

Spiralism in Haitian Literature: the Chaos-Creation Cycle

Tamara Knapp Ingram

Thesis submitted to the faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In

Foreign Languages, Cultures and Literatures

Alexander Dickow, Chair

Sharon P. Johnson

Medoune Gueye

April 24, 2025

Keywords: Haiti, Haitian literature, Spiralism, Frankétienne, Prophète, Haitian Créole,

Caribbean literature

Spiralism in Haitian Literature: the Chaos-Creation Cycle

Tamara Knapp Ingram

ABSTRACT

Spiralism is a literary, philosophical and artistic movement born in Haiti in the late 1960s under the oppressive regime of François Duvalier. This movement captures life in chaos and suggests a non-linear understanding of time and experiences. Embracing a fluid and interconnected perspective on existence and art, Spiralism expresses outrage at governmental tyranny and offers an unconventional narrative style that emphasizes the recurring cycles of time and experiences and repeating characters. Haitian writers have historically faced significant barriers to publication, which has contributed to the marginalization of Haitian literature in academic discourse. This thesis explores why and to what extent Haitian literature has been marginalized, beginning with an overview of the country's history in order to create the foundation for exploring Spiralism and Frankétienne, the most prominent of the movement's founders. It includes an analysis of *Mûr à crever*, considered the quasi-manifesto of Spiralism, and examines Frankétienne's literary techniques that intertwine chaos and creation and challenge the linear concepts of time and space. The final section of this thesis explores the enduring influence of Spiralism in contemporary Haitian literature. Through an analysis of two of Emmelie Prophète's novels, this thesis argues that Spiralism continues to resonate in today's works in the themes of exile, liminality and fragmentation. The spiral represents the cycling challenges of the Haitian people and the gradual but inevitable movement forward, reflecting their resilience, adaptability and enduring hope.

GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Spiralism is a literary, philosophical and artistic movement born in Haiti in the late 1960s under the oppressive regime of François Duvalier. Spiralism expresses outrage at governmental tyranny and offers an unconventional narrative style that emphasizes the recurring cycles of time and experiences and repeating characters. Haitian writers have historically faced significant barriers to publication, which has contributed to the marginalization of Haitian literature in academic discourse. This thesis explores why and to what extent Haitian literature has been marginalized, beginning with an overview of the country's history in order to create the foundation for exploring Spiralism and Frankétienne, the most prominent of the movement's founders. It includes an analysis of *Mûr à crever*, considered the quasi-manifesto of Spiralism, and examines Frankétienne's literary techniques that intertwine chaos and creation and challenge the linear concepts of time and space. The final section of this thesis explores the enduring influence of Spiralism in contemporary Haitian literature. Through an analysis of two of Emmelie Prophète's novels, this thesis argues that Spiralism continues to resonate in today's works in the themes of exile, liminality and fragmentation. The spiral represents the cycling challenges of the Haitian people and the gradual but inevitable movement forward, reflecting their resilience, adaptability and enduring hope.

Dedications:

This project is dedicated to my best friend, fellow Hokie and husband Randall, who supports and joins me in my passion for exploring francophone cultures. To my children, Stephen, Justin and Jordan, who are my favorite people on the planet. And to the remarkable people of Haiti who inspire me with their unbelievable joy and resilience.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to express my gratitude to the professors of French and francophone studies at Virginia Tech, particularly my committee. I am grateful to Dr. Richard Shryock who was my professor and an inspiration many years ago in my undergraduate years. I am most appreciative of Dr. Alexander Dickow, who guided me through research methodology, challenged me to be a stronger thinker and writer and encouraged me at every turn.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Haiti and the Spiral.....	2
Chapter 2: Frankétienne and <i>Mûr à crever</i>	30
Chapter 3: Contemporary Haitian Literature and the Persistence of Spiralism in the Works of Emmelie Prophète.....	52
Conclusion.....	80
Sources Cited.....	83
Sources Consulted.....	87

Introduction

In 2016, I traveled to Haiti for the first time, knowing little about this country aside from its moniker as the poorest country in the western hemisphere. I met joyous and generous people who had, just six years earlier, endured a massive earthquake that caused many tragedies and left behind massive destruction. I returned every summer after until 2020, when the entire world shut down during the pandemic of Covid-19. I have not gone back since, and at this writing, there is little hope of Haiti's return to security in the near future, not due to the virus but due to the political turmoil and rampant gang violence. This thesis aims in part to honor the writers, artists and thinkers who have represented their Haitian creole culture.

In Chapter 1 of my thesis, I offer a summary of the history of Haiti from its early years of colonization, its independence and its persisting struggles. I narrow the focus to understanding Haiti's place in the literary world and the marginalization from that world as well as from the francophone Caribbean, with brief discussions of Francophonie and literary capital. I introduce the idea of the spiral and chaos, its presence in the many areas of life, but specifically in the Caribbean and in Haiti. Lastly, this chapter presents the little-known literary movement, Spiralism. In Chapter 2, I delve more into Spiralism with first an introduction to Frankétienne, one of the movement's founders and the most prominent of the Spiralists. *Mûr à crever* is considered a key work of Spiralism, and I offer my analysis of this quasi-manifesto work of fiction that somewhat defines the movement. Chapter 3 is the crux of what I set out to argue as it explores contemporary Haitian fiction and makes the connection between the Spiralism of Frankétienne and current day writer Emmelie Prophète. I aim to show the enduring influence of Spiralism and that its characteristics, specifically exile, liminality and fragmentation, persist in Prophète's writing.

Chapter One: Haiti and the Spiral

*“L’Histoire est une suite de mensonges
sur lesquels on est d’accord.”
Napoléon Bonaparte*

*“Le passé a ainsi toujours
son mot à dire.”
Fernand Braudel*

Haiti’s history

Haiti was inhabited by the Taino indigenous peoples, who called several Caribbean islands home. When the Spanish conquest began and Christopher Columbus landed on the island of Hispaniola in 1492, the first Spanish settlement was established soon after. Later the French would claim the western part of the island, and eventually this territory would be called Haiti. The French called their part of this island Saint-Domingue. It was called Ayiti by the Taino people, and when Haiti fought for and won independence from France in 1804, the historic name was restored. For the few hundred years in between European settlements and independence, French colonists brought enslaved people from Africa, and this sugarcane-producing colony became one of the richest in the world. From roughly 1690 to around 1800, a plantation-style economy that used forced labor made this island very profitable for France.

As for Haiti’s rebellion and subsequent independence, even today, most people are unaware that Haiti was the first slave nation to break free from its imperial rule. In the 1790s, enslaved Haitians began revolting, and by 1801, Toussaint Louverture became the leader of the Haitian revolution and people. Fighting continued for a few more years, and in 1804, Haiti officially became independent from France. In 1825, France finally acknowledged Haiti’s independence but required a payment of 150 million francs to be paid over decades until 1887. To enforce this, France sent an armada to block all trade to and from Haiti, and Haiti was

strongarmed into paying an estimated equivalent of 30 billion dollars in today's economy. Haiti took out loans to make its payments, and the final payment was actually made in 1947.

Resources that should have been used to build infrastructure, healthcare and education programs were diverted to service this debt. The Haitian government resorted to extreme measures to meet the obligations, including mass deforestation, selling trees to France and other markets. This practice left much of the nation exposed and terribly vulnerable to soil erosion, lacking in biodiversity and subject to dangerous mudslides. Even a tropical storm can cause severe flooding, devastation and deaths because there are so few trees. These environmental consequences are some of the first places we can see the presence of the spiral in Haiti, as environmental degradation fuels the cycle of poverty.

Also noteworthy, during the 1800s forced labor continued in Haiti. Even though most of the white, French owners of plantations were gone, and Cap-Français, the primary port city in northern Haiti where enslaved African people were delivered, was no longer part of the slave trade route, the Haitian government kept many of the old ways. Haiti gained independence, but many Haitians were forced to continue working in sugarcane fields because of the income this produced. The system of *restaveks* began and tragically continues today. This troubling practice places children from impoverished families with families who could afford to house, feed, and possibly educate another child in return for domestic work. The legacy of slavery and economic challenges continue as *restaveks* were and are often mistreated and seen as property. This system, which has been normalized in Haitian society, is part of the cycle of poverty, vulnerability and inequality that perpetuates a modern form of slavery. Human rights are not valued, education of children is severely insufficient, and exploitation of Haitian people continues.¹

Haiti's challenges continued into the twentieth century with political instability and turmoil and foreign intervention. The debts to France and other western nations continued and contributed to a series of short-lived governments and coups. In 1915, the United States intervened militarily in Haiti, citing concerns over political instability in the region. The U.S. occupation lasted until 1934 and was characterized by efforts to stabilize the country, but it also led to significant resentment among Haitians. Soon after began the dictatorial regimes of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier (1957-1971) and his son, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier (1971-1986). Their nearly three-decade-long rule was marked by a combination of oppression, corruption, and attempts at modernization, which had profound effects on the country. One of the most significant impacts of the Duvalier regimes was the systematic repression of political dissent. Under Papa Doc, the governing forces were notorious for brutality, including arbitrary arrests, torture, disappearances and political killings, with estimates of nearly 30,000 deaths attributed to this violent regime. This climate of fear stifled opposition and created a culture of silence among the populace. Papa Doc launched the Tonton Macoutes, a militia-style secret police force that he used to intimidate and terrorize any opponent. They were responsible for a range of brutal and corrupt activities. While the Duvalier regimes sought to modernize Haiti's economy, their efforts were often undermined and eclipsed by duplicity and mismanagement. Government funds were frequently embezzled, leading to a lack of investment in essential services and infrastructure. Although there were brief periods of economic revival, particularly during Jean-Claude's rule when international respectability was sought, the overall economic situation remained dire, with Haiti facing bankruptcy and a reliance on foreign aid. The long-term effects of the Duvalier regimes extend to the health and well-being of the Haitian population. Haitians who lived through this period faced social challenges of limited access to

education and healthcare, which can be attributed to the socio-economic instability and lack of services and infrastructure during and after the Duvalier years. Rampant corruption, violation of human rights, and lack of political freedoms have left deep scars on the people of Haiti.²

Haiti's recent history is marked by the catastrophic 7.0 magnitude earthquake of January 12, 2010 that devastated Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas. Over 220,000 people died, 1.5 million people were left homeless, and tens of thousands of children instantly became orphans. Tent cities were erected throughout the affected areas to provide shelter for the homeless, and many of these still serve as homes today as the challenges of recovery persist. The enormous destruction created by the earthquake exacerbated the economic frailty of Haiti. Haiti faced a state of profound humanitarian crisis in 2010, and this state persists today as violence and food insecurities continue to rise.

Remembering and understanding the history of Haiti have led historians and writers to explore the elements that have been overlooked, suppressed or underacknowledged. The fact that its slave revolt was the largest in history is remarkable. This revolt created the first black nation to have won independence from imperial rule. Michel-Rolph Trouillot was a Haitian anthropologist who wrote *Silencing the Past* in 1995. His third chapter is particularly noteworthy, and it is called, "An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-event." Trouillot explains, "the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable in its time: it challenged the very framework within which proponents and opponents had examined race, colonialism, and slavery in the Americas" (82-83). Trouillot examines thoroughly these ideas that were unthinkable, not in the sense that we might use that word today, as appalling or offensive; unthinkable in the sense that no one was even *imagining* that race, colonialism and slavery could be thought of differently. Trouillot goes on to call the Haitian Revolution the "ultimate test to the universalist

pretensions of both the French and American revolutions. And they both failed. In 1791, there is no public debate on the record, in France, in England or in the United States, on the right of black slaves to achieve self-determination, and to do so by the way of armed resistance” (87). Because it would take several decades for international recognition of Haiti’s independence from France, we can surmise that the unthinkable that had just happened was still being denied, as the very act of the revolt was incompatible with Western ideologies at the time. France would go on to recover economically from its loss of a valuable colony. Haiti, however, would spend the next century and a half under severe punishment for its actions. Historian and researcher Nick Nesbitt also comments on this remarkable distinction in his article, “Troping Toussaint, Reading Revolution,”

The Haitian invention of decolonization and universal emancipation was a momentous rupture in being, one that obliterated the slaveholding logic of eighteenth-century global capital. It was the production of a concrete universal, the construction of imminent human possibilities and unknown worlds that remain largely unfilled today. (30)

Nesbitt clarifies that Haiti’s revolution was not merely a slave revolt. The problem of colonialism was addressed for the first time, and decolonization began, albeit very slowly. Even though France had just adopted its *Déclaration des droits de l’Homme et du citoyen de 1789*, they were unprepared for its full implementation. Nesbitt explains that Toussaint fought for the transformation of formal rights into real rights. Western thought would attempt to hold up the beliefs that no race is inferior to another and that freedom is a natural right, but the reality of this, as Nesbitt puts it, is largely unfulfilled today. Haiti’s revolution called for an overhaul of social systems that still today is incomplete.

I am not suggesting that other nations do not have a history equally replete with imperialism, slavery, dictatorship, extreme poverty, political corruption and natural disasters. Yet, appreciating the distinctive and isolated situation of Haitian people is paramount to this exploration of the literary phenomenon of Spiralism that this thesis examines. These major events give the framework needed to explore Haiti's place in the world, more specifically the literary world, and to analyze the efforts and works of its writers, thinkers and artists. The complex interplay of its historical context, political corruption and socio-economic challenges contribute to Haiti's status as an oppressed and marginalized nation, kept from access to opportunities for recovery, growth and empowerment. Understanding Haiti's unique history and the beginnings of its marginalization will help as we move on to Haitian literary works produced in the last half-century.

Situating Haiti in the Literary World

Contextualizing Haiti's literary past and present forces us to acknowledge the challenges faced by writers in postcolonial countries. These writers, along with those from other nations distant from the literary mainstream, have had to contend with external forces and power dynamics in the literary landscape. For more than a hundred years prior to the postcolonial period, as literary centers in Europe and the West emerged, Paris was the universally recognized literary capital. In her book, *La République mondiale des lettres*, Pascale Casanova calls Paris, "la ville dotée du plus grand prestige littéraire du monde" (42). After its own revolution, Paris was unchallenged as the center of art and culture and for thinkers who would rebel, writers who wanted to be heard, those exiled, and those who would change the world. There was a universality and fascination with Paris that drew from everywhere.

In the early and mid-twentieth century, there were over forty francophone nations that France mostly governed with enormous economic and cultural influence. As the world began moving into a postcolonial era after World War II, discussions within academic and literary circles turned to examining imperialist practices. Writers from current or former colonized countries had a viable channel to explore postcolonial ideas and to share their experiences and perspectives in challenging voices that had previously not been heard.

Casanova uses two simple, but key, phrases: literary space and literary capital. Literary space is what all marginalized writers from anywhere other than France strived to attain. Casanova explains the value in literary capital as criticisms and translations bring recognition to a work: “Le critique comme le traducteur contribuent ainsi à l’accroissement du patrimoine littéraire de la nation qui consacre. La reconnaissance critique et la traduction sont ainsi des armes dans la lutte pour et par le capital littéraire” (41). Writers were seeking not only to be published but to be recognized and have literary significance and value that critics and translations offer. They faced impossibly difficult choices. Those who moved from the periphery to the center in search of literary space had language obstacles to overcome. Writers often had to learn to write in French or, if their language was French, it became a question of sounding French enough to hide or deny another nationality, heritage or culture. Casanova’s insight describes the nature of the competition to be published.

En outre, il est clair que cette position dominante de Paris entraîne souvent une cécité française spécifique, en particulier aux textes venus des contrées les plus éloignées des centres. L’ignorance ou, mieux, le refus d’une vision historicisée de la littérature, la volonté de n’interpréter les textes que dans des catégories « pures », c’est-à-dire

« purifiées » de toute référence historique ou nationale, ont souvent des conséquences dommageables pour la compréhension et la diffusion des textes consacrés à Paris. (52)

Casanova's reference to texts stripped of all historical or national references makes clear other obstacles in the struggle to attain literary space and capital. Writers tried to find the preferred French vernacular while navigating explicit and implicit bias. The constraints of these unwritten rules naturally had damaging consequences on critical discourses.

Kaiama Glover is a researcher, professor, translator and the author of a significant work that explores the literary and cultural contributions of Haiti. *Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon* is a critical examination of how Haitian writers have been marginalized throughout the postcolonial era. Glover offers a thorough analysis of Haiti's experience in the literary world and explores the cyclical struggle of Antillean writers throughout the mid- and late-1900s, specifically writers of the postcolonial era seeking to be published and needing blessing and invitation to do so. In this time period, francophone Caribbean thinkers, primarily from Martinique, were beholden to the publishing power of Paris. These would-be writers and theorists left their homes for Paris to further their education and enter the literary arena. The desire to find literary space in Paris gave writers from all over outside France both a unified voice and also a need for a distinct voice. As Eric Essono Tsimi states in his article, "Noir et Black: les nuances de nègre (dans une histoire littéraire blanche),"

Originellement, le désir de France [...] et la centralité de Paris préparaient sub-sahariens et Créoles, suivant des enjeux ponctuels ou opportunistes, à s'unir ou à se distinguer les uns des autres, sans toutefois jamais échapper aux représentations négatives ni à leur statut de sujets coloniaux, de citoyens racisés. (20)

Tsimi aptly points out another side to the struggles of writers. The Paris literary gate-keeping system with unwritten rules based on identity, in effect, stifled the identities of those seeking entry. Writers could not escape their status as colonial subjects or racialized citizens, but many did find their way in by assimilating to Parisian standards, purifying their French and representing themselves in such a way as to not be offensive, and certainly not radical. France did publish authors from its diverse corners of the world, but not at her own expense. For writers of a different race, from a different culture, with unique and fresh voices shaped by colonial experiences, this situation was near impossible.

