

# Kreyol Intertextuality and Decolonizing Narrative in Veillées noires

Kevin Meehan

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Résumé de l'article

Cet essai nous présente trois niveaux d'intertextualité utilisés dans l'histoire « Echec et mat » de Léon-Gontran Damas. Par le biais d'histoires folkloriques, de paroles de musiques populaires créoles de l'époque, ainsi que d'écrits satyriques du 19e siècle, cette histoire offre un microcosme des techniques d'intertextualité utilisées dans l'oeuvre entière, *Veillées noires*. Plus précisément, je retrace la méthode utilisée par Damas pour pouvoir insérer dans son conte, une satire écrite et publiée en créole par le Guadeloupéen Paul Baudot. Bien que cette satire créole écrite par un auteur béké blanc du milieu du 19e siècle est d'une certaine ambiguïté politique, et bien qu'il devrait être déterminé par des références musicales et folklorique, Damas souligne l'importance de document écrit en créole à cette époque. De tels écrits coexistent avec d'autres formes d'oeuvres culturelles et font partie d'un réservoir dans lequel Damas puise pour assembler son discours anticolonial. Ces empreintes intertextuelles révèlent une identité culturelle aussi plurielle qu'anticoloniale.

## Kreyol Intertextuality and Decolonizing Narrative in *Veillées noires*

Kevin Meehan

Léon-Gontran Damas is usually remembered as a great poet and the third founding father of Négritude (with Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor). However, he was also a superb writer of fiction, and his 1943 volume of folkloric short stories, *Veillées noires*, presents a rich field of decolonizing interventions.<sup>1</sup> Examining the story “Échec et mat” as a microcosm of strategies employed throughout the entire collection, this essay identifies three different levels of intertextuality used by Damas to assemble a complex anticolonial discourse grounded in a range of earlier Kreyol-based cultural production techniques. Taken together, these examples of intertextuality express an identity that projects its decolonizing vision across multiple classes, racial groups, language forms, and historical periods.

*Veillées noires* is a collection of stories based first and foremost on folktales culled by Damas from his childhood memories as well as fieldwork collecting carried out in the previous decade when he returned to his homeland of Guyane (French Guyana) after studying in Paris. Published by Stock Editions, a venerable Parisian publishing house that was once known as “the Temple of Taste” for having previously introduced French readers to works by Voltaire and Rousseau, Damas’s book contains nineteen stories along with a fascinating introduction by the author commenting on the origins and narratological features of the tales, the importance of the stories for healthy identity formation in a milieu shaped by diaspora and pressure from the French colonial policy of assimilation, the impossibility of absorbing, translating, or otherwise assimilating Kreyol utterances into the volume’s flow of literary French, and the status of Guyanese society as a “marvelous” (*merveilleux*) space defined by its Amazon Basin setting.

Each story subtly yet ruthlessly dissects assimilationist ideology, tracing its disruptive impact on language, moral codes, and personal psychology, as well as its divisive stratification along class, gender, and racial lines. Drawing on folktales, popular songs, and written Kreyol political satire from 19<sup>th</sup> Century Antillean authors, the stories also explore sites of resistance capable of repairing fractured psyches and reconstituting social factions into decolonizing alliances. As an example of how imagining alliances can bridge social divisions, though Damas was born into the Francophile mulatto elite based in Cayenne, he proudly claimed filial ties to French Guyana’s African maroons as well as the Amerindian communities who settled both coastal regions and the jungle interior of the colony; indeed, one of the most striking things about these stories is the value attached to African-Amerindian dialogue, and the nuanced picture of *négritude* that consequently emerges in stories that intermingle Ashanti and Carib folkloric characters.<sup>2</sup>

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1 I gratefully acknowledge support from the National Endowment for the Humanities that allowed me to spend time as a Scholar in Residence at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, where the Damas Papers are located.

