s music and people crudely represent a sense of authentic legacy of African heritage. In this way, the nuanced and complex discussions about identity and culture that Anadine and Jean-Paul conduct stand out against the haunting presence of the Haitian men who never enter into the ethics of conversation with them. It is with these ghostly non-conversants in mind that we return to ‘Pour une littérature-monde en français’ and the recommendation to change the ways we name difference within the world of literature: in seeking to dismantle once and for all the colonial hierarchies that have inflected how French writing is read. The nameless Haitians, haunting Pépin’s otherwise careful exploration of how to enact precisely what the manifesto advocates, remind us that the dismantling of hierarchies remains a continuous challenge.

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