The Negritude movement emerged in the 1930s among French-speaking African and Caribbean writers living in Paris as a distinctive response to French colonial rule and the policy of assimilation. It was a literary and cultural movement that sought to explore, reclaim, and celebrate Black identity and culture in a context that often marginalized and oppressed people of African descent. Martinican writers in this evolving movement wrote to expose and criticize colonial rule in order to bring value to their black heritage. The principal writers in this literary movement set out to reject Western domination and to represent the black intellectual voice from areas under political influence from colonial powers. Those writers, including Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, moved to France, entered the larger arena and received critical recognition and acclaim. It was in Paris that Césaire, Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor and poet Léon Damas from French Guiana, found a collective voice and published Negritude's first literary magazine-manifesto, *Légitime défense*. For two decades, they produced works that challenged the imperialist presence, yet they continued to need that imperialist presence to be able to keep producing works. Like these theorists, all writers seeking literary space were trying to find a seat at the table where they had not been welcomed before, as they were writing about the system

itself that had kept them from the table for so long. Aimé Césaire wrote mostly poetry and theatrical plays, yet did have one major work and a few essays dedicated to colonialism. In 1960, Césaire published *Toussaint Louverture: La révolution française et le problème colonial*, his only work of history. As mentioned earlier, the Haitian revolution was the actual invention of the process of decolonization. Césaire would also come to this conclusion in his lengthy discussion of the implications of the French Revolution. Césaire recognizes Toussaint as a progressive revolutionary who turned a mere slave rebellion into the onset of the dismantling of the colonial system.³

While those in the Négritude movement found success in Paris, at home however, the Antilleans were attacked by their own. A younger generation of writers criticized Césaire and others for playing the game of leaving for Paris, likely softening their views and words, and publishing in France to find recognition. The theoretical models of Edouard Glissant influenced thinkers in the Caribbean, and a somewhat antithetical movement began to develop. In the 1980s, Créolité became the literary movement of this younger generation, as they contributed to the black voice.⁴ The Créolité movement focused on cultural and linguistic identity as its three founders from Martinique and Guadeloupe aimed to honor, legitimize and celebrate the unique identity of the French Antilles. Eric Essono Tsimi notes in his article:

Le créole, plus tard, servira à distinguer le Noir d’Afrique et le Noir des Antilles.

Haïtianité, négritude ou créolité sont autant d’effets contemporains de la persistance des préjugés de couleur dans les sociétés postcoloniales, ces concepts représentent une gamme de tons idéologiques du nouveau Noir, tous dérivés de conceptions racistes, esclavagistes et colonialistes qui remontent au début de la Modernité. (15)

Essono Tsimi is clear in connecting the Creole voice to more than just the selective and exclusionary admittance into the literary world; he connects the Creole voice to all Black ideologies, past and present. Yet, even as the Creolists found a voice that distinguished their history from that of black Africa, the Créolité founders, Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant, would each decide to move to France for their higher education. Confiant found that publishing in the Creole language resulted in poor sales, yet his first French-language novel was so well received in the French literary world that it was a contender for the Prix Goncourt. While promoting the Creole identity and criticizing the continuation of French colonial rule in the Antilles, the Creolists still found that they had to write in French and seek a publisher in Paris. In short, writers have struggled to find their path to the world stage of literature. The path that most Antillean writer-theorists have chosen is one that has rules and implied restraints on their voices. Pascale Casanova observes:

Ni Confiant ni Chamoiseau ne parlent plus, comme ils l'ont fait à leurs débuts, d'écrire en créole et de publier dans leur pays. Ils sont passés des Éditions caribéennes aux éditeurs les plus prestigieux de Paris, et ont adopté un français créolisé lisible par tous les francophones. Reste, on le voit, que cette volonté de s'imposer à travers la revendication d'une différence linguistique au sein même d'une grande langue littéraire est l'une des grandes voies de subversion de l'ordre littéraire, c'est-à-dire, et de façon indissociable, de mise en cause de l'ordre esthétique, grammatical, politique, social, colonial, etc. (379-380)

Casanova does not mince words in her conclusion that language decisions made by the Creolists were more than simple linguistic choices. Language is not a neutral tool for communication; it is intertwined with culture, power and history. In a colonial context, deviating from the imposed

language is tantamount to a challenge of the grammatical, social and political legacies of colonialism.

Other academics and critics have written about the struggle of francophone Caribbean writers to find a clear voice untainted or unconstrained by outside forces or limitations. Nick Nesbitt states in *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature*, “while the critique of exploitation at the heart of decolonization received perhaps its most original and developed formulation among Antillean thinkers, the region’s dependency upon the French metropolis short-circuited the practical implementation of this critique” (3). Similar to Casanova’s deduction, Nesbitt shines a light on the extent to which the thinkers from inside the system of colonialism had their hands tied, calling Paris’ access control a sabotage of critique. This phenomenon, along with the practice of younger writers finding their voices by stepping on the shoulders of older writers (with both negative and positive implications), creates a “progression-based canon” as Kaiama Glover calls it, that is, a canon that evolves as movements fight their way in. Writings from this region in the twentieth century are characterized by a departure from predecessors and an advancement of a new position. Glover states, “To whatever extent these [francophone Caribbean] authors question France’s colonial and postcolonial behavior and criticize her racist, xenophobic, assimilationist ideologies, they all engage with the former imperial power on her own terms” (9). Again, the question of language conformity arises as Glover points out that Antillean writers chose legibility, that is, they chose to write in a language that would be published so that their words could be read and translated. They engaged with France on her own terms to gain literary space and literary capital. Glover explains the reactions of other critics that range from anger at their chosen assimilation to praise for finding a way past the gatekeepers.

As she explores the consequences of inclusion and exclusion from the canon, Glover notes that French-speaking Caribbean literature has been dominated by figureheads of francophonie. In 2007, a manifesto was published in *Le Monde* called, “Pour une littérature-monde en français.” Forty-four writers called for the end of ‘francophonie’ and, in its place, a world literature in French. Calling the use of the word ‘francophone’ the last avatar of colonialism, writers from various marginalized nations declare the end to the literary empire in Paris and demand that a world literature in French rediscover all that had been forbidden. The collective writers of this manifesto declare:

Le centre jusqu'ici, même si de moins en moins, avait eu cette capacité d'absorption qui contraignait les auteurs venus d'ailleurs à se dépouiller de leurs bagages avant de se fondre dans le creuset de la langue et de son histoire nationale : le centre, nous disent les prix d'automne, est désormais partout, aux quatre coins du monde. Fin de la francophonie. Et naissance d'une littérature-monde en français. (Le Bris 1)

Just after publishing this declaration, many of the thinkers involved published articles and essays to support their ideas that challenge the traditional notions of national literature and promote a vision that embraces diversity and multiculturalism. Critics of this discourse wondered if the article served as a marketing ploy for French literature; others remarked on the little success that followed.⁵ The basic idea of this movement to bring an end to ‘francophonie’ has not come to fruition, and its failure illustrates that the vision of a diverse literary scene, where everyone is treated equally and without regard to race, may not be possible. Individuals continue to be identified by their backgrounds as “others” in relation to white metropolitan France. Earlier we read Eric Essono Tsimi’s insight that writers were unable to escape their races or their nationalities, which was all but required to enter the Paris literary scene. Their status as

casualties of colonization and race inequality could not (and should not) be sufficiently sifted from their identities. While “Pour une littérature-monde en français” presents an appealing ideal, it confronts realities that it cannot overcome. Nonetheless, for this discussion, it is noteworthy that the two Haitian Spiralists living in 2007 did not sign this manifesto. Their absence from this group makes me wonder about the correlation to their absence from the literary canon. The forthcoming exploration of Spiralism will continue to piece together how and why the Spiralists were overlooked.

Martinican voices were the most published and certainly are the most critically recognized of francophone Caribbean writers on a global scale. Haiti, however, having left the colonial scene over 150 years before the post-colonial era arrived, has no connection to the publishing power of Paris. There is no worn path for Haitian writers to follow that takes them on an educational journey to France where doors are opened to academia and the publishing world. Unlike Martinique, Guadeloupe and other Antillean countries, Haiti has no administrative ties to France, and as such, has had few invitations to the literary world in Paris. Haiti was not simply released as a colony but cut off and economically sanctioned by France. Haiti was fiercely punished for its independence financially, but also in this literary game of access. There are painfully few writers and thinkers from the Caribbean who were known or published before the twentieth century, and even fewer from Haiti.

Understanding the historical, geopolitical and literary status of nations in the Antilles will help in the exploration of Haitian literature and, more specifically, Spiralism. Conceptually, Haiti may appear inspirational, but practically, Haiti showed the world that a nation that fights for and wins independence has no easy future afterward. Mary Gallagher offers this summary in *Soundings in French Caribbean Writing since 1950: the Shock of Space and Time*:

The history of Haiti is unique in the Caribbean: it is unimpeachably different in relation not just to French Caribbean history, but to Caribbean history in general. Haiti has been, indeed, and continues to be for every other Caribbean island, although particularly for the French Caribbean, an over-significant other. Two further factors that distinguish the Haitian literary context are the extremely low levels of literacy in Haiti, and the fact that Haitian writers are largely and for obvious political, cultural, and economic reasons, writers in exile. (7)

Gallagher takes us back momentarily to the discussion of Haiti's history, its uniqueness in the Caribbean, and an idea that I am exploring: Haiti's marginalization from an already marginalized group. She introduces an intriguing thought in her synopsis of Haiti's historical distinctiveness: the idea of exile, writers who are part of the Haitian diaspora. In the publishing world, Haitians have had to look elsewhere for help. France laid the groundwork for its dismissal of Haiti when it quite grudgingly acknowledged Haiti's independence. The world continued to marginalize Haiti's historical accomplishment of liberating itself from colonialism and (eventually) slavery by refusing to discuss it. Haiti found itself again marginalized by its francophone neighbors in the Antilles, as they (Martinican and Guadeloupean writers) were able to publish their voices through the esteemed channels in Paris. So naturally, Haitian writers and thinkers would not find a friendly helping hand extended from French publishing houses. As other francophone authors from the Antilles fought their way into the prestigious world, Haitian authors found a back door out, and a connection with Québec, the francophone province far to their north, but not nearly as far conceptually. Haitians and francophone Canadians have a long history, and Québec would eventually serve as the needed link to the publishing world that Haitian writers had been long denied. Historian Sean Mills wrote *Une Place au Soleil: Haïti, les Haïtiens et le Québec* in 2016

to analyze the migration of Haitians to Quebec and how the two cultures have interacted over time. The repressive regimes of the Duvaliers forced many Haitians into exile in the 60's and 70's, particularly Haitian intellectuals. Many Haitians who left home and settled elsewhere are in French-speaking Canada, with a large population of academics, writers, and theorists working in Québec. Canadian Roman Catholic missionaries began a relationship decades earlier when they traveled to Haiti to "save, educate and civilize" the people of Haiti. Mills makes the interesting point that the two nations share the same motherland, and Canadian francophones behave a bit like the older brother, taking care of the little brother. At every turn, Mills shows that Haitians found support, either from Canadians visiting their island place in the sun, or in a new Quebecois second home.

Maximilien Laroche was a Haitian scholar educated in Toulouse and Quebec, who then became a professor at the University of Laval, specializing in Haitian, Quebecois, Creole and French literature. His 1970 collection of essays entitled *Le Miracle et la métamorphose* includes an essay "Appartenance à la francophonie." Laroche draws comparisons between writers from Quebec and Haiti and their shared status as annexed or marginalized. This essay explores the complexities of identity and belonging within the francophone world. He argues that the French-creole bilingualism of Haitians enriches the literary landscape and reflects the complexities of Haitian identity. Laroche describes the shared struggle of Quebec and Haiti for identity and independence:

Cette autonomie, sinon cette indépendance, que les littératures du Québec et d'Haïti réclament, n'est pas une simple manifestation de mauvaise humeur, une sorte de crise d'adolescent, qui ne s'exprime que par la négation et le refus. Déjà leur personnalité, les

écrivains l'expriment ou tentent de l'exprimer dans des œuvres ou des théories qui ne doivent rien à la mère-patrie. (13)

Laroche adds to the discussion about those writer-thinkers who are in the francophone world, yet fully beholden to the powers in Paris. To convey their individuality, they seek full independence from the influence of or obligation to France. Understanding this relationship invites us to explore how Haiti found itself in need of a place that could serve as a welcoming second home. It is certainly not a unique occurrence that francophones from a French territory or former colony far from France would seek opportunities in France or another francophone nation.

Contemporary Haitian writers are published almost exclusively by Mémoire d'Encrier in Quebec, a publishing house established in 2003 as a home to authors who explore themes of identity and resilience. The publishing house was founded by Haitian writer Rodney Saint-Éloi in Montréal and aims to provide a platform for authors who reflect the complexities of their identities and experiences, particularly in the context of Haiti's rich literary and cultural heritage. The Spiralists and other Haitian writers found an open door at Mémoire d'Encrier. An idea that will repeat itself, as do many ideas in the exploration of Spiralism, is that Haiti is like no other nation. Its history is intricate and distinctive, and Haitian writers, thinkers, and artists, as well as their access to the global stage, have faced significant challenges.

The Spiral

The spiral is a prevalent pattern found throughout the natural world, manifesting in various forms and structures. Defined as a curve that emanates from a central point, the spiral can symbolize evolution, spiritual journey, and life itself. Spirals appear in mathematical constructs, such as the spiral of Archimedes. In astronomy, several galaxies, including our own Milky Way, are characterized by their spiral arms. The Fibonacci spiral lives in nature in

multiple forms: pinecones, snakes, storms, flower petals, shells and curly hair. Weather systems, hurricanes, cyclones and tornadoes, exhibit powerful spiral structures. In botany, Goethe explored metamorphosis which led to the discovery of spiral tendency in the growth and reproduction of plants. His essay on spiral tendency explains the line of beauty, harmony, balance and perfection found in all of life. Bryan Klausmeyer describes the spiral in Goethe's works as "ranging from aesthetics and art history to mineralogy and geology, from botany and cosmology to anthropology and sexuality" (Klausmeyer). Among the various formations of the spiral, the double helix of DNA stands out as the most recognizable, followed closely by a perfect football throw and the well-known image of a spiral staircase. The spiral serves as a fascinating exploration for scientists across diverse fields, representing growth, progress, new life, and forms in motion.

In literature, the spiral often assumes a bleaker role. A continuous state, an endless cycle of movement that turns in on itself, the spiral can evoke feelings of a fixed destiny or an unavoidable fate due to perpetual motion. Edgar Allen Poe's "Descent into the Maelstrom" describes the journey into the spiral of a violent storm, where forces are uncontrollable and on a path of increasing strength and momentum. The power of the spiral storm, as told by the narrator, is a descent into fears and chaos of the mind. This spiral journey evokes feelings of desperation and entrapment in an unending reality. Poe's narrator must navigate his psychological struggles within the spiral that threatens to undo him. The literary spiral is marked by cycles of chaos and existential dread. Characters within literature can often become ensnared in these recurring patterns of turmoil. Regardless of its overall positive or negative connotation, the presence of the spiral is powerful and intricate: it represents growth with infinite possibilities

or madness on an inescapable trajectory. The spiral is winding and circular chaos that feels disorganized yet operates as a cohesive and organized force within nature.

Spiralism

The spiral that connects us to Haiti and to the intent of this thesis extends beyond what we see in science, nature or literature. To bridge this conversation of the spiral to the Spiralists and Spiralism, a familiarity with the idea of chaos is essential for this dialogue. “Dans l'œil de la spirale” is a documentary film whose production began in 2012, two years after the devastating earthquake near Port-au-Prince. In the trailer, the narrator asks several guiding questions, “La spirale, est-elle la forme primordiale de l'univers? A-t-elle un début? A-t-elle une fin? Dans le vide du chaos, la création, est-elle sa finalité? Haïti, il n'y a pas d'autre endroit dans le monde où il y a tant de chaos et de dévotion artistique. Pourquoi?” (“Dans l'œil de la spirale”). These fundamental questions of oppositions - beginning and end, creation and finality - initiate this film's exploration of the relationship between chaos and creativity within Haitian culture. The full 55-minute documentary was a project of the Haiti Cultural Foundation.⁶ The film connects chaos and creative expression in Haiti as it features seven prominent artists. It was completed and released in 2014 and won awards at small film festivals in the United States. The narrator of the trailer states, “Survivre les [sic] désastres, transformer la misère en poésie visionnaire, c'est devenir le maître de chaos” (“Dans l'œil de la spirale”). The narrator reveals that the key to navigating chaos and enduring suffering lies in transforming those experiences into meaningful existence and vibrant life. Haitian philosophy, history, art and literature are woven together in a spiral by invisible threads of chaos. Frankétienne was a writer, painter and philosopher who is one of the featured artists of this documentary. The trailer teases out the significance of chaos in Haiti as it relates to the spiral. Frankétienne says, “Le chaos, c'est la réalité fondamentale de la

vie. Le non-chaos est une fiction. Le chaos est incontournable. Pour approfondir la spirale, c'est l'observation quotidienne de ma terre" ("Dans l'œil de la spirale"). He emphasizes the undeniable presence of chaos that is evident in his everyday surroundings.