2 Damas identifies the Maroon settlements in French Guyana as being Ashanti in origin and another story in the collection, “Pêche en eau trouble,” features Turtle, Firefly, and Tiger, all of whom are familiar characters in Ashanti folklore (on the Ashanti roots of Guyanese Maroons, see Damas, *Retour de Guyane* 25-27; for Ashanti folklore see Rattray, and Pelton 25-70). The figure of Tiger is pivotal, though, for projecting a cross-cultural Maroon-Carib articulation. For readings that locate Tiger as a totemic figure for Carib and other equatorial Amerindian groups, see Whitehead (ii, 182, 224 n. 11), Roth, *Inquiry into Animism* (143), and Métraux (155 ff.). For a Carib tale pitting Turtle against Tiger with a better outcome for Turtle, see Roth, “Introductory Study” (483-84). For an overview of Caribbean literary discourse on Amerindians, see Gannier, who includes a comment on Damas emphasizing “mixed” Maroon-Carib groups in the jungle interior (162). For an overview

Stylistically, Damas is well-known for the striking, percussive rhythms of his poetry emphasizing short lines, repeated phrases and images, and a piercing directness in his poems and his personality.<sup>3</sup> In the stories of *Veillées noires*, all of these qualities—compression, ironic humor, precise confrontation—are projected through the folktale form that provides the foundation for Damas's storytelling. While folklore collecting would have been a standard part of the field research that led to Damas's travelogue/ethnographic writing in his previous book, *Retour de Guyane*, several things make the methodology and genesis of *Veillées noires* unique.<sup>4</sup> First, Damas insists in his introduction that his contact with the folktales is in fact a *re-introduction* to cultural scenes familiar to him since childhood. Damas's status as a cultural insider is conveyed in the "ecstatic" sentiments expressed when he recalls the "merveilleuses veillées noires sur la rive de la lourde Mana, où je me sentais redevenir enfant en retrouvant les mêmes contes parmi le même puissant arôme de fleurs sauvages exaspérés par la nuit équatoriale" (10), and in his boundless reverence for the real-life source of the tales, an ancient woman storyteller named Tètèche. Simultaneously, the writing in *Veillées noires* places Damas outside the space of the folktale performance, through the use of literary French as a narrative vehicle for stories Damas claims were initially recited by Tètèche in "la dialectique sonore et nuancée du patois créole" (9).<sup>5</sup>

Another way in which the narratives collected in *Veillées noires* depart from ethnographic conventions is through their status as fiction. Scholars have generated innumerable books and lengthy journal articles containing transcriptions of tales provided to the researcher by an informant. This body of work is typified, for example, in the compendium of creation and animal tales from the Amazonian Chiriguano people published by the esteemed folklorist Alfred Métraux in 1932 (and cited above in note 2). Although Damas seems to situate his work in the same category when he writes of the tales that, "J'ai fait de mon mieux pour les transcrire, tandis que Tètèche parlait," (*Veillées noires* 12) in fact the stories in *Veillées noires* are imaginative re-creations that challenge the generic boundaries of folklore and are more properly characterized as literary texts. By introducing the vernacular-speaking Tètèche as narrator of the tales while opting to use standard French as the register for her storytelling voice, Damas effectively situates his folkloric content as modern and progressive rather than primitive, exotic, or vestigial, as the disciplinary imperatives of ethnology would have mandated.<sup>6</sup> In trending toward modernist literary expression and away from documentarian folklore, Damas resembles his

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of race and ethnicity in French Guyana, and an analysis of contemporary relations between Maroons, Amerindians, and the French state apparatus, see Collomb (206-210).

