Translation into English of Marie-Célie Agnant’s
Vingt petits pas vers Maria and Le Noël de Maïté
accompanied by a study of the author,
her oeuvre and her place in Canadian literature

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Mémoire présenté en vue de l’obtention de la Maîtrise ès arts
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Abstract

This thesis is divided into two parts: the first part provides an introduction to my translations from French into English of two children’s books by Haitian-Canadian writer Marie-Célie Agnant: Vingt petits pas vers Maria, a short story about domestic workers living in Montréal, and Le Noël de Maïté, a story about a girl spending Christmas in Canada with her Haitian grandmother. I give a short overview of Marie-Célie Agnant, her literary oeuvre, and her reception in Canada. I discuss the Haitian diaspora, especially within the Canadian context. I include an overview of some writers, men and women, from Haiti who have produced migrant writing. I then describe the place of minority writing in Canada and draw parallels between Agnant and Dionne Brand, Makeda Silvera and Althea Prince, English-language writers in Caribbean-Canadian literature who address Black women’s realities in Canada. Like these women, Agnant writes to fight the silence that is imposed by racism and sexism. The introductory essay concludes with comments on my translation process and examples of my translation strategies.

The second part of this thesis consists of my two translations, Twenty Tiny Steps Towards Maria and Maïté’s Christmas. These are the first of Agnant’s young adult books to be translated into English. Also included in this section are my translations of the appendices of these two books, which include notes, questions, games, interviews and recipes designed to make the books more interactive for children and teach them about Haiti and the life of immigrants in Canada.
Résumé


Littérature comparée, littérature québécoise, traduction, Haïti, Marie-Célie Agnant, auteurs antillais.
Table of Contents

PART I

Introducing Marie-Célie Agnant 1
Haitian Diaspora Writing 9
Minority Writing in Canada 19
Translating Marie-Célie Agnant 26

Vingt petits pas vers Maria 31
Le Noël de Maïté 36

Works Cited 42

PART II

Twenty Tiny Steps Towards Maria 56
Maïté’s Christmas 97
Ce mémoire intitulé :

"Translation into English of Marie-Célie Agnant’s 
Vingt petits pas vers Maria and Le Noël de Maité 
accompanied by a study of the author, 
her oeuvre and her place in Canadian literature"

est soumis à un jury composé des personnes suivantes:

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Introducing Marie-Célie Agnant

Marie-Célie Agnant was born in 1953 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti and she came to Montreal in 1970. Once Agnant arrived in Canada, she studied at Concordia University, graduating with a degree in French language education. Agnant has worked as a teacher, a cultural interpreter and a professional translator, from English and Spanish into French and Creole.

Agnant’s oeuvre is varied: she has written poetry, novels, short stories, children’s literature, and folktales, and has been active in oral storytelling, lectures and theatre, such as the Bread & Puppet Theatre group in Vermont. Agnant bases her stories on observations of current social issues and she explores themes of racism, exile, solitude, exclusion and women’s realities. Inspired by real women’s life stories, Agnant’s voice speaks for women who are unable to communicate their own experiences through writing.

For the first twenty years Agnant was in Montreal, she considered her stay to be temporary. When the army and the elites overthrew the elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991, Agnant lost hope in her country’s recovery:

[J]’ai mis beaucoup de temps à défaire mes valises à Montréal. Ça ne s’est passé qu’en 1991, après le coup d'état en Haïti où j’ai perdu tout espoir de rentrer dans mon pays d'origine. [...] Il y a eu un déclic à un moment donné ; je me suis dit : tu es ici et puis ici c'est maintenant. (Spear, “Agnant”)

After deciding that she was not going to return to Haiti, Agnant began publishing. Her first publication in 1994, with CIDIHCA, was a collection of poetry titled Balafres. In October 2009, Agnant published, with Mémoires d’encrier, her second book of poetry, Et puis parfois quelques fois. The poems are tales from the author’s experiences in love, sorrow, exile and childhood.
Her first novel, *La dot de Sara*, was published in 1995 with Remue-ménage and has yet to be translated into English. Agnant collected oral stories over a three-year period for *La dot de Sara*; “J’ai recueilli les récits de vie de ces femmes, ce qui leur reste à la retraite. J’ai voulu leur rendre hommage” (Bouchard). Several real women helped to create one fictional grandmother character, Marianna, whose stories about understanding the world and how to survive in it are her granddaughter Sara’s dowry. Women’s oral stories are from the past but also help one understand the present and prepare for the future (Lequin, *Écrire* 244). *La dot de Sara* was nominated for the Prix littéraire Desjardins.

Agnant’s books, such as *La dot de Sara, Vingt petits pas vers Maria* and *Le Noël de Maïté*, call attention to the grandmother’s role in Haitian culture. Agnant’s old women characters, removed from their homeland, pass along their wisdom to their grandchildren. In both the stories translated for this thesis project, Agnant portrays women as traditional Haitian storytellers. In *Le Noël de Maïté*, Céphie’s stories from Haiti are extra-special to her great granddaughter, who has always lived in Canada. In the final chapter of *Vingt petits pas vers Maria*, the narrator recounts, from a childhood memory, her grandmother’s life story. The narrator believes that she became a writer so that she could write about her grandmother fleeing the coffee tree fields of Haiti to come to Chicago.

In 1997, Remue-ménage published Agnant’s collection of short stories *Le silence comme le sang*, which was nominated for the Governor General’s award for literature. In 2003, the entire collection was translated by Lauren Manes as “Silence Like Blood” for Manes’s Master’s thesis in French and Linguistics at the Honors College, University of Oregon. Some of the stories have also been translated separately, in five languages and primarily for academic purposes. From *Le*
silence comme le sang, “La maison face à la mer” was translated into Spanish in 2001 and the translator’s name was not given. It was published by Casa de Las Américas, which is a Cuban organization that has promoted literature and the arts from Latin America and the Caribbean since 1959. Its purpose is to build socio-cultural relationships by supporting, promoting, researching, publishing and awarding the Casa de Las Américas prize, one of the oldest and most prestigious literary awards in Latin America. Christina Vander Vorst translated the same story into English and it was published in the journal Métamorphoses in 2003. The short story is also available online on the Île en île website, read by Agnant in French in October 2001. Also from Le silence comme le sang, the short story “Deux jours pour oublier” was translated into Dutch by Kenneth Booten in 2003 for Deus ex Machina, a themed blog that features dossiers on foreign literature. From Le silence comme le sang, “A Murderous Look” was published by an unnamed translator on the Oberlin College website to accompany a lecture given by Agnant in February 2004. The original French text, “Un regard assassin,” was published by the online magazine, Orées, in association with the French department at Concordia University in 2001 (Agnant, “regard”). A few translations and original texts are available online, giving a larger audience access to Agnant’s writings.

In 2001, Le livre d’Emma, Agnant’s second novel for adults, was published in Montreal and in Port-au-Prince. It was nominated for Le Prix Ringuet de l’Académie des Lettres du Québec. In 2004, Le livre d’Emma was published in France by Vents d’ailleurs. José Antonio

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1 The website offers cultural resources including biographies, photos, bibliographies and excerpts of over 200 writers from the francophone world.
2 On this blog, writers from abroad draw attention to authors who have been neglected or yet undiscovered by Dutch-language publishers.

Agnant’s third adult novel, *Un alligator nommé Rosa*, was published by Éditions du Remue-ménage in Montreal in 2007. This story takes place in the south of France and recounts how Jean-Claude Duvalier’s dictatorship had a lasting effect on its victims, the Haitian people.

Agnant has also written a number of books for young readers. It was at the request of her publisher that Agnant first wrote children’s literature and went on to publish four books for adolescents with Hurtubise HMH. Agnant explains to Ghinelli: “Je suis arrivée à la littérature pour les jeunes par hasard, sur l’invitation d’un éditeur” (Ghinelli 145). The first book from 1999, *Alexis d’Haiti*, was inspired by stories Agnant heard while working with refugees in the 1980s (Agnant, “Écrire” 89). This story was chosen as part of “A Wish for Peace,” the 2005 Read Up On It guide that Library and Archives Canada compiled to celebrate the sixty-year anniversary of the end of WWII by bringing attention to works by Canadian authors of children’s literature who have produced books about war, conflict resolution and peace.

*Alexis, fils de Raphaël*, published in 2000, is the sequel to *Alexis d’Haiti*. It is the story of a young boy and his mother’s flight from Haiti to Florida, where they seek refuge as boat people until finally the boy’s uncle invites them to join him in Montreal. The boy speaks Creole and must overcome the language barrier. Alexis and his mother fight to liberate Raphaël, a political prisoner in Haiti. Agnant’s *Alexis d’Haiti* and *Alexis, fils de Raphaël* are aimed at readers between 12 and 17 years old. Neither of these stories are available in translation, but both have had second printings.
Agnant’s second book for children, *Le Noël de Maïté*, published in 1999, was nominated for the Prix Aurora Awards (for Canadian science fiction and fantasy) as the best long-form work in French for its use of the fantastic. (Céphie’s story recounts how her aunt Cia turned into a bat and how a comb left by a mermaid helped her hold her tongue.) In 2001 Agnant published *Vingt petits pas vers Maria*, her fourth book for young readers. The story draws attention to the situation of live-in domestic workers in Canada.

In 2003 Agnant published two illustrated Haitian folktales for children. Folktales are “stories that grew out of the lives and the imaginations of the people, or folk. Folktales have always been children’s favourite type of traditional literature” (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 122). *L’oranger magique : conte d’Haïti* was published by Les 400 coups, and *La légende du poisson amoureux*, by Mémoire d’encrier, both Montreal publishing houses. These books are an indication of Agnant’s valorisation of oral tradition and how she works to keep it alive:


In 2007, *La légende du poisson amoureux* received the Prix Gros Sel from Belgium (*Rezolibre*). The prize has existed since 2005 and it is awarded by the magazine *Rezolibre*. In 2008, the award became recognised by the Belgium Francophone community and now the winner receives a monetary prize instead of 500 grams of coarse salt!

Agnant also shares her stories with live audiences, like the folktale “Tipège et la méchante dame,” which she told in Berlin in 2006. Gabriele Bergfelder-Boos transcribed and
adapted a written version of the tale and a copy is available in French on the University of Berlin’s website, accompanied by an interview (Bergfelder-Boos, “Tipège”).

Agnant is known around the world and travels thanks to professors and critics who network her literature and share it with the general public. In this sense, writing is part of a greater human experience, as Agnant stated in an interview:

J’en profite pour voir de nouveaux pays [...] en contemplant les bouilles étonnées de petits Danois ou Autrichiens ou Allemands qui apprennent le français et qui m’écoutent leur raconter l’histoire de Thézin, ce poisson qui était amoureux d’une jeune fille.

L’écriture en ce sens est une grande expérience humaine. (Turnier, “Rencontre”)

In *La légende du poisson amoureux* and *L’oranger magique*, Agnant uses traditional Haitian legends as the subject of her writing. Therefore, she is able to share her Haitian culture with other Francophone cultures around the world. While her writing is not primarily set in Haiti, the characters are often from there.

However, Agnant does not limit herself to Haiti for inspiration for her writing. In 2008 she published a traditional tale that belongs to the Aymara people living in South America. *La nuit du tatou : - un conte aymara de la forêt péruvienne*, published by Les 400 coups in Montreal, is a traditional folktale for children. About two million Aymaras live in Peru, Chile and Bolivia. In this book, illustrated by Veronica Tapia, Agnant writes the tale of the Aymara people who borrowed sleep from the armadillo, making him live in darkness.

When writing for youth, Agnant seeks to transmit language and not to create a commercially driven product:
Je veille à ne pas les heurter, et surtout à leur apporter quelque chose d'autre qu'une littérature commerciale ... Pour écrire pour les enfants il faut les connaître, comprendre leur langage et faire en sorte que notre propre langage les rejoigne. (Cecon)

Agnant’s folktales *La légende du poisson amoureux* and *L’oranger magique* are written in Creole and are accompanied by an equivalent French text. Similarly, Haitian writer Dany Laferrière uses a Creole expression and a French equivalent to begin each chapter in his adult novel *Pays sans chapeau*.

In addition to her fiction writing for adults and children, Agnant has been active in academic events and other literary undertakings, and her writing has drawn critical attention. Since 2000, Agnant has participated in numerous conferences and has lectured in Africa, North America, Latin America, Europe and the Caribbean. Agnant was invited to the Oberlin campus, in Oberlin, Ohio, by La Maison Francophone to lecture in English on “Place and Displacement: A Haitian Woman Writes in Quebec” in February 2004. She also gave five lectures on “Migrant Literature in Quebec” for a week-long mini-course, sponsored by Oberlin’s department of French and Italian and La Maison Francophone, in the spring semester of 2005 when Agnant worked as the writer-in-residence (Logan). In March of 2004, Agnant participated in a round table discussion for *La Journée Internationale de la Francophonie* at the Université de Montréal that was published in 2005 as *Créer, penser, informer*.

Agnant has also written for three collective publications. In 2004, Agnant wrote the short story, “Le vieil homme à moitié pierre,” for the collection *Nul n’est une île*, edited by Stanley Péan and Rodney Saint-Éloi. The same year, Péan, a Haitian-Québécois writer renowned for his children’s literature, was elected as the president of L’UNEQ (l’Union des écrivaines et écrivains...
du Québec) and this prestigious post allowed him to increase the promotion of Québécois and immigrant literature at home and overseas. In 2006, Vents d’ailleurs published the collection *Dernières nouvelles du colonialisme* for which Agnant contributed “Je suis de ce pays où l’herbe ne pousse plus...,” a non-fictional essay. In 2007, Mémoire d’encrier in Montreal and Présence africaine in Paris published her short story “T’écrire” in *Une journée haïtienne*, edited by Thomas C. Spear.

Agnant’s writing was the topic of several papers presented at the 2008 American Council for Quebec Studies conference (“Preliminary Program”). Conference presentations on Agnant were given by participants from universities across Canada and the United States. A first group of participants, which was chaired by Françoise Naudillon and included Thomas C. Spear, Joëlle Vitiello, Colette Boucher and Ching Sao, discussed anger and exile in Agnant’s writing and orality in her style. A second group, chaired by Patrice Proulx, discussed Agnant’s three adult novels.

Marie-Célie Agnant has significantly contributed to Canadian literature in French and she has published a variety of fiction since 1994. Some of Agnant’s writing, particularly her short stories and her novels for adults, has been translated and I believe it is due time for some of her children’s stories, published over a decade ago, to be translated into English. If the translations *Twenty Tiny Steps Towards Maria* and *Maïté’s Christmas* are published, younger English-speaking readers with an interest in Haïtian culture and literature could experience Agnant’s writing.
**Haitian Diaspora Writing**

In Canada there is a diaspora of Haitian writers, men and women like Marie-Célie Agnant who settled here to escape the ruthlessly oppressive regimes of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, and subsequent unrest. While François Duvalier was in power from 1957 to 1971, writers, among other professionals, migrated from Haiti to Canada. During the Duvalier regime in Haiti, male writers were imprisoned, tortured and even died, but no women writers perished. By the 1930s and 1940s “public movements aimed at female empowerment had begun to emerge” but Duvalier’s government suppressed such activities after 1960 (Adjarian 95). Strict censorship was imposed and restricted Haitians’ opportunity to learn and write French. The first wave of emigration in the 1960s consisted mainly of the forced exile of the French-speaking Haitian elite. Under the oppressiveness of the Duvalier regime, many Haitian writers yearned “for a higher standard of living and political freedom” therefore migrating to Canada, France or the United States (Mensah 67).

In a history book of Caribbean Francophone literature, Michael Dash describes how Haiti had, in the 1940s, one of the most sophisticated literary cultures in the Caribbean and how Duvalierism changed, among many other things, Haiti’s literary scene:

The oppressive conditions under Papa Doc in the 1960s created a literary diaspora of fleeing intellectuals. Today, Haiti is a unique case in the Caribbean in that there is a firmly entrenched literature written in exile in Paris, West Africa, New York and Montreal, as well as one created within the country. (310)

Haitians such as Anthony Phelps, Gérard Étienne and Émile Ollivier continued their writing and their other careers while in exile. Anthony Phelps, an established poet in Haiti, continued to
publish after his arrival in Montreal in 1964. In Paris, Phelps published his first novel in 1973 after nine years of exile. Three years later Phelps was published in Montreal, where he continues to be published today.

