

# Papiamentu-Strategies and Négritude in Curaçao: Cola Debrot and Frank Martinus Arion

*Papiamento-Estrategias y Négritude en Curazao:  
Cola Debrot y Frank Martinus Arion*

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## ABSTRACT

Using a comparative approach, this essay explores the life and the work of Cola Debrot and Frank Martinus Arion, two classical writers from Curaçao, an island that is part of the Netherlands Antilles. These authors are usually studied separately, because of their different social backgrounds. However, in their own opinion, they encounter one another in their own culture, within an Antillean mentality, characterized by speaking Papiamentu, as well as the philosophical foundation of Unamuno's existentialism. As a result of this combination, this particular Antillean culture always refers to African heritage as one that is equally important as the legacies from other countries or continents.

**Keywords:** Curaçao; Négritude; Papiamentu; Antillean Mentality; Unamuno's Existencialism.

## RESUMEN

Por medio de una aproximación comparativa, este ensayo explora la vida y la obra de Cola Debrot y Frank Martinus Arion, dos autores clásicos de Curazao, una isla que forma parte de las Antillas Neerlandesas. En general, los estudios sobre estos autores les tratan por separado, debido a la diferencia de sus orígenes sociales. Sin embargo, de acuerdo con ellos mismos, en su propia cultura se encuentran mutuamente en el contexto de una mentalidad antillana, caracterizada por hablar papiamentu así como por su filosofía existencialista unamuniana.

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Como resultado de esta combinación, esta particular cultura antillana siempre refiere a su herencia africana, tan importante como las herencias de otros países o continentes.

**Palabras clave:** Curazao; Négritude; Papiamentu; mentalidad antillana; existencialismo de Unamuno.

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Cola Debrot (1902-1981) and Frank Martinus Arion (1936-2016) were both born in the former Dutch West Indies.<sup>2</sup> This territory was comprised of six islands: Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao (the ABC, or Windward islands), St. Maarten, Saba and St. Eustatius (the SSS, or Leeward islands), and Suriname, or Dutch Guyana. One of their most notable cultural distinctions is that the ABC Islands have a specific creole language of their own: Papiamentu/o.<sup>3</sup> A creole English is spoken on the northern islands, and in Suriname the language is Sranan.

The Dutch West Indies became a semi-autonomous region in 1954, and the islands were called the Dutch or Netherlands Antilles. Aruba became a separate, autonomous constituent nation in 1986 and Suriname, an independent republic, in 1975. In 2010, the other islands separated and reorganized: Curaçao and St. Maarten became autonomous constituent nations, while Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and Saba became special municipalities of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Curaçao has been the most important of these islands because of the central location of its bay, a “free harbor,” accessible to ships of all nationalities since 1675 (Allen), and a center for illegal (slave) trade with Latin America. Debrot and Arion lived in the capital, Willemstad, and both show keen awareness of the effects of the new economy of the multinational oil industry which began in the twentieth century. Curaçao has long been a governmental center and, because of the constant flux of Africans during the colonial era,

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<sup>2</sup> This Anglophone expression is still in use. The extraordinary professorship at the University of Amsterdam (VU) is characterized as a professorship in contemporary West-Indian Literature. There is also a website, organized by the Society of Dutch Literature (Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde) in Leiden: <https://werkgroepcaraibischeletteren.nl>

<sup>3</sup> This creole language is known as Papiamentu in Aruba, and Papiamentu in Curaçao and Bonaire.

hierarchies reflecting the economies of the slave plantation were explicitly established.

These changes of political status show that over the years, both Debrot and Arion adapted to several different political structures. Today they are both recognized as classical authors of Dutch Antillean literature, very much involved in different stages of anti and post-colonialism and emancipation. In this paper, I will begin by giving a brief overview of their lives and work. I will then focus on their relationship with Papiamentu culture and the *négritude* movement, as well as their impact. Finally, I will explore their connection with literature in other languages.

### **Cola Debrot**

Cola (Nicolaas) Debrot was born in Bonaire but studied in Curaçao. He came from a family of landowners. His father's last name, Debrot, originated in the francophone section of Switzerland; his mother's (Nouel) had connections with Venezuela and the Dominican Republic. As a child, Debrot used to visit his family in Caracas and was brought up in a multi-lingual environment: Papiamentu was his daily language; Spanish was his mother's tongue; and his education was entirely in Dutch.

In 1916 Debrot went to the Netherlands to study. Living in Utrecht and Amsterdam, he studied law and medicine, participating in the artistic and literary avant-garde, which, at that time, was strongly oriented toward Paris. His first short novel, *De Mapen* (1933), did not attract much attention, although it is a striking reflection on cognitive intelligence. The "mapen", half-men half-ape, are bred in a Soviet laboratory, and are the victors of the Russian revolution. Debrot states, "Caliban has a new master—get a new man!" and he judges this "new" situation at the end: "... through a rain that pelts down on the Tverskaya as well as on the Leidsestraat. For the rain it raineth every day" (48).

