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## Archiving Ten Years of Aftershocks in Haitian Seismic Notebooks

Rachel Douglas

Notebooks constitute the birthplaces and archives of the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Notetaking and notebooks are also omnipresent in post-earthquake Haitian films and texts. Scribbling down notes, immediate reactions and later impressions was for many writers the means of initiating and rewriting responses to the temblor and its still continuing aftershocks. Seismographic Haitian writing born out of these notebooks created layered repositories of embedded vestiges like the Haitian earth itself after the January disaster. This quake was not a one-off seismic event: it was processual with an extensive aftermath.<sup>1</sup> Creation of many of the Haitian earthquake texts and films was also a continuous process, and this article uncovers the long, and in some cases still ongoing, process of forging these narratives.<sup>2</sup> In the Caribbean context, the archetypal notebook is Aimé Césaire's "Cahier d'un retour au pays natal" [Notebook of a Return to the Native Land] (1939), and this article argues that these Haitian texts and films can be thought of as reworking Césaire's Ur-notebook. As will be explored, the notebook pages are also often spaces where Haitian writers write and update their own textual and filmic responses to the earthquake. Transformations of the blank space when filling up the notebook pages will be linked to the completely altered post-earthquake Haitian spaces explored in the texts and films. These notebooks should be seen as key *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, and are places where memory is embodied. Often these handwritten notes were kept close to the body during the tumultuous days after the earthquake struck. Such notebook pages correlate to French historian Pierre Nora's definition of "lieux de mémoire" as a site "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (7). This article seeks to extend Nora's limited Francocentric approach, widening the scope to look at Haitian sites of memory. This

article argues that places like notebook pages and Port-au-Prince streets form a many-layered palimpsest on which entangled and partially erased hi/stories are etched.

Guiding this article is the idea of ‘rasanblaj’—gathering or re/assembling in Haitian Creole. Taking Haitian anthropologist-artist Gina Athena Ulysse’s explorations of the idea as a starting point, this article uses rasanblaj as a lens through which to examine the many layers of a text and film network born out of writers’ first impressions. This article brings together the organizing principle of rasanblaj and the unique Haitian style of lodyans storytelling to reframe the texts and films born out of the earthquake. Lodyans was theorized and illustrated by Haitian master lodyanseur and geographer Georges Anglade, who lost his life in the quake along with his wife Mireille. Lodyans involves piecing together miniature improvised stories like a mosaic rasanblaj. Generically, many of the texts and films are hybrid rasanblaj in themselves and are composed of multiple mini-stories that are gathered together like a collage. New elements and different versions of the same stories are often added and built up in layers like improvisations in a jazz composition.

This is not an exhaustive account of the many Haitian texts and films dealing with the earthquake. It is also important to clarify that not every Haitian writer has written about the earthquake. Several Haitian writers have deliberately chosen not to write about the disaster.<sup>3</sup> As so many of these earthquake stories overlap and intersect, they are referred to here as a ‘network.’ Here, I am building on Susan Gillman’s idea of the “text-network,” which I am extending to Haitian films about the earthquake too.<sup>4</sup> All of the texts and films tell different versions of the same story, but some of them come together to form an entangled web of rasanblaj.

There is a tight nexus of texts and films around the writer-artist Frankétienne in particular, formed of Dany Laferrière’s *Tout bouge autour de moi*, Rodney Saint-Éloi’s *Häiti, kenbe la!*, Frankétienne’s play *Melovivi or The Trap*, as well as his subsequent film (directed

by Charles Najman) *A Strange Cathedral in the Viscous Darkness*. Laferrière and Saint-Éloi's accounts of the earthquake overlap because the two writers were together in Haiti at the Karibe Hotel when the earthquake struck. Both texts recount their travels around a completely altered Port-au-Prince. They write separately about visiting one living site of memory: the writer-artist Frankétienne who is designated a "poet-landmark" by Laferrière and described as someone who "fait corps avec la terre" ("is one with the Haitian earth"; 31).<sup>5</sup> Here both narratives intersect with Frankétienne's premonitory play, which represents the aftermath of a disaster like an earthquake. As Frankétienne recounts to his writer-friends, he was rehearsing this two-man play just moments before the earthquake struck. Following Laferrière and *Tout bouge autour de moi*, we can designate the play a *mise en abyme* that "is today part of the history of this city" (2010, 60). From inside both Laferrière and Saint-Éloi's narratives, Frankétienne declaims lines from the play. Here the *mise en abyme* presents us with a smaller version of the play about an earthquake inside the narratives that we are reading. The fabric of the reassembled fragments of Laferrière and Saint-Éloi's rasanblaj are interwoven with Frankétienne's disaster play. What adds to the multilayered rasanblaj is the fact that several narratives are predicated on repetition and rewriting, especially Laferrière's *Tout bouge*, which he rewrote one year later, and Frankétienne's film *A Strange Cathedral*, for which his play is the starting point.

Yanick Lahens started writing what would become *Failles* by writing three times this sentence from her previous book: "The apocalypse has already happened so many times on this island. [...]" After writing this three times, she removes the phrase before finally rewriting it again (27).<sup>6</sup> Here we see how the earthquake text and film network are all predicated on rewriting from their beginnings. This article is based on entries from Lahens's handwritten diary/manuscript, which was subsequently published as *Failles (Fault Lines)*.<sup>7</sup> This first-person

account interacts with Lahens's later fictional pre-/sequel companion text *Guillaume et Nathalie* (2013).

