

Following in Île-en-Île's Footsteps

Nathan H. Dize

Beginnings

I remember when I was first asked to contribute to the online archive Île-en-Île. In the summer of 2017, I was taking part in the Haitian Creole Summer Institute at Florida International University when I received an email from Thomas Spear. He asked me if I would be interested in composing the author page for a young Haitian novelist named Néhémy Pierre-Dahomey, whose novel *Rapatriés* had just been released in France in January. I later found out that a friend, knowing that I was reviewing *Rapatriés* (Repatriated) for the *Journal of Haitian Studies*, had given Thomas my contact information.¹ I gladly accepted Thomas's offer, thinking at the time that it would be delightful to be in contact with Néhémy. This was new to me. I had never been in touch with an author before; I always found it daunting for some reason or another, like my job as a critic was to hide behind the books themselves. Working with Île-en-Île would be my chance to grow, to build a bridge, and to ask Néhémy questions about his life, his burgeoning career, and his powerful debut. This was the Île-en-Île process, after all—to ask authors about their lives and to compose a living biography, for living authors, at least.

At the outset, I could not see how a webpage would lead to a friendship that would reorient my scholarship. As I talked with Néhémy over email, WhatsApp, and the phone, I created the brief sketch of his life and aesthetics now preserved on Île-en-Île. Our conversations, the discussions we had about *Rapatriés*, and the work we shared with one another would alter my approach to literary studies and translation. Though I only ever produced one page for Île-en-Île, I hope that recounting my experience working with the site and Néhémy Pierre-Dahomey will reveal how impactful human connection can be for the study of literature and how essential it is to our digital humanity.

¹ Nathan H. Dize, review of *Avant que les ombres s'effacent*, by Louis-Philippe Dalembert, and *Rapatriés*, by Néhémy Pierre-Dahomey, *Journal of Haitian Studies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 169–72.

Process

The process of creating a page on Île-en-Île is, by necessity, subjective. Archived in its pages are the lives of living authors, deceased authors, authors who have changed careers or who have lived multiple professional and aesthetic lives as well as established and emerging authors. In my case, I was asked to create a page for an emerging author with only a few publications to his name, including the short story “Je n'ai pas tué Amandine” (“I Didn't Kill Amandine”) and his novel *Rapatriés*. This meant that not only was there a dearth of critical sources available on Néhémy Pierre-Dahomey, but there was also little biographical information about him on the web from which I could compose his author profile. I knew I would have to reach out to Néhémy directly to learn the information necessary to incorporate his literary career into the robust series of pages Île-en-Île had already created for so many archipelagic authors.

Île-en-Île has always relied on personal connection to create and curate the presence of archipelagic literature on the web. Users can see experience the impact of the personal directly in their series of videos called “5 Questions pour Île-en-Île” as well as indirectly in the individual author pages. Even though I did not produce a “5 Questions” segment with Néhémy, my conversations with him were invaluable for creating his page. To be sure, I could rely on my training as a researcher to scour the web for bibliographic information, but only by speaking with Néhémy directly could I learn about his literary influences, learn about his personal biography, and ask him about the poetic intentions and ambitions of his literature.

The Île-en-Île process taught me a new way of working; it taught me that we have much to learn from one another by just sitting down with one another and talking, telling one another our stories. Île-en-Île reminds us that talking, wherever it may occur—in a New York apartment with Marie-Cécile Corvington-Charlier, in the Port-au-Prince gardens of Emmelie Prophète or Kettly Mars, or over an internet connection between a Nashville café and a Parisian apartment—is an essential element of understanding literature and the impact that it has on our lives.²

Continuations

Just after I presented Thomas Spear with the content that would become Néhémy Pierre-Dahomey's page on Île-en-Île, I asked Néhémy if he would allow me to translate his short story “Je n'ai pas tué Amandine.” I thought that translating the short story would be something of a second act in contributing to Néhémy's web presence, granting more readers access to his evocative prose. I had already translated a few poems by Haitian authors and was on my way to completing a sample translation of *The Immortals* by Makenzy Orcel, one of Néhémy's

² “Marie Vieux Chauvet, the Person and the Writer; Témoignages de Lilian Vieux Corvington et de Marie-Cécile Corvington-Charlier” (video), Île-en-Île, updated 25 April 2021, <http://ile-en-ile.org/marie-vieux-chauvet-temoignages/>; Emmelie Prophète, “5 Questions pour Île en Île,” Île-en-Île, updated 26 October 2020, <http://ile-en-ile.org/emmelie-prophete-5-questions-pour-ile-en-ile/>; Kettly Mars, “5 Questions pour Île en Île,” Île-en-Île, updated 26 October 2020, <http://ile-en-ile.org/kettly-p-mars-5-questions-pour-ile-en-ile/>.

literary peers, so I felt motivated for the task.³ As we discussed the possibility of translation, however, together we decided that it was more beneficial to Néhémy if I worked on his novel *Rapatriés*, instead of his short story.

