

# Inside the writer's studio: Jean-Philippe Toussaint's Mes bureaux: Luoghi dove scrivo.

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JEAN-PHILIPPE Toussaint's *Mes bureaux: Luoghi dove scrivo* is a little-known book by a relatively well-known author. None of the scholarly literature acknowledges its existence, Toussaint's publisher the Editions de Minuit does not include it in Toussaint's bibliography, and the national libraries of France and Belgium do not own a copy of the text. (1) This lacuna is particularly significant given that Toussaint has been a prominent figure on the French literary scene since the publication of his first novel *La salle de bain* in 1985. The novel was a commercial and critical success, selling 80,000 copies during its first year of publication and provoking critics to speak of a nouveau "nouveau roman." (2) Since this auspicious debut, Toussaint's writing has continued to receive considerable critical attention. In 2005, Toussaint gained institutional recognition by winning the prix Medecis for the novel *Fuir*.

Paradoxically, while *Fuir* was thrust into the limelight for having won Toussaint the prix Medecis, Toussaint's other book published in 2005--*Mes bureaux*--was ignored by nearly all critics. (3) While the text may have been overlooked due to its unusual form and content--*Mes bureaux* is an eclectic arrangement of prose, photographs, and drawings that take the reader inside many of the places where Toussaint has written--more likely the book owes its obscurity to its curious publication history. To begin with, Minuit, Toussaint's editor, did not publish it. In fact, *Mes bureaux* was not even published in France. Instead, it was printed and distributed by a small Venetian publisher--Amos Edizioni--for the very logical reason that the text is, oddly enough, in Italian. The Italian translation of an unpublished French manuscript, *Mes bureaux* is, indeed, an exceptional book. That Amos Edizioni printed only one thousand copies for distribution means that it is also a rare one. The text is also remarkable in that unlike Toussaint's other books which have been translated into thirty languages from Galician to Japanese (Toussaint, *La bibliotheque* 16), *Mes bureaux* has appeared in only one language. It is as if the book has been, quite literally, lost in translation.

The book's material elusiveness echoes the text itself, which walks a fine line between the opposing yet enmeshed preoccupations of intimacy and evasion, a balancing act that characterizes Toussaint's production more generally. From the publication of his first novel *La salle de bain* to his most recent novel (at the time of writing this essay) *Fuir*--the titles of which gesture toward the dual concerns of intimacy and evasion--Toussaint has explored the limits and possibilities of intimacy, both at the level of story and of discourse. Toussaint continues this investigation with *Mes bureaux*, albeit from a distinctly autobiographical perspective. (4) The text offers the reader a rare glimpse inside the writer's studio, giving a behind the scenes look at the diverse yet ordinary spaces where Toussaint has written. *Mes bureaux* constitutes an exercise in--and a meditation on--intimacy: it offers intimate details about Toussaint's

writing process and production, it acknowledges and privileges the influence of his family on his writing, and it explores certain intimacies between fiction and non-fiction as well as between word and image.

The word *bureau*--the point of departure for the text--is a polyvalent term that the *Tresor de la langue française* delineates as having both intimate and non-intimate dimensions:

1. Table, souvent couverte d'un tissu de bure, ou d'une autre matière protectrice, généralement munie de tiroirs ou de casiers, entourée d'une ou plusieurs chaises ou fauteuils, où l'on écrit, manie des papiers classés ou à classer
2. Pièce privée ou officielle où est installée cette table; lieu, établissement où s'effectue, généralement selon un horaire fixe, un travail régulier rétribué, de nature plutôt intellectuelle
3. Organisme ou établissement ouvert au public et dont la vocation est de rendre un service d'intérêt général; service ou organisme privé, et surtout public, qui conçoit, prépare, administre ou contrôle quelque chose

At once a "private room" and a "public office," the term *bureau* lies at the intersection between the public and the private, much as does *Mes bureaux*, a text that makes public Toussaint's private life as a writer.