### **Notebooks of Return to the Native Land**

References to scribbling in notebooks abound in the Haitian earthquake texts, as writers discuss the urgent need to document the developing moment of the tremors from 4:53 p.m. on 12 January 2010. Several narratives document the making of the chronicle, diary, notebook or letters as they are in the process of being written. This is a conscious decision, as Lahens writes, “Dès le mercredi 13 janvier 2010 j’ai commencé par tenir une chronique avec une simple comptabilité des faits et une description que je voulais la plus précise qui soit des dommages” (“From Wednesday 13 January 2010 onward, I started to write a chronicle with a simple accounting of the facts and a description that I wanted to be as precise as possible about the damage”; *Failles* 91). Also on the spot, Laferrière pulls out his little black notebook that goes everywhere with him and begins to jot down first impressions as they strike him. After the earthquake, Haitian anthropologist-performance-artist Ulysse issued a powerful call for new narratives about Haiti as she documented the making of her own postquake chronicle with a strong performative component.

As well as *l’urgence d’écrire* (the urgency of writing), there is also the *devoir de mémoire* (the need for memory/to remember). These words and images combined form the archive of what happened that day: “Men pawòl nou sou douz janvyè pou ashiv sa” (“Here are our words on 12 January for this archive”; Ulysse, “Pawòl fann” 72). Saint-Éloi makes the important point that the formerly colonized have not had access to their own archives, unlike the former colonizers: “Les vainqueurs ont toujours pour eux les archives. Ils ont leur livre jauni et les versions de toutes les histoires” (“The conquerors have always had the archives for

themselves. They have their yellowed book and the versions of all the histories; *Haïti, kenbe la* 199). Now Haitians need to have archives and versions of all their own stories. The narrator's great-great-grandmother Grann Tida looms large over Saint-Éloi's *Haïti, kenbe la!* with her oral storytelling. According to this ancient storyteller, "History is a tale that is not written down" (199), and many of these Haitian notebooks have a purposeful orality to them: a strategic performative device of rewriting as they are in the actual process of being written.

The notebook form is a crucial archival component of these new narratives of Haiti after the earthquake. One archetypal Caribbean notebook is Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. A new section titled "Return" added to Laferrière's 2011 rewritten version of *Tout bouge* inscribes the rewriting in the line of Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, itself a multiply revised long poem. In his ever-present notebook, Laferrière documents his returns to his native land. The notebooks present the native land—Haiti—almost as a foreign place, even for those writers normally resident there. Their on-the-spot and spur-of-the-moment notes bear witness to the complete transformation of the fabric of their homeland, especially the capital city Port-au-Prince. This process of note taking is a type of fieldwork, a means of capturing everything as quickly as possible, as Shalini Puri notes in *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory*.<sup>8</sup> The turn to the notebook is a choice for how to represent disaster and capture its scale, and highlights the difficulty of narrating the developing moment. Notebooks are *the* genre for Puri's *Grenada Revolution*, and urgent memory is what these notebooks work towards recovering.

One of the first novels on the earthquake to be published was Makenzy Orcel's *Les immortelles* (*The Immortals*), which was published in September 2010. Generically, however, this 'novel' is hybrid, as are many Haitian earthquake narratives. Notebooks remain all important. There is a dialogue between these notebooks, books in the making, words in the

memory and the human body, mind and heart. As Adrienne Rich observes, a notebook is “a stained book carried close to the body,” and “the notebook scribbled by hand” is definitely a “centre of gravity” (115–16). In Orcel’s book, the male-writer figure’s role is to immortalize the prostitutes of Grand Rue. He writes down in the pages of his notebook the stories passed on by one prostitute about her protégée. Additionally, the male scribe is given the dead prostitute’s own notebook and is instructed to incorporate her notes into his. The narrator’s notes intertwine with those of the deceased, and the novel also rewrites one of Jacques Stephen Alexis’s novel too: *L’espace d’un cillement* (*In the Flicker of an Eyelid*).

If fillability is the primary function of any notebook, then we are reminded that the constant filling in of notebook pages is an ongoing process of assemblage-rasanblaj. The focus on notebooks helps us to explore memory as a process. Another of the first Haitian novels about the earthquake to be published in December 2010 was Marvin Victor’s *Corps mêlés*. Here too there is a prominent reference to “cahiers,” notebooks/exercise books as part of the earthquake debris: “[L]eurs cahiers rescapés des termites et des cyclones aux pages racornies” (“Their notebooks survivors of termites and cyclones with hardened pages”; 129), with their yellowing stiff pages. In Gary Victor’s *Collier de débris*, a female debris remover also finds a pupil’s exercise book in which a blot of ink could indicate the interruption of the quake. She wonders where the hand could be that made the blot. These notebooks survive, even if their authors do not. The Haitian text-film network keeps filling in the silences of the earthquake archives through note taking in notebooks that are for incremental filling in as an everyday practice, as Lisa Gitelman reminds us. Fragmentation is ubiquitous in these notebooks. The fragmented form speaks of the intense pain, the personal and collective trauma suffered by Haitians.

## Archives of Fragmented Bodies, *tè glise* and Post-Earthquake Zombies

Many of the bodies encountered in these texts and films are in pieces. Everywhere in the Haitian earthquake narratives, we can see that the personal and collective trauma suffered by Haitians is intertwined. Lahens uses a striking image in *Failles* that is repeated at the end of *Guillouame et Nathalie*, and then again almost ten years later in her 25–26 December 2019 article for *Le Monde*. In this repeated image, Port-au-Prince is embodied as a violated and disembowelled woman whose body is in pieces like so many of the city’s inhabitants (*Failles* 12–13). This female Port-au-Prince’s body is presented as stripped naked as part of a physical and sexual assault. Many earthquake narratives foreground the rows of bodies and body parts strewn around the city, as we see repeatedly in Arnold Antonin’s 2010 documentary *Chronique d’une catastrophe annoncée: Haïti Apocalypse Now*. Lahens recounts the trauma of seeing bodies and body parts on the pavement (62) with all the swarming flies.

