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“Russell Banks goes Creole”: A Talk with the Author of *The Book of Jamaica* and *Continental Drift*

Kathleen Gyssels and Gaëlle Cooreman

1 Born on March 28th 1940 in Massachusetts, Russell Banks grew up in New Hampshire in a working class family. In 1958, Banks was the first in his family to be admitted to Colgate University but dropped out after nine weeks, feeling uncomfortable among the students of wealthy families. Instead, he hitchhiked to Florida hoping to join Fidel Castro’s revolution against Fulgencio Batista. He worked as a plumber, a shoe salesman and a window dresser. In 1967, he eventually graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A year earlier, he had founded Lillabulero Press with William Matthews and had started publishing Lillabulero, a literary magazine. In the following years, Banks published poetry and taught at Emerson College and at the University of New Hampshire. He also taught at Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence College, and Princeton University. In 1975, he published his first two books, the collection of short stories *Searching for Survivors* and the novel *Family Life*. In 1976 and 1977, he spent eighteen months in Jamaica. Subsequently, he published *The New World* (1978), *Hamilton Stark* (1978) and *The Book of Jamaica* (1980). In the years that followed, he wrote *Trailerpark* (1981), *The Relation of my Imprisonment* (1983), *Continental Drift* (1985), *Success Stories* (1986), *Affliction* (1989), *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991), and Rule of the Bone (1995). His last books to date are *Cloudsplitter* (1998), *The Angel on the Roof* (2000) and *The Darling* (2004). Russell Banks won numerous prizes and awards for his fiction, including the John Dos Passos Award and a nomination for the Pulitzer Price with *Continental Drift*. Moreover, *Affliction* and *The Sweet Hereafter* have been successfully adapted to cinema, while *The Book of Jamaica*, *Rule of the Bone* and *Continental Drift* are currently being made into films.

2 This interview was conducted by Kathleen Gyssels (KG) and Gaëlle Cooreman (GC), on May 27th 2007 in Paris. Banks went to discuss with filmmaker Raoul Peck the adaptation of his boat people novel *Continental Drift* (1985). Until now, the problem of Haitian illegal migration to the United States remains underrepresented in daily news and international broadcasting as well as in Haitian literature. After the literary essay *De si jolies petites plages* (1982) by Jean-Claude Charles,
Banks was the first writer to dedicate an entire novel to the Haitian boat people. Since that time, in Haitian literature, the problem of the boat people has remained a detail in theatre (‘Ton Beau capitaine’ (1987) by Simone Schwarz-Bart), and a more elaborate subject in poetry (DreamHaiti (1994/1995) by Kamau Brathwaite), short stories (‘Children of the Sea’ (1994) by Edwidge Danticat), children’s literature (Haiti Chérie (1991) by Maryse Condé; Alexis d’Haïti (1999) and Alexis, fils de Raphaël (2000) by Marie-Célie Agnant) and the novel (Passages (1991) by Emile Ollivier; L’Autre face de la mer (1998) by Louis-Philippe Dalembert).

The Great Creole-American Novel

KG: Could you tell us more about your idea of the Great American Novel. How do you see it and how far are you in really accomplishing this ideal?

RB: It is a fascinating concept to me, you know, because it seems almost peculiar to the United States, the chimera, the idea that there could be such a thing as the Great American novel. The concept first appears in print right after the Civil War. The author, John William DeForest, calls for a Great American Novel and he examines the existing novels. He questions whether Uncle Tom’s Cabin is a Great American Novel. He considers Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, and James Fenimore Cooper. None of them seem to him to be satisfactory because none of them are able, at the level of literary art, to accomplish all the varieties of American society, American geography, American politics, and so forth. None of them are inclusive enough. But that’s the first mention of it. It was picked up again in the twentieth century, mainly as a critical concept. But writers sometimes buy into critical concepts and are led by them and this one has been a particularly attractive one to American writers. You know, I’ve spoken with writers from China and Europe as well and they sort of envy us for having that unattainable goal out there. The “Great Chinese Novel” was already written a thousand years ago, the “Great French Novels” were written in the nineteenth century, the “Great Spanish Novel” was written in the seventeenth century, the “Great English Novels” were written in the eighteenth century. Ours are unwritten, ours are still out there. The idea of it sets a very high standard for us. It’s unwritten and so we aspire to it, in a way. It’s sort of the “Great White Whale” of the novel, sailing out there in the sea, and we all are in our little boats. I have been searching for it and hoping to harpoon it.

