D'lo d'Amérik – Elixir from America. Translators' Note[1]

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Abstract

Our translation note reads as a commentary on our collaborative translation into English of the short story '*D'lo d'Amérik*. Elixir from America' by Martinican writer and poet Roger Parsemain. This note allows us to present some of our translation choices, particularly with a view to preserving and bringing to the surface of the target text elements of *kréyòl Matinik* that are sometimes latent, sometimes explicit in the source text. It also gives us an opportunity to situate the act of translation in multilingual spaces, calling for more horizontal flows, such as South-South and transoceanic flows.

Dans cette note de traduction écrite à quatre mains, nous commentons notre traduction collaborative vers l'anglais de la nouvelle « *L'Eau d'Amérique. D'lo d'Amérik* » de l'écrivain et poète martiniquais Roger Parsemain. Cette note nous permet de présenter certains de nos choix de traduction, en particulier dans un optique de préserver et faire réémerger le kréyòl Matinik parfois latent dans le texte-source pour le lecteur cible. La note nous permet également d'inscrire le geste traduisant dans des espaces multilingues, appelant à des flux horizontaux, de type sud-sud, et transocéaniques.

Keywords

Collaborative translation, Creoles, transoceanic connections, horizontal flows, multilingualism
Traduction collaborative, créoles, connexions transocéaniques, horizontalité, multilinguisme

Given the polyphonic realities of postcolonial (literary) ecosystems such as the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, translating literature from those spaces always entails working at the intersection of several languages and beyond a normative, monolingual understanding of languages. This includes translating literature seemingly produced in "one" so-called "major" language – French – into "another" – English. Roger Parsemain's collection of short stories, *Les Campêches s'ennuient* (Le Gosier: Long Cours, 2021) is a case in point. Although written mainly in French, Parsemain's short stories feature a number of expressions in Martinican Creole (*kréyòl Matinik*), all italicized in the original text, as well as cultural and linguistic elements that anchor the French used by the author in Caribbean realities. This is especially true of "L'Eau d'Amérique. *D'lo d'Amérik*", a short story set in 1930, in Le François – Parsemain's hometown located on the east coast of Martinique – where Lambert, the young narrator and the grandson of Mait' Montout, becomes privy to the machinations of two older men: *Pè Farné*, the owner of the pharmacy where the young man works as an apprentice, and a master *quimboiseur*, a sorcerer and healer in the Antilles.

"L'Eau d'Amérique. *D'lo d'Amérik*" features expressions and dialogue in *kréyòl Matinik*, but also includes many French words that have a particular resonance and meaning in the Caribbean. As translators, it was very important for us to retain those references in the English version and not to try to replace them with equivalents, as we feel that this strategy would erase Martinican cultural and linguistic specificities. One word that comes to mind is "boucan" (p. 33), which, in the context of the short story, refers to a wooden frame on which meat is roasted or smoked over fire. In our English translation for *Alizés*, we decided to keep the French word "boucan", as we felt that English readers familiar with La Réunion and the Indian Ocean would be familiar with the cooking technique given the importance of *boucané* dishes in Creole cuisine. We similarly decided to retain "*faitnoir*" (p. 35) as it was spelled in Parsemain's original to create transoceanic echoes between Martinique and La Réunion, where "fénoir"

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similarly refers to darkness. We adopted a similar strategy for three other terms in the short story – "dorlis", "*menntô*" and "*isalop*" – two of which featured in a glossary provided in the French edition.[2] For English readers not familiar with Creole realities from either Martinique or La Réunion, we decided to provide optional endnotes, which have been placed at the end of the translation, but which would ideally be added as a stand-alone appendix to the text that would not necessarily be physically bound to it.[3] The reader can then decide whether they want – or need – to find out more about the terms explained in the notes. This type of material could also be used in a classroom setting to help determine whether, in a multilingual, Creole/French teaching environment like that of La Réunion, learners feel that paratext – taking the form of endnotes explaining Caribbean realities, in this particular case – is useful or not. Students of English, Creole and French at university level could work together on alternative translations, which could lead to interdisciplinary creative workshops with professional translators, taking the form of translation slams or activities like translation competitions, for example, that would generate group work and could also lead to peer-to-peer assessment, as jury members would include students from other classes.[4]

