

[Haiti in Translation: Translating Pretenders by Fernand Hibbert, an interview with Matthew Robertshaw](#)

Discussion published by Nathan Dize on Wednesday, February 20, 2019

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"The way I see it,' said Mr. Cato, "the main problem is political. They should let us handle our own affairs and start by pissing off." Fernand Hibbert, *Pretenders*

Nathan H. Dize, Vanderbilt University

Translation is a powerful medium; it is capable of preserving and disseminating powerful ideas well after the original text falls out of print. For scholars of Caribbean and Haitian literature this has frequently been the case. Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook's translation of Jacques Roumain's [*Masters of the Dew*](#), along with the Cuban edition, *Gobernadores del rocío*, published by the Casa de las Américas and prefaced by Nicolas Guillén, helped to preserve and make a case for re-issuing the French version of the text. Marie Chauvet's entire oeuvre has also been reborn from its proverbial ashes. Now, all of her novels are now currently in circulation in French after experiencing a renaissance when [Italian](#) and [English](#) translations of *Amour, colère, et folie* in 2007 and 2009, respectively. In 2014 Dany Laferrière, the most recent member of the immortals of the Académie Française, wrote [the afterword to the Zulma pocket edition of Chauvet's transfixing triptych](#)--almost assuring that the text will remain in print for some time. We can only hope that Matthew Robertshaw's translations of [Fernand Hibbert's *Romulus*](#) and [*Pretenders*](#) will renew popular and scholarly interest in one of Haiti's more vocal critics of US imperialism and empire in the first decades of the twentieth century. ¹¹

Just released in December, Matthew Robertshaw's translation of *Pretenders* (2018) (*Les Simulacres* [1923]) brings Hibbert's response to the United States occupation of Haiti and its imperial foreign policies in the Caribbean to Anglophone readers for the first time. Hibbert's *Pretenders* is a short, but powerful critique of imperialism when the United States imposed a bi-lateral Marine occupation of the island of Ayiti/Kiskeya (Dominican Republic 1916-1924; Haiti 1915-1934). It tells the story of Hellénus Cato and his bourgeois entourage in the hills of Pétiion-Ville as they contemplate the

current political climate of the nation. Questions of national education, Marxist-Leninist socialism, and potential US annexation loom large in the conversations between Hellénus Cato, the soon-to-be cuckolded protagonist and embattled politician, and his friend Mr. Brion. Other characters like Mr. Delhi have their own ideas about the United States' endgame strategy, claiming that the Yankees covet Port-au-Prince as a naval base--effectively mirroring the American's concurrent relationship to Cuba at Guantanamo Bay. In the end, Cato becomes so engrossed in the politics of the day that he loses sight of the trouble brewing under his own roof as his wife Céphise flirts with Pablo Alcantaras, the seductive Cuban national.

Translated and introduced by Matthew Robertshaw, a doctoral candidate at York University in Toronto, *Pretenders* is a novel that will resonate with modern readers. Robertshaw aptly makes use of the final paragraph of his brief introduction to comment on how the novel speaks to a *longue-durée* of challenges to Haitian sovereignty from the first US occupation to the instantiation of the Republic of NGOs following the January 12, 2010 earthquake. Since autumn 2018, Haitians have voiced concern over the squandering of funds related to the Petro Caribe oil deal between Haiti and Venezuela. Over the last few months this has amounted to nationwide demonstrations on October 17 and November 18--the anniversary of Jean-Jacques Dessalines' assassination and Vertières Day, respectively. Haitians on social media from Twitter to Instagram have established numerous hashtags to urge the Haitian government to address the Petro Caribe scandal as well as the [IMF's imposition of sharp fuel taxes](#) on the Haitian people. As Haitians today tweet [#Kòtlajanpetrokaribea](#), the characters of *Pretenders* ponder the fate of national education under a US global hegemony where the Haitian government, as Hibbert's third-person narrator reminds us, "is [...] the President of the Republic."² As Cato's character suggests in the epigraph above, contemporary readers are left to wonder what might happen if, as in the novel, the US were to leave Haiti alone to control its own sovereignty?

Nathan H. Dize: Your introduction to *Pretenders* is quite fascinating, especially in the way you draw parallels between Haiti in the 1920s and the US imperial presence today by way of successive UN missions as well as internal Haitian scandals like the Petro Caribe affair. What does it mean to read Fernand Hibbert today versus reading him in 1923? What does his perspective bring to an anglophone reader of Haitian literature in our current geopolitical landscape?