KG: I see that you are reading Hemingway?

RB: I do. Because one of the reasons I love Paris is that when I was about twenty-one years old I read A Moveable Feast. I loved the romance of Paris in the 1920s as Hemingway captures it in that book. Much of the novel’s setting is here, in this district. I decided to buy a copy this morning and now, when I started reading it again, I am falling in love with Paris all over again as a result of it.

KG: And of course there are other expatriates that you admire like James Baldwin who spent so many years here. But how did you become involved with the African diaspora? Your first novels don’t bring out the racial component.

RB: It doesn’t really begin to appear till The Book of Jamaica and that was in the late seventies. That’s the first time that I began to try to penetrate the mystery of race in America through writing. But I first encountered that mystery of the presence, or rather the underpresence of race in the late fifties when I was barely eighteen years old and I left New England “on the road” à la Kerouac and ended up in Miami, Saint-Petersburg.
and other places in Florida. This was during segregation days, before the Civil Rights era, and for the first time I became aware of the presence of African American life. I was raised in northern New England essentially in an all white society and at the time in America you could very easily avoid that knowledge. You could go all the way through High School and if you never left you could go all the way through your life and never know, never speak with a black person so it was eye-opening to me. I was discovering America in a way and later when I went to University in 1964, I ended up in North Carolina at Chapel Hill and that was a great beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. It was right there in front of me. I walked into Chapel Hill in September 1964, and twenty-four hours later I was in jail because they were demonstrating and marching right there in the street, and I got involved instantly as a kind of a principle of a romantic young man. It was difficult if not impossible... It was not impossible to avoid but it was difficult to avoid.

KG: So the political turmoil made very soon an activist of you?

RB: Yes and I became it quickly. It became an integral part of my political education as well as my social education starting in that period in the sixties, and then in the seventies it was really a part of my political awareness and social awareness. But it didn’t enter my fictional imagination until I went to live in Jamaica in the nineteen seventies, and once I was out of the country. Moreover, I was a white person living in a black society in a time of turmoil. I was fascinated by the attempts that Michael Manley was making to go the third way in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet influences, to try to survive somehow without becoming a client of either as Cuba had become a client of the Soviet State or so many of the other islands and smaller countries in that area had become clients of the US. I thought he was a very brave and interesting, imaginative and talented statesman and he was a socialist. I was politically engaged by him.

KG: The Marxist years and also the anti-Americanism already. I think that is really your issue there.

RB: By then I had started to identify myself as a person of the left and as a critic of American policy because of the Vietnam War and so many other policies as well. But I hadn’t really imaginatively engaged the issue of race or the narrative of race by that time until really I got to Jamaica and I just allowed myself to do it. I think I’ve felt a kind of restraint about writing about race. I just thought: « This is not my story ». Then I began to realize: « No, I can write about this. It is my story as well ». It’s not just a black person’s story. It’s a white person’s story. It’s an American story and it’s central to the American experience. Wherever you stand racially, whatever your racial identity is. And so I felt: « OK, I can do this. I really have to find technical means in order to express my awareness of difference rather than awareness of sameness. I can tell this story if I am aware of telling it from the point of view of a white man looking out and not from the point of view of a black man looking this way ». It was an interesting contrast because William Styron in Confessions of Nat Turner had done the opposite, he had taken the point of view of the black man looking out and so it raised certain moral/aesthetic issues, political issues with regard to representation and literature.

KG: But you find Styron’s perspective also very successful, I think.

RB: Not really, the way I feel about Styron’s was that I didn’t think it was illegitimate. I didn’t agree with the critics of that book, the black critics of that book in terms of its legitimacy. I just found it aesthetically unsatisfying. What he had projected onto the
protagonist simply was implausible to me linguistically, formally and aesthetically. He had projected onto a man who was supposedly barely literate if at all a kind of neo-Victorian diction and vocabulary and sentence structure. That rhetorical perspective was utterly forced to me. Only a white person would do that kind of projection onto a black person, would feel entitled to that, with no respect for what would have to have been his vision and his world view. He didn’t do his homework in that sense. He did his historical homework, but he didn’t do his imaginative homework.

