As Makenzy Orcel says of his most recent novel, *Maître-Minuit*, “c'est un livre qui raconte ... une société debout” (It is a book that recounts a society on its feet).[1] *Maître-Minuit* depicts the Port-au-Prince of the latter half of the twentieth century through the eyes of Poto, the presumed child of a drug-addled woman who comes of age under the Duvalier dictatorship, and who comes into his own as an artist during the uncertain years that follow Jean-Claude Duvalier’s 1986 departure. Early in the novel, Poto asks of Grann Julienne, a rare and wise maternal figure in his life, “c'est qui Maître-Minuit, Grann?” (Who is Maître Minuit, Grann?), to which she replies: “c'est un homme qui reste debout, avance toujours, quoi qu'il arrive” (It's a man who stands up, always moves forward, no matter what) (p. 24). It is this obstinate, forward motion that characterizes Poto and Haiti, as conceived by Orcel.

The first half of Orcel's novel focalizes on the fascinating character of Marie Élitha Démosthène Laguerre, a strung-out woman who exists in a state of consciousness between life and death. In an interview, Orcel claims that Marie Élitha Démosthène Laguerre was the *raison d'être* of the novel as a whole, that he had wanted to tell her story.[2] Marie is a woman who has opted for the disconnected life of a junkie rather than live consciously with the traumas of her childhood. An underdog for sure, Poto is kidnapped at birth by Marie Élitha Démosthène Laguerre, ushered into the hungry and lonely existence of the child of an addict only to rise to relative power as the right-hand man of la Cité’s criminal leader, MOI; Poto’s coming-of-age as an orphan constitutes the second half of the novel. Throughout all of this, Poto relies on drawing as an outlet for his frustrations, and a way to catalogue his experiences. In the latter years of Poto’s life, the contents of the backpack he refuses to set down, his drawings, become the center of the Port-au-Prince art world. In fact, Poto lives in relative comfort until he is kidnapped by criminals seeking to harvest and sell his organs. When they present him to their boss, the threatening and gorilla-like criminal overlord, “le Kong Haitien,” they learn that Poto is too old, his organs undesirable. Rather than release Poto back to his life, they commit him to a psychiatric institution where his protests of sanity are futile.

This is where we find Poto, handcuffed to the hospital bed, in the narrative that frames the four sections of the novel, finding resolution in the afterword. When his neighbor asks him why it is that he is handcuffed there, Poto responds, setting up the remainder of the novel: “en guise de réponse, je lui raconte toute l’histoire” (by way of response, I tell him the whole story) (p. 14). This opening is not new to Orcel; he takes a similar approach in his
first novel, *Les immortelles* (2010), in which the prostitute-narrator mentioned above requires that her client, a writer, record the story of the prostitutes of *la Grand-Rue* who perished in the 2010 earthquake. In his novelistic career thus far, Orcel has previously inhabited similarly disenfranchised female perspectives: his third novel, *L'Ombre animale* (2016) is recounted from the perspective of a dead woman, silenced in life but free to speak from her unknown rural grave. Orcel's female narrators, due to the intersections of marginality that they inhabit, lend a dreamy, marvelous-real quality to his prose. Poto, a male voice that ranges from innocent to vile, narrates with more clarity, as though his feet are more firmly planted in reality.

Orcel launches into the first section of the novel, “Premièrement: Marie Élitha Démosthène Laguerre,” via the first-person narration of Poto. This section, which recounts Poto’s childhood but is primarily interested in the experiences of Marie Élitha Démosthène Laguerre, is qualified by a stringent lack of hope and the pain of witnessing all good things come to a certain end. Some of Orcel's most beautiful prose attends to Marie's inaccessibility, as seen through the eyes of a child who depends on her: “je pouvais presque sentir sa présence, en même temps elle était si loin que j'avais l'impression d'avoir toute une vie à traverser pour arriver jusqu'à elle” (I could almost feel her presence, at the same time she was so far away that it seemed I had a whole life to cross just to get to her) (p. 63). Orcel represents Marie's altered consciousness as a sort of willful death, her remove the result of a particularly painful childhood ravaged by sexual abuse.

As is common to Orcel's work, the narrative voice in *Maître-Minuit* travels, inhabiting different bodies and perspectives. At times, it seems Orcel writes directly to his reader, reflecting on his artistic process. He also offers the voices of François, Jean-Claude, and Simone Duvalier, as well as that of an unnamed child, Tonton Macoute. These perspectives are primarily delivered via a third-person narrator, with a level of intimacy that suggests direct access to their thoughts. Orcel writes of Papa Doc's insistence that his son, “le petit joufflu” (the little chubby one), attend public executions (p. 92). He leaves behind the third-person narrator briefly, offering a humanizing and intimate moment with a very young Jean-Claude, who wonders, “dis papa, comment tu fais pour tuer autant de gens sans éprouver de tristesse, sans verser une larme, sans avoir aucun souci pour dormir la nuit ?” (tell me papa, how do you kill so many people without experiencing sadness, without shedding a tear, without worrying how you will sleep at night?) (p. 94, italics original). At times, Orcel’s foray into the quotidien of the Duvaliers is reminiscent of René Philoctète’s poetic rendering of Trujillo’s fears and self-doubt in *Le peuple des terres mêlées* (1989). While Orcel by no means equivocates in his interpretation of François Duvalier, his approach is less sardonic than that of Philoctète, and he inhabits the perpetrator’s perspective with the same nuance he demonstrated in *L'Ombre animale*.

