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Social History Book Club: Lyonel Trouillot, *Antoine of Gommiers*

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This is the second in a new series of *Social History* Book Club round-table reviews in which an interdisciplinary panel of historians and scholars of literature discuss important works of historical fiction. The series will consider the impact of historical fiction on the discipline of History, as well as the way novelists' works interact with historiographical trends in a wide range of subfields and adjacent disciplines. Panellists will also talk about the processes of writing about the past and where the novelists' craft might offer inspiration for historians, or help historians engage with diverse audiences beyond academia.[1]

For the second *Social History* Book Club, we selected *Antoine of Gommiers* (Tucson: Schaffner Press, 2021) by award-winning Haitian author and academic Lyonel Trouillot. The story is told from two alternating perspectives, those of the brothers Ti Tony and Franky, who live in an impoverished and crime-ridden alley in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince. Franky is writing the 'biography' of Antoine of Gommiers, a legendary figure who, through a series of episodes and morals, is variously a prophet, seer, trickster, matchmaker, hero and huckster. These sections often recall Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983), in which the reader is left uncertain whether they are encountering fact or fiction, and which questions the nature of 'authenticity' in relation to identity and the past. This story, presented as an alternative history, is juxtaposed against Ti Tony's account of the brothers' everyday lives and challenges living among ordinary people as well as gangsters, murderers and sex workers. Franky's ambition to have

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[1]Readers of *Social History* are welcome to propose books for the group to discuss. Please email socialhistoryreviews@manchester.ac.uk

his manuscript published leads the brothers into encounters with the 'President of the Historical Society', forming part of Trouillot's broader commentary on the nature of History as a discipline and as a profession.

Our contributors to this *Social History* Book Club discussion are: Frances Houghton, Lecturer in Modern British History, Open University; Kesewa John, Lecturer in Black British History, Goldsmiths, University of London; Eloise Moss, Senior Lecturer in Modern British History, University of Manchester and Reviews Editor, *Social History*; Michael Sanders, Professor of Nineteenth Century English Literature, University of Manchester; Julie-Marie Strange, Professor of Modern British History, Durham University; and Benjamin Thomas White, Senior Lecturer in Global History, University of Glasgow.

What is the novel's commentary on the discipline of History?

Benjamin Thomas White: Several possibilities came out of our discussion last time of Zadie Smith's *The Fraud* because we concluded that although she had a really wonderful command of nineteenth-century British history and literature, there were resources she might have drawn on in terms of Caribbean historical literature and historical fiction. Kesewa, as *Antoine of Gommiers* was your suggestion, I was wondering if you could tell us a bit about your own encounter with this book.

Kesewa John: I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to interview the author, Lyonel Trouillot, as part of the Page Turners Book Club.[2] The first time I read this novel last summer, I thought it was an incredible story. It questions fact and fiction, myth versus the nature of reality, and what kinds of histories are privileged in dominant narratives of the past, and it struck me that these are all questions that Michel Rolph Trouillot has explored – in his incredible *Silencing the Past* – that historians know so well. Lyonel Trouillot is the brother of Michel Rolph Trouillot. If you were thinking of teaching on the relationship between history and fiction, it works really well because in the Caribbean so much of our fiction is history, and so much of my history is fiction. I think Caribbean historians are always thinking about these lines. I'd love to hear other historians' take on it. I also think that you don't need to be a scholar of the Caribbean to understand what the book is trying to say; although the novel feels very present and real in terms of what we know of Caribbean realities, its themes are also universal because of the questions it poses.

[2]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5Bt8tnHCIE

Benjamin Thomas White: I think it's a really good choice for us. It's not necessarily a comfortable read for historians, given the role that is attributed to professional historians within the novel as gatekeepers of knowledge and narratives. Yet it's a wonderful book and I agree that you don't need to be an expert on the history of Haiti to appreciate it. For example, I think *Antoine of Gommiers* has been a big success in France. I read it in French because I noticed that Trouillot's biography on the back of the book said 'Lyonel Trouillou was born in 1956 in the Haitian capital where he still lives today'. Given that many authors are forced to leave Haiti for Haitian literature to be taken seriously, often by travelling to former imperial metropoles so their words are heard, it seemed that Trouillot's assertion 'I'm still here' was an important statement and that reading it in the original language was important.