In Haiti, Gérard Étienne undertook classical studies and worked as a teacher and as a journalist. Étienne left his homeland after being tortured and imprisoned several times for having conspired against the Duvalier regime. Forced into exile in 1964, Étienne arrived in Montreal where he pursued his studies and worked as both a teacher and a journalist. One year later, he published *Lettres à Montréal*. By 1970, Étienne was a professor at the Université de Moncton, where he continued to work until his retirement. His writings include nine collections of poetry, two short stories, seven essays, one play and nine novels. His first novel, *Le Nègre crucifié*, recounts his imprisonment and torture in Haiti; this book was translated into English under the title *Crucified in Haiti* by another Université de Sherbrooke student, Claudia Harry, as part of her Master’s thesis in Comparative Canadian Literature. Gérard Étienne passed away in Montreal in 2008.

Émile Ollivier worked closely with Haitian immigrants during Quebec’s Quiet Revolution and, like many Haitian men living in Quebec during the 1960s, he identified with the movement. Haitians “have had a marked and direct influence on the development of Quebec nationalist ideology” and they sympathised with engaged writers such as Jacques Godbout and Gaston Miron (Naves 73). Upon arriving in Quebec, Haitians “discovered an emerging Québécois literature” to which men like Anthony Phelps, Gérard Étienne and Émile Ollivier joined their voices (Naves 75). Ollivier remarked how “we who had known independence since 1804, we understood their struggle.”

Haitians brought with them the idea of negritude, an ideology championed by Jean Price-Mars with the publication of his ethnographic essay *Ainsi parla l’oncle* in 1928. His essay studies the fundamentals of Haitian society and states that Haitians have a double heritage; they are African and French, not simply Black Frenchmen. Price-Mars influenced other Haitian writers, who in turn helped to shape Haitian identity.

Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, which valorised Black identity in 1947, is another example of the negritude movement. As Haitian writer Dany Laferrière explains: “le Nègre des anciennes colonies ne valait pas tripette, et ceci à ses propres yeux. Les Haïtiens avaient pratiquement renié leur origine africaine.” The writings of Price-Mars and Césaire, among others, helped change that mentality and create Haitian identity (Magnier 69). Therefore Haitian immigrants to Quebec could sympathise with the Québécois, who were fighting to have their own identity valorised and recognised.
Dany Laferrière was part of the second wave of Haitian immigrants to come to Montreal. In 1976, the Duvalier regime continued to oppress Haiti, and as a journalist Laferrière’s life was in danger. When he was 23 years old, his mother arranged for him to leave the country (Ignatieff 203). In Quebec, Laferrière spent nine years working as a journalist and as a television personality. His career as a writer began in 1985 with *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, published in Montreal by VLB, and it has since blossomed. VLB éditeur published Dany Laferrière’s first six novels, from 1985 until 1994. The first edition of his fifth novel *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune Nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?* is out of print. The second edition, published by Typo seven years later in 2000, is also out of print. Typo, from Montreal, also published second editions of *Éroshima* in 1998 and *L’odeur du café* in 1999. Dany Laferrière reworked *Le goût des jeunes filles* (1992) and *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune Nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?* (1993) producing new versions of these novels and publishing them for a second time with VLB in 2004 and 2002 respectively.


Dany Laferrière did not publish any children’s literature before *Je suis fou de Vava* in 2006. Readers familiar with Laferrière’s work know that Vava is Vieux Os’ first love, which is recounted in some of his adult novels. The book won the 2007 Governor General of Canada Award for literature and was translated into Creole that same year. *Mwen damou pou Vava* has
been nominated for the IBBY Honour List 2010 by the Haitian Section of IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) for the quality of its translation by Lyonel Trouillot. In 2009, Laferrière published his second children’s book *La fête des morts*, which again draws attention to Vieux Os’ love for Vava all while showing that a funeral procession can be a joyful moment.

With simultaneous publications in Montreal (with Boréal) and in Paris (with Grasset), between 2006 and 2009, Dany Laferrière published three novels, *Vers le sud, Je suis un écrivain japonais* and *L’énigme du retour*, which won the Prix Médicis. Laferrière’s latest book *Tout bouge autour de moi*, published by Mémoire d’encrémier, is a chronicle about Laferrière’s return to Haiti after the earthquake on January 12, 2010. The short vignettes read like poetry and the profits of the book will finance publications by Haitians with Mémoire d’encrémier.

Dany Laferrière is important to migrant literature and has a large readership not only in Quebec and Canada but also in the United States, France and Haiti. He is consequently the Haitian writer most translated into English, thanks to David Homel who completed seven translations between 1987 and 1997. David Homel’s translations include *How to Make Love to a Negro, Eroshima, An Aroma of Coffee* and other titles in translation that are less obvious, such as *Dining with the Dictator (Le goût des jeunes filles), Down among the Dead Men (Pays sans chapeau)* and *Why Must a Black Writer Write about Sex? (Cette grenade dans la main du jeune Nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?)*, which won the Governor General’s Literary Award for translation in 1995.

Marie-Célie Agnant may not be as well-known a Haitian-Canadian writer as Dany Laferrière, but she is probably better known than many Haitian women writers, both in Canada and around the world. There are other women from Haiti who have published and there are
several reasons that explain why their voices are not widely heard. To begin, women in Haiti have a higher illiteracy rate than men. For example, in 1995, the illiteracy rate among men in Haiti was calculated at 52% and among women it was slightly higher at 58% (US AID). Also, women were less educated yet they were excellent storytellers, at home in a setting that favoured oral Creole. The lack of French education during the Duvalier regime contributed to the fact that there have been relatively fewer Haitian women than men writing in the diaspora.

Traditionally, Haitian women primarily transmitted their stories orally while Haitian men dominated the presses and controlled politics and education. Women were silenced in political and public realms and Agnant is familiar with men’s reaction to a woman in literature: “Des hommes qui, souvent, voient avec beaucoup d’appréhension l’arrivée d’une femme en littérature et se mettent en quatre dès lors pour la faire taire par tous les moyens. C’est l’attitude générale” (Ceccon).

Having spent her youth in Haiti, Agnant confides that fear accompanies the defiance to write: “J’ai toujours été habitée par le silence et la peur, ... Ce sont ces silences qui me poussent à écrire” (Bouchard). Her writing, motivated by silence and fear, belongs to a realm traditionally occupied by men in Haiti. Agnant further explains: “En écrivant, je proteste donc contre le silence, et mes livres, même lorsque destinés aux enfants, sont des cris contre la docilité, contre les valeurs consacrées” (Agnant, “Écrire” 91). For example, one of Agnant’s children’s books translated for this thesis, *Vingt petits pas vers Maria*, is set in Montreal and addresses the issue of immigrant domestic workers. To extrapolate on her story and to give more information about their situation in Canada, Agnant includes exercises for the young readers in the appendix, “Le plus de plus,” and poses thought-provoking questions about immigrants and Haiti.
Other women writers from Haiti came to Canada during and since the Duvalier regime. Some used their homeland as the setting for their fiction (Adjarian 101). For example, Marie Chauvet “began her publishing career in 1946 [and] was, at different times in her life, an exile,” staying for a short time in Canada (Adjarian 101). Marie Chauvet’s writing contemplates the origins of the Duvalier dictatorship. Dany Laferrière explains in an interview how writers in exile like Marie Chauvet could safely denounce their own implication in the degradation of Haitian society: “pointer du doigt cette bourgeoisie totalement impliquée dans le processus de dégradation de la société haïtienne” (Magnier 67). In exile, away from Duvalier’s terrorising Tontons Macoutes, writers could openly write about the Haitian reality.

In Montreal, Lucie Lequin and Verthuy Mai'r published a collection of articles about women’s migrant writing in Canada and France in 1996. The collection includes “La littérature des femmes haïtiennes migrantes : le cas du Canada” by Michèle Glémaud.³ In her article, Glémaud lists 35 women writers from Haiti who have published 63 works combined, and she concludes that women are nevertheless incessantly silenced (Glémaud 123). She explains how women have generally had less time, less money and less freedom to write. For example, in Port-au-Prince in 1975, Nadine Magloire’s _Le sexe mythique_ was much criticised because she wrote about a woman’s erotic experience from a woman’s point of view (Glémaud 129). Men have written about women’s erotic experiences, but a woman writer was not allowed the same liberty. Nadine Magloire’s writing was ahead of its time; it denounced women’s marginalised place in

³ Glémaud is a MBA graduate from l’Université de Sherbrooke who is currently head of recruitment at the Université de Montréal.
Haitian society. Women writers have their own way of portraying themselves in literature: “elles montrent l’évolution significative du rôle féminin et jettent une lumière différente sur le caractère des femmes” (Glémaud 126).

During their exile in Montreal, Nadine Magloire and Ghislaine Charlier wrote about their homeland. Glémaud explains: “elles semblent avoir acquis des droits qu’elles n’avaient pas et, enfin, elles osent parler du «domaine perdu»” (Glémaud 127). These women returned to Haiti and now primarily publish there. The writers archived by Michèle Glémaud are rarely mentioned in Canada or in Haiti and while some of their writings are recognised as examples of Haitian literature, few collections make reference to them (Glémaud 125). Other women writers from Haiti include Marie-Soeurette Mathieu, a poet, a novelist and a journalist, who has been living in Montreal since 1972 where she has published four novels and four collections of poetry. Her first collection of poetry, Lueurs, published in Port-au-Prince, appeared in 1971. Five years later, another collection of poetry, Poèmes d’autrefois, was published in Montreal. Also included is Liliane Devieux, a writer and journalist, who was born in Port-au-Prince in 1942. Now she lives in Montreal where she published her only novel L’amour, oui. La mort, non. in 1976, which won Le Prix Caraïbes in 1978. In total, from 1974 to 1991, five Haitian women produced their first publications in Canada (Glémaud 128).

Other exiled Haitian women writers include Adeline Moravia and Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, who came from Haiti to Ottawa, where they are published. They use their life experiences as the subject of their writing and their motherland as their setting. In 1975, Jacqueline Beaugé-Rosier also emigrated from Haiti to the Ottawa Valley, where she studied at Algonquin College, and then obtained her B.Ed. from l’Université du Québec à Hull in 1987 and

Another expatriate Haitian woman writer is Jan J. Dominique, who worked as a writer and as a teacher in Haiti and has a “profound sense of social responsibility” (Adjarian 109). Dominique also worked with trade unions and in radio journalism, which recognises oral transmission as being the most effective form of communication among the illiterate population. In Haiti, Jan J. Dominique published her first novel *Mémoire d'une amnésique* in 1983. After settling in Montreal in 2003, Jan J. Dominique republished *Mémoire d'une amnésique* and her collection of short stories, *Évasion*. She reworked her second novel, *Inventer... La Célestine* and published it with Remue-ménage as *La Célestine* in 2007. This was Dominique’s first experience with a publisher (Turnier, “Entrevue”).

Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat, who regularly writes to Dany Laferrière, lives in the United States and publishes in English. Laferrière has said in an interview published by Lanctôt in 2000 that Danticat is the only other Haitian writer with whom he has a true correspondence (Magnier 75). As a Creole-speaking Haitian, Danticat “belongs to that sector of the urban (black) working class with roots in the Haitian peasantry” (Adjarian 87). Thus one of her objectives as a writer is “giving voice to concerns of Haitian underclass women” (Adjarian 104). Edwidge Danticat was born in 1969 and her parents immigrated to New York four years later, leaving her in Haiti with her aunt and uncle. At the age of twelve, after the death of François Duvalier, she joined her parents in the United States. Danticat obtained an MFA from Brown University in 1993 that led to the publication of her thesis project, the novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in 1994. Danticat has taught creative writing at university, she has worked on projects about Haitian art
and she has made documentaries about Haiti. In 2008 Edwidge Danticat wrote the preface to the English translation of Jan J. Dominique’s *Memoir of an Amnesiac*, which was published in Florida by the Caribbean Studies Press. The protagonist Paul is a writer and “speaks to give words to silence: ‘the silence of my mother and of the mother of my mother ... those women who never had the chance to make themselves heard’,” explains Dominique (Adjarian 92).

This need for Haitian women to write is reflected in Marie-Célie Agnant’s *Vingt petits pas vers Maria*, whose narrator is also a writer, much resembling Agnant herself. The narrator concludes in the last chapter that she became a writer to voice her grandmother’s story. The grandmother told her: “‘you will become a writer, to write my story.’ It was like an order” (my translation 81). The narrator, like Agnant, writes for women who are silenced, inventing a fictional past for Maria Dolorès that is inspired by her own grandmother’s story. When the narrator meets the new maid Mona, she learns that Mona had “always dreamed of becoming a writer” but was discouraged to do so by her father (my translation 78).
Minority Writing in Canada

Over the past century, significant numbers of people from Caribbean countries have been immigrating to Canada in search of a better quality of life. In “the early 1960s there were sufficient concentrations of Jamaican and other Caribbean students in major Canadian universities to establish their own student clubs” (Mensah 99). Joseph Mensah’s study Black Canadians: History, Experience, Social Conditions, published in Halifax in 2002, discusses Canadian immigration policies as they have affected Haitians. The first wave of Haitian immigrants went to Paris or Montreal. In 1962, “Canada formally revoked the preferential treatment given to white immigrants [...] emphasis was placed on education and professional skills and not race or ethnicity,” and as of 1967 immigration was based on a point system (Mensah 71). Canadian immigration offices opened in Haiti, as well as other Caribbean countries and Africa, and this “was another significant impetus for the immigration of Blacks to Canada” (Mensah 71). Joseph Mensah explains how, from 1972 onwards, Creole-speaking Haitians arrived in increasingly large numbers. Every year since 1973 over one thousand Haitian immigrants have come to Canada. In 1971 Haiti was not among the top 20 countries providing immigrants to Quebec, but by 1981 it was ranked 6th (105-06).

According to Joseph Mensah’s study, most Francophone immigrants from the Caribbean are Haitian and almost 90% of them live in Montreal. Between 1980 and 1988 over 19,000 Haitians immigrated to Quebec where they count for 1% of the total population or 17% of the visible minority. In the Canadian census from 1996, 71,055 Haitians lived in Montreal. Ottawa had the second highest concentration with 4,670 Haitian immigrants and Quebec City and Toronto had over 1,200 Haitian immigrants each (106-07).
The influx of immigrants in the latter half of the 20th century brought eventual writers from the Caribbean to Canada whose contribution to Canadian literature has helped to redefine it. For example, Austin Clarke came from Barbados to study in Toronto in 1955. He left university to work as a journalist and as a broadcaster in Toronto, where he began his career as a writer. His fiction draws attention to the inhospitality of North Americans, their “tasteless food” (Hutcheon and Richmond 63), and their reluctance to learn about “foreign” customs. Austin Clarke’s contribution to Canadian literature began in 1964 when he published his first novel, The Survivors of the Crossing. In 1965, he published a collection of short stories, and he went on to produce a total of six collections in the next thirty years.

Austin Clarke, like some other immigrants, became a writer only after arriving in Canada. They would eventually help remodel Canadian literature by adding variety, making it more multicultural. In 1988 Parliament passed Bill C-93, Canada’s multiculturalism act, and the valorisation of diversity this bill promoted has been reflected in the literary canon. Canadian literature has continued to become more diversified in recent years, and the development of minority writing has helped the nation to perceive itself as multicultural. Other voices have emerged in Canadian literature, and new minority writers have been the subject of literary interest and analysis.

In an interview with Linda Fatigba, Agnant discussed the importance of migrant writing in Quebec. According to Agnant, migrant writers have shifted the focus of Quebec literature to themes such as alterity and the other: “Depuis l’arrivée des écrivains migrants, il y a d’autres thèmes qui investissent cette littérature avec les revendications des classes laborieuses, des
classes d’immigrants. C’est toute la question de l’ailleurs et de l’autre, qui a investi cette littérature” (Fatigba).

Claire Harris, who was born in Trinidad in 1937 and moved to Calgary in 1966, explains that when writers are primarily classified by race “the result … is a marginalization which effectively denies these poets legitimacy” (Harris 115). While it is helpful to study a marginalized group, such as Black writers, it is equally important to look beyond the question of race. Agnant, who writes not only about Haitians, remarks that silenced voices reach beyond skin colour: “l’absence de parole véritable du citoyen va au-delà d’une question de couleur de peau” (Fatigba). Agnant’s Haitian voice and her English-Caribbean counterparts have had similar experiences, but their writing goes beyond being Black.