Edwidge Danticat, who travelled to Haiti three weeks after the earthquake on a relief plane, also recalled seeing “piles of human remains freshly pulled from the rubble” (*Create* 165)—body parts that had melded together with the yellowed cloth of skirts sticking to them. These snapshots of the body parts are reflected in the fragmented form of the narratives themselves. Haiti’s *tè glise* (slippery ground) has fragmented even the ground, which is no longer solid beneath people’s feet. As Danticat sums up, “Haiti has never been more slippery ground then after this earthquake with bodies littering the streets, entire communities buried in rubble, homes pancaked to dust [...] now even the ground is no more” (157–58). Port-au-Prince’s body, like the dead bodies piled in its streets, was in bits and returning to dust. These links between the bodies of the deceased and amputated and Port-au-Prince city’s own mutilated body appear frequently throughout the text and film network. Lahens keeps returning to the image of multiple teeth pulled out. Many buildings have fallen to pieces with



major structural damage, and there are gaps and rubble where they used to stand. The narratives enumerate all the wounds to the body of the city, as well as profound changes to the very fabric from which the capital is composed. This is a city that “had changed physically [with] fault lines catastrophically rearranging its landscape” (Danticat, *Create* 158). Certain places figure prominently in the narratives, including the site of mass graves where “nameless, uncounted bodies were being dumped” (Ulysse, *Why Haiti* 12)—the human refuse of this earthquake. One such site is Titanyen, previously the Duvalier dictatorship’s site for dumping its victims. This site was used again for mass graves after the earthquake.

Regarding the traumatized people in the capital, several narratives refer to them as zombies. Lahens repeatedly refers to the residents of Port-au-Prince as zombies or the living dead: “Nous sommes DESOUNEN [undone], dans une sorte d’hébétude. Des zombies” (“We are undone, in a sort of stupor. *Zombies*”; *Failles* 36). There are references to Haitians’ collective “stupeur” as if, Lahens remarks, Haitians have been in a long coma. Who, she asks, will wake them up and dezombify them by administering salt, the traditional antidote for dezombification? Similarly, Laferrière describes how passers-by are moving “tels des fantômes zombies” (“like zombie ghosts”; *Vers* 155). Ulysse reports that CNN and other global media news networks’ “dehumanization” narrative presented Haitians as “indifferent,” “callous” and “subhuman” (*Why Haiti* 28). What the Haitian narratives reveal, however, is that Haitians are completely traumatized by the earthquake experience and losses. People’s vacant dead-eyed stares make them appear like revenants from the dead, such is their experience of pain. As Leigh Gilmore reminds us, “[T]rauma produces a range of bodily, perceptual and neurological effects” (15). Trauma is also linked to endless repetition. In many of the earthquake narratives, the witness-survivors repeatedly experience shaking, as if the tremors were continuing. Laferrière, Saint-Éloi and Danticat all write about the bodily experiences of shaking and

continued aftershocks after they are on lòt bò dlo, on the other side of the water from Haiti in North America. The aftershocks continue because the trauma is in their heads. Memory is repetition here. More recently, Laferrière has used the graphic novel and drawing/sketching to reimagine the materiality of the earthquake destruction through visual images and traces of handwriting in *Vers d'autres rives* (2019), in which he represents himself returning to witness the broken buildings after the earthquake while trying to find the face of love there in the gaps between buildings.

The writers' furious scribbling of notes highlights the many disappeared people and buildings. Holes and gaps in these narratives often represent the people, places and entire communities that have been wiped off the map without a trace. There is a strong archival impulse at work here, where narrative is woven around the silences and gaps. Michel-Rolph Trouillot has compellingly drawn attention to the uneven power in the production of sources, archives and history narratives by highlighting the silences that enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: moments of fact creation (making sources), moments of fact assembly (making archives), moments of fact retrieval (making narratives) and the moment of retrospective significance (making history in the final instance) (*Silencing* 26). The bodies of the texts are broken into pieces like those of the bodies of the city and its inhabitants. These texts are hybrid and open-ended. They often give the impression of being first drafts of a multilayered narrative in process and form a relational, open-ended and extendable network that works as an archival space. Where the gaps and holes of missing people and bodies are concerned, the text and film network gathers together individual and collective memories, reimagining community and the city in the aftermath of disaster. In their form, many of the texts appear fragmented, and this fragmentation speaks of the intense personal and collective trauma suffered by Haitians. Each text performs a reassembly of the fragments. This text and film network thus offers archival capabilities and a place for collective memory when it gathers

together the textual fragments, as if re-embodiment the city. These rasanblaj narratives are also archives of the future: they call forth a Haiti and a city that do not even exist yet. The fragments are sewn back together through connective tissues and membranes, relaying the textual fragments and creating archival capabilities and places for collective memory.

### **Archiving the Changing City and (Non-)Reconstruction**

The most visible change since the earthquake, documented by the text-film network, is the tents and camps springing up in and around the city. What emerges clearly from the texts and films is that humanitarian aid continues the long history of outsiders harming Haiti.<sup>9</sup> Many decry the introduction of cholera to the country by United Nations (UN) peacekeeping troops from Nepal in October 2010. In Frankétienne's play and film, there are several references to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the UN, the United States (US) and France being predators in Haiti. They are presented as occasionally visiting ailing Haiti so that the country does not die, but these outsiders also make it clear that they do not really want Haiti to recover either. One way in which the play *Melovivi* is adapted for the film *A Strange Cathedral* is that a key international G7/10/17/20 summit is more clearly presented in the film as a Haiti donor summit where the lingua franca is the English 'sign here' and the universal currency is the US dollar. In the film, Frankétienne and Garnel Innocent play representatives of rich countries and international donors and their interests. Their multilingual language is empty of all meaning. They talk about how to solve problems with a remote control. They enthusiastically declare that they have signed for the United States. The bureaucrats are self-congratulatory, patting themselves on the back, shaking hands and declaring that all the problems are solved. Their disengagement from Haiti and its problems is clear. They cheerfully take leave of each

other with the empty words “See you at the next summit,” “See you at the very next summit” (*Melovivi* 51). They are set to helicopter their donations to the next disaster.