Matthew Robertshaw: When it first appeared, the novel was an unambiguous indictment of the US Occupation. Shortly before he published the book, Hibbert had actually served as Secretary of State for Public Instruction under President Dartiguenave, and in this role he was at the center of a major conflict between occupiers and occupied. The Americans wanted to scrap Haiti's classical-style education system wholesale and replace it with a more pragmatic industry- and agriculture-oriented system. Haitians were indignant. The proposal struck to the heart of their notions of Haitian cultural identity. They very much saw it as an attempt to replace the French aspects of their cultural heritage with what they saw as a soulless, materialistic American substitute (see Léon D. Pamphile's, *Clash of Cultures* for more on this topic). Haitian elites like Hibbert reaffirmed their attachment to French culture as a way of claiming cultural superiority over the 'barbarous Americans.' This is clearly reflected in *Pretenders* where, for example, one of the main characters is obsessed with Stendhal.

All this to say that Hibbert was targeting a specific historical instance of imperialism. And, like Jean Price-Mars had declared in his *La Vocation de l'élite* a few years earlier, he accused his compatriots of allowing the Occupation to come about by their flagrant self-interest and bitter squabbling. These are the Pretenders, the "Simulacra," that Hibbert treats most harshly: those local opportunists who seek to enrich themselves at the expense of their fellow Haitians.

When reading the book today, the context is very different, of course, but the themes still lend themselves to a discussion about modern imperialism and economic exploitation. The novel serves as a valuable commentary on the pretensions of powerful nations from the point of view of the underdeveloped world. The Simulacra that Hibbert describes—whether local or foreign—are still having their way with Haiti. There are still wealthy nations that take advantage of weak states, and there are still Haitian politicians who "mask the truth regarding their interests and appetites." The novel's underlying message is as pertinent today as it was in 1923.

NHD: Before diving into Hibbert's novel, I'm curious why you chose to translate the title as *Pretenders* when the French, "*simulacres*" or "*simulacra*" is used in the text? Was this a matter of marketing or something altogether completely?

MR: Mainly marketing, yes. I actually began working on the translation for an independent French course during my undergrad at the University of Guelph. The

professor, the inimitable Dawn Cornelio, has several translations of French and French-Canadian novels under her belt. She suggested that changing the title would help sell it to an anglophone audience, since the word ‘simulacra’ would strike potential readers as obscure and antiquated. I think it was good advice. It’s a lovely, funny and highly readable novel, and I didn’t want to set it up as a difficult old book from a far-off, mysterious country. You don’t have to know anything about Haiti or the 1920s or the Occupation to enjoy this story. *Pretenders* doesn’t sound like you’re committing to a laborious read. *Simulacra* does.

A simulacrum is an image or representation of something, often with the implication of inferior quality. As noted, the Simulacra that Hibbert refers to are those who claim to be working in the interest of the country but actually use their position to enrich themselves. I considered several titles—*Fakers*, *Frauds*, *Flimflammers*—that might catch the attention of possible readers while preserving the meaning of the original title. Literary scholars have also tried to render the title more familiar in their critical works; Léon-François Hoffmann called it *Shamming* while J. Michael Dash preferred *The Children of Sham*. I settled on *Pretenders* because it fits the concept of hypocrisy, but also has political connotations—*i.e.* pretenders to the throne—that seemed appropriate in the case of the illegitimate foreign interlopers during the US Occupation.

NHD: The cover art is evocative, and although we are always cautioned against judging a book by its cover, I couldn’t help but think of the idiomatic expression referring to situations as either “black or white,” or some nuanced version of the two. Was this what you were going for when you designed it? Is this dynamic something we see playing out in the novel?

MR: Nothing in the story is black and white, to be sure. While the Occupation is discussed from various angles, the pro-Occupation perspective is entirely unrepresented—there aren’t any US American characters—and the anti-Occupation stance is shown in a range of shades, from Mr. Brion’s quiet optimism to Gerard Delhi’s cynical hedonism to Hellénus Cato’s apocalyptic bombast.