Literature is a bridge that allows readers to access other cultures and realities, as Agnant explains in an interview: “Je suis différente de cet autre, mais il y a quelque chose qui me relie à lui. La littérature permet justement d’établir cette passerelle pour qu’il me rejoigne dans mon humanité” (Fatigba). Agnant also writes about other cultures such as those of Peru, the United States, France and the Philippines. Minority writing brings together people of different backgrounds and it allows them to question their own cultures in relation to others. After all, people are more than just their ethnic, racial, or gendered identities; they are human beings sharing one small planet. As Agnant explains, she has raised her Canadian-born children, “before anything else, to be human beings. I am a person. Before being an identity” (Naves 80-81).

The challenge, however, is that voices of minority writers, like those of Black Caribbean women, are not always welcomed by mainstream publishing houses that do not trust
there to be a large enough reading public to generate profit. In an interview with Jérôme Ceccon, Agnant listed questions Canadians should be asking publishing houses:

Qui contrôle le monde de l’édition ? Qu’est-ce qu’on offre aux lecteurs ? Quel espace laisse t-on en librairie à certains auteurs ? Principalement ceux que l’on considère comme faisant partie de la marge ? (Ceccon)

In 1999, Arun Prabha Mukherjee discussed the place of women from racial minorities within Canadian literature and denounced that “publishing houses often turn down their writing because it’s ethnie” and not simply “Canadian” (158). Mukherjee accused mainstream publishing houses of disregarding minority writing because it was “too distanced from the Canadian reader’s experience,” and asserted that their readership was made up mainly of white middle-class people who do not enjoy reading about non-Canadian settings (160). According to Mukherjee, at that time, “Canadian literature did not reflect Canadian writing. It excludes people born elsewhere, First Nations and women” (158). This trend had been happening throughout the 20th century and was critiqued long before Mukherjee’s article. In the 21st century there are many more minority voices that are published in Canada and the increase in publication leads me to believe there is an increase in popularity for minority writing.

Dionne Brand came to Toronto for her university education 25 years after Austin Clarke, in 1980. Brand has given an outlet to other writers as a founding member and editor of Canada’s first Black women’s newspaper, Our Lives. Since her arrival in Canada, Brand has been an activist and has worked as an editor, writer, and researcher for a number of alternative journals and papers. In 1990 Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond published Other Solitudes, a collection that draws attention to emerging minority writers like Dionne Brand, originally from
Trinidad, who in an interview observed how non-white writers would soon become “the new wave of Canadian writing” (Hutcheon and Richmond 277). In 1996, Smaro Kamboureli edited *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature*. In 2004, Sherry Simon’s article “Land to Light On?” states that Kamboureli’s anthology “showed that much of the most innovative and energetic writing in Canada is today by minority writers” (9). The anthology, which was published again in 2007, includes poetry and short fiction of 70 writers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The second edition includes introductions to over 35 writers who are rarely anthologised elsewhere.

In another interview, from 1998, Dionne Brand asserts that white writers are never asked to prove that their themes are universal; she similarly refuses marginalization and places herself in a central position within a Black literary canon: “I don’t consider myself on any margin; I’m sitting right in the middle of Black literature, because that’s who I read, that’s who I respond to – I’m not on the margin of Canadian literature” (Daurio 35).

In 1985, Makeda Silvera and Stephanie Martin, a lesbian couple from Jamaica, founded Sister Vision Press in Toronto. Their publishing house for women of colour has helped women’s voices be heard when mainstream publishing houses and even alternative presses have rejected them. Many of Makeda Silvera’s anthologies and collections of short stories are published with Sister Vision, through which she has successfully claimed a space for the Caribbean woman’s experience in Canada, including the lamentable situation of domestic workers. The short stories in Makeda Silvera’s second collection *Her Head a Village*, published by Press Gang, present: the harsh realities of urban life for Caribbean immigrants who, instead of finding a land of opportunity and social and physical mobility, discover that they must inhabit
peripheral spaces in the city, such as ethnic ghettos, back alleys, or as live-in domestics in white middle-class homes. (Beneventi 167)

In this collection, the Jamaican domestic worker returning to Canada in “Caribbean Chameleon” feels uncomfortable as she heads for customs. Although she has her papers, she knows she faces difficulty coming into Canada because she is a woman and she is not white. The domestic worker, in Her Head a Village, is an example of exploitation that women can face in our society. The woman in “Canada Sweet, Girl” narrates what her life has been like since she came to Canada nine years ago. Still without legal landing papers, she cannot obtain a good job, making it impossible for her to better herself. Pregnant, jobless and evicted from her apartment, she turns to domestic work. She takes care of other people’s children “six days a week. Seven in di morning to eight at night. Two different families” while an older woman of seventy takes care of her son (42). When it is discovered that she is an illegal immigrant, her son is offered citizenship but she is deported to the Caribbean.

Althea Prince, born in Antigua, also first published with Sister Vision. Her writing often presents women struggling to adapt to life in urban North America after being raised in the Caribbean, and her stories are about everyday life: “I used ‘story’ in the sociological sense to speak of a people’s way of perceiving the world, of epistemology” (Gillam 122). Prince did not recount the racism she faced when she first arrived in Toronto in the 1960s until 2001. Eventually Prince became “instrumental in advancing new voices, academic and artistic, from marginalized communities” while working as the managing editor for the Canadian Scholars Press International and the Women’s Press (Kanaganayakam 60-61).

Makeda Silvera, born in 1955, and Althea Prince, born in 1945, immigrated to Canada when they were girls. These women, like Dionne Brand and Marie-Célie Agnant, have given voice to the Black woman from the Caribbean, and their writing includes real-life experiences, tales from other women, folklore, stories from their childhood, women’s identity problems, their economic and sexual exploitation, sex and sexual orientation, mother-daughter relationships, migration and madness.

As explained in the introduction of We’re Rooted Here and They Can’t Pull Us Up, the six women contributors felt that their experience, as women, is different from men’s. Any man or woman can be subjected to racism, but “gender compounds this situation” (Bristow 4). Black women writers like Althea Prince, Dionne Brand, Makeda Silvera and Marie-Célie Agnant can be twice overlooked because of their sex and their skin colour. Although putting them into the category of Black Canadian women risks marginalizing them, making such a comparison has helped me to better understand their shared experiences as Black Canadian women writers who were born in the Caribbean.
Translating Marie-Célie Agnant

In the following pages, I will explain some of the challenges I have faced in translating two of Marie-Célie Agnant’s children’s books from French into English — *Vingt petits pas vers Maria* and *Le Noël de Maïté*. I will reflect on some of my influences as a reader and as a translator. I have undertaken this translation project not only to complete the requirements of a Master’s degree in Comparative Canadian Literature, but also out of my personal interest in Caribbean-Canadian culture and its literature, in both French and English.

One of the challenges a translator faces is to capture the voice of the original author. To my French ear, Agnant’s writing is poetic, imaginative, vivid and colourful. Her writing demonstrates both her proficiency in the French language and the influence of Creole and Haitian culture. Agnant, in an interview, admits to Gabriele Bergfelder-Boos that she reads her texts aloud in order to achieve a certain musicality. After a reading of her tale, “Un regard assassin,” she gave an interview in Berlin in 2006 and explained that her writing resonates through orality:

> Il faut qu’il soit lu à voix haute... Si on voit un de mes textes, on fait l’expérience, on le lit, on trouve le rythme. Dans la musique. Et parfois je vais dire à mon éditeur : il y a un mot, quelque chose qui ne peut pas changer parce que ça choque le rythme de la phrase.

(Bergfelder-Boos, “interview”)

In another interview, Agnant discusses the translator’s creativity and recognizes that she, as the original author, has little control over the final product of her stories in another language. When she is able to read her work in translation Agnant hopes to find the musicality that she originally put in the text:
Quant aux traductions, sans vouloir prétendre que je m’en désintéresser, je sens que le livre ne me concerne plus vraiment lorsqu’il est traduit dans une autre langue. Je le perçois beaucoup plus comme un travail de création du traducteur. Lorsqu’il s’agit de langues qui me sont familières telles que l’espagnol ou l’anglais, j’essaie de retrouver la musique du texte et cela me suffit. (Turnier, “Rencontre”)

Agnant writes not only to achieve musicality in words but also because she needs to express herself: “Je suis devenue écrivaine en partie pour la musique des mots, mais surtout par besoin de paroles” (Agnant, “Écrire” 86). Agnant explains in *Vingt petits pas vers Maria* how she invents her stories: “I observe people quite a bit, but the characters I create are made up of traits belonging to many people. I can begin with a thought, a random fact, or a character that I want to bring to life” (my translation 88).

She is welcomed by Montrealers, who are curious about her way of speaking French: “les gens aiment bien nous entendre parler, cette langue qu’ils reconnaissent mais avec cet accent qui n’est pas le leur” (Agnant, “Écrire” 87). In *Vingt petits pas vers Maria*, the narrator’s neighbour, Constance, tells the narrator about her new maid, Mona, and comments on the quality of her Haitian French:

Elle vient d’Haïti, comme vous, et parle un français impeccable. Étonnant! Elle prétend avoir été professeure de français chez elle. C’est spécial, vous ne trouvez pas? (*Vingt petits pas vers Maria* 46)

She’s from Haiti, like you, and she speaks impeccable French. Astonishing! She claims to have been a French teacher back home. That’s special, don’t you think? (my translation 74)
This tongue-in-cheek comment is particularly ironic for the reader of the French original in light of the quality and flavour of Agnant’s French. Constance is being condescending to doubt that Mona was a teacher in Haiti and that her French is so surprisingly sophisticated.

Agnant writes in a more international French and rarely uses vernacular Creole in her writing. A problem with Haitian Creole is that many of those who speak the language are unable to read. Creating texts in French makes sense to Agnant because it allows her to possibly reach a larger Francophone population versus a much smaller Creole one. In an interview, Agnant explains: “[Le français] n'a de sens pour moi que dans la mesure où, grâce aux efforts d'universitaires, d'enseignants ou autres organismes, tels l’Alliance française par exemple, mon travail devient accessible à un plus grand nombre de lecteurs” (Cecon).

The issue of writing in Creole or French was encountered by Dany Laferrière, another Haitian writer. His publisher Jacques Lanctôt pointed out that Laferrière originally used Creole syntax in L’odeur du café. In an interview, Laferrière explains how Lanctôt comprehended the meaning of the words in French but that he did not fully understand how the words were put together: “il peinait quelquefois à comprendre le sens de certaines phrases” (Magnier 224). Dany Laferrière was unable to access the memories of his childhood in Petit-Goâve without thinking in Creole; because he grew up using Creole, it continued to influence the way he wrote in French. For the benefit of his French-speaking readers, Laferrière reworked the manuscript to clarify the sense and to ensure that more readers could access his work: “Je l’ai écrit en français parce que la très grande majorité de mes lecteurs ne lisent que le français” (Magnier 224). Using Creole words or syntax helps to establish the language as a legitimate means of literary expression, but texts written in a primarily oral language reach a smaller market and are less widely read.
Haitians like Frankétienne (born Franck Étienne in 1936) write in French and in Haitian Creole. In 1975 Frankétienne was able to publish the first novel written in Haitian Creole, _Dézafi_, thanks to the development of a recognised written form of that language (Schutt-Ainé 103). Since 1980, Haitian Creole has been equipped with an official orthography, and Haitian writers use it to produce texts that touch on diverse aspects of the Haitian experience.

By striving to retain the French and Creole flavours of the original texts, I am adopting an approach that is consistent with the strategy of “foreignization” advocated by Lawrence Venuti, a well-known translation theorist and a professor of English at Temple University in Philadelphia. Venuti has worked as a professional translator from Italian into English since the 1980s. In *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Venuti encourages translators to adopt the translation strategy of “foreignization”:

one [strategy, domestication,] requires that the author of a foreign nation be brought across to us in such a way that we can look on him as ours; the other [strategy, foreignization,] requires that we should go across to what is foreign and adapt ourselves to its conditions, its use of language, its peculiarities. (104)

In 1998, when Lawrence Venuti published *The Scandals of Translation*, he recommended leaving “remainders” in the translation “that question the unity of standard English” (11). He suggested flaunting the foreign just enough to remind readers that they are outside their own culture. Otherwise, if a translator tries to adopt the target language and its culture, the reader would be less aware of the cultural exchange that happens in translation.

In an effort to make foreign the English text, I chose to occasionally use words that are similar to French. In *Vingt petits pas vers Maria*, for instance, I employ “cord” rather than “rope”
to translate “une corde, tendue, me tirait avec force” (Vingt petits pas vers Maria 9) “a taut cord, pulling me with all its force” (my translation 59). Similarly, I use “silhouette” rather than “shadow” when the narrator describes seeing Maria behind the muslin curtains: “sa silhouette semblait me parvenir à travers un prisme” (Vingt petits pas vers Maria 22) “her silhouette seemed to reach me through a prism” (my translation 64). Other such choices from the first chapter of Vingt petits pas vers Maria in English include words such as façade and décor. These words are “remainders” of the original French text within my English translation. By translating Agnant’s “autour du globe” (Vingt petits pas vers Maria 21) as “all around the globe” (my translation 64) rather than the more common “all around the world,” I slightly upset the readability of the translation.

In Le Noël de Maïté, Agnant uses a play on words, a paronomasia, when she describes Maïté’s determination to oppose her Aunt Inès: “Elle va montrer à cette Inès qu’ils ne sont pas des pantins mais bien des Plantin” (Le Noël de Maïté 28) “She will show Inès that the Plantins are not puppets” (my translation 106). I could not recreate the pun, but I could at least retain the alliteration, therefore translating “pantin” by “puppet” in Le Noël de Maïté. In Vingt petits pas vers Maria, however, I translate “pantin” by “marionette” when describing how María Dolorès de la Cruz’s lover shook when he coughed:

Entre deux accès d’une toux rauque qui le secouait tel un pantin, ce garçon, qui avait la révolte ancrée dans le sang, lui avait dit... (Vingt petits pas vers Maria 16)

Between two bouts of raspy coughing, which shook him like a marionette, this boy, who had revolt running in his veins, had told her... (my translation 62)

I decided not to use the same word in both texts because, in Vingt petits pas vers Maria, I opted
to use “marionette” as a remainder of the French text and as a more accurate representation of
the evoked image.

In *Le Noël de Maîté*, Agnant writes “Il porte son propre cartable accroché à ses épaules,
et tient par la poignée celui de Maîté” (*Le Noël de Maîté* 10). Obviously Agnant does not use
“cartable” to mean “binder,” as it does in Canadian French; rather, she means “book bag,” the
international French usage, and this is how I translated it: “He is carrying his own book bag on
his back and is holding Maïté’s by the handle” (my translation 100). Although Agnant has been
living in Quebec for many years, she rarely uses Québécois French in her writing. Still, at times,
Quebec seems to influence Agnant’s writing, such as in her use of snow imagery in *Vingt petits
pas vers Maria*: “The words made me think of the light and graceful snowflakes of a first
snowfall” (my translation 64). Her words, like snowflakes, land on the pages where she is
creating Maria’s story.

Marie-Célie Agnant’s writing is musical as well as colourful and I have strived to
maintain these qualities in my translations. Next, I will discuss specific issues I faced while
translating her two books for young readers.

*Vingt petits pas vers Maria*

The focus of *Vingt petits pas vers Maria*, one of the two books translated for this thesis, is
a portrayal of the alienation lived by an immigrant domestic worker. Marie-Célie Agnant has
lived in the same neighbourhood since she moved to Montreal and it has inspired *Vingt petits pas
vers Maria* (Spear, “Agnant”). The narrator’s neighbour, Constance, is based on one of Agnant’s
own neighbours, and Maria Dolorès is inspired by other domestic workers, mostly Filipinas, who work in the rich neighbourhood next to Agnant’s.

Agnant, through her autobiographical narrator, explores the relationship between reality and fiction and imagines a story about the neighbour’s maid. From inside a café, the narrator, an American immigrant of Haitian decent, hears a woman outside who starts “to hum a tune, a melody that, in some strange way, seemed to awaken inside me some sort of echo” (my translation 58). She follows the woman, who is singing a field song in Spanish; she is intrigued and seeks to get to know this woman, who is her neighbour’s maid. But instead of talking to her, the narrator imagines her as Maria Dolorès de la Cruz and writes a fictional past for the maid.