Rain, of course, and Dutch rain in particular, creates an atmosphere of melancholy in contrast to the heavy rain showers in the tropics. Debrot's composition of this sentence in English within his Dutch text might have been related to the California dancer, Estelle Reed, with whom he lived at the end of the 1920s and who later became his wife. His creation of the character Caliban,

conceptualized long before any other Caribbean author wrote of “Caliban” as the rebellious subaltern and ex-slave, represents the oppressed worker who is so manipulated that he becomes a brainless hybrid in a totalitarian regime.

Debrot continued writing and published *My Black Sister* (*Mijn zuster de negerin*, 1934/35) also in the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> This short novel, which predated Aimé Césaire’s *Retour au pays natal* (1939), was deeply influenced by his critical attitude toward upcoming National Socialism in Germany. This example of *négritude*, in Dutch, describes the return of a Caribbean landowner’s son from the Netherlands to his Caribbean island, where he falls in love with a black woman who turns out to be his half-sister.<sup>5</sup> Without ever having read *Cecilia Valdés* (1882), the famous novel by the Cuban author Cirilo Villaverde concerning incest in slave society, here Debrot touches upon this public taboo: in slave society, incest is quite common, resulting in a series of illegal and not completely “white” offspring, often creating very complicated situations. These narratives brought him harsh criticism in Curaçao, where people identified the plot of the narrative with Debrot’s own family background. In the special issue of *Callaloo*, in her function as a guest editor, Hilda van Neck-Yoder writes in her introduction: “In his brilliant novella, Debrot, himself, violated the colonial code of silence, the code of male and white loyalty” (442) and “this violation frames the ‘Dutch Caribbean poetics [...] to speak the unspeakable, a Creole poetics in which the colonized emerge as protagonists” (442-443).

In the following years, Debrot continued publishing short novels and, in 1942, he published a short story, *De non van Estupendo* (The Nun from Estupendo), situated in Venezuela. He pursued this focus further while working on his novel *Bewolkt bestaan* (Cloudy Existence, 1946), in which his characters live in Paris, Guadeloupe, New York, Amsterdam, Curaçao, and Caracas.<sup>6</sup>

During World War II, Debrot lived in Amsterdam, where he had a private medical practice. After returning to Curaçao in 1948, he continued in the same

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<sup>4</sup> Here I am using the translation of the title that Olga Elaine Rojer and Joseph O. Aimone used in the literary magazine *Callaloo* in 1998. They wrote: “Our translation is heavily in debt to the 1958 translation to English by Estelle Reed-Debrot, which appeared in the *Antilliaanse Cahiers*. We would like to thank Mrs. Debrot for her support and encouragement, and hope that in this new English translation the original intent and lyric beauty of Cola Debrot’s novella is made even more immediate” (*My Black Sister* 604).

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, the concept of *négritude* signifies a general awareness in Caribbean literature of the African presence and heritage in their multiple cultures.

<sup>6</sup> He began writing this novel in 1937, publishing just one chapter, “Op Guadeloupe,” and working on the manuscript throughout the following years.

profession in Willemstad and became involved in politics. He was in touch with the most important political leaders of the time, including Dr. Moisés da Costa Gomez of Jewish descent, founder of the new political party NVP (National People's Party). This "dotoor," as he was called, was a representative of the less educated, exclusively Papiamentu-speaking population, characterizing himself as a "Latino." This friendship also led Debrot to write about politics (which he did only once), and to make changes in his writing style. In *My Black Sister*, he describes the local dialect on the island as "Negropatois," a language spoken in daily communication because most islanders do not speak Dutch. Subsequently, under the pseudonym Chandi Lagun, he published *Camindi' Cruz* (1948), a dialogue in Papiamentu between two men, each a member of a different political party.<sup>7</sup> This meeting at a crossroads reflects the political mentality of the working people but, although they mostly disagree, the two remain "on speaking terms" at the end.

Debrot was also one of the founders of the Cultural Centrum Curaçao (CCC) and his cultural and political engagement brought him to The Hague as the General Representative of the Netherlands Antilles in 1951. Four years later he was appointed Director of the Cabinet of the Plenipotentiary Minister (Gevolmachtigd Minister) of the Netherlands Antilles, during which time he founded the magazine *Antilliaanse Cahiers* (1955-1967, 5 volumes), which focused on Antillean culture. He also participated in the organization of international conferences, such as those of UNESCO; and, in June, 1956, he traveled to Switzerland to take part in the 39th annual conference of the ILO (International Labour Organization). At that time, Debrot wrote *Dagboekbladen uit Genève* (1957), a diary with nineteen entries from June 3-28, in which he documents the meetings of the organizations, the differences among the representatives at the conference, and his personal interests in Geneva. Four years later, Debrot was appointed Governor of the Netherlands Antilles and returned to Curaçao with his family.

In his absence, however, many things had changed. The refineries had expanded their activities considerably after World War II and attracted many

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<sup>7</sup> Later, Jules de Palm translated this dialogue into Dutch under the title "De tweesprong."

workers from other, mainly English-speaking, Caribbean islands. It was easier for them to obtain employment with the multinational companies because they spoke English, while the local workers knew only Papiamentu and some elementary Spanish.<sup>8</sup> Tensions increased, exploding on May 30, 1969, a date as legendary in the social history of the island as August 17, 1795, when Tula led a slave rebellion in those times of pan-Caribbean protest against slavery (Phaf-Rheinberger 2008).

