

A Primer of Haitian Literature in *Kreyòl*

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ABSTRACT

The early history of Haitian Kreyòl remains subject to intense debate among linguists, though there is no doubt it was the principal medium through which slave revolts were organized and the foundations of Haitian culture set. By the end of the nineteenth century there were already significant literary texts, in particular Oswald Durand's "Choucoune" and Georges Sylvian's *Cric? Crac!* During the thirties and forties, proponents of Kreyòl struggled to have it recognized as the national language and standardized. This process did not bear fruit until the IPN (Institut de pédagogie national) orthography became official in the eighties. Beginning in the fifties, there had already been a renaissance of poetry in Kreyòl, the leading figure of which was Feliks Moriso-Lewa. At least two generations of writers have followed in his footsteps. In the person of Franketyèn, Kreyòl has one of the most fascinating contemporary writers in world literature.

Even the basic history of literature in Haitian Kreyòl cannot be crammed into this small space.¹ The first extant poem, "Lisette quitté la plaine," was composed in the mid-eighteenth century, and this lover's lament must have been only one among others of a kind, remaining examples of its genre having been lost to the record. In other words, literature in Kreyòl predates independence by decades, and the language itself does by as much as a century. It was the medium in which Haitian independence was conceived and best expressed, as backhandedly shown by the attempt of French authorities to issue proclamations in it during the preceding revolutionary tumult, though they got the language wrong and wrote in Martinican Kréyol (see Confiant).

Long before the proclamations of its status as national language in 1983, and as official in 1987, Kreyòl was the essential instrument of national life. As Albert Valdman wrote in 1984, "no domain of use and no communicative situation is exempt from the encroachment of Creole. In rural Haiti and among the urban masses, all intellectual, psychological, and social needs are served by Creole" (79). Most writers

belong to the approximately five per cent who can speak French fluently and prefer to write in it, for reasons which need not be reiterated here. Nonetheless, literature in Kreyòl and the ongoing expansion of its use in public life are now more than ever before vital agents of national identity.

One practical difference between a primer of Kreyòl literature and that of any widely taught literary language, which Kreyòl decidedly is not, is that its neglected or ignored early history must be worked into the text, hence the first section below spent on the landmark texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, before the second section on the dynamics and more accessible writing of the recent past and present. The circumstances of the genesis of Kreyòl as an autonomous language remain murky and subject to debate. There is no question that it was forged in the crucible of plantation slavery. What is at dispute is whether the language derives from French or, instead, is African at its core, a direct descendent of Ewe, Fon, or other West African languages, the French complexion of its vocabulary being superficial. Although this debate is technical in nature and turns as well around how we define “derives,” “descendent,” and “origin,” these conflicting points of view are artifacts of Haitian literary history, itself composed of Kreyòl and French *versants*.

Haitian Kreyòl is often lumped with its cousins, the other Caribbean French Creoles/*Kréyòls*, those of Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana, plus the *Patwa* of St. Lucia and for that matter the true Creole of Louisiana, with which Kreyòl is with some effort mutually intelligible, though perhaps no more than Portuguese with Spanish. Despite the similarities in language and culture among French Antillean Creoles, to use another term for this extended family, the specific social and political history of Haiti has meant that even between words that are patently cognate, there are few exact equivalents; nor is the grammar the same. This divergence holds even more at the higher discursive level of literary ideology. An idea with a certain appeal in Martinique and beyond, let us for the sake of argument say *créolité* (per *L'éloge de la Créolité*, see Bernabé et al.), may well be out of place in Haiti. For example, in Martinique and Guadeloupe a major issue over recent years has been defining and controlling the CAPÈS French University program in Creole languages, an endeavor of interest to French citizens with academic careers at stake, but one that falls outside the Haitian frame of reference. At the same time Kreyòl culture exercises an irresistible fascination for Antilleans with access, even mediated, to the language. Vodou retains a place of honor among New World religions of African source, Cuban *santería* and Brazilian *candomblé*, to name but two. Kreyòl is of course the language of Vodou, and the role of both the language and the religion in the struggles that led to Haitian independence lies beyond doubt. It was, for example, the language of the pre-independence heroes of slave revolt, Makandal (1748–58) and Boukman (1791), and that of the anti-Vodou leaders of independence itself, Toussaint-Louverture and Dessalines (see Hoffman 245–66).