Agnant uses the pronoun “Elle” as the title of chapter 1, to refrain from giving an individual identity to the maid, who represents all women in similar situations. In the English translation, I used the title “She”; I was constrained by the use of the same pronoun in the accompanying appendix, “Writing the Story of Many Women” in Vingt petits pas vers Maria’s, “Le plus de plus,” where Agnant writes:

Comme Mona, Elle est née en Haïti près de la frontière avec la République dominicaine. (Vingt petits pas vers Maria 81)

Like Mona, She was born in Haiti near the border of the Dominican Republic. (my translation 93)

The title of chapter 2, “L’Autre,” brings to mind the notion of a person from a culture unknown to the reader. The translated title, “The Other,” a term associated with migrant literature, is similarly pertinent to the story. The second chapter is a fictitious account of Maria’s wanderings about her homeland with the field song in her head. Because her story is imagined, the narrator
gives several popular boy’s names to the fictitious Maria’s lover: “Pasha, Pablito, Juan, Carlos, Manuel, Ali” (Vingt petits pas vers Maria 17). She even lists possible places where they could be living in a similar situation: “Bahia, Cartagena, Jakarta, Maranhão or Managua. The images of my memory suggested Port-au-Prince or Santo Domingo” (my translation 62). The narrator, who was born in Chicago but whose mother and grandmother were born in Haiti, envisions Haiti as the fictional Maria’s home.

By the end of the second chapter, the maid’s character is given the name of Maria Dolorès de la Cruz, based on the neighbour telling the narrator that her maid’s name is Maria Dolorès. In chapter 3, the narrator imagines the poor woman’s escape on a merchant marine ship. The narrator talks to the neighbour about Maria in chapter 4. Months pass before the Sunday where María, the real one, is arrested. The narrator laments in chapter 5 that she did not take the twenty tiny steps to go next door to meet the real Maria Dolorès.

Despite maintaining a rarefied distance from her neighbour’s maid Maria, the narrator identifies with her. As pointed out in the appendix by the author herself, a small distance such as twenty tiny steps “represents the distance between human beings. It’s the distance created by social conditions or origins but especially by selfishness and indifference” (my translation 86). While the narrator had good intentions about introducing herself to the real Maria Dolorès, she never manages to do so and remains distanced from this woman whose life she was reinventing through her writing.

The impersonal relations between the characters underscore the alienation of the characters. The narrator barely seems to know the neighbours; she never calls Constance Martin by her first or last name. When she encounters the neighbour’s husband in chapter 7, he is not
given a name and only seems to be relaying his wife’s messages to the narrator. When asked the
name of the new maid, the husband replies, “[I]t may well be Maria” because “Constance can
never remember names. It’s a lot easier for her if she calls them all Maria.” (my translation 75).

The narrator does not miss the opportunity to introduce herself to the neighbour’s new
maid, Mona, in chapter 8. They talk about Maria’s real story and the field song that first attracted
the narrator to her. Finally, after talking with Mona, the narrator realises that the fictitious story
she wrote about Maria Dolorès de la Cruz was actually based on her own grandmother’s story,
which she recounts in chapter 9.

*Vingt petits pas vers Maria* describes the reality lived by immigrant women who come to
Canada under the Live-In Caregiver Program. In the story, Maria cannot return home to see her
own child; instead, she takes care of the Martin’s baby, without earning enough money to send
for her own daughter. Maria, who is escorted away in handcuffs after attacking her employer,
exemplifies how life can be a struggle for these women and how the Live-In Caregivers Program
might not give them the freedom they hoped for.

In the appendix of *Vingt petits pas vers Maria*, Agnant provides her readers with a
summary of the official text about the Live-In Caregivers Program and discusses the immigration
situation in Canada at the time of publication in 2001. “A True Story” is about two Filipinas
who arrived because of the Program (my translation 95). Their story is more positive than
Maria’s because they are eventually able to bring more family members to live in Canada. This
true story provides an important counterpart to the fictional story of Maria.

Agnant’s concern with the plight of immigrant domestic workers is shared by Caribbean
writers who have immigrated to Canada and write in English. Austin Clarke’s writing primarily
speaks about Caribbean immigrants in Toronto and their struggles against racism and economic exploitation. Clarke left Barbados in 1955, the year that the Caribbean Domestic Scheme was adopted in Canada. After WWII, Canada recruited women from struggling countries to do domestic work for Canadian women who had less time to keep house, due to pregnancy or to being in the workplace. Domestics “mainly from Jamaica and Barbados” were offered landed immigrant status (Mensah 151). This was “one of the few legal avenues by which Jamaicans could enter Canada ... nurses, teachers, secretaries and clerks took advantage of the program” and used it as a way to leave their homeland (Mensah 99). The program was cancelled in 1967 with the arrival of the point system immigration.

The only story in Austin Clarke’s collection *When He Was Young and Free and Used to Wear Silks* to give a female point of view is “Waiting for the Postman to Knock.” It tells the story of Enid, a Barbadian who came to Canada and, in 1969, finds herself alone with no money at Christmastime. Her letters are heartbreaking tales of how she has been sick and unable to make money to pay for rent and bills. Finally, a letter comes from her friend Dots, a Barbadian also working as a domestic, who promises to visit Enid after work. In the end they find solace in being together to celebrate with the food and drinks that Dots brought from her employer’s house.

Creating a sisterhood is also a solution that Agnant offers in *Vingt petits pas vers Maria.* The domestic workers gather in the park and share news from their countries and stories about their lives:
Là, elle rencontrait d’autres femmes, ses compagnes, payées, tout comme elle, pour promener les enfants, les vieillards et les chiens, lorsque les patrons s’en allaient à leurs affaires. *(Vingt petits pas vers Maria 22)*

There, she met with other women, her companions, paid, just like her, to walk the children, the elderly and the dogs, while their bosses went about their business (my translation 64).

The women relate to each other, creating a sisterhood of comfort in their new environment.

Constance is the perfect example of how the people they live closest to are unable to relate and sympathise with them. The domestic workers are physically removed from their homelands yet they still have close ties with those countries.

Agnant, like other Caribbean authors, writes about the difficulties shared by women from all over the world who have sought to come to Canada in hope for a better life. Although *Vingt petits pas vers Maria* is ostensibly a children’s book, it is designed to educate both children and adults and sensitize them to the immigrant experience.

*Le Noël de Maïté*

Translating *Le Noël de Maïté* posed different challenges. This book is more specifically about Haitians and their place in Quebec and transmits more about Haitian culture than does *Vingt petits pas vers Maria*. The grandmother character is crucial to a story like *Le Noël de Maïté*, about the wisdom of an old woman and the importance of storytelling. *Le Noël de Maïté* exemplifies the grandmother-granddaughter relationship in Caribbean cultures, often the subject matter of Agnant’s fiction. Céphie, the grandmother, listens to reggae and Compas music in her
apartment and wishes she had stayed in Haiti, whereas her granddaughter Maïté does not want to leave Canada. The granddaughter does not have the same connection to Haiti because she has never lived there. For a first-generation Canadian girl, Maïté is startled by the idea of going to Haiti in December: “Christmas in Haiti! Haiti in the summer would be fine, but for Christmas, it’s absurd!” (my translation 106). In the end, grandmother and granddaughter spend Christmas together in Céphie’s apartment.

The story Céphie tells on Christmas Eve teaches Maïté an important lesson about holding her tongue, how words are important and powerful but how she must learn to use them wisely. Marie-Célie Agnant demonstrates her sensitivity to voices that have long been silenced by having her character Maïté speak her mind.

This story gave me, as a translator, the challenge of dealing with Creole words and cultural references. In Vingt petits pas vers Maria, Agnant does not use any Creole and her cultural references to Haiti are minimal. When Agnant used Creole words in Le Noël de Maïté, I have retained them in my translation and, like Agnant, I italicized the Creole to identify it clearly as “foreign”. When Céphie uses Creole, it is followed by the French equivalent: “Ki moun sa? Qui est là?” (Le Noël de Maïté 37). In my translation, I borrowed the Creole and translated the French into English: “Ki moun sa? Who’s there?” (109).4

As with the Creole cultural references, I put thought and research into finding ways to describe Haitian dishes and ingredients that were unfamiliar to me. For example, in my

4 This juxtaposition of two languages in one text is also common practice in First Nation narratives.
translation, when references are made to types of food, I translated

pâte de fruits, biscottes, sirop d'orgeat, tablettes de noix, djondjon, soupe au giraumon,
aubergines à la morue, akras (Le Noël de Maité 42-47)

by

fruit candies, melba toast, barley syrup, nut bars, djondjon, giraumon squash soup,
eggplant with cod, fritters. (my translation 110-13)

These foods reflect Haitian cuisine. I use the term giraumon, and specify that it is a type of
squash. The term djondjon, borrowed from Creole in the original, is again borrowed in the
English translation; the meaning of djondjon is explained in the French text and in my translation
by Céphie, who is appalled that her granddaughter has never tried the exquisite Haitian treat:

Comment? Tu n’en as jamais mangé? Ah, les démons ! Ma pauvre petite, le djondjon est
exquis. C’est tellement bon qu’il faut faire attention. Si on n’y prend garde, on se mange
les doigts. (Le Noël de Maité 44)

What? You’ve never eaten any? Ah, those devils! My poor girl, djondjon is exquisite. It’s
so good you have to be careful. If you don’t watch out, you’ll eat your fingers. (my
translation 111)

Céphie goes on to give a more straightforward explanation: “Tiny little dried mushrooms that
you cook with rice” (my translation 111).

While Céphie’s speech has Creole undertones, Maité speaks a French that has been
influenced by growing up in Quebec. Maité also values the Creole influence from her Haitian
heritage transmitted primarily by Céphie, who continues to use Creole and Haitian expressions
with her granddaughter. In French, Maité calls Céphie “Grand-mère” (Le Noël de Maité 20). I
accentuate the use of Creole in my translation, having Maïté addresses Céphie as “Grann,” a Creole word, rather than as the more formal English word “Grandmother” (103).  

At the beginning of Le Noël de Maïté, Agnant shares a song for playing hopscotch. Instead of using an equivalent English-Canadian hopscotch song, I chose to translate the original French song literally, maintaining the singsong style, the flavour and the images:

Sur un pied de laurier-rose, il y avait sept fleurs. Le vent a soufflé, une fleur est tombée. Combien en reste-t-il? Sur un pied de laurier-rose, il y avait six fleurs. Le vent a soufflé… (Le Noël de Maïté 10)

On a stem of oleander, seven flowers grew. The wind blew, a flower flew. How many were left? On a stem of oleander, six flowers grew. The wind blew… (my translation 100)

In Le Noël de Maïté, all of the characters’ proper names, Corinne, Céphie, Nickolas, Maïté, Inès and Alfred are borrowed from the original but with minor changes to “tante Inès” (24) and “oncle Alfred,” (28) which become “Aunt Inès” (102) and “Uncle Alfred” (103). Maïté’s aunt and uncle, who still have ties to Haiti, have a hard time relating to their niece, who has lived only in Quebec. Aunt Inès represents an older generation who is worried about the loss of Haitian values. At one point, after Maïté storms into the adults’ conversation, Inès laments to her husband: “See what I mean, Alfred dearest, when I talk of lost values and traditions, lost sense of family, and lack of respect” (my translation 107).

Maïté has a close relationship with their grandmother, keeper of the Caribbean culture. My familiarity with Dany Laferrière’s Da character, for example, gives me a better idea of the grandmother’s role in Haitian culture. Agnant’s old women characters, removed from their

homeland, pass along their wisdom to their grandchildren. Vieux Os’ grandmother Da is a portrayal of what life could have been like in Haiti for La dot de Sara’s Marianna or Le Noël de Maïté’s Céphie.

The boys at school call Maïté “Fifi Brindacier” (Le Noël de Maïté 1), the French name of Swedish author Astrid Lindgren’s red-haired heroine, Pippi Longstocking; Pippi had no patience for adults, just like Maïté, who stands up to her Aunt Inès. I decided to retain this same reference in my translation, although I debated adapting the reference and changing Pippi Longstocking to Anne Shirley, the most famous redhead in Canadian literature, because Lucy Maud Montgomery’s fictional orphan girl from Prince Edward Island is as mischievous and sharp-tongued as Maïté. The reference to red hair is important to the story: in Maïté’s paternal family, “one generation out of three, a girl is born with that red hair,” which is responsible for her being sharp-tongued. Maïté’s mother, Corinne, “stays mum when Céphie is around. Céphie is Maïté’s great-grandmother. Not only do she and Maïté get along well, but also their resemblance is striking: the same almond-shaped eyes, the same rebellious hair” (my translation 102). They have a special bond, symbolised by their red hair.

I found it necessary to adapt some French idioms and proverbs, which are integral parts of the story. In the opening scene, the saying used to describe how Nickolas felt before Maïté talked to him, “gai comme un pinson” (Le Noël de Maïté 1), could be translated literally as “gay as a finch” but the more idiomatic English expression is “happy as a lark” (my translation 99). In the appendix to Le Noël de Maïté, “Le plus de plus,” the section “Like an Animal!” gives hints about familiar animal expressions in French. Three out of five English translations did not have to be adapted: the turtle is
slow, the lamb is meek and the fox is sly in both languages (my translation 124).

As we can see in the appendices, Agnant’s *Vingt petit pas vers Maria* and *Le Noël de Maïté* are also designed for use in the classroom, to teach children about the realities of Canadian and Québécois cultures. Both of my translations include all the notes, questions, games, interviews and recipes published in the appendix “Le plus de plus” in the French originals. They make reading more interactive for children, and are especially helpful for teacher and student, or parent and child. The books are designed to educate children and adults about Haitian culture. I hope that, if my translations of these books are published, they will be able to do the same.

Translation is a tool that has broadened my perspective of Haitian language and culture as I brought Marie-Célie Agnant into comparison with other Caribbean and Canadian writers. A translation is only made possible due to “the strength of an interpretation” (Venuti, *Translator’s Invisibility* 17), and the more research and reading that I did about Black, Caribbean, Canadian, Québécois and women’s literatures, the more comfortable I felt with my interpretation and translation of Agnant’s *Vingt petit pas vers Maria* and *Le Noël de Maïté*. 
Works Cited


Twenty Tiny Steps Towards Maria

By Marie-Célie Agnant

Translated from the French by Chantal Samson
She 58
The Other 62
Maria Dolorès de la Cruz 66
Maria Dolorès, the Real One 68
Twenty Tiny Steps 71
Why Me? 73
My Neighbour’s Husband 75
Mona 77
Grandmother’s Story 81
Appendix 83
Chapter 1: She

On the lawns, patches of yellowed grass were appearing, here and there, through the last few piles of dirty snow. The first signs of spring. This particular morning, the sky was quite beautiful. Nevertheless, I had gone into the small café where I often took refuge to write down my first pages of the day.

She had stopped in front of the café to glance with a mechanical eye at the menu posted on the door. I had noticed that her eyes were of a deep black, her hair wavy and also black, with glints of blue. But what struck me the most was the gray veil over her eyes which, on the other side of the dull window, seemed to stare off to a far-away place, leaving nothing on the sidewalk but her angular face, her midnight blue highlights and her bony fingers gripping the handle of the baby carriage.

Suddenly, she started to hum a tune, a melody that, in some strange way, seemed to awaken inside me some sort of echo. Without really knowing where my feet would lead me, I began following her.

She was coming back from her daily stroll with the baby. The grating sound of her boots on the asphalt mixed with the grinding sound of the wheels on the carriage she was pushing. The synthetic collar on her coat bristled like a dead animal wrapped around her neck.

She crossed Vingtième Avenue and followed Vingt-deuxième. At the corner of Vingt-troisième, she slackened her pace as she cast a distracted glance at the jeweller’s display window. She bent her head a little to one side, which made her right shoulder appear higher than the other, creating the appearance of a hump under her coat.

What secret quest, what remote memory bonded my steps to hers, all while she was
paying no attention to me whatsoever? I followed her into that no-exit street lined with luxurious houses, where we lived, she and I, in bourgeois quietude.

