

**GHOSTWRITING: PEDAGOGY, PERSPECTIVE, AND PERFORMATIVITY IN DANY LAFERRIÈRE'S *COMMENT FAIRE L'AMOUR AVEC UN NEGRE SANS SE FATIGUER***

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In his novel *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* (in English, *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*), Dany Laferrière parodies the genre of the instruction manual. Unlike the 'How To' and 'For Dummies' series intended for amateurs retiling their bathrooms, this text purports to instruct in the elusive methods of seduction and sex. However, the title is a cover – quite literally – for other forms of instruction and exploration. Though *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired* claims to instruct white women in how to manage their black male lovers' sexual stamina, the reader will find nothing of the sort. The title is a teaser, a clever marketing ploy by an even cleverer writer who plays on the cliché: sex sells. Indeed, this novel, Laferrière's first, has met with great success and put Laferrière on the map in both Caribbean and Quebecois literature. Laferrière's play with cliché and provocation begins with his title and continues throughout the text. In *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*, Laferrière tirelessly provokes through the deployment of identity clichés that wed race with gender and sexuality. The black male *Nègre* and the white female *Blanche* are the principal stereotypes Laferrière invokes, tied to one another in a relationship of sexual contingency and taboo. The lessons Laferrière offers are not about love-making, though there is quite a bit of that in the novel. Rather, Laferrière lays bare the consequences of slavery and colonialism on contemporary interracial, heterosexual relationships, and uses sex as one example of how uneven power plays out. His ironic title is a playful hook masking pedagogy of another kind.

There is an interaction here between a fictional form that is ostensibly pedagogical and the manner in which identities are learned and performed. Mimicry and repetition are entailed in all social behavior. Normative identity behaviors are modeled and then replicated; Judith Butler's (1993: xxi) notion of performativity describes this process. Gendered heterosexuality and race, the two features of identity that concern me here, are materialized in the body. As Butler (1986: 45) demonstrates, "the body is a field of interpretive possibilities, [... and] 'existing' one's body becomes a personal way of taking up and reinterpreting received gender norms;" this applies to racial norms as well. Performativity entails both the passive acquisition of identity norms and the active interpretation of these. Laferrière's text depicts gendered and racialized social and sexual behaviors. It models racial, gender and sexual roles in a narrative of intimate relationships between black men and white women. This subtler pedagogical content is reinforced by the overt pedagogy of its ironic 'How To' form. Laferrière highlights the socially conditioned and performed features of identity in a textual form that professes to instruct. At times, Laferrière shows identity roles as passively, unconsciously absorbed; at others, they are actively, explicitly taught and reiterated. On one pedagogical level, the novel can be read to model behavior for black men saddled with the racist label *Nègre* in 1980s Montreal. On another pedagogical level, Laferrière instructs more broadly in the intertwined histories of slavery and colonialism, in their continued effects on contemporary relationships, and in relationships of uneven power, be they grounded in differences of race, sex, or class.

I will return to these connections between form and content at the end of the paper, when we will see more clearly how Laferrière's parody of a pedagogical genre interacts with his parodic pedagogy of identity stereotypes. First, I will outline the principal identity types Laferrière deploys in his novel, primarily the *Nègre* (black man) and, to a lesser extent, the *Blanche* (white woman). Next, I will

examine the ways perspective, gaze and voice intertwine to signal the contingency and relationality of identity categories. Intimate relationships are also relationships of power, and identities can be deployed as forms of power. I will show how Laferrière's treatment of identity stereotypes instantiates performativity, and connects to pedagogy, perspective, and power.

In *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*, Laferrière deploys the stereotypes of the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* (in French).<sup>1</sup> The *Nègre* type, capitalized in Laferrière's text, connotes sexual virility, barbarism, cannibalism, physical laborer status and laziness. In contemporary French, both in France and in Quebec, *nègre* bears the weight of the 'N' word in English. It used to be synonymous with slave, and the novel's epigraph confirms this connection. Laferrière (1985) starts the novel with an infamous line from the *Code Noir*, the 1685 French law regulating slavery in the colonies: "Le nègre est un meuble." ("The *nègre* is property.")<sup>2</sup> He thereby points to slavery in the French colonies as the historical backdrop for this novel, set in 1980s Montreal. The writer himself emigrated from Haiti to Quebec as a young man in the early 1970s. His epigraph bridges the temporal and geographical gap between colonial period Saint Domingue and contemporary Quebec to show how the older sense of *nègre* as slave, property, laborer and subject of ill treatment continues to animate white imaginaries in contemporary Quebec.<sup>3</sup> Though members of the *Négritude* movement reclaimed the term *nègre* to

