

Frankétienne (1936-), Haitian writer, painter, actor, singer, mathematician, activist, and intellectual, was born Franck Étienne on 12 April, 1936 in the Artibonite region of Haiti. Abandoned by his father, an American industrialist, he was raised by his mother in the Bel Air neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, where she worked as a street merchant to support her eight children, managing to send Franck, her eldest, to school. As a young poet in the early 1960s, he frequented a regular literary salon hosted by novelist ***Marie Vieux Chauvet** for a group of politically minded poets known as the Haïti Littéraire (Literary Haiti) group. Though not an official member of the collective, he was deeply influenced by members Davertige, Serge Legagneur, Roland Morrisseau, Anthony Phelps, and **René Philoctète**, all of whom ultimately were driven into exile from President-for Life **François Duvalier's** Haiti. Married to Marie-Andrée Étienne, mother of his son Rudolphe, Frankétienne is widely known as the author of *Dezafi* (1975), the first novel ever written in Haitian Creole, as well as for his decision to remain in Haiti throughout the dangerous period of François and **Jean-Claude Duvalier's** dictatorial regimes.

Over the course of half a century, Frankétienne penned over fifty plays, poetry collections, and works of prose fiction in both French and Haitian Creole, beginning with the publication of his first poems in the 1960s. His paintings number in the hundreds. Considered one of the most important figures in twentieth and twenty-first century Haitian literature and the arts, Frankétienne long enjoyed immense popularity in Haiti and among members of the Haitian diaspora. Although necessarily a member of the intellectual elite, he sought throughout his career ways to reduce the distance between himself and members of the popular and peasant classes in Haiti, creating and

participating in projects for the development of the community as well as dedicating himself to the more solitary task of creative writing. Well aware of the extent to which illiteracy prevents many Haitians from participating in the literary sphere, Frankétienne always made it a point to write plays in Creole meant for Haiti's stages and to produce audio recordings that might reach a broader public. Notwithstanding this prolificness and renown among Haitians in Haiti and abroad, however, Frankétienne's work remained for several decades engulfed in near total silence outside of his island. Having elected to remain in Haiti throughout the exceedingly repressive and silencing Duvalier presidencies, for fear of being prevented from returning, he spent the better part of his writing career in relative isolation – on a literal, physical level – from the literary “mainstream” of the Caribbean region. Only very few of his texts were published and circulated outside of Haiti, making them difficult to procure. It was not until the late-1980s that his works became the object of sustained critical consideration in both a national and international context.

Although for many years Frankétienne sacrificed the international acclaim enjoyed by those writers and intellectuals who had been forced to flee Haiti for lives of exile in France, Canada, the United States, and elsewhere, he lived his insularity as an opportunity for creative liberation. Rather than seek, that is, possibilities for physical escape from the confines of Haiti, Frankétienne developed an aesthetic practice meant to make the very most of the tension between inside and outside, between island and world. In 1965, he founded, along with writer-intellectuals **Jean-Claude Fignolé** and René Philoctète, the philosophical and aesthetic concept of Spiralism. He has since become the

most widely known of the three authors and the most readily associated with the Spiralist practice.

Radically subversive on both a formal and a thematic level, Spiralism was born of a desire to challenge existing literary conventions in the French-speaking Caribbean. The aesthetic is characterized by a deep commitment to the exploration of Haiti's landscape and its folk culture, and it proposes dramatic changes to the way in which the novelist represents at once the stagnant, the tragic, and the magical aspects of Haitian reality. Frankétienne's work explicitly emphasizes the enormous cultural wealth to be found in the collective mythology of village life in Haiti, in the Vodou sensibility of the so-called lower classes, and in the vivid imagery of Creole proverbs. As such, he conceives of Spiralism as an aesthetic embedded in the Caribbean oral tradition, a tradition in which stories are relayed as cumulative and cyclical narratives, temporally untethered and achronological, open to intervention from a profoundly implicated listening audience. His conception of the spiral connects, moreover, with the most universal dimensions of the physical world, inasmuch as the notion of the spiral integrally reflects the dynamic by which organisms and living systems grow and develop. Frankétienne thus borrowed this metaphorical tool from the realms of biology, physics, and arithmetic as a means of universalizing his creative perspective, again, without ever abandoning the space of the island. Frankétienne's prose fiction works, which he calls "spirals" are dense and often violent portrayals of the Haitian real that move in and out of the most private spaces of individual human being and the wide, inclusive space of common humanity.

Although only recognized outside of Haiti well after the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986, Frankétienne received multiple prominent honors in the Caribbean region and

beyond, beginning in the early years of the twenty-first century. He received the Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe in 2002 for his work *H'Éros chimères* and the Prix Prince Claus (Netherlands) for the entirety of his artistic corpus in 2006. He was named an Artist for Peace by UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 2006, shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in 2009, and awarded the prestigious title of Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres de la France in 2010.

Though willing since the end of Duvalierism to risk traveling outside of Haiti, Frankétienne remains firmly rooted. As theorist of Haitian literature Jean Jonassaint has affirmed, “Stubbornly anchored in his little bit of island...publishing regularly in both languages of the Haitian literary tradition, enjoying a large national audience – more than any other, Frankétienne is a Haitian writer.”

[*Names in bold appear elsewhere in the Dictionary]

Bibliography

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Kaiama Glover