

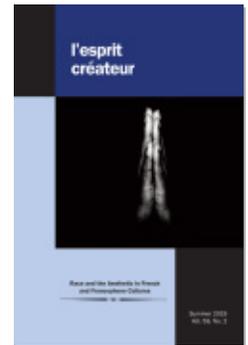


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Matter of Race

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L'Esprit Créateur, Volume 59, Number 2, Summer 2019, pp. 25-41 (Article)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2019.0014>

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“Blackness” in French: On Translation, Haiti, and the Matter of Race

Kaiama L. Glover

The basic grammar of blackness is often [...] lost in translation.

—Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*¹

IN THIS ARTICLE, I reflect on the stakes and the practice of translating into English an Afro-diasporic text written in French. More specifically, I address the imbricated layers of translation involved in bringing renowned Haitian author René Depestre’s prize-winning 1988 novel *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* first to the space of metropolitan France and, subsequently, to an anglophone reading public. Reflecting on the translation of this particular work provides an opportunity to consider the various challenges that inhere in translating Haiti, both metaphorically/culturally and literally/linguistically, to a world largely primed for its degradation.² A close look at *Hadriana* compels us to examine the stakes of translating, in particular, to a global readership that most often views Haiti through the lens of irrevocable, demeaningly racialized difference. What is entailed in ‘carrying over’³ meaning from a Haitian context to a non-Haitian, Euro-francophone audience and, from there, to an Afro-anglophone world? What is the task of the translator within this racially hierarchized transatlantic space?

In thinking through these questions, I have taken as my point of departure writer and translator John Keene’s call for more substantive reflection on race across diverse cultural frameworks. Keene argues that to translate ‘blackness’ in its various iterations and geo-cultural contexts might serve to make plain the contingency of race as lived experience and, further, to push against homogenizing, U.S.-centric conceptions of what blackness represents. “Were more black voices translated,” posits Keene, “we would have a clearer sense of the connections and commonalities, as well as the differences across the African Diaspora, and better understand an array of regional, national, and hemispheric issues.”⁴ Indeed, while there exists great continuity among the many sites of Africa and its diasporas, there is no such thing as a global ‘black experience.’ Diverse and divergent colonial and postcolonial histories have produced heterogeneous black geographies, epistemologies, cultures, and languages, rendering black peoples in many ways illegible to one another.

It is within this broad context that I consider the geo-cultural site-symbol that is Haiti, a place whose ‘blackness’ continues to be seen as uniquely patho-

logical. It must be said: Haiti is 'black' in a special kind of way. Although as foundationally Afro-diasporic as every other of its Caribbean neighbors, Haiti has been long disparaged by the particular racialized denigration of its popular religion. The idiosyncrasy of Haiti's 'blackness' has everything to do with degrading perceptions and representations of Vodou. A clear case of what Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot identifies as the deployment of culture to euphemize the idea of race, North Atlantic discourse concerning Haiti consistently casts the island nation as fundamentally stunted by its Afro-spiritual practices. Insofar as theories of cultural difference equate more and less transparently with theories of race, the stigmatization of Vodou as cultural practice is unequivocally racial.

Haiti thus presents a high-stakes example of 'blackness' in need of translation. But not just any kind. Haiti needs translation as a potential tool/site of articulation, that is, as "a process of linking or connecting across gaps" (Edwards 11), of facilitating "the recognition of necessary heterogeneity and diversity," so as to produce "a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference."⁵ Translating *Hadriana* was, for me, such a potential "discourse of diaspora" (Edwards 12), a destigmatizing effort that might place an alternative narrative of Haitian Vodou into circulation in the Global North. Following Keene, I have understood translating Haitian literature from French into English as a means, however modest, of creating space for an expanded notion of blackness within the African diaspora.

Haiti's persistent denigration in globally circulating narratives of perceived political dysfunction and socio-economic despair makes this task of translating the "Black Republic" very much a matter of ethics. As Tejaswini Niranjana has argued convincingly, "[i]n a postcolonial context the problematic of translation becomes a significant site for raising questions of representation, power, and historicity."⁶ In order to grasp fully the significance of this claim, it is important to begin by thinking about the means via which writers from the so-called Global South present themselves for circulation outside of their local context, presenting their 'foreignness' for appreciation and, ultimately, consumption on familiar terms.

Vodou and Haiti in a global frame

What is a book anyway? It is a product, a commercial item. I write in order to be read, in order to sell to the people around me. But if they cannot read, my book is worth nothing. It is a commercial product which is going to stay here, insulted by dust.⁷

—René Philoctète

In 1946, nineteen-year-old Haitian poet and student revolutionary René Depestre left his homeland in the wake of a national political transformation he had been instrumental in effecting. Depestre spent the subsequent thirty years of his life engaged in militant socialist activism throughout Western and Eastern Europe, South America, and the Caribbean, including twenty years in Cold War Cuba, all the while prolifically writing poetry and political essays. He currently resides in Lézignan-Corbières, in the Aude region of southern France. Throughout these lifelong peregrinations, Depestre has sought to reach an audience situated well beyond the space of his native land. Be it in his capacity as poet, novelist or political essayist, he has written consistently for a public situated primarily outside of Haiti, presenting his island to another—an Other—global space. In this respect Depestre has long been pre-occupied with the power differential that places him on the margins of a world order he has worked passionately to upset. He has understood that staging his desired intervention requires a sustained practice of cultural translation.