No, I think what I really had in mind when I was planning out the cover was Frantz Fanon. The book is very much about masks and faces, pretensions, deceit. Like Fanon, Hibbert is concerned with the psychology of the colonized, and he’s clearly critical of Haitians who show their contempt for the occupiers by appropriating American status symbols, like Mr. Delhi with his Overland automobile. “When I saw

the latest American goon driving frenetically on the sacred earth of the fatherland,” says Mr. Delhi, “I told myself that I deserved contempt if I continued travelling by buggy or by foot.” Of course, Fanon would also be critical of Brion, Hibbert’s hero, and his obsession with French literature. Hibbert doesn’t go as far as Fanon or Jean Price-Mars. He doesn’t move past the Francophilia of the Haitian elite; that is to say he doesn’t celebrate the Haitian peoples’ Africanness for its own sake. He gives a nod to a Haitian identity that is distinct from France in a discussion about Haitian language and poetry, but modern post-colonial theorists would surely say he doesn’t go far enough to oppose the persistent mental slavery, the insistence on the superiority of Western culture. If anything, Hibbert downplays the black and whiteness of the Occupation. He downplays race and focuses on culture and political sovereignty. It was another five years before Price-Mars published *Ainsi parla l’oncle* and the Indigénistes really started shifting the conversation toward a greater understanding and appreciation of the Haitian people’s complex and distinct heritage.

NHD: Many of the scenes in the novel are these humorous, sarcastic debates between Hellénus Cato and Mr. Brion about the role the Haitian government plays in society, the US occupation, US imperialism in the broader Caribbean basin, and abstract political ideology. At one point, Cato says that the Haitian government is nothing more than a metonymy for the sitting president. To this, Mr. Brion responds, saying he does not “think it is fair to attack a government that doesn’t operate freely” (21). Are the two men both critics of the US occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), or is it more complex?

MR: There’s no doubt that both Mr. Brion and Hellénus oppose the Occupation. The two men differ greatly, however, in their approach. Hellénus is this bombastic, outspoken critic of the Americans who, nevertheless, was briefly wooed by the occupiers, even becoming an “Americanizing Americanist.” The romance fizzled shortly thereafter once he realized they weren’t going to make him President, and soon he resumed his patriotic stance. Hellénus is thus an example of the Simulacra. His opposition to the Occupation is more a matter of fashion than substance.

Mr. Brion, on the other hand, is more nuanced in approach to the situation. He admits (to Hellénus’s horror) that the Americans have benefited the country in certain ways, “by giving us peace and order.” He is adept at playing devil’s advocate. He finds himself in rooms full of men heaping insults on the Americans, and he pokes holes in their statements to their endless frustration. Nevertheless, he is clearly not happy with the Occupation— “an occupied country is always in a humiliating situation”—but

he insists on sober reflection. He's is eminently worried that, in their blind patriotic fervor, the Haitian people will force the Americans out the country and resume their internecine conflicts of the pre-Occupation period. The novelist shared this anxiety with Mr. Brion, who serves as his mouthpiece. Even back in 1908 when he wrote *Romulus* one of his greatest concerns was the instability of his country. The people tended to stage revolutions and ask questions later. In the case of the Occupation his fears were justified by the country's subsequent history. A swell of anti-American sentiment preceded the occupiers' withdrawal in 1934, and the country's bitter divisions—political, racial, social—resurfaced stronger than ever (see Matthew J. Smith's *Red and Black in Haiti* for more on the factional struggles in the post-Occupation/pre-Duvalier period).

NHD: The novel, although brief, has a rather engrossing plot—it almost feels like a Graham Greene-esque Cold War novel with political satire baked in. How would describe *Pretenders*? Where does it fit within Hibbert's œuvre?

MR: It really is a great story. Hibbert wrote four novels between 1905 and 1910 and then took a break from prose fiction, not writing *Les Simulacres* until 1923. As such, it's quite distinct from his other works. A lot happened in Haiti between 1910 and 1923, and so he was writing in a very different context. His earlier works are very much in the style of Balzac and Flaubert, realist novels of manners, character-heavy, exposing the vanity and hypocrisy the Haitian bourgeoisie, a class to which he belonged. These elements are still present in *Pretenders*, but there is also a stronger central plotline—Pablo's deception of Mr. Cato in order to steal his wife—which acts as a sort of allegory for the Occupation itself.

NHD: In key moments, Hibbert introduces linguistically-coded humor, I'm thinking of when Pablo Alcantaras is incapable of pronouncing words like "tuberculosis," and says "tubercoulosus" instead. What role does humor play in the novel, and was this hard to convey in translation?