- 3 As African American jazz poet Jayne Cortez memorably expressed it: "Damas was very sharp, he was a sharp thinker, a real critical thinker, and he could put his finger on the pulse right away. He was a sharp, intense, humorous, confrontational brother all in one slice. [...] In all of our conversations when he commented on something or somebody, he sort of was able to go straight to the core of it and do it in two or three words, just like his poetry—rhythmic—and just like that with that curious gleam in his eye. He was very poetic, ironic, and precise" (quoted in Meehan 126).
- 4 The fact that Damas based his fiction on the folktale genre makes perfect sense in light of his connections to Paul Rivet, Marcel Mauss and Michel Leiris, who were, respectively, Damas's teachers and fellow student at the Institut d'Ethnologie in Paris. For more information and commentary on Damas's relationship to the ethnology movement of 1930s France, see Gyssels (46-48), Kesteloot (232), and Ojo-Ade (12-14, 17).
- 5 As a field researcher, Damas's intriguing insider-outsider position is comparable to the scenarios faced at precisely the same time by Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, Alejo Carpentier, and others. Hurston writes about her insider-outsider relationship to African American folklore in the opening paragraphs of *Mules and Men* (9), and her similar relationship to Caribbean culture in *Tell My Horse*, especially in the chapter "Women in the Caribbean" (326-30). See also Dunham's "Footnote on Going Native" in *Journey to Accompong* (51-52), and Paul B. Miller's analysis of the insider-outsider dynamic in works by Carpentier and René Maran (4-5).
- 6 The classic indictment of Western anthropology's tendency to deny coevalness to the societies it scrutinizes can be found in Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (31-35), but see also Thomas Ward's more recent characterization of this dynamic as "taking as a given the modernity of a West bent on studying the 'primitiveness' of other societies, judging them by a European timeline, not by their own" (97).

regional contemporaries Zora Neale Hurston, Lydia Cabrera, and the Haitian novelist Jacques Roumain (also a fellow classmate of Damas at the Institut d'Ethnologie).<sup>7</sup>

Standard French is also the language of empire, assimilation, and the *mission civilisatrice*, yet Damas' prose style is not a seamless flow of Parnassian French. In a linguistic analysis of Damas, Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux refers to an "immense souffle créole" that permeates his entire body of work ("Damas et ses langues" 117). Indeed, by loading the narrative of *Veillées noires* with song lyrics, aphorisms, riddles, repetitive phrases, and allusions to earlier Antillean writing in Kreyol, Damas employs three different levels of intertextuality to generate a flexible decolonizing literary vehicle drawing from a full spectrum of traditional as well as modern cultural forms.<sup>8</sup> To begin with, Damas invokes an obscure but extensive archive of printed Antillean texts in Kreyol. At one point in "Échec et mat," when two of his characters are having a contest of improvised performances, one of them, Kariakou (Gazelle), recites part of "Proclamation de Fondoc, Gouverneur de Guadeloupe et Dépendances," a text that parodies the authoritarian political and verbal style of a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century governor of Guadeloupe. In fact, this "speech" is taken verbatim from a 1890 volume, *Nos Créoles*, by Armand Corre, who is himself transcribing the text from an earlier satirical anticolonial piece published around 1860 by the Guadeloupean writer, Paul Baudot. While the original text by Baudot does a good job of ridiculing the French colonial regime—and uses Kreyol as the linguistic vehicle—Corre, who was a Paris-based medical doctor, sociologist and criminologist, reveals his pro-colonial orientation by translating the Kreyol into French and expressing extreme anti-black sentiments throughout *Nos Créoles*.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps because of these colonialist vibrations, Kariakou's interlocutor and the protagonist in Damas's story, Tortue, ultimately rejects the verbal style of the embedded speech in favor of improvised songs.

Tortue's preference for songs over politico-bureaucratic speech (and parodies of it) signals a second level of intertextuality that is created through repeated references to popular music. In "Échec et mat," the improv contests also feature musical performances, with the song lyrics presented in both French and Kreyol.<sup>10</sup> Sociologically, these songs are expressions of the white and mixed-race peasant population of "rudes travailleurs" celebrated by Damas in *Retour de Guyane* (75). While the lyrics transcribed in "Échec et mat" do not always have an overt anticolonial message, they are elements of what Damas describes as "un folklore d'une richesse incommensurable" (*Retour* 75) whose music and dance are derived "nettement de tradition africaine" (*ibid.*) and whose peasant animators