Depestre's extra-insular aspirations are as readily apparent in his poetry and prose fiction as they are in his political writings, and *Hadriana* is no exception. Steeped in the so-called marvelous real, *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* foregrounds the fantastical and the erotic within a frame that opens onto the Atlantic world from a decidedly Haitian perspective. Upon its publication, *Hadriana* sold almost 200,000 copies and won several awards, including the prestigious Prix Renaudot.⁸ But as Colin Dayan has brought to light, the popular success of the novel in many ways reflected and revealed the racialized projections and exoticist desires of the French reading public. Reviewers in France encouraged readers to “let themselves go,” to immerse themselves in “the land of zombis,” and to embrace the “deflowerings, aphrodisiac emanations, sexual exploits, forbidden ecstasies” and “irresistible sorcery” of the Haitian folk.⁹

Despite—or, perhaps, given—the terms of the novel's acclaim in France, *Hadriana* has been the subject of sustained critique in academic circles. Where French reviewers and award-givers rejoiced in the escapist fantasies permitted by Depestre's tropical narrative, North Atlantic Caribbeanist scholars have accused the author of exploiting Haitian culture as an exotic commodity for European consumption.¹⁰ Although it is certainly true that many postcolonial writers choose or are compelled to live in the Global North while continuing to write about their home countries, Depestre's having rejected socialism in the late 1970s and taken up residence in the heart of the French countryside after three decades of overt militancy have left him particularly vulnerable to critical interrogation involving questions of authenticity and political engagement.

It is the case that *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* tells a Haitian story to a non-Haitian audience; the novel is marked linguistically, structurally, and narratively by efforts to translate Haiti (in)to a wider francophone space. Published in France by the prestigious Éditions Gallimard, *Hadriana* necessarily belongs to the fraught category of “world literature,” a network of literary works that is ultimately embedded within the canons and hierarchies created by European imperial nation-states. Explicit elements of the novel make plain Depestre’s attentiveness, at least in part, to a non-Haitian readership. Take, for instance, the extensive “Glossaire des termes haïtiens (Langue créole)” placed as an appendix to the narrative. Although the vast majority of the glossed words in this addendum relate to Vodou and so belong to a Haitian Creole lexicon, Depestre has rendered them orthographically in French. Also worth noting is Depestre’s strategic deployment of epigraphs throughout the novel. His opening citation presents lines from a poem by French Surrealist René Char and is followed immediately by an allusion to French Surrealist intellectual André Breton’s 1937 novel *L’amour fou*. Subsequent sections and chapters of *Hadriana* are framed by the words of James Joyce, Kateb Yacine, Victor Hugo, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Sophocles. Depestre makes use of these epigraphs to situate his novel, subtly yet insistently, within a predominantly European canon. He is clearly concerned both with *Hadriana*’s linguistic legibility and with the novel’s positioning vis-à-vis the “regimes of value”¹¹ that consecrate the literary on a global scale.

This is the context within which Depestre has been subject to disapproval—critiqued for his perceived consent to, if not collusion with, the racist and ethnocentric “fetishisation of cultural otherness” (Huggan 10) mobilized by former and current imperial centers of the North Atlantic to circumscribe and exploit the Global South. It is a critical response that is bound up in anxieties regarding what theorist Graham Huggan has labeled “the postcolonial exotic.” Huggan’s concept outlines the recuperative tendencies of the Western literary institution—its capacity to absorb and domesticate difference as it consumes it. Indeed, postcolonial writers are often called upon to translate their foreignness for institutions, industries, and consumers situated primarily in the North Atlantic. Doing so is a tricky enterprise. Independent of an author’s purpose or desire, a text can be easily coopted “as an exotic good, not so different in its packaging from all of the other colonial exotica making its way into the metropole.”¹² Postcolonial writers thus are caught within something of a bind. How does one represent Global South culture without sensationalizing it, reifying existing racial stereotypes, or censoring its idiosyncracies in the interest of rendering it more palatable to a world that denies its value(s)? How does one

present non-Western culture to the West for consumption (comprehension, consideration) without betraying that culture in the process?

There is a fine line, it is true, between opening a window onto an “Other(ed)” culture and “staging racial and ethnic stereotypes” for commercial gain (Watts 11). This is arguably the line Depestre walks in *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*. In chronicling the adventures of a pretty French girl who gets turned into a zombie, Depestre admittedly does not shy away from representing the pathologies of Haitian Vodou. He incorporates the unsavory dimensions of Haiti’s religious practices, and he invites an interrogation of Vodou’s ambivalence with regard to matters of race and gender. By including such over-the-top elements as evil black magic sorcerers, sex-crazed human-butterfly hybrids, and, yes, zombies, he risks affirming Western stereotypes about Afro-diasporic religion. By the same token, however, Depestre takes care to portray the intricacies of Vodou as epistemology, aesthetic, and faith.

