In her 2010 novel, *Le Reste du temps*, Emmelie Prophète reminds us that every day begins like any other until someone close dies. The absence death brings stays with us for the rest of our lives. Prophète not only is preoccupied with recounting the circumstances that lead to one’s death but, as the title indicates, is also invested in the impact the deceased have on the living. In the opening pages of the novel, on April 3, 2000, Jean Dominique and Jean-Claude Louissaint are shot and killed outside of the offices of Radio Haïti Inter. The news of Dominique’s death sends Port-au-Prince into a widespread period of mourning, culminating in a state funeral for Dominique and Louissaint at the Stade Sylvio Cator, adjacent to the Grand Cimetière. At the end of the novel, Jean-Baptiste, the protagonist’s favorite bookseller, unexpectedly dies before she can see him one last time. On the surface, *Le Reste du temps* seems like a novel about Dominique’s passing but is ultimately a more profound reflection on how three men, all named Jean, never meet in life yet come together in the memories of the protagonist.

*Le Reste du temps* reads like a novel, although the protagonist bears a striking resemblance to Prophète in real life. Readers of contemporary French and Francoophone fiction will recognize this genre play as “autofiction,” where the narrator and protagonist carry the name of the author, live the same lives, and engage in the same activities but must be distinguished. Or as Chloé Delaume writes in *La Règle du je*: “Je m’appelle Chloé Delaume. Je suis un personage de fiction” (My name is Chloé Delaume. I am a fictional character).[1]

In *Le Reste du temps*, Prophète never uses her name; she only names the real people around her. Still, readers familiar with Prophète’s biography will recognize her as the first-person narrator. The author, just like her narrator, hosted a jazz program at Radio Haïti Inter and worked as a school teacher in 2000 when the book takes place. However, eschewing the theoretical game that Delaume proposes in *La Règle du je*, Prophète narrativizes the assassination of Dominique as a means of coming in closer proximity to the events and the people caught up in them, protecting herself in a way that perhaps memoir could not. In a sense, this blend of autobiographical writing and fiction—or, autofiction—with all of its imaginary tools provides Prophète with a means by which to process her own feelings of desire and loss after the deaths of Jean-Baptiste, Louissaint, and Dominique. The narrative follows the female protagonist from the beginning to the end of April 2000, with flashbacks to the early 1990s set against the background of trade embargoes and the tumult of Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s first presidential mandate. The three Jeans are at once intimately present in the narrative yet also fleeting in moments of remembrance or anticipated meetings. Stacey D’Erasmo refers to this type of storytelling where the characters are suspended in the possibility of something happening or not as “meeting in the if” or “[meeting] in the subjunctive.”[2] The protagonist’s trips to work during the early 1990s are punctuated by this sense of longing: every time she spots Jean-Baptiste, he promises her a full set of Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913) Aware of the possibility that Jean-Baptiste might not fulfill his promise, the protagonist acknowledges that “nous savions tous les deux qu’il n’y avait très peu de chance qu’il les ait un jour, mais nous continuions à jouer le jeu” (we both knew that there was only a slight chance that he would have them
one day, but we continued to play the game) (p. 130). The protagonist’s seemingly never-ending quest to possess all seven books in Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* serves as the narrative device that links Jean-Baptiste, *le vieux libraire* (the old bookseller), to Dominique.