7 Though the reception of Damas's fiction remains limited, within that subfield there are numerous examinations that explore Damas's mediation of folkloric materials. While I discuss the Caribbean, African and global scope for the "feast in the sky" tale that provides a narrative kernel for "Échec et mat," this approach is not my primary focus in the present essay. Readers interested in this topic can consult Modenesi and Chevrier for further commentary on specific animal tales referenced in Damas's collection. Gyssels, "Lapin, Luciole," and Pestre de Almeida explore Damas's relation to modernist peers and postmodernist successors across the Americas who also engage folkloric content in their fiction.

8 "Damas et ses langues" by Hazaël-Massieux provides an indispensable guide to the different language forms on display in Damas's writing and traces the influence of Kreyols (particularly Guyanese and Martinican), regional French, and the highest level of academic and artistic French ("le français le plus élaboré" 126). Even while characterizing his prose as an example of carefully-written French in which "la part des sonorités et d'une éventuelle exploitation de l'oralité est très réduite" (133), she nevertheless concludes that Kreyol, in *Veillées noires*, "tient une place directe plus importante que dans les poèmes" (122).

9 Corre's prejudice seems to be part of a larger paranoia about the purported negative impact of overseas departments on the metropolitan French body politic. Evidence of this can be found in the following warning issued in *Nos Créoles*: "Français de la Métropole, j'ai à déplorer l'immixtion de l'élément colonial dans nos propres affaires, la prépondérance dangereuse que cet élément a conquise par l'intrigue, au sein du ministère de la marine et qu'il essaie d'acquiescer en d'autres ministères" (5-6).

10 See—and hear—for example, "Tant Sirop Est Doux," which is embedded toward the end of "Échec et mat" (132). A 30-second audio clip performed by Emilie George is available from Folkways Records at <https://folkways.si.edu/emilie-george/tant-sirop-est-doux/world/music/track/smithsonian>

Damas finds to be “naturels, spontanés et forts de cette simplicité” (*ibid.*). As in *Retour de Guyane*, the embedded song lyrics in “Échec et mat” carry an assumption that popular cultural activity exists outside of colonial authority and retains a strong element of autonomy.

If the first two types of intertextual references reflect, respectively, an anticolonial Béké elite and a French Guyanese peasant population, all of these references are framed and managed through a third level of intertextuality. This third level relates to the folkloric tales—known in French literary studies as “fables, contes et légendes”—that were conveyed to Damas as a child and to which he was reintroduced during his fieldwork research during the mid-1930s. While these three levels of intertextuality suggest how nuanced Damas’ approach is to understanding and articulating a multi-faceted decolonizing identity, it is worth restating that the matrix for this articulation, the tradition of oral tales and legends, is itself a plural mélange of African and Amerindian folklore, which supports the claims of recent scholars who have argued for the unique status of Damasian *négritude* as a fluid and dynamic concept when compared and contrasted with the more well-known ideas propounded by Senghor and Césaire.<sup>11</sup>

For the remainder of this essay, I want to examine more closely the first type of intertextuality, which is embodied in Damas’ reference to Baudot’s “Proclamation de Fondoc, Gouverneur de Guadeloupe et Dépendances.” As mentioned above, this is a written Kreyol text published originally by Baudot in 1860, then later by Corre in 1890 (when it was translated from Kreyol to French), published again in 1923 (in a slightly different French translation) as part of a volume of Baudot’s work edited by Maurice Martin, republished by Martin in a second edition in 1935, and finally re-issued in a 1980 reprint of Martin’s second edition to commemorate the “Année du Patrimoine” in Guadeloupe. To clarify the context for Damas’ invocation of Baudot’s text, we can begin by noting that “Échec et mat” is based in part on a popular tale of Tortue being carried aloft by birds then dropped back to earth in pain and humiliation. On the surface, this is a story told to children to explain the appearance of tortoise shells, which seem to have been pieced together from broken fragments. There are many written versions of the tale offered by authors ranging from the Creolist poet Gilbert Gratiant who was Damas’s instructor at the Lycée Schœlcher in Martinique, back through Haitian poet and politician Georges Sylvain earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marbot in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, La Fontaine in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and Aesop in the classical era. There are also traditional variants from India and West Africa, and in the Ibo version that is re-told in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (67-70), Turtle is male and the occasion for taking flight is his desire to attend a feast being given in heaven. This narrative thread, which is unique to the Ibo story, is incorporated prominently in Damas’s story, though Tortue is gendered female by Damas. A consistent element throughout all versions is Tortue’s identity as a verbal trickster and a malcontent, and while different versions of the tale provide different reasons for Turtle’s discontent, and draw different