Kreyòl has perhaps as many as eight million speakers; most are monolingual in it. Though the steady stream of refugees over recent decades to Miami, New York, Montréal, Paris, and other parts has put many of its speakers in contact with English, Spanish, Québécois, and French, those who remain in Haiti live fully in Kreyòl. Haitian immigrants into other Antillean communities are often deprecated and exploited, but there is an undeniable feel of “deepness” and authenticity to Kreyòl, even as spoken in the diaspora. Moreover, the canon of Kreyòl literature is no mean component of the international archive of literatures in Creole.²

In his thumbnail history of Kreyòl, John Holm claims that its origins lie in part in “the speech of the seventeenth-century buccaneers, a mixed crew of French, English, and African outlaws,” and places its rise within the framework of the struggles among colonial powers for control of the whole island, Hispaniola, which eventually produced more wealth from sugar than any other colony (382–83).³ It was thus an offshoot of the *baragouin des sauvages* spoken in the other French colonies during that century, and it follows that a turning point in its history was the 1685 *Code Noir* decreed by French authorities throughout its Caribbean colonies, which formalized the racial apartheid upon which plantation slave economies were based. But the precise conditions that gave rise to Kreyòl are best delineated by the demographic transformation that occurred somewhat later. In 1681, the slave population was about 2,000 out of a total of 6,000; in 1728, there were 50,000 slaves, a vast majority of the Haitian population. It is possible to dispute the profile of the slave population during this formative period, for example, the ratio of children to adults, the ethnic make-up of the slaves who were increasingly exported directly from Africa and not from other French colonies, fertility and death rates, etc. Differing conclusions follow from these arguments (compare, for example, Lefebvre and Bickerton). However these debates play out, we know that by the third decade of the eighteenth century, Kreyòl had defined its own terms and was spoken both by the slaves and even by slave-holders.

In those years, African languages continued to coexist alongside nascent Kreyòl, as did psychocultural links to African “nations” defined in Haiti as Congo, Arada, Nago, Ibo (Fleischman 34–35). The situation was complex. On the one hand the African population and thus African cultures were continuously replenished by the advent of new *bossal* slaves, those uprooted and brought directly from Africa with no previous experience of slavery, who had not in other words been broken. According to the creolist Peter Stein, “Bossal slaves were tried and tested in Kreyòl by those who had been born in the colony” (91). This communal, one is tempted to say dialogical, process goes a long way to explaining the perceived “Africanness” of Kreyòl, and tends to support the substratist view of Kreyòl genesis, according to which the language is not an imperfectly learned version of French, instead a compromise between speakers of African languages, the majority of slaves during the formative decades, and speakers of the emerging Creole. Put in different terms, the target language of most early speakers of Kreyòl was not French, as it appears to those who possess French and approach Kreyòl through that lens. Postcolonial theory has focused on the “in-between” places created by colonialism and the ensuing displacements of the colonized, though most emphasis has fallen on the interstices in which diasporan intellectuals and writers dwell. Some of the appeal of Creoles in the postcolonial cult of hybridity is perhaps due to the fact that Creoles issued from large-scale in-between places, though these were far below the elevated niches of transnational intellectuals, who have sometimes taken their own dilemmas for those whose drama took or takes place on an altogether different stage.

This is a primer of Kreyòl literature, not Kreyòl itself, so it should now be stated that the initial foyer of this literature *qua* literature, written and printed, was not the oral culture, tales, proverbs, and songs that were more or less coeval with the birth of the language, rather the hybrid culture of the bilingual elite whose models of literature came from French tradition. Just as it is impossible to understand the genesis of Kreyòl without reference to the dehumanizing conditions of plantation slavery and the multitude of Africans who were inducted into this machine, so must the history

of Haitian Kreyòl literature be read against the prerogatives and the constraints of the Haitian elite, who have constructed it from within their own convoluted situation.