Frankétienne describes chaos as inescapable. Chaotic systems are everywhere and dominate the universe. In science, chaos theory provides a framework for understanding complex systems that exhibit unpredictable behaviors. The term "Butterfly Effect" was coined by Edward Lorenz to describe this, using the analogy of a butterfly flapping its wings and causing the formation of a hurricane miles away. A very small change in the initial state can result in large differences in a later state (Sutter). Chaos theory is founded on an idea that we live in a realm of unpredictable chaos, yet within the chaos are discernable patterns and structures. Frankétienne engaged with this chaotic nature of life and society. Chaos embodies a dual nature; while it can lead to disorder and destruction, it also serves as a source of creativity and renewal. This perspective aligns with contemporary chaos theory, which suggests that chaotic systems can lead to new forms emerging from disorder. Frankétienne's Spiralism captures this dynamic, illustrating how chaos can foster innovation and transformation rather than just fragmentation and annihilation.

The student-run newspaper at Williams College, *The Williams Record*, offered a review of "Dans l'œil de la spirale" after a one-time screening of the film in 2022, in conjunction with a visiting art exhibition by Haitian Frantz Zéphirin, one of the artists featured in the documentary. The author of the review article, Olivia Johnson, describes Spiralism as a spiritual and artistic movement, a philosophy in which all things exist on a continuum. She notes the juxtaposition of the chaos of destroyed homes and buildings with jubilant crowds and celebrated art (Johnson). She detects the deeply spiritual connection of this cultural aesthetic to the spiral.

The connection of the spiral and the spiritual can be observed in other aspects of Haitian society. Kaiama Glover in her book *Haiti Unbound* connects the presence of the spiral to region-specific elements of Haitian culture. The poteau-mitan is the wooden post at the center of all Haitian Vodou temples around which ceremonies revolve. Vodou is the syncretic religion with African and Catholic roots that is widely practiced in Haiti⁷. The poteau-mitan, usually depicting the motif of two intertwined snakes and decorated with vibrant colors, is an integral part of Haitian culture and belief system (Glover viii). This spiral post is not only the center of ritual dance, it is the path taken by spirits of the Vodou religion (Latin American Studies Association).

Also observing the spiral and chaos in Haitian society is cultural anthropologist Chelsea Kivland who published a significant ethnographic work in 2021 that explores the complexities of urban life in Haiti. A central theme of her book is the idea of improvisation in the face of adversity or chaos. Kivland illustrates how individuals adapt to their circumstances, creating makeshift systems of governance and community organization. This adaptability showcases the creativity and resourcefulness of those living on the margins, Haitians who live in a context often characterized by violence and instability. In Bel Air, a slum area of Port-au-Prince, Kivland encountered a mural painted by Frankétienne, and she explored its exemplification of the Spiralism movement. As she began to understand the meanings of the spiral in this community as it related to her research and discovery, she noted: “the spiral, with its circling back to go forward, complicates a linear theory of history and enables a reading of the past as entangled in the present, a swirling of the time of the colonial and postcolonial, dictatorial and democratic, and crisis and post-crisis” (Kivland 213). Even the anthropological view of Haitian culture detects the spiral and acknowledges the repeated cycle of adversity and creativity. Kivland mentions a linear theory of history, which suggests progress from one era to the next, indicating

a continual advancement or improvement in society over time. This perspective implies that each period builds upon the previous one, leading to a more developed and refined social structure. This is not Haiti; the Haitian way is the spiral of chaos and creation. The image of the spiral circling back to go forward does not leave behind past struggles but keeps them cyclically informing and influencing the present.

A significant work that explores ideas of cycles and chaos in the Caribbean was written in the 1990s by novelist and essayist, Antonio Benítez-Rojo. In *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, he addresses the complexity of Caribbean literature, acknowledging the interactions and influences of many cultures, the presence of many languages and the fusion of traditions. He aims to examine Caribbean literature and interconnections of the islands through a fresh lens, rejecting the previous simplistic reductions in favor of a more comprehensive understanding of many variables and influences. He suggests a rereading of the Caribbean considering expanded ideas of the geography of islands and waters (referred to as a meta-archipelago), the machines of capitalism, and the scientific Chaos theory (intentionally capitalized as he does in his references). In his re-evaluation of various literary works representing different Caribbean cultures, he argues that each society within is part of an island that repeats itself. This remarkable and award-winning work is now considered a classic in Caribbean studies. Because significant movements in the Caribbean extend beyond Haiti, which has strong ties to Hispanic literature and shares its island home with the Dominican Republic, much of what Benítez-Rojo addresses falls outside of the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that this writer-thinker acknowledges the fluidity of definitions and the interconnectedness of repeating cycles, a concept that Frankétienne called the spiral.

Spiralism in Haiti is quite far from the initial discussion about the spiral in botany, math and literature. The spiral found in science and throughout nature represents growth and new life, and in literature, madness, entrapment and dread. Defining Haitian Spiralism is no simple feat as it captures these ideas, the positive and the negative, and also pulls its history, culture and religion into the cycle. The literary and artistic aesthetic known as Spiralism is relatively obscure and not widely explored. The difficulty in defining Spiralism aligns with the very essence of the word *define*, which implies bringing closure, identifying limits, and confining an idea. This notion stands in stark contrast to the expansive and fluid concept of the spiral itself. Similarly, the assertion that Spiralism *began* in the late 1960s contradicts the notion that the spiral itself has no temporal beginning. Spiralism is representative of the chaos-creation cycle that is Haiti's history and culture that has always been.

Part of the nature of Spiralism is that it is under-acknowledged and overlooked. There are surprisingly few works about this movement. Regarding books on Spiralism, there are two notable works: Frankétienne's *Mûr à crever*, the quasi-manifesto written in 1968, and Glover's *Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon* published in 2010. As for academic articles, interviews with Spiralist writers, book reviews and other related articles, these have emerged primarily within the last twenty years. As academics and journalists explore and write about Spiralism, they don't seem to be discussing a movement in the past. Unlike the Négritude and Créolité movements which are rooted in the twentieth century, Spiralism is not only little known, it is written about as if it were a recently born movement. It is curious that the academic and artistic worlds seem to be in discovery mode, but very slowly. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, access to the literary world was almost non-existent for Haitian writers, and of course, this is part of the reason for its obscurity. A movement was born in the late 1960s

on a small island marginalized from its Antillean neighbors and marginalized from the world. It is not too surprising that its birth went mostly unnoticed and that still today so few people have heard of this literary aesthetic. This too is part of what defines Spiralism today: its ability to persist without needing recognition and its ongoing representation of Haiti's chaos, which remains just as relevant now as it was over 50 years ago.

As previously noted, the primary literary movements associated with the Caribbean are Negritude and Créolité. Spiralism does not follow suit and diverges from these established movements. Negritude began in the 1930s in Paris as a cultural and political movement around heritage and identity. In the first half of the twentieth century, France was home to several movements that shared the goal of revolution. Cubism, Feminism, and Surrealism are radical movements that challenged conventional thinking and rebelled against the current status quo. Negritude was equally a response to colonialism and a cultural cry to honor blackness and African heritage. Much later Créolité was founded in 1989 in the French Antilles with a primary goal of critically responding to the Negritude collective black experience with a demand for an inclusive identity that embraces the complexities and diversities of the Caribbean cultures. So how does Spiralism relate or compare to these movements? Spiralism does not cry out to the world with a challenge that needs to be heard. It was born out of chaos, out of expressive reaction to the cyclical state of Haiti. Certainly initial works of Spiralism were an expressive cry of outrage to the vicious oppression of the Duvalier regimes, yet they did not have a planned and coherent socio-political agenda. Spiralism is a result, a consequence of the repeating state of struggle, freedom, oppression, survival, creation that makes up Haiti's past and present. This is the spiral. Perhaps this movement is not rooted in a particular century because it has always

been. It existed before being defined, before the writing and publishing of its manifesto.

Spiralism doesn't need to be published to exist.

However, being published is still a necessity in this world. The writer-thinkers from the French Antilles who confronted the latent Eurocentrism dominating the publishing industry had to navigate this process which affected both their creative process and the reception of their works. The francophone Caribbean voices were limited to specific, prominent writers who had been accepted into the literary circles, and because of this process, their collective voice was constrained. This somewhat closed group of Antillean writers who gained access to the Parisian publishing houses became representatives of the francophone voice in the Caribbean. This implies that they were not only creators of their works, but necessary in the discourse surrounding their works to enhance comprehension and appreciation. Kaiama Glover states it well:

I mean to suggest that inasmuch as these Caribbean writers-theorists have provided European and North American academics/critics with interpretive tools with which to decipher and appreciate their own creative works, they allow for a somewhat excessive legibility (Haiti Unbound 12).

Her phrase “excessive legibility” indicates a concern that these interpretive tools might lead to an oversimplification and misrepresentation of Caribbean literature. The result could be a reading of francophone writings that aligns more closely with Western academic frameworks than honoring the unique culture from which these works emerge. Glover's suggestion smartly raises questions about representation, transparency and the potential for a distorted interpretation. To be clear, we are talking about the majority of the writings of the twentieth century emerging from the francophone islands in the Caribbean, but more specifically, the writings from Martinique and

Guadeloupe, those of the Créolité and Negritude movements. As we are attempting to define Spiralism, it is important to clarify also what it is *not*. Writer-thinkers from Haiti were starkly different from their neighbors as they lacked the access but also this ‘excessive legibility’. For example, Frankétienne’s books do not come with an introduction or foreword that prepares the reader and sets a critic on a predetermined path. *Mûr à crever* was written in 1968 yet not translated into English until 2014. Works from Haitian writers stand less interpretable, less accessible, less visible because of their marginalized status. The excessive legibility that makes other francophone literature palatable does not extend to Spiralist works, which is part of the reason this movement is obscure and underappreciated. The chaos-creation voice of Spiralism is still being discovered and understood and is on its path to resonating with Western audiences.

The Spiralists

The Spiralists are Frankétienne (born Jean-Pierre Basiliqne d’Antor Franck Étienne d’Argent, he wrote under the pseudonym of Frankétienne, which is spelled Frankétyèn in Haitian creole), Jean Claude Figiolé and René Philoctète. Frankétienne (1936-2025) was a writer of novels, plays and poetry, an artist, an activist and intellectual. He was named the father of Haitian letters by the New York Times in 2011. His 1968 work, *Mûr à crever*, was published in French and translated into English by Kaiama Glover as *Ready to Burst* in 2014. Written during the height of François Duvalier’s dictatorship, it is an explosive novel whose central character is writing a book about Spiralism, and for this reason it is considered the quasi-manifesto of this literary movement. Jean Claude Figiolé (1941-2017) was an author of a trilogy of novels in the Spiralist movement. The third co-founder of the movement, René Philoctète (1932-1995), wrote primarily poems, and his one novel, *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, is considered a key work of Spiralism. Their works aim to serve as a journey of exploration and interrogation of reality rather

than a means to convey a predetermined message or specific interpretation. So, while Spiralism is not a political movement, the tumultuous 60s and 70s undeniably played a vital role in banding together Figiolé, Philoctète and Frankétienne to challenge current political discourses and practices. The three writer-thinkers lived in Haiti throughout their lives. Kaiama Glover describes their refusal to leave their home: “Determined to engage absolutely with the quotidian violence that plagued Haiti during the Duvalier régimes, the Spiralists have spent much of their creative energies figuring out how to survive while writing within and about their country” (*Haiti Unbound* 20). They valued creativity, sought to prioritize and rejuvenate the Haitian creole language, and engaged readers in the postmodern philosophical and literary approach known as Spiralism. In an interview in 1991, Jean-Claude Figiolé was asked, “Si on devait définir le spiralisme en quelques mots?” His response: “Nous [Frankétienne, Philoctète et Figiolé] nous sommes toujours refusés à enfermer le spiralisme dans le cadre d’une définition. Il appartiendra aux critiques et aux historiens de le faire” (Magnier 46).

For the purposes of this thesis, I will limit the discussion of the Spiralists and understanding the elements of Spiralism to Frankétienne and *Mûr à crever*. My general argument that contemporary writers are continuing the spirit of Spiralism necessitates a limit on the discussion in order to offer sufficient space to explore the works of Emmelie Prophète.

NOTES

1 The organization, Advocates for Human Rights, in a 1990 report on domestic labor, found that Haiti's practice of *restaveks* violates international prohibitions against slavery, forced labor and the exploitation of children. In the last few decades, several organizations have dedicated efforts and resources to ending this form of modern day child slavery. <https://restavekfreedom.org/>, <https://www.endslaverynow.org/>, <https://www.haiti-now.org/>. In 2009, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations condemned the *restavek* system.

2 For an in-depth analysis of the reign of absolute violence and rhetoric of national unity by which the Duvaliers maintained totalitarian authority for nearly three decades in Haiti, see anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot's 1990 study, *Haiti: State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*.

3 Widely considered one of the best historical texts on the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, by C.L.R James, written in 1963, is an excellent source for more about the formation of the first independent postcolonial nation.

4 A creole language refers to a linguistic blend that emerges from the combination of two or more languages. It is most commonly associated with languages that arose in colonial contexts, resulting from interaction among European colonizers, enslaved Africans and indigenous populations.

5 The original manifesto was followed by a Gallimard 382-page collection of essays of the same title, written by several of the writers and signers of the article. Critics of the arguments discuss the contradictions and problems of the manifesto and found the "movement" to be mostly unsuccessful. See the full bibliography for related articles.

6 The Haiti Cultural Foundation no longer appears to have an online presence or likely any active existence. The trailer is available on YouTube, but I have not been able to find the full-length documentary. The New York African film festival and the Big Apple film festival have a record of having shown this film, but unfortunately, it is not part of any accessible archive.

7 It is said in Haiti that 90% of Haitians are Catholic, 10% are Protestant, and 100% are Vodou. This reflects the idea that many Haitian Christians practice Vodou even if they don't admit it. Vodou is a unifying religion of enslaved Africans dating back to the early days of colonialism in the 1600s.

Chapter Two: Frankétienne and *Mûr à crever*

*“The spiral defines the perpetual movement
of life and of all evolving things;
it is characteristic of the dialectic.”
Frankétienne*

Frankétienne

The literary examination of Antillean writers and the discussion of the spiral enhance this exploration of Spiralism and its most prominent advocate, Frankétienne. In this chapter, I intend to provide insight into his background and his remarkable contributions to literature, the arts and the recognition of Haitian Creole (Kreyòl) as a legitimate literary and cultural language.

Frankétienne’s goal was to express the complexities and chaos of life in Haiti through his artistic endeavors. Unlike many of his peers from the francophone Caribbean, Frankétienne did not gain literary access through conventional channels. His works challenged the under-acknowledged status of Haiti, Haitian creole and their absence from the global literary canon. This chapter begins by first exploring Frankétienne’s role in Haitian literature and his articulation of the chaos of existence through Spiralism. My analysis of *Mûr à crever* will follow, and chapter three will ultimately highlight the connections between Spiralism and contemporary Haitian literature.

As mentioned earlier, many writers from the Caribbean had to make the choice to write (or not write) in French, to stay in their native home or leave for greater publishing opportunities. These choices would determine the legibility of and public’s access to their works.

Frankétienne’s education and academic achievements could have afforded him opportunities to flee Haiti, for simple reasons of literary access, if not also to escape severe governmental oppression, as many of his contemporaries chose to do. Jean Jonassaint is a Haitian researcher, writer and professor who has written about Frankétienne and his works. In Jonassaint’s 2004

article “Beyond Painting or Writing: Frankétienne’s Poetic Quest” he writes, “Frankétienne is in the truest sense a Haitian writer, obstinately attached to his country” (143).

Frankétienne was writing poetry in French in the 60s, then in the 70s began writing novels, the first of which was *Mûr à crever*. He wrote entirely in French until *Dézafi*, his fourth work of fiction that has the distinction of being the first novel written and published in Haitian creole in 1975. About Frankétienne’s bold decision to write in creole, Hermann-Bell argues, “as political oppression and the suffering of his compatriots increased under Duvalier’s *noiriste* dictatorship, so too did his awareness of the issues of language, identity, and political writing, and he began his life-long pursuit of producing texts in Kreyòl” (Hermann-Bell 38). The Créolité movement was undoubtedly influenced and possibly inspired by the novel *Dézafi*, as seen on the dedication page of its manifesto, *Éloge de la créolité*. Chamoiseau, Confiant and Bernabé express thanks to Édouard Glissant, Aimé Césaire and Frankétyèn.

Born in Haiti in 1936, Frankétienne was abandoned at a young age by his father, a wealthy American industrialist, and was raised by his mother in the Bel Air neighborhood of Port-au-Prince. She worked as a street merchant to support her eight children and managed to send him, the eldest, to school. His mixed ethnicity distinguished him yet also fiercely rooted his identity in his Haitian home. Just recently passed away at 88 years of age, he lived a long life of many experiences and produced numerous works. Frankétienne was quite willing to grant interviews in the last decade of his life, which may signal the beginning of the much-needed legibility and deserved visibility of his works. He gained considerable international recognition in recent years, including being named Commandeur in France’s Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2010 and being called the “father of Haitian letters” by a *New York Times* article in 2011 (Archibold). Those who sought out Frankétienne were generally scholars in French literature and

francophone studies, several are Haitians in the diaspora, and their discoveries are as varied as the genres he explored. He was commonly recognized by an extensive array of titles: novelist, poet, playwright, painter, musician, activist, mathematician, intellectual and ex-minister of culture.