While *Mes bureaux* unveils certain aspects of Toussaint's writing process and production, Toussaint remains remarkably hidden in the text. Of the numerous photographs that make up the book, he appears in only one, and barely so at that, with the photograph showing only his forearms and hands resting on a computer keyboard. That *Mes bureaux* is not a transparent text also functions to veil Toussaint. Indeed, *Mes bureaux* seems a perfect illustration of Toussaint's belief that "one can go quite far in revealing the intimate if one is protected by a form" since, in Toussaint's view, "form is the clothing that hides the potentially obscene and, in any case, indecent side of intimacy." (5)

Organized into thirteen sections, each of which begins with a title followed by a brief autobiographical reflection and then visual images that illustrate the reflection, *Mes bureaux* is a highly stylized and exceptionally visual text. The book's thirteen sections contain thirty-six photographs and seven drawings--in color and in black and white, and of varying sizes--that offer a visual portrait of Toussaint's *bureaux*. (6) Not only does *Mes bureaux* juxtapose the verbal and the visual, it also positions the fictional and the non-fictional against each other. The autobiographical text includes seven citations taken from five of Toussaint's novels and one citation from Samuel Beckett's *L'innommable*.

The photographs in *Mes bureaux* show Toussaint's *bureaux* in a particularly intimate light, with personal and non-work-related objects appearing in many of them. One photograph shows a computer next to breakfast laid out on what appears to be a kitchen table, and five photographs show Toussaint's *bureaux* to include a bed. Often the images situate Toussaint's *bureaux* in the intimate space of a home, and several show that outdoor domestic space can also constitute a *bureau*. Of the nine photographs of Toussaint's *bureau* in Barcaggio, three are of a workspace inside a home and six are of a patio area and herb garden located next to this indoor space. When the photographs show Toussaint's *bureaux* in the impersonal space of a hotel room or dormitory residence, personal items such as a sport coat, a cycling hat emblazoned with "BELGIUM," or a postcard of a Mondrian painting figure prominently in the images. (7) Family members appear in several photographs, as if to underscore the intimate dimension of Toussaint's *bureaux*.

While *Mes bureaux* assumes a non-fictional stance, it also repeatedly destabilizes the line that conventionally separates fiction from non-fiction. Citations from Toussaint's novels appear both inside the autobiographical reflections and underneath the "autobiographical" photographs. Toussaint's fictional worlds and Toussaint's "real" world are positioned in a way that interrogates the relationship between the two and emphasizes their points in common rather than their differences. In fact, *Mes bureaux* is written under the sign of Toussaint's fiction. Its epigraph is a citation taken from the novel *Monsieur*: "Il ne demandait pas davantage à la vie, Monsieur, une chaise" (*Monsieur* 86). (8) By taking as its epigraph a citation from Toussaint's fiction, autobiographical *Mes bureaux* playfully links Toussaint to his fictional characters and problematizes the conventional opposition between fiction and non-fiction. (9)

On two occasions *Mes bureaux* ludically explores the points of intersection, the intimacies, between fiction and non-fiction by pairing a photographic image of one of Toussaint's bureaux with a citation from one of Toussaint's novels. Despite their physical proximity, the relationship between citation and photograph is entirely ambiguous. To begin with, it is unclear whether the citations illustrate the images or whether the images illustrate the citations. The ludic juxtaposition of citation and photograph asks the reader to reflect on the relationship between the two, in particular to consider the longstanding question of whether art imitates life or life imitates art. These pairings of fictional citation and "real" photographic image complicate the conventional opposition between fiction and non-fiction, suggesting instead that there is a fictional element to autobiographical representation as well as an autobiographical dimension to fiction. Similarly, as for the relationship between word and image, the pairings of citation and photograph underscore their points in common. A photograph, they seem to intimate, is a citation too, a visual citation of a past moment.