“Lisette” has been attributed to a white plantation owner, Duvivier de la Mahautière, and dated to either 1754 or 1757 (Chamoiseau and Confiant 73–74; Farquhar). One conclusion to draw from this authorship would be that by mid-eighteenth century, Kreyòl was so widely spoken that slave masters had not only some control but appreciation of it. Perry Arthur Williams claims that “Lisette” belongs to a lost genre sung by mulatto entertainers before “idle colonial rich women who would flatter their mistresses, tell them stories in the *doux et nonchalant parler créole*” (sweet and nonchalant creole; 29). Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant interpret *cocotte* differently, taking Lisette (or *Lizèt*, to cast this name into the IPN, *Institut de pédagogie national*, orthography) to be a seductive courtesan and the authorship of a white planter as something close to voice expropriation: he pretends to be a slave himself in order to hide his deep attachment to her, which would be scandalous (74). Leaving aside the complex gender and narratological issues entailed by in such a description, “Lisette” does read like a French poem of the period, with the proviso that the image of captivity upon which it plays, one familiar to Europeans via Provençal troubadour lyrics from the twelfth century on, also spoke directly to the world of slaves and slavery in which it was sung. Note an additional Haitian element in this stanza, the opposition between *laplèn* (the lowlands) and the implicit *mon* (hills or highlands, to which *marrons* or escaped slaves fled in Haiti and throughout the Caribbean): “Lisette quitté la plaine / Mon perdi bonher à moué; /Gié à moin semblé fontaine / Dipi mon pas miré toué / Mon tant comme zozo nan cage” “Lisette left the lowlands / I lost my happiness; / My eyes are like fountains, / Since I haven’t seen you / I am like a bird in a cage.”⁴ I have written “stanza” because we are clearly dealing with a French poetic form (ABAB + refrain), one alien to the rhythms of Kreyòl but which imposed itself on early authors in Kreyòl.

Jean Bernabé has remarked that “Lisette” and works of its ilk belong to a “pre-literary” period of Kreyòl (I: 276). His argument makes sense within the framework of his analysis of the discursive and ideological development of Caribbean Creole as a self-conscious project predicated upon the inherent structures of the languages, but French literary reflexes lasted well into the twentieth century and dominated nineteenth-century writing, not only Oswald Durand’s “Choucouné”—one of the few poems in Kreyòl he composed—but such self-consciously Afrocentric or nationalistic poems as François-Romain Lhérisson’s “Grand Maman moin dit: Nan guinea” and Sylvain’s *Cric? Crac!* On the surface, Durand’s “Choucouné” is a skillfully wrought example of the European *pastorelle* in which the love-struck knight-errant typically loses his beloved shepherdess to a lover who abducts her from an idyllic setting. Even in medieval Europe there was a political dimension to this kind of plot. Durand’s Choucouné is lost, however, to a pink-faced white man wearing the paraphernalia of his power, though it is implied that Durand himself was a knight-errant of a certain rank, and that the advantage purveyed by the abductor was based in race and in language, since the “little white man” notably spoke French:

Gnou p’tit blan vini rivé:
P’tit barb roug’, bell’ figur’ rose,
Montr’ sous côté, bell’ chivé . . .
—Malheur moin, li qui la cause!

Li trouvé Choucoun' joli,
 Li parlé francé, Choucoun' aimé li . . .
 Pitôt blié ça, çé trop grand la peine,
 Choucouné quitté moin, dé pied moin lan chaîne!