Many aid agencies and humanitarian organizations distributed cash-for-work programmes after the quake. In Victor’s *Collier de débris*, the main character is hired to work in a cash-for-work crew and wears her bright T-shirt branded with the logo of an NGO. Having lost everything, including her husband and her son, she ends up living in a camp. Her life soon revolves around camps and rubble. The working day consists of eight hours in the burning sun for the Haitian minimum wage of two hundred gourdes per day, roughly the equivalent of five euros—an insufficient salary to live on. Victor’s rubble clearer notes that people are being reduced to debris themselves, with no dignity. Greg Beckett contrasts the foreign-aid workers’ first-class salaries and air-conditioned offices. The rubble remover in Victor’s novel likens the cash-for-work programme to slavery and another attempt to get Haitians to return to neocolonial plantations. Victor’s work-crew member describes how the city is drowning in debris, depicting the mounds of broken concrete that remain visible everywhere as being like an invasion or metastasizing cancer. The rubble sticks to the workers’ skin and embeds itself in their memories. Among the rubble lie many human remains, which constantly shock the finder.

Physical insecurity and multiple rapes have occurred in the camps, and there were many rapes in the overcrowded relief camps. Myriam Chancy’s forthcoming 2021 post-earthquake novel and essays address the prevalence of rape in the camps and the battles over scarce water—a precious commodity in camp life.<sup>10</sup> Kettly Mars’s 2013 novel *Aux frontières de la soif* (*At the Borders of Thirst*) also focuses on links between rape and hard-to-find water.<sup>11</sup> Set one year after the disaster, the book features protagonist Fito Belmar, a Haitian male writer with one successful novel to his name. In addition to writing, Fito is also an architect and town

planner. These multiple professions give him a special insight into the sprawling and growing spaces of the Canaan camps, as they become a permanent slum. Fito becomes obsessed with Canaan and travels to the camp to engage in sex with young virginal girls who are forced to prostitute themselves. Mars, from her title onward, focuses on the scarcity of water in the camps for people living in tents, which become swelteringly hot during the daytime. In *Aux frontières de la soif*, we hear about the failed attempts to install a more permanent camp-water supply. Instead, water trucks distribute water at the camps, and the people come to fill up their basins and drums. As we learn, in Canaan everything has a price, including water, food and sex.

In Fito's case, young tender flesh is sold in American dollars in advance by a shadowy 'Uncle' figure Golème Gédéon. We learn about Golème's links with an underground paedophile ring that links to NGOs, the UN MINUSTAH peacekeeping force and Haitian government officials. Published in 2013, Mars's book tells of the sort of abuse that would emerge in February 2018 when it was revealed that Oxfam senior aid workers had used prostitutes in Haiti, including girls as young as twelve. However, the sexual predator in Mars's novel is no foreigner but a relatively privileged Haitian intellectual, compared to the girls in the camps whom Golème presents as earthquake orphans. Despite being Haitian himself, Fito sees Canaan as another world, "un pays perdu aux frontières de la soif" ("a lost country at the borders of thirst";157). Here children and their bodies are sold for a little bread or water. After his Canaan encounters, Fito describes how dust ends up everywhere, including in the most intimate body parts. This persistent dust remains on the body as a reminder of his sexual transgressions and needs to be washed away with effort. Fito thirsts for these young girls' bodies until he starts to write about Canaan. He "vomits" down all that is happening in Canaan onto the blank desert-like pages of his writer's block. Writing Canaan encourages him to find his words again and overcome his writer's block in this *mise en abyme* where the book bears the

same title as the one we are reading—the title that contains the book—as he types and starts to fill in the blank page on screen. The space of Canaan is presented as a labyrinth, which cannot be navigated at night without a guide. Canaan becomes the centre of the novel as a new principal coordinate of post-earthquake Haiti.

### Haitian Sites of Memory

The cathedral and its rubble become *the* image of Port-au-Prince's destruction by earthquake in Frankétienne's film *A Strange Cathedral* and Jean Marie Théodat's book *Des décombres et des hommes (Of Rubble and Men)*, which features the destroyed cathedral on the cover. Here, the cathedral acts as the key *lieu de mémoire*, site or realm of memory of the destroyed city. The skeleton of the cathedral and its few standing walls frame and embody Port-au-Prince being brought to its knees by the 2010 earthquake. We are presented with the cathedral as an archive of the many layers of palimpsest Port-au-Prince. The cathedral represents a metaphor, a piece of the fractal puzzle and the ultimate mise en abyme or microcosm of the ruined city with its cracked walls and piles of rubble. Frankétienne's words repeatedly refer to being in the "realm of death" and accumulate to build up a picture of the city as a necropolis. The film memorializes the hundreds of thousands of earthquake dead.