**Voice, Vodoun⁹ and Vévé in *Continental Drift***

**GC**: In that respect, you really did your imaginative homework in *Continental Drift*. What really struck me was the kind of narrative device you use there. The narrator is very « overt » (Rimmon-Kennan, 1983), certainly in the Haitian story. Other critics have emphasized « the intrusive quality of the voice » (Douglas, 2001). Is it a kind of anti-realistic technique? It seems to me that you want to show that you can’t tell Vanise’s story from her point of view. In Bob’s story there are many dialogues, the characters are able to speak for themselves, while Vanise remains quiet. It is always the narrator who is commenting upon the characters’ mood and mental state. As a result, there are barely dialogues in the Haitian story.

**RB**: That’s to the point, actually, because I felt perfectly comfortable narrating Bob Dubois’ story from a third-person subjective narrative point of view, and I felt entitled to do that. But with Vanise’s story I had to invoke a different kind of narrator, one that was almost Olympian. I imagine that really I see the Haitian loa speaking. The concept of the loa is interesting to me as a way to do this, because in vodoun the loa is a spirit of the death which is invoked. I am very clear to myself and to the reader as well that this is a magical voice in a sense speaking; this is not a conventional authorial voice. And so I felt comfortable enough to describe her world from the point of view of this deity. The invocation of that deity and the artifice of the Haitian vodoun ceremony allowed me to translate Vanice’s worldview and ideas. Each of the stages of the novel follows the various stages of the ceremony.

**GC**: Next to the presence of the loa, there is the Western aspect in *Continental Drift*. When I first read the « Invocation », I immediately thought of epics like Virgil’s *Aeneid* or Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. You invoke a loa (instead of a muse), you resume the story you’re about to tell, and in the « Envoi », you inform the reader about what will happen after the end of the story. You also specify the message of the novel. Can you comment on this « mixture » of genres and the deliberate presence of the epic?

**RB**: That was very deliberate, indeed. I was trying to use certain structural elements and images that are familiar to us, the Western European classical literature on the one hand and use images and vocabulary in some ways drawn in this case from Haitian imaginative narrative, whether it’s ritualistic or religious or storytelling, on the other hand.

**GC**: Do you consider *Continental Drift* as an epic novel?

**RB**: Well, yes, that was deliberate and that’s why it ends with the *Envoi* too, which is another kind of Western feature.

**GC**: On the other hand your heroes are different from those of the classical epics, who come from higher social classes. There is always a successful ending too. Your characters
are like anti-heroes from this point of view, and there's no happy ending, apart from Vanisè's survival.

22 RB: I don't see Dubois as an anti-hero. Actually, my cultural orientation forbids drawing a hero from an upper-class. It's something that was explored very early on by American writers and legitimized in American literature starting with Mark Twain. He would make a hero from the lower class and even from an adolescent boy with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* particularly10. And then in the twentieth century it is a given that you can write tragedy and you can write epic and draw your protagonist from the lower, middle or any class at all.

23 GC: You say in chapter two that the real heroes are those people who migrate and leave everything behind to go to places they know nothing about.

24 RB: I take this as natural for America because from our inception in the seventeenth century or even before that was a primary modus. Leaving corrupt old Europe and starting over, you know, in this virginal wilderness as we thought. « The New World ». That whole notion of there being « a new world » is a pretty powerful one. It's reinforced over and over and over again by geography and by mythology and by history and by economics. After a couple of hundred years, you take it for granted. It's in your cultural DNA.

25 GC: In relation to vodoun, it is also worth noting that in the original American edition, you draw a vèvè at the beginning of each chapter.

26 RB: Yes, right, the little vèvès, the vèvès, which is how you begin each stage of the ceremony.

27 KG: What a pity that those vèvès disappeared from the French translation.

28 GC: You made yourself a cover illustration in the form of a collage, which also disappeared from the French translation.

29 RB: In the American edition it's on the front cover. They only used it in the hardcover first edition in the United States. But then it was Harper & Row.

30 KG: The American edition respected those significant details while the French translation cut out these paratextual elements11.

31 RB: It was the first novel of mine to be translated into French, with Belfond, which is a large commercial house. I was flattered and pleased that they were bringing it out here, and then, once it was done, I was sort of stuck with it. There wasn't a great deal I could do about it. Since, I have spoken with Actes Sud, and Actes Sud has been a very wonderful publisher for me over the years.

32 KG: This editor, with a Belgian director, Hubert Nyssen, carefully chooses the cover illustrations, the lay out and other paratextual elements, and even the paper12.

33 RB: They are more appropriate and then they've done new fresh editions each time, and Pierre Furlan became my regular translator. Until now I have been working with Pierre closely and we've become quite good friends.