MR: It took a bit of effort to deal with Pablo's accent. In the original French, he fumbles with the French *u* sound, saying "la loune" rather than "la lune," for example. This doesn't work in English, of course, so I had to think of something else. I settled on the front-rounded *u* in English words like "calculations" and "tuberculosis," rendering them "calcoulations" and "tubercoulosis," which, when read aloud, give the impression of a Spanish accent. Like in the original French, this served to mark Pablo as foreign, which was key to his character and to the plot in general.

There are other instances where Hibbert plays with language in order to say things about his characters, such as when Hellénus pronounces enigma “egnima,” but generally the humor is less language-based in *Pretenders* than it was in Hibbert’s earlier novels, where he used Creole to great comedic effect. There’s very little Creole in *Pretenders*. Here, most of the humor is derived from the absurdity that exudes from Hellénus Cato. Hibbert seems to have been a fan of this character type: the ambitious, bumbling bureaucrat. Romulus Joseph, Sénator Rorotte, Hellénus Cato—they’re all the same sort of self-defeating blunderer. The humor in *Pretenders* derives, on the one hand, from the hollowness of Hellénus’s patriotism, and, on the other, from the way Pablo is so easily able to pull the wool over his eyes, exploiting his greed to make a fool out of him. If we see him as a metaphor for the Haitian elites generally, the character can be read as a mocking spin on the whole absurd situation under the Occupation.

NHD: There is one scene where Hibbert takes on the process of translation himself, saying that when Anténor Firmin says the word “to hold,” he really means what Demesvar Delorme conveys with the Haitian Creole word “kenbe,” or to hold, to capture, etc. (66). Even though Hibbert wrote *Pretenders* in French, Haitian Creole takes on a great deal of significance in terms of expression. Keeping in mind that the novel is published only five years after the United States imposed French as the official language of Haiti, what are Hibbert’s language politics towards Haitian Creole and how does this compare to his contemporaries?

MR: As I said, Hibbert uses a lot less Creole in *Pretenders* than he did in his previous works. In *Séna*, *Les Thazar*, and *Romulus*, which were written more than a decade before *Les Simulacres*, he employed Creole liberally. Much of the humor in these earlier works was derived from his playful use of language. At the time, his contemporaries Frédéric Marcelin and particularly Justin Lhérisson employed the same technique. They were pioneers of the Haitian novel, the first to set their works in Haiti, and among the first to use Creole in formal literature. I’ve written a bit about this from a historical perspective. The novelists helped inaugurate a debate over whether Creole should be seen as a legitimate language, to be used in formal contexts like education and in writing.

But by the time he wrote *Pretenders* there was a shift toward more conservative literary styles in Haiti. As mentioned, Haitian intellectuals really dug in their heels after 1915, and worked to undermine the implicit ‘civilizing mission’ of the

Occupation by presenting themselves and their nation as ‘civilized’ according to Western criteria. For bourgeois Haitians this meant emphasizing their attachment to French culture. It is evident in the poetry, which has a clear recourse polished verses in pristine French and traditional poetic structures (see Chapter 2 of J. Michael Dash’s *Literature and Ideology in Haiti 1915-1961*). *Pretenders*, likewise, is written in polished French with only a few phrases in Creole. It is deeply embedded in Western Culture, making references to Ancient Greece and Rome, to numerous French poets, playwrights and novelists, and to European and American history. In a way, it’s refreshing to see Western history through the lens of Haiti; as historians of the country we work tirelessly to demonstrate the centrality of the Haitian Revolution to the whole thrust of Atlantic history. And it certainly makes for an easier translation than, say, Justin Lhérisson’s semi-Creole *La famille des Pitite-Caille*. But in the scope of Haiti’s literary history one might classify *Pretenders* as somewhat tangential to the development of the nation’s literary corpus for the very reason that it was written during this reactive phase.

In any case, Hibbert doesn’t fully abandon the Creole project in *Les Simulacres*. As you said, he includes a brief but interesting discussion of Haiti’s linguistic situation and its implication for Haitian literature. Mr. Brion (who, again, tends to present the clearest articulations of Hibbert’s own views) attests that Haitian poetry is essentially “the translation of a thought in Creole.” In so saying he advanced the notion that the two languages are separate, that Haitian Creole is not a vulgar dialect of French but is a language in its own right.

NHD: I wanted to address Hibbert’s presentation of Hellénus’ wife, Céphise. She is Pablo Alcantaras’ object of desire, a bored housewife flipping through women’s magazines in her Pétion-Ville salon, and also the novel’s proverbial damsel in distress. How do you interpret Céphise’s character? When Hibbert writes, “Haitian mothers, the fate of the Fatherland is in your hands!” (108). How are we to understand Hibbert’s gender politics, and are they representative of the literature of the era? How do you handle this as a translator of a work that is 95 years old?

