

CREOLE DRUM
TANBOU KRÈYOL

by GEORGES CASTERA
translated from the Haitian Creole by AMANDA PERRY

GEORGES CASTERA
(1936–) was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and writes poetry in French, Haitian Creole, and Spanish. Castera is widely recognized as one of the founders of modern Creole poetry, combining oral rhythms with unpredictable imagery and semantic ambiguity.

TANBOU KRÉYOL

(Powèm pou 4 podyòl ak 2 wòch)

Tanbou mache di
sa m pa ka pote
m a kapote l
Sa m pa ka
sa m pa ka
m a ka

trakatap katap ka
trakatap katap ka

GOUDOU GOUDOU GOUDOU

Plop
Plop
Plop

Plop
Plop
Plop

Gen tanbou
se ak zo mò pou bat yo
pou bri a sèk, rèk
Aprè ou bat vant yo
Pou fê yo pale

CREOLE DRUM

(Poem for two mouths and two stones)

Drums marching say
what I can't carry
I'll overthrow
What I can't
what I can't
when I can

trakatap katap kan
trakatap katap kan

1. The onomatopoeic *goudou goudou* would later be used to refer to the 2010 Haitian earthquake.

RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE¹

Plop

Plop

Plop

Plop

Plop

Plop

There are drums
you beat with the bones of the dead
for a dry rough sound
after you beat their bellies
to make them speak

GOUDOU GOUDOU GOUDOU

Plop

Plop

Plop

Pou fê yo pale
pou nèg isit nèg lòtbò
sispann lage chèy pay
anba sab lanmè

trakatap katap ka

m a ka
sa m pa ka
sa m pa ka
ma ka pote l
sa m pa kapote l

Tanbou m bat la
Tanbou m bat la
w a karase l ak men ou
w a karese l ak kò w
Mo kreyòl yo se tanbou m
Tanbou m bat la rèk
Tanbou m bat la sèk

RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE

Plop

Plop

Plop

2. *Nèg* in the original, derived from the French *nègre* but usually a generic word for “man” in Haitian Creole. *Blan*, meanwhile, from the French *blanc*, or “white,” refers to foreigners of any race, including those of African descent.

To make them speak
so men² here men elsewhere
stop dropping straw chairs
on the sea’s sand

trakatap katap kan

when I can
what I can’t
what I can’t
I’ll carry
what I can’t overthrow

My drum beats there
My drum beats there
you caress it with your hand
you caress it with your body
These creole words are my drum
The drum I beat rough
The drum I beat dry

Tanbou yo mache di
san timoun san granmoun
depi anwo jouk anba

San timoun, san granmoun
tout lajè tout longè
tout lajè lan lari aklè

Se yon lame fizi atè
ki pa veye frontyè
ki pa veye lanmè
Se yon lame san lonnè
Se yon lame peyè
san peyi
k ap gaspiye yon divitial
rafal katafal bal
pou fê moun pè
Se yon lame pèpè
lòt lame abiye dezabiye
a klè.

Tambou mache di
sa m pa kapote
w a ka pote l
w a kapote l
si m pa ka pote l
sa m pa ka
sa m pa ka

The drums marching say
blood of the young, blood of the old
from above to below

blood of the young, blood of the old
all widths all lengths
all seen spilt in streets

It's an army that grounds their rifles
that doesn't guard borders
that doesn't guard oceans
It's an army without honor
It's an army paid
without patriots
that's wasting en masse
bullets in bursts and blasts
to make people afraid
It's an army with clothing made
for another army that dresses and undresses it
in plain sight.

Drums marching say
what I can't overthrow
you can carry
you'll overthrow
if I can't carry
what I can't
what I can't

w a ka
trakatap katap ka

Gagòt fwonmi sou zo mò se sa nou wè

Nou wè yon lame an plizyè mòso
Nou wè soufrans malere
Nan tout tobout atoufè
Nou wè testaman ekri pale mete la
Nou wè tout chèf
ak konsyans ti bebe
Tout chèf ki t ap di lanmò
bon apeti manje byen toufonnen
trakatap katap ka
pilonnen fouke anfrajele anvyole
yo tout ap kouri
ki abiye
ki toutouni
lan yon bann batonis zo kase
je pete
 blidip blidap
rantre la rete la

Plop

 Plop

 Plop

you can
trakatap katap kan

What we see is an ant nest beneath dead bones

We see an army in many pieces
We see needy suffering
in all desperate depths
We see testaments written spoken set aside
We see all leaders
with an infant's awareness
All leaders who were yelling death
bon appetit stuff yourselves full
trakatap katap kan
shelling, seizing, whipping, raping
they are all running
the clothed
the naked
in a tumult of batons and broken bones
burst eyes
 blidip blidap
go back there stay there

Plop

 Plop

 Plop

Tanbou pran tanbou bay
Sa w pran se pa w

pa w

trakatap katap ka
trakatap katap ka

m a ka
sa m pa ka
sa m pa ka
m a ka
m a kapote l

Drums take drums give
What you take is for you

for you

trakatap katap kan
trakatap katap kan

when I can
what I can't
what I can't
when I can
I'll overthrow

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: "Tanbou Kreyòl" appeared in *Rèl* in 1995, four years after a military coup ousted populist president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Though the U.S. would facilitate Aristide's return to power in 1994, the coup remains widely perceived by Haitians and Haitian Americans as supported by the CIA, part of a long history of American intervention on the island and in the hemisphere. The army that Castera decries in "Tanbou Kreyòl" is most immediately that of the coup regime, but the critique has broader relevance for a military organization that, since its reestablishment under the U.S. Occupation of 1916 to 1934, has only engaged in operations against its own people.

The poem combines its attack on corruption and state violence with a call for mass mobilization within Haiti and among the diaspora. The crux of the poem is its intensely onomatopoeic refrain, which puns on *ka pote*, meaning "to be able to bear, or to carry," and

kapote, meaning "to overthrow." How much can one bear, Castera asks, before the only option is to overthrow the existing system? With the same consonants repeated in the line "trakatap katap ka," the refrain further invokes drum beats, underlining the rich symbolic weight of an instrument central to both contemporary and historical Haitian life. The drum is omnipresent in contemporary Haitian music as well as cultural and religious events, but it is also associated with resistance to slavery, as drums were used by slaves to communicate between plantations and organize revolts.

In this piece, Castera makes excellent use of Creole's capacity for contraction, dropping articles, conjunctions, and genitives to create a work that is at once semantically dense and sonically explosive. The poem's phonetic complexity makes it especially challenging to translate, with nearly every line marked by internal rhyme, alliteration, or ono-

matopoeia. Despite less overlap in vocabulary, English is perhaps better suited than French to capture these qualities thanks to its more flexible grammatical structures.

For the translation, I made choices based on sound wherever possible without unduly distorting the meaning. Thus, while the multiple rhymes of a line like “gaspiye yon divital/rafal katafal bal” cannot be directly rendered in English, I translated it as “wasting en masse/bullets in bursts and blasts,” combining assonance, slant rhyme, and alliteration to give an impression of the original.

“Tanbou Kreyòl” has been anthologized and translated into French, while Rodney St-Éloi and Maximilien Laroche argue in extensive close readings that the poem is a milestone in the development of Creole poetry. This translation is among the first to give Anglophone readers access to Castera’s work.

—Amanda Perry

AMANDA PERRY is completing a PhD at New York University on Caribbean literature in English, French, and Spanish. Her current project focuses on reframing the Cuban Revolution as a Caribbean event.