In the context of this May revolt, the workers' union planned a general strike. Governor Debrot agreed to receive a union delegation in his residence to negotiate. The photograph taken of this meeting on September 12, 1969 is historic. It shows Wilson Godet and Amador Nita (President and General Secretary, respectively, of the Antillean Harbor Workers Union, AHU), with Stanley Brown (a teacher and publicist) standing next to Debrot. Their dress reveals the social distance: Debrot is in a formal suit, looking like a "white" official, while the style of the darker skinned "others" is reminiscent of that of Fidel Castro. It was later claimed that this meeting secured social peace on the island, because the union leaders negotiated with the government instead of calling for a general strike, which most certainly would have had a different outcome.

Notwithstanding the strike's avoidance, the upper ten percent of the Curaçao population was enraged. They had always considered Debrot to be one of them because he came from a *blanku* planters' family. Now, however, he was negotiating with the rebels who lacked social standing! Their general rejection was so profound that many of Debrot's colleagues and friends did not attend his farewell reception shortly afterwards—a serious affront. After this personal debacle, Debrot, whose retirement date was already set before that legendary May Day, left Curaçao for the Netherlands and fell into a deep depression, from which he recovered with considerable difficulty. He never returned to Curaçao, and concentrated on his literary work, most of which was published posthumously.

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<sup>8</sup> Papiamentu-speakers can easily communicate in Spanish, but their differences in pronunciation and grammar are apparent.

### **Frank Martinus Arion**

Frank Martinus Arion, born in Willemstad, has a different, “Black” background. His father was a well-known politician in the NVP and his son’s second last name was instantly associated with that activity. Later, as a writer of fiction, this association lost its relevance and was even largely unknown in the Netherlands. As a linguist, and to distinguish among his contributions in various genres, Arion often published under the name of Frank Efraim Martinus, or Frank Martinus.

Being quite a brilliant scholar and frequently publishing in academic journals, he went to the Netherlands in 1955 to study Dutch literature. Arion first visited the night school “Noctua” in The Hague to obtain the qualifications for admission to the university (he needed an exam in Latin and Greek) and, while studying classical languages, he started writing poems which were later published as *Stemmen uit Afrika* (Voices from Africa, 1957). His epic poetry represents a foundational narrative of voices from Africa in the Dutch language and describes a fictional voyage through “Black” Africa. The volume received quite a positive press review. Those were the years of poetical renewal by the “Vijftigers” (those of the fifties), a group of poets, who wanted to radically change the content and style of Dutch literature. Interest in poetry was strong in the Dutch press, and Arion even came to be characterized as a “Black Virgil.”

In the meantime, Arion became well-known among Antillean students. He cofounded magazines with them and started writing in Papiamentu, while at the same time publishing articles and travelogues in Dutch. In 1965, a few months before finishing his studies, he decided to return home. In those years in the Netherlands his interest in Papiamentu grew steadily, undoubtedly stimulated by contacts with other Antillean students, who generally spoke Papiamentu among themselves. Back in Curaçao, Arion started to collect texts written in Papiamentu, and during the chaotic days of May 1969, he succeeded in rescuing unique and rare Papiamentu texts just in time to save them from being burned. He founded a magazine, *Ruku*, whose title alluded to the red paintings—*roucou*—of the Amerindians. He managed to publish twelve issues, in which the influence of the Black Power movement and Papiamentu, were important topics. In 1972,



he also published the very first bibliography of Papiamentu texts (Martinus, *Bibliografie*).

At the beginning of the 1970s, Arion returned to the Netherlands to present his final academic exam and was appointed as an Assistant Professor in the Institute for Dutch Studies at the University of Amsterdam. During this period, he finished his novel *Dubbelspel* (*Double Play*, 1973), which he had begun in 1969. This novel was—and still is—a bestseller. The plot focuses on an afternoon in which four men play dominos on a Papiamentu-speaking Caribbean Island. They all have different backgrounds and the author reflects on their political and social expectations. The book won an award from the Society of Dutch Literature, and Arion donated the money to a foundation fighting apartheid in South Africa. He traveled to Africa, France, and Martinique, among other areas, and published a second novel, *Afscheid van de koningin* (*Goodbye to the Queen*, 1975). Here the plot reveals the often-disguised connections of multinational companies with recently independent African countries and does not hesitate to expose Dutch involvement.

The title of this second novel is symbolic because, in the year of its publication, Arion departed for Suriname, which had been independent from the Netherlands since November 25, 1975. He married the Surinamese anthropologist Trudi Guda (Head of Cultural Affairs in Paramaribo). Two years later, a third novel, *Nobele Wilden* (*Noble Savages*, 1977) was published. This was a philosophical novel about religion and post-colonialism: a man from Martinique, inspired by his experiences in Lourdes, becomes a priest and then a bishop while maintaining written correspondence with a former girlfriend from Switzerland, whose family owns a plantation on his home island.