The section entitled "Mythology" further explores the relationship between fiction and non-fiction by book-ending the autobiographical written reflection with citations taken from two of Toussaint's novels. (10) The section begins with the incipit of the novel *Monsieur*, a passage that situates the protagonist of the novel in a bureau. After this citation from Toussaint's fiction, the autobiographical reflection begins and tells of Toussaint's grandfather's bureau in Sars-Dames-Avelines. Toussaint explains that this bureau constitutes a "mythical and foundational" (24) bureau, one that he has unconsciously tried to reconstruct in each of the places he has written, that is, in each of the bureaux revealed in *Mes bureaux*. He describes his grandfather's bureau in both "real" and fictional terms. Toussaint has no "authentic" (24) memory of it--he was never allowed to enter it as a child--and yet the bureau firmly exists in his imagination, where it represents "a refuge from the rest of the world, a shelter, a bathroom" (24). By ending the autobiographical reflection with the word "bathroom," the text establishes a link between Toussaint's grandfather's bureau and Toussaint's first published novel *La salle de bain*. The link between non-fiction and fiction is reinforced by the fact that the incipit of *La salle de bain* immediately follows, and serves to close the autobiographical reflection.

In *Mes bureaux*, not only does Toussaint reveal the impact of his grandfather on his writing, he also acknowledges the influence of other family members on his production. The section entitled "My Typewriters," for example, contains three photographs of a toddler in a tee-shirt and diaper standing on a chair with his hands resting on the keys of a typewriter. The child is Toussaint's son, and the typewriter was used by Toussaint to write his first four novels. These images underscore the intimate dimension of the act of writing as well as the interconnectedness of Toussaint's life as a writer and as a father. While Toussaint's son clearly was not responsible for writing any of Toussaint's manuscripts, the images suggest

that his role in their creation was not entirely negligible.

Similarly, the final section of *Mes bureaux* is devoted to the role that Toussaint's wife Madeleine Santandrea has played in Toussaint's writing. In this section, entitled "Madeleine," Toussaint describes his desire to end *Mes bureaux* by taking a photograph of the bureau in which he is finishing the text. He gives a visual description of the scene, in which he notes that his computer, in a "perfect *mise en abyme*" (63), is displaying the first page of *Mes bureaux*. As Toussaint takes this reflexive photograph, his wife silently enters the bureau from behind him and unexpectedly walks into the scene being photographed. Her sudden appearance causes Toussaint to have an epiphany in which he realizes that her presence rather than disrupting the image actually completes it. Toussaint ends *Mes bureaux* by affirming his wife's presence in his production, writing in the *excipit*: "she was the only thing missing from this book, Madeleine, who has walked in the places where I write and who has traversed my life and my novels for more than twenty years" (63).

Two photographs follow these final words, the last of which is both highly suggestive and provocative. The first set of pages shows an image of Toussaint's bureau in his apartment in Brussels where he finished the text. The second set of pages presents the same scene, but with Toussaint's wife Madeleine in the frame. This final image of Toussaint's wife next to Toussaint's computer displaying the text of *Mes bureaux* foregrounds the interconnectedness of Toussaint's writing and his private life. The intimate relationship between the two is underscored by the fact that in this last image Madeleine is nude from the waist down.

While audacious in the extreme intimacy that it shows, the final image of *Mes bureaux* is not a gratuitous display of nudity. Rather, Madeleine's nude body functions poetically, constituting a *mise en abyme* of *Mes bureaux*, a text that exposes Toussaint's bureaux in all of their nudity. The photograph and its layout in the book are highly wrought and thus reflect Toussaint's contention that writers can--and must--represent the intimate, but that this must be done with attention to form. Madeleine's face in the photograph is blurred and unrecognizable, and the provocative image of her nude body is ludically tempered by the fact that underneath it appears a citation from the novel *La salle de bain* in which the protagonist describes the nudity of his companion Edmondsson. The citation directs attention away from Madeleine's nude body onto Toussaint's fiction, once again problematizing the separation of Toussaint's fictional worlds from his "real" world. *Mes bureaux* ends on this ambiguous gesture of intimacy and evasion.

The double gesture of showing and hiding that characterizes *Mes bureaux* is perhaps best emblemized by the section entitled "The Barcaggio Bureau." By far the shortest of all of the reflective texts, it consists of only one sentence that makes the case for narrative reticence:

If there had to be just one, it would be this one, but I prefer to keep it secret, in its abstract silence, invisible and mental. (28)

This preference for "invisibility," however, is immediately problematized by the nine photographs--more images than in any other section--of the Barcaggio bureau that follow. Paradoxically, the section that argues against showing shows the most. In so doing, it draws attention to the complex dynamic of evoking and silencing that is the art of narrative.

