



2025 French-American Foundation Translation Prize

Finalist Interview with Aqil Gopee & Jeffrey Diteman, co-translators of *The Maroons* by Louis Timagène Houat (Restless Books)

Q: What did you enjoy most about translating *The Maroons* by Louis Timagène Houat?

Aqil: What excited me most about translating *The Maroons* was the opportunity to recover a work that had been submerged under layers of historical silence. Published in 1844, the novel was quickly forgotten – whether through neglect or deliberate suppression by anti-abolitionist forces – and remained virtually unknown even after its rediscovery decades later. Translating it into English felt like breaking that silence: not only expanding its literary reach, but offering it as an essential document for rethinking the global history of enslavement. *The Maroons* traces networks of trafficking, resistance, and colonial violence in the Indian Ocean – routes often sidelined by the dominant focus on the transatlantic slave trade. Making this text available meant helping to restore those itineraries to the archive, and to offer a critical vantage from which that history can be reconstructed and its afterlives resisted.

Jeffrey: It doesn't seem appropriate to discuss my enjoyment of this project without first acknowledging the text as a document of unthinkable suffering. Houat describes in horrific detail the atrocious violence and indignity of plantation slavery as it was practiced on Île Bourbon. That said, the novel also offers bold visions of resistance, rebellion, escape, and the possible future dissolution of race and class as social categories. So what I enjoyed most about co-translating *The Maroons* was the encounter with Houat's extraordinary creative imagination, which allowed him to evoke several possible outcomes of the abolitionist movement in a single, brief narrative. It's remarkable that, in a work that denounces slavery in such explicit terms, there is also a space reserved for genuine hope for something beyond emancipation, a hope for meaningful equality.

Q: When did you each first encounter the French language, and what inspired you both to become French-to-English translators?

Aqil: I'm from Mauritius, once a sister colony of Réunion – both islands were colonized by the French in the 18th century, though their trajectories later diverged: Mauritius was taken by the British and eventually became independent, while Réunion remains a French overseas department to this day. As a descendant of indentured laborers from South Asia, I've inherited an exilic relationship to language: my



ancestors' languages are not quite mine, and the languages they acquired were never fully theirs. My encounter with French was not a choice but an imposition, shaped by the same structures of domination and exclusion that *The Maroons* exposes. What I did choose, later, was to reclaim that language – by writing in it, and by translating from it – as a way of turning it toward different ends. In a place like Mauritius, where colonial languages are layered over Creole, translation isn't a profession – it's a condition of speech. After an internship at Restless Books, the opportunity arose to turn that condition into a craft. I took it. This project became a way to make that history speak otherwise.

Jeffrey: I was lucky to have an excellent French teacher in high school. Mr. Shepperd was more than an educator; he was an indispensable intellectual mentor and remains a great friend. I was inspired to become a translator by another mentor, a wonderful person who gave me a leg up in the world of commercial translation. Since then, I've translated everything from pharmaceutical documents to international journalism and formal poetry. I've just got the bug, I guess.

Q: The French-American Foundation Translation Prize seeks to honor translators and their craft, and recognize the important work they do bringing works of French literature to Anglophone audiences. What does being named a finalist for this prize mean to you, and, in your own words, why does a Prize like this matter?

Aqil: I stumbled into literary translation almost by accident – a series of fortunate encounters. One of the most formative was taking classes with Ilan Stavans, who also happens to be the publisher at Restless Books, when I was an undergraduate at Amherst College. Even though I've always lived – and written – between languages, it had never occurred to me to shape that into a formal practice until then. Being named a finalist for this prize makes that early step feel not just lucky, but meaningful. It marks the beginning of something I want to keep doing. A prize like this matters not just because it honors the craft of translation, but because it expands which voices and histories get to enter the Anglophone literary world. In this case, it's not simply French literature, but francophone literature – *a novel from Réunion, about enslavement in the Indian Ocean* – that is being brought into conversation with a broader readership. That kind of recognition helps push the boundaries of what stories translation can make visible, and what geographies of experience it can connect.

Jeffrey: Louis Timagène Houat was never recognized for his writing during his lifetime or for over a century afterward. His erasure from history is a crime against the human intellect that has robbed us of a visionary writer who could have been included in the abolitionist canon but was not. Anything that we can do to redress that injustice is a



step in the right direction. This prize matters because, beyond acknowledging the vital cultural work of literary translation, it has the power to bring visibility to authors like Houat who deserve to be known and studied.