Religious problems have been a theme of Arion's interest for a long time. He was raised in an environment in which people believe in the appearances of the Black Virgin and in magical powers. Convinced that these beliefs were not solely a characteristic of "underdeveloped" people, Arion traveled as a voluntary *brancardier* to Lourdes in 1958. He also visited Lourdes at a later date. When teaching at the Institute for the Education of Teachers in Paramaribo, he was invited to give a series of conferences on one of the most important, older Surinamese writers, Albert Helman (1903-1996), a series published in *De*



*eenzame jager* (The Lonesome Hunter, 1977), in which Arion addresses a very relevant topic. He argues that Helman, who had edited the handbook *Mozaïek van Suriname* (1977), decided to supplement this work with another one, *Facetten van de Surinaamse samenleving* (Facets of Surinamese Society, 1977). In *Mozaïek*, the different cultural groups were separately described, but Helman wanted to center on their interaction and mutual influences. A typical plantation society in the Guyanas, Suriname's population includes Amerindians, Maroons, Creoles, Jews, Hindustani from India, Muslims from Indonesia, and Chinese, among other ethnic groups. For Helman, they had their "cults of magic" in common—their belief in magico-religious interpretations. Since he had focused on this topic himself in *Nobele wilden*, Arion shows that Bernadette Soubirous was not a mere uneducated shepherdess. Indeed, she had a very rational view of the "miracle" from the perspective of her Occitan background in France.

Arion did not concentrate further on these magico-religious traditions. When the military staged a coup in Suriname in February 1980, he returned to Curaçao and became director of the Instituto Lingwistiko Antiano. He devoted himself entirely to achieving the recognition of Papiamentu as an official language, something not even his own countrymen believed in. To make himself heard, he published a polemical manifesto, *Martein Lopap 2 o malesa di semi-lingualismo* (Martijn Lopap 2 or The Wickedness of Semi-lingualism, 1983; Phaf, "La deconstrucción"). The title refers to a text written by Joseph Sickman Corsen (1853-1911), who portrayed Marteín Lopap, a man in Aruba who repeated any language he heard without knowing which one he spoke. Arion's severe attack on local people who had no confidence in their own native language is typical of the tone of the difficult debates on Papiamentu and its appropriate position in education. Therefore, in 1986, he co-founded with Trudi Guda and other Curaçaoans, the first primary school teaching entirely in Papiamentu in the earliest grades, the Skol Humanistiko Erasmo. This entailed constantly writing materials for lessons in this language, since these texts did not exist. The school was under constant criticism by those considering this language a dead-end for students seeking higher education. He also founded a political party, KARA (Kambio Rapido) in 1990, to offer an alternative to the official political groups. KARA promoted increasing economic production to become more independent

from the Netherlands, as a preparation for future political independence. Notwithstanding these multiple activities, Arion managed to publish more novels. *De laatste vrijheid* (The Last Freedom, 1996) concerns the possible eruption of a volcano on a Caribbean Island and the prognosis of local Creole-speaking inhabitants, in contrast to the interpretation of international academic experts. In that same year, Arion finished his PhD at the University of Amsterdam, published as *The Kiss of a Slave* (Martinus, *De eenheid*), on the relationship between Papiamentu and West African languages. His most noteworthy argument is that among themselves, the slaves spoke a special secret language, Guene (Arion “The Value”), very much influenced by the African languages, to hide their African identity, less present in Papiamentu.

Arion remained politically active and, in 2008, together with five other Curaçaoans, he repudiated the title of Knight in the Order of Oranje-Nassau, received from the Dutch government in 1992. He returned the ribbon with the medal of honor of this distinction to the Dutch and, in his accompanying letter he cited the Netherlands’ attempt to “recolonize” the Antilles. In his last novel, *De deserteurs* (The Deserters, 2006), taking place at the time of North American independence and slavery, he introduces four men (like in *Dubbelspel*) from different continents who come together in a Quaker home in Philadelphia: the Quakers’ son, a son of an illegal planter from Barbados, an African prince, and a Chinese student. They are involved in the struggle against slavery. The Chinese character shows Arion’s growing interest in the Chinese language (Martinus, “Creole Identity”). When he was appointed Professor of Linguistics at the University of Curaçao, he made a structural comparison between Chinese and Papiamentu in his inaugural speech “Un modèl nobo pa Linguístika General” on October 27, 2009.

### **Mutual Influences and Respect**

Apart from their obvious political engagement, there are many differences as well as points of convergence between the two authors: Debrot and Arion.

From Jaap Oversteegen’s biography on Debrot (*In het schuim and Gemunt*) we understand that there was a more or less regular communication

between them. The first evidence is found in 1955, when Debrot was appointed Director of the Cabinet of the Plenipotentiary Minister of the Netherlands Antilles and started planning the publication of the *Antilliaanse Cahiers*. Arion's poetry volume *Stemmen uit Africa* (Voices from Africa) was published in its third issue of November 1957. Martinus had proposed the title "Poetical journey through Africa," but Debrot changed this to "Voices from Africa." He also published other poetry by Arion in his magazine and considered him to be among the most promising young writers.