Frankétienne was named the UNESCO Artist for Peace in 2010. He estimated that his artistic production comprises over 2000 paintings, drawings and sculptures using a variety of techniques and media. He received invitations to showcase his artwork in exhibitions, and his contributions have been recognized by numerous institutions, establishing him definitively as a painter. He painted with oils and acrylics on canvas, created street art, drew, sculpted and experimented with various brushes and plastics.

Frankétienne the playwright wrote plays in Haitian creole for the purpose of being performed for the people, and many of these have not been published or are largely unknown outside of Haiti. His plays embrace chaos as a stylistic choice, mirroring the nature of Haitian society. This approach allowed him to explore deep social and political themes, making his works impactful and relevant. Additionally, Frankétienne's talent for integrating various elements of performance art, such as music and visual arts, enriches the theatrical experience of his productions. In his article, "On Frankétienne : the Course of an Opus," Jean Jonassaint states: "The majority of unilingual Haitian-Creole speakers, who have no real access to national literature written in French, found in Frankétienne, from his first plays (particularly *Troufoban* and *Pèlin-Tèt*, created December 8, 1977, and July 6, 1978, respectively) an exceptional champion" (116). In an interview, Frankétienne told the story of one of his proudest moments as an artist. An older Haitian woman saw him across the street one day and excitedly shouted out a line from one of his plays. He was moved that she would recall this line, and that she, who was

most likely unable to read, had been touched by the performance (Merriam, “Haitian is My Language”). Frankétienne was driven to make the vibrant Haitian language resonate with his public.

In an interview with Michael Merriam, Frankétienne spoke about the importance of writing in Haitian creole. He explained that his views on language and cultural identity have shifted over the years. The valorization of Haitian creole as a printed language has evolved into a preference for simply “Haitian” as the language in recent years. Just as Négritude sought to reclaim African culture and identity and Créolité sought to celebrate the Antillean identity and language, Frankétienne now sought to honor the creole language of Haiti as simply Haitian. In 2015, he stated:

My conception of Haitian Creole has changed. I’m no longer involved with Kreyòl. I’m involved with Haitian. It is a mistake that people keep talking about the Creole language. Kreyòl is the language of the plantation. Kreyòl is tied to colonialism. Kreyòl is tied to slavery [...] The English speak English. The Spanish speak Spanish. The French speak French. I am Haitian. I speak Haitian. (Merriam, “Haitian is my Language” 24)

Frankétienne the writer-thinker-artist evolved in his understanding and representation of what is best for his country and his people in language, literature and identity.

Frankétienne in Haitian Literature

Frankétienne’s commitment to his compatriots and his homeland are reminiscent of the traditional oral storytelling of the Caribbean. Deeply rooted in island life and culture, folk tales are passed down through generations, conveying history, social commentaries and cultural values. Using music, song, dance and commonality of language to connect is part of the

storytelling tradition and equally a part of Frankétienne's expressive and unifying works. Glover notes this connection:

The very idea of the spiral recalls the foundations of the Caribbean oral tradition, according to which stories unfold cumulatively or cyclically; are relatively unconcerned with any purely narrative structure or horizontal, linear development; and are subject invariably to the frequent and spontaneous interventions of the public. The interplay of repetition and deviation at work in the spiral form thus provides a structural point of departure that decisively anchors the Spiralists' fiction in a Haitian geo-cultural space.

(Haiti Unbound viii)

Glover is quick to categorize the Haitian storytelling tradition as unconcerned with structure, which may be an overgeneralization. However, her connection of the storytelling tradition to Spiralism is fascinating as it ties in the concept of the non-linear history and recurring narratives that distinguish Haiti.

Traditional oral storytelling helps to preserve the diverse culture, history and identity of many Caribbean Island communities. As noted in chapter 1, Haiti's history is distinct, and its path to establishing a literary presence has been challenging as Haitian writers have been marginalized. In the Caribbean field largely dominated by Martinican thinkers such as Césaire and Glissant, perhaps Haiti's literary presence requires a different lens to be viewed and understood as intended. Michael W. Merriam is an archeologist specializing in displaced literature, and he wrote an interesting article in 2015, "Haitian Literature as a Model for World Literature," in which he calls for a broader interpretation of literature. He posits that the category of literature must be expanded and that Haitian literature takes many forms. There are ways to read "literary systems outside of books and documents," for example, interpreting ceremonial

activities and events as literature. Merriam states, “As Haiti has, historically, lacked a strong publishing industry and reading audience, critics should consider an ethical orientation toward the literary as it manifests in unexpected, extralingual forms. Haitian literature is uniquely positioned, in fact, to provoke such a mode of attention” (Merriam, “Haitian Literature” 27). He calls for a fresh exploration of Haitian literature that will require more than comparisons to other Antillean works. Merriam also points out the danger of seeing only the “journalistic Haiti”, a country utterly defined by the worst of its troubles. Seeing, reading and understanding Frankétienne’s works will be enhanced by adopting a broader interpretation of literature. Recalling oral traditions and acknowledging extralingual forms of Haitian literature are part of understanding Frankétienne’s Spiralism.

As discussed in the first chapter Kaiama Glover suggests that an “excessive legibility” exists for non-Haitian Caribbean writings that can lead to misinterpretation and oversimplification of texts. The prominent writers from the French Antilles found access to the elite publishing world and equally provided interpretive tools about their works. The outcome could be a less culturally authentic reading or an interpretation that is primarily palatable to Western sensibilities. Michael Dash, a scholar and specialist in Haitian culture and literature, discusses in a similar manner what he calls “irreducible opacity” in his 1998 article, “Haïti imaginaire : l’évolution de la littérature haïtienne moderne.” The notion of legibility addresses the extent to which the world can interpret and in turn write about French Caribbean works. Opacity addresses this notion from the other side: the extent to which a writer may want his or her work interpreted.

Le pays natal révèle dans cette littérature contemporaine une opacité irréductible qui est loin du symbolisme de l’arbre qui stabilise l’espace ancestral. En déracinant l’arbre et

l'espace du dicible, ces écrivains de la diaspora rejoignent le mouvement de pensée spiraliste de Frankétienne. (Dash 51)

The term opacity implies that there are layers of cultural significance in Haitian literature that cannot be easily deciphered or reduced to simple interpretations. This reflects the richness and diversity of native narratives, which have unique cultural references, traditions, and experiences that may not be immediately accessible to those outside the culture. The idea of irreducibility suggests a deliberate choice by authors to maintain a level of mystery or complexity in their works. This is a form of cultural rebellion, where the narratives resist being simplified or appropriated by mainstream interpretations. By embracing opacity, writers assert the right to have their works understood on their own terms, rather than through the lens of external expectations or interpretations. Frankétienne exhibits this rejection of external analysis; he prioritizes his fellow Haitians, their language and their experiences and is unwilling to be transparent just for the sake of mainstream acceptance. Frankétienne wrote *Mûr à crever* during a period of political tyranny, having elected to remain in Haiti throughout the exceedingly repressive and silencing Duvalier presidencies, for fear of being prevented from returning. He spent much of his writing career in relative isolation from the literary world, creating “irreducibly opaque” works. In these same decades, his Antillean counterparts were helping their works be welcomed and understood by Western academia. The Spiralists, on the other hand, resisted absorption and quietly staged a rebellion against not only the actual dictatorship of the day, but also the dictatorial control of the literary elite. Dash’s analogy to the uprooted tree refers to those Haitian writers in the diaspora who write from a position of exile. Exile is a dominant motif in Haitian literature and one that I will return to in the discussions of *Mûr à crever* and

contemporary works. Exile and the chaos-creation cycle are themes that appear in the key work of Spiralism, *Mûr à crever*, and in current Haitian literature.

Mûr à crever

As previously noted, Frankétienne's initial example of a Spiralist aesthetic, *Mûr à crever*, is a novel written during the Duvalier dictatorships. At a time when most Haitian intellectuals were either in hiding or in exile, Frankétienne remained in Port-au-Prince and wrote a fictional protest to this cruel regime. His first attempt at writing a novel, it offers insight into the psyche of a generation of young men who wander the streets of Port-au-Prince without purpose, facing unemployment and contemplating exile, illegal migration, ways to make money and ways to make a change in the status quo. These young men feel frustrated, incapacitated and trapped in a country which they see as an open-air prison. Interestingly, Kivland's anthropological work of 2020 referenced earlier in the first chapter is titled, *Street Sovereigns: Young Men and the Makeshift State in Urban Haiti*. Her work explores the lives of young men on the margins in urban Haiti, and her current-day stories and findings resonate remarkably with the realities faced by the youth in the 1960s (Frankétienne) and the fictional lives of Raynand and his friends, over fifty years before Kivland's observations. The dynamics of street politics, criminal gangs, and life within a militarized state have seen little change and remain entrenched in a spiral of survival under an oppressive government.

The title itself is indeterminate and intriguing. *Mûr à crever* was translated (by Kaiama Glover) as *ready to burst*. It could mean *fully ripened to the point of bursting open and dying*, evoking the image of a fruit so ripe it will explode. Frankétienne spoke about the title in the interview with Merriam, noting that even if the accent circonflexe is omitted from the spelling of *mûr*, *mur* is equally a word that conveys a pertinent meaning: a wall, breaking down a wall, and

this would be understood when the title is heard (without seeing the accent). Whether spoken or written, the title suggests a rebellion, that something is destined to happen fiercely, and the title becomes most important at the end of the story (Merriam, “Haitian is my Language” 22).

The original novel was published in Haiti in 1968 (Presses Port-au-Princiennes), in French. It has had subsequent rewritings, with a publication in 1995 (Éditions Mémoire: Port-au-Prince) and 2004 (Ana Éditions) in Bordeaux, France and a 2014 publication in New York (Archipelago Books Edition) of its English translation. In 2009 Rachel Douglas wrote *Frankétienne and Rewriting: A Work in Progress* which explores the evolution of his own ideas on Spiralism throughout these rewritings. She says this in her introduction, “Aesthetically, rewriting allows his work to remain in the open and mobile state of being written; this constant flux of rewriting enables him to enact the trajectory of the key figure of his aesthetic thinking, the Spiral” (Douglas 4). No one version of his story is more important than another. Reflecting the political and socio-economic climate of his country, rewriting allows Frankétienne to layer ideas. Many Caribbean writers have returned to their works. Glissant and Chamoiseau have rewritten some of their works; Césaire has rewritten one of his best-known works, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, several times. Each rewriting allows for the representation of a new or changing political climate. Douglas points out that Frankétienne almost never deletes or replaces anything already written but instead embellishes an idea or supplements his original thoughts. The original text remains in the cycle of creative rewriting, and no one version becomes definitive (Douglas 16-17).

Raynand is a young man living in Port-au-Prince with his mother. He has no job or source of income, and he walks the streets daily. For a while, he has a true love, Solange, whom he would like to marry, but their relationship ends, and Raynand is devastated. His mother

arranges passage for him on an (illegal) boat to the Bahamas in hopes of being able to send money home to her to pay for her medical needs. After a few short and very difficult months, he is deported along with other illegal migrants. Once back in Port-au-Prince, he gullibly agrees to invest in a business deal that is a scam and not only loses what little money he had, but also his hope of finding any success at all. Alongside this series of unfortunate events, Raynand meets Paulin, who is of the same age. Paulin is an intellectual, determined to make a difference in his world. He is writing a book and spends hours each day engrossed in his new kind of novel written in a style he calls Spiralism. The two young men become best friends and often discuss the philosophical messages of Paulin's book. His work is not yet titled, and he tasks Raynand with coming up with the title. The last part of the story is a frantic and confusing invasion of outsiders who arrive in Haiti and ultimately imprison Paulin and Raynand which leads to their deaths. Just as Raynand is dying, he finally decides on the appropriate title for Paulin's book: *Mûr à crever*.

Before the story begins, Frankétienne offers his thoughts on Spiralism. The first words and pages open the door to his aesthetics with an urgent and explosive feel.

Mieux que la chute d'un caillou dans l'eau à pouvoir faire remuer chaque brindille au passage des ondes, le spiralisme cerne la vie au niveau des associations (par les couleurs, les odeurs, les sons, les signes, les mots) et des connexions historiques (par les situations dans l'espace et le temps). Non dans un circuit fermé. Mais suivant une spirale. D'une richesse telle que chaque nouvelle spire, plus élargie et plus élevée que la précédente, agrandit l'arc de vision. (13)

These first words are not presented as paratextual commentary but as part of the narrative. They are woven into the story they foretell, and they disclose Spiralism's objectives. Frankétienne

wants readers to engage with all associations, senses and connections and to consider the spiral as they begin the novel. While almost every page of the story is full of vivid imagery and intriguing dialogue that are worth unpacking, it is in the first few pages that Frankétienne speaks boldly to the reader about Spiralism and about what is about to unfold.

Chaque jour, j’emploie le dialecte des cyclones fous. Je dis la folie des vents contraires. Chaque soir, j’utilise le patois des pluies furieuses. Je dis la furie des eaux en débordement. Chaque nuit, je parle aux îles Caraïbes le langage des tempêtes hystériques. Je dis l’hystérie de la mer en rut. Dialecte des cyclones. Patois des pluies. Langage des tempêtes. Déroulement de la vie en spirale [...] À force de vouloir dire, je ne suis devenu qu’une bouche hurlante [...] je parle par la voix de Raynand, par la voix de Paulin, par la mienne propre. Raynand et Paulin ne sont qu’un seul et même personnage. Moi je suis leur voix, tantôt faible, tantôt forte, mais toujours existante. (15-18)

Frankétienne’s choice of intense words – folie, furie, hystérique and bouche hurlante – evokes a vivid picture of panic and desperation, setting the stage for the reader’s impending journey. In a 2015 interview, he explained what he meant when he wrote about using the “dialect of cyclones and hurricanes.”

That’s a way of saying that the hurricanes, the cyclones, when they manifest, they have a language of their own [...] that is to say a baroque language. I have an ambiguous language. I have a chaotic language. I have a baroque language. I have an opaque language, and I claim my opacity because life is opaque. (Merriam, “Haitian is my Language” 24)

Frankétienne offers interpretive tools for the reader yet stops short of fully explaining his aesthetic vision of Spiralism. As suggested earlier, perhaps his opacity is tied to the idea that he

wrote this novel in Haiti, for Haitians and during an oppressive dictatorship and not for the literary world. Perhaps he is equally reminding the reader that chaos takes a central and creative role in his novel. Frankétienne gives a little guidance for the reader, somewhat of a warning that the reading experience will be henceforth disorienting as identities overlap and fracture. Glover refers to this passage as an “intrinsic schizophrenia of the Author as a creator whose fictional characters are ultimately extensions of himself” (*Haiti Unbound* 40).

As previously discussed, the Duvalier regime, led first by Papa Doc, then Baby Doc, was marked by severe political repression and suppression of dissent, along with censorship. As we will see, *Mûr à crever* is a powerful allegory of the suffocating political and social conditions of Haiti during this time. Frankétienne managed to produce this work that subtly critiqued the chaos and oppression of Haitian society under these dictators, and it stands as a testament to his resilience and creativity. Throughout the novel, the author alternates between third person and first-person point of view. Immediately, the reader is struck with the change in narration and the layers of storylines with an omniscient third-person narrator offering internal and external commentaries. Frankétienne’s story moves from his own questions, comments and memories, told in the first person, to Raynand’s adventures in this troubled society, told in the third person, to Raynand’s alter ego, Paulin, and his efforts and experiences, also told in the third person. Another voice speaks into this novel, in the first person, in the form of an unidentified storyteller. Most likely Frankétienne reappearing in small interruptions, these inserts are italicized and somewhat random recollections of the past that offer yet another window into the senseless realities of life in Haiti under a dictatorship. There is a deliberate stylistic contrast between the main text of the novel and the italicized embedded stories. These brief interruptions to the central plot of Raynand’s journey consist of first-person reflections, childhood recollections and past

traumas that appear to be the author's own voice. Raynard's life is narrated through a disjointed series of events that follow his stream of consciousness, often in fragmented sentences. The embedded memoirs are written in a more conventional and refined style. The contrast is intentional and adds to the mounting tensions of the novel and more importantly, requires the reader to engage with the text. The reader is not only following Raynard's story but also trying to make sense of the seemingly unconnected narratives that are woven in throughout. It is the experience of cycling through various voices which, by Frankétienne's admission, are versions of the same character.

Spiralism in *Mûr à crever* manifests itself most clearly in two distinct ways: the recurring cycles of time and experiences and the repeating characters. Frankétienne's experimental approach allows for the non-linear storytelling in which time, chronology and order of life events are spiraled. The pattern of hope and betrayal repeats often in Raynard's life. He meets and falls in love with Solange, and they promise to love each other forever and plan a future together. Raynard is heartbroken when he learns later that Solange betrayed him and promised her heart to another.