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<sup>1</sup> I keep the French terms untranslated here to preserve their connotations in the original French. *Nègre* and *Blanche* are gendered racial identifiers, unlike the gender-neutral 'black' or 'white.' *Nègre* carries with it a particularly dense semantic genealogy that does not transfer seamlessly into an English translation. David Homel, the novel's translator, uses three words - 'Negro,' 'Black' and 'Nigger' - in different instances to translate *Nègre*; *Nègre* can be situated at the confluence of these terms, but cannot be captured by one term alone.

<sup>2</sup> Subsequent citations from the primary text will be indicated in parentheses, the French text's page number followed by that of the English translation.

<sup>3</sup> Delesalle and Valensi's study (1972: 85-90) of the history and lexicography of the word *nègre* traces the *production* of the category as referring to *how its members are treated*. They show that, in the French dictionaries of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, there is a lexicographical progression from *nègre* as people of Africa, to *nègre* as slave, to *nègre* as that which is traded and made to labor in plantations; this last definition accords with the *Code Noir* cited above: "Le nègre est un meuble." Ultimately, *nègre* is codified in the eighteenth century to index a certain kind of treatment – that of being treated like a slave – and not a category of humans or even laborers. The expression "traiter quelqu'un comme un nègre" (to treat someone like a *nègre*) meant to treat someone with harshness and scorn.

advance the cause of black liberation,<sup>4</sup> Laferrière does not recuperate the term. Rather, he invokes it in its outdated, racist formulation and applies it to a contemporary context. This way, he signals the trope's continued contemporary relevance, despite the taboo against its use. In the novel, the black male *Nègre* is paired with his perceived opposite, the white female *Blanche*. This type connotes upper class status, credulous naiveté, and sexual appetite. Both types transmit racial content filtered through heterosexual gender categories.

Though the narrative voice shifts to various perspectives, the prevailing position explored is that of our narrator and others like him: black men in Montreal who are labeled *Nègre* and interested in white women. The text reads more like a memoir or autofiction than a 'How To' manual. It is not particularly action-driven; instead, we follow the narrator in his thoughts and conversations and observe his relationships with women. He is a writer writing a novel, much like the one we read. The narrative's sonorities are often more oral than written, as if the first-person narrator is speaking his thoughts, actions and feelings. The autobiographical dimension, manifest in the prevalence of first-person statements and the uniform use of the present tense -- I think this, I feel this, I do this, and then I do that<sup>5</sup> -- indexes the

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<sup>4</sup> The *Négritude* movement, started in the late 1920s, appropriated the racist slur *Nègre* as grounds for racial unity, resistance and empowerment (Césaire 2005: 27-8). Césaire (2004: 119) describes how *Négritude*'s adoption of the term *nègre* arose:

Léopold Sédar Senghor a dit: "On s'en fout! Nègre? Mais oui, je suis un nègre! Et puis après!" Et voici comment est née la négritude: d'un mouvement d'humeur. Autrement dit, ce qui était proféré et lancé à la figure comme une insulte amenait la réponse: "Mais oui, je suis nègre, et puis après!"

(Léopold Sédar Senghor said, "We don't give a damn! *Nègre*? Well, yes, I am a *nègre*! And then what!" And this is how *négritude* was born: from a movement of humor. In other words, what was proffered and thrown in our faces as an insult summoned the response: "But yes, I am a *nègre*, and then what!") (translation mine)

The term *nègre* under *Négritude* entailed an element of defiance and provocation. Laferrière's use of it is also provocative, but in a different manner: Laferrière deploys *Nègre* to signal an outdated racist slur's continued (if silenced, taboo) purchase in the present.

<sup>5</sup> As one example of many:

UNE CHRONIQUE DE MA CHAMBRE AU 3670, RUE SAINT-DENIS [...]