MR: As is so often the case, Céphise is more of a plot device than a character. She’s the trophy wife and the competent housekeeper, the damsel in distress, the object of men’s lusts. Like Daisy Buchanan, she’s bored but loyal until Pablo arrives on the scene and then she’s powerless before his seductive advances. Ultimately, when she starts to have second thoughts and Pablo gets aggressive, Céphise needs to be rescued. The tropes are blatant, and I’m the first to admit it. Mr. Brion even makes

sweeping generalizations about Haitian women being submissive and passionless, though these comments are also connected to his backstory, which we see in Hibbert's earlier novel *Les Thazar*, in which he is rejected by a young woman who chooses to marry for wealth instead of for love. Still it can be jarring to read things like: "The secret to making women love you is being young, handsome and rich—and this third quality suffices most often." As a translator, however, and as a historian, it's my job to present these attitudes accurately. I may subconsciously have mitigated some of Hibbert's language that paints Céphise as helpless and childlike, but I tried to be as faithful as possible to Hibbert's version. It's not the translator's role to put literature in sync with modern values, but to present attitudes as they were, and then leave it to readers and critics to dissect and discuss them. There's no doubt that we need more stories with strong and complex female characters, but we also need to keep reading what has been written in the past so we can understand where these attitudes come from. And as Edward Said insisted, we can read and take pleasure from works of literature while still being critical of their underlying attitudes and assumption.

NHD: In every interview for *Haiti in Translation*, we save the last question for translators to comment on their experience practicing translation. *Pretenders* is the second translation you have published, you also translated Hibbert's *Romulus* (Deux Voiliers, 2014), which you started prior to your doctoral work at York University. How do you balance working on your dissertation and your translation practice? What was the most important lesson you've learned from the release of *Romulus* to the publication of *Pretenders*?

MR: The trick is to already be done. After I translated *Romulus* (which was in 2013 was during my undergrad) I quickly tackled Hibbert's later work in one of those rare flurries of productivity. I even convinced the French department to give me credit for it. Then I just let it sit on a hard drive for about four years. I kind of forgot about it. Then last year, when my publisher asked if I had anything new that I might consider publishing, I said "as a matter of fact I do." By this point I was headlong into my PhD and now the father of two young boys, JJ and Wesley. Spare time was not something I had in spades. But it didn't take long to revise the translation and turn it into something publishable. The trick, as I say, was already having done the bulk of the work. I'm being facetious, of course, but there's something to be said for letting things breathe.

In any case, *Pretenders* is actually my third translation. I also co-translated C. S.

Lewis's *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* into Haitian Creole in 2015-16 and published it with Educa Vision in 2017. I somehow managed to cobble that one together while I was in the middle of my MA and after the birth of my first son. I guess part of the answer for how we manage to accomplish the things we love in the midst of our obligations is to simply make time for it. Don't treat it like a distraction, but as something else you need to do. Keep it on the to do list.

It's easier said, obviously. We're in such a career-oriented society that we sometimes feel guilty about doing the things we want to do. C. S. Lewis has a good quote about that. He would supposedly tell his graduate students that "the great thing is to be always reading but not to get bored — treat it not like work, more as a vice! Your book bill ought to be your biggest extravagance." I guess that's one approach. Don't treat translating like a job or hobby, treat it like a vice. Do it in secret when your family has gone to bed. Delete linguee.fr and [ProZ](http://ProZ.com) from your browser history. Skip classes and blow off work to get your translation fix. If nothing else, you'll cultivate a respectable reputation for eccentricity. And if you're lucky you might also get to contribute to the intercultural exchanges that our increasingly interconnected yet xenophobic world so desperately needs.

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[1] Indeed, interest in Hibbert has already begun to resurface, most recently [Shanna Jean-Baptiste](#) gave a presentation at the 2019 MLA Convention in Chicago about two of Hibbert's texts *Les Thazar* and "[Le Mariage d'Otto](#)": "Writing the Fin de Siècle Nation: Haitian National Identity in Fernand Hibbert's *Les Thazar* and 'Le mariage d'Otto.'"

[2] Hibbert, Fernand. *Pretenders*. Trans. Matthew Robertshaw. (Deux Voiliers, 2018), 21.