



Douglas & McIntyre

EXTRAS

HEADING SOUTH: A NOVEL

by *Dany Laferrière*

HAITI: 1970S

I was 17-years-old in 1970. Papa Doc (François Duvalier) was still in power. I lived with my mother, my sister and my aunts (and one uncle) in a neighbourhood in downtown Port-au-Prince. Like many people at that time, we lived above our means. We were seemingly middle class but really we were poor. My mother had lost her job, my father had been in exile for 12 years. Only my uncle had work – at the Ministry of Finance. We lived hand to mouth. Most of my uncle’s salary was spent on magazines and detective novels that I inherited once he’d finished reading them. I went to a middle school run by Canadian monks, the *Collège Canada-Haitien*. The women of my family were constantly trying to protect me. Every time I went out, they were terrified that I would be beaten by Duvalier’s *Tontons-Macoutes*. It was a terrible time. Grown-ups never went out; the street had been brutally overtaken by the *Volontaires de la sécurité Nationale* (the Militia of National Security Volunteers), Duvalier’s killer thugs. But despite all this, my friends and I still managed to carve out spaces to live. We would meet at our more fortunate friends’ houses to dance, we’d play volleyball at the *Collège Saint-Pierre*, we’d try not to stay out too late. And we avoided any place where there might be “sharks.” It sounds strange, but in that time of profound darkness, we managed to live a life of sunlight. And the true sunlight was in the form of love—we would write passionate love letters to our friends’ sisters. It was a constant cycle of restraint and luminosity.

THE WRITING LIFE

I compare writing to Ariadne’s string, from Greek mythology, with life like a labyrinth and writing the string that keeps us from getting lost in it. When I write, I have the feeling that my entire life is in my hands – a continuous present. And this helps me avoid feelings of nostalgia that might creep up on me because of my life in exile. It’s this nostalgia that gives a backwards-looking tint to all work created in exile. It gives the impression that we write in exile only to deal with the fact that we’ve been uprooted from our own country. I don’t fall into this category. All my life happens, at any given moment, exactly where I happen to be. I hold it in the tips of my fingers that run across a piano’s keys. And the country I write about is more and more one that I’ve invented (from dreams, fantasies and my own reality) than some lost country I’m mourning. I don’t mourn my life, I devour it. I’m trying to erase from my internal theatre any notions of territory as iden-

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tity. And I started with the notion of time by eliminating artificial borders. The problem arises that too often people only see in me the exiled writer. Exile brings me back to territory. Being Black brings me back to race. Being an immigrant keeps me in the sociopolitical ghetto. So I write to escape my race, my economic class, my sex, and fly liberated above the roofs.

SEXUAL POLITICS

First of all, there's not just sex in my work. I've written about my childhood, the political climate of Port-au-Prince, my time in Montreal. Certainly, sex plays an important role. In Haiti, I use sex to cross social boundaries and confront the class problem. In Canada, I use it to cross racial boundaries. It's never just sex for sex's sake. It's a means and not an end. When I first arrived in North America, I noticed that it was easier to sleep with a girl than to have a coffee with her in a public place (I'm speaking specifically, not generally). I asked myself how it could be that an act so pure, so intimate, so private – the sexual act – be less of a big deal than having coffee with someone. In reality, it seemed, that which is done hidden from public view, actually doesn't count. Only the social is political. If sexual attraction is an innocent game for one person (the North American girl), then the other (the Black man) will alter the situation completely by changing his public persona. The girl tries to only show this intimate familiarity with her lover, while he wants this shown in public. For me as a writer, there is a similar situation that interests me. It's the North American situation. But in the case of *Heading South*, it's the middle-aged white woman who travels to the South. She wants to live these intimate sexual feelings out loud, and it is the young men who want to keep the relationships secret. The South has no recourse for dealing with the sexuality of the female tourist and yet it is steeped in politics surrounding young Haitians. The sexual act, when shared between people who are from different races, different classes, becomes, all of a sudden, a big deal.

A HAITIAN PLAYLIST

Papa Doc was extremely rigid when it came to sexual morality. These old dictators are always directly in line with religious leaders. His son, Baby Doc who succeeded him after his death, was more about pleasure. And the pleasure machine is first and foremost a money machine. Tourists began flooding the island with cash and drugs. New music from the youth movement exploded on the scene at the same time. We danced anywhere we could to: Tabou Combo, Shupa Shupa, les Fantaisistes de Carrefour, Les Légendaires de Delmas, Les Ambassadeurs, Les Loups Noirs, Les Difficiles de Pétionville, Les Gypsies, Les Shleu Shleu, etc. It was rhythm-based; totally different from the slow, soft music we were used to. Like rock. Afros, miniskirts. Sex was the main theme of these songs, but never explicitly. After the bloody dictatorship of Papa Duvalier it was now a dictatorship of pleasure. Repression continued, for sure, but it was less harsh.

HEADING SOUTH

A Novel

Publication date: October 10, 2009

Trade paper · \$22.95 CDN

ISBN: 978-1-55365-483-4

5.5 x 8.5 in · 208 pages

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