*A Strange Cathedral* is not a film version of Frankétienne's play *Melovivi or The Trap*, which is a point of departure for the film. Certainly, there are a number of lines in common between the play and the film, which is as multilayered as its set: the rubble of the former Cathedral of Port-au-Prince. The film's title *A Strange Cathedral in Viscous Darkness* is also the title of one of Frankétienne's literary texts. In the 1990s, the writer rewrote his landmark eight-hundred-page text-and-image compilation *L'oiseau schizophone* (1993).<sup>12</sup> Collectively, the rewriting was titled *Les Métamorphoses de l'oiseau schizophone*, in eight volumes with *A*

*Strange Cathedral* as volume 5. In the film version, actors Frankétienne and Innocent frequently clutch notebooks close to their bodies as they pick their way across the layers of debris where the cathedral once stood. Frankétienne also reads extracts from his *Rapjazz*, another work with a long history: it was first self-published in Port-au-Prince in 1999 before being published in Montreal by Saint-Éloi for publisher Mémoire d'encrier in 2011. All of this means that the film is predicated on many levels by active rewriting. From the premonitory play written prior to the earthquake in November–December 2009 to this film, the time and place coordinates shift. Here, the very first words of the film uttered by Frankétienne are the pivotal date and time when the earthquake struck. From the first words onward, the film focuses squarely on the earthquake's impact and its aftermath.

*A Strange Cathedral* begins with Frankétienne crying and clutching objects among the rubble. Sitting amid the remains of the cathedral, Frankétienne declares to “speak for those who are dead and didn't have a burial” and describes how “we are walking on the dead.” The cathedral is in fragments, like all of the precariously built urban concrete jungle of Port-au-Prince. People pick their way carefully across the mountains of rubble, which are uneven underfoot. They pick up and inspect material vestiges of the people who probably died here. At one point, Frankétienne picks up a tiny girl's shoe that is placed in his shirt pocket and a stethoscope that is placed around his neck. These items are like talismans or memorial objects for the dead: material archival traces of people's lives. As in Victor's *Collier de débris*, notebooks are also found and brandished by Frankétienne and Innocent's characters. They dialogue about the fact that “there is no text,” “there has never been any text.” There are some lines from published works, including the play *The Trap*, but improvisation plays a central role in the film too, as characters ad lib furiously.

*A Strange Cathedral* also features the participation of some people who were living among the rubble. We see people picking through the ruins like archaeologists to salvage anything of use or value, including metal rebar. We see young boys in particular climbing precariously on some of the great building's incomplete skeleton. These participants include a blind man who sings haunting songs about the earthquake with his guitar. There is also a breastfeeding mother who sings a sad song, lamenting that she cannot feed her hungry children but vowing never to give up. Other participants featured include suffering people who are praying for help to survive in the aftermath of the earthquake. All of these 'performances' bring the film closer to the post-earthquake reality of Port-au-Prince. These contributions are dignified and give human faces to those affected by the earthquake.

Other key spaces in the film include the cemetery of Port-au-Prince and some scenes in a forest. One principal performer is Erol Josué, who is a Vodou priest and has been director of the National Bureau of Ethnology since 2012. In the film, Josué leads Vodou ceremonies to remember and honour the earthquake dead. He is visibly moved by the memorializations and offerings to the dead. As Frankétienne sings in the film, "[T]he cemetery is not far, the cemetery is very close!" Some of the ceremony takes place in the cemetery of Port-au-Prince, a central site for remembering the dead of the city and a place where there was little room for all the uncounted dead buried in mass graves. At times, Frankétienne appears in the film as one of the dead in a wooden coffin upright against a large tree.

Towards the end of the film, we see the wooden coffin being burned inside the cathedral light, with the flames burning brightly against the darkening sky. As in many works by Frankétienne, including those from both before and after the earthquake, the isotopies of apocalypse are prominent throughout where pleonasm builds up a picture of apocalypse. Repeatedly, we are told that Haiti is burning brightly with planetary destruction fast



approaching. We are told that “the day when Haiti disappears, our planet will no longer exist.” There are, however, also positive references to the future.

Théodat’s autogeography explores the links between humans, the environment and rubble. One of his primary sites is the cathedral, which he describes as “the mirror of a certain representation of the country” whose body has now collapsed and whose head has been chopped off. Again, we see how interconnected the text-film network is. One entry in Théodat’s work, “Viva Melovivi,” published 28 April 2010, recounts how Théodat watched the Haitian premiere of Frankétienne’s play at the Parc Historique de la Canne à Sucre. The play’s scenery is described in similar terms to the collapsed cathedral, with collapsed panels and disembowelled walls (12). This set, with its “bric-à-brac of cords and string,” is just as Frankétienne’s yard had been set up for the play rehearsal when Laferrière and Saint-Éloi came to check on the elderly writer-artist the next day. Théodat notes—just as Laferrière and Saint-Éloi did on 13 January 2010—that this decor is premonitory, anticipating “the urban landscape after the 12 January disaster” (31). This performance is a milestone of the post-earthquake period and marks, at the end of April 2010, the first cultural event since the earthquake. There are thousands in the audience, many of whom have lost loved ones and their houses, but they have made an effort to come and watch with their dignity and their grief intact (30). Appropriately for this play and its subject-matter—terrible events and devastated lives—Théodat notes that the sky was threatening to halt the proceedings with rain. This was an outdoor performance lasting nearly two hours.

In the film *A Strange Cathedral*, Frankétienne rests his head on bags of charcoal while he expresses the damage that has been wreaked on his land by extensive deforestation over the past two hundred years of Haitian independence: “It began right after independence. There was never any plan [...] we didn’t have these floods and landslides. [...] The trees have been

assassinated. Farmers have to chop wood. It's the deforestation of my country [...] the total annihilation of my land." As he makes clear, this deadly deforestation is entangled with colonization and extraction of resources from what was once France's richest colony: "Always the same shit for the past two hundred years. We had the horror of slavery, the terror of colonization." The anarchically expanding city and the crisis of Port-au-Prince was fuelled by charcoal—the fuel of poverty. There is, the film reminds us, a direct connection between the lack of trees and terrible landslides swallowing up people, cars and houses. Every rainy season signals a potential rainy season. Further disasters are always heralded.