What did you think about the structure? How do stories of the everyday (the history of the life of the two brothers and their mother, Antoinette, in the alleys of Port-au-Prince, as told by Ti Tony) contrast with the fable of Antoine of Gommiers as told by Franky? Which does Trouillot present as the 'important' history?

Eloise Moss: I thought this was quite a challenging book to read at times, especially the passages that didn't have a strong narrative coherence, such as the chapters that were written in the form of a fable. They sometimes felt to me like so many connected scenes designed to give a flavour of who this man, 'Antoine of Gommiers', was. Those sections were morals as well, and it took me some time to understand the purpose of those passages. However, the realist chapters in between were very visceral, and quite depressing at times about everyday life in in Haiti in Port-au-Prince. I wondered what other people thought about the structure of the novel and what worked and what didn't.

Michael Sanders: Two things that struck me were that, like you, I had to make sense of the relationship between the two narratives, which was difficult until you reached the end of the novel. Towards the conclusion, you realise that what you've been reading in the chapters giving the account of Antoine of Gommiers is Franky's manuscript. That helps retrospectively, I think, to make sense of the scenes you've been reading. It also became very resonant because of the present-day situation in Haiti, which entered the news just as I was about 30 pages into the novel. The story's realist scenes about the organisation of gangs and the kinds of problems faced by people on an everyday basis really put that news into perspective.

Eloise Moss: I agree, it felt a very timely novel, and like you I found that I understood more by the end of the novel than I had in the early scenes. I wondered if that structure was about the nature of history itself and what are the important parts to invest in: the tales we tell ourselves for comfort and hope in dark situations (the fable of Antoine of Gommiers), or the realist parts of the novel as narrated by Ti Tony, that are more like news reporting. During our previous book club on Zadie Smith's *The Fraud*, we had talked about wanting to read more works of Caribbean historical fiction to help contextualise that novel. I find it interesting that when I've read other novels written by Caribbean authors, the blend of magic and fable and the 'real' seems to be a distinctive aspect of that genre of writing.

Benjamin Thomas White: I was also fascinated by the structure of this novel, which is in very short sections, not numbered as chapters, and often written in one long paragraph; so, short chapters but extremely long paragraphs. This is really interesting because in Ti Tony's part of the narrative it becomes a stream of consciousness, where he's thinking through things that have happened and putting them in perspective. By contrast, in Franky's narrative, the story of Antoine de Gommiers is written in a much more formal style of French, and although it's not written as stream of consciousness, Trouillot has chosen to do the same thing, giving readers these long passages without paragraph breaks to create a similar effect. There's something intriguing about the structure chosen and the way Trouillot chose a parallel structure for these two narratives which are very different in style and in content, which he begins to explicate towards the end. He doesn't just let you work it out, even though by the time you're three-quarters through the novel, you've had to work it out anyway.

Eloise Moss: I struggled with the long paragraphs as well, but I found myself being quite self-reflective about why I was struggling because I'm so used to a type of writing that isn't stream of consciousness, that follows the rules of English grammar. At the beginning, the long paragraphs discomforted me but I started to kind of question why that was the case, when it reflects that we think and feel in much less structured ways.

Julie-Marie Strange: The first 30 to 40 pages I really did struggle with, it was challenging. Then I got about 40 pages in and was hooked with it. I realised that once I understood the characters, the blurring of the lines between fiction and reality was making me consider which stories were real, and whose reality counted. Kesewa, I found the interview you did with Trouillot really fascinating, particularly his mention of his brother's book, *Silencing the Past* (1995). He also says that he doesn't use the word 'family'; he refers to his siblings as friends. It reflected a very conscious rejection of power structures that are imposed, for example, through categories like 'family'.