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11 See in particular Wilder (151-57), F. Bart Miller (42) and Gyssels (“Damas et le mythe de l’Amérindien” 53-54) for discussions of Damasian *négritude* in comparative and contrastive relation to Césaire and Senghor. Gyssels has emphasized throughout her scholarship how Damas in fact remained ambivalent about the identity forms associated with the literary and political movement he helped to found, and maintained a consistent view of himself as someone with “three rivers running through his veins” (Gyssels, “Give me back my black dolls” 107). It is tempting to link Damas with more recent non-binarian identity concepts such as “métissage” (Glissant 250), “hybridity” (Bhabha 159-165), “liquid modernity” (Bauman 1-8), “performativity” (Butler 185-93), and “differential consciousness” (Sandoval 135-43, 181). This list could be broadened, but what I want to suggest is that Damas’s capacious approach to culture, identity and politics speaks for itself in its time and place. His praxis exemplifies the qualities of fluidity and multiplicity that define his work around race and decolonization and does not need to be justified through association with more well-known contemporary concepts. His work speaks as a prophetic articulation of what we could expect and indeed have seen in the decades since his death, and serves as a guide to how we might best envision ourselves and position ourselves in current struggles for individual and collective freedom, survival, and resilience.

moral lessons, it is easy to see how Tortue in “Échec et mat” works as a symbolic projection of Damas’s desire to vocalize his own anticolonial sentiments.<sup>12</sup>

In Damas’s retelling of the feast in the sky tale, Tortue arranges transportation with Vulture but is dropped and humiliated very quickly by the second page. The rest of the story, which is the longest one in *Veillées noires*, depicts Tortue claiming vengeance one by one on animals who had verbally or physically abused her. The recitation of Baudot’s parodic speech appears later in the story after Tortue has already violently dispatched several of these antagonists. The speech itself is a series of 23 paragraphs, each criticizing an aspect of colonial governance in Guadeloupe and suggesting how the speaker, Fondoc (a *porte-parole* pseudonym adopted frequently by Baudot), will resolve the problems now that he has been elevated to the governorship. Damas includes most of the speech, up to paragraph 16, in which Fondoc visits local schools where recently-emancipated adult students are learning to read and write. “Voyons; ils écrivent!” he proclaims, and goes on to note that their literacy training does not mean an end to cultivating the land:

Ça n’empêche pas de travailler la terre ; sans manioc, sans igname, sans café et sans sucre, adieu porcelaine. Il ne restera que les couis et pensez-y souvent : la première peine ici-bas, c’est d’avoir le ventre vide. (Baudot 103)<sup>13</sup>

To decipher this intertextual reference, we must first recognize the incredibly complex palimpsest it represents. On the surface, we have Damas’s 1943 reference to Baudot (though, again, it is a partial reference including only 16 of the original 23 paragraphs). One layer below this surface, so to speak, are two competing intermediary texts, one from 1923/1935 by Martin who re-printed and re-translated Baudot’s Kreyol original into French for publication in Guadeloupe, in a book titled *Œuvres Créoles*. The other is Corre’s 1890 volume, *Nos Créoles*, which offers the French translation preferred by Damas in his story.