J'écris : LIT.

Je vois : matelas poisseux, drap crasseux sommier grinçant, Divan gondolé.

Je pense : dormir (Bouba dort douze heures d'affilée), baiser (Miz Sophisticated Lady), rêvasser au lit (avec Miz Littérature), écrire au lit le *Paradis du dragueur nègre*, lire au lit (Millers, Cendras, Bukowski). (106).

pedagogical function of the text. It models certain behaviors --behaviors that I read for how they are gendered, sexualized and racialized, in a text that engages pointedly with these dimensions. Though there is rarely explicit instruction here, this kind of narration suggests that the narrator sets an example to follow, offering behavioral guidelines for the racial, gender and sexual roles available to young men like him. He becomes a model of the stereotype he represents, and a latent pedagogy is discernable here. From the very first, and throughout the novel, the narrator refers to himself excessively as a *Nègre*. The excessive repetition of the term makes him a model *Nègre*, even as it problematizes this racist stereotype. He self-consciously explores the *Nègre* type that he *must be*, hoping to uncover the truth about the role. I am interested in both the gaze that the term implies, and the role that the type describes.

Laferrière plays with the figure of the *Nègre* rather than that of the *Noir* (black). Though both are designations for blackness, they carry different connotations. *Noir* serves as a neutral or positive description of an individual's racial identity as perceived through phenotype, while *Nègre* refers to the historically constructed trope that is necessarily racist and therefore negative. The narrator writes: "En tant que Noir, je n'ai pas assez de recul par rapport au Nègre." ("As a black, I don't have enough distance from the *Nègre*." (49/42; translation modified). *Noir* is what he is, and how he describes others, while *Nègre* is the racist stereotype problematized throughout the text and troubling to the narrator.<sup>6</sup>

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(A description of my room at 3670 rue St-Denis [...])

I write: bed.

I see: dank mattress, dirty sheet, pounded-out pillow, corrugated couch.

I think: sleep (Bouba sleeps twelve hours straight), make love (Miz Sophisticated Lady), daydream in bed (with Miz Literature), write in bed (*Black Cruiser's Paradise*), read in bed (Miller, Cendrars, Bukowski.) (98)

<sup>6</sup> In Haitian Kreyòl, *neg* is a neutral, non-racialized designation roughly synonymous with 'man' or 'guy,' and can refer to men of any skin color when followed by adjectives indicating color. For example, *neg blan* refers to a white man, while *neg nwa* refers to a black man in Haitian Kreyòl. Laferrière's use of *Nègre*, not *neg*, in his French-language text thus situates it within the French language and Montreal cultural contexts and justifies an interpretation of the term's connotations within these contexts. Though the French language is also spoken in Haiti, there is no explicit Haitian content in this novel beyond the reader's extratextual knowledge of the writer's birthplace. The narrator's nationality is never disclosed; rather, he and other black men in the novel are framed as *Noir* and *Nègre* immigrants to Montreal, irrespective of nationality.

Laferrière's use of the term *Nègre* always signals a historically established, racist white gaze toward people of African descent. The narrator's gaze upon himself is refracted through the white racist gaze upon him, and this is a gaze he cannot ignore, for it stares him in the face at every turn -- on the street, at the post office or the nightclub. The narrator uses the label both in provocative, mocking ways, and in seriousness. While he may mock the 'African savage' stereotype quite blatantly, he questions other aspects of the *Nègre* type with sincerity, for these are not questions about his self, but about how racist others view him. Even when the term appears to be invoked unproblematically, as when one man refers to "l'âge d'or nègre" (the *nègre* "golden age") (90/81) when there were six *Blanches* for every *Nègre*, *Nègre* signals the white gaze that the *Blanches* bring to bear on the courtship situation, and that the speaker has internalized. Although the speaker celebrates a positive feature of the *Nègre* type, that of successful *séducteur*, this feature, like *Nègre* generally speaking, remains contaminated by racist undertones, making a neutral or celebratory usage impossible, at least as it operates here in Laferrière's text. In another instance, a different speaker claims, "Nous autres, Nègres [...] nous avons plutôt besoin qu'on nous foute la paix" ("We *Nègres* need to be left alone") (91/82). Here again, the designation *Nègre* crystallizes an external gaze, a manner of being treated by whites. This moment connects poignantly back to Deleselle and Valensi's finding<sup>7</sup> that *nègre* came to signify inhumane treatment in the eighteenth century. Laferrière illustrates here the trope of the *Nègre* as a product of colonial discourse, a construct of its racist project, and a restrictive, dehumanizing gaze that black men must manage.