In front of the opulent facade of number 54, she stopped. With a distraught expression on her face, she looked all around, as if despairingly trying to recapture her soul in the setting. She stood before the house as though hesitant to go inside. I saw her hands, small and delicate; already they bore traces of hard work. She stood at an angle. I could observe her face; her thick lashes were trembling.

Suddenly, she bit her lower lip, took a quick glance at the sleeping baby and seemed to come back to her senses, becoming aware of her existence, of the exact sense of her presence, there, on the sidewalk. Then, in one brisk movement, she gripped the baby carriage and climbed the granite steps leading up to the landing. From her pocket, she took out a key, pushed the heavy glass door open on its hinges and entered the house.

At the same instant, like a flash, a dazzling idea came to me. There was a need pushing me towards her, a taut cord, pulling me with all its force. I was not thinking about what I would say to her, I could not think. I was a cat, holding my breath as I crept forward. I slid one foot forward, then the other, and there I was, on the landing, and since the second door had been left open, I could see her.

The fine period pieces in the parlour, the soft plush armchairs seemed to invite me in and drive me away all at once. Everything was in its place. It was an uncompromising interior, as regular as clockwork, organized with care: Persian rugs, marble tables, vases overflowing with flowers.
Barefoot, she skimmed across the surface of the polished floor, holding the child in her arms, close to her. She looked intensely at the baby; her look became passionate. She pressed the baby more tightly to her chest and, with quick little steps, began to climb the stairs.

With my arms dangling, I stood on the landing where I could hear noises from within the house. I heard a door open and close. Her footsteps were getting closer; she came back down the stairs and into the long hallway, headed for the kitchen perhaps. She did not know that I was there; she did not suspect that I had followed her all the way to this house that was not her home, that belonged to another, to my neighbour, her boss.

From inside the house, suddenly, the singing arose. It was that same melody, only this time accompanied by words. She sang in Spanish: "To recapture the bird’s song that rocked your early childhood, even if your legs are severed, you will become a reptile, a serpent, a grass snake: you will learn to crawl. You will become a bird, a hawk, a falcon: you will learn to fly."

In my chest, I felt my heart skip a beat. That melody... like an old image rising up before me like a reflection.... Her voice broke on the last notes as I left, almost running, carrying this song she had just revived within me. It haunted me all day.

Every morning thereafter, I went back to that little café to watch for her, to surprise her veiled gray look and perhaps even to ask her where she had learned that song. Every morning I would wait for the noise of her worn heels on the sidewalk mixed in with the grinding of the carriage wheels. I resolved to wave to her, to invite her to come inside and have coffee with me. Every morning, the noise of the wheels, like a rattling, and her regular trotting, a little hesitant.... Every morning, I waited for the next morning.
April passed by, May too. She started to abandon the too-lively streets for walks in the park, for the shaded backyard, or even for the orderly garden of the luxurious house where she lived.

From my veranda, it was impossible to see the backyard. It had to be beautiful, framed by two immense willows and a giant elm that projected their shade onto the silence of the street. I began to look for her comings and goings behind the muslin curtain. And I decided to invent a story that could be hers, to imagine her life, when she had not yet become a domestic worker at my neighbour's house. I took my notebooks and my pens and I sat across from the window, a big glass bay window from which I could see the street and the house opposite, where she was living.
Chapter 2: The Other

I invented her birth in one of those countries where misery has an imperishable edge that suffocates all hope. Shortly after her birth, her wandering began. She went in all directions, carrying her childhood at arm’s length, exhausted. She went through a village, perhaps even a city: a maze of gray streets, a cluster of old buildings with battered facades, bare walls ready to fall down at the slightest jolt. That place of her childhood, that village, that city, whose contours I was sketching on my papers, seemed to arise from my memory, a survivor of my long lost remembrances. A place of lost childhood and of spoiled dreams; perhaps it was Bahia, Cartagena, Jakarta, Maranhão or Managua. The images of my memory suggested Port-au-Prince or Santo Domingo. It was in this place that her childhood had hatched, and had abandoned her, I wrote: a district of shantytowns that neither her eyes nor her heart could ever come to love.

My memory, burning, drew the curves of the deserted road that swallowed her up. She wished to distance herself from the immense fields that would remain with her always at the tips of her fingers, worn down from picking the berries on coffee trees. In those fields, she had left behind most of her dreams and she had fled, carrying with her the echo of a voice, the voice of a boy whose name was Pasha, Pablito, Juan, Manuel, Carlos or Ali. Between two bouts of raspy coughing, which shook him like a marionette, this boy, who had revolt running in his veins, had told her: “We will fight, you’ll see, we’ll fight against the walls, against those that build them up around us. We will demolish those walls and we will get out of here. One day, you’ll see, before we have grown up, we will be free! You will come with me and we will be married. We will have children, children that we will not sell.”
One night, the boy’s coughing fits started to echo like the howling of dogs in the night....

In the early morning, Pasha, Pablito, Juan, Carlos, Manuel or Ali was no longer. While the boy and his rebellious refrain were being buried, she took advantage of a moment of the guards’ inattention and slipped away across the fields. She followed a random road, with, as her only baggage, the boy’s rebellious song and, in her pockets, a little tarnished mirror, an engagement gift given to her by that boy who went by the name of Pablito, Juan, Carlos, Pasha, Ali or Manuel.

In her dress of heavy gray fabric, she merged with the shadows, casting from time to time an anxious look over her shoulder and, like an animal, she slept that night at the foot of a tree.

There, she told herself that the fields and the factories where children leave their fingers, their lungs and shreds of their flesh reached well beyond the walls and barbed wire which enclosed the coffee trees and kept her a prisoner. That acrid odour emanating from the berries, she thought, the odour that constantly filled her throat, would pursue her to the ends of the earth. Alone in the night, she understood how hard it was to knock down prison walls and how very false it was to claim that all people are born equal.

The next day, she continued on her way, with that refrain which had refused to be left behind: “To recapture the bird’s song that rocked your early childhood, even if your legs are severed, you will become a reptile, a serpent, a grass snake: you will learn to crawl. You will become a bird, a hawk, a falcon: you will learn to fly.”

Every morning, I would station myself in front of the window; I would hear the neighbour’s steps leaving the house. Her heels hammered, peremptorily, on the flagstones of the walkway. Before leaving, she would shout out orders one last time, and her voice would be lost
as she abruptly closed the car door behind her. I opened my notebooks. While observing the
comings and goings of the young woman attending to her chores in the cozy house, I aligned my
sentences. The words made me think of the light and graceful snowflakes of a first snowfall. On
my pages, they always seemed to waltz for a few moments, before disappearing into an
unconscious spinning of a story that I wanted to be full of emotion. I, a poetess who stammered
and frolicked with her sentences, had almost forgotten her sad voice as she warbled her strange
song, her endless comings and goings from Sunday to Sunday, the child’s diapers to change, the
dog to walk. In fact, I no longer needed her. Like a potter before the wheel, I could imagine an
existence however I liked; I could shape it, give it a life as many times as my pen desired, in as
many countries, all around the globe. I could make that existence translucent or opaque, or I
could even erase it or ignore it.... Behind the muslin curtains, her silhouette seemed to reach me
through a prism. But sometimes, like a fleeting shadow, she rose up, between my sheet of paper
and myself, between the Other woman whose existence I invented and myself.

In the evening, satisfied, I would close my notebooks, saying to myself that I was surely
born with imagination and sensitivity at the tip of my pen.

I had stopped going to the little café. It was the height of summer. I knew that her daily
walks with the baby took her to a large park not far from the house. Now she wore faded
Bermudas handed down to her from her boss, or else modest dresses, tight little girl’s dresses
that looked as though they had shrunk with time.

There, she met with other women, her companions, paid, just like her, to walk the
children, the elderly and the dogs, while their bosses went about their business.
One evening, I crossed paths with my neighbour. She was coming back from work. Petite, her hair blonder than blonde, her skin delicate, milky and clear; just like her house, my neighbour was an incarnation of perfection. I do not know why, but she seemed incapable of staying still. She moved around incessantly, releasing whiffs of an expensive perfume, relentlessly pinching her lips into a pout like a spoiled child and gesticulating wildly with her arms, all the while running her hands through her hair, endlessly pushing it back from her face. She was wearing a navy suit, and navy shoes as well. Putting her leather briefcase on the ground, she began talking to me about anything at all, about the changing seasons, about how time flies, about her new anti-wrinkle cream. Then she went on about women’s role in the workplace and how this proclaimed liberty was really nothing other than a pitiless yoke. Before leaving her, I asked what her maid’s name was. Suddenly wary, she stared at me in silence for a long moment.

“Maria Dolores,” she said after a moment. “That’s a peculiar name, don’t you think? I simply call her Maria. It’s less complicated. The one before her too, we also called Maria. Since they never stay too long, we baptize them all Maria.”

She spoke very quickly. And in her slender neck, her swanlike neck under translucent skin, a vein pulsated.

“Always on the lookout for names for your characters!” she continued, raising her eyebrows. The dry tone of her voice expressed her great exasperation.

That night, in my notebook, I wrote: “Maria Dolores.” It seemed to me that that name fit like a glove the Other woman whose existence I had chosen to invent between the lines in my notebooks. I also gave her a last name: de la Cruz.
Chapter 3: Maria Dolorès de la Cruz

Every morning, I would go back to my notebooks. Maria Dolorès de la Cruz was on my page, at the tip of my pen. I followed her as I sowed my words. My fingers were no longer sufficient to count her years of wandering since she had left the coffee tree fields.

One evening, she went down to the port, that place where so many quests lead and dreams are born. Along narrow lanes, she roamed aimlessly. She ventured into a dark alley. In the muddy ruts, she walked, at a measured pace. In the opposite direction, a man came towards her. He gave her a glance out of the corner of his eye and pretended to be on his way. However, he retraced his steps and then stood before her. He was a sailor. He had a neck as strong and thick as a bull, a face like a block of stone, hands as wide as the blades of an oar, a voice like a growl.... She was shaken to the core by the violence in his voice, this abyss, wide open before her, and fear, real fear, the kind that is palpable, that penetrates you and pierces your intestines, swept through her. She shivered and ran her skinny fingers through her coarse and tangled hair.

The man with the bull-like neck began telling her about dreams that cannot die. He described for her horizons where the eye can see no end. In his ferocious voice, he told her: “Everything will be fine, you’ll see, everything will be for the best....” So, despite her fear, she followed this man and offered him what caresses she had left and her fading young body.

Before leaving with him toward those endless horizons, she returned one last time to the village of her childhood and entrusted her mother with a little girl named Luisa. The child was a mirror image of her mother.

She made the voyage on a merchant marine ship flying a Philippine flag. The sour-tempered sailor, who had already wandered everywhere and had traveled all the seas of
misfortune, locked her up in a barrel pierced with several holes which he had stowed away in the boat’s hold. Hidden in the cargo, she drifted, like a half-dead fetus with her little bundle, a few crumbs of hope and, on her breast, the imprint of the hungry lips of her little girl who had been conceived between the desire for oblivion and mad hope.

The voyage was long, but time no longer mattered. Hope, she told herself, lay at the end of the horizon. On the pages of my notebook, there was hardly any space left.
Chapter Four: Maria Dolorès, the Real One

It was a Sunday when Maria Dolorès, the real one, arrived in the neighbourhood. That morning, I remember it well; I was looking out the window when I noticed my neighbour. She was leaning over an enormous clump of rhododendrons, tending to them passionately. I walked across the street to talk to her, as usual, about everything and nothing at all. She then started telling me that her new maid had been sent to her by an agency which kept a large part of her salary.

“I would have preferred a young woman who can speak both French and English with a decent accent and who doesn’t roll her r’s and l’s like sailors or those girls that learn the languages in brothels along the wharf,” she told me.

“It’s most likely due to her mother tongue,” I answered her, a little embarrassed, as if I were trying to apologise. “What matters most,” I said to conclude, “is that she be a reliable person.”

“You’re perfectly right,” she agreed. “She knows how to do everything. You’re right... we just can’t have everything.”

Months had passed. Maria Dolorès would regularly go to the park where there were other housekeepers. Always staying within an arm’s reach of the children, the young women commented on the news of their countries torn apart by war, lamented about their misery and dreamed of sending for their children, husbands or elderly parents.

Then came that Sunday, and at nightfall, her cry like a hurt animal.
Rushing out at the sound of the sirens, I remained standing in my doorway. From a distance, police cars rushed towards us, two, then four and then five. The crowd of curious bystanders suddenly grew dense.

My neighbour looked calm despite her fixed expression. Always just as blonde. In the blue-gray night, her translucent skin seemed iridescent. She was massaging the nape of her neck. I tried to get closer, gently parting the crowd.

Between two police officers, I saw Maria Dolorès, handcuffed from behind. Before heaving herself into the car, she looked at me, she took a long look at me. Suddenly it became clear to me that the Maria Dolorès de la Cruz whom I claimed to have given birth to between the lines of my notebook and the Maria Dolorès being escorted by police officers became, through that gaze, one and the same person.

After the ambulance and the police were gone, my neighbour came to join me on my veranda. She did not understand, she did not know why Maria Dolorès had so violently attacked her. Her lips trembled as she repeated: "Why me? Why me?"

She stared at me with incredulous eyes, and told me that she vaguely remembered one time when Maria Dolores had told her what her life was like before... before she arrived at my neighbour’s house. She had even confided in her boss the dreams and the fears she had for her daughter.

We both looked bewildered, and I had in my ears the wailing of the sirens taking away Maria Dolorès in the night.
The neighbour kept repeating: “I don’t understand. I really don’t understand why. I never
did her any harm; I was always good to her, I think. I paid her salary. I even gave her my old
clothes that I didn’t wear anymore.”
Chapter Five: Twenty Tiny Steps

After that Sunday, words arose within me, but they did not reach my pen. Broken, crumbled, useless words. I closed my notebooks, put away my pens, and watched the days go by. Like calm untroubled water, the days flowed, without any ripples. Maria Dolorès, her wandering look, her arms cradling her boss’s baby, her nostalgic song, that oppressed aura which hovered around her: random facts? A tide of torment that I could not dam had been inundating me since her departure. Like a piece of wreckage, the waves took me back toward her, every day. Like a crazy butterfly that circles around a lamp, tirelessly my thoughts turned around her. Her jet-black hair had curly blue highlights. They floated before me since she had left, with her hands cuffed behind her back.

The space between the two sidewalks was all that had separated me from Maria Dolorès.

One night, I crossed the street, putting my feet one in front of the other. Twenty steps, twenty tiny steps. Forty total: twenty there, twenty back. Between her and me, had there really been only that little distance? A few steps? A short insignificant journey?

In the summertime, I would write on the veranda. There is a huge tree in front of the house. Between two lines traced on the paper, I contemplated a corner of the sky through a curtain created by the bushy branches. I listened to the chatter of the birds and was surprised how I recognized almost all of their codes. I could understand the variations of sounds that announced their happiness, the trills and the shrills during mating season. I also perfectly distinguished their sharp cries of distress, and those warning cries that announced a cat was approaching. Next to me, in the lounge chair, Chamois, my fat kitty cat, purred. I talked to her.
She understood everything. She knew she should not scare the birds. I had told her. She obeyed me and sought a caress, half closing her eyes.

It was from this veranda that I had observed Maria Dolorès. I continued to see her. Her white apron, her smile that sometimes went misty as she bent over the carriage to pick up the baby. She cuddled the child, changed his diaper, danced around with him in the cozy living room. She roared with laughter and the child was happy. Then she rocked him. She sniffed the baby’s lavender-scented layette. She climbed the stairs. She sighed and pictured herself with her own daughter again. When she had left her, her baby was the same age as this child. What was her little one doing now? She wondered.

Maria Dolorès... the rare letters that you had perhaps received would have told you that everything was going well, that the little one was growing fast, that within the next few moons she would be a little woman. It’s too soon, you must have thought, trembling.
Chapter Six: Why Me?

One morning, I crossed paths with my neighbour.

“I took a couple days off work to train the new maid,” she informed me. “I absolutely must take a real vacation after that. What do you expect? That’s life. I was pretty lucky, however; the wound caused by that crazy Maria Dolorès was just superficial. A piece of glass,” she repeated, incredulous: “Can you imagine? A piece of glass! The police officers kept it, obviously, as evidence. It was under the table where she had thrown it when I twisted her arm. In her bedroom, they found other pieces just like it in a little bag. They looked like pieces of a broken mirror. The officers also found a little lock of a child’s hair. It could have been witchcraft, don’t you think? Why would she be keeping pieces of a mirror? Why?”