Il entrevit Solange dans les bras de Gaston. Ce fut une décharge violente. Un coup de vent. Un cyclone. [...] Son ventre bouillonnait. Ses tripes se tordaient comme un reptile atteint à la tête d'un coup de pierre. [...] Je suis entouré d'ombres. [...] Je suis irrémédiablement drapé de ténèbres sous la chape sordide d'une nuit sans fin. [...] Je ne suis qu'une pitié, qu'une grande douleur. (Frankétienne 43-44)

What emotional turmoil and despair as Raynard descends into darkness, all communicated with two-word or three-word sentences, contributing to his internal affective responses. Frankétienne returns to the metaphor of the natural disaster to emphasize the destructive nature of this chaos.

The physical descriptions of his stomach and guts are intensely visceral, raw pain and agony like that of a wounded animal. Raynand is reduced to nothing more than his anguish and isolation. Equally important is that Raynand's devastation is described first in the third person, then the author changes his language to write in the first person. Frankétienne too, has experienced suffering and the dark loss of hope.

Raynand's short-lived adventure in the Bahamas also illustrates the cycle of hope and betrayal. After his heartbreak over Solange, his mother persuades him to leave and try to find a better life in the Bahamas. This is Raynand's first experience with another society as he tries to find work and hope.

Un nouvel enfer sur la terre étrangère [...] Charlatan, l'homme joue à l'illuminé. Il croit épater les autres espèces par des tours de prestidigitation baptisés conquêtes de la civilisation... Électricité. Mécanique. Architecture. Balistique. Et, d'un bout à l'autre du temps, la tragicomédie de l'Histoire. Vaste cirque de nains et de clowns. (63-64)

Frankétienne uses a rare biting tone to offer a sharp critique of humanity's arrogance and the cyclical nature of history. The devastating effects of colonialism and so-called progress are now a "nouvel enfer," perhaps implying that moral depravity and futility continue. Again, Frankétienne changes his language from third to first person as he continues on the following page, "Ah! Quelque chose ne vas pas.. Serais-je le seul à le sentir? Comme les braises de l'enfer me grillent la cervelle!" (65). Tragically, Raynand finds that no good fortune awaits him in the Bahamas. He is treated terribly and is quickly deported back to Haiti; another experience of hope and disappointment cycles through the character's life.

Raynand's business venture represents yet another instance of loss and betrayal. After returning to Haiti and suffering the death of his mother, he is nearly starving as he finds no work

in Port-au-Prince. He hears of a rich American industrialist who has come to town and wants to buy pistachios to make oil and soap. Raynand spends weeks in the mountainous countryside negotiating the purchase of 100 bags of pistachios from a local farmer. He returns to Port-au-Prince to await the boat that the American promised to send, with the money for the purchase. Raynand stores the bags of pistachios and is, at first, quite content to wait on the boat's arrival, believing fully that he will be paid well. He is full of hope and happiness.

Il sifflait à longueur de journées [...] il se couchait avec des projets d'avenir au bout desquels il accrochait une petite voiture, une jolie maison. Et enfin, il décorait tous des beaux rêves avec la présence et les atours d'une femme imaginaire, une merveilleuse épouse qui ferait regretter à Solange sa trahison. (149)

Hope is clearly part of the cycle of chaos and creation. The despair is not constant, as here Raynand wants to work hard and achieve his dreams. However, Raynand learns after a month of waiting that the American is an impostor, a fake industrialist. This American visited several Caribbean islands to make false promises and claims and steal where he could. Raynand is devastated at this news, angry at the American's greed and deception. Yet, he thinks that all hope is not lost because he can still sell the pistachios there in the city for a small profit. He returns to the old home where he had stored the bags to find piles of caterpillars and no more pistachios. Once more, Raynard allowed himself to have great hope, only to be met with betrayal and devastation.

Raynand's life in much of the novel is characterized by the cycle of dreams and desires that end in disappointment and deception. In this character's struggles, Frankétienne presents his notion of the spiraling of time and experiences. In a nation that lacks opportunities and good fortune, where a young man is constantly battling headwinds that mean to break him, Raynand

lives in a spiral. Forces keep him from exiting, keep him from realizing a dream, and eventually keep him from living.

Frankétienne depicts the idea of spiralism in his characters; the reader re-encounters various individuals of influence in Raynand's life who seem to be different versions of the same character. The most obvious is Frankétienne's use of an alter ego, Paulin. Paulin is introduced to the reader and also to Raynand just after Raynand is devastated by Solange's betrayal. Her new lover chases Raynand through dark streets, and Raynand believes that he is running for his life. After a long pursuit, Raynand falls hard against the concrete, is injured and unconscious. He awakens in his home, barely able to recognize his mother and a stranger. He learns that this stranger is Paulin, who found him in the street and saved him. This is how Raynand and Paulin become dear friends. Throughout the story, Paulin seems like a real and separate individual, and there are many conversations and interactions between Raynand and Paulin. In other words, it is not clear that Paulin is Raynand's alter ego. In fact, I doubt the reader would suspect this had Frankétienne not chosen to tell the reader upfront before his story even begins.

Raynand et Paulin ne sont qu'un seul et même personnage [...] Raynand, fatigué, se cherche dans Paulin, image de celui-là qui lutte à transformer les répugnantes réalités. Et dans l'intervalle, une voix reste audible: celle de Raynand, celle de Paulin, la mienne propre. Or, moi-même, je ne sais encore rien de la vie qui m'emporte en un train de mirages et d'utopies vivaces". (18)

Frankétienne's explanation of who Paulin is and why he exists is telling. Two sides of the same character: Raynand the tired, defeated one and Paulin the revolutionary change-maker. The author also includes himself as an alter ego, adding that his voice is there too, along with Raynand's and Paulin's. An author uses an alter ego to explore the depths of a character, to

reveal sides or struggles within a character that the character may not realize that he has. Of course, Raynand declares Paulin his best friend because Paulin represents all that Raynand wants to be. Paulin is an intellectual, an educated young man who is writing a very important book that will change the world. Paulin is also employed, so he has enough money to support himself and to devote hours to writing. Paulin and Raynand have long conversations about Paulin's novel and how it is quite a challenging project. His words describe his ideas,

Je ne veux pas écrire un roman narratif. Ni une histoire tendue d'un bout à l'autre d'un vecteur [...] Le roman est une vision de la vie [...] C'est une spirale en mouvement. Ça s'ouvre et se ferme en des hélices irrégulières. Il s'agit de surprendre à temps quelques boucles de la spirale. Donc, je construis mon roman en spirale, avec en porte-à-faux des situations diverses traversées par la problématique humaine. Et les tours élastiques de la spirale, embrassant les êtres et les choses dans des portions d'ellipse et de cercle, définissent les mouvements de la vie. C'est ce que je désignerais sous le néologisme de spiralisme. (114-115)

Frankétienne offers Spiralism as a revolutionary approach to storytelling. His philosophy is fluid and cyclical. The spiral in storytelling is also Frankétienne's theory on history, relationships and the human condition. Interestingly, Paulin and Raynand discuss the Spiralist novel, its meaning and goal, and at the same time, Frankétienne has told the reader that his novel is precisely what the main character and his alter ego are creating and discussing. Frankétienne's use of self-referentiality enables him to mirror his own development of Spiralism.

There are three women in the novel: Raynand's mother, Raynand's lover, Solange, who betrays him, and Paulin's love, Marina. In the spiralist manner, these women are three iterations of the same individual. They embody love and hope, and each woman ultimately leaves or

betrays a version of Raynand. Later in the story, after Solange betrays him, and after his mother passes away, Paulin is also abandoned by his love Marina who marries another man. In the italicized commentary offered by the author, he says, “J’ai enfoui mon cœur dans la bouteille à la mer” (134). Each facet of the storyteller, no matter which personality is speaking at any given time, interacts with women who seem to be a version of the same character, a representation of failing love, lost hope and abandonment.

Frankétienne is intertwined with Raynand and Paulin and declares himself as part of this three-in-one main character. Of course, he, himself, will be a voice that speaks in and through the character of Raynand / Paulin. In Frankétienne’s own words quoted above from page 18, there is the sense that he is frustrated that his voice(s) is/are not enough. He says the voice is suffocated and implies that it is a struggle to remain audible. He claims to understand nothing about his own enduring utopias, which is both humble and tragic. Raynand and Paulin have the hope of young men, at least in the beginning of their stories, yet Frankétienne’s voice echoes disappointment, despair and hopelessness. This is why the end of the story is also the end of Raynand’s (and Paulin’s) life. Frankétienne himself experiences a recycling set of mirages.

A final example of characters cycled through the lives of Raynand, Paulin and other Haitians is the invaders who arrive near the end of the story. Their arrival is described, “De manière inattendue, un lundi matin à l’aube, une nuée d’anges blonds apparaissent dans le ciel du pays. Ailes déployées [...] la divine armée” (205). The invaders take over the capital city and then the country, at first distributing food, clothing and medicine. Quickly, however, chaos is everywhere, and the invaders metamorphose: “Les anges se transforment au crépuscule en bêtes effrayantes. Cornes au front. Griffes crochues. Lèvres rongées qui laissent entrevoir des dents jaunâtres, pointues” (206). The days feel more and more lawless and frightening, and crowds

gather to listen to someone speak about resisting the invaders. Raynand hears the passionate speaker motivate the people to fight against those who are unwelcome and who come to dominate and destroy. Speaking about the invaders, the speaker says to the crowd, “Ils ont érigé leurs richesses matérielles, leur art, leur science et leur technologie sur les misères de quatre continents. Et aujourd’hui ils osent nous parler de leur civilisation!” (209). Raynand realizes that the one innervating the crowd is Paulin. Paulin continues to arouse and provoke the listeners,

Désormais, nous n’entendons plus être traités en parents pauvres et en domestiques. Nous rejetons l’asservissement. Et sans renier ce qui nous est propre, nous proclamons notre droit à jouir de toutes les merveilleuses conquêtes de l’Occident et à savourer les fruits qui auront mûri sur le fumier de nos misères”. (210)

Who are these invaders, these monsters, giant insects, ravenous beasts, who arrive like angels yet then violently take over the nation? They are all those who have ever oppressed the Haitian people. These invaders represent those who arrived under an imperial flag, the French and the Spanish. The monsters are the Dominicans who murdered thousands of Haitians in the north.¹ The intruders are also the North Americans, including those who appear to arrive as angels with food and medicine.² François Duvalier, who was leading one of the most repressive and corrupt dictatorships in modern times at the time this novel was written, is equally a monstrous enslaver. He did not descend from afar, but he imprisoned and tortured his fellow countrymen for speaking out against him, just as Paulin and Raynand are imprisoned near the end of the story. These invaders and enslavers are recycled characters in Haiti’s non fictitious story.

Quite interwoven with the idea of rewriting mentioned earlier and the notion of self-referentiality is the literary tool of *mise en abyme*. Frankétienne’s use of the novel within the novel allows him to reflect on writing and explore his own challenges from a position within his

own writing. Paulin's writing of his novel and his discussions with Raynard about his bold new philosophy are insights into Frankétienne's endeavors and challenges with his own conceptualization of Spiralism. Here he can also candidly declare his thoughts on the novel and his desire to write in the *Genre Total*. On the opening page of *Mûr à crever*, Frankétienne declares, "comme moyen d'expression - efficient par excellence - le spiralisme utilise le Genre Total où sont mariés harmonieusement la description romanesque, le souffle poétique, l'effet théâtral, les récits, les contes, les esquisses autobiographiques, la fiction" (13). Later in the narrative Paulin and Raynard continue to tease out the ambitions of Spiralism and their (Frankétienne's) idea of the novel. Paulin tries to explain and Raynard replies:

- Je mets en place la structure des chapitres. Je ne veux pas écrire un roman narratif.
- Tu voudrais, si je réalise bien tes desseins, poursuivre l'expérience d'André Gide dans *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*?
- Pas précisément...L'élargir plutôt. Gide a composé son roman en "abyrme". Cela bien entendu accusait déjà un progrès dans la construction romanesque [...] je construis mon roman en spirale. (114-115)

André Gide's 1925 novel is seen as a precursor of the *nouveau roman*, interweaving several plots within a novel, and an omniscient narrator who sometimes addresses the reader. *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* challenged the traditional novel, reacting against Realism. In our story, Paulin and Raynard discuss Paulin's (Frankétienne's) desire to use the *Genre Total*, to use the *mise en abyme*, to build on the idea of the *nouveau roman*, to present the vision of life as a spiral in motion. This connection is a key component in achieving the objectives of *Mûr à crever*.

Frankétienne's *Mûr à crever* is the introduction to Spiralism. This novel is the story of a typical young man facing obstacles and oppression and a critique of a country facing obstacles

and persistent oppression. Frankétienne's voices are at times hopeful and intelligently set on positive change, like our young protagonist, Raynand / Paulin. His voices are at other times angry, desperate and full of fear. *Mûr à crever* captures the essence of a narrative, a reflective commentary, and serves as a form of manifesto. This fusion of literary styles is Spiralism, where the author vividly portrays life in Haiti, eliciting a sense of existence within an infinite spiral of occurrences and individuals. Frankétienne brings the reader into cycles of experiences: hope and loss, dreams and devastation, and into cycles of people: those who betray, those who are alter egos who know ultimate disappointment. At the very end of the story, during the chaos and terror of the invasion and imprisonments, Raynand is consumed with finding Paulin to tell him that he has the perfect title for the book. The last scenes of the novel are not unlike scenes on a battlefield of a major war. Raynand helps some prisoners escape, and they flee together. They are fighting off the prison guards and fleeing for their lives, and Raynand is wounded in the chest. Just as he is dying, he tells a fellow escaping prisoner that he must find Paulin and tell him that the title of the book is *Mûr à crever*. The reader has an odd moment of wondering, "Am I holding Paulin's book in my hands?" It would be fitting for life in a spiral.

NOTES

1 The Parsley Massacre was a mass killing of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic near the most northern Haitian border. Dominican president and dictator Rafael Trujillo ordered his army to kill an estimated 20,000 - 40,000 Haitians near the Dajabon River. Much of the killing took place in the river that divides the two nations as Haitians tried to flee and cross the border back into Haiti. The river ran red with blood and was named la Rivière du Massacre. This genocidal violence is the subject of René Philoctète's novel, *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*.

2 As a response to the political instability after the assassination of Haiti's president, the United States occupied Haiti from 1915 - 1934. They established military control, took over the administration and implemented a new constitution. American businesses gained influence over Haiti's economy, especially in the infrastructure and agriculture sectors. Haitians resisted and rebelled and were quelled with US military force and repression. The occupation left an impact on Haiti's political landscape and relations with the United States.

Chapter Three: Contemporary Haitian Fiction and the Persistence of Spiralism in the Works of Emmelie Prophète

*Île des soupirs, île des
martyrs, île des temps perdus.
Tout ce temps a tourné en
rond. Se perdre d'abord.
Mourir ensuite.
Emmelie Prophète*

*Lespwa fê viv.
(L'espoir fait vivre)
Proverbe haïtien*

Bridging Spiralism to Contemporary Works

Chapter 1 examined how writers in the francophone Caribbean, like so many outside of the literary mainstream of Paris, had to navigate the external power dynamics of the postcolonial landscape. Writers aimed not just for publication but also for recognition and the literary significance that comes with being translated and discussed globally. In twentieth-century Haiti, writers not only faced the gatekeeping challenges of the Paris publishing world but also the internal oppression of dictatorships and political turmoil. Exile was often the only option for Haitian writers, and the world saw very little published from those who remained in their home country. This socio-historical context of the publishing realities for Haitian writers framed the exploration in chapter 2 of Frankétienne's works written (and rewritten) in the second half of the century. As previously noted, Mémoire d'Encrier became a publishing home that welcomed Haitian writers. Archipelago Books has also embraced writers from marginalized communities and published Haitian stories and poems. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, diverse perspectives and narratives have gained important and increasing exposure to broader audiences.

Yet even with this celebrated development, there are few academic studies on not only Frankétienne, but Haitian fiction in general. A surprising lack of comparative analyses of Haitian literature is still prevalent, especially in the contexts of postcolonialism, social and political challenges and cultural expression through Haitian creole. There are books waiting to be written across the literary landscape. Where does Haiti's history and precarious relationship with the publishing world leave today's writers? This thesis continues to explore and understand Spiralism and its effects on twenty-first-century writers. In my examination of contemporary Haitian literature, I bridge Frankétienne's Spiralism and *Mûr à crever* to the works of Emmelie Prophète.

What are scholars observing about Haitian literature written in the last half-century? What analyses are those in the academic field offering in regard to both Spiralism and contemporary Haitian fiction? After framing Haiti's history and literary struggles in chapter 1, then focusing on the movement Spiralism, Frankétienne and *Mûr à crever* in chapter 2, questions remain about what happened in Haitian literature after the end of the Duvalier regime in 1986. What has changed for Haitian writers in the last four decades? Chapter 3 responds with an overview of recent works and the trajectories of three noteworthy female authors who are publishing today and finding success and recognition in the literary community: Edwidge Danticat, Myriam Chancy and Kettly Mars. This chapter then offers an analysis of two works of one contemporary writer, Emmelie Prophète, namely *Testament des solitudes* and *Un ailleurs à soi*. Here, we will see the continuing presence of Spiralism and how it manifests in Prophète's works. Through a discussion of the themes of exile, liminality and fragmentation in Prophète's novels, I will argue that the influence of Spiralism persists in today's literature.