### **Lodyans, Rasanblaj and Memorial Trees with Many Deep Roots**

Torrential rain, flooding, landslides, cyclones and hurricanes are always feared throughout the texts and films. Those living in tents or camps are more at the mercy of the elements, particularly as many of the camps and growing slums are built on old swamps in spatial margins that are also socially deprived margins, capable of making natural hazards such as the rainy and hurricane seasons create more catastrophic disasters. It is hard to stick out the rainy season in a tent, and tents are often blown away by fierce winds. In contrast, Théodat is a privileged camper, but his diary-blog-notebook makes frequent references to scribbling down his notes in torrential rain. Towards the end of *Des décombres et des hommes*, he writes of how his tent is increasingly covered in holes, meaning that his books and all-important notebooks are no longer safe from the violent rainstorms that keep battering the city.

Taking up the torch from Anglade, Théodat recounts teaching the first geography lectures in Port-au-Prince since the earthquake, in which prominent Haitian Canadian geographer Anglade and his wife Mireille died. Théodat's writing explores the links between humans and the Haitian space. As well as being a fellow Haitian geographer, Anglade was also

a master of Haitian lodyans—Haitian miniature stories pieced together like mosaics born out of a framework of collective creation, orality traditions and performance. Anglade's legacy was his formulation of a theory of lodyans. To conclude, I will bring together this unique Haitian style of lodyans and the imperative to tell stories with the organizing principal of rasanblaj in order to reframe the interconnected text-film network emerging out of the 2010 earthquake. All of the texts and films are generically hybrid, often composed of multiple mini-texts that are accumulated or pieced together bit by bit like a collage, building on improvisation like a jazz composition. As we have seen, new elements and different versions are added and built up in thin layers.

Our writers in particular are always in the act of scribbling down pages of notes. So many of the Haitian texts and films dealing with the earthquake come out of first drafts in scribbled notebooks or rough visual sketches. These notebook pages accumulate like the sedimentation of living memory and try to capture the experience of the quake and/or its long aftermath. So many works refer constantly to the materiality of the process of their own self-making, with Théodat and Laferrière referring constantly to scribbling notes about the earthquake experience. Many of these textual and filmic accounts are chronicles that grow generically out of the liminal space/time of the earthquake and engage with the day-to-day crisis of the developing earthquake moment and the long and still unfinished reconstruction process.

There are, as Anglade and Ulysse remind us, important orality and performance elements integral to both lodyans and rasanblaj projects. Many of the texts and films from the network are fluid, not fixed, and constantly changing. They often try to cut across some of the linguistic and literacy borderlines that are stark in Haiti, where so many are illiterate and monolingual Creole speakers. Frankétienne, Théodat and others write in both French and Creole, and others too, when they write, can be thought of as translating the spoken Creole words into written form and other languages, including French and English.

One master lodyanseur who stands out in Théodat's work is Élie, who is also a master builder. Although Élie does not write a word, his input and perspectives are writ large everywhere throughout Théodat's work. Élie is an accomplished storyteller who can improvise stories or lodyans. The master storyteller's gift is contrasted with Théodat's accumulations of drafts in his notebook, which try to capture and write down the stories, with the scribe-listener taking notes on the spot while the stories are still fresh in his mind. As the stories rain down from Élie, the writer takes out his notebook and pen and tries to write them all down. Élie can barely read and write, with French almost a foreign language to him, but he listens to certain pages that are read out. He encourages his writer-friend to keep writing the notes down in his chronicle to attest to Haitians' courage and their rebuilding of the destroyed capital.

In terms of rebuilding, Élie is a master bricklayer who has carefully learned his trade. Élie makes a link between note taking and his own rebuilding (385–86). This master builder also enacts rasanblaj when rebuilding or telling stories. In the aftermath of such a deadly earthquake, demand for Élie's building skills is at an all-time high, although people do not have the means to pay. All of Port-au-Prince is a building site in progress, and the mother's house is described as a chrysalis undergoing a transformation. As well as wishing he could be a lodyanseur, our geographer-scribe would have liked to have been a master builder like Élie, "placing the stones one by one with authority" (384). The geographer-scribe comments on how different the building styles of Haitian and Dominican Republic-style masonry are. This piece-by-piece Haitian style of rebuilding *is* rasanblaj.

What I want to suggest, following Ulysse ("Why Rasanblaj"), is that overlapping rasanblaj and lodyans are catalysts, keywords, methods, practices and projects for the composite, generically hybrid text-film post-earthquake network identified in this article. These texts and films are themselves rasanblaj and lodyans, but this is also the method by which the

episodic textual/film-clip fragments are sewn together like patchwork quilts, like in a story in Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*, in which pieces of cloth are stitched together like historical memories for posterity. The network of loosely interconnected texts and films are pieced together like a patchwork quilt or woven like a spider's web or as the fractal pieces containing the whole in miniature. Often, the notebook is the mirror at the epicentre of each text and the ultimate *mise en abyme*. Like the collapsed cathedral, these notebooks inside the books we are reading mirror new and old representations of the city and the relations between people, buildings, rubble and space. The different pieces **re-member** those who disappeared in the earthquake and in other apocalypses before and since. As in lodyans storytelling, there is a call-and-response dynamic in many of these Haitian responses to the earthquake, whereby the storyteller calls out, "Krik?" and the waiting audience replies, "Kra!"—this is how oral storytelling always begins. These Haitian responses to the earthquake engage in 'tiran des lodyans,' literally, 'shooting off' lodyans. Like lodyanseurs, these responses opened the box of stories and pieced together miniatures, like the piecing together of mosaics. Other Haitian storytelling formulas frequently invoked are the call 'tim tim' and the response 'bwa sèch,' where 'tim tim' opens the challenge and throws the audience a riddle. Then the audience who wants to hear the riddle replies, 'bwa sèch' (bring it on). Many of these works have a long composition process in which the audience gives feedback like in lodyans, for example, the readers of Théodat's France Info blog, which eventually became a book.