She turned her face toward me, as if she expected me to provide her with an answer. Without waiting for one, she continued: “Why would she want to kill me with that? Why me? I can’t answer that question. Do you understand any of it? Every time she received letters from back home, she became gloomy, irritable. I also know that her fondest dream was to send for her daughter… well, I understand her… But she didn’t even have her own home. My husband says she must have been depressed.”

“That’s probably true. You told me yourself that she hadn’t seen her daughter for seven years,” I finally managed to say.

“But what did that have to do with me?”

My neighbour did not wait for any answers. She did not need answers. She jumped into sentences as if she were playing hopscotch. Her blonde locks shone in the sun.
“When she threw herself on me,” she continued, “I was under the impression that she had always kept in her pocket, in her fist... that piece of glass. Lucky too that the little one was already asleep. He didn’t hear any of her howling. It would have been terrible for him. A real shock, wouldn’t it be, to see that shrew attack me like that? He is only a child. He seems to have already forgotten her, that’s what’s important. Anyway, the new maid that I just hired is a little more cheerful and seems a little less sly. She’s from Haiti, like you, and she speaks impeccable French. Astonishing! She claims to have been a French teacher back home. That’s special, don’t you think? But they come from everywhere, you know. I could have gotten one from Algeria. She had completed two years of med school before leaving her country. That would have been good, but she was too pretentious. She didn’t want to care for the garden. The agency also sent me another one, from Romania. A music teacher before arriving here; but she seemed surly. I hope not to have a hard time with this one. With my career, I just must have a maid. She assured me she didn’t leave any children behind in her country. Though, sometimes, they lie in order to get the job. Go figure how they can even think about bringing children into this world in such miserable countries, where there are already so many problems! It’s true,” she concluded, with a sigh, before turning her back to me, “it really takes all kinds to make the world go round!”

The neighbour took out her set of keys. She left me standing on the sidewalk, without even saying goodbye. I opened my mouth to say something, anything. The words remained deaf to my call. I could feel them inside me, trapped, dislocated, annihilated....
Chapter Seven: My Neighbour’s Husband

A tall man, more than six feet in height, my neighbour’s husband made you think right away of those enormous skyscrapers that, in big cities, crush everything, monopolizing all the space. His big hands, giant hands with slender fingers like a pianist’s, with wide palms like water-lily leaves, instinctively drew your attention. He was the one who rang my doorbell to tell me they were leaving to spend their vacation elsewhere, in the Marquesas Islands, he specified.

“Constance asked me to tell you that, due to her busy schedule, she can’t find time to come over herself. She’s asked if you could keep an eye on our house. The new maid will be staying there while we’re away... but you never know. As Constance says, life is not quiet like it used to be, nor are the neighbourhoods. However, to have a break from the routine and stress of our jobs, we need to get away twice a year, at least.”

He confided all this to me with a shy smile while he mechanically shrugged his shoulders. I questioned him about their many trips, about the countries they had visited. They had been to Timbuktu, had explored the shores of the Titisee and had toured Venice in a gondola. They had been as far as Darjeeling, had taken photos in front of the Taj Mahal, in all of the gardens of Beijing, and in Egypt, near the pharaohs’ tombs. I wished him bon voyage and asked him the name of their new maid.

“I don’t know,” he answered, without hesitating. “It may well be Maria.” He put his gloves back on and took a couple of steps toward the door. Just as he was about to go down the stairs, he paused for a short moment and seemed to be thinking. “Constance can never remember names. It’s a lot easier for her if she calls them all Maria.”
His colourless voice and his inability to look me in the eye filled me with immense discomfort. I summoned all of my courage to ask him what would become of the woman the police officers had taken away. He shrugged his shoulders, looking annoyed, and mumbled that he knew absolutely nothing about it. Torment was written all over my face. He noticed.

“You don’t look so well, you know. You must be overworked. You should think about resting a little,” he said before briskly turning his head, with what seemed to be a touch of embarrassment.

I watched him walk away.
Chapter Eight: Mona

This morning, I put one foot in front of the other, I crossed the street... twenty tiny steps. I rang the doorbell.

It was almost as if she had been standing behind the door waiting for me.

“Hello, Maria.”

With an ironic smile she replied: “Maria is gone. I’m Mona.”

I tried to explain myself.

“Don’t worry about it... I’m used to it,” she interrupted, closing the door behind me.

“You’re the neighbour from across the street?”

“Yes. Madame Martin must have told you about me?”

“She said that you would be coming over to look in on things. To make sure everything was all right.”

“Actually, I simply came over to ask you your name.”

“My name is Mona. I just told you.”

With a dazed expression, I looked around as if trying to recognize something familiar, as if I were expecting Maria Dolorès to appear.

“Is this the first time you have come over here?”

“Yes.”

“But Madame Martin said that she’s known you for many years now.”

“It’s true. I have been living across the street for ten years now.”

Perplexed, she shrugged her shoulders and briskly rubbed her arms.

“You’re cold?”
She nodded her head “Yes.”

She headed toward the kitchen and I followed her. She put water on to boil and began putting away the dishes, not paying much attention to me.

She had a proud posture, a rolling gait, and the measured gestures of a woman who is accustomed to handling silver and fine china carefully.

“Would you like to have a seat?”

I let myself drop onto a chair that she gently pulled out.

“You don’t know me, but I know you a little. The curtains are nothing but a veil, just gauze. I see you every day,” she said.

Her warm voice vibrated and seemingly wanted to crumble the oppressive silence of this big house whose floors shone like many mirrors.

“I see you come and go amidst your books. If I had the time, I would write a story with a character that resembles you. Many novelists, I imagine, probably go about it like that. When I was a child, I chose passers-by or neighbours and I would invent extravagant stories about them.”

I awkwardly tried to change the subject: “You noticed my books?”

“There are books on every wall.”

Confused, I almost bowed my head: “It’s true. They are everywhere.”

“I adore books. In books there are dreams that never die, dreams sown by poets, words scattered on white pages, just like stars, strewn across the sky. I’ve always dreamed of becoming a writer, but my father often repeated to me that life is not like in storybooks.”

She half closed her eyelids. It was as though her eyes were flickering out, like two sparks.
“You’re from Haiti, Mona?”

“Yes. I grew up in Lascahobas, not far from the border.”

Something like a valve opened and closed in my throat as I told her: “My grandmother and my mother are also from that area but I was born in the United States, in Chicago. That’s where my mother had emigrated.”

“The girl that was here before me came from the neighbouring island, actually... on the other side,” she said, examining my expression, which had suddenly brightened.

“Really? She came from the Dominican Republic? Now I understand everything!” I got up so suddenly that I almost knocked over my chair.

“What do you understand?” she asked, in astonishment.

“I understand now where her song is from. Twice I heard her singing it, you know.”

“The song about the bird?”

“You know it too?”

“Yes, it’s a field song, an air that’s always been sung by agricultural workers on both sides of the border. In fact, I found out where she’s from because in the room, which hadn’t been emptied or cleaned before my arrival, I found envelopes, the mail she received: a few letters written in Spanish. On the envelopes, the postmarks read: Cruz Alta, República Dominicana. There are also pictures of a little girl. She has the look of those kids who, as they say back home, begin howling at the moon in their mother’s womb.”

“They say that?”

“Yes. The elders say that. They have lived through a lot, so they know.”

She fell silent. We could hear the steps of a solitary stroller, who was whistling.
A monotonous whistle, a gypsy tune filled the house despite its closed doors and windows.

"Cruz Alta is a city that almost throws itself into Lake Azuei, as if wanting to drown in it."
Chapter Nine: Grandmother’s Story

That night, like a child amused by repeating a new sound, I said over and over again:

Cruz Alta, Cruz Alta.

Just like memories, dreams are unpredictable. During the night, in a dream, I found the song’s roots, buried in the mists of time, sung by generations of seasonal workers, coffee workers, sugar cane cutters, tobacco pickers. This song was in Grandmother’s luggage when she came to join Mother, in Chicago. I was only three years old, I believe.

At this time, Grandmother was already quite old. Yet, from morning to night, she went about our three-room apartment, cleaning, washing, cooking, while Mother would go to the rich ladies’ houses in Upper Sky to do their housework and to make their floors shine, before she went to her night classes. This was a very long time ago. All day, she worked around the house, ran errands so that Mother had time to study. “You,” she would tell me, with that accent particular to those who are born near the border, that accent where the r’s and the l’s bring to mind the sound of rolling stones, “you,” Grandmother repeated, “you will become a writer, to write my story.” It was like an order. Then she sat down in the rocking chair next to the window and recounted for me once again her race through the coffee tree fields, describing the streams that she had crossed, her fear of grass snakes... and all the dreams she had had while, overcome by fatigue, she had fallen asleep at the foot of a tree the night she ran away.

After the age of 55, Mother obtained her nursing diploma. Grandmother was so happy. We took the subway home from the graduation ceremony. All the way, she hummed. She had arrived in this crazy country, as she said, with that refrain on her lips and that taste for revolt she had gleaned in the coffee tree fields.
The following day, I went back to the little café. Behind the dirty window, I sat all morning, without seeing time or people pass by; words flowed, quickly, from my pen, to recapture the bird’s song and to finish Grandmother’s story.

The neighbour is back from vacation. With her husband and her child. The Marquesas Islands are splendid, she told me, rolling down the car window. Nothing like that to put you back on track and erase all bad memories. A way of letting me know not to mention Maria Dolorès to her anymore. Her memories of her have been washed away by the waves, buried in the sand, cast away, far behind her, like old abandoned slippers.
Twenty Tiny Steps Towards Maria

Appendix

Created by:
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From an idea of:
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Translated by:
Chantal Samson
Before Reading

Interview

This text was born from the discomfort I felt one day when my son, who was 7 or 8 years old at the time, asked me a question. During our usual walk to school, we were crossing through a wealthy neighbourhood of Montreal when he suddenly asked me: “Why, here, is it the Black women who take the White babies out for walks?”

A few months later, an article appearing in a Canadian daily newspaper about the dreadful living conditions experienced by housekeepers from the Philippines spurred me to write a first version of the text.

Marie-Célie Agnant
The Cover and the Illustrations Speak

Look at the cover and the illustrations and then select the most improbable possibility.

1. Maria is:
   a. A young woman who writes funny scenarios.
   b. A young woman living far away from the people she loves.
   c. A young woman who dreams of becoming a bird.
   d. The young woman represented on the cover-page.

2. The “Bird-Woman” in the illustration on the cover symbolizes:
   a. The distance that separates the character from her loved ones.
   b. Desire for liberty.
   c. War and death.
   d. Dreams and creation.

A Question to Think About:

Did you notice the little pictures and the bold letters at the beginning of each chapter?

They let you dream about and envision the story before you discover it through reading.
Interview

Twenty steps... that represents the distance between human beings. It’s the distance created by social conditions or origins but especially by selfishness and indifference.

In this novel, my characters move around a lot, a little like we all do or wish we did. This movement symbolizes the quest: first, the quest of the dispossessed in the world who are seeking to improve their living conditions; second, the quest of the wealthy who want to possess the world through their eyes and their money; and third, the quest of the romantics and humanists who are searching for the best of all worlds for themselves and for others.

In this text, each character is isolated despite a few clumsy efforts to break their solitude. The narrator is distant from Constance Martin, whom she does not call by her first or last name, and Constance is so far removed from her maids that she calls them all Maria.

Indifference prevents us from seeing the people around us: they are invisible, they do not exist and do not need names. They become Maria, the maid, the girl, la fille, la chica, le boy.

Marie-Célie Agnant
Words to Speak of Displacement and Movement

Among the following four verbs, find the one that does not belong.

Then match the three verbs that remain with the appropriate meaning.

1. Climb, wander, ascend, descend.
2. Sail, navigate, go on a cruise, drive.
3. Enter, insert, penetrate, slow down.
4. Ramble, approach, move away, retrace your steps.
5. Stroll, walk around, go on an excursion, immigrate.

a. To move for pleasure.
b. To move with respect to a specific place.
c. To move towards the interior.
d. To move higher or lower.
e. To move on water.

Questions to Think About:

Do you know your neighbours?

How many steps separate you from your closest neighbour?
While You Read

Interview

I observe people quite a bit, but the characters I create are made up of traits belonging to many people. I can begin with a thought, a random fact, or a character that I want to bring to life. That’s how I invent my stories.

In this text, the narrator uses the person she is observing like a painter uses a model. When the writing is finished, only the creation counts; the model has melted and has become invisible.

I reflect a lot and sometimes at length about how I am going to tell my story in order to make it a literary piece, a narration: in what order I will recount events, who the narrator will be, etc. When that is in place, the words flow with pleasure from my pen.

Marie-Célie Agnant
Correct the Mistakes in the Following Sentences:

1. The narrator, the “I” of the text, is a writer. She was born in the Philippines and has lived for the past 10 years in the house across the street from the Martins.

2. The narrator observes the neighbours’ maid whose name is Maria Dolorès. Mona, her boss, calls her Maria.

3. Maria Dolorès, who is watched by the narrator, becomes “She” in Chapter 1 and “Maria Dolorès, The Real One” in Chapter 4.

4. Maria Dolorès de la Cruz is a character invented by the narrator. She imagines her having a difficult life and meeting a boy named Theo.

5. The narrator also imagines that Maria Dolorès de la Cruz has a little girl named Luisa. Maria Dolorès de la Cruz becomes “The Other” in Chapter 2 and gives her name to the title of Chapter 3.

6. Maria Dolorès, “The Real One,” also has a little girl whose name is not given. An unfortunate event that happened to this child was perhaps the cause of her mother’s sudden violent outburst.

A Question to Think About:

Is it possible that the narrator and the author share some similar characteristics?
Interview

In this story, the neighbour is the main character: she occupies the whole space, she possesses everything. The other characters are all “Marias,” people who gravitate around her, like accessories.

Constance is not a woman or a man; she is without a soul. Constance is a system.

The song’s message brings together all those who believe in human dignity.

The bird’s song is a song of hope. It travels through time, it crosses oceans and it never dies. Through this song, stories like Maria’s become part of the world’s history.

Marie-Célie Agnant
Recapturing the Bird’s Song

Choose the appropriate word.

To recapture the bird’s song that marked / rocked your early youth / childhood, even if your legs are / tongue is severed, you will become a reptile, a fish / serpent, a grass snake: you will learn to crawl / run. You will become a nightingale / bird, a hawk, a falcon: you will learn to cheat / fly.

A Question to Think About:

Among the songs, nursery rhymes, poems, and fairy tales from your childhood, are there any that have a message of freedom and independence?
Interview

Our era not only promotes but preaches forgetfulness. It does so in a number of ways, including by presenting information as entertainment, as nothing other than a consumer product.

The writer has a duty to remember. This duty is very important to me. In this particular case, we are dealing with collective memory -- the memory of seasonal workers, women and men, overworked and underpaid workers in the fields and in the factories. It is also the memory of women who, because of their sex, are victims of discrimination and violence.

Marie-Célie Agnant
Writing the Story of Many Women

Who is She? Is She the narrator, Maria Dolorès, Maria Dolorès de la Cruz, Mona, Constance, the mother, or the grandmother of the narrator?

1. Like Mona, She was born in Haiti near the border of the Dominican Republic.
2. Like the narrator’s grandmother, She fled from the coffee tree fields.
3. Like the narrator’s mother, She cleaned and polished floors.
4. Like Maria Dolorès, She rolls her r’s and her l’s.
5. Like Maria Dolorès de la Cruz, She has a little girl who stayed in her homeland.
6. Like Maria Dolorès, She has a little mirror.
7. Like the narrator, She observes what goes on next door.

A Question to Think About:

Constance does not understand what happened. She acknowledges that Maria Dolorès may not have had the best life but she is perplexed: “What did that have to do with me?”

What do you do to make the world a better place?
After Reading

Maria Dolorès’ Story Is Based on Reality

Marie-Célie Agnant has wanted to make her characters believable. To do so she took into account the actual immigration situation in Canada. Here is a summary of the official texts:\(^1\)

The Live-in Caregivers Program is a special program designed to bring workers to Canada to assume positions as live-in caregivers when there are not enough Canadians to fill the available jobs. A live-in caregiver is an individual who provides care for children, elderly persons or persons with disabilities in a private home.