34 KG: What about the Creole? Did you ask a Creolophone to help you and do you consider using footnotes or a glossary?

35 RB: No, well, I did work with someone who knew Creole. Whenever there is Creole in *Contental Drift*, either just before or just after, there is a paraphrase.
KG: This is an important issue for Martinican writers. I don’t know if you know Patrick Chamoiseau. Do you follow that « branche » of literature?

RB: Not closely, but I think Chamoiseau is a great novelist. I think Texaco is a great novel and wonders come out of French language. There are some fascinating younger Jamaican novelists coming along too, young writers like Colin Channer. And I am interested in people like Linton Kwesi Johnson who are working with language in ways that really attract me. But I by no means have a comprehensive view of it. It’s more or less just a consequence of my ongoing interest in the Caribbean and in that world.

Continental Drift, from the Waves on the Page to the Screen

KG: Could you tell us more about your choice of Raoul Peck as stage director for the movie, which interests us very much, especially as we are becoming very sceptical about the powers of literature. People don't read anymore. But they do go to movies. Do you also believe that Continental Drift, which to us is a chef-d'oeuvre, will be much more important when it’s going to be a movie by Raoul Peck?

RB: I hope so. I am involved as a writer and a producer and I control it as much as possible. We’re casting it now. It’s a difficult movie. We’ve been working on it for ten years to try to get it made and I was told many times by financiers and producers that if I would just change it to Cuba and make them Cubans instead of Haitians there wouldn’t be any problem. Haitians have a particular image in the United States. When people think of Haitians, they think of extreme poverty, of AIDS, and of French-speaking black people. This American imagination is pretty scary. It combines all those things. So that’s one of the reasons I wanted to work with Raoul Peck. I could not think of a single American director, white or black, who could do justice to the Haitian part of the story. To me, that’s crucial. It must be central to the movie.

KG: I was a bit disappointed to see that Lumumba, for example, didn’t stay long on the program, even in Belgium, in spite of its obvious importance given our colonial past. I hope that Continental Drift will be a great success.

RB: I think so, I hope so. There has been, you know, a push, for over the last few years the novel has been taught at many universities and now the people who are actually making the movies read the novel at university.

KG: When the movie is released, huge groups of people and students will discover your novel. Lots of movie fans will want to come back to the novel or discover for the first time Continental Drift.

RB: That’s what happened with the other books that have been made into movies. In fact, it increased the readership to a great degree. So I don’t feel any deep conflict between making a film out of a novel and having the novel’s life continue, because the film can accelerate and enlarge upon the novel’s readership, if it’s a good film.

« Marassa » Novels and Marooning

KG: Tell us more about the first book in which you deal with the Caribbean, The Book of Jamaica, which I consider a novel on the possibilities of a nation coming out of a specific
pan-Caribbean ideology rooted in Jamaica, Rastafarianism. This political movement with high spiritual meaning and an anti-colonial agenda really is rooted in the phenomenon of the Jamaican maroon societies and can be considered a maroon ideology. *Continental Drift* and *The Book of Jamaica*, to me, are twin novels, or marassa (Creole for « twins »). You could intertwine both novels, especially with the character of the Rasta, « bro » Terron (in *The Book of Jamaica*), coming back as Tyrone, the Rasta who traffics Haitians to Miami (in *Continental Drift*). *The Book of Jamaica* is about Rastafarianism, which does not work out. Today, Jamaica is a very violent society, and we can barely speak about harmony in the nation. I heard, for example, terrible things about gay men nearly escaping being lynched in February this year. In Haiti, ordinary people are not only victims of political and domestic violence, but they fall prey to sexual violence, too. The French slogan « Honneur et Patrie », replaced by Haitians' « Honneur et respect », no longer seems accurate. Today justice is no longer guaranteed, human rights are violated and the peasantry suffers daily from the lack of food, medical aid, and most of all respect. The Haitian society proves a very violent society as you show at the very start of *Continental Drift* where a road accident with a van charged with meat generates a robbery by a young, poor boy, Charles, who then has to flee because his aunt and adoptive mother knows which punishment he and herself will endure by the very hands of Vanice's « concubine », a local policeman. Do you intend to address the problem of the collapse of Caribbean unity and the Caribbean community? Is it on purpose that this Tyrone figure comes back in *Continental Drift* to sell his sister and brothers, in a way? If you consider two centuries of Caribbean History/histories, if you see it from a historical perspective, how much do you account for the legacy of slavery?