12 The nature of Turtle’s transgression, punishment, and the resulting moral vary significantly from tale to tale. In the Indian and Greek/French version, Turtle simply wants to see the world from a bird’s eye viewpoint, and when he is dropped back to earth, the moral lesson is about being content with one’s lot. A variation on this has Turtle holding onto a stick carried aloft by two geese who warn him not to talk during the flight. When he opens his mouth to talk back to the geese or (in some versions) to people on the ground, disaster ensues, providing a cautionary tale about talking too much (Vogel 44-46). In the Ibo tale, when Turtle arrives at the feast in the sky, he tricks the birds and the host into letting him eat all the food. His feathers are stripped and his fall back to earth warns readers/listeners against gluttony. In Damas’s re-telling, we encounter the feast in the sky thread from the Ibo story, and read of Tortue’s frustrated efforts to reach Heaven until she is picked up by Vulture who is on his way to the party. When Vulture is halfway to Heaven, he drops Tortue purely out spite, which correlates more with the Indian/Greek/French version. The moral logic of “Échec et mat” is Damas’s original creation, though, because Tortue is not greedy, nor over-weening in her desire to join the party in Heaven. Instead, she is the victim of Vulture’s unwarranted treachery and this morality is reinforced by the detail that the Virgin Mary is the one who picks up the pieces of Tortue’s broken shell and puts them back together after her fall. The balance of the story traces Tortue’s successful efforts to triumph over animals who have slighted or threatened her.

13 Compare the original text from Baudot as given first by Martin and then Corre:

“...mais il faut que j’aïlle moi-même à l’école des marmailles, attraper ces grandes négresses et ces grandes nègres à barbes pour leur faire voir que savoir lire et écrire n’empêche pas de travailler la terre. Sans manioc, adieu la nourriture; sans café et sucre, adieu toile, madras, parasols, Cornichons! À la place d’assiettes en porcelaine, vous aurez des couis. La houe! La houe! habitants, convient à toutes les couleurs de peau; et, pensez-y bien: le premier chagrin des gens, est devoir le ventre vide” (Baudot 177).

“...mais il faut que j’aïlle aux écoles de ces marmailles, pour secouer ces grandes négresses, ces grands nègres à grande barbe. Voyons ; ils écrivent ! Ça n’empêche pas de travailler la terre ; sans manioc, pas d’igname ; sans café et sans sucre, adieu toiles, madras, parasols, cornichons; au lieu d’assiettes en porcelaine, il ne restera que les couis (calebasses servant de vaisselle). La houe ! La houe ! Habitants, elle convient aux peaux de toutes les couleurs, et songez-y bien, la première peine ici-bas, c’est d’avoir le ventre vide...” (Corre 292).

While Damas’ citation more closely approximates Corre’s translation of Baudot, it is clear that the version of Fondoc’s speech presented in “Échec et mat” has been re-fashioned, which strengthens the view that Damas is producing original creative writing rather than simple documentation of a folkloric archive.

Still further down in the layers of literary history contained in this passage, we find not only the original iteration in Kreyol by Baudot, but a related 1859 text that tells roughly the same story about the arrival of Gen. Frébault in Basse-Terre. Frébault, a hero in the French victory at the Battle of Solferino, and later an artillery commander in the Franco-Prussian War and senator for life in the French parliament, served as governor in Guadeloupe from 1859-1863. Baudot's Kreyol poem, "Récit par Fondoc à Fondagnant sur l'Arrivée du Gouverneur Frébault à Basse-Terre," memorializes this high government official as "autoritaire et juste" and one who greets the assembled crowd with "mille saluts pleins de grâce" (23). The terms here, which are respectful and suggestive of general public harmony (Baudot 22-28), stand in sharp contrast to the satirical "Proclamation" which ridicules the governor's discourse, loudly protests the social decay allowed to exist under colonial authority, and undermines that authority by peppering the speech with Rabelaisian obscenity. Every paragraph begins, "Zabitan foute!/Habitans, foutez!"<sup>14</sup>

Each layer of this palimpsest creates a different potential resonance for Damas's own intertextual use of Baudot's "Proclamation." Moving back through the different layers, we start with Baudot himself, who was a notary public, or "notaire," and scraped out a living in the lower rungs of the colonial bureaucracy for fifty-odd years (Martin x-xi).<sup>15</sup> The pseudonymously-voiced "Proclamation" allows him—via the narrative persona of Fondoc—more freedom to launch a critical commentary on that bureaucracy than would normally be possible.