The eligible candidates receive a work permit that allows them to work in Canada as live-in caregivers. After two years of work, (...) they may request permanent residency for themselves.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) The following summary translates the description of the program that Agnant gives in her book. The description has since changed; see: http://www.cic.gc.ca/ENGLISH/work/caregiver/index.asp

\(^2\) This condition has been updated since the book was written: “Effective April 1, 2010, live-in caregivers working in Canada under the Live-in Caregiver Program: have two options for calculating their work experience to be eligible to apply for permanent residence (24 months of authorized full-time employment, or a total of 3,900 hours of authorized full-time employment); have four years from their date of arrival to complete the employment requirement to be eligible for permanent residence under the Program; and no longer need to undergo the standard mandatory requirement for a second medical exam when applying for permanent residence.”
A True Story. *The following story is true although the names have been changed.*

Her name is Melca. She was born in the Philippines. She was married and had three children. To escape poverty, she used the Live-In Caregivers Program and the Quebec counterpart to come to Montreal. Her work within a family respected the clauses of a contract protected by law.

Two years later, she applied for permanent residency but could not include the members of her family in the application, since she did not have sufficient funds to buy their plane tickets.

Mélody, Melca’s sister-in-law, arrived through the same program and replaced Melca in the household which had brought her to Quebec two years earlier. Mélody, who was single, was an accountant’s assistant in her country.

Two years later, Melca and Mélody went back to the Philippines. Melca returned to Montreal with her husband and her children and Mélody came back engaged, but alone. Melca’s two sons and her little daughter attended a school where they studied in French. They lived as a family, putting a little money aside. Evenings and weekends, the adults worked overtime.

Mélody went back to her country to get married and then brought her husband to Canada. They have just had a baby boy.

Mélody left her job but, with her baby, she often visits the three little girls whom she raised and who have not forgotten her.

Mélody has applied to have her mother come, and her husband is looking for a family in Montreal who could use his sister’s services.
Solutions

Before Reading

The Cover and the Illustrations Speak

1. a ; 2. c.

Words to Speak of Displacement and Movement


While You Read

Correct the Mistakes

1. The narrator was born in Chicago, USA;

2. Constance, her boss...

4. ...whose name is Pablito, Juan, Carlos, Pasha, Ali or Manuel.

Recapturing the Bird’s Song

Rocked; childhood; legs are; serpent; crawl; bird; fly

Writing the Story of Many Women

1. The narrator’s grandmother

2. Maria Dolorès de la Cruz

3. Maria Dolorès

4. The narrator’s grandmother

5. Maria Dolorès

6. Maria Dolorès de la Cruz

7. Mona
Maïté's Christmas

By Marie-Célie Agnant

Translated from the French by Chantal Samson
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maïté and Nickolas</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maïté and Aunt Inès</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christmas in Haiti</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Céphie and Maïté</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christmas with Céphie</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Maïté and Nickolas

This afternoon Nickolas Plon is feeling as happy as a lark. He is on his way home from school and humming a popular song. Christmas is coming and Nickolas is under the impression that he can hear merry church bells. In front of him walks Maïté Plantin, the prettiest girl in school. She has almond-shaped eyes, a rebellious head of hair and, under her chin, the cutest dimple. Unfortunately, Maïté has a reputation for being as tough as nails.

“Pippi Longstocking,” the boys whisper behind her back.

Nickolas prefers to leave a good distance between Maïté and himself. “Although she’s pretty,” he tells himself, “with her cinnamon-red mane, she’s like a real dragon when she’s angry.”

Maïté does not punch you in the ribs nor does she kick you in the shins. But her tongue is a scalpel and... she knows how to use it. When her tongue is not up to the job, she flies into one of those rages, real storms that leave her adversaries stunned.

Nickolas could cross the street but his house is on this side. He grumbles a little, “Why should I change sides? The street belongs to everybody.”

Suddenly, Maïté turns around. She lets out a sharp cry: “You again! Just my rotten luck! I don’t want you walking behind me! Walk on the other sidewalk!”

“But... my house is on this side,” stutters Nickolas.

“I don’t care,” she retorts before continuing on her way.

Dumbfounded, Nickolas is rooted to the spot. He asks himself where Maïté gets such nerve. She turns around again. “Do you understand me?”

1 Pippi is the redhead heroine created by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren.
Nickolas opens his mouth. No sound comes out. Then, without a word, Maïté moves toward him. He sees, in Maïté’s chin, her little dimple opening and closing. He feels shivers along his spine. Maïté takes her time, she advances slowly. The sun, going down by this hour of the afternoon, creates highlights of fire in her hair. “Her qualities are buried in her hair,” Nickolas thinks.

Maïté narrows her eyes. “He’s sniffling,” she tells herself, “and to top it off, he’s wearing old-fashioned glasses from the last century. He’s such a ninny!” Suddenly, a demonic flash crosses her eyes.

“Here!” she says. With a brisk gesture, she hands her book bag to Nickolas. “If you want to follow me, make yourself useful!”

Surprised, Nickolas swallows his chewing gum and starts coughing.

“You aren’t going to get any pity from me with your coughing!” announces Maïté. “At your age, it’s quite shameful to be chewing on a bit of rubber like that. And put your hand over your mouth when you cough!”

“Good grief,” mumbles a distressed Nickolas.

As his dreaded adversary walks away, poor Nickolas turns bright red. He is carrying his own book bag on his back and is holding Maïté’s by the handle. “Two bags of books and binders, it’s... it’s...” Nickolas stammers, struggling along and panting. As for Maïté, with her hands in a circle above her head, she skips and sings while playing hopscotch on the sidewalk:

“On a stem of oleander, seven flowers grew. The wind blew, a flower flew. How many were left? On a stem of oleander, six flowers grew. The wind blew...”
After a moment, she turns around and cries: “Walk faster, you turtle. If my mother scolds me, it will be your fault, and believe me, you’ll pay for it!”

Nickolas cannot believe his ears. He grumbles: “She has the most beautiful eyes on Earth, but she also has all the faults there are on Earth... and that red mane... and that way she has of standing on her tiptoes...”

On the corner of Belleville Street Maîté takes back her bag without saying a word. She quickly climbs the stairs leading up to her home. Bewildered, Nickolas remains motionless on the sidewalk. Despite the cold, he is sweating. He feels humiliated and regrets that he didn’t leave her book bag on the sidewalk.

Seconds pass, then minutes. His glasses slip to the end of his nose. Suddenly a biting voice brings him out of his stupor. It’s Maîté, hidden behind the front door.

“Nickolas Plon,” she says, “do you think you’re a street-lamp now, or did you forget where your house is?”

Nickolas runs away as fast as his legs will carry him. Behind his glasses his eyes are getting misty. He will not cry.
Chapter Two: Maïté and Aunt Inès

Immediately after closing the door, Maïté is smitten with remorse. She would really like to be friends with Nickolas again.

According to Maïté, her tongue has a life of its own and that is the cause of all of her troubles. For Corinne, her mother, the problem is rather Maïté’s hair and she often has a look of terror on her face when she talks about it.

“In your father’s family, in one generation out of three, a girl is born with that red hair which causes her to be completely…”

Corinne falls silent when Céphie is nearby. Céphie is Maïté’s great-grandmother. Not only do she and Maïté get along well, but also their resemblance is striking: the same almond-shaped eyes, the same rebellious hair. As the years have passed, Céphie’s hair has become a sparkling white colour.

Suddenly, Maïté jumps and almost falls down the stairs: “I’ve got it. It’s Aunt Inès. She’s the one that puts me in such a state. She’s the reason I hurt Nickolas. She’ll pay for it!”

She rushes into the house like a tornado. Bursts of voices reach her from the living room. Trying to hold her breath, she cocks her ear.

“A good spanking would fix her,” murmurs Inès... “You spoil Maïté too much! She’s insufferable!”

“Only love and wisdom allow you to understand certain things,” replies Céphie, her voice soft but firm. “Unfortunately, they are not given to each and every one of us. Beneath her porcupine exterior, Maïté possesses some very beautiful qualities. And nobody can claim to be

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2 Elsewhere in the story, Céphie is referred to simply as Maïté’s grandmother.
perfect. Not even you, Inès..."

"But, Céphie..."

"Let me finish. When you talk like that, you think you can hit two birds with one stone, don’t you? We have the same character, Maïté and I."

"But no, Céphie..." Aunt Inès’s voice becomes reassuring. “You don’t understand... It’s that habit she has of contradicting us, of being opposed to everything, of only wanting to do as she pleases.”

"The same habits that I have,” replies Céphie in a sharp tone.

"Céphie,” simpers Aunt Inès, “Maïté has to learn to obey.”

"Of course... But she also has the right to her opinion.”

"Bravo, Grann,” Maïté tells herself, waltzing about in the hallway. “It’s a good thing you’re here. Before Inès arrived, Christmas was a real celebration. Uncle Alfred took me to the stores and I picked my presents out myself. Everything is different now. Inès this, Inès that, Inès gives her opinion about everything. Who knows what’s going through her head right now? Why not spend Christmas in Haiti? If Inès wants to, everyone wants to. You don’t realise that I take after someone, Inès,” says Maïté, pursing her lips. “I will outsmart all your schemes, you old shrew. Charge!”

Like a soldier, she marches down the hall. She follows the whiffs of Inès’s sweet perfume.

"Ew!” she exclaims, pinching her nose. She enters the kitchen where her mother is busy peeling bananas to fry.

“ ’Evening Ma, where’s Grann?”
“Ah, Maïté, there you are! Your grandmother was here just two minutes ago. She must have left by the back door.”

“Who’s in the living room?” Maïté asks again.

“Your uncle and your aunt.”

“Did you know, Ma, that all our chairs have caved in because of Aunt Inès? If she ate less, it would save our furniture.”

Corinne’s face grows pale. She drops the knife and raises her arms toward the sky, ready to melt into tears. Finally, she manages to say dryly: “Spare me your comments.”

“It’s the truth, Ma. And if we had an apartment on the tenth floor, well, she’s scared stiff of elevators...”

“One more word, Maïté, and you will bitterly regret it,” cries her mother.

Maïté makes ready to leave but Aunt Inès enters the kitchen just at that moment.

“That perfume!” sighs Maïté. She greets her aunt with a forced smile and answers her questions mechanically.

“Well, you’re growing bigger and bigger. And school? You’re behaving yourself?”

Half-closing her eyes, Maïté breathes deeply and begs her tongue to hold back. Then, claiming to have a stomach ache, she escapes to her bedroom.

Between Maïté and her aunt, there is no love lost. Inès has never forgiven her for the Christmas when she found the Barbie doll – the one that she had taken so much time to choose -- with its head shaven, its legs and arms torn off. The doll had been covered in tomato sauce and put into a box on which Maïté had written in black marker: “Corpse”!
“Why?” Inès had howled while weeping over the doll as though it were a real corpse.

“Her heels were too high and she fell. Her arms and her legs were too skinny and they broke,” Maïté had giggled, hiding under the table.

Lying across the bed, she smiles, thinking about her aunt’s flushed face that day.
Chapter Three: Christmas in Haiti

Maïté pretends to sleep while she listens carefully to the adults’ conversation.

“What a marvellous idea to spend this Christmas in Haiti, Fredo!” says her mother.

Maïté is startled. She bounces out of bed: “Ah! ah! So that’s what they’re planning!

That’s the best one yet: Christmas in Haiti! Haiti in the summer would be fine, but for Christmas, it’s absurd! Ah, that sourpuss, Inès, she’ll learn that you don’t lead Maïté Plantin by the nose...”

Maïté plants herself in front of the mirror and points a raging index finger:

“It’s between me and you, Inès!”

She straightens her shoulders, tightens her fists, and then sits back down.

“Let’s keep listening,” she tells herself.

“It’ll do us some good to be back there, to reconnect with the past....” It is Uncle Alfred’s voice.

“He would never have dared to decide this without asking us. Never! Inès put that idea in his head,” thinks Maïté. “Uncle Alfred is not the same anymore. Ah, dear Inès, I’ll get even with you in the end.”

Maïté fidgets, holding herself back from erupting into the dining room. In her head, ideas are exploding like soap bubbles.

She will show Inès that the Plantins are not puppets. Boiling with rage, she compares her mother and Aunt Inès to chickens clucking about bathing suits, beachwear and little gifts to bring to friends.

Bang! Maïté throws her teddy bear into the cupboard.

“There, that’s what I’d do to that barrel Inès.”
And wham! She punches her pillow. Wham! She punches it again. Whack! A cloud of light feathers floats about her room. Her pillow has ripped open! Maïté casts a frightened look around the room. That’s the straw that broke the camel’s back. She leaves the room screaming:

“I am warning you: I am not going on this trip! I will not go!”

She stands on tiptoe like a ballerina. Her hair is strewn with feathers. She even has some on the tips of her lashes and on her lips. You would think she was dressed up for a masquerade ball.

Uncle Alfred bursts into resounding laughter and the others join in. Maïté is blazing with anger. Her eyes are two flame-throwers.

Corinne is the first to get a grip on herself. Since the death of Maïté’s father, François, she has accepted all of her daughter’s whims. “Flaming hair or not, family heritage or not, this cannot go on any longer,” Corinne tells herself. In an unconcerned manner, she announces:

“The whole family will go to Haiti, Maïté. If you refuse to go with us, you alone know what you will do and where you will go.”

“I am big enough to stay by myself,” affirms Maïté.

“Do you hear that? What a rude child! It’s out of the question!” roars Aunt Inès in turn.

“Everyone is going, including you!”

And, in the tone of a tragic heroine, she carries on with a long speech.

“See what I mean, Alfred dearest, when I talk of lost values and traditions, lost sense of family, and lack of respect. Oh my, oh my,” she says while shaking her head, “if you were my daughter!”

“What a pity that would be for me!” replies Maïté, quick as a flash.
Surprise and indignation turn Aunt Inès’s voice raspy. Once again she calls on her husband as witness:

“But... Fredo, listen to what she dares to... Won’t you say something?”

Uncle Alfred announces that he is going to make coffee. Maïté has one card left. Aghast, they hear her ask:

“And what about Grann, what were you going to do with her? Send her to an old folks’ home?”

Well she must have been eavesdropping, thinks Aunt Inès who, from one surprise to the next, can’t get a word in.

Maïté knows she has just scored a point.

“Grann is right to say that you think she’ll swallow anything. I am going to tell her that you’ve decided to ship her off to an old folks’ home.”

“But... but...” says Uncle Alfred.

“Did you or did you not plan to put her in an old folks’ home because you think she’s in the way? Yes or no? Tell the truth!”

Uncle Alfred escapes to the kitchen while Corinne and Inès try to save face.

“Wh... Wha... What are you talking about?” stutters Inès, panicked.

Corinne and Inès babble briskly and then, in unison, their voices mixed with embarrassment and astonishment, they exclaim: “You want to stay with Céphie? At Céphie’s? So be it! You’ll stay with Céphie!
Chapter Four: Céphie and Maïté

Leaving them in shock, Maïté slips away to her grandmother’s.

“Knock knock knock.”

“Ki moun sa? Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Grann.”

When Céphie does not want to see anyone, she barricades herself in and listens to reggae and Compas music. She lives in a little flat just beside Uncle Alfred’s house, not far from Maïté’s. She does not have a telephone because she cannot tolerate the screaming of the machine, and she lives with a cat named Kalinda that can do anything: open cupboards, meow when the kettle is boiling, and even quickly fetch another roll of toilet paper. Céphie opens the door. Between Maïté and herself, there is no need for long sentences. Their two heads of hair mix together when Maïté rises up on tiptoe to hug Céphie.

“We won, Grann! I’m spending Christmas with you.”

“What are you talking about, child?”

Maïté then tells her grandmother what has just happened and what Aunt Inès and her mother have decided.

“Oh, my little one,” Céphie says tenderly, “it isn’t for nothing that you look like me. I know the secrets of your heart. I knew something was brewing. Send me to an old folks’ home! Ah, those devils! Just yesterday I reminded them how they’d hounded me so to force me to leave Haiti. That was all before you were born, of course. I kept telling them I was too old to change countries, but it was in vain; they didn’t listen to me. I protested, raged, threatened; they won, forced me to sell my little house and brought me here like a suitcase.”
"You know, Grann, the idea of the old folks’ home was all Aunt Inès’s."

"Certainly, it must have come from her. Well, I’m not budging from here!"