RB : That's an interesting connection. I didn't have the connection between the two books in my mind that way, but I can certainly see how it can be done. I think the breakdown, or rather the loss of community in both places, in Haiti and in Jamaica, which I followed closely over the years is really due to external factors more than to internal factors. Partly, of course, it's the history of slavery and colonialism and the difficulties of transcending those oppressive histories and the institutions that are remnants still today of those hundreds of centuries of criminal rule. I view colonialism and slavery as criminal simply and purely, not merely illegal, because after all, they were both legal. But they nonetheless are criminal and a couple of centuries ago these communities lived in a criminalized atmosphere, in which all the institutions were essentially criminal and exploitative. The only third-world colonial society that I ever spent any time in that seems to have created for itself a national myth that isn't defensive and isn't in reaction to slavery and colonialism is Cuba, where the mythology of the Revolution has displaced the mythology of overcoming colonialism or slavery. A kind of new narrative appears starting in 1958. It sets almost a curtain between the history of slavery and the history of colonialism. I have been down there two times in recent years. One of the things that amazed me was a conscious or deliberate attempt to establish a new mythology of independence that was not anti-colonial and not anti-slavery. As a result, there isn't this kind of shadow hovering over Cubans the same way that it hovers over Haitians and Jamaicans. There isn't this kind of insecure reaction against the history of slavery and the history of colonialism. There are heroes, but their heroes are the Revolution, you know the Great figures of Che Guevara and so forth, and Fidel, etc. And there are stories of the Granma coming in from Mexico, and the stories of Fidel and the boys up in the Sierra Maestra Mountains. So there's a whole narrative and it's a part of their way of imagining
themselves the same way Americans imagine their own war of independence. We have a set of heroes, we have a set of stories... and so nobody sits around thinking about having been an English colony. So that part of our story is in some sense displaced by the story of the war of independence, and we call it the revolutionary war. It was our Revolution and it's a rather different story. Haiti and Jamaica don't have quite the same kind of freedom from that old narrative. That's one thing. The other thing that's much more political and economic, though, has to do with the control and manipulation of both countries' lives in the twentieth century particularly by the United States and the use made of these countries by the United States' economic and political interests. Haiti and Jamaica are islands large enough to be nation-states as is Cuba, in contrast to Antigua or the Lesser Antilles. What they have become over the years is essentially client states of the United States. Every now and then they try to declare their independence, and whenever they do they have to pay a very heavy price for it. For instance, look at how the dependency of Jamaica on tourism has essentially demoralized the country. The violence took off in Jamaica in the late seventies when guns and gangsters started running the political machinery in Kingston and Montego Bay in the interest of Seaga's party that was trying to overthrow Michael Manley's party with support from the Americans and the CIA. That's when we started seeing violence in Jamaica. Then very shortly after that the drug trade started to finance violence. The eighties have been overrun by drug corruption, too, and the last decade particularly.

The Writer's Wit, the Critics Witnessing

KG: In an interview, can you allow a lot of irony, and a lot of « hide and seek »?

RB: It's not a good idea, because you will end up on the internet, it will end up circulating for the next ten years and it will be coming back to haunt you. I know a young man here in Paris who has put together a book of interviews with me that go back twenty-five or more, thirty years. He has gone back to archives and found all these old interviews. I haven't read it yet, but I am sure I contradicted myself many times over the years.

KG: I didn't find yet any contradiction in the very instructive conversations you had with Reeves (1987), Birnbaum (2005), Rae-Connor (2003). Authors, especially postcolonial authors, sometimes have a body of interviews that outmatches the body of fiction. We critics and scholars are a « privileged » generation in that we can encounter the novelist, have a talk, ask him or her directly our questions. In the best occasions, we have a nice time exchanging thoughts and views on the real world besides the fiction. Not so with Hemingway or Melville. In that perspective, how do you see the Internet in its expanding horizon? Don't you feel anxious about such a kind of evolution?