Later, in his *Verworvenheden en leemten van de Antilliaanse literatuur* (Achievements and Gaps in Antillean Literature, 1977), Debrot characterizes Arion's novel *Dubbelspel* as an example of "authenticity," representative of work by other Antillean authors:

The starting point of view of these writers is found in Guillermo Rosario's title, *E rais ku no ke muri*. It concerns the root or, if you like, the roots that don't want to die. They are not, as some propose, the roots of a physical "négritude" or an earthly Afro-Antillianism ("terrenal" in the terminology of Unamuno), much less of a black power-fanaticism. They concern the roots of authenticity, which are always in danger of being overgrown by a network of phraseology. Words like "human value" and "social engagement" might also be applied here, but unfortunately, because of their frequent use, they are worn out. It primarily concerns authenticity. (216)<sup>9</sup>

Debrot goes on to argue that the clue in Arion's *Dubbelspel* is the question as to whether it is possible for the characters to ever escape from their double play. He is not alluding to the situation in the game of dominos, but to the different roles the characters are required to assume, concluding that there cannot be an answer. This problem can be solved only in a reincarnation, if ever. In this same essay, he also shares his thoughts on Martein Lopap, Sickman Corsen's man in Aruba, who can only echo words, but is not able to express himself in a

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<sup>9</sup> Het uitgangspunt van deze auteurs vindt men in de titel van Guillermo Rosario, *E rais ku no ke muri*. Het gaat om de wortel of, zo men wil, de wortels die niet afsterven willen. Het zijn niet, zoals weleens wordt voorgesteld, de wortels van een fysieke "négritude" of een tellurisch Afro-Antillianisme ("terrenal" overeenkomstig de terminologie van Unamuno), laat staan van een blackpower-fanaticisme. Het gaat om de wortels van authenticiteit, die telkens door een netwerk van fraseologie dreigt te worden overwoekerd. Woorden als "menselijke waardigheid" en "sociale bewogenheid" kunnen hier eveneens van toepassing zijn, maar zij zijn helaas door het veelvuldig gebruik versleten. Het gaat in de eerste plaats om authenticiteit (216).

coherent language, “de arme gek” (The Poor Fool, 124). For Debrot, this image is always with him and, when he hears somebody forming a chain of words without reasoning, he consoles himself with the thought: “Look, there we have Lopap again on his chatterbox” (“Kijk, daar zit Lopap weer op zijn praatstoel” 125).

On the other hand, Arion’s collection of essays reveals how important Debrot was for his personal development as a writer. Notwithstanding the difference of thirty-four years in age as well as in social standing—a Black and a *blanku* Antillean—they respected each other’s work and admired each other’s identity. Arion even used to visit Debrot when he returned to the Netherlands after his retirement.

The two men shared their deep interest in the culture and people of their small island community. In the 1940s, when Arion was a young boy, Debrot and Da Costa Gomez used to visit his father to discuss the politics of the NVP. So, Debrot knew Arion’s name when he published his work in the *Antilliaanse Cahiers*. Arion writes that, back from the Netherlands in Willemstad, he went to listen to Debrot, then governor of the Dutch Antilles, when the latter gave conferences on linguistic problems, whose texts he later published as “Het polylinguale karakter van de Antilliaanse samenleving” (The Polylingual Character of Antillean society [1967] 1986). In 1970, when Arion dedicated an issue of *Ruku* to Debrot, he published two quatrains, four-line poems Debrot had written about the days in May “Vergeef” (Forgive) and “Dec. 1969,” He also created a written portrait of Debrot, “De onbekende Cola Debrot” (The unknown Cola Debrot), asking for his “levenshouding” (attitude towards life), formulating it as “Qué faire?” He points out Debrot’s two dialogues, one of them written in Papiamentu in 1948 and the other one in Dutch in 1949 (Dialoog bij de ruïnes, dialogue among the ruins), and also mentions *Dagboekbladen in Genève*, in which –as he says– life became transparent for the Russian Alexej Wsewolodowitch: he does not complain about his destiny in life, but accepts it. In Arion’s opinion, this same attitude toward life is found in Debrot’s quatrains dedicated to May ‘69. His clarity and insight express compassion for society and for Antillean society in particular. He observed the island’s political mentality and its motivations very precisely.

It is interesting to note that in this text, Arion mentions that Curaçaoans certainly would reelect Debrot as their governor because of his personality more than his function. This shows that Arion did not belong to the group who refused to attend Debrot's farewell reception, and that he saw Debrot from a different perspective. He was impressed by Debrot's literary and intellectual work and makes this known repeatedly. In his essay "Literatuur als vermakelijk onderzoek" (Literature as Joyful Research, 2006), Arion describes the process of writing *Dubbelspel*. He departed from the concept of the experiment as a means of prediction, along the lines of Orwell's *Ninety-Eighty Four* (1949). After having written a first novel in 1958 about the World's Fair in Brussels (never published), Arion judged himself as too conventional, compared to Debrot's *My Black Sister*. He not only praises Debrot's moral courage to publish a story of that nature in the 1930s, but also emphasizes its form. The narrative covers a period of 24-hours, a very unusual time frame in Dutch literature. In the same way, Arion's *Dubbelspel* uses a similar time frame—a Sunday, especially the afternoon, in which four men play a deadly game of dominos. In the end, one of the losers kills one of the winners, who not by accident, is an immigrant from English-speaking Saba.