Two days before Christmas, the whole family left for Haiti and Maïté moved in with Céphie.

Céphie never goes grocery shopping. She really dislikes supermarkets, which she calls cluttered windows. On Christmas Eve, around 10 o’clock at night, she says to Maïté:

"Well, my girl, let’s go to market."

"You must be kidding, Grann. It’s too late now."

"Shush! Put on your coat. No mittens, it’s next door."

Céphie hands her a basket and grabs an old woollen shawl. In front of Alfred’s house, she takes out a key.

"Oh, oh, Grann!" says Maïté.

"Shush!" she says again. "The eyes see while the mouth is mum."

In the empty house, it is cold. While Maïté shivers, Céphie, agile, makes the rounds of the cupboards:

"Come, pass me a chair, I must climb up. Ah, those rascals! They put all the good things in the back because they know I come here to restock. Another of Inès’s ideas. To thank her, here, let’s take these good fruit candies! She’s constantly getting treats from over there. Never offers me any. That glutton, she’ll come back twice as round as before, want to bet?"

"You know, Grann, you speak exactly like I do."

"Don’t forget the same blood flows in our veins."
Ha! Ha! Ha! They both double over with laughter.

"Here," she says, "these packs of melba toast are delicious. Look, over there, in the buffet, some wine. It’s really good for my old bones and for my heart. Even the doctors say so. Some barley syrup? Bravo, you’ll have a delicious treat."

Céphie continues to scrounge around, filling up her two baskets.

"Nut bars!" exclaims Maïté.

"Take them. You can allow yourself to put on a few pounds. Ah, ah!" she suddenly howls. "Look at the big bag of djondjon she’s been hiding. The she-devil! She knows I adore djondjon. She’d never think to give me a little bit."

"What is it, Grann?"

"What? You’ve never eaten any? Ah, those devils! My poor girl, djondjon is exquisite. It’s so good you have to be careful. If you don’t watch out, you’ll eat your fingers."

"But what is it, Grann?"

"Tiny little dried mushrooms that you cook with rice. All right, we’ve got everything, I believe. Let’s go."

Maïté hesitates.

"If it’s too heavy, I can go and come back, you know."

"No, Grann, I don’t want to stay here alone."

"Well then, manage to carry the basket."

Maïté looks at this woman who everyone says is so old and who, without stumbling, is carrying a heavy load of provisions. Maïté clenches her teeth and picks up the basket.

"Say, Grann, how old are you?"
“How many times do I have to tell you that age doesn’t exist? Only the heart is important, when you have one, of course. Or, if you prefer, I am as old as that queen who has been dead for thousands of moons and who lies in her casket and counts grains of rice to stay awake.”
Chapter Five: Christmas with Céphie

Every day, while listening to music, Céphie cooks up tasty little dishes: giraumon squash soup, eggplant with cod, fritters.

“Eat, girl, eat, my child,” she repeats to Maïté. “Even if age doesn’t exist, we don’t know how much time we’ve got left.”

Outside, on Christmas Eve, winter is sprinkling its softest snowflakes. Inside, Céphie’s room is very cozy. They have lighted candles and prepared Mardi Gras fritters whose aroma envelops the room. Under the soft duvet, cuddled against Céphie, Maïté listens to her grandmother tell stories that she claims are older than the Earth. The clock strikes midnight.

“Merry Christmas, my little Maïté,” says Céphie in a voice full of emotion. “Without you... I’d probably be in the old folks’ home right now.”

“I’m here, Grann, that’s what’s important, right?”

“You’re right. Now, I am going to give you your Christmas present. But, before that, I must tell you a story.

“When I was a child,” begins Céphie, “My mother’d forever complain about my bad habit of talking back. One day, she decided to send me far away to live with my old Aunt Cia; and she declared: ‘Céphie will not return home until she’s learned to hold her tongue!’

“Cia was a cross-eyed hunchback with a club foot. A real witch, although she’d screech loud and strong that she was not! She’d acquired experience, she said, by raising alone ten rowdy boys and five impertinent girls and ruling them with an iron fist. She’d spent her whole life working to feed her brood. She’d mutter endlessly. ‘I put naughty children in their place with a
swat of my stick!’

“So I was at Cia’s. Every morning at the crack of dawn, her voice, a real crow’s caw, woke me up:

‘Let’s go Dragon-lady. Get up and roll your braid.’

“She would look at me with a seemingly transparent eye: without a word, I’d obey. One chore barely finished, she’d cry out again:

‘Go to the well and draw water for your bath and then for mine.’

‘My... hands hurt, Aunt Cia,’ I’d groan.

‘Bravo! You’ll have the hands of a hard-working woman,’ she’d reply.

“She’d give me a bucket and push me towards the well. All day long, it was the same. Every night, I’d go to bed broken by fatigue.

“At night, Cia snored just like an old engine. She snored so loud that she’d shake the old shack. Every night I’d have the same nightmare: Aunt Cia would turn herself into a bat, slap me with her wings, and laugh: ‘You insolent little girl, you think you can do whatever you wish, ish, ish, ish! You must change or else you’ll stay here for your entire life. Before long, you’ll be as hunched and wrinkled as I am, and cross-eyed too, hoo, hoo!’

“It was impossible to run away, for all around me there was nothing but mountains and thorny bushes.

“However, my nightmare ended the day she sent me to wash clothes at the river. The tub was heavy and I was crying. Suddenly, between my lashes and through my tears, I saw something shining. A comb! It was floating between two rocks. We often used to say that mermaids came to comb their long hair by the riverbank at night.
“One of them, I’d thought, must have misplaced her comb or maybe had even guessed that I wasn’t as bad as I was said to be. She’d left it for me.

“That little comb, Maïté, saved me from Aunt Cia. In fact, I discovered that whenever my tongue wanted to lash out, whenever I felt that I was going to lose control of it, I would comb a lock of my hair.”

“And what would happen?” asks Maïté with impatience.

“All the qualities I needed to chase away my troubles would stream down over my shoulders.”

“But how?”

“You know, we can’t explain or understand everything.”

“But there must be an explanation. Maybe ... the time it took to comb out a lock of your hair gave you time to think.”

“That’s a good explanation, Maïté. I’d never thought of it. One thing’s for sure: the more time I took to fix my braids, the clearer I could see how to solve a problem. I got into the habit of never deciding anything or of saying anything at all before taking out my comb to fix my hair. By the time I untangled it all, I was sure not to mess up.

“As for Cia,” Céphie continues, “she told everyone who’d listen that she’d taught me good manners. But you see yourself, that wasn’t the case. Time has mellowed my hotheadedness and these days my tongue is very tired. Anyway, I no longer feel like doing my hair. I like it just as it is. Don’t you?”

“Oh yes, Grann.”

“There, under my pillow, is where I keep it. Take it.”
Maïté does as she is told.

“This comb is yours. I’m giving it to you.”

In the dim light of the bedroom, Maïté discovers a tiny comb of pearly tortoiseshell. She passes it through her hair, and it emits a little sound, like that of a banjo.

“You see, mermaids comb their hair to that music. Take good care of it and above all don’t forget: whenever you feel your tongue losing control, quick, grab the comb, untangle a few locks and...”

“...all the qualities I need will stream down over my shoulders,” says Maïté, smiling.

The following morning, when Céphie opens her eyes, she discovers a new Maïté. Piles of little plaits frame her pretty face.

“But...” she is stunned to see Maïté so pale, “didn’t you sleep?”

“No, Grann. I spent the whole night braiding my hair. I had to think.”

Céphie sits up. In the cluster of pillows, her mass of hair emerges like a snowy peak.

“That’s very interesting,” she says to Maïté, “and what were you thinking about?”

“I’ve got to do something so that Nickolas’ll forgive me...”

And she tells her grandmother what she had done to Nickolas before Christmas.

“To be forgiven, yes. The most important thing is not to start again!”

“I know that well, Grann. But with Aunt Inès, it’s impossible.”

“You’re right. For she-devils like her who want to send grandmothers to old folks’ homes and to stifle children... they’re not worth combing your hair for. What if we invited Nickolas over for lunch?”
“Marvelous,” says Maïté, delighted.

Nickolas Plon stares wide-eyed and his jaw drops when he opens his front door and comes face to face with Maïté, who has just rung his doorbell.

“Nick, I would like you to forgive me for what I did the other day, and Grann has invited you over for lunch tomorrow,” says Maïté all in one breath.

Nickolas opens and closes his mouth.

“I can tell her yes?” asks Maïté.

“Yes,” Nickolas says in a stunned voice.

Then he asks:

“What is your grandmother like, Maïté?”

“Just like me.”

With one sweeping motion, she points to her round mane and stretches her lids to her temples. They both burst out laughing.
Maïté’s Christmas

Appendix

Created by:

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Translated by:

Chantal Samson
Before Reading

A Corner of the World

Where was Maïté’s grandmother born?
Haiti’s Past and Present

There are two mistakes in the following information.

Find them by using your common sense.

Correct them by consulting a dictionary or by referring to the solutions on page 130.

1. Christopher Columbus discovered the island of Haiti in 1892. He called it Hispaniola.

2. Indians inhabited the island but they were decimated by war, ill-treatment and disease. They were replaced by slaves brought from Africa to work in sugar cane plantations, which were used to produce sugar and rum.

3. In the 17th century, the island became American. For that reason French, along with Creole, is still one of the two official languages of Haiti.

4. In 1802, France captured Toussaint-Louverture, the leader of the slave revolt. He died while imprisoned in a French fort. In 1804, General Dessalines drove out the French and proclaimed the island’s independence.

5. Haiti was the first island of the West Indies to gain its independence. This was the first of various movements that progressively led to the abolition of slavery by France, England, Spain and Portugal.

6. With a history of instability and political crises, today the country depends on international economic aid for the survival of its population.
Maïté Plays Hopscotch

To better understand Maïté’s story, you must, like her, know how to play hopscotch. Nobody knows where this game originated. It is played in countries as different as France, England, Russia, India, Nepal, the United States and Haiti. One of the oldest hopscotch drawings is traced on the floor of the forum in Rome. The design and certain rules of the game may vary a little.

To play hopscotch, trace the hopscotch pattern in the dirt or draw it with chalk on the pavement. The squares must be big enough to fit your foot.

Rules of the game:

1. The first player throws a stone into square 1. If the stone does not land inside the correct square, it is the next player’s turn.
2. Carefully hop over square 1, containing the stone, and into square 2. Then continue down the board.
3. At the end of the board, jump on numbers 9 and 10. Now jump around and return down the board to hop onto square 2
4. Balancing on one foot in square 2, pick up the stone, then hop into square 1, and off the board. On each turn, throw the stone into the next square.
5. If you lose your balance or throw the stone into the wrong square, it becomes the next player’s turn. Start from the point where you went wrong when it’s your turn again. The winner is the first player to complete the hopscotch up to square 10.

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While You Read

Events

Below are some events taken from the story that you just read. Unfortunately, a gust of wind has mixed them up. It is up to you to put them back in order!

1. Maïté threatens to tell her grandmother that her mother, her aunt and her uncle want to send her to an old folks’ home.

2. Maïté invites Nickolas to her grandmother’s house.

3. Maïté forces Nickolas to carry her book bag.

4. Inès and Céphie do not share the same point of view regarding Maïté’s personality.

5. Maïté moves in with Céphie.

6. Maïté comes home to discover that Inès, Alfred and Corinne intend to spend Christmas in Haiti.

7. Céphie gives Maïté a comb.
In this story, you learned that Céphie has a magical object. Identify that object and associate it with the magic power it possesses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Magic Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A rabbit’s foot</td>
<td>Gives candy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A mermaid’s comb</td>
<td>Draws rewards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A key of gold</td>
<td>Multiplies gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A chicken bone</td>
<td>Allows time to think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaming dice</td>
<td>Protects against sickness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A moonstone</td>
<td>Chases away monsters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A star</td>
<td>Produces good ideas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Like an Animal!

We can describe qualities and flaws by making comparisons with animals. Match each of the following characteristics with one of the animals on the list.

1. Happy as a
2. Slow as a
3. Curious as a
4. Meek as a
5. Sly as a

a. Lamb
b. Monkey
c. Fox
d. Lark
e. Turtle

Which character in the story is associated with a porcupine? Why?

Which character in the story is associated with a lark?
All in the Family

In the following list, find two traits that Maïté and her grandmother have in common.

1. A turned-up nose
2. Almond-shaped eyes
3. A sweet tooth
4. Prominent cheekbones
5. A round chin
6. Pointed ears
7. A protruding chin
8. Rebellious hair
9. Black eyes
10. A pointy nose
Céphie, Maïté’s grandmother, listens to music in her little apartment. Identify one of Céphie’s favourite types of music in the following list:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rock and Roll</th>
<th>Rap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reggae</td>
<td>Classical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blues</td>
<td>Pop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazz</td>
<td>Gregorian chant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here are three definitions of musical genres. Which one defines reggae?

1. Popular Jamaican music whose rhythm is marked by a repetitive structure.

2. Popular music that originated in America and is characterized by the use of electric guitars and a drum set.

3. African-American music that allows a lot of room for improvisation.
Sleeping like a Baby

Near the end of the story, Céphie tells Maïté about a nightmare she once had. Her Aunt Cia turns herself into a bat. Do you remember? The land of sleep and dreams is so mysterious! In the following list, decide which statements seem true:

1. You spend one third of your life sleeping.
2. While you sleep, your body replaces dead cells.
3. Sleep helps you develop your memory.
4. Many migratory birds can sleep while flying.
5. Horses sleep standing up thanks to a system that prevents their knees from bending.
6. 52% of sleepers have dreamt about flying like a bird.
7. In the middle of a dream, your brain’s neurons are more active than when you are awake.
8. You can change positions up to 60 times in your sleep.
9. 55% of sleepers have had dreams about being late.
10. Bats need about 20 hours of sleep per day.
Haitians

Find the beginning or the ending of each sentence in the basket, where they were placed by mistake.

1. ...is the capital of Haiti.
2. The Haitian people grow sugar cane, bananas, cocoa, cotton, ...
3. Many Haitians have left their country for political and ...
4. Many Haitians have emigrated to Miami, New York, ...
5. ..., the author, was born in Haiti.
6. ... and Dessalines are famous Haitians. Their names have been given to streets, buildings, institutions, and places all over the Caribbean.
7. ..., there is a population of about 50,000 Haitians.

Port-au-Prince...
... economic reasons.

In Quebec...

Marie-Célie Agnant...
... rice, corn, tobacco, and coffee.

Toussaint-Louverture...
...Montreal and Paris.
Haitian Mardi Gras Fritters

When Nickolas comes for lunch, perhaps Céphie will prepare these delicious fritters following a typically Haitian recipe.

The bananas are over-ripe, they are soft, their peels are black, and nobody wants to eat them. Hurry, turn them into Mardi Gras fritters. The riper the bananas, the better the fritters will be.

Ingredients:

1 or 2 over-ripe bananas
1 cup flour (whole wheat or other)
1 egg
½ cup milk
3 tbsp sugar, a pinch of salt
1/4 tsp baking soda
nuttmeg, cinnamon, grated zest of one lime
1/4 tsp vanilla extract

Mash the bananas and add all the other ingredients. Mix until the batter is smooth.

Let the batter stand for at least 15 minutes.

In small spoonfuls, drop the batter into a pot of hot oil and fry on both sides over medium heat.

Remove excess oil by pressing on paper towel. Sprinkle with sugar.
Solutions

Before Reading

A Corner of the World

In Haiti

Haiti's Past and Present
1. 1492
3. In the 17th century, the island became French.

Maîté’s Portrait
2. By adding cinnamon red hair to the description, we get Maîté’s portrait, the heroine of the story you read.

While Reading

Events
3 ; 4 ; 6 ; 1 ; 7 ; 2.

Abracadabra!

A mermaid’s comb allows you time to think.

Like an Animal!
1. d ; 2. e ; 3. b ; 4. a ; 5. c.

All in the Family
2 and 8

---

4 This question is not given in the original, only the answer appears in the solutions.
Do-Re-Mi...

Reggae

1.

Sleeping like a Baby

All are true.

Haitians

1. Port-au-Prince

2. Rice, corn, tobacco, and coffee

3. Economic reasons

4. Montreal and Paris

5. Marie-Célie Agnant

6. Toussaint-Louverture

7. In Quebec