Contemporary Haitian Fiction

In 1991, Georges Castera, a Haitian poet, playwright and founding member of Association des Écrivains Haïtiens, wrote an essay examining the identity, goals and struggles of Haitian writers. One of his guiding questions was: “For whom does the Haitian writer write, considering 85% of Haitians are uneducated”? He explores early notions with which Haitian writers may have grappled: “Comme toutes les littératures des pays dominés, la nôtre passe par deux grands moments: un moment d'imitation du modèle français dominant [...] en raison des liens particuliers existant entre Haïti et la France. Puis, un moment de rupture” (91). It is interesting to consider this “moment of rupture” that Castera mentions, particularly for each colonized country that found its independence, or at least its identity apart from France. The movements we have briefly explored are such moments of rupture. Negritude and Créolité embody precisely the rebellion against “imitation of the French model” and quest for an existence neither attached nor beholden to France’s influences. Indeed Haiti’s radical moment of rupture sparked the exploration of a distinctive voice for every Haitian would-be writer. Questions of identity for any colonized nation are complex, especially when acceptance into a literary world of recognition is at stake. Factors such as race, skin color and choice of language significantly contribute to the identity struggles for Haitian writers. Castera notes that by the 1980s, critics and literary journalists felt compelled to categorize Haitian writers as *dedans* or *dehors*, indicating whether they were writing from inside Haiti or from the diaspora. He explores the complications around a writer’s decision to express ideas in Haitian creole or French. Fully appreciating the variables that Haitian writers faced not only when Frankétienne, Philoctète and Figolé created Spiralism but that continue to challenge and frame novels written by contemporary Haitian writers lays the groundwork for this last chapter that examines present-day

works of fiction. Over a half century ago, Spiralist writers contended with many of the same issues of identity that exist today. Similar to Castera's guiding question, I wonder for whom today's Haitian writer writes and if the aesthetic components of Spiralism are still at work.

Yanick Lahens is a Haitian novelist and journalist who wrote a 1997 article about the contributions of four female Haitian authors to the modern novel. With the exception of Marie Vieux-Chauvet who wrote during the 1950s and 60s and died in 1973, the other three contemporary novelists are still active today. Their works at the time of her article led Lahens to draw this conclusion:

Les romanciers haïtiens se sont souvent abrités derrière les remparts des grandes constructions idéologiques ou politiques pour ne pas se risquer ou s'afficher. Les romancières se sont au contraire tenus au plus près de la vie quotidienne donnant ainsi une toute autre dimension, un tout autre éclairage de l'histoire loin de toute rhétorique abusive ou excessive. (94)

Her distinction between male and female writers leads to the interesting observation that Haitian men have chosen to address political and social turmoil while women have illuminated aspects of daily life. Novels authored by Haitian women explore themes such as social classes and roles, femininity, the maternal figure and sexuality. I have noticed similar patterns in contemporary Haitian works by female authors whose literary works often present the female perspective and experience, enriching and reshaping the broader Haitian narrative. In this century, publications of works by women writers have increased, leading to greater recognition and literary acclaim. Contemporary works of prose and poetry contribute to the literary landscape that represents Haiti, with storytelling deeply rooted in Haitian history and culture. This approach illuminates the female experience, particularly concerning gender roles and trauma. In her article, Lahens

asserts that the female writer offers stories of the individual, contrasting with male writers who generally aim to make political changes or offer commentary on historical events. At first glance, this female-gendered perspective notably diminishes the significance of female Haitian writers' contributions. The works of female writers depicting family dynamics and women's roles offer critical commentary on political and social ideology, equally impactful as those of male writers who explicitly address governmental or philosophical issues. Lahens stops just short of clarifying the danger in the assumption that the personal or domestic realm holds less significance than the political sphere. Sociologists, philosophers and feminist theorists have argued to the contrary, that domestic arrangements and the daily life of individuals are not isolated from political realities but are instead deeply connected to them. Political power and social structures influence all spheres of life. Narratives of everyday injustices or struggles enable readers to understand how inequalities and injustices manifest for the average Haitian citizen. It would be an oversimplification to limit the characterization of Haitian novels by suggesting that male writers exclusively focus on politically-driven narratives while female authors only portray family and everyday life. *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, written by Jacques Roumain in 1944, is considered a classic novel that addresses more than political ideas and social transformation. The novel portrays a young Haitian man determined to bring change and solidarity to his impoverished community. It is a realist novel centered around the themes of hope and ideological resistance against oppression. While it addresses ideas of political change, it is equally a drama of love, courage and human dignity. A story of magical realism, *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* by René Depestre published in 1988, is also a classic that presents Haiti's Vodou culture in a tale of zombies, love and questions of race. Therefore, an oversimplified expectation of a novel's depicted themes and concerns based on the gender of the authors is shortsighted. While the

discourse on Haitian literature has largely been shaped by works by male writers, the contributions of female authors are worth our scholarly attention. The novel is a vast and significant part of Haiti's literary landscape, yet my continuing investigation focuses specifically on female writers whose influence has not been sufficiently explored in academic discussions.

Edwidge Danticat is one of the four women writers that Lahens mentions, referencing the 1994 novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, her first work. In the last 30 years, Danticat has continued to write novels, short stories, non-fiction and children's stories. She has received acclaim and recognition and numerous awards. There are significantly more academic writings about her works, due undoubtedly to the fact that she writes only in English. Critics and online review sites are eager to shine the spotlight on Danticat's works, thanks in part to a nod from Oprah's Book club. Her novels explore themes such as family bonds and generational trauma, daily life during political turmoil, oppression and cultural preservation. Évelyne Trouillot (sister to writers Jocelyne Trouillot, Lyonel Trouillot, and to anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot mentioned in the first chapter) is a prolific writer of poetry, novels and short stories in French and Haitian creole and the recipient of literary awards. Trouillot's works address themes of trauma, feminism and gender roles, human rights and identity. Kettly Mars is an active author of poems and novels in French. Her novels *Saisons sauvages*, *Aux frontières de la soif* and *Je suis vivant* are acclaimed works that address themes of life under the Duvalier dictatorships, the dysfunction of life in the tent camps after the 2010 earthquake, class, race and sexuality. Kettly Mars tells stories of solidarity and resilience, power and corruption, often highlighting the struggles of marginalized individuals. Myriam Chancy is a female writer from Haiti whose valuable works are finding audiences, especially in the last twenty years. Her novels have received critical praise for their portrayal of exile and displacement, the legacy of colonialism and the impact of natural

disasters. In my exploration of Spiralism and its connection to contemporary Haitian literature, I am drawn particularly to Emmelie Prophète's poetry and fiction. Most of the female writers mentioned thus far write from the diaspora and some in English. Emmelie Prophète is a prolific writer from Haiti who has remained in her home country throughout her career, and this deeply rooted perspective seems to influence her writing style, not unlike that of Frankétienne.

Emmelie Prophète

Emmelie Prophète was born in 1971 in Port-au-Prince, and at age 14, she met René Philoctète and Jean-Claude Figiolé, two of the founders of Spiralism. They offered her books, a precious gift given the lack of access to education and works of literature. The few public libraries that exist in Haiti, established by international organizations, are often not maintained or are in disrepair after the 2010 earthquake. This gift of books would shape Emmelie Prophète's future. Today, she holds degrees in law, modern literature and communications, and has written for several periodicals. Prophète has served as the director of the Haiti Direction Nationale du Livre, as the Minister of Culture and Communications and as the Minister of Justice. She has authored novels and books of poetry which have been honored with various literary awards. For this thesis on francophone Haitian writers and Spiralism, the works of Emmelie Prophète are highly relevant. She writes in French, and like Frankétienne, she chose to remain in Haiti and writes from *dedans*. Most importantly, the influence of Spiralism figures prominently in her works.

In a general sense, Emmelie Prophète and the Spiralists all engage deeply with the themes of Haitian identity, trauma, and resilience, a focus shared by many Haitian authors. Prophète's works often delve into the psychological and emotional landscapes of her characters, mirroring the Spiralists' focus on complex human experience within the Haitian context. On a

more specific level, I intend to highlight the parallels between Prophète's and Frankétienne's works, illustrating how Spiralism cycles on and persists in contemporary literature. The analysis of Prophète's novels, *Le Testament des solitudes* and *Un ailleurs à soi*, will capture the poignancy and beautiful sorrow found in her prose. Subsequently, this study focuses on the specific themes of exile, liminality and fragmentation in her works, showcasing the enduring presence of Spiralism, over fifty years after Frankétienne's *Mûr à crever*. To provide a clearer context for these themes, I will first offer an overview of the novels' plots, characters and narrative voice.

Le Testament des solitudes

Prophète's novel, *Le Testament des solitudes*, won the Grand Prix littéraire de l'Association des écrivains de la langue française in 2009. The novel was translated by Tina Kover in 2022 into English with the title *Blue*. In *Le Testament des solitudes*, Prophète writes with a profound sadness and longing as she shares memories of her family, specifically the women in her childhood. Her words and storytelling encompass more than her personal experiences; they reflect a sense of hopelessness that she perceives in the lives of those around her, both past and present, in Haiti. She shares tales of exile that don't end well. The theme of survival and the dream of happiness are woven together, and the only lifeline for the characters in her stories lies in the notion of leaving, the hope of going *ailleurs*.

In 2010, Emmelie Prophète, Frankétienne and Rodney Saint-Éloi (Haitian poet and founder of the publishing company Éditions Mémoire) were together at the Café Littéraire hosted by Étonnants Voyageurs, where authors were invited to read and discuss latest works as part of the annual Festival du Livre. This particular panel was titled *Haiti Chérie*, and the authors shared their thoughts on various topics about Haiti and their writings. Prophète discussed

Testament des Solitudes and how to interpret stories that center around females: “C’est une histoire des femmes haïtiennes, mais ça a tendance à ‘féminiser’ ce livre. Mais il ne s’agit pas de ça en fait. C’est une histoire haïtienne d’une famille écartelée où les femmes sont obligées de s’exiler pour pouvoir soutenir ceux qui sont restés au pays” (Frankétienne and Prophète, *Café Littéraire*). Prophète invites the reader to look through the lens of Haitian women’s experiences to see broader societal systems and the challenges of survival.

In *Le Testament des solitudes*, the narrator never reveals her name, so this novel feels autobiographical, a sentiment that Emmelie Prophète confirmed in later interviews. The narrator is in the airport, flying between Florida and Haiti, and finds herself with the time and space to reflect on and relive past experiences. Her inner thoughts are her memories, the stories of three generations of females who flood the pages with their experiences and dreams, as the narrator recalls sights, smells and feelings from her childhood and adulthood. She is prompted to tell her story as she travels home to Haiti after the funeral of an aunt who was living in Florida. The airport is a pivotal part of her story, as she shares from a place of in-between.

Her mother is the oldest of three sisters, and each sister has children. The novel jumps from stories of the sisters’ childhoods to memories of the narrator’s childhood and present-day experiences. Part of the beauty in these poignant stories is found in how the narrator weaves through generations in her storytelling. She changes her voice, sometimes recounting a story for the reader, other times speaking directly to her family members in her memory. It is sometimes difficult to follow each character’s individual stories, but this seems appropriate as Prophète, or the narrator, invites the reader into a swirl of sorting through sad recollections and ideas of finding one’s place. Prophète writes of her aunts and cousins, their leaving and their dying, sometimes writing about them, sometimes writing to them.

The narrator begins *Le Testament des solitudes* when her mother and two aunts were young girls. “Trois filles. Nées ici quand il ne fallait naître ni ici, ni femme” (9). This short phrase sets the tone for the stories to follow that depict how living in poverty keeps women silent. The narrator quickly admits her inability to tell the story chronologically, or to even identify the story she wants to tell. She continues, “L’histoire est floue, inconnue or presque. Bribes d’incertitudes, temps consignés dans les cahiers illisibles. Il ne devra y avoir ni souvenir ni testament” (10). These short sentences at once suggest a deeply introspective exploration of memories, with a vagueness, an uncertainty and an idea that we will see again, fragmentation. As the three young sisters grow, they each have dreams and plans to leave, to escape to a new life. Their childhood hopes grow into desperate efforts to find happiness. The first step of leaving means moving from their village in the south of Haiti to the capital city of Port-au-Prince.

Trois femmes bonnes à partir, à se jeter dans la violence de la ville, dans le parfum des hommes. Toujours un bonheur plus loin, le dos tourné au temps qui passe. Trois âmes perdues, certaines de n’être de cette terre lointaine que par un malheureux hasard. Soeurs de même mémoire, de même envie, de même destin. (10)

Prophète describes her mother and two aunts as young women who leave their southern province and move north to Port-au-Prince, full of hope which always seems to be attached to the next escape.

In several chapters, the narrator painfully recalls the events specific to her aunt Christie, the youngest of the three sisters. The narrator remembers watching men come and go from her aunt Christie’s life, as she learned “ce que l’amour n’était pas” (13). Christie would give birth to a daughter who died young, and other children that the narrator seems to have never known.

Christie foutait le camp dans des taxis de fortune, se faisait peloter, versait son sang dans les corps qu' elle ne voulait pas forcément faire vivre, ou, quand elle le voulait, ne réussissait pas à faire vivre. Elle avait passé une grande partie de sa vie entre draps et oreillers sous le poids d'hommes menteurs, qui respiraient trop fort. Le temps s'enfonçait dans son corps, elle pensait déjà à d'autres voyages, d'autres danses, d'autres silences. La vie lui glissait entre les doigts, elle ne le sentait pas. (14)

This quote holds the first instance of suggested violation and vulnerability. Christie feels the need to flee from oppressive situations and the need for change, yet there is a powerlessness conveyed in Prophète's words, as life was slipping through Christie's fingers. Chasing her next voyage, her escape and hope tied to *ailleurs*, Christie left Haiti under the promise of being married to a man upon arrival in the US, her passage paid and arranged in return for her betrothal to a man she had never met. "Son voyage avait été payé en échange de son corps et de son âme" (38). When she arrived, she was already pregnant.

Les enfants de Christie sont nés sans identité, sans racines, sans habitudes. L'ailleurs était finalement à eux... et moi, je suis loin de leur vie, dans un aéroport attendant un départ. J'ai toujours été loin, j'ai tout regardé passer et je continue, de cette chaise, à faire la même chose, regarder pour oublier. (39)

The narrator's aunt made it to her *ailleurs* but her misery accompanied her. The narrator is just as sorrowful; she does not rejoice in Christie's escape or proclaim the dream realized. With a sense of resignation, Prophète watches from afar, in order to forget, showing her doubt in the dream of escape. The narrator gives bits and pieces of her aunts' and cousins' plans to leave Haiti. "Nous avons des exils d'avance, des grandes villes, et des projets. Pour survivre, il faut nourrir tôt son exil, sa fuite ou sa mort. [...] Elles sont parties mourir ailleurs, Christie, Odile et peut-être sa fille

Dina. Partir pour avoir le droit de choisir leur mort” (27-28). The dream of elsewhere and the desire for life and freedom are strong, but the narrator knows that none of the stories end well. These memories flood her while she waits in the Miami airport, returning home after Christie’s funeral.

Emmelie Prophète’s writing style in *Le Testament des solitudes* is lyrical, descriptive, evoking strong emotions and memories, and resembling a long poem. This work marks her first foray in writing a novel after publishing two collections of poetry, which significantly shaped her narrative approach. Many of her sentences are brief, have no subject or verb, or repeat a word, often a feeling. While the story does not adhere to traditional poetic structures like rhyme or meter, it is reminiscent of a prose poem with its fragmented thoughts, rich phrasing, and succinct expressiveness. In the way that a reader must linger over poetry to contemplate or fully appreciate the author’s meaning, Prophète invites the reader to spend time working through the jumble of disintegrated memories in her lyrical passages. Here is an example from *Testament* that hints at a Spiralist influence as the narrator reflects on her home and her aunt who died in exile: “Île des soupirs, île des martyrs, île des temps perdus, les chansons ne guérissent de rien. Bouches sans valeurs, mots sans raison. De nuit comme de jour, ils s'engouffrent tous dans ces ténèbres, sans cri, sans frayeur. Tout ce temps a tourné en rond. Se perdre d'abord. Mourir ensuite” (39). This excerpt evokes the tragic and sorrowful atmosphere of the island of Haiti. There is regret expressed and frustration at the lack of reason and a hopelessness that erodes memories. The phrase “screamless, frightless darkness” suggests an emotional numbness that contrasts with the implied chaos and despair. There is a deep sense of futility where life is portrayed as cyclical and meaningless. Prophète expresses collective grief and suffering of

Haitians, the futility in their struggles and the cyclical nature of despair: the repeating spiral, night and day, time going around in circles.

In *Le Pacte lyrique*, Antonio Rodriguez theorizes about the expectations and the effects of reading narratives in prose compared to reading poetry. Rodriguez explains that a reader learns to assume that a work of prose will have action, and a work of poetry will have emotions. Because of this generalization, a reader then expects to read narrative prose and follow the action, details, and descriptions, and this experience informs the reader's understanding and interaction with the text. Likewise, a reader will expect to read a poem and find feelings evoked or stirred. Prophète's use of poetic prose in *Le Testament des solitudes* creates a sense of uncertainty for the reader who finds themselves needing clues to aid in interpretation. The short sentences that often lack a subject or verb resemble and evoke the essence of poetic verses. Some passages seem as if they could have been lines of a poem, reformatted into paragraphs. This blend of prose and poetry, along with the admission of the narrator that her story is fuzzy, results in a disorienting experience for the reader. However, this confusion doesn't lead to a sense of being lost, rather it fosters empathy for the narrator's struggles to navigate a lifetime of memories and make sense of the choices that her female relatives made.