Many texts in this network are also updated or rewritten from later perspectives, most notably with Frankétienne and Laferrière. Now, after more than ten years since the earthquake, many Haitian writers have written more about the earthquake and are updating what they previously wrote. Lahens, for example, in an article for *Le Monde*, repeats her image of Haiti as a violated and disembowelled woman, adding reflections on what has been happening

politically in Haiti over the past decade. Geographer Théodat has updated his notebook-blog with a new notebook; new handwritten pages sum up “Port-au-Prince en sept lieux: Dix ans après; 2010–2020” (“Port-au-Prince in Seven Places: Ten Years After”) Canaan is one of the new Haitian places since the earthquake that he focuses on, noting that the temporary camps and shelters became permanent. Théodat underlines that this new urbanity is risky because the Canaan camp is built on another fault line. Such camps are now, he remarks, completely ruled by gangs. As for sites of power, these have not been rebuilt. He focuses again on the cathedral as a key *lieu de mémoire* or mirror of Port-au-Prince, which remains in ruins—an image of the failure of rebuilding around the capital. Existing slums have grown, and new slums have developed haphazardly as with the permanentization of the Canaan camp. As for the cultural life of the city, all of the theatres and cinemas have not been rebuilt, as well as state university buildings. What we see are the nine handwritten pages of notes. The materiality of the handwritten traces here on loose leaves of paper and the fragile traces of note taking make us think about the different layers of the completely altered city. They also convey the urgency of the composition process—these notes are *prises à chaud*, jotted down on the spot while still fresh in the geographer’s mind. The space of the page mirrors the seven spaces of the city.

Again, we see that the notebook form is crucial for the dynamic layering of Haitian writing about the earthquake. All of the composite components of these hybrid text-networks conjure up the spatial dimensions of the dramatically altered and changing Haitian capital city. Living memory is carried by the body and the trace of the hand. There is a sedimentation of the different leaves, like the ground of the Haitian earth.<sup>13</sup> These notes and lodyans are the archives of the earthquake and have a long genesis like the multilayered Haitian earth itself. There is also continuity. Ten years on, the city is still experiencing aftershocks; ten years on, the earthquake itself and the Haitian text-film network continue to have afterlives and grow new leaves, branches and fruit. The earthquake is still not over yet.

There is an important connection to the Haitian earth that is developed in many of the notes and stories. In the immediate aftermath of the quake, many of the note takers and storytellers recall having to sleep on or next to the ground under the stars. Geographer Théodat chose to pitch his tent “plus bas encore, au plus près du sol” (“further down, even closer to the ground”; *Des décombres* 43), where he merges with the earth and the vegetal among the rubble. There is communion with the Haitian earth and the elements through the act of planting or rooting oneself in Haiti and growing roots like a tree. Note taking and storytelling are activities that take place beneath mango trees in Théodat’s yard. One mango tree in particular becomes the landmark for his tent. Since the earth trembled, this particular mango tree has become more bounteous, raining down juicy mangoes that sustain the note taker and storytellers. A direct blow to the head from such heavy fruit could be lethal, and so there is a fragile balance between life-giving fruit/nature and risk to life.

Such trees become important sites of memory themselves. In his collection of lodyans, Anglade tells the story of an ancient mango tree in his grandparents’ yard, near the Champ-de-Mar, which had been planted on 1 January 1804, Haiti’s independence day. This particular mango tree grew in a peculiar way because former slaves had symbolically buried into the tree hole the irons that were used to punish slaves. This iron became completely embedded with the tree roots, meaning that the irons could never be removed without killing the tree. This tree grew throughout all the tumultuous periods of Haitian history. The rate of production of mangoes varied considerably, depending on what was happening in Haitian politics. Anglade writes that the botany faculty and archivists of the 325 species of local mangoes and a leading agronomist all came to visit this mango tree to learn from it (306).

As is observed in many of the texts and films, the most fragile nature continues to grow even as all that is concrete collapses. We can think of these trees as family trees. They represent the living memory of each family and of Haitian history. For centuries, the tree has

been associated with the idea of genealogy: family trees are found everywhere. In some accounts of return to the native land, there is an attempt for Haitian diaspora members to plant themselves back in Haitian soil. This is the case of Théodat, the geographer. Many of the Haitian texts and films about the earthquake use Haitian history to go back to the genesis of the Haitian Revolution, seeking to find inspiration there for counteracting and understanding the ongoing disaster of the earthquake and its long aftermath. One Haitian revolutionary hero frequently invoked by the text-film network is Toussaint Louverture and his reference to “the tree of liberty of the Blacks” when Louverture was betrayed and captured by the French. Before being forced onto the boat that would carry him to imprisonment and death in France, Louverture declared, “In overthrowing me, you have cut down in San Domingo only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are many and deep” (qtd. in Daut). Previously, Louverture had referred to the liberty tree to inspire his soldiers to fight for freedom, for example, when he proclaimed, “Let us go forth and plant the tree of liberty, breaking the chains of our brothers still captive under the shameful yoke of slavery” (Louverture 28). As we have seen, slave chains planted at the roots led to symbolic burial of slavery and unusual growth. The liberty tree was a principal symbol of the French, American and Haitian Revolutions. In 2004—the bicentenary year of Haitian independence—President Jean-Bertrand Aristide would explicitly echo Louverture’s parting words. After the earthquake, Louverture’s prophetic words about the liberty tree continue to resonate as trees continue to grow or spawn new saplings.