Martinus (Arion) organized a symposium on Cola Debrot and contributed with the essay "Het tragische levensgevoel bij Cola Debrot" (The Tragic Outlook on Life in Cola Debrot, 1988). He refers to the Spanish influence in Debrot's work surrounding the concept of "illucidatie," a formal explanation which is a direct reference to the Spanish author Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), a philosopher who developed a specific form of existentialism. For Debrot, the Antilleans are closer to Unamuno's existentialism than the Europeans, because they explicitly cultivate perseverance and a courageous attitude towards life, in contrast to a destructive rationalism. Therefore, the "tragic outlook" on life refers here to the efforts and actions of the Antilleans. In his essay, Arion quotes not only Unamuno, but also Spinoza, Kant, Greek tragedies, and other sources. He concludes that this "tragic" attitude toward life is full of promise, combativeness, vitality, and the courage to battle the contradictions—a truly heroic undertaking.

Subsequently, in “De korte e van Cola Debrot” (The Short E of Cola Debrot, 1989), Arion recalls that originally, he hoped to devote the final thesis of his academic studies to Debrot. That was in 1971. However, he chose to center on creole languages instead because of his passion for the language and the requirements for the examination. He mentions that he met Debrot personally for the first time in 1956 at The Hague and was impressed that Debrot used to pronounce the long “e” in Dutch as it was pronounced in Papiamentu. Later, when back in Curaçao, their conversations were always conducted in Papiamentu. In Arion’s opinion, from then on Debrot increasingly expressed his personal views (“hij was steeds meer zichzelf geworden” 48). He documents this view with the example of Debrot’s theater work, “Bokaal aan de lippen” (Bowl to the Lips), written in 1949 and published one year later. The plot tells the story of the complicated love relationships in a segregated Antillean society. Again, a provocative issue but, as Arion notes, the provocation lies not only in this plot, but also in the fact that the story takes place entirely in a Papiamentu-speaking environment. Although written in Dutch, the details of these love affairs adhere to the typical island customs, as is suggested in the title. A “bowl” to drink from refers to a wedding party at which the well-dressed guests bring the bowl to their lips. This detail makes a precise reference to the wedding dinner custom where guests are expected to give speeches and, after each speech, everyone raises their glass or bowl to their lips, without drinking—*toka i no bebe*—, since more speeches follow and the custom does not permit drinking until all the speeches are finished. Of course, such details would make sense only for a Papiamentu-speaking audience, so Debrot always refused to let his theater piece be performed in Dutch or Spanish. Only when May Henriquez translated the text into Papiamentu, “Dos palabra pa kelki na boka,” in 1973, did Debrot drop his objections and write an introduction: “Een enkel woord” (One Single Word, 285-288), which begins as follows: “The Romans, who spoke a language deceptively similar to Papiamentu, used to say ‘habent sua fata libelli.’ This means that books too have their special history. This play, ‘Bowl to the Lips,’ also had its changes of fortune” (285).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> De Romeinen die een taal spraken bedriegelijk veel lijkend op het Papiamentu, plachten te zeggen “habent sua fata libelli”. Dat will dus zeggen dat ook boeken hun speciale geschiedenis hebben. Het spel “Bokaal aan de lippen” had ook zijn lotwisselingen (285).

Debrot continues by saying that the Antillean tone gives the comedy its playfulness and its sense of aggression, also producing harmony between the mental attitude and the language itself.

### **Other Literary Influences**

Finally, in 2009, Papiamentu was declared an official language of Curaçao, together with English and Dutch. A long process of official recognition, which began in the 1930s with the correspondence between Rodolfo Lenz in Chile and John de Pool in Panama (Phaf-Rheinberger, “El papiamentu”) and promoted by Debrot and Arion as well as many others described above (Coomans-Eustatia), finally achieved its goal. Elisabeth Echteld, the Dean of the Faculty of the University of Curaçao, points to the important role of Frank Martinus Arion in this respect as one of the chief promoters of Papiamentu at the primary, secondary, and academic levels (Echteld).

An interesting point of reference is the influence of Spanish-speaking cultures and history in the work of these two authors. As mentioned before, this is most explicit in Debrot’s oeuvre. During World War II, he showed these connections in his novel *Bewolkt bestaan*, with an eye to Venezuela in particular. He was very aware that since the nineteenth century the politics of this neighboring country had always had an impact on his home island which served as a refuge for Venezuela’s exiles, beginning with its most prominent representative, Simón Bolívar, after his first defeat at the hands of the Spanish in 1812 (Phaf-Rheinberger, “Holland”). In Debrot’s youth, many people still spoke Spanish, but this had changed greatly upon his return from the Netherlands in 1948. The oil industry had attracted many Dutch and English-speaking workers with higher education, and Spanish was no longer important as a conversational language.