At about the midpoint of the novel, for example, Depestre’s narrator-protagonist Patrick Altamont (a character whose biography maps almost perfectly onto Depestre’s own) presents a veritable anthropological treatise on the zombie myth in Haitian and global history. Titled “Prolegomena to a Dead-End Essay,” the long passage lays out nine “propositions” that address the intersections between North Atlantic racism, global capitalism, and the philosophical purchase of Haitian cultural expression. Here and elsewhere in the novel,¹³ Depestre’s overtly outward-facing authorial gestures demand that Haitian Vodou be taken seriously as knowledge-system and worldview.¹⁴ His narrator’s thoughtful meditations on the mechanisms and philosophies of Haitian spirituality serve to counterbalance and contextualize the more titillating portrayals of Vodou in the novel. The passages in which he explicates the intricacies of the zombie’s juridical and legislative embeddedness in Haitian society, for example, or his staging of Vodou and Catholic rituals as equally valid and valued in the Jacmelian community, serve to establish Vodou’s complexity and real social legitimacy. Moreover, just as Depestre unabashedly represents Vodou’s erotic investments, its preoccupation with blood and death, its hyper-valuation of whiteness, and its misogynist tendencies, he also gives us its practices of healing, its nourishment of the communal, and its insistence on joy and possibility.¹⁵ To his reader, then, the responsibility for recognizing that a similarly fundamental duality informs the teachings and practices of every one of this world’s most sanctioned global faiths.

Packaging Hadriana: the tasks of the translator

The dynamics of translation in a Caribbean frame must be inscribed within the region's histories and their afterlives; and these dynamics tend to suggest inequality and friction more than any senses of free flow and equivalence.

—Charles Forsdick, “Translation in the Caribbean, the Caribbean in Translation”¹⁶

If Depestre's novel offered a translation of Afro-Haitian culture to a non-Haitian, francophone audience in the late 1980s, leaning as it did right into the whirl of complexities surrounding the global image of Haitian Vodou, my translation of *Hadriana* proposed carrying both Haiti's culture and language(s) across to a new target-reading public thirty years later. As an African-American woman of Caribbean descent, I kept foremost in mind three specific engagements in realizing this task: first, translating responsibly within the maelstrom of existing narratives about Haiti and 'blackness'/Vodou; second, translating to and for a desired Afro-diasporic readership; and third, remaining attentive to the 'packaging' of my translation.

The translator of Haitian literature must keep in mind “the politics of translating and the ethnocentric violence that sometimes accompanies it.”¹⁷ If done successfully, translating the work of postcolonial black writers reveals “the range and complexity of black lives” on a global scale (Keene). If not, there can be more and less direct consequences regarding global policies toward peoples in 'black' nations. Failures of cultural translation create hierarchies of value wherein 'lesser' cultures are mis-read as lacking or deficient—and subsequently are deemed worthy or not of protection from harm. As Huggan has convincingly noted, insofar as translation functions within a global market that tends to commodify difference, “the exoticist production of otherness [...] may serve conflicting ideological interests, providing the rationale for projects of *rapprochement* and reconciliation, but legitimizing just as easily the need for plunder and violent conquest” (Huggan 13). The case of Haiti provides a stark instance of the ways in which translation informs the discourses that determine which black lives matter and, relatedly, the success or failure of policies and practices that have an explicit impact on those lives.

The power differential between Haiti and those (putatively post-)imperialist nation-states of Europe and North America that have been so imbricated in Haiti's social, political, and artistic institutions makes the question of translation less one of “the unequal power relations between languages” (Bassnett 343) and more one of the unequal power relations between cultures. Insofar as the majority of Haitian literature is translated into English from French, concern with the subjugation of a minority language is not 'the problem.'

Rather, the concern is the subjugation of a racial and cultural “minority position” (Bassnett 341). In this position, Haiti and Haitians are assumed to be at once excessively legible (as in, transparent and simplistically two-dimensional) and absolutely *illegible* (as in, incomprehensible and ‘other’). The most pernicious and obvious of these assumptions hinge on the matter of race. Exceptional and absolute, Haiti’s ‘blackness’—again, a ‘blackness’ fundamentally linked to Vodou—marks its every interaction with the world beyond its borders.

As postcolonialist cultural theorist Stuart Hall rightly argues, it is crucial not only to identify ways in which “economic structures are relevant to racial divisions,” but also to consider “how the two are theoretically connected.”¹⁸ The first task is to attend to “the specificity of those social formations which exhibit distinctive racial or ethnic characteristics,” what Hall names “this ‘something else’” that *translates* backward and forward between the social/racial and the economic (Hall, “Race” 20, emphasis mine). Vodou is an instance of “this ‘something else.’” It is an ostensibly “extraeconomic” (Hall, “Race” 20) factor that has a significant impact on Haiti’s legibility to the outside world—a cipher through which the nation’s political and economic struggles have been read, especially in the United States. As I have written about elsewhere, Vodou has been aggressively fashioned and thus widely perceived as an obstacle to Haiti’s development.¹⁹ Across various media and in myriad geocultural spaces, “no religion has been subject to more maligning and misinterpretation from outsiders over the past century.”²⁰ From aid organizations, to the news media, to the Hollywood film industry, “the threatening spectacle of Vodou”—or “voodoo,” in its so-called U.S.-American “translation”—is consistently deployed “by outsiders to signal the backwardness and indolence that they feel best describe Haitian history.”²¹ Further, ever since the word “voodoo” came into wide use in an English lexicon, the label has served to disparage Haitians. It has been used to evoke evil and brutality, sexual excess and depravity, and has had significant purchase in U.S. mediatizations of Haiti’s supposed ungovernability and propensity for disaster.