So a little white man arrived:
 A little red beard, a pink face,
 With a watch in his vest, fine hair . . .
 —My pain is due to him!
 He found Choucouné pretty.
 He spoke French to her, and Choucouné liked that . . .
 Better to forget all that, it hurts too much,
 Choucouné left me, my feet are in chains.⁵

Here too Kreyòl is subject to a European rhyme-scheme: ABABCCDD. As well, the irony that a Kreyòl-speaking object of desire (Kreyòl itself?) was stolen away by a French-speaker as recounted in a poem cast into a French verse form was likely not lost on readers of the time. To some extent, Jean Bernabé's aforementioned analysis does bear. Kreyòl as depicted in "Choucouné" was still enmeshed in French esthetics, though the poem was not, I would argue, preliterary, but rather marked a noteworthy moment in literary self-consciousness, one in which the poet seems to have understood the conditions of his dependency but found no way to supersede them. One could argue, in fact, that Durand had composed a work ahead of its time: "Choucouné" was a kind of metapoem, a poem on the language of the poem itself, a statement that anticipated much thought and theme just beginning to coalesce in World literature. On the Haitian periphery, then, we find hidden away in a language very few have or can read a statement whose message, leaving aside its Haitian particularities, might have been well received by international readers, had they known it. The infernal logic of globalization had, I would submit, precursors throughout its margins. The subsequent success of "Choucouné" as lyric of a popular song, one best known to English speakers as "Yellow Bird" but sung across the Caribbean and to this day in Haiti may not directly reflect its ideological content—it has been combined with a catchy tune and performed by Harry Belafonte and the late Celia Cruz, among many others. It remains a monument of Kreyòl literary culture.

François-Roumain Lhérisson's "Grand-maman moïn dit: Nan Guinée," which dates from somewhat earlier, also cleaves to French verse forms, though in it we begin to glimpse the outlines of a new esthetic, one heralded by reference to Africa and other features of Caribbean literature as we now know it:

Grand-maman moïn dit: Nan Guinée
 Grand mouché rassemblé youn jour
 Toute pèpe li contré nan tournée
 Et pis li parlé sans détour:

"Quand zôt allez foncer nan raque
 Connain coùment grand moune agi:
 Badinez ben avec macaque,
 Mais na pas mangié queue à li."

Grandma told me that in Guinea
 a Chief one day gathered
 his people around him
 and told them plainly:

“When you head into the bush
 keep in mind how adults act:
 it’s okay to chat with a monkey
 but don’t twist his tail.”⁶

There are many levels on which this poem can be interpreted. In the first instance, it exemplifies the connection between fable-like narrative and proverb, a characteristic of Creoles worldwide. Next, this dialogue between narrator and audience set up a typically Caribbean and African-American *cric? crac!* or call-and-response discursive space. Evoking a previous storyteller (the grandmother, *Grand-maman*), the poem fashions itself as one link among others in a community-based chain of utterance, a major motif of Caribbean writing to this day. Further indication of its exemplary status in the history of Caribbean (verse) narrative is the imaginary site of the grandmother’s memory: an ancestral Africa, whose stable social relations have been lost, expunged, a *locus amoenus* from which its present audience is removed by, in this case, only a generation or two. There, in Africa, straight talk (*parlé sans détour*) was possible. The proverbial tag (*badinez ben avec macaque*) is portrayed as natural African speech, its burden of wisdom reproducing the speech act upon which the poem is founded: advice from the elderly (*coûment grand mouné agi*) transmitted across generations, but advice also warning against the limits of repartee (*mais na pas mangié queue à li*). This second-degree simulacrum of oral tale-telling is a quintessential mode of literature in Creoles.