RB: It's simple, to me it's a working condition and I don't take it too seriously. I think all it means is there are different generations of writers who have developed different kinds of skills in order to deal with the fact that you do have a proper identity and to some it's more difficult than others. I mean, Don DeLillo, or even Thomas Pynchon, has given none over the years. I don't feel particularly vulnerable that way. On the other hand, I don't seek it. I am fortunate in some respect because no one paid much attention to me until I was well into my middle or late forties and by that time my habits of work and my friendships and my relationships were pretty much established and so it didn't really alter my life. Most of my life I have been somewhat out of the mainstream. I have lived in upstate New York for the last twenty years or in New Hampshire or wherever but I
havent lived in New York or in a place where I might be exposed to the media so I haven’t had that much trouble with it particularly.

**Intertextual Waves beyond the Riff of Language**

50 GC : Now I would like to go back to Continental Drift and I would like to ask if you know Emile Ollivier who can be considered the most important Haitian-Canadian writer living and working in Montreal where he died unfortunately in 2002 ?

51 RB : Yes, I do. I have met him here in Paris several times.

52 GC : I see striking resemblances between your Continental Drift, and his Passages. There are also two stories, one about a character that resembles very much the author, in this case Normand, a Haitian intellectual living in Quebec. On the other hand you have a boat people woman, Brigitte. Moreover, the two stories meet at the end of the novel. Do you think Ollivier might have read your novel ?

53 RB : That may well be, I don’t know. I think he read the book in French in the late eighties.

54 GC : And Passages is from 1991, so it could be possible. Especially as Ollivier uses the metaphor of the migratory birds.

55 RB : That’s interesting.

56 GC : They are coming to die on Florida’s beaches. On the radio and in the local newspapers there is a lot more fuss about the death of those birds than about the Haitian boat people, who also had to flee their island when the Americans disposed of poisoned waste near their village.

57 RB : That’s really interesting, well, that’s fascinating. I hope that’s true actually. I would be delighted. That kind of sharing is something useful to anyone. Useful to me, useful to him.

58 KG : I also had in mind Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow, with the Papa Legba figure introducing the protagonist Avey Johnson to the ritual of the Nation Dance on the island of Carriacou. Paule Marshall’s husband was a Haitian anthropologist, by the way. In Continental Drift, your Papa Legba character similarly appears as a crippled old man. In other words there are the same surreal circumstances, as well as the same vodoun initiation. So I was thinking maybe Russell Banks has read Praisesong for the Widow ?

59 RB : I didn’t know her work until quite a bit later actually. I learned most of the Haitian religion, society, history the way probably most white American intellectuals would learn it : in the library. I realized that there were these iconic figures that run through the Haitian imagination and that they were to me very useful to bring into the story a rather detailed and careful study of the history of Haitian vodoun and the imagery of it and its meaning, to try to use it to help structure the novel. I think that those figures are like Christian figures you know that appeared in European and North American literature to a great degree. They’re inescapable. Do you read fiction by American Southern writers ? In Faulkner all the way up to Flannery O’Connor to contemporary writers like even I won’t say Richard Ford so much as Barry Hannah, you see the same use of fundamentalist Christian imagery appear whether it’s Roman Catholic as it is with Flannery O’Connor or Baptist as it is in Barry Hannah. That imagery is inescapable. It is part of the cultural landscape.
KG: If we could come back to Ollivier: could it be that nobody brings out this connection because of the language barrier? In Caribbean literature, I struggle all the time with it. For every Anglo-Caribbean novel I found a Franco-Caribbean one. But the language barrier is so big that people don’t see those intertextual waves, and the comparative approach is missing in the criticism as it is also missing in our teaching programs and conferences’ goals. Of course, Dutch Caribbean literature has always been the “hidden wave”, the absent component in a discipline (Caribbean studies) which is otherwise quite boosting.

RB: There’s the language and then there are two other dividing lines I think that resist integration, if that’s what you’re asking for. One is racial. A white writer writing about the Caribbean is generally isolated from the audience of a black Caribbean writer or even a black American writer and then there is also the simple national identity, which isn’t necessarily linguistic. Sometimes people are very familiar with Jamaican writers and don’t know anything about Trinidadian writers or vice versa. It’s the same language but it is a different national identity. Part of that is due to the writers themselves and part of it is due to the way the national culture promotes itself as well. I think you’ve got three different factors operating. So the work that you’re doing as a Caribbeanist and I like to think the work that I do too works towards integration.

KG: What are your future projects on the Caribbean diaspora worldwide or the African diaspora?