Kesewa John: Trouillot as an author, in the context of his family of intellectuals, is incredibly interesting because he's also very grounded in the day-to-day reality of Haiti. I did wonder if the characters of Franky and Ti Tony were based on the relationship between Lyonel and Michel Rolph Trouillot, because they're portrayed as very similar in some ways and there's the juxtaposition between Michel Rolph Trouillot's illustrious academic career and the way Lyonel Trouillot has remained grounded in the streets of Haiti, in an environment where crime and violence are present on the streets every day. Even in the novel, Ti Tony is not an anti-intellectual character – he's not the big intellectual that his brother is considered to be but he's not anti-intellectual. Another character, Pépé, says to Ti Tony that 'you're not like me, you haven't chosen the streets, you just haven't gone down the route of your brother', and I wonder if Lyonel Trouillot sees himself as if he's that character; he's got a soft spot for his brother, but lives in a different world.

Benjamin Thomas White: I noted that earlier point that Trouillot doesn't use the term 'family', and I observed that family terms are not used in this book either. Ti Tony doesn't describe Franky as his brother, he describes them as the two of them together. When he refers to the character of Antoinette, he doesn't call her his mother, so it takes quite a while for you to be sure that the woman he's talking about is his mother. At one point Ti Tony does refer to Danilo, who is not his brother, as his 'street brother'. He uses the term for someone who is not a blood relative. It's interesting that Trouillot carries that principle into his fiction as well.

How does the novel deal with embodied experiences versus the fable Franky is writing? Ti Tony's account is heavily corporeal, of sex, violence, labour, and how Franky became disabled. By contrast, the 'history' Franky is writing is a set of morals, or fables, woven around the saint-like figure of Antoine of Gommiers. Are the embodied experiences acting as a critique of the way history is told?

Eloise Moss: I was interested by the way the reader comes to sympathise with the two characters, Franky and Ti Tony, over the course of the book. At first I was alienated by Franky's story, the fable he was writing about Antoine of Gommiers, because I couldn't understand what he was trying to achieve and the story was so wildly idealised. It gave Antoine a biblical quality that was so strange given what we knew about their real lives. But by the end of the novel, I felt such deep empathy for what Franky was trying to achieve. There's a really moving scene where Franky and his gangster pals try to get the President of the Historical Society to accept Franky's fable as

a work of history. Again, it forces us to ask those deep questions about what is history, what is a fable, why does it matter? As Trouillot writes, 'In History, you make choices that, later, folks will blow out of proportion, and there you are: a monster or a hero. In literature, you make up a fable that relates to nothing at all, and we reward you for being mistaken about what's real or not' (31). I thought that was an important commentary about the academy and the artificial barriers it creates to different types of history, as well as who is and is not included. I also thought it was significant that Franky was a disabled character, which added another layer onto the decolonising aspects of the novel.

Frances Houghton: I was actually slightly uncomfortable with what I felt was a rather one-dimensional portrayal of Franky and disability. I felt that such a sharp division drawn between the two brothers made me question the nature of the portrayal. Franky is unable to use his legs, instead he lives a life of the mind. As a consequence, he delves into this rich, wonderful, fabled world, which becomes his contribution and the lens through which he is seen here, although the novel shows that it's not really valued by society or the profession of history. It made me consider how readers with diverse positionalities in relation to disabilities might encounter the novel, and its rather stereotypical representation of a character who has a working body that doesn't function in society; I wasn't entirely sure what the author's comment on that was. His contribution is the fable in his mind and the historical research that he's able to do, but it's not necessarily clear where he 'fits' into the society that Trouillot paints. It's a world of the imaginary rather than the world of the real. Perhaps this is Franky's role: to sit outside the world of the streets (both literally and figuratively) and make us query our assumptions about what, and how, we know the world around us – and how we categorise and interpret it.