*Mes bureaux* underscores both the ordinariness and the variety of the places where Toussaint has written. A glance at the appendix, which includes a tentative list of all of Toussaint's bureaux, reveals that they span many nations, including Algeria, Spain, Germany, Japan, Italy, Belgium, and France--at its center in Paris and at its margins in Corsica. In the sections

"Temporary Bureaux," "Japanese Bureaux," and "Berlin Bureaux," Toussaint portrays himself as a transnational writer, a writer without borders whose bureau is anywhere, provided there is a tabletop for his computer and, true to the incipit of *Mes bureaux*, a place to sit. In the section "Panoply" Toussaint reveals that he rarely writes at home, stating instead: "to write, I leave" (53). He takes with him his "portable office" (53), a bag with the manuscript on which he is working and the writer's toolbox in the twenty-first century: a portable computer, cables, a storage device, a mouse, at times a keyboard as well as the more traditional writing tools of pens and pencils. Sunglasses and hiking boots complete the "writer's panoply" (53). Toussaint insists on the importance of his hiking boots for his writing, noting that they have, at times, functioned as an ambulatory bureau. He devotes an entire section to them, complete with photograph, in which he reveals that an emblematic sentence of the novel *Faire l'amour* came to him one day while putting on his boots.

In the section entitled "Distancing," Toussaint emphasizes the importance of distance and travel for his writing, noting that he first began to write during his first extended stay abroad. In this section, not only does he suggest that a true test of intimacy with a place is whether or not one can visualize it in its absence, but also that this absence is sometimes necessary in order to become more intimate with the place itself. He explains that the only way that he could write about Paris as he did in *La salle de bain* was by distancing himself from it, remarking: "in Algeria ... I finally found the distance necessary, the right distance ... to evoke Paris" (13). For his later books, too, Toussaint has lived by this rule. When he wrote the passage that describes the Tokyo sky in the novel *Faire l'amour*, he explains that he was "mentally" (15) in Tokyo but "physically" (15) in Belgium, looking at the beach of Ostend from the window of his bureau.

Not only does *Mes bureaux* shed light on Toussaint's writing process, it also illuminates details about some of his projects. In the section entitled "The Marcel Breuer Chair," for example, Toussaint reveals "a secret, intimate and almost spatial-temporal link" (46) between the novel *La television* and the film *La patinoire*: the chair evoked in the novel is the same chair that the protagonist uses in the film. Toussaint also shares information about his unpublished manuscripts in *Mes bureaux*. The reader learns that Toussaint's first novel "Echecs," which was never published, is a ludic meditation on overcoming writer's block. It tells of a writer who gets his finger permanently stuck in his typewriter, suffers for several hours, and then comes to the realization that nothing is stopping him from continuing to write, an ending that recalls that of Beckett's *L'innommable*. The appendix lists four other unpublished works: three plays entitled "Rideau," "Ni l'un, ni l'autre," and "Les draps," and a novel cowritten with Gil Delannoï entitled "Alusse écrit."

*Mes bureaux* also shares details about Toussaint's first published novel *La salle de bain*. Toussaint reveals that a few days before leaving Algeria where he wrote the novel, he burnt all of the rough drafts of the text in a dumpster at sunset. The only trace of his time in Algeria and of his work on *La salle de bain*, other than the published version of the novel, is a small ink drawing included in *Mes bureaux* that shows a desk, typewriter, and chair. By showing where Toussaint wrote the novel that would mark the beginning of his literary career, the drawing represents a point of origin, one that echoes Toussaint's grandfather's "foundational" (24) bureau. Toussaint calls the drawing a "self-portrait" (22), and the sport coat draped on the back of the chair a "signature" (22).

*Mes bureaux*, too, constitutes a self-portrait. Instead of portraying characters retreating to rooms of their own as he does in his fictions, Toussaint shows the reader his own. In these rooms, Toussaint reveals certain aspects of himself, but he also remains distinctly hidden.