Fragmentation is a key element in Prophète's writings. As a theme, fragmentation encompasses disjointed memories and broken relationships. It is the chaos and complexity of the human experience in general and also the narrator's specific experiences. Fragmentation can also be Prophète's choice of narrative structure: her intentional use of disconnected and incomplete stories in order to be intentionally disruptive. Memories are often recalled in fragmented ways, and perhaps Prophète is deliberate in her exploration of fragmentation as a theme and a self-referential reflection on the core ideas of *Testament*. In a broad sense, the narrator's entire story

is broken into pieces from various stages of her life. In chapter 14, the narrator talks about actual mirrors for much of the chapter. She speaks of “le parfum des miroirs” and “le sanglot des miroirs” and “le rire des miroirs” (63). She describes the neighbor who resided across the street from her childhood home and in whose house was a large mirror that was easily visible from the street. All passers-by were aware of its occasional blinding reflection of sunlight and of their own reflections. One day the mirror shattered, and they never again saw their reflections clearly. For years, the broken mirror remained, and the neighbor never removed it or replaced it. The broken mirror served as a constant reminder to the narrator of her fragmented identity. “Les femmes se regardaient dans des miroirs à moitié cassés... Peut-on se voir belle dans un miroir cassé? Je voudrais le savoir. Elles se cachaient derrière les portes, des fenêtres, pour se coiffer, s’habiller, se regarder disparaître” (65). In a later chapter, the narrator wonders if the airport had a mirror like her old neighborhood, if people would look at themselves and be less anxious. She wonders aloud about the power of identity, about seeing one’s reflection and knowing how to survive. I will return to the theme of fragmentation after the analysis of *Un Ailleurs à soi* to connect it more fully to Spiralism.

In an article for *World Literature Today* in 2022, Robyn Cope reviewed *Blue*. Addressing the translation from French to English, she comments on the translator’s excellent ability to convey Prophète’s poetic sense of longing:

Most notably, *Blue* faithfully reproduces the author’s use of repetition. As words such as “misery,” “elsewhere,” and “solitude” appear over and over in the text, what gradually emerges is an impressionistic portrait of the progressive alienation of a person (the narrator) and a people (the Haitians of her homeland and its diaspora in the Global North). (59)

Cope remarks on the alienation, the longing for wholeness, the desire for home, the need to grieve, and the urge to tell a story that seems so hard to understand. Exile, escape and the yearning for *ailleurs* are familiar; Raynard expressed similar desires and frustrations in *Mûr à crever*, an idea we will revisit when we bridge Prophète's works with Spiralism.

In addition, Prophète's writing employs a variety of opposites that recur throughout the novel: contradictory couplings of the narrator's thoughts and feelings that help readers and the narrator to make sense of the many memories. Prophète writes of never closing her eyes for fear of missing a memory and needing to close her eyes to not see those same memories. She describes the continuous sounds and cries she experienced alongside the enormous silences. In writing about her own childhood, the narrator says that she spent, "Vingt ans dans le vide, sans repère, sans mémoire, sans moi-même" (54). Yet, she also has vivid memories full of details. For example, she recalls the day her grandmother died, on December 11, and that it was the day she had to recite René Philoctète's poem, "Mes camarades de soleil" at school. She was afraid of the dark, yet also greatly needed its tranquility and solitude. Her descriptions and words are intensely vivid, and all the while she repeats that her memories are blurry. She travels freely, floating through her emotions and recollections, in a state of weightlessness. Yet, she is at the same time, stuck in the airport, very much in one physical, liminal place of in-between.

At the beginning of this chapter, we started with a brief introduction of Haitian fiction, noting the generalization that female authors have typically written more about the experiences of Haitian women and family dynamics than male writers. Danticat, Chancy, Mars are three contemporary Haitian writers who tell difficult stories of disasters, trauma and despair. Prophète equally carries this burden, as we have seen in the exploration of *Le Testament des Solitudes*. Prophète was interviewed by Brad Listi for his podcast, *Otherpppl*, in 2022. She calls *Testament* a

public story, not only a story of her past and her family but a story of many women and many men, of misery in Haiti. Prophète explains that Haitian writers give voice to all those who can't talk about how unimaginably difficult life is in Haiti. *Testament* is a story of misery that is the testimony of many Haitians, those who migrate and those who remain, and the suffering that comes with either choice. (Prophète interview).

Un ailleurs à soi

A more recent work of Emmelie Prophète, *Un ailleurs à soi*, is her sixth novel, published in 2018, and it is the story of two women whose lives intersect for a brief time. This work of fiction has not been translated, and as such there is very little paratextual content associated with it. There is no foreword from another author or scholar, nor any book reviews or academic articles as of yet. Consequently, there is little to influence or frame how the text is perceived and interpreted by readers. The publisher, Mémoire d'Encrier, provides a book blurb which offers a brief summary of the story and themes:

Tout un peuple se prépare à fuir, s'inventant un ailleurs à défaut d'un avenir. Partir est un mythe auquel personne n'échappe. Au Ayizan, chic restaurant de Pétion-Ville, se font et se défont les voyages. Lucie sert les clients le jour et vend son corps la nuit. Maritou fuit la haine de Jeannette et la pitié de Clémence ses demi-soeurs. Elle vomit son angoisse et sa solitude jusqu'à sa rencontre avec Lucie. Elles s'appriivoisent jusqu'à s'aimer. Un ailleurs à soi, miroir où se tissent illusions et vœux de départ. (*Un ailleurs* back cover)

As the title suggests, the theme of finding an “elsewhere” and escaping to a new future is central. Maritou is a young Haitian woman living in Pétion-Ville, just south of the capital, Port-au-Prince. She is a university student who dreams of going elsewhere, and this is her story of how she makes her dream of elsewhere become a reality. She is much younger than her two sisters

with whom she lives. Jeannette, the oldest, is cruel to Maritou because she is convinced that Maritou is not the daughter of their father because of their mother's extramarital affairs. After Maritou was born, the father of Jeannette and Clémence lost his voice. As the pastor of a church, he was unable to continue his livelihood and soon after died. Their mother left the three girls shortly after this, moving to New York City, and Jeannette raised Maritou with much resentment. Their mother called home occasionally, "Quand elle leur parlait au téléphone, elle disait qu'elle était contente de la liberté qu'offrait l'ailleurs. Un endroit où on la regardait sans la voir, sans douter de ses paroles qu'elle voudrait bien refaire sa vie, rencontrer un homme. Tous les pays de la seconde chance peuvent s'appeler Amsterdam" (24). The reference to Amsterdam occurs several times in the novel. Maritou reads often and tells stories to Lucie about places in the world. She often recounts the story of women in a Nigerian village who dreamed of going to Amsterdam, where there is plenty of clean water and where you can be whoever you want to be. In the story, the Nigerian women of the Hilin Kaye village could not escape their situation and chose to end their lives:

Des femmes avaient, au début des années quatre-vingts, décidé de se suicider en se jetant dans un trou béant dans une grotte. Elles avaient pu choisir leur tombeau. Elles ne s'étaient pas réunies. Elles n'avaient pas pris la décision ensemble. Le geste était comme allé de soi quand la polygamie est arrivée dans leur village, quand on leur avait enlevé les toutes petites libertés qu'elles détenaient. (20)

Maritou dreams of escape, and like the Nigerian women, knows that without a new elsewhere, the future is inevitable and hopeless.

Lucie is a young woman who is a server in a restaurant during the day and works in prostitution some nights. She fled her family home as a teenager. She felt no love or affection

from her parents or her two older brothers. Lucie resented being a girl because she was expected to cook, clean and do the laundry, and more significantly, was a victim of incest, the object of her own father's desires¹. She is certain that no one missed her or even noticed when she left. When Lucie and Maritou meet, they become friends and also lovers. Their love for each other helps to heal past wounds. Throughout their short relationship, Maritou talks of her dream to leave and reads stories to Lucie about other places where people are free. Maritou knows that she must go and find her *ailleurs*. Lucie speaks of her *ailleurs* as there, in the streets in Haiti, that she found her new elsewhere already when she left her family and found freedom living in the streets of Pétion-Ville.

The story is primarily told in the third person, but there are instances where Maritou expresses herself in the first person. Prophète shifts from narrating the story to allowing Maritou to voice her thoughts directly, particularly in moments of strong emotion. When Maritou realizes that she loves Lucie and is in turn loved by Lucie, she communicates directly to her, in what seems to be a poem:

Tu es ma toute première fois. Je suis ta toute première fois.

Il n'y aura désormais qu'un seul parfum sur terre, le tien.

La vie avant n'était qu'un rêve maladroit.

Me voilà simple et pleine d'expressions.

J'ai grâce à toi fait connaissance avec moi-même.

J'ai grandi sans savoir, sans comprendre. (46)

Not only does Maritou find tender words for Lucie, but Prophète chooses to have her speak these words directly, to give the reader a more intimate connection to Maritou's feelings.

Throughout the novel, the reader encounters other characters: those who work at Ayizan and other regular customers there. Eventually, Maritou has enough money for a plane ticket, and she succeeds in obtaining her passport. She asks Lucie to leave with her, but Lucie declines. The final pages are Maritou's last preparations, goodbyes to Clémence and Lucie and the departure of the plane to Maritou's *ailleurs*.

Exile

Earlier we explored Michael Dash's idea of irreducible opacity in his article, "Haïti Imaginaire: l'évolution de la littérature haïtienne moderne" from 1998. In the same article he states, "Si un seul thème caractérise la littérature haïtienne moderne, c'est celui de l'exil" (46). Exile is certainly found in the contemporary works of Prophète in the migration of characters, the yearning for *ailleurs*, and the dream of escape. Frankétienne's characters equally wrestle with ideas of escape and migration. One of the most horrifying scenes of *Mûr à crever* is in the chapter detailing Raynard's forced deportation by boat from the Bahamas back to Haiti, along with numerous other men and women. The collective despair and anguish from various unnamed migrants illustrate their humiliation and hopelessness. By the end of the chapter, Raynard observes the tragic fate of four men who choose to leap overboard. He witnesses their preference to be brutally devoured by the circling sharks rather than endure repatriation, the consequences of the failed escape and the return to their former lives. The choice of ending one's life is also depicted in Prophète's novels. For example, the women in *Testament* who left Haiti had the right to choose their own deaths, implying that the right to determine one's fate is powerful and that staying would be an even more harrowing experience, an entrapment filled with despair and devoid of the hope for escape. This mirrors the story of the Nigerian women that Maritou

recounts to Lucie. Those who have no hope of *ailleurs* choose to end their lives. Spiralism encompasses the persistent and unending cycle of seeking a better elsewhere.

Just as Maritou talked of, dreamed of and planned for an *elsewhere*, so also did many of the characters in *Le Testament des solitudes*. Emmelie Prophète has called Haiti a country in transit. She replied to a question about this in an interview:

Haïti est un pays d'où tout le monde voudrait partir. Et cela depuis toujours. Aujourd'hui encore, dans les milieux ruraux en Haïti, quand quelqu'un décède on dit qu'il est retourné en Guinée, on parle du Golfe de Guinée, la grande côte où s'approvisionnaient les esclavagistes. L'Haïtien est tourmenté, il a toujours un voyage à faire. Il faut ajouter à cela les problèmes économiques, la dictature qui a duré presque trente ans. Le géographe Georges Anglade concluait il y a une quinzaine d'années que nous étions les nouveaux nomades de la terre.

Her words underscore the restlessness and perpetual struggle of Haitian people. The idea of a journey can be literal, as migration in search of a better life, and abstract, as the search for freedom and hope. The sense of displacement, elsewhere and exile is a defining feature of Haitian identity.

Exile in Haitian literature is not only prominent but is complex. Is the writer in exile, writing from *dehors*, as so many do from the diaspora? Or perhaps the author is writing from *dedans* about their experiences of escape or about others who have left? Elsewhere for those who leave Haiti is the hope of freedom and survival. Elsewhere for those who remain in Haiti is the dependency on those who have left and the doubt or despair around the decision to stay. In the 2010 *Étonnants Voyageurs* panel with Frankétienne, Prophète had this to say about Haitian writers from all over:

On parle d'Haïti et ses ailleurs parce que c'est un pays qui est composé. Il y a le pays lui-même, l'île et aussi les ailleurs, le Canada, la Floride, quelques villes d'Europe ou des États-Unis, où nous avons une importante diaspora et il y a une connexion quotidienne. On vit ensemble, même séparés par les mers, par les barrières administratives, on est soudés. (Frankétienne et Prophète, Café Littéraire)

Exile is a part of every Haitian life in one way or another. Prophète's description highlights the positive and unified side of many Haitian artists writing from the diaspora. Yanick Lahens discusses another dimension of exile from the point of view of a Haitian writer. In a 1993 interview, she expressed her thoughts about the forced exile of many intellectuals and writers on the part of the Duvalier dictatorships that provoked the deepening of what she calls "the syndrome of inner exile, a syndrome doubling up upon itself and connected to their [exiled writers'] ambiguous status in society as artists and their mounting social unease" (Zimra 82). What a complex psychological state to be displaced from their home, to have a fragmented identity and to carry the creative burden of expressing this human condition through writing. Lahens touches on the dual nature of a writer's burden from exile. In this interview, she does not praise the idea of political exile of course, but does recognize the positive result, that in sheer numbers, Haitian writers on the outside began to greatly surpass the volume of works published from within the country. This dynamic raises questions of identity for each writer who weaves their own experiences of migration into their works. Haitian identity as an emigrant is indeed complicated.

Louis-Philippe Dalembert is a Haitian poet and novelist who has also written about exile, as he has spent many years writing both from *dedans* and *dehors*. In his 1998 article, "Exil et

diaspora: une littérature en migration,” he elaborated on the various ways that exile is experienced:

Si le thème de l'exil est devenu une constante dans la littérature haïtienne, c'est parce qu'il correspond à la situation concrète que connaît l'écrivain tant à l'extérieur qu'à l'intérieur du pays. L'exil n'est donc pas lié au seul déplacement physique dans l'espace, volontairement ou non, du pays d'origine vers une terre étrangère. Il se traduit aussi dans l'isolement que vit l'écrivain dans son propre pays, brimé par un pouvoir hostile à toute littérature qui, de surcroît, prône un discours collectif. (41)

The physical displacement of an author or any individual can be unsettling as they are removed from cultural, linguistic and social roots. Exile involves the loss of the sense of belonging. Yet, the writer in his own country can experience exile: an alienation or silencing from within.

Frankétienne, Philoctète, Fignolé and other writers during the Duvalier regimes experienced oppression and hostility from within their own land. In essence, exile can manifest in two ways: internally, which can be physical or emotional, and externally, encompassing geographic, cultural, intellectual and sociopolitical aspects. The chaos-creation cycle of Spiralism encompasses all of these characteristics of exile, and the cycle continues today in contemporary literature.

Liminality

In her article referenced above, Robyn Cope states that *Le Testament des solitudes* is a study in liminality. Liminality in literature refers to the in-between moments, the space between an inciting incident in a story and the protagonist's resolution (Cope). Liminal space describes perfectly the narrator's "in-between", not just physically in the airport, but emotionally as she grieves her past and present losses and considers the women in her family who went in different

directions. Characters are not meant to stay here, in this in-between, in literature. Liminal experiences tend to lead to growth or transformation and the unease of ambiguity often resolves in a significant development. Storytelling encompasses the journey of a character as they navigate various experiences, leading to change and development from one identity to another. Yet, for both the narrator in *Testament* and for Raynand in *Mûr à crever*, the liminal space is where these characters reside. Through Raynand's unpredictable experiences and his often excited and desperate determination, his journey never manages to free him from his liminal state. Prophète's narrator, just like the Spiralist protagonist, remains in her in-between reality. Her mother, aunts and cousins also never leave their uneasy, unresolved liminality. In *Ailleurs*, Lucy remains as well, physically in Port-au-Prince, and also in her state of ambiguity, as she is still figuring out how to find freedom from her oppressive childhood family experiences. Maritou alone has a story that brings potential change. She alone potentially journeys not only out of Haiti but also to the hopeful and eventual end to her liminal space.

Joe Bunting, who writes for the site, *The Write Practice*, says that liminality is destructive and chaotic. It is often "violence or tragedy that forces the ending of one phase" and the metamorphosis to another (Bunting). Essentially, it is in the core of a traditional narrative when the protagonist evolves or transforms into a new version of themselves - whether as the hero, the winner, or simply a renewed individual, and often the journey is marked by pain, loss or suffering. Unfortunately for the characters in *Mûr à crever*, *Testament* and *Ailleurs*, they are perpetually held in chaos, violence, or tragedy. The liminal space of destruction of their daily lives does not have the fruitful outcome that is typically expected. Of course, we want the protagonists to attain their goals. Prophète's characters in *Testament* who succeeded in leaving were not able to leave behind the trauma. Raynand's struggles ended in his death. At the end of

Ailleurs Maritou has her passport, purchases her ticket and boards the plane, finally leaving, and she may be the exception who finds her new elsewhere. The story ends there, and the reader never knows if her escape from her liminal space is successful. For the Haitian, leaving does not guarantee escaping the spiral of liminal space. Resolution, change, progress, all remain elusive, leaving the characters trapped in a spiral of their chaotic realities.