It is striking that neither of these authors makes much mention of the literature of Latin America nor authors such as Alejo Carpentier, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, or Carlos Fuentes as sources of inspiration. Both men were fluent readers of Spanish texts, and books by those authors had been translated into Dutch since the 1970s. Obviously, as Curaçaoans, they were occupied with other problems. Debrot’s interest in the



Spanish Siglo de Oro was already evident in 1946, when he published the volume *Bekentenis in Toledo* (Confession in Toledo) in the style of the Spanish Baroque. The author tells his readers that these poems are reproduced from a manuscript by the fictional Francisco de Alba y las Cuebas, who had lived in Toledo at the height of the baroque. Debrot also mentions that this author seems to have been inspired by the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, which he had seen in the Escorial, the King's palace not far from Madrid, and that he had probably visited the Low Countries.

Later, in 1959, Debrot translated two poems from Spanish into Dutch: "Njam-Njam" by Luís Palés Matos and "De dode soldaat" (El Soldado Muerto) by Nicolás Guillén, both representatives of the "poesía negra" in the Spanish Caribbean. His other texts, with a focus on Spain and the "Spanish period" (1499-1524) of the Netherlands Antilles, were published posthumously, thanks to his wife.

Estelle Reed-Debrot writes that they took a trip to Spain in 1958 and visited the Prado Museum over several days. Immediately afterwards, Debrot started writing a long theater piece, "Op zoek naar de Infanta" (In Search of the Infanta), which he never finished. This was followed by "Brief aan de president. Fragment" (Letter to the President), equally unfinished, "De vervolgdén" (The Persecuted), a short novel, and "De droom aan de bleke baai" (The Dream at the Bleak Bay), unfinished as well. These texts were published in *Cola Debrot. Verzameld werk 3* for the first time, with comments, corrections, and explanations by his wife, who oversaw the publication of this important part of Debrot's oeuvre. Without undertaking an individual analysis of each work at this time, it is clear that Debrot was extremely interested in the culture and history of sixteenth and seventeenth century Spain, as well as in the "Spanish period" before the Dutch colonization of the islands, at that time referred to as the territory of the Caquetío Amerindians and the Spaniards.

At first sight, we do not find any explicit interest in Spanish-speaking literature in Martinus Arion's work. However, a brief further look reveals that he alludes to Spanish language writings in his literary texts: to the poems of Nicolás Guillén or to Segismundo in *La vida es sueño* by Calderón de la Barca. But Arion seems to have been more interested in concentrating on authors from other

Caribbean islands, especially the English ones. This is clearly expressed in his novel *De laatste vrijheid*, part of which can almost be read as an answer to V. S. Naipaul and his statement that nothing new was ever invented in Caribbean lands. Arion emphasizes the opposite of Naipaul, the Trinidadian writer and winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize in Literature, who, at the end of his life, even tried to forget having been born and raised in that tropical region. One of Arion's novelistic characters composes a musical piece, *Guerillas of Love*, as a counterpart to Naipaul's novel *Guerillas* (1975). The emphasis with which Arion seeks to explain this difference makes his novel an impressive statement in favor of the artistic and scientific capacity of Creole-speakers. His characters come closer to the 1992 Nobel Literature laureate, Derek Walcott, native of St. Lucia, from whom he quotes the following lines:

I grew up where alleys ended in a harbor  
and Infinity wasn't the name of our street;  
Where the town anarchist was the corner barber  
with his own flagpole and revolving Speaker's seat. (*De laatste* 935)

Arion's enthusiasm for *Omeros* (1990), the long epic poem in which Walcott lays out the transatlantic relations between the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa, is understandable because he too, had reacted strongly to Homer's verses when learning Greek in The Hague, as he mentions in his foreword to the second edition of *Stemmen uit Afrika* (Arion, "Ter inleiding").

In sum, both authors are oriented by different cultural horizons. When relating these to their affinity with *négritude*, it is striking that although Arion is generally considered to be the originator of this tendency in Curaçao with his *Stemmen uit Afrika*, he himself mentions Debrot as the actual creator: "All things considered, it was not Frank Martinus Arion who introduced the *négritude* to the Antilles with his *Stemmen uit Africa*, ...but the white Cola Debrot with *Mijn zuster de negerin*" (Arion, "Her tragische" 116).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Goedbeschouwd heft niet Frank Martinus Arion de *négritude* op de Antillen geïntroduceerd met zijn *Stemmen uit Africa* ..., maar de blanke Cola Debrot met *Mijn zuster de negerin* (Arion, "Het tragische" 116)