The translation of Haitian Vodou into “voodoo” in English has been a highly politicized matter for the past several decades. Since 2011, Haitian and Haitianist scholars and practitioners of Vodou, spearheaded by historian Kate Ramsey and in conjunction with KOSANBA, a scholarly association dedicated to the study of Haitian Vodou, have petitioned various prominent media institutions to dissociate the term “voodoo” from Haitian spiritual practices by adjusting their stylesheets. To date, while the Policy and Standards Division of the Library of Congress has amended its subject heading to reflect the serious-

ness of getting these terms right, the Associated Press and numerous national U.S. publications have shown a marked indifference to the long-historical force of this malapropism. This insensitivity to the power of the term is regrettable, and it has been an issue in the domain of literary translation as well.

The 2015 publication of influential Haitian novelist Kettly Mars's *Saisons sauvages* in English is a troubling instance of this phenomenon. The novel's talented and much-decorated translator Jeanine Herman made (and has since defended) the decision to render "Vodou" as "voodoo" in the English text.²² Queried about this choice in a published interview, Herman explains that after thinking "long and hard about *voodoo* vs. *vodou*," she and her editor "finally decided *voodoo* seemed more accessible." She continues, "I thought *voodoo priestess* had a nice ring to it, something almost Baudelairean about it." The insouciance of Herman's rationalization suggests, at best, an unawareness of the real stakes of such a choice. At worst, her position echoes "centuries of ahistorical arrogance and racial and cultural supremacy."²³ Granted, as Herman readily acknowledges, she had little to no familiarity with Haiti or its cultural and political realities prior to embarking on the translation of Mars's novel.²⁴ But this is distressing in and of itself. The absence of cultural sensitivity resulting from the translator's lack of information about the source (con)text is a function, ultimately, of the U.S. publisher's relative unconcern with the fact of Haiti's precarity on the world stage. The careless assertion that the term "voodoo" is, currently, most "accessible" begs two critical questions: 1) what anglophone audience is the novel meant to interpellate? and 2) what pedagogic and ethical responsibility do the translator and publisher bear?

These questions bring me to my second point of entanglement in approaching the translation of Depestre's novel: the matter of audience. Haiti is in many ways as foreign to non-Haitian Afro-diasporic communities in the United States and elsewhere as it is to Europeans and non-black Americans. Although largely marginalized as second-class citizens within their national contexts, Afro-diasporic consumers of 'First World' media have been necessarily influenced by anti-Haitian stereotypes of Vodou. U.S.-American Blacks, especially, are situated by virtue of their nationality (albeit only ostensibly and precariously) on the privileged side of the developed/underdeveloped, imperialist/colonized divide, and so may not recognize Haitians as political and cultural kin. Afro-diasporic populations in the anglophone Caribbean (Jamaica, Barbados, the Bahamas, etc.), also have tended to see Haitians as unwanted populations. Though geographically proximate and 'racially allied' with Haitians, Afro-anglophone communities throughout the Americas have remained in many ways distanced from the Black Republic.

There was a second audience/readership for whom I intended my translation of *Hadriana*: anglophone and creolophone Haitian communities outside of Haiti, communities that, by reason of global imperialism and its long wake, have been separated from their *francophonie* and subsequently cut off from their rightful cultural patrimony. Teaching Caribbean literature in New York City has led me to encounter many such students, first-generation Haitian-Americans who read and write in English, not French. I thus have witnessed firsthand the phenomenon whereby individuals from a transnational community are alienated from certain aspects of their heritage. Insofar as Depestre is an incontrovertible pillar of the Haitian literary canon, his celebrated contribution to world letters ought to be read by those who can and should claim him as their own.

Targeting these two Afro-anglophone readerships as the personal stakes of my translation project posed a particular challenge. Whereas both audiences could access the novel in the English language, their understanding of Haitian culture diverged. I was thus obliged to balance an effort to render comprehensible certain culturally specific realities, on the one hand, with the desire to maintain the very opacity that can signal resistance or critique in ‘minority-culture’ literature toward a dominant culture, on the other. Depestre’s inclusion of the “Prolegomena” and appendix in the original French text served to shoulder much of this ‘burden.’ His creative integration of explicative elements into the very narrative of *Hadriana*, along with his inclusion of the glossary, effectively lessened my responsibility as mediator of both the language of the source text and the cultural specificities it presented. To a certain extent, translating the non-Anglo-Western elements of Depestre’s novel was ‘simply’ a question of adhering to the foreignizing strategies he himself had decided to implement.²⁵