In other instances in the text, however, we felt that immediate English translations of entire Creole phrases would help English-speaking readers who may not be familiar with French – let alone with a French-based Creole like *kréyòl Matinik* – better understand the plot. Such phrases appear sporadically in the short story, including in the dialogues. Examples include the passages "Days at the pharmacy are long. *Sé avan soley jis apré soley. From before sunrise till after sunset*." and "I don't listen to the words of Pè Montout and Pè Rénor because the gang keeps its distance: *Timanmay pa ka kouté conversasion gran moun*. *Children shouldn't listen to adult conversation*." Although words like "timanmay" and "gran moun" might resonate with English speakers familiar with La Réunion, entire sentences written in Creole might not be as easily grasped by readers, unless they are proficient – and used to reading, one might add – in Creole. We therefore sought to take these realities into account when considering the various reading profiles across different French and English-speaking contexts, especially since recent issues of *Alizés* have been published in Open Access and are now accessible worldwide.[5]

Equally important for us was to help bring back to the surface Creole words and expressions that we felt were latent in the original, but central to the plot and to the author's voice. This is why we opted, for example, to translate "l'eau rouge", which appears in the final section of the short story, as "*d'lo rouj*" while indicating that this was a reference to eosin:

> His despair suddenly dies down. Silence follows, replaced by the clinking of glass. My ears locate his hands on the shelf where the antiseptic, the eosin solution – *d'lo rouj* –, the arnica tincture, iodine bottles, ether and non-reduced alcohol are stored.

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[2] "Dorlis" and "isalop" were explained as follows in the French edition: "Dorlis: incube. Le *dorlis*, par des procédés maléfiques, pénètre dans les maisons pour abuser des femmes la nuit, pendant leur sommeil. " "Isalop: enfant de salope, assimilable à l'espagnol *hijo de puta*. L'*i* du mot viendrait de *hijo*, enfant." Voir Roger Parsemain, *Les Campêches* s'ennuient (Le Gosier: Long Cours éditions, p. 234-325).

[3] This idea was inspired by the digital glossary that was provided by Éditions Zulma on their website for the first French edition of Nii Ayikwei Parkes's *Tail of the Blue Bird*, translated by Sika Fakambi under the title *Notre quelque part* (Paris: Zulma, 2014). It appears that this glossary is no longer available on the publisher's website. https://www.zulma.fr/livre/notre-quelque-part/ [consulted 20 June 2025].

[4] For further thoughts on teaching Caribbean literature and translation from a transoceanic perspective and in the Indian Ocean more specifically, see Laëtitia Saint-Loubert, "'Cari-beans': Teaching Caribbean Literature in the Indian Ocean", *Sargasso – Transforming Pedagogy: Practice, Policy, & Resistance* (2018–2019, 1 & 2), Katherine Miranda (dir.), 47–69, and Savrina Chinien & Laëtitia Saint-Loubert, "Pedagogical Passages: from Dublin to Saint Augustine", *Irish Journal of French Studies*, special issue on "Passages", dir. Charlotte Berkery & Laëtitia Saint-Loubert, vol. 24, 2025 (forthcoming).

[5] The journal's editorial line can be accessed here: https://alizes.univ-reunion.fr/74 [consulted 20 June 2025].

Here, translation served as a site of revelation, as a latent Creole reference in the original French was brought back to the surface of the text in the target language, English. Our aim, through such choices, was not only to destabilize French and English as monolithic linguistic realities, but also to complexify the French-Creole nexus, as the expression in *kréyòl Matinik* would travel beyond its original ecosystem and its relationship to French and the metropolis. Our collaboration with the author was crucial in this regard, as it gave us invaluable insights into the genesis of the text and provided us with a unique opportunity to clarify our interpretation of the original, but also to get a deeper understanding of Le François and its history, particularly in relation to sugarcane.[6] The following passage comes to mind:

> Pè Farné penche la tête d'un air entendu et, sans un mot, il disparaît dans la petite pièce. Tertullien a gagné la porte. Il installe sa patience sur le seuil. Son œil, sa tête, suivent le réveil du bourg avec les femmes vers la messe d'aube, les ouvriers de l'usine libérés du quart de nuit, la charrette de Joseph *À tout' bèt*. (p. 40)

One of the elements for which we needed clarification in this passage was the expression "quart de nuit", as we weren't sure whether this referred to the night shift and the "trois huit" in French. The author confirmed our intuition, but also added information about the decline of the sugarcane industry in Martinique: "de 21h à 6h du matin. Les usines à sucre faisaient les 3/8 durant la récolte, de février à juin. En 1949, il y avait 14 usines à sucre… Depuis plus de 40 ans, il n'en reste qu'une seule : Le Galion, à Trinité…". This exchange with the author led to the following translation, in turn:

> Pè Farné tilts his head with a knowing look and disappears into the small room without a word. Tertullien has reached the door. He waits patiently on the threshold. He turns his eyes, his head, watching the village waking up, the women going to dawn mass, the factory workers liberated from their night shift, and Joseph's horse-drawn cart.[7]

Our own collaboration, as an English native-speaker living in Scotland and a French native-speaker living in Ireland when this project started in 2021, also brought about its own set of challenges and rewards. Neither of us had been to Martinique at that point, and although we had various opportunities to send questions to the author who generously answered them, some elements of the text still eluded us. Not necessarily because they were Creole realities we were not familiar with – most of these had been clarified by the author – but because, in some instances, we had some difficulties visualizing the exact location of a scene, as in the extract that follows:

> La nuit se dissout sans hâte dans le bourg quand j'arrive par le **corridor**. J'entends le pharmacien déjà à sa sonnaille de fioles. Le clapot de sandales s'éloigne vers la boutique fermée, revient et s'arrête au pied de l'escalier. Pè Farné pétaille après ses filles rétives au réveil et taloche un ordre à la servante en bousculade de vaisselle et casseroles dans la cuisine.

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[6] We first got in touch with Roger Parsemain via email in October 2021. This was followed by a Zoom conversation a few weeks later for which we had sent the author a list of questions to which he replied during our exchange. As all aspects of the text could not be covered during our exchange, the author kindly submitted written answers to our remaining questions later on.

[7] The phrase "*À tout' bèt*" comes again later on in the same paragraph, this time in the longer Creole expression "*À tout' bèt*, *dlo dan zié!*" which is where we chose to provide an English gloss. We felt that the earlier sentence, where the phrase first occurs in reference to Joseph's cart, was already quite long and we wanted to preserve its flow.

> Sans attendre, je prépare le foyer, la marmite et me rive au supplice. Cela dure un siècle.
>
> Au haut du mur, une première touche de soleil flatte un bout de tôle. Ça y est. Pè Farné surgit dans la cour et son œil s'allume. (p. 35-36, our emphasis)

Although we intuited that the "corridor" mentioned in the extract was a passageway rather than an indoor hallway given that the narrator is positioned outside, by the fire, it was only through a tour of Le François with the author in the winter of 2021, during a research visit to Martinique, that this "passage" – the term we chose in English to translate "corridor" – became a tangible reality that anchored our translation experience. This embodied experience of translation served as a powerful reminder of the origins of our friendship, born through and in translation many years ago, when we were both exchange students in Germany. Back then, our language of communication was neither French nor English – our so-called "native languages" – but German, the language of the culture we were physically and emotionally immersed in at the time. In hindsight, we would say that this formative experience has deeply nurtured our understanding of translation as a unique space for mutual reflection, creativity and mediation, a space in which we "feel both at home and yet unhomed"[8]. Translating Caribbean and Indian Ocean literature together, yet away from the main publishing circuits of our respective countries of birth and their supposed literary capitals – London and Paris – has been our way of celebrating the joys of creolization experienced through translation, while also affirming that a decentred approach is essential in fostering fairer, more horizontal and truly transoceanic exchanges.

[8] Karen Fleetwood and Laëtitia Saint-Loubert, "Translators' Note", in Gaëlle Bélem, *There's a Monster Behind the Door*, trans. K. Fleetwood & L. Saint-Loubert (Sligo: Bullaun Press, 2024), p. v.