Julie-Marie Strange: I think the novel questions how we attribute value. In my reading, the novel is showing that there are structures of power and the people who are invested with bestowing value, ostensibly, are clearly there because of that power; so I felt the novel was querying who gets to say what has value and who doesn't. Franky's narrative is a narrative of hope, and it's a narrative of those who are silenced by violence, including the violence of the archive. In that context, Franky's disability had added significance because he's an emblem of the violence of power structures and we as readers recognise his narrative has 'real' value because it's about belief and hope and it's a story for the powerless.

Frances Houghton: I think within disability studies there's sometimes considered to be a problem with that because the stereotype or trope of the disabled person in literature is often that their function is to offer those

narratives of hope and be a 'ray of sunshine'. There's room for discussion here about why narratives of disabled people are regularly made solely to reflect or embody narratives of hope and nobility of spirit. Why does it take a disabled person to tell these stories? Thinking more broadly about disabled characters in literature, like Katy in Susan Coolidge's novel *What Katy Did* (1872), Katy is nice and kind, and almost quite sickening as a literary figure. Although it would be difficult to make a direct comparison between Franky and Katy, I think there's the potential for a really interesting conversation about how readers would respond if Franky and Ti Tony's roles were reversed. What happens if Franky is a slightly mean anti-intellectual person and Ti Tony is Franky's character? At the end of *Antoine of Gommiers*, Franky comes out on top because his fable is appreciated, to an extent, by the President of the Historical Society. But thinking about the work of disability within the plot shows all these textures and layers and dimensions of power, including who gets to speak and how power is accessed. We never really find out much else about who Franky is and what makes him tick. Even Pépé – the murderer of teachers! – has a little redemption drawn into his character, but I don't think we particularly learn anything else about Franky's character. What makes him happy or angry; does he have sexual feelings for anyone; what are his thoughts on his family's situation? By limiting use of the disabled figure to tell the straightforward narrative of hope, in a sense, it feels like Franky's identity as a complex human being is rather sidelined (unlike all the other excellently drawn characters in the novel).

Kesewa John: I wonder if Franky's disability is interesting because he's not born with it, it's a consequence of the poverty that they experience and the danger they're exposed to. He becomes disabled because he's trying to perform some manual labour, and keep up with people. He's trying to do something that's not natural to him, which is a problematic story in many ways; this is something that's happened to him. Yet, also, his disability renders him dependent on his brother, Ti Tony, who otherwise might have gone and had a very different life. Consequently, it ties them together and forces them to be loyal to each other in ways that they might not otherwise have been. In some ways it allows Ti Tony to admit the value of Franky's life and ideas, because he will always be loyal to his brother. He won't leave him and go off and do something else because they need each other. As such, it feels like Franky's disability is a part of the story, not additional to the plot. It's a lived reality that has its own subplot and I don't think it is only a symbol of hope.

Eloise Moss: Trouillot uses violence in the novel as a deliberate juxtaposition against the life of the mind that Franky narrates. I wondered if the inclusion of disability was part of a conversation about the issues that

historians don't always capture, i.e. the day-to-day difficulties and challenges that people faced historically. Those narratives tend to be excluded particularly from idealised versions of the past, but Frances's comment has also made me think differently about how those voices are used.

Frances Houghton: It is a very complex depiction. My guess is that Trouillot doesn't want you to be entirely comfortable, because I think it's meant to make you question ideas about power and bodily ability and the right to speak.

Benjamin Thomas White: Franky has this life of the mind long before his accident. It's part of his character, and that is what makes him out of place in their class in the school in Port-au-Prince. Poverty and violence are so prevalent that everyone has to be ruthless to survive. Franky is not ruthless, but neither is Ti Tony, because if Ti Tony was ruthless, he would just walk out. In a way, it is the fact of becoming severely disabled that means that Franky can't do anything else, so when he's writing the fable and producing all of the falsified historical evidence to go with it, it gives him a tool of survival. In context, when someone is severely disabled in a neighbourhood like the one described in Port-au-Prince, the fact that you can survive at all is a testament to the emotional and familial bonds forged in the community, and in this instance, how lacking in ruthlessness Ti Tony is, even if he resents the situation a little bit.