*Mes bureaux* thus constitutes a counter-discourse to the exhibitionism and voyeurism that underpin the contemporary phenomenon of what Serge Tisseron terms *extimite*, or overexposed intimacy. The intimacy of Toussaint's text, if anything, is quite underexposed. (11) That *Mes bureaux* does not "tell all" and that its readership is limited to "the happy few" work toward preserving the intimacy of the text.

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(1) Toussaint is a Belgian national, his writing engages the French literary tradition, and his publisher is French. It does not seem unreasonable to expect *Mes bureaux* to figure in both national library collections.

(2) The publication figure for *La salle de bain* is cited on the *Historique* page of the Minuit website. For more on contemporary critical reaction to the new generation of writers emerging in the 1980s see Jacques-Pierre Amette's "Le nouveau 'nouveau roman,'" as well as Yvan Leclerc's "Autour de Minuit," Alain Robbe-Grillet's "The French Novel: From Nouveau to New," and Fieke Schoots's "L'écriture minimaliste."

(3) A search through contemporary publications indicates that only two critics--Giovanna Dal Bon and Mario Fortunato--wrote book reviews of *Mes bureaux*.

(4) The autobiographical approach of *Mes bureaux* echoes Toussaint's literary self-portrait *Autoportrait (a l'étranger)*. But whereas *Autoportrait (a l'étranger)* primarily takes as its subject Toussaint's public life as a writer--attending literary conferences and being interviewed in different cities around the world--*Mes bureaux* orients itself toward Toussaint's private life as a writer.

(5) On July 1, 2008, I had the opportunity to interview Toussaint in his bureau in Brussels, during which he emphasized the relationship between form and intimacy on several occasions. When I asked him about *Mes bureaux*, he responded: "Je dirais, et j'aurai sans doute l'occasion de le redire, qu'on peut aller assez loin dans l'intime si on est protégé par une forme et il n'y a pas d'impudeur. Des lors qu'on n'est pas protégé par une forme et qu'on n'a pas de talent on devient impudique. Souvent d'ailleurs aller vers l'intime c'est une nécessité. Les grands écrivains, justement, doivent aller très loin dans l'intime. C'est obligé, sinon c'est ennuyeux ce qu'ils racontent. C'est là qu'on touche au cœur de l'humain, aux choses les plus intéressantes de la personne, mais cela ne se justifie, ce n'est acceptable que s'il y a une forme qui protège. C'est la forme qui sera le vêtement qui va cacher le côté obscène éventuellement de l'intimité et en tout cas impudique. Moi, j'essaie d'aller assez loin dans les révélations intimes tout en restant toujours très pudique."

(6) All of the photographs and drawings are by Toussaint except for one photograph taken by his wife Madeleine Santandrea.

(7) The cycling hat points both to Toussaint who is Belgian and to the novel *La salle de bain*, the Belgian protagonist of which has a fondness for his country's cycling champions. The Mondrian postcard also recalls the protagonist of *La salle de bain*, whose favorite painter is Mondrian. In the film adaptation of *La salle de bain*, the protagonist carries a Mondrian postcard with him and sets it down on his bureau when he finally returns home. The photograph with the Mondrian postcard in *Mes bureaux* constitutes a sort of citation of *La salle de bain*, problematizing the separation of Toussaint's fictional worlds and his "real" world.

(8) For citations of Toussaint's novels, which are in Italian in *Mes bureaux*, I use the original French.

(9) In the literary self-portrait *Autoportrait* (a *l'etranger*) Toussaint makes a similar move. Throughout the text, Toussaint remains unnamed, as are his anonymous protagonists. On the one occasion when he refers to himself with a word other than "je," it is as "Monsieur," thereby linking himself to the eponymous protagonist of the novel *Monsieur*.

(10) The translation from Italian to English is mine, here and throughout.

(11) In *L'intimite surexposee*, Tisseron provides a sustained analysis of "Loft Story," France's first reality television program. He uses this case study to argue that a cultural shift toward an obsession with exposing one's self is occurring in France and in Western culture more generally.

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