Fragmentation

I noted earlier in this chapter that fragmentation is a key element in Prophète's writings; this is equally true for Frankétienne's Spiralist works. In both *Testament* and *Mûr à crever*, memories and thoughts appear disjointed, pausing then resuming several pages later.

Thematically representing the chaos-creation cycle of life in Haiti, fragmentation is an aspect that was present in writings in the 1960s and also today over fifty years later. Societal breakdowns leave the characters in broken spaces. Frankétienne and Prophète both also choose fragmentation as a deliberate narrative structure that reinforces the themes of incomplete and shattered identities and the continual search for life and happiness elsewhere.

The lack of chronology in the stories is an aspect of fragmentation. In a Spiralist nature, the narrator in *Testament* has trouble finding a beginning to her story because it is the story of all the women in her world, the experiences that are looped in an unending cycle. "Il faut que je trouve un commencement à cette histoire. Sera-ce possible?" (8). Later, she admits, "l'histoire m'échappe de temps à autre... mon histoire hachée, presque sans commencement" (37).

Adding to the element of fragmentation, both authors shift the point of view in their writings. In *Mûr à crever*, Frankétienne narrates the story of Raynand, yet the reader soon realizes that it is often unclear who is talking, who is expressing thoughts of frustration or worry, who is recalling a childhood memory, who is expounding on tenets of Spiralism. In fact, this

variation in voice from Raynand, Paulin and the author becomes itself a characteristic of this literary style, an element of Spiralism that captures the idea that the Haitian people, their experiences and their sentiments are repeated, shared and are part of the cycle of the spiral. Emmelie Prophète writes with the same sense of confused or blended point of view. The reader is often uncertain of who the “I” is when the point of view abruptly changes from third to first person. In *Ailleurs*, the voice of narration occasionally jumps from the third person to the first person without warning. The story of Maritou and Lucie is generally in the third person, yet Maritou’s voice interrupts Prophète’s own recount as she speaks directly to her sister, Clémence, of her need to leave, “l’ailleurs vers lequel je marche depuis toujours,” (95). Her writing is not strictly stream-of-consciousness, yet it conveys a similar sense of little control, as if something deep in the mind governs the flow of emotions and words. The train of thought can often be challenging to follow, and the characters sometimes seem to blend together, especially in *Testament* where the women lived and died lives of broken dreams. Frankétienne expressed a similar idea in *Mûr à crever*,

J’étouffe. J’écris tout ce qui me passe par la tête. L’important pour moi, c’est l’exorcisme. . . . Pourtant le malheur, la misère, le désespoir, la rage, les fleuves, les tempêtes, le sang, le feu, la mer, les cyclones, mon pays, les arbres, les montagnes, mon peuple, les femmes, les enfants, les vieillards, tous les hommes, toutes les choses et tous les êtres me gonflent la voix, à un point que, s’il arrive que j’échoue, j’aurai été réellement seul. (17–18)

Frankétienne is profoundly burdened by the issues he identifies: the despair of Haiti’s extreme climate and socio-political challenges. Prophète calls her story minced and without a beginning. Both authors express feelings of the words and the experiences being in control, the need for

expression is stronger than the writer. This feels frenetic, feverish in the case of Frankétienne, more burdened and sorrowful in the case of Prophète. Both capture the repeating turmoil and unending cycles that are characteristics of Spiralism. For Prophète, her burden also encompasses her memories. Memory is significant as she cycles through ancestral stories and present struggles.

To conclude this chapter it is important to revisit some final reflections on the relationship between Prophète's works and Spiralism. Frankétienne extensively discussed the concept of the spiral, and this quote may best capture the narrative elements that appear in his work *Mûr à crever* and in Prophète's novels, *Le Testament des solitudes* and *Ailleurs à soi*. "L'œuvre spirale est constamment en mouvement. C'est ce qui explique en partie cette suite de ruptures dans le développement du texte. D'ailleurs, il n'est nullement nécessaire de construire l'œuvre à partir d'un sujet précis" (Kauss). Frankétienne explains that *Mûr à crever* is not just a story about Raynard, but an evolving work that is not a fixed narrative. A spiralist work feels ruptured, without one specific subject at hand. This rings true also in *Testament* and *Un ailleurs*. Frankétienne continues his explanation,

Écrire devient dès lors une véritable aventure, celle d'un récit multipolaire où chaque mot, jouant le rôle de déclic, est susceptible de se transformer en noyau prêt à se désagréger pour donner naissance à d'autres entités verbales. En ce sens, la spirale est fondamentalement une œuvre ouverte, jamais achevée. La spirale est une tentative de saisir le réel dans la diversité de ses aspects. (Krauss)

Prophète captures this adventure, where one memory triggers another, and it becomes her struggle to try to grasp reality, to make sense and hope out of her experiences. The above quote

captures the essential elements of Spiralism that persist today in contemporary fiction: liminality, fragmentation and exile.

NOTES

¹Prophète does not treat lightly the realities that women characters in her novels face: they are often victims of incest, rape or forced into prostitution. These themes and harrowing truths are also present in the works of Edwidge Danticat, Kettly Mars and Myriam Chancy. These authors give voice to these issues in engaged and important ways. Indeed, I do not diminish their significance, however, fully analyzing the themes related to sexual violence falls outside the scope of this thesis.

Conclusion

I have argued that the characteristics of the Spiralism born in Haiti in the late 1960s during the Duvalier regime remain evident today. I have identified essential attributes of Frankétienne's foundational work which are prominently expressed in his overt declarations and also more subtly woven into his interesting narrative, *Mûr à crever*. Spiralism manifests itself in the repeating of characters and, as Glover put it, "the intrinsic schizophrenia of the Author as a creator whose fictional characters are ultimately extensions of himself" (*Haiti Unbound* 40). Frankétienne's aesthetic equally highlights the notion of repeating experiences where time is not linear, and chronology becomes fluid and indeterminate. This thesis explores why and to what extent Haitian literature has been marginalized, beginning with an overview of the country's history in order to create the foundation for exploring Spiralism and Frankétienne, the most prominent of the movement's founders. It includes an analysis of *Mûr à crever*, considered the quasi-manifesto of Spiralism, and examines Frankétienne's literary techniques that intertwine chaos and creation and challenge the linear concepts of time and space. The final section of this thesis explores the enduring influence of Spiralism in contemporary Haitian literature. Through an analysis of two of Emmelie Prophète's novels, this thesis argues that Spiralism continues to resonate in today's works in the themes of exile, liminality and fragmentation.

Fifty years after the emergence of this philosophical and aesthetic movement, to my knowledge, no one claims to write as a Spiralist, yet the narrative traits and distinctive features of this movement are recognizable in contemporary literature. While the works of Emmelie Prophète may not initially appear to connect to Spiralism, a closer examination reveals the underlying repeating cycles and similar themes in her works. My analysis of Prophète's novels highlights the fragmentation of characters, the liminal spaces and the theme of exile, and the

enduring influence of Spiralism is evident in her works. The Spiral continues, of course as Haiti endures cycles of oppression, resistance, renewal.

I began working on this thesis in the summer of 2024, and one of the first works that I read was Frankétienne's *Mûr à crever*. The dive into Spiralism began, and I was fascinated by everything this artist was sharing with the world. I wrote most of the content of this thesis before his passing on February 20, 2025. I cannot fully explain why I am so grateful to have begun my exploration into his works, his voice and his passion before he died. I feel like, in a very small way, I crossed paths with greatness, and I am fortunate to have discovered some of his artistic creations and to have made a contribution to the needed academic conversations around Frankétienne and Spiralism. Now that Frankétienne is no longer with us, it seems even more fitting and maybe urgent that the academic community, the literary world, Francophiles, and those who hope for a brighter future for Haitians explore and learn from and about Spiralism.

Additionally in recent months, new scholarship has been published that contributes to the conversations around Spiralism and contemporary Haitian fiction. I was unable to read these works and incorporate them into my ideas, but I have referenced them under sources consulted, as I was able to read chapter overviews as these new works were published. These works are *Spirals in the Caribbean: Representing Violence and Connection in Haiti and the Dominican Republic* by Sophie Mariñez and *A History of Haitian Literature*, edited by Darlene Daut and Kaiama Glover. Encouragingly, these new works indicate that there is continued interest in Haitian works and signal the relevance of Spiralism.

My aspirations in this project are many and diverse. I hope to see Haitian literature gain wider readership and appreciation and to honor Haitian writers who write from *dedans* and *dehors*. Additionally, I aim to spark interest in Spiralism, Haitian creole, Frankétienne and

Emmelie Prophète, fostering more academic conversations, explorations and connections. The spiral circling back to go forward does not leave behind the past but keeps it cyclically informing and influencing the present. Spiralism is not a movement of the past, but representative of the chaos-creation cycle that is Haiti's history, culture and present.

Works Cited

- Archibold, Randal. "A Prolific Father of Haitian Letters, Busier Than Ever," *The New York Times*, 29 April 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/30/world/americas/30haiti.html>. Accessed July 30, 2024.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective, Second Edition*. Translated by James E. Maraniss. Duke University Press, 1996.
- Bunting, Joe. "What is Liminality in Literature?" *The Write Practice*. <https://thewritepractice.com/liminality-story/>. Accessed Aug. 1, 2024.
- Cope, Robyn. Review of *Blue* by Emmelie Prophète, translated by Tina Kover. *World Literature Today*, vol. 96, no. 6, 2022, pp. 57-59.
- Castera, Georges. "L'écrivain haïtien: quelques considérations," *Iberoamericana*, vol. 15, no. 1. Länderschwerpunkt: Haiti, 1991, pp. 89-97.
- Dalembert, Louis-Philippe. "Exil et diaspora: une littérature en migration." *Notre Librairie*, January–April 1998, pp 40-45. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64967354/f49.item>. Accessed Dec. 5, 2024.
- "Dans l'œil de la spirale." *YouTube*, uploaded by In the Eye of the Spiral, July 16, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0Qmjt7gPz0&t=70s>. Accessed June 28, 2024.
- Dash, J. Michael. "Haïti Imaginaire: l'évolution de la littérature haïtienne moderne." *Notre Librairie*, January–April 1998, pp 46-51, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64967354/f49.item>. Accessed Dec. 5, 2024.
- "10 questions à Emmelie Prophète." Bibliothèque des Amériques. <https://www.bibliothequedesameriques.com/actualites-litteraires/portraits-dauteurs/10-questions-emmelie-prophete>. Accessed March 15, 2025.

- Douglas, Rachel. *Frankétienne and Rewriting: A Work in Progress*. Lexington Books, 2009.
- Gallagher, Mary. *Soundings in French Caribbean Writing since 1950: the Shock of Space and Time*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Glover, Kaiama. *Haiti Unbound, A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon*. Liverpool University Press, 2010.
- . “Present-ing the Past, The Persistence of the Para-Revolutionary Moment in Jean-Claude Figonle’s *Aube tranquille*.” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2010, pp. 208-226.
- Frankétienne and Prophète, Emmelie and Saint-Éloi, Rodney, panelists. *Café Littéraire. Étonnants Voyageurs*, 2010, <https://vimeo.com/45055868>. Accessed Feb 25, 2025.
- Frankétienne. *Mûr à crever*. Hoëbeke, 2013.
- Hermann-Bell, Bevin. *Asserting, Renewing and Expanding: The Littérisation of Contemporary Haitian Literature*. 2013. Concordia University, MA thesis.
- Johnson, Olivia. “Review: In the Eye of the Spiral.” *The Williams Record*. November 2, 2022, <https://williamsrecord.com/462127/arts/review-in-the-eye-of-the-spiral-and-wcma-exhibit-celebrate-haitian-artists/>. Accessed June 18, 2024.
- Jonassaint, Jean. “On Frankétienne: The Course of an Opus.” *Sirena: poesía, arte y crítica*, 2008, no. 1, pp.112-120.
- Kivland, Chelsea. *Street Sovereigns: Young Men and the Makeshift State in Urban Haiti*. Cornell University Press, 2020.
- Kauss, Saint-John. “Le Spiralisme de Frankétienne.” *Potomitan*. April, 2007, <https://www.potomitan.info/kauss/spiralisme.php>. Accessed December 14, 2024.
- Klausmeyer, Bryan. “Spirale (Spiral).” *Goethe-Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts*, 2021,

- <https://goethe-lexicon.pitt.edu/GL/article/view/22>. Accessed Nov. 16, 2024.
- Lahens, Yanick. “L'apport de quatre romancières au roman moderne haïtien,” *Journal of Haitian Studies*, vol. 3/4, 1997/1998, pp. 87-95.
- Laroche, Maximilien. *Le Miracle et la métamorphose: Essais sur les littératures du Québec et d'Haïti*. Éditions du Jour, 1970.
- Latin American Studies Association, Haiti*. Vodou: History and Cultural Significance. <https://haiti.lasaweb.org/en/vodou-history-and-cultural-significance/>. Accessed Dec. 5, 2024.
- Le Bris, Michel, et al. “Pour une littérature-monde en français.” *Le Monde*, March 15, 2007.
- Magnier, Bernard. “Jean-Claude Fignolé, poète de la mémoire.” *Notre Librairie*, January–March 1991, pp. 45–48, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6496734q/f47.item>. Accessed December 30, 2024.
- Merriam, Michael. “Haitian Literature as a Model for World Literature.” *World Literature Today*, vol. 89, no. 2, 2015, pp. 26-28.
- . “Haitian is My Language: A Conversation with Frankétienne.” *World Literature Today*, vol. 89, no. 2, 2015, pp. 22-25.
- Nesbitt, Nick. “Troping Toussaint, Reading Revolution”, *Research in African Literatures*, Summer, 2004, vol. 35, no. 2, Haiti 1804-2004, pp. 18-33.
- . *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature*. University of Virginia Press, 2003.
- Prophète, Emmelie. *Un ailleurs à soi*. Mémoire d'Encrier, 2018.
- . Interview by Brad Listi. “When you feel things you have to talk about them: Emmelie

- Prophète on writing about family,” *Otherppl*, Feb. 4, 2022.
<https://lithub.com/when-you-feel-things-you-have-to-talk-about-them-emmelie-prophete-on-writing-about-family/>. Accessed Feb. 1, 2025.
- . *Le Testament des solitudes*. Éditions Mémoire d’Encrier, 2013.
- Rodriguez, Antonio. *Le pacte lyrique*. Éditions Mardaga, 2003.
- Sutter, Paul. “Chaos theory explained: a dive into an unpredictable univers.” *Space*.
<https://www.space.com/chaos-theory-explainer-unpredictable-systems.html>, Accessed
January 12, 2025.
- Taleb-Khyar, Mohamed. “Frankétienne.” *Callaloo*, vol. 15, no. 2, Haitian Literature and Culture,
Part 1, Spring 1992, pp. 385-392.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Beacon Press,
1995.
- Zimra, Clarisse. “Haitian Literature After Duvalier: An Interview with Yanick Lahens.”
Callaloo, vol. 16, no. 1, Winter 1993, pp. 77-93.

Works Consulted

- Batraville, Nathalie. "Éloge du spirralisme: projets poétiques et politiques caribéens dans *Mûr à crever de Frankétienne*," *Small Axe*, no. 55, 2018, pp. 89-102.
- Chancy, Myriam. *Spirit of Haiti*. Mango Publishing, 2004.
- . *What Storm, What Thunder*. Tin House Books, 2021.
- Danticat, Edwidge. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Vintage, 1994.
- . *Brother, I'm Dying*. Vintage, 2008.
- . *Everything Inside*. Knopf, 2019.
- . *Haiti Noir 2*. Akashic Books, 2014.
- . *Krik? Krak!* Vintage, 1996.
- Daut, Marlene D., and Kaiama Glover, editors. *A History of Haitian Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2024.
- Depestre, René. *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*. Gallimard, 1998.
- Dubois, Laurent. *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*. Picador, 2013.
- Figolé, Jean-Claude. *Aube tranquille*. Paris: Seuil, 1990.
- Gysells, Kathleen. "One Hour for Eternity: A Conversation with Jean-Claude Figolé." *Journal of Haitian Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2010, pp. 8-14.
- Mariñez, Sophie. *Spirals in the Caribbean: Representing Violence and Connection in Haiti and the Dominican Republic*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024.
- Nzengou-Tayo, Marie-José. Review of *Mûr à Crever* by Frankétienne. *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 1, Turning our Heads to Haiti, 2016, pp. 141-142.

- Philoctète, René. *Poèmes des îles qui marchent*. Actes Sud, 2003.
- Prophète, Emmelie. *Impasse Dignité*. Mémoire d'Encrier, 2018.
- . *Le bout du monde est une fenêtre*. Mémoire d'Encrier, 2018.
- . *Le reste du temps*. Mémoire d'Encrier, 2010.
- . *Les villages de Dieu*. Mémoire d'Encrier, 2022.
- Suarez, Lucia. "Breath, Eyes, Memory: Rape, Memory, Denunciation," *Journal of Haitian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2003, pp. 111-125.
- Watkins, Angela. "Restoring Haitian Women's Voices and Verbalizing Sexual Trauma in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*." *Journal of Haitian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2016, pp. 106-127.
- Shelton, Marie-Denise. "Haitian Women's Fiction." *Callaloo*, vol. 15, no. 3, Summer 1992, pp. 770-777.
- Waite, Geneviève. "L'Haïti métaphorique de Frankétienne". *Journal of Haitian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2020, pp. 128-148.