For Corre, translating and republishing literary expression in written Kreyol allows him to extend research on cultural mores in the colonial periphery, something he was mostly interested in from the standpoint of criminology. As someone who built a career trying to analyze and contain perceived social pathologies in and from the French empire, Corre easily uses Baudot's text to help project a condescending idea of "Nos Créoles" living in a debased world where language is hobbled by mimicry. Though Kreyol has "ses interjections et diverses locutions propres," it is "souvent imitatives, à consonances redoublées" (261). Corre goes on to disparage Kreyol as a manifestation of supposed black inferiority in the following terms:

C'est un apport du nègre, qui remédie à la pauvreté des mots-idées fixes dans sa cervelle, par des exclamations ou de brèves figures, résumant toute une association de sentiments, coupant aussi trop fréquemment le discours, à tort et à travers, sans la moindre raison (*ibid.*).

Martin, writing in 1923/1935, has a more sympathetic rationale for retranslating and republishing this text. In his preface, Martin seems to be promoting a history of written literature in Kreyol as kind of soft cultural nationalism. Such writing, he claims, "aiderait certainement aujourd'hui à l'étude de notre patois et nous éclairerait sur les mœurs de différentes époques de notre histoire locale" (Martin ix). The implication that an imagined

14 The actual text in "Échec et mat," is a speech given by Kariakou in response to a request from Tortue that she "Récite-nous donc quelque chose, un morceau d'auteur étranger, de préférence" (Damas, *Veillées noires* 121). Kariakou begins reciting the proclamation addressed by Fondoc to his audience of "Habitants" in which he parodies the authoritarian pronouncements of a former governor (presumably Frébault). After comparing the text of *Veillées noires* with the two versions of Baudot's "Proclamation," it is clear Damas adheres more closely to Corre's French rendering of the original Kreyol. Where Martin translates the opening Kreyol phrase of the speech, "Zautes pas té ka coué moïn sré monté général" (Baudot 172), as "Vous ne croyiez pas je serais arrivé général" (Baudot 173), Corre renders it "Vous ne vouliez pas croire que je deviendrais général" (Corre 290), and this is closer to the wording that appears in Damas's tale: "vous ne vouliez pas croire qu'un jour je deviendrais Général" (Damas, *Veillées noires* 121). Where Martin retains the borderline obscenity, "Zabitan Foutez!" Corre sanitizes it to "Zabitan F...." while Damas excizes it completely, and gives readers simply the word, "Habitans." It is interesting to speculate why Damas, who was never one to hold his tongue, would have toned down this particular expression, but perhaps he was feeling the combined effect of life during wartime under Nazi occupation and his previous experiences of censorship.

15 For more on Baudot's contribution to Antillean writing in Kreyol, see Hazaël-Massieux (30-31, 162-183).

community of readers needs to embrace Guadeloupian cultural autonomy but within the French state apparatus is amplified in “Pourquoi Paul Baudot?” an essay published as a foreword to the 1980 re-issue of *Œuvres Créoles*. Writing for the Comité départemental de l’Année du Patrimoine, Edmund Bambuck endorses Baudot’s work as a solid example of “patrimoine littéraire” and describes his writing as “une œuvre créole susceptible de marquer un moment de la vie de notre pays, de ses traditions et de ses coutumes” (Bambuck i).