The narrator tries to understand how he is seen by whites, occasionally shifting into male and female white narrative voices whose racism is plain to see. The narrative relates:

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<sup>7</sup> See Note 3.

Ce n'est pas tant baiser avec un Nègre qui peut terrifier. Le pire, c'est dormir avec lui. Dormir, c'est se livrer totalement. Le plus que NU. [...] On a déjà vu des jeunes filles blanches, anglo-saxonnes, protestantes, dormir avec un Nègre et se réveiller le lendemain sous un baobab, en plein brousse [...] Méfiez-vous. Baiser avec un Nègre, c'est bien (c'est même recommandé), mais dormi avec... (83-4)

(Making love to a Negro isn't frightening; sleeping with him is. Sleeping is complete surrender. It's more than nude [...] It's happened before: young, white, Protestant Anglo-Saxon girls sleep with a Negro and wake up under a baobab tree in the middle of the bush. [...] Be careful. Fucking with a Negro is all right (it's even recommended), but sleeping with one...) (74-5)

The content and the personal pronouns in the passage index the speaker's position (non-*Nègre*) and interlocutor (*Blanche*), indicating a shift in narrative voice and perspective to that of a racist white. (The passage's parenthetical recommendation signals Laferrière's play with multiple perspectives, as his polyphonic narrative moves through different voices, roles and stereotypes.) Importantly, narrative voices are performances, and when the narrative shifts in voice, these shifts are performances of other identity positions.

Another meaning of the French word *nègre* comes into view here: that of ghostwriter. Through shifts in narrative voice, as in each deployment of the term *Nègre*, Laferrière (via his narrator) ghostwrites the racist white gaze, performing a form of critical ventriloquism. These voices may belong to female *Blanches* or to male *Blancs*; sometimes they are in the form of newspaper headlines; always they signal a broader, white hegemonic anti-black discourse; always they reveal a perspective and gaze on black men that the narrator explores by trying them on. His narration is inhabited by other narrative voices, voices that index social positions he must navigate and negotiate as a black man in Montreal. Jana Evans Braziel (2003: 881) writes that this novel "points to the ways in which black masculinity and black male sexuality are always already *framed* by a racialized erotic economy defined within [...] white, masculine, heterosexual parameters that trap black men." Here the narrator tries out different

positions within this matrix, attempting to understand them from the inside, though these are only performative attempts, fantasies of others' positions. Indeed, he cannot escape his own position to truly understand another's:

Si je deviens subitement Blanc, là, juste en le souhaitant, que se passera-t-il? Je ne le sais pas. La question est trop grave pour faire des suppositions. Je verrai les Noirs dans les rues et je saurai à quoi ils pensent quand ils regardent un Blanc. Je n'aimerais surtout pas que quelqu'un me regarde avec une telle convoitise dans les yeux. (79)

(If my wishes were granted and I suddenly turned white, what would happen? I have no idea. The question is too important for suppositions. I would see blacks in the street and know what they think when they see a white. I wouldn't want people staring at me with that covetous look in their eyes.) (69)

The narrator finds himself in a hall of broken mirrors. He tries, but fails, to see himself fully through the white gaze, and to see himself fully despite it. His own sense of self is fractured by the white gaze he can neither ignore, nor fully grasp. He catches glimpses of his likeness, refracted through different social positions and racial perspectives that yield imperfect reflections. It is through narrative polyphony that Laferrière renders multiple gazes and multiple perspectives, at once ghostwriter and ventriloquist. He demonstrates here the contingency and relationality between identity types, always in relationships of uneven power.