Georges Sylvain’s 1901 *Cric? Crac! Fables de La Fontaine racontées par un montagnard haïtien et transcrites en vers créoles* was the summit of nineteenth-century Kreyòl, not only in terms of synthesis of form and content, but its book length; it stands in this regard alongside the first novel in Kreyòl, Alfred Parépou’s 1885 *Atipa*, written in *Kreol gwiyane* (French Guiana Creole). What might be seen in Lhérisson’s use of a Kreyòl proverb as a tentative exercise in emerging Kreyòl esthetics was expanded to a lengthy satirical account of Haitian social realities cast within a purported “transcription” of La Fontaine, though studded with Kreyòl proverb. *La Fontaine’s* exist throughout the Creole-speaking world, with varying degrees of success and interest. The device of putting La Fontaine into Creole had been already been used earlier in the century by the Martinican François Marbot in his 1846 *Les bambous*, but to the end of reconciling, ideologically at least, slaves with the futility of resistance. Sylvain’s aim was different, and his repeated allusion to Kreyòl proverb and the distinctive ways in which he “rewrote” La Fontaine demonstrate his awareness that the popular expression in Kreyòl was the inevitable standard against which writing in Kreyòl need be laid. It would be no exaggeration to claim that *Cric? Crac!* itself is a something of a standard for literary Kreyòl, and some measure of its importance is the new edition just published in Port-au-Prince (FOKAL [*Fondasyon Konesans Libète*] 2002), which should make it more available than it has been to a readership in Haiti and beyond.

Despite the heavy hand of French, then, pre-twentieth-century literary Kreyòl anticipated themes and techniques present to this day, reference to the African

heritage and Haitian oral culture as well as the conflictual sociolinguistic matrix in which the language has been mired since its beginning, plus use of Kreyòl proverb not simply as token of orality but as model of good, that is deep, popular style.

The American occupation of Haiti in 1915, which lasted until 1931, was the defining moment of modern Haitian national consciousness. Indeed, the opposition of Georges Sylvain to the American occupiers up to the moment of his death in 1925, serves as a symbolic bridge between the old and the new literature in Kreyòl, though Sylvain himself ceased writing in Kreyòl after *Cric? Crac!* During these troubled decades the literary defense and illustration of the language shifted into French, most notably in the work of Jean-Price Mars, the title of whose 1928 *Ainsi parla l'oncle* might be said to echo Lhérisson's "Grand-maman m'a dit." Much energy was consumed in debate about the origins of Kreyòl and the best way to write it, matters themselves embroiled in the question of whether Kreyòl or French was to be the primary language of literacy in Haiti. Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain—Georges Sylvain's daughter but a force in her own right—was a prominent proponent of Kreyòl as the vehicle in which to express the African origins and/or the national culture of Haitians (see her *Le créole haïtien*). It is easy now to mock the opposing francophile leanings of Jules Faine, but his claim in 1936 that the source of Kreyòl lay in Maritime French and that Kreyòl writers, of which there were still precious few, should turn to French literary models (much as the French themselves had turned to Latin ones during the Renaissance), had at least the virtue of coherence. This tension among Haitian literati was aggravated during the 1940s by the advent of anglophone US Protestant missionaries, who incongruously became advocates of literacy in Kreyòl, for their own for purposes of proselytization to be sure, and proposed their own orthography.⁷ In terms of literary production, this period left little worth mentioning, though it can be thought of as a necessary phase preceding the renaissance of the language in the 1950s, when a new generation, one often epitomized by Feliks Moriso-Lewa (Félix Morisseau-Leroy), took passionately to Kreyòl, abandoning much past poetic practice. His *Dyakout* (straw sack, along with a machete the basic accoutrement of the cane-cutter) was originally published in 1953 as *Diacoute*, and was followed by three numbered sequels, each of which further refined his notion of Kreyòl esthetics. At the same time, in a vein common in Creoles worldwide, came his Kreyòl *Antigone* (1954), which stands alongside his near contemporary Frank Fouche's Kreyòl *Oedipe-Roi* (1955) and *Yerma* (from Garica Lorca's play of the same name, 1956) as early examples of translation/adaptation of world classics.