Yet, in translating *Hadriana* I nevertheless was obliged to grapple with what translation theorist Maria Tymoczko calls the “dilemma of faithfulness,” that is, the question of what to do with “factors that are particularly problematic for the receiving audience.” Tymoczko explains that “to be ‘faithful’ such problematic factors must be transposed despite the difficulties they might cause to the sensibilities or cognitive framework of translator or audience.”²⁶ As celebrated Martinican writer-theorist Édouard Glissant has argued, peoples from “small countries” affirm “the right to opacity”²⁷—the right to illegibility or, better, to untranslatability. They engage a praxis of refusal vis-à-vis the condescending and endangering presumptions of transparency that circulate in countries of the Global North regarding peoples of the Global South. The translator’s task is thus particularly complex in this context, insofar as she

must decide whether to unmask “aspects of a text that actively resist being translated” (Basnett 341). Faced with the possibility of a given author’s deliberate opacity, what responsibility does the translator then have to allow for the possibility of such active resistance? How can the translator fulfill her obligation to render a text legible while respecting the refusals built into the language of a source text from a ‘minority’ culture? Moreover, to what extent do matters of race and/or/as culture determine the parameters of the translator’s accountability to the author she seeks to carry over into another world(view)?

While I take seriously Edwards’s contention that “diasporic reciprocity is above all a call to translate,” I also recognize that the process of translation can lead as readily to exoticizing and silencing as to unifying and subverting. There are, in other words, real risks attendant in “attempt[ing] to carry blackness beyond the boundaries of nation and language” (Edwards 118). Given these risks, translating Vodou was of particular concern for me in every aspect of translating Depestre’s novel. The very choice of the word “Vodou” to render Depestre’s “vaudou” marked a definitive stance vis-à-vis the ethics of representing Haiti in foreign spaces—an acknowledgment of what Ramsey posits as the “history of stigmatization attached to the usage of the word ‘voodoo’ and thus its inappropriateness to name the religion.”²⁸ Beyond that decision, however, the novel posed the challenge of representing Vodou culture in translation. Knowing very well that Depestre’s unabashed incorporation of ‘local color’ in *Hadriana* might allow certain readers to find a home for their prejudice, I had to resist overstepping my authority and succumbing to “the common translatorial temptation to erase much that is culturally specific, to sanitize much that is comparatively odorous” (Basnett and Trivedi 7). Specifically, I had to reckon with the relatively Puritanical culture of the Anglosphere. *Hadriana* contains several highly erotic scenes, among which are descriptions of sexual encounters between Hadriana and various male and female partners in Jacmel, as well as evocations of the explicit sensuality and sexuality of Vodou.

For the most part, I endeavored to follow the source text’s lead: I did my best to identify English terms that would render the extravagance of Depestre’s ludic register. There was, however, a particular textual moment that proved more complicated to contend with: an early subplot in the narrative that recounts the terrible tale of Balthazar Granchiré, a young man who has been turned into a demonic butterfly-like creature by a vengeful sorcerer. As legend would have it, Granchire has been cursed with an outsized penis and insatiable sexual desire, and he is responsible for drugging and penetrating members of Jacmel’s female population while they sleep. Several theorists

argue that Depestre's humorous rendering of what amounts to predation evinces "the deeply rooted sexism that pervades the text."²⁹ But there is something more to this story—a something more I have unearthed, through close reading and textual and contextual analysis, in the context of my scholarly work.³⁰ Taking into account the fact that reports of Granchiré's alleged nocturnal assaults involve only Catholic nuns and teenaged 'virgins' and married women of the elite class, the story of Balthazar Granchiré reveals itself to be a satirical riff on the Jacmelian community's bourgeois preoccupation with feminine respectability—a preoccupation that sets the stage for Hadriana's zombification.

Whereas presenting these conclusions in the academic context involved careful and detailed intellectual work, connecting with my aspired-to readerships in the context of translation required a more economical interposition. How could I *not* keep in mind what the 'non-professional' anglophone reader might make of this episode through my rendering? This consideration ultimately shaped my decision in translating the monster-butterfly's name. While "Granchiré" does not have any semantic value in French, it does signify in Creole: the word translates literally to "big gash" or "big tear." This is a ribald allusion, of course, to either/both female genitalia or/and the phallic penetration of female genitalia. I first toyed with the idea of translating this character's name as "Balthazar the Ripper." Upon reflection, however, I realized that such a translation would be a misrepresentation, given what I believed to be the passage's satirical nature. The baggage attached to the "Ripper" etiquette risked shifting the English-language reader outside of Depestre's darkly comic intention into a unambiguously violent and macabre context.³¹ I decided instead to render the name in English as "Granchire," thereby maintaining the relative opacity of Depestre's evocative moniker for an anglophone reader while at the same time, by removing the Frenchifying diacritical marker, giving back to the name its fullest Creole signification. I thus hoped to interpellate an anglo-creolophone reader in much the same way the original French would have winked at a creolophone reader in the francophone world.

My personal experiences of presenting *Hadriana* have borne out the notion that cultural familiarity and the context of consumption condition audience response to the most provocative elements of Depestre's novel. In the years leading up to and immediately following the English publication of *Hadriana*, I was invited to discuss the novel in three different academic settings: a Francophone Studies graduate seminar at New York University; an undergraduate class on Caribbean literature at St. John's University; and a postcolonial Caribbean Studies graduate seminar at the University of Miami.