There are many reasons why translation can be beneficial to a debut novelist; it can build the confidence of their publisher, increase the author's visibility abroad, and, especially with English translations, spur the interest of publishers in other languages in purchasing the rights to commission their own translations. In Néhémy's case, the case for translation was identical to the reasons for creating his Île-en-Île page, to ensure that his writing would be available and accessible to readers, scholars, and students of Haitian literature. Île-en-Île also presents an exhaustive list of works in translation by the authors in its archive, making it a crucial bibliography for translators and publishers assessing the potential market for a book. Though our translation of *Rapatriés* has yet to be acquired by a press for English publication (it has been translated into German as *Die Zurück gekehrten* by Lena Müller for Edition Nautilus), we continue to collaborate, building on the working relationship and friendship we kindled while compiling Néhémy's Île-en-Île page.

Futures

In November 2020, COVID-19 turned on and the world had been in various stages of lockdown for going on eleven months. Out of this separation and isolation came the desire to create a forum for Caribbean authors to present their work, especially since the ongoing pandemic precluded in-person signings, book releases, and readings. Along with my colleagues, I helped launch Kwazman Vwa: New Paths in Caribbean Literature, where we aimed to host digital book salons with Caribbean authors about books published or to be published during the pandemic.⁴ The first author to join our program was Néhémy Pierre-Dahomey in February 2021 to discuss *Rapatriés* as well as his second novel, *Combats*, which was released in March 2021.⁵

Initially, Kwazman Vwa (Crossing Paths) was conceived as a platform for emerging Haitian writers. Yet, as soon as we solidified our group of collaborators, we realized that our ambitions were much larger than just Haitian literature. We hoped to open a path for any Caribbean writer to discuss their work in a public, online forum held by video conference and to transcribe and translate the interviews to broaden the audience of each writer.

³ The first poems I translated were Charles Moravia's "La vision de Président Wilson" ("President Wilson's Vision") and Evelyne Trouillot's "Secousses" ("Tremors"). See Nathan H. Dize, "Translating Global Citizenship: Haiti, Charles Moravia, and Woodrow Wilson," *sx salon* 26 (October 2017), <http://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/discussions/translating-global-citizenship>; Evelyne Trouillot, "Secousses/Tremors," *Meridians* 18, no. 2 (2019): 480–81.

⁴ Kwazman Vwa, home page, <https://kwazmanvwa.com/>, accessed 22 January 2022. Kwazman Vwa is an ongoing project and archive of conversations about Caribbean literature and culture. The most recent episodes can be found on the "previous episodes." The group's founding members are Jennifer Boum Make, Nathan H. Dize, Corine Labridy, Erika Serrato, Jocelyn Sutton Franklin, Lucy Swanson, and Charly Verstraet.

⁵ "Interview with Néhémy Pierre-Dahomey" (in French), Kwazman Vwa, accessed 22 January 2022, <https://kwazmanvwa.com/featured-guests/>.

As I think back on it now, it is no mistake that Néhémy was the first author we invited to participate in Kwazman Vwa, nor was it by accident that we intended to transcribe, translate, and archive these conversations for future readers, listeners, and viewers.⁶ After all, thanks to Île-en-Île, we were following a model with which we were familiar. We have dreams and aspirations of interviewing authors in their Caribbean gardens and yards. We yearn to hear the sounds of the noisy street, the honking of tap taps, and the voices of the *ti machann* selling their produce as we discuss Caribbean aesthetics. We wait for the day when we'll be able to return to book events and salons the world over. But until then, we'll be online, following the path that Île-en-Île traced for us.

⁶ Our conversation with Néhémy Pierre-Dahomey and our second event, featuring Jessica Oublié (author of *Tropiques toxiques*), are available online at <https://kwazmanvwa.com/featured-guests/>.

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