As is often the case for Creoles, anthologies are extremely important instruments of dissemination, and two anthologies of Kreyòl will be relatively accessible to readers of this piece, hence my focus on them here. The first is the Haitian section, edited by Maximilien Laroche, of Lambert-Félix Prudent's 1984 *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie créole*; the second, the 2001 *Open Gate: Anthology of Haitian Creole Poetry* edited by Paul Laraque (*Pòl Larak*) and Jack Hirschman—the former has the advantage of allowing us to read Kreyòl alongside other "French Creoles" from around the world. One significant feature of developments in twentieth-century Kreyòl can be gathered by comparing the Moriso-Lewa's "Merci, Dessalines" in Prudent's *Anthologie* (305–08), with the broader sample from his works in *Open Gate*, for example, "Choucoun"—the proper name is common but inevitably recalls Durand's "Choucounne." Moriso-Lewa's mordant humor was palpable in "Merci, Dessalines" with its satirical citation of French throughout and especially in the closing line, as opposed to the Kreyòl of

the main text, albeit in an orthography which has since become outdated.⁸ Contrast between the authenticity of Kreyòl and the ironic artificiality of the superstrate French is a recurrent motif in the language, and is well expressed in the proverb “pale franse pa di lesprit pou sa” ‘speaking French doesn’t make you smart.’ As for Moriso-Lewa’s later “Choucoun,” it too denounces Haitian political conditions, but the poem is the new orthography: “Kou m’gan kochma / Se tonton makout m’plede reve / . . . Yo te mennen vin wè makout fiziye / 5 pitit gason-l nan lari Gran Gozye” ‘Whenever I have nightmares / It’s the tonton macoutes I’m dreaming about / . . . They brought her to see the macoutes shoot / Her 5 sons on a street in Grand Gosier’ (Laraque and Hirschman 2–3). This typographical point might appear epiphenomenal, especially as measured against the content it conveys, vigilante execution. But the feel of the new orthography both marked and encouraged a sea-shift which redefined poetic expression, though Haitian rural and popular life and belief remain central to most poems of the period, e.g., Klod Inosan’s (Claude Innocent) “Calinda la poul batte” (*kalinda* was a slave dance, now revived in new forms; cf. Prudent 310–13); Pòl Larak’s (Paul Laraque) “Lakansiel” (the “rainbow” is a multifaceted image in Vodou, related to the serpent Dambala in his ariel incarnation; Prudent 315); or, again, Moriso-Lewa’s twist on Vodou possession, “Gan defwa m’pa mwenmenm” ‘Sometimes I’m not myself’:

Gan defwa m’pa mwenmenm
 Gan yon lwa bosal k’ap danse nan tèt mwen
 Yon law chagren k’ap frape-m atè
 . . .
 Gan yon lwa revolisyon k’ap bouyi nan san mwen
 Chwal mwen sele
 M’prale
 Yon lambi revolisyon ap rele-m
 Si ou gan kouray kenbe men-m
 Chwal mwen sele
 A n’ale.

Sometimes I’m not myself
 There’s a wild [bossal] loa dancing in my head
 A sorrowful loa which stamps on the ground
 . . .
 There’s a loa of revolution boiling in my blood
 My horse is saddled
 I’m set to go
 A lambi [conch shell used to call for revolt] of revolution is sounding
 If you’ve the courage, take my hand
 My horse is saddled
 Let’s go.⁹

Apart from converting Vodou imagery into a personal indeed erotic call for revolution, Moriso-Lewa embraced the rhythms of everyday speech, a characteristic of modernist experiments in other Creoles.¹⁰ His generation—which included Frank Fouche (Frank Fouché), Jòj Kastrá (Georges Castera), Pyè-Richa Nasis (Pierre-Richard Narcisse), and Lyonèl Twouyo (Lyonel Trouillot)—revolutionized not only the tone

but the metaphoric possibilities of Kreyòl. Take, for example, Jòj Kastrá's "imagistic" and trenchantly ironic "San" (Blood):

An n'al gade san koule,
cheri

pou you fwa nan lavi,
sa pa san moun k'ap koule,
pou yon fwa nan lari
se pa san bèt k'ap koule,

an n'al gade san koule,
cheri,
se solèy ki pral kouche.

Let's go see blood flow,
darling.