Fascinating to me in these encounters was the striking correlation between the overall cultural affiliations of the respective groups of students and their reactions to Depestre's rendering of Vodou and the erotic. At NYU, an elite institution located in Manhattan's West Village, the students—the majority of whom were not of Caribbean origin, and all of whom were well versed in postcolonial and feminist theory as articulated within the frame of North Atlantic scholarship—expressed discomfort with the perceived excesses of Depestre's carnivalesque presentation of Vodou and hyper-sexualization of Hadriana. The students at St. John's—none of whom had yet engaged substantively with Caribbean or postcolonial theory, and the vast majority of whom identified as first-generation Caribbean-Americans—read the same descriptions of Vodou, sex, and carnival without objection. Though only one among them was of Haitian origin, several recognized their own Caribbean cultural experiences and traditions in Depestre's portrayals of popular religious expression and in the narrative's anchoring in the so-called “marvelous real.” In Miami, distinct hub of multiple Caribbean diasporas, a diverse cohort of graduate students from across the Americas writ large, and variously invested in Caribbean and postcolonial studies, similarly appreciated Depestre's provocations as at once rooted in and subversive of Haitian cultural realities.

The response of these diverse micro-readerships provides (admittedly anecdotal) confirmation of Huggan's very important caution regarding audience reception, notably that readers “by no means form a homogeneous or readily identifiable consumer group. Postcolonial literatures in English,” Huggan notes, “are read by many different people in many different places; it would be misleading, not to mention arrogant, to gauge their value only to Western metropolitan response” (Huggan 30). This is, of course, the case for postcolonial literatures in translation as well.

As a professor at an Ivy League institution in the northeastern United States, editor of a Caribbean Studies journal, and translator of francophone literature and theory, I belong, I recognize, to that “relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery.”³² This positioning within the literary institution motivated me to be very lucid regarding my intention and my responsibility in translating *Hadriana*. Beyond the lexical decision-making and attentiveness to the interests and capacities of my personally-desired audiences, my other interventions as translator had to do with the packaging of Depestre's novel for the anglophone world. I had to find a publisher I could trust to do justice to the novel's deep anchoring in Haitian

Afro/Vodou culture, without betraying that culture by pandering to the potentially racist presumptions of the non-Haitian reading public.

I spent over two years ‘shopping’ my translation. I was able to pitch directly to decision-makers, facilitated by introductions from two colleagues—a prominent novelist and an esteemed scholar of Haitian history—who enthusiastically supported the project. Thanks to these relationships, my queries were always acknowledged and thoroughly answered, enabling me to get a clear sense of what Depestre’s novel looked like from a market perspective. I began, optimistically, by approaching an imprint of a major international press that recently had published a Haitian novel in translation. The response was disappointing but encouraging: the editors found the translation compelling but thought the generic instability of the novel (its inclusion of the prolegomena, the glossary, and other pedagogical elements; the collage-effect of its inclusion of a newspaper article, an “imaginary interview,” and a love letter in the middle of the narrative; and the change in first-person narrator two-thirds of the way through the story) made it more suitable for an independent press. Undaunted, I approached editors at two such presses, both of whom found the book “fascinating” but “too challenging” for a “casual reader.” The novel definitely was not African-American fiction, and its presentation of a white heroine on a black island was thorny. What was the “publishing hook,” one mused. It was suggested that I reach out to an academic press. Still undaunted, I did just that. But this option, too, came to naught. Even with my proposed critical introduction attached and strong praise for the quality of the translation, *Hadriana*’s presentation of the exotic and the erotic made the editor nervous about reception among the press’ academic readership.

I was, at this point, decidedly daunted. How could it be that this novel—written by an author who was admired by celebrated contemporary Haitian literary figures, and that had won a major prize and been translated into seven languages—was of so little interest to U.S. English-language publishers? Stymied by the question, I nevertheless tried one last approach: I reached out to contemporary Afro-Haitian-American woman writer Edwidge Danticat, who I knew not only appreciated Depestre’s novel, but even had been inspired by it to publish her own chronicle of Jacmel. I asked Danticat whether she would consider writing a foreword to the translation. Her response—“Whatever you need, my dear. I really love that book”—set me back on track.

When it comes to so-called marginal literature, the right preface can make all the difference. As Richard Watts has written, a preface can serve both to “move the merchandise” and to signal to the reader “the quality, seriousness, and perhaps even political orientation of the text in question” (Watts 2, 13).

Famously respected (and even beloved) by both scholars and ‘non-professional’ readers, Haitians and non-Haitians, Edwidge Danticat was the ideal ‘shepherd’ for *Hadriana* in the (Afro-)Anglosphere. Her own work is renowned for its sensitive treatment of gender and transnational blackness and, accordingly, she is perfectly placed to ‘vouch’ for *Hadriana*’s value in these arenas. The very presence of her name on the book’s front cover, along with a blurb from her foreword on the back, would attest to the legitimacy of the novel’s intent and accomplishment.