If we accept that position, it is interesting to look at what Debrot was reading when he was creating the plot for *Mijn zuster de negerin* while living in the house of the painter Pyke Koch in Utrecht. Koch was very interested in Freud and psychoanalysis (Tilborgh). He used to read aloud to his friend Debrot from the novel *Frau Beate und ihr Sohn* (Mrs. Beate and Her Son, 1912), written by the Austrian author Arthur Schindler, in which the author discusses erotic desire and a possible incest. So again, it can be seen that the influence of international literature is fundamental to the understanding of the development of the *poesía negra* as well as of the *négritude* in different locations.<sup>12</sup> Another similarity is that both Debrot and Arion sought a philosophical foundation for the Antillean lifestyle. Debrot was greatly interested in existentialism, and in his introduction to this philosophical concept, “Bij wijze van inleiding to the Existentialisme of de wereld in zak en as” (By Way of Introduction to Existentialism, or, The World is Completely Down and Out, 1947), he presents interpretations of Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger, and, of course, Jean-Paul Sartre. As Arion has shown, Debrot opts for Unamuno’s special interpretation, as being more in line with the Antillean mentality. Arion adopts this existentialism in his “Caribbean” novel, *De laatste vrijheid* (The Last Freedom), in the metaphor of his *Sunrise Inn* (Phaf, “*Adyosi*”), now not as much oriented toward Orwell as his first novel, but toward Unamuno’s thoughts on the “tragic” aspect of life’s actions and efforts.

Without a doubt, these two authors have different views on the militant Black Power movement. For Debrot, it is too radical, whereas Arion shows his interest in his magazine *Ruku*, but without organizing a Black Power movement of his own. For both, it is more important to include their militant attitude in their specific interpretation of life, culture, and history on this Antillean Island. For both, “black” and “white” cultures are unthinkable without Papiamentu, a creole language similar to Kapverdianu in Cape Verde and other creole languages found along the West African coast (Jacobs). Starting from this base, Debrot and Arion design their plots within a contemporary international and historical perspective.

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<sup>12</sup> Some other examples: Nicolás Guillén was reading Oscar Spengler when writing his first poetry in 1930; Aimé Césaire was impressed by Leo Frobenius’ writings on Africa.

It might be argued that, in this sense, they both are ambassadors for international affairs.<sup>13</sup>

For Dutch and Caribbean literature, Debrot's *Dagboekbladen uit Genève* is unique. His diary was written during an annual ILO conference, and he must have been aware of the importance of his presence there. Oversteegen mentions that Debrot planned the publication of his diary before starting to write it; this is exceptional, because he kept diaries all his life, but never published his earlier ones. One reason for this exception might be a personal one. The family on his father's side originally came from the French-speaking section of Switzerland, and on June 13<sup>th</sup> Debrot writes that he came across a plumbing supplies shop, whose owner was Charles Debrot, a plumber. A second reason might be that he considered this ILO conference particularly important. In his book on the history of its organization, Daniel Maul describes that, in those years, the ILO was discussing technical strategies for a post-war decolonization process, which was dominated by Cold War tensions. Debrot sketches the contrasts between American and Soviet positions in his text. He also reports in detail on the organization of the ILO and the power structure among its functionaries, and—as he writes—one looks more insignificant than the other. Most important, however, is the encounter with an old Russian friend, Alexej Wsewolodowitsch, he had met in France in the 1930s. In Paris, they were bohemians, Debrot as a potential writer and Alexej, quite flamboyant as an aspiring artist. Now, in Geneva, Alexej earns his money as a tour guide, having abandoned his painting career. The two men are unable to return to their friendship of earlier days, not even by visiting the Greek Orthodox Church together as they used to do in the French capital. This is such an overwhelming experience that Debrot's diary ends with the words: "Do svidaniya Alexej, good-bye Alexej!" (88).

In the conference environment in Geneva, Debrot feels at home with people from all over the world, from all types of cultures and backgrounds. He takes advantage of the opportunity to characterize Arabs, Africans, and Russians, and, among other cultural groups, "Latinos" get special mention. In his opinion, they "have all read Rousseau," albeit only the title of his *Social Contract* (35),

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<sup>13</sup> Curaçao does not have a Ministry of Foreign Affairs of its own. The country is represented by the Minister Plenipotentiary of Curaçao in the Council of Ministers of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in The Hague.

and they use to practice a lifestyle of *dolce far niente*, “porque no me da la gana (45);” in short, they are less disciplined, very likeable, and relaxed. In the *Dagbladen*, Debrot also characterizes his own identity as that of a Hispano-Suizo: a Hispanic with anarchistic tendencies from the side of his mother, while his father’s roots guarantee Swiss misanthropy (45).

Debrot’s observations on Alexej have been integrated into Arion’s interpretation, in which the objective is to show that he and Debrot are “brothers,” both working in different ways for the same family—the Curaçaoan citizens. *Négritude*, for them, is a foundational issue to overcome mental segregation. According to Arion, in his interview with Rowell: “We don’t have perhaps as strict a definition of black in Curaçao as you may have in the United States. We consider this a black community as a whole [...] And it has to be simple a Papiamentu-based community” (*My Black Sister* 538-539). In this spirit, Debrot and Arion left their monumental legacy in writings, in which readers can find many global historical and political connections as well as the intention to negotiate between the different poles of existing contradictions. Their attachment to Papiamentu is crucial. Its playful and “tragic” mentality, told from a male perspective, is unique both in the Caribbean and the Americas, and is the fundamental condition for feeling comfortable with Antillean people anywhere in the world.

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