For once in a lifetime,
It's not people's blood spilling,
for once, in the street
it's not animal's blood flowing,

let's go see blood flow,
darling:
the sun is setting.¹¹

These pioneers of modern Kreyòl were followed in the 1960s by the *Sosyete Koukouy* (Society of Fireflies), "the only Haitian literary movement still in existence" (Laraque and Hirshman xiv). The name itself is revealing, referring as it does to a proverb Sylvain had cited in *Crac? Crac!*—in his words "Tou koukouy kléré pou jé yo" 'fireflies glow for their own eyes'—which might be read as defense of esthetics for its own sake and against all odds, understandable for a group of writers who have almost all been through the ordeal of imprisonment or exile during the Duvalier period, and whose branches have perforce been as active in Canada and the United States as in Haiti. Moriso-Lewa himself died in Miami, and as many of the other writers cited in *Open Gate* either have been in the diaspora as not. Exile and imprisonment are not anomalies in the annals of twentieth-century world literature, but dispersion and diaspora have been especially debilitating for the development of Kreyòl literature, since the vast majority of its speakers and hence those who might best appreciate it are themselves trapped within Haiti and cut off from these writers. The demography of contemporary Kreyòl literature thus reflects the bitter realities of Haitian society over the past several generations, torn as it has been between those in the diaspora and those who have remained inside "par bravoure ou par attachement" 'bravado or attachment'¹² and who ask themselves "poukisa m'ret isit?" 'why do I stay?'—sometimes answering (as in Rene Filoktèt's poem "M'chouke" 'I'm rooted: "paske gen youn pye bwa m'renmem sou wout Grandans / youn solèy ki p'ap chare solèy / paske gen youn fanm yo rele Emeline Michel, / youn kò tanbou ki pa janm rete' 'because there's a tree I love on the road to Grand'Anse / a sun which doesn't play at being the sun / because

of a woman by the name of Emeline Michel, / a chorus of drums which never stops.¹³ Like most writers in Creoles worldwide, Rene Filoktèt (René Philoctète) is bilingual. No hard and fast rule applies to a bilingual writer's choice of language, but Kreyòl tends to be the preferred medium in which to express revolt against and revulsion at the brutality of oppression which has haunted Haiti throughout its history (of which Moriso-Lewa's "Choucoun" above might be considered paradigmatic), or nostalgic memory and yearning, as in the extract immediately above from Filoktèt's "M'chouke," or, to offer another instance of this voice, Boadiba's "Madam La Prezidant" (Madame President): "Pou fèt mwen m'ta renmen / Tout peyi-a / Kouvri ak rivyè k'rekonmanse chante / Pou tout wout dle ap rezonnen" "For my birthday I want / The whole country / Covered with rivers that are singing again / So that all the waterways resound / With the shouts of children bathing."¹⁴

Typical of contemporary writers, Boadiba is in the diaspora; atypically, she is female, though in fact most active female voices in literary Kreyòl live abroad, for example Jaklin Skot (in Africa), or Siz Bawon (United States). One exception is Deita, pseudonym of Mèsèdès F. Giya (Mercedes F. Guignard), who returned to Haiti after the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship. Her 1989 *Esperans Dezire* might be taken as the first feminist novel in Kreyòl, or at least one whose subject predicated a reversal of gender roles, since its heroine is *Premye Famn Prezidan Dayiti*—the first woman President of Haiti.

2002 was a landmark year for Kreyòl literature, and offers a focal point upon which to conclude this summary, two years before the centenary this issue celebrates. Above, I signaled the historiographical importance of the re-edition of Sylvain's *Cric? Crac!* That came in that year. Even more significant for the state of writing and reading in Kreyòl was the re-issue of Franketyèn's *Dezafi* in the official orthography (Châteauneuf-la-Rouge: Édition Vents d'Ailleurs, 2002). *Dezafi*, a title that can be clumsily translated as "cock-fight," is the unrivaled masterpiece in the language and certainly among the great literary achievements in any Creole. This story of "zombification and dezombification" is obviously an allegory for Haiti itself during the Duvalier dictatorship (see Laroche). Pursuing to its logical conclusion the strategy of many writers in his generation, one implicit in Moriso-Lewa's *Gan defwa m'pa mwenmenm* (above), Franketyèn converted the symbols and rituals of Vodou into literary motif and material, but also pointed to the paradox that Vodou is consubstantial with this agony, be it cause or be it effect. Characters fall prey to zombification and loss of self at the hands of both *hougan* and white, bourgeois oppressors. These two modes of zombification cannot be distinguished, just as there is way to separate understanding of the repressed political state of the peasant from the culture to which he remains in bound.