The elegant preface Danticat ultimately provided generously contextualizes, educates, and reassures. It exercises a measure of control, enjoining the reader to look beyond the superficially exotic to think about the deeper meanings inscribed in the narrative. “Just as one might at carnival,” Danticat writes, “one must surrender to this story while not being too easily offended or outraged.” She also pointedly prepares the reader for Depestre’s unstable generic and other choices—“[t]he novel occasionally veers into *lodyans*—a tongue-in-cheek narrative genre meant to provoke laughter,” she explains, “though here perhaps it is intended to provoke other carnal reactions as well.” Finally, Danticat subtly gestures to the different layers of access different readers might expect to enjoy: “[Depestre] not only describes a lively town, but also evokes class, color, religion, and gender dynamics, cleverly weaving them into his supernatural plot. He name-drops famous Jacmelians whom locals, and even regular visitors, are likely to recognize” (Depestre 14, 15). Highlighting *Hadriana*’s at once universal and insular scope, its invitations and its refusals, the whole of the foreword offers guidance without preachiness, explanation without condescension. It is, in and of itself, a very graceful instance of translation.

Danticat’s paratextual imprimatur secured, I went on to pitch the project with renewed confidence. The obvious target this time was Akashic Books, which had published Danticat’s groundbreaking edited short-story collections *Haiti Noir* and *Haiti Noir 2: The Classics*. A well-reputed and widely admired small publishing house, Akashic’s self-declared ethos—“reverse-gentrification of the literary world”—seemed promising. Moreover, the very first two subject headings of the press’ catalogue read “Black Interest” and “Caribbean Interest.” While the vicissitudes of alphabetization account for the prominent placement of these topics, a closer look through Akashic’s list categorically confirms the press’ deep commitment to Afro-diasporic literatures: the list features multiple titles related to ‘blackness’ and race in a U.S.-American frame, including works by Amiri Baraka, Bernice L. McFadden, and Melvin Van Peebles, as well as a wide-ranging and extensive list of important titles by Caribbean writers—including Elisabeth Nuñez, Colin Channer, Kwame Dawes, Katia D.

Ulysse, Thomas Glave, Robert Antoni, Marlon James, and Danticat herself. All these factors provided me with crucial ‘market’ context. The presence of these living authors in Akashic’s catalogue, several of whom write their island from the vantage point of the continental United States—did the work of vetting the press for me. I could feel certain that *Hadriana* would be handled with care.

Akashic’s carefulness in fashioning the postcolonial package of my translation is evidenced in the details of the frame placed around the published manuscript. Danticat’s foreword does the work of situating the novel; a short “Translator’s Note” articulates my conception of the translation as intervention and speaks directly to my desired readership. Perhaps most important from a commercial perspective, there is the cover art—the paratextual element most viscerally responsible for interpellating potential readers. For *Hadriana*’s cover, Akashic proposed, to my great pleasure and relief, an image both evocative and respectful of Haitian Vodou—of Haitian blackness. The design is at once aesthetically arresting and a perfect staging of the story that follows. It features a stylized ensemble of *vèvè*, sacred symbols of Haitian Afro-spirituality,³³ which form the pattern of a muted background and are integrated also into the typeface of the book’s title. These symbols present an opacity that is, once again, invitation and refusal: they appeal differently to initiated and uninitiated reader alike—not unlike Depestre’s novel.

“[W]here does ‘realism’ stop, and doudouist folklorization begin?” asks literary theorist Thomas Spear in reference to Depestre’s writing in general, and to *Hadriana* in particular. Spear is perfectly right to pose this question, and he is also right to take it back. “The question is not necessarily useful,” he concedes in the following sentence, “literature, a work of the imagination, does not care about any reality.”³⁴ Responses to *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* very much echo this ambivalence. Depestre has been celebrated as much for his wanderings back and forth across the globe in bold pursuit of political justice and racial equality, as for his deep commitment to Haitian culture as source of aesthetic beauty and creative inspiration. At the same time, he has been much criticized for unguardedly presenting aspects of that culture—its Afro-spirituality, its ebullient erotic expressiveness—for consumption by those likely to disdain such cultural traits. To translate Depestre’s French into U.S.-American English has meant being caught up in this contradiction. It has meant facing the risks inherent in extracting Haiti’s ‘blackness’ from its original Francophone context and carrying it over sensitively—mediated and repackaged—to the English-speaking world.