The question of the accident that leaves Franky severely disabled is also interesting in terms of thinking about historical narratives. Ti Tony's narrative is broadly historical, it's chronological. When he first starts talking about Antoinette it's made clear that he's talking about events that happened before her death, and it's clear that when Ti Tony and the gang go to try to persuade the President of the Historical Society to take Franky's manuscript, that happens at the end. What breaks the narrative is Franky's accident, when the reader is introduced to the fact that he has been left severely disabled long before you're told what happened. The narrative is broken in form, like Franky's body. Given that the book is about historical and pseudo-historical, or counter-historical narratives, the fact that its own chronological narrative (via Ti Tony's narration) breaks around this moment is significant.

Michael Sanders: I wonder if we are underestimating the character of Ti Tony, in the sense that the mind–body distinction is tempting, but if you think about who's doing the narrating, it's mostly Ti Tony. All of the really interesting philosophical observations about history come from Ti Tony, and not from Franky. For example, it's Ti Tony who says 'history does not weather the passage of time the same as legends do. The past is where the dead come to life and turn into heroes', and 'Our dead aren't heroes, they're

just cadavers' (18) when he's thinking about the people in his area of Port-au-Prince. There's a temptation to see Franky as the intellectual, as Ti Tony does. But it's also clear that Ti Tony has ideas and philosophy. I wondered if Franky and Ti Tony are counterparts or doubles of other characters, such as the sons of the two secretaries, one of whom tells an incredibly florid narrative of the past while the other says, 'no, it wasn't like that at all, it was basic. It was straightforward'.

On Frances's point about disability, for me it was complicated by the fact that Franky was already working on the history of Antoine of Gommiers before he became disabled. In that sense, his hopeful version of history is not a product of his disability. There's an interesting scene when Ti Tony is coming home from work, and the women in the alleyway want to embroil him in their own domestic disputes. His excuse to leave is that he says he has to get home to care for Franky, which he notes always elicits the response 'Oh, poor Franky', which causes Ti Tony to meditate on what that means for Franky, to always be 'poor Franky' in this context.

Frances Houghton: We were talking about how Franky is engaged on his work before he becomes disabled, but in the swimming story we find out that he already has asthma. So he's already portrayed as being weaker in his body, because Ti Tony has to save him.

Julie-Marie Strange: I wondered what the significance of his asthma was, and how far the novel's themes are environmental. I saw this as a novel about the violence of power and the way that it cascades from power 'from above' into sexual violence, intimate violence and the violence of parents against children. I was thinking about where Franky's asthma comes from, in the context of the environment of Haiti (there are lots of references to dust in the atmosphere) and the polluted waters, and how his asthma is another product of violence; it becomes embodied.

Eloise Moss: I noticed that every sexual encounter was in some way non-consensual or was part of a transaction, and that Franky's attempts to write this history were in some respects the only kind of emotionally pure thing that goes on within the novel, apart from the way Ti Tony cares for him.

Julie-Marie Strange: Although Franky wants to sell his History, so writing is also transactional.

Michael Sanders: When the brothers visit a sex worker, she turns the transactional encounter to her advantage. She refuses to make them permanent clients, and won't have them return, because she knows them as friends and can't become emotionally involved if she's going to survive. It's a horribly clear-sighted novel in that way about how people survive in that situation.

How does the novel portray historians, including the 'President of the Historical Society'?

Michael Sanders: I wanted to consider the motif of buried histories in the novel. Early on, Ti Tony says 'We live on the alley just off Grand Rue, but its real name is Jean-Jacques Dessalines'. It raises the question of whether the people of the alley refer to it as Grand Rue as a comment on their alienation from their country's history, or if it is their way of rejecting the power structures that are in place. The President of the Historical Society knows it as Jean-Jacques Dessalines, but for its inhabitants, it's Grand Rue. As reader you wonder whether that's significant as a reference to processes of historical forgetting that surface throughout the novel.