Ultimately, Orcel’s attention to the intimate thoughts of Jean-Claude and Simone places these two as victims of the regime; the negative impact on their lives and nervous systems is not entirely unlike that of the rest of the population. While he does not offer a particularly generous portrayal of the Duvaliers, here, as in *L’Ombre animale*, Orcel seems interested in drawing attention to the human experience of perpetrators; this text questions the assumed alliance of morality and humanity often used to denounce perpetrators and distinguish them from victims. Much of the first section of the novel accounts for the myriad ways fear and paranoia inhabit every corner of Port-au-Prince under Duvalier. Peripheral characters such as Lamy, a kindhearted hardware store owner, loses his business, his family, and his life when Duvalier decides to extort all of the businesses of Port-au-Prince. Gustave, a dear friend who teaches Poto how to live on the streets, is shot protecting a sex-worker he had fallen in love with. In this way, Orcel illustrates that every beacon of light is systemati-
cally extinguished by the regime. In *Maitre-Minuit*, he shows that no one is beyond the threat of the regime; Orcel's use of the Duvaliers' voices illustrates that they, too, have unwittingly become prey to the system they uphold. The unnamed child who joins the Tonton Macoutes after they promise him food is so traumatized by the death he witnesses that he thinks to himself, “j'aurais dû me laisser crever de faim” (I should have let myself die of hunger) (p. 126). François Duvalier himself is afraid to leave his palace. If Marie Chauvet wrote “totalitarianism as the quotidian work of all members of society,” I would argue that Orcel writes totalitarianism as an untethered threat to all members of society, regardless of their access to power.

The second section of the novel, “Deuxième-ment: où aller ?” (Secondly: where to go?) begins with the death of Marie Élítha Démosthène Laguerre and spans the remainder of Poto’s youth. Through a series of short vignettes named for Port-au-Princian streets, Orcel follows a now homeless Poto from “Martissant, 23, rue Soray” to “rue Chareron” and “rue Pavée.” Living on the streets, Poto experiences for the first time the designation of “fou” (crazy person). His sanity is put into question here by passers-by, a prelude to his days in the psychiatric institution where his protests of lucidity only seem to confirm his madness. Eventually, Poto is picked up by MOI, the unlawful ruler of la Cité, who brings Poto along on his ascent to power and increased danger. This section of the novel attends to the transition out of the Duvalier dictatorship and the lawless existence which followed for Poto. Unsurprisingly, Port-au-Prince, post dictator, continues to be governed by the constant threat of violence.

The third and fourth sections, “Troisième-ment: personne n’est une colline” (Thirdly: no one is a hill) and “Quatrièmement: faut jamais dire qu’on n’est pas fou” (Fourthly: don’t ever say you’re not crazy), follow Poto as his art is discovered and celebrated. Consistent with the ethos of the text, no good thing comes unchallenged. Poto is soon kidnapped by two men working for black-market mastermind “le Kong Haïtien” (p. 269). When “le Kong” determines that Poto is too old to be a viable candidate for organ harvest, his henchmen bring him to a psychiatric facility where he is quickly categorized among the “fous particulièrement violents” (very violently insane) (p. 274). He is submitted to electric shock therapy and tranquillized. Most importantly, Orcel clarifies that being committed to such a facility served the same purpose as being murdered. “Le Kong Haïtien” and his men, seem to be motivated by pure malice. However, their actions have practical ramifications: Poto would never be taken seriously again and thus could never credibly identify his attackers. For Poto, there is seemingly no way out; his insistence that he is not crazy is taken as further evidence of his break with reality. Eventually, after Poto’s death has been falsely reported in Port-au-Prince, he is able to leave the psychiatric facility and makes his way to Miami. The epilogue offers a brief snapshot of his life there, in which Orcel reminds his reader of the legend of Maître Minuit, incarnated by a Poto who remains steadfast no matter what.

*Maitre-Minuit* is a beast of a novel. In three hundred pages, Orcel poetically explores numerous themes ripe for scholarly engagement—from failed and traumatic motherhood to psychiatry as a weapon. Orcel's writing is always thematically, and often aesthetically, consistent with the twentieth-century Haitian canon. However, for Orcel and other resident Haitian authors who have made their mark over the last nine years, the literary setting has been contemporary Port-au-Prince. Orcel’s choice in *Maitre-minuit* to turn his attention to the Duvalier era may mark a shift for this generation of writers and is sure to inspire more comparative readings of twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts. One of the most prominent voices of what Martin Munro has called “the new Haitian novel,” Orcel invites with his latest text a conversation around the continuity of trauma be-
tween twentieth- and twenty-first-century Port-au-Prince.[4]

Notes


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