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Notes

1. Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2003), 211.
2. To date, I have published three works of Haitian fiction in translation: Frankétienne's *Ready to Burst* (New York: Archipelago Books, 2014); Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Dance on the Volcano* (New York: Archipelago Books, 2016); and René Depestre's *Hadriana in All My Dreams* (New York: Akashic Books, 2017).
3. "Translation is, etymologically, a 'carrying across' or 'bringing across': the Latin *translatio* derives from *transferre* (*trans*, 'across' + *ferre*, 'to carry' or 'to bring')." Christopher Kasparek, "The Translator's Endless Toil," *The Polish Review*, 28:2 (1983): 83.
4. John Keene, "Translating Poetry, Translating Blackness," <https://z.umn.edu/443a>.
5. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds. (New York: Columbia U P, 1994), 402.
6. Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992), 1.
7. René Philoctète, "Entretien," *Callaloo*, 15:3 (1992): 626. See also Kaiama L. Glover, "Haitian Literature and the Insult of Dust," *sx salon* 23 (october 2016), <https://z.umn.edu/443g>.
8. That year, the novel also won the Prix du roman de la société des gens de lettres and the Prix de l'Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique, among other prizes.
9. See Colin [Joan] Dayan in "France Reads Haiti: René Depestre's *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*," *Yale French Studies* 83 (1993): 154–75 for citations from contemporary French reviews of the novel.
10. Katell Colin-Thébaudeau, for example, accuses Depestre of courting "a Western readership" and casts suspicion on the literary merit of the novel due primarily to the fact of its success among a North Atlantic reading public: "René Depestre wants to be read in Europe, in North America [...] he does his best to entice this foreign reader to the island of Haiti by reflecting back to him a host of delectable exoticist images" (Colin-Thébaudeau 43-46). Colin-Thébaudeau goes so far as to suggest that all of Depestre's theoretical writings on Haiti's popular culture are designed to mask and legitimize his troubling fiction writings.
11. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing at the Margins* (Liverpool: Liverpool U P, 2001), 7.
12. Richard Watts, *Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World* (Lanham: Lexington, 2005), 11.
13. In an early section of the narrative titled "The Zombifier's Secret Code, or, A Zombiferous Pharmacopia," one of Depestre's characters describes the various steps undertaken by practitioners of 'black magic' to turn human beings into the living-dead.
14. It is worth noting that Depestre is trained in the field of anthropology, a domain that both practices and relies on cultural and racial translation.
15. In the hours following Hadriana's death, a debate arises as to whether to mourn her according to the rituals of Catholicism or Vodou. A compromise is reached wherein the local Catholic priests are convinced by local Vodouisants that certain tenets of the Vodou faith must be honored so that the people of Jacmel might accept and heal from the loss of Hadriana. In addition, it becomes clear by the novel's conclusion that Hadriana herself is very much imbued with a psychological strength that comes from her having been cared for by domestics who initiated her to a degree into Haiti's spiritual universe.
16. Charles Forsdick, "Translation in the Caribbean, the Caribbean in Translation," *Small Axe*, 48 (November 2015): 161.
17. Susan Bassnett, "Postcolonialism and/as Translation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, Graham Huggan, ed. (New York: Oxford U P, 2013), 345.
18. Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth Lindeborg, eds. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), 20.

19. Kaiama L. Glover, "'Flesh Like One's Own': Benign Denials of Legitimate Complaint," *Public Culture*, 29:2 (May 2017): 235–60.
20. Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011), 1. Ramsey's masterful study offers to date by far the most thorough, nuanced, and exhaustive account of the Haitian spiritual practices that "in official Kreyòl orthography and most scholarly writing" (6) have been encapsulated in the word "Vodou." As Ramsey notes, both "Vodoun" and "Vodun" are also acceptable terms among scholars and practitioners.
21. Colin Dayan, "And then Came Culture," *Cultural Dynamics*, 26:2 (2014): 144.
22. "Haiti in Translation: *Savage Seasons* by Kettly Mars, An Interview with Jeanine Herman," <https://z.umn.edu/443h>.
23. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, "Broken Mirrors: Mythos, Memories, and National History," *Haitian Vodou: Spirit, Myth, and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 2006), 21.
24. "I didn't know much about the political situation in Haiti," Herman notes, "I had not heard of the Haitian classics, and I didn't even know that French was not [Mars's] first language. I was not at all familiar with Haitian culture or literature." Herman, "Interview."
25. By "foreignizing strategies," I mean the inclusion of textual and paratextual materials that explicate elements of the source culture, as opposed to domesticating the text so to conform with the target culture.
26. Maria Tymoczko, "Post-colonial Writing and Literary Translation," in *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 21.
27. "Nous réclamons le droit à l'opacité!," Édouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), 11.
28. Kate Ramsey, "From 'Voodooism' to 'Vodou': Changing a US Library of Congress Subject Heading," *The Journal of Haitian Studies*, 18:2 (2012): 14.
29. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gébert, "Women Possessed: Eroticism and Exoticism in the Representation of Woman as Zombie," *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah and the Caribbean*, Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gébert, eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 1997), 50.
30. In *Disorderly Women: On Caribbean Community and the Ethics of Self-Regard* (Duke U P, forthcoming).
31. I am referring, of course, to the never-identified nineteenth-century serial killer, Jack the Ripper, who brutally murdered several sex workers in the East End of London. Jack the Ripper's story was highly sensationalized by the media in its time and has since given rise to hundreds of works of both fiction and non-fiction.
32. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1992), 149.
33. *Vèvè* are powerful religious symbols used during Vodou ceremonies to call the *lwa* (spirits) into attendance. They are traced on the floor of the ritual space using a mixture of cornmeal and wood ash.
34. Thomas Spear, "Carnavalesque Jouissance: Representations of Sexuality in the Francophone West Indian Novel," Richard D. Reitsma, trans. (1998), <https://z.umn.edu/443i>.