Laferrière plays with the type and trope, giving us a *Nègre* who isn't entirely certain what that means, but who *must be* a model *Nègre* given the fact that his *Nègre*-ness is mentioned at every turn. The narrator's introspective moments aside, when it comes to action, he plays the role that is expected of him, rendering the *Nègre* in a theatrical way that belies the performative features of the identity. For example, playing the 'African savage,' he threatens to eat his lover's cat. His interrogation and his playful exaggeration of the *Nègre* type reveal it as a construction, a set of expectations, and a performance, rather than something natural. He states explicitly at one point: "[il y a] des types. Il y a



des Nègres et des Blanches. Du point de vue humain, le Nègre et la Blanche n'existent pas. [...] ces deux-là sont une invention de l'Amérique." ("These are just types. *Nègres* and *Blanches*. On the human level, the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* do not exist. [...] They are American inventions.") (153/145) Laferrière parrots, plays with and problematizes the *Nègre* type as he parodies the 'How To' pedagogical genre. He 'queers' the *Nègre*, exposing the racist assumptions concealed within the designation, by giving us a *Nègre* who both exceeds and confounds expectations. Similarly, his faux 'How To' manual confounds expectations of the genre.

The *Nègre* type is clearly Laferrière's focus, and the most historically weighty label under examination. But the *Nègre* is paired with its alleged racial and sexual opposite, the *Blanche*. The narrator has intimate relationships with various *Blanches*, and proves to possess the sexual virility that the *Nègre* type connotes. In effect, Laferrière challenges a number of features of the *Nègre* type, by, say, making his narrator a man of letters rather than a man of labor. But when it comes to the one feature where the *Nègre* is judged superior to the white male, Laferrière confirms it. This is a clear provocation.<sup>8</sup> Laferrière, and his narrator, deliberately play on white male fears, and throw the stereotype in its originator's face.

The narrator successfully plays the hypersexual, hypervirile, hypermasculine black stud – a role that filters masculinity and heterosexuality *through* a racial category. He is desired by the *Blanche* because of his perceived racial otherness in a white-dominant, heteronormative regime and that regime's taboo against their coupling. He in turn desires the *Blanche* for the same reasons. However, Laferrière

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<sup>8</sup> My reading departs from that of critic Daniel Coleman (1998: 53), who finds Laferrière's intervention around black masculinity ultimately ambivalent in this novel. Where Coleman sees Laferrière's critique of racist discourse weakened by his simultaneous invocation of stereotypical black masculinity, I read this use of stereotype as wholly provocative. My interpretation is bolstered by the fact that the narrator interrogates the "Myth of the Black Stud" (121) explicitly; Laferrière thereby engages reflexively and critically with the stereotype at key moments in the text and reveals the 'black stud' as a role historically produced, anticipated and performed.

also treats the *Nègre*'s desire for the *Blanche* as sexual vengeance for racial and class wrongs, past and present. One example:

Le Grand Nègre de Harlem a le vertige d'enculer la fille du propriétaire de toutes les baraques insalubres de la 125e (son quartier), la baisant pour toutes les réparations que son salaud de père n'a jamais effectuées, la fornicant pour l'horrible hiver de l'année dernière qui a emporté son jeune frère tuberculeux. (19)

(The Big *Nègre* from Harlem's head spun at the prospect of sodomizing the daughter of the slumlord of 125th Street, fucking her for all the repairs her bastard father never made, fornicating for the horrible winter last year when his younger brother died of TB.) (15)

Sex in this novel is about much more than just sex; it is a cover for other forms of power. And the black men in this novel, perceived as hypermasculine and virile, deploy this sexual power to redress other areas of disempowerment, namely in race and class. Identities are also areas of power and unpower. These moments of sexual vengeance for race and class wrongs instantiate heterosexual masculinity as a vector of power, in addition to an identity. Here, men deploy the *Nègre* type as a power maneuver. It is not an identity that they chose; it is one assigned, and one steeped in violence and oppression. When they lucidly and purposely *perform* the *Nègre* type, it is a strategy to convert an identity into power.