The protagonist discusses Proust many times with Dominique over the years, often defaulting to this subject for conversation. When she visits Dominique’s house after his death, she notices a yellowing copy of *Sodom and Gomorrah* sitting by the door and allows herself to think that Dominique is alive again, that the two would launch into “une énième conversation avec moi sur l’œuvre de Marcel Proust” (an umpteenth conversation) (p. 158). Though she often thought of Jean-Baptiste and Dominique in the same light, the two men were entirely different. Dominique was “une grande voix, des onomatopées suggestives, l’arrogance mêlée au bon droit, à l’assurance d’une citoyenneté acquise et des centaines de fenêtres ouvrant partout sur le monde, avec vue sur toute la beauté, toute l’histoire, toute la misère humaine aussi” (a grand voice, suggestive onomatopoeias, arrogance mixed with goodwill, with the confidence of acquired citizenship and hundreds of windows opening everywhere out to the world, with a view of all beauty, all history, all of human misery, too). Jean-Baptiste was “silence, un pas lourd dans la poussièrè, ou dans la boue, selon la saison” (a silence, a heavy step in dust or mud, according to the season) who traveled very far outside of Port-au-Prince, but listened intently to the radio every single day for local and international news (p. 152).

The narrator understands Dominique and Jean-Baptiste in terms of contrast, much as she sees Dominique and Louissaint. On the one hand, Dominique is known for his voice and how it entered into the lives of thousands of people every day with a simple “bonjour.” On the other hand, “Jean-Claude était né sans voix” (Jean-Claude was born speechless) and so he died, unfortunately overshadowed even at his own funeral by the grand scale of the public viewing he shared with Dominique (p. 56). The protagonist fights within herself to remember the tone of Louissaint’s voice, and when she cannot she laments that he will be remembered for his hands, his work: “Il n’avait eu que des mains, Jean-Claude. Des mains qui époussetaient, servaient, ouvraient et refermaient la barrière, s’agitaient pour dire adieu” (Jean-Claude, he only had hands. Hands that dusted, that served, that opened and closed the gate, that waved to say goodbye) (p. 57). Faced with an inability to change Louissaint’s circumstances in life and at his funeral, Prophète refuses to let his story fall outside of her narrative, accounting for him and his family alongside Dominique’s story.

*Le Reste du temps* is an important novel now as it was in 2010 when it was first released. Since that time, we have seen that Prophète’s protagonist was right about Dominique: thanks to his “grande voix” as well as preservation efforts by Jan J. Dominique, Michèle Montas, Laura Wagner, and the team of undergraduate and graduate assistants working at Duke University’s David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the memory of Dominique lives on.[3] These preservation efforts have made it possible for scores of people to once again hear Dominique’s voice and to feel his gravitas flowing through the speakers of a computer. Prophète’s novel shows us an intimate perspective on Dominique that shows he appreciated silence just as much as filling the room with his powerful voice. *Le Reste du temps* is also a critical reflection on the disparity between how we remember those who are visible, or audible, versus those who society willfully ignores as part of the décor of a radio station or a street corner. In her portrayal of Louissaint and Jean-Baptiste, Prophète reminds us that the loss of life is always felt acutely, regardless of how well you know the deceased or not.

The inscription on the book’s dust jacket claims that Legba—also known as the master of the crossroads—“est le dieu des écrivains” (is the lwa of writers) and “dans la mythologie vaudou, Legba symbolise le passage du visible à l’invisible, de l’humain aux mystères” (in Vodou mythology, Legba symbolizes the passage from the visible to the invisible, from the human to mystery). In this regard, the new highly affordable pocket editions represent a *kaalfou*, a crossroads at which previously published works of literature, like *Le Reste du temps*, can and will find new readers. Originally released in a large-format first edition in 2010 by Mémoire d’encrier, *Le Reste du temps* is the fifth of eight initial volumes in the Montreal-based publisher’s new pocket edition series, the Collection Legba.[4] As Boonie Thomas recently remarked, editor-in-chief Rodney Saint-Éloi’s work has made Mémoire d’encrier critical to the Francophone literary landscape in Québec for its commitment to Caribbean, North American, and indigenous Canadian literature in French.[5] Thanks to Mémoire d’encrier’s efforts, novels like *Le Reste du temps*—which had fallen out of critical purview because it was released during a groundswell in Haitian literature just after the 2010 earthquake—are now more broadly available. Its inclusion in the Collection Legba is a welcome re-addition to Haitian literature in French.
Notes


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