Eloise Moss: I thought that 'who are the historians?' was a question throughout the novel. The professional historians, like the President of the Historical Society, fulfilled the stereotype of an old, wealthy man, separated from society. Yet there were so many other examples of history-making going on, whether in groups, such as the inhabitants' rejection of the name of the alley, or via the individuals who choose to fight for Franky's version of events, like Ti Tony does. Throughout, they elect which history to choose and who gets to tell it. I thought that was such a clever way of forcing us to think about history as a profession. There's that final scene when Ti Tony and the gang go to the library and there are lots of bureaucratic obstacles to their entry. It was a good way of illustrating the everyday barriers to access and the gatekeeping around officialdom in history that occurs.

Julie-Marie Strange: When I started to read this novel I thought of it as two separate stories, from two individuals about two different kinds of relationship with the past, and again as a distinction between mind and body. As I progressed through it, I really began to query whether these were distinctions at all. Trouillot is getting us to think about how the narratives are entangled, enmeshed, and part of a whole. Franky and Ti Tony tell one character that although they look so similar, are almost identical, they try to be different but still end up being 'the same'. Even Pépé, who is a gangster and chooses the life of the street, turns out to have had an education. So I wondered how far Trouillot is asking readers to think carefully about the structures of power that encourage us to make these distinctions, through which we de facto re-enact and replicate inequality. I began to wonder if Franky and Ti Tony were *that* different, which made me query the nature of truth and fiction, since ultimately we realise that Franky's version is as true as the books in the president's library.

Michael Sanders: In relation to the point about the closeness between Ti Tony and Franky, even Antoinette has a photograph where she's written their names above them as children to tell them apart.

Kesewa John: One of the things that struck me was how far Franky was conscious of falsifying documentation to tell a history. It's not an accident. He's hustling in the same way that everybody else is in the alley, he's just got an academic hustle. He loves language, and he loves history, but he's lonely, he's got a man bringing books to help him with this project, which is his way of contributing. The idea is that Franky's book will make money for them and the brothers need that because they're poor. When the President of the Historical Society reads it, his eyes light up and he characterises it as just a work of fiction. Yet he also delights in it, he doesn't ask Ti Tony and the gang to leave. He finds it interesting because at least half of it is fictionalised. Why doesn't he kick them out? Or say, 'I don't have time for this, I'm a proper historian'. This scene made me query whether the President is actually the person that Ti Tony perceives him to be. He lives in a nice house. He's got a big library. Is he an amateur historian, or local historian? Is he the equivalent of the President of the Royal Historical Society in Haiti? In many ways, it transpires that he's actually a local historian with a passionate interest, and may just be a random guy who's got enough money to appear rich to someone who's extremely poor.

Julie-Marie Strange: That's sufficient to give him authority, which calls into question what 'authority' is. In a later scene, we see the President in his bathrobe and he's got his puny ankles on show. By including this, Trouillot really gets us to question and play around with the concept of what is authority? How is it bestowed? How is it seen?

Frances Houghton: Is the President also a hustler?

Julie-Marie Strange: Is he? Are we all as historians? Are we all? Is he going to plagiarise Franky's work? After reviewing the manuscript, he implies he might now write something on legends. Will Franky and Ti Tony ever see it again? It's just one hustle to another.

Michael Sanders: It made me think a lot about the nature of academia. The novel portrays teaching in interesting ways, via the character Maître Cantave, who readers are told hates the end of the month when he has to kick students out because they can't afford to pay the tuition fees. The business of who's got money and how money is circulated runs throughout the novel. Ti Tony's boss gives out loans but doesn't necessarily expect to see them returned. [Tony's boss] is happy to pay out when people win and also takes a certain number of banknotes a day, which are described as so soiled and dirty that they can't be reused again. During an episode where Ti Tony and Franky go swimming, they run into another gang and the little kid who they think is really helpful turns out to be the brains behind

the operation. He saves them from drowning, but only on condition they pay him. Yet he also stops the rest of the gang from beating them up and gives Ti Tony some money back to buy a shot of penicillin on the way home, because the water is polluted and he's been cut. The character of Danilo escapes and gets away, but appears to use Ti Tony's name on the documentation. The different kinds of hustles are all interlinked with the motif of survival.