Though the *Nègre*'s relations with the *Blanche* are framed in terms of vengeance and retribution, it is important to note that these relations are always consensual and do not entail acts of sexual domination. While men's power over women is confirmed rather than challenged here, Laferrière shows the *Blanches*' complicity in their subservience. When they perform sexual services for the narrator, or volunteer to clean his house, it is at their own initiative and not from coercion. Laferrière uses these instances of white women's subservience to black men in two ways: as a manifestation of white guilt, and as a provocative reversal. The narrator jokes that his lover is his slave when she cleans his house; he confirms here his sexual power as a straight man. Meanwhile, in terms of race and class, the *Blanche*

maintains her privilege. In subtle ways, Laferrière shows how both the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* behave in order to meet expectations, performing the identities they are ascribed in a “constrained repetition of norms” (Butler 1993: 60) Their predictable gestures are identity performances, “ritual[s] reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo” (*ibid.*). If the narrator acts the black stud, and if his lover cleans his house, both are fulfilling roles assigned to them, whether conscious of it or not. We see here how surreptitiously identity roles and their relative power positions shape our relationships, even in the most intimate of moments.

While the narrator consciously performs his role, he questions “le mythe du Nègre Grand Baiseur” (“the Myth of the Black Stud”) (130/121) at the same time. He is unsure if it is true, and suspects it amounts to “un petard mouillé” (“a wet firecracker”) (20/16) – a disappointed expectation, a false alarm, expressed here in an image of impotency rather than of virility. Laferrière emphasizes the *Nègre* and the *Blanche* as ideas, constructions, myths, fantasies. But ideas, beliefs and fantasies shape our realities in many significant ways and have very real effects on human relationships. Laferrière treats the *Nègre* and *Blanche* as types that can be performed, with varying degrees of awareness of the performance taking place. The *Nègres* in the text are often lucid about performing a role to suit the *Blanche*’s expectations. The *Blanches*, however, are unaware that they are performing a role, or anticipating one from the black men they encounter. In a poignant example, two men, characterized as ‘the First *Nègre*’ and ‘the Second *Nègre*,’ chat in the washroom of a nightclub:

LE PREMIER NÈGRE

Avec ces filles, frère, il faut être vif, sinon elles te filent entre les doigts. [...] Elles sont ici pour voir du Nègre, il faut donc leur donner du Nègre.

LE DEUXIÈME NÈGRE

Qu’est-ce que c’est que “du Nègre”?

LE PREMIER NÈGRE

Ecoute, frère, fais pas le malin. T’es ici pour baiser, c’est ça? T’es venu ici pour baiser une Blanche, n’est-ce pas? Eh bien, c’est comme ça.

LE DEUXIÈME NÈGRE

Pourquoi est-ce qu'une femme...?

LE PREMIER NÈGRE

IL N'Y A PAS DE FEMMES ICI. IL Y A DES BLANCHES ET DES NÈGRES, C'EST TOUT. (127-8)

(FIRST *NÈGRE*: You'll have to be quick with these girls, brother, or they'll slip through your fingers. [...] They came here to see some *Nègre*. We've got to show them some *Nègre*.)

SECOND *NÈGRE*: What's this 'some *Nègre*'?

FIRST *NÈGRE*: Listen, brother, cut the innocence. You're here to fuck, right? You're here to fuck a *Blanche*, right? That's how it works.

SECOND *NÈGRE*: But a woman can be...

FIRST *NÈGRE*: There's no women here. There's *Blanches* and *Nègres*, that's all.)

(119-20; translation modified)

In this example, one man explicitly teaches another how to perform the *Nègre* that the *Blanches* came to see. With a pedantic, authoritative tone, the First *Nègre* instructs the Second *Nègre* in the rules of the game and the roles the game requires. *Nègre*-ness is, following Butler (1990: 519) "a stylized repetition of acts," something that one does, rather than something that one is. Here, Laferrière captures identity as pedagogy and performativity: something learned and then performed. And these identities matter because they are also resources of power.

In *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*, Laferrière explores the *Nègre* and *Blanche* types as particular, limiting forms of racialized masculinity and femininity. This parody of the 'How To' manual likewise parodies identity stereotypes, as the novel's narrator cleverly plays the *Nègre* in mockery of both the type and those who believe it. Through brazen provocation and theatrical exaggeration, Laferrière deploys the *Nègre* and *Blanche* as overblown stereotypes and constricting identity performances. Meanwhile, he manipulates narrative voice, gaze and perspective to illustrate the contingency and relationality between identity types and their attendant social positions. Identities are also vectors of power, and Laferrière shows how unconscious identity performances reveal invisible power dynamics, and how conscious identity performances can address and redress these.

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