Yet *Dezafi* transcends this "nativist" framework, expressing simultaneously the avant-garde principles of *spiralisme*, which Franketyèn espoused at the end of the 1960s and went on to explore in subsequent works in both Kreyòl and French, as well as the French version (as opposed to translation), of *Dezafi* itself: *Les affres d'un défi* (1979). These two presumably contradictory esthetic principles are cast into an innovative "basilect," or deep Creole, difficult even for native speakers, though in this regard too Franketyèn was fulfilling the agenda of his cohort, those born in the 1930s and who followed in the footsteps of Moriso-Lewa.¹⁵ That all these strains and strategies have been fused into a single work speaks to Franketyèn's genius—the word I think is not misplaced—and to his central position in the canon of Kreyòl (and international Creole) literature.

For this reason, and for its vision of hope despite everything, let me conclude this introduction to literary Kreyòl with a versified extract from *Dezafi*:

Nuit-la pwès; nuit-la kòryas. Mentou, eswa-
nou sere lan fon kè-nou.

Youn lalin grimèl ap balize dèyè mòn; li
fouke youn touf nwaj san ganson.

Chak swa, nou lòyen zetwal.

The night is thick, the night is tough. But still our hope
is kept safe in the depths of our hearts.

A high yellow moon is rising behind the hill; it
grabs a tuft of naked trouserless cloud.

Each evening we eye the stars.¹⁶

NOTES

1. Kreyòl, with the grave accent over the *o*, is the official Haitian IPN spelling. In Martinique and Guadeloupe, the new orthography has *Kréyol*. There is an increasing amount of material in and on Kreyòl on the web, which can readily be found through the available engines. I am grateful to my (blameless) colleagues Maximilien Laroche, Madeleine Hron, and Jean Jonassaint for information on recent publications.

2. This matter I have discussed elsewhere (in my *Entwisted Tongues* and in summary version in Arnold 29–56).

3. Some indication of the hold the image of buccaneers has to this day in Haiti can be seen in the successful revival in March 2003 at the Théâtre national d’Haïti of Franketyèn’s 1979 play, *Twoufoban*, whose title refers to a site mythically attached to pirates: <http://www.journallunion.com/news.cfm?newsID=1301>.

4. Here and throughout, I am leaving the examples in their orthography in which I have found them. This version is from Charles (1979). Chamoiseau and Confiant have a slightly different text (73). For some reason, they assume that the image of a bird in a cage is inherently “European.”

5. I am quoting Ulrich Fleischmann’s version, and alluding to his analysis (37).

6. Here cited from Thomas 134; also in Williams 45.

7. There is a lengthy history of this multifaceted debate in Dejean.

8. This is hard to demonstrate, but there is little difference between Sylvain’s improvised 1901 orthography and Moriso-Lewa’s in the 1950s: “Merci, Dessalines / C’è ous qu’montrez nous chimin nous” (Prudent 305).

9. Laraque and Hirshman 8–9.

10. For example, the works of the Surinamese poets of roughly the same generation, J. G. A. Koenders and Trefossa. For examples, see Voorhoeve and Lichtfeld’s landmark anthology of Sranan (1975).

11. Laraque and Hirshman 40–41.

12. In the words of Franketyèn, from an interview with Yves Chemla at http://homepage.mac.com/chemla/fic_doc/frank_inter.html.

13. Laraque and Hirshman 160–61.

14. Laraque and Hirshman 216–17.
15. For a definition and explanation of “basilectal” Creole, see my *Entwisted Tongues*, ch. 4, “Deep Speech.”
16. Cited here from Laraque and Hirshman 142–45.

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