How does the novel explore different forms of historical knowledge and practices?

Eloise Moss: This novel does every single type of history, whether oral history, crime history, interdisciplinarity with poetry and folklore, and critical examinations of memory as well. I love the passages on money because it was such a good example of material culture history: 'All these bills have passed from pocket to pocket, from bra to bra, from one little hustle to the next. The bills come to us after a long history of petty transactions. They carry a trace of every exchange – creased and crumpled, like the clients' faces. . . . They smell of mouldy sweat' (79). You could dip into this novel and use so many different passages to teach different types of history. It is a hustle, because we are always filling the gaps in knowledge and evidence with our own assumptions, imagination, plausibility.

Frances Houghton: I think there's a really fascinating commentary here on the use of oral history, which is so much a part of the way that Caribbean communities pass down their histories through storytelling, which was dismissed as not 'real' history by the historical profession for such a long time. Yet I found it really interesting that it's the written document that Franky chooses to falsify, so it's almost like he's playing the historians at their own self-consciously elitist 'intellectual' game, subverting their idea of 'legitimate' historical records.

Benjamin Thomas White: The reference to Danilo's fake documents is fascinating. It's the same person who fakes the passports and the visa, we assume, as the person who fakes the historical letters for Franky, and it speaks to the fact that paperwork has to be faked to be effective in this context. You need the paperwork and its existence is what matters, it doesn't matter if it's fake. It's about what you need to do to shape your narrative and your destiny. This is what Danilo represents, someone managing to shape his own destiny, whereas Ti Tony doesn't see himself as able to do that. You need paperwork and therefore you've just got to make the papers happen.

Kesewa John: Doesn't Danilo fake his paperwork because he's not been registered? He's the one person who doesn't have a surname, because his people live and die and they don't ever get their deaths registered or their

births recorded; it takes time and it's very expensive. Consequently, there's a whole culture of community in which people don't have any paperwork. So he uses Ti Tony's name because presumably his life has already been recorded.

Benjamin Thomas White: On the topic of the novel's references to how authority and order are created, and the role of violence in that, a clear example is in one of the final chapters, which portrays an encounter in a cafe on the way to the President of the Historical Society's house. There's an abusive husband beating his wife in public and getting away with it, because he can show a card that says he's important. It's an authority that Pépé overrules, with his different kind of authority – he threatens him with his gun – that in some other context he wouldn't be able to use.

Kesewa John: That was such a redemptive moment for Pépé. Before that he seems like a monster, who goes around killing teachers. We've mentioned that Ti Tony can be philosophical, but so is Pépé in that moment. There's another scene, when he talks about his likely end, and it overturns the idea that he's just a thug with no brain. He fully understands his ranking and his place, which again is horribly clear-sighted. It's how Pépé becomes the gang boss, but he knows he will ultimately be killed when someone else becomes boss.

Eloise Moss: This takes us neatly towards the end of the novel. The scene in the cafe is about how many people look away during instances of violence, because they don't feel like they have the power to intervene. It's not confined to Haiti. It's a very widespread experience. This is another powerful silence which as historians we should always be looking for. At the close, *Antoine of Gommiers* has an unfinished quality whereby you know the brothers' lives are going to continue beyond the final scene, but you don't know if the President of the Historical Society is going to plagiarise Franky's fable, or whether the brothers will benefit from it. The lack of a neat narrative conclusion prompts you to reflect on the artificial forms of periodisation that historians establish when telling the stories of people's lives.

Michael Sanders: As Trouillot writes, 'Writer, historian. To me, it's all the same' (31).

Julie-Marie Strange: 'If there is a difference, the only choice is in the hogwash you use to produce whatever you write' (31).