Echoes of Toussaint’s prophetic words from the past resonate particularly loudly when apocalypse is sounded because there is always a positive future pole. An image of Haiti as a phoenix rising from the ashes is repeated because Haiti’s roots are many and deep, like Louverture’s liberty-tree reference so long ago at the time of the Haitian Revolution. Extreme



deforestation and soil erosion aggravate any natural hazard—earthquake, hurricane, torrential rain—when it strikes Haiti. Many of the texts and films, especially Dominique Batrville’s *L’ange de charbon* and Frankétienne’s *A Strange Cathedral*, refer to the hardships that lead fallen trees to be made into charcoal that still powers Haiti to this day. Now that the concrete jungle of Port-au-Prince has partly fallen, life is identified with the organic growth of trees such as the sacred mapou tree, whose many and deep roots can be seen clearly. A mapou houses the Vodou gods, and it would be unthinkable to cut one down. Such trees, their leaves and branches are the repositories of Haitian historical and living memory. Here we can leaf through the archives of Haiti’s past and present, while looking to the future. Louverture’s liberty-tree metaphor leads us to think about the genesis of the ancestral Haitian family tree and its future potential for growth. When we map out the genealogy and rasanblaj narrative structure of the multitude of stories born out of the 2010 earthquake, we can see how important rasanblaj and lodyans are as frameworks of collective creation and memory in the Haitian context. Together, all of these hybrid modes of writing, note taking and sketching novels, short stories, plays, films and more build up a mosaic, telling many different versions of the earthquake narrative and adding past, present and future elements. Notebooks and loose paper leaves add to the archival dynamics, material traces and rasanblaj of this still developing earthquake moment.

Trees are important sites of memory where memory crystallizes and secretes itself today in Haiti. One prominent memorial is artist Pascale Monnin’s mirror-tree sculpture in Martissant park, Port-au-Prince that remembers the victims of the earthquake. From the branches of an imposing mapou tree are hung interactive mobile sculptures of the faces of neighbourhood children who survived the earthquake. The sculpture is made mostly of concrete and iron—materials that killed many Haitians in the disaster. Mirrored glass is also used prominently in the memorial, creating reflective mosaics. There are twelve faces that hang from the tree, symbolizing the date of the earthquake, but these mirror-faces also reflect one

another, giving the impression of thousands of children. This multiplication via mirrors of children's faces responds to the fact that we do not know exactly how many people actually died in the seismic event. "How do you deal with death when you don't have a body?" Monnin asks.<sup>14</sup> According to Michèle Pierre-Louis, director of the Haitian Freedom and Knowledge Foundation (FOKAL), it was important to create a physical hallowed space in the Martissant park because so many people disappeared, never to be heard of again, and yet there exists no complete list of the earthquake dead who cannot all be named. Usual death rites were not able to be performed, and many corpses could not be retrieved from underneath so many layers of concrete rubble. By fashioning this mirror-tree memorial, Monnin performed the task of creatively memorializing the dead en masse. Through the reflective mirrors, the memorial takes on extraordinary physical dimensions. Mirrors are memory laden and play multifaceted roles in memorializing the dead, as Kyrah Malika Daniels has explored. Mirrors and mapou trees are thought to be sacred houses for the Vodou Lwa (spirits), which are often referred to as living underneath or behind mirrors. Broken mirrors are also thought to possess prophetic or regenerative properties and to offer a portal for communicating between our world and that of the dead—the afterlife. This layered memorial tree *is* a rasanblaj where shards of glass, fissured concrete and iron fragments are transformed and made whole again. So too does the bric-a-brac of seismographic Haitian texts and films offer transformative visions of Haitian-style rasanblaj and rebuilding through multilayered stories where the 2010 earthquake is still not over yet and aftershocks continue. These seismographic texts and the Port-au-Prince sites of memory they describe resemble overwritten palimpsests with new layers added on top of vestiges of previous written traces, which have been partially erased or obscured by the earthquake.

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<sup>1</sup> On the processual character of disaster, see Mika.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive recent account of Haitian literature about the earthquake, see Vignoli.

<sup>3</sup> On this, see Munro, *Writing*.

<sup>4</sup> Gillman conceptualizes the “text-network” in relation to C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*.

<sup>5</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup> On the long-running theme of apocalypse in Haitian literature predating the 2010 earthquake, see Oliver-Smith, Schuller and Morales, and Munro, *Tropical Apocalypse*.

<sup>7</sup> On *Failles*, see Walsh.

<sup>8</sup> See Puerto Rican artist Sofía Gallisa Muriente’s discussion of her notebooks with Yarimar Bonilla in the film *Aftershocks of Disaster*.

<sup>9</sup> This negative picture is summed up in Raoul Peck’s *Fatal Assistance* documentary and his fictional film *Murder in Pacot*.

<sup>10</sup> This novel is discussed in Chancy’s talk “Harvesting Haiti: Unnatural Disasters.”

<sup>11</sup> On this novel, see Munro, “Thirsting.”

<sup>12</sup> On this rewriting, see Douglas.

<sup>13</sup> I am inspired here by Walcott’s play by the title *The Haitian Earth*, which has inspired artworks by Trinidadian artist Johnson.

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<sup>14</sup> Monnin's sculpture is featured in the film directed by Ed. Owles and Kasia Mika *IntranQu'illités* (2019).

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