Damas’s own cultural politics do not align with any of the above figures, though he shares elements with each one. His interest in national liberation struggles encompasses the affirmation of Kreyol identity evident in Martin’s text but has more in common with Gratiant and other *Créolistes* for whom such a linguistic and literary tradition functions as a touchstone for political independence.<sup>16</sup> Damas was a staunch critic of the psychology of assimilation and a prophet of what later generations of anticolonial writers and activists including Fanon, Ngugi and others would refer to as “decolonizing the mind.” He saw his fiction as having a role to play in this process and specifically mentions directing his “contes-histoires” at young adults of Caribbean descent living in France and struggling with the psychological damages of assimilation. According to Damas in his introduction to *Veillées noires*,

Et c’est ainsi que ces contes me sont apparus comme la voix même de la Guyane, ma Terre natale.

Et j’ai voulu que Tètèche parlât aux petits et aux grands enfants d’Europe, comme elle parlait à ses enfants petits et grands de Là-Bas. (10-11)

His interest in diagnosing and remediating psycho-generative disorders among a target audience of imperfectly assimilated Antillean migrants ironically places Damas in a position of methodological kinship with Corre, albeit with diametrically opposed politics.<sup>17</sup> Though we have no information about which versions of Baudot were available to Damas, his grounding in social science theory and practice may help to explain why he would use Corre—a regular presenter at the Société d’anthropologie de Paris throughout the 1880s, 90s, and early 1900s—rather than Martin as his source text for a French translation of Baudot. Baudot’s original text, meanwhile, in itself fulfills some of Damas’ ideological objectives, and particularly resonates with the latter’s strident critique of French colonial administration, fueled by his experiences of censorship and underdevelopment in the colonies and ever-fewer opportunities for advancement in the colonial offices in Paris during the interwar period.<sup>18</sup>

As an artifact of written Kreyol literary discourse reiterated several times over in the decades between its original publication and Damas’s intertextual use of it in “Échec et mat,” Baudot’s “Proclamation de Fondoc” is fundamentally ambiguous. It can be used to advance the aims of soft cultural nationalists like Martin and Bambuck, and can even be

16 See Schnepel for a comprehensive discussion of how Kreyol language politics have evolved across five centuries in the Caribbean and, particularly in Guadeloupe, how the quest to create, document, and popularize Kreyol literature has functioned as an aspect of nationalist / *indépendantiste* culture (20-34, 81-85, 207-213).

17 Although Damas is operating in disciplinary social space that is remarkably similar to Corre’s, several things mark the difference between Damas’s decolonizing aims and the ultra-colonialist nature of Corre’s work as a social scientist and translator. Where Corre imagines his mission is to protect the metropole against “l’immixtion de l’élément colonial dans nos propres affaires,” Damas is concerned with improving the mental health of colonized citizens, offering his stories as a remedy against the psychology of assimilation. In addition to these different imagined audiences and different ideas about the potential impact of written words, Damas clearly has a more positive, well-informed view of Kreyol than Corre. Where Corre, as we saw above, sees Kreyol as a dysfunctional language “sans la moindre raison,” Damas claims in his introduction to *Veillées noires*, “J’ai essayé de respecter, encourageant le risque d’être parfois obscure, la tradition orale des pays créoles au langage d’une subtilité souvent déconcertante” (11).

18 On the professional experiences of Antilleans and other colonial citizens in the French state bureaucracy, see Wilder 217-232.



compatible with imperialist disdain for the colonized as expressed by Corre. In a similar way, Damas himself occupies an existentially ambiguous place, having been trained and enabled to operate within the very circuits of colonialist discourses and practices—ethnology, literary publishing in French—that his writing is designed to resist and dismantle. Given this textual and situational ambiguity, Damas deploys several other types of intertextuality, other citations to other cultural practices that compete with and ultimately stage and control his use of written Antillean literature in Kreyol. Writing in Kreyol has its place in an anticolonialist polemic, indeed, but more important, and more reliable is the body of oral tradition, the “contes, légendes et fables” that serve as the organizing matrix of Damas literary production in *Veillées noires*.

*University of Central Florida*

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