RB: No real conscious program. I mean, for me, writing a novel is a way of dealing with something that’s mysterious to me and trying to penetrate something that I can’t otherwise penetrate and that I can’t understand except by writing a novel about it. And I do return, obviously, to certain themes, certain central obsessions but the Caribbean is not one of them. I think the history of race in America is one of them and I do return to that in different ways. There are different chapters of it that fascinate me at different times. For instance, with The Darling it was the chapter of Liberia that fascinated me, and I wanted to try to somehow explore that and understand that through the novel, but once it’s done, I feel like: “Well, OK, I think I got that now and I try to move on”. The novel I just finished, there isn’t a single black person in it!

Thank you very much for this insightful conversation about your writing, and we look forward to seeing the Continental Drift adaptation in the Seventh Art.


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NOTES


2. As we prepared this interview, on Friday May 25th, a migrant vessel with 150 Haitians on board capsized while towed by a Turks and Caicos police boat. Official reports counted 20 people dead, 63 had survived the shark-infested waters, the rest was missing.

3. « DreamHaiti » first appeared as one of the poems in DreamStories (Longman, 1994). A more elaborate version of the poem was published separately in 1995 with Savacou North.


5. See Banks, « Lire et relire Moby Dick », Magazine littéraire 456 (September 2006), 32 : « Certes, j’arrivais à comprendre que ce roman [...] traitait de l’Amérique et que le baleinier, le Pequod, était une Nef des fous, une métaphore qui idéalisait la démocratie américaine en même temps qu’elle la parodait dans son mélange de races et de classes, dans sa mission commerciale consistant à tuer la grande baleine blanche, la ramener et vendre l’huile tirée de son corps ; qu’elle la parodait aussi dans la folle, la fanatique recherche d’absolu de son chef le capitaine Achab qui, lui, veut tuer la baleine pour des raisons personnelles essentiellement religieuses [...] Mais pour moi, [...] Moby Dick était un portail qui s’ouvrait sur des salles plus vastes, pensées à une échelle plus grande, que tout ce que j’avais été capable de concevoir jusque-là. Le roman sur la traque de la baleine blanche, terrifiante et vengeresse, est alors devenu l’image même de ma vie et de mon travail. [...] je peux toujours me tourner vers Moby Dick et le relire. Car, dans la mesure où j’ai changé, lui aussi ».


7. Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

8. See Continental Drift : « It was still possible at the time this story takes place, the late 1970s, to grow up in America without having known a single black person well enough to learn his or her name, without having seen a black person, except on television or from a great distance, even when that person happened to be standing right next to you in line at the bank or in a cafeteria or on a bus. Bob Dubois and his wife Elaine grew up that way », 61.


11. Generally, Actes Sud chooses carefully iconographical material that suits the content of the novel. The cover illustration by Winslow Homer, « Hurricane », 1898, on The Book of Jamaica translation is indeed very appropriate. Homer was an American painter who lived in the Bermudas, the Caribbean and the Bahamas. He was famous for his portrayals of rural life, ti case créole of fisher men and women and coastal landscapes.

12. Actes Sud publishes several authors dealing with the history and society of the « First Black Republic » ; such as Madison Smartt-Bell’s Trilogy on Toussaint Louverture (Le Soulevement des Ames, 1994 ; Maître des carrefours, 2004 ; and La Pierre du bâtisseur, 2007) as well as Haitian authors such as Lyonel Trouillot (Bicentenaire, 2004) and Fabienne Pasquet (La deuxième mort de Toussaint Louverture, 2001).
13. Raoul Peck is a Haitian-born artist who grew up in the « Congo belge », returned to Port-au-Prince and became minister of culture from 1995 to 1997. He deals in depth with the repressive regime in Un Homme sur les quais (1993) in which an opponent to the terror of the dictatorship is murdered. In Lumumba, Death of a Prophet (2000), Peck stages Patrice Lumumba, who has been brutally tortured, kidnapped and killed with the aid of the CIA and Mobutu, at that moment still a young lieutenant. In his last movie, Sometimes in April, (2005), Peck deals with the Rwanda genocide which started in April 1994. While all of his productions are having a huge impact on cinema regarding the African continent and its diaspora, they are not in spite of their tremendous qualities cash successes.

ABSTRACTS
This interview with Russell Banks, acknowledged author of The Book of Jamaica (1980) and Continental Drift (1985), amongst others, was conducted on May 27th 2007 by Kathleen Gyssels and Gaëlle Cooreman (University of Antwerp). The main topics included are Banks’ idea of the Great American Novel, his involvement with the African diaspora and his « Caribbean » novels The Book of Jamaica and Continental Drift.


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