



Travelling “back” to the Caribbean: Female Transnational Identities and Linguistic Relatedness in Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* and Edwidge Danticat’s *After the Dance*

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According to Barbara Korte, there is nowadays a “corpus” of postcolonial travelers such as V.S. Naipaul, Jamaica Kincaid, Pico Iyer and Caryl Phillips who are engaged with colonial heritage and issues of belonging as well as new interactions of de-territorialization or extra-territoriality (2000). Central to this “canon” is the travelers’ efforts to underscore historical power relations forged through travel and to contest and protest their endurance. The travel narratives I investigate in my paper rightly belong to this canon, especially for the way they display processes of transculturation, linguistic relatedness, and cultural hybridity through the experience of travel.

In Paule Marshall’s third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), the protagonist makes a physical and emotional journey from the United States to the Caribbean, discovering her African roots and a new “homeland”. In Edwidge Danticat’s travelogue *After the Dance. A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti*, the author/narrator reconstructs the carnival history of her country through the languages (English, French, Kreyòl), the cultural references and the artistic objects that represent the complexity of Haitian society. Across spaces and languages, I explore how the two female protagonists succeed in making the most important journey of their lives, against the fear of an unknown that becomes progressively familiar, embracing a transcultural and transnational renovated identity.

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Travel Writing and the Caribbean Space

According to Barbara Korte, there is a “corpus” of postcolonial travelers such as V.S. Naipaul, Jamaica Kincaid, Pico Iyer, Caryl Phillips and Amitav Ghosh, to mention a few, who have been engaged with colonial heritage and issues of belonging as well as new interactions of de-territorialization or extra-territoriality (Korte 2000, 172). Central to this “canon” is “the travelers’ efforts to underscore historical power relations forged through travel and to contest and protest their endurance” (Lindsay 2015, 31). To the corpus outlined by Korte we could certainly add two female writers like Paule Marshall (1929-2019) and Edwidge Danticat (1969-), highlighting their common interest in the colonial heritage and in the linguistic relatedness of the places they describe and to which they belong.

Marshall was born in New York to parents migrated from Barbados, whereas Danticat was born in Haiti and moved to New York when she was twelve. These writers have contributed to what R. Clarke defines as “neither a genre (a variety of writing) nor a sub-branch of the literary field (a ‘social space’ of moral, political, and intellectual contest)”, since “postcolonial travel writing describes an eclectic and expansive corpus of journey literature, and a transnational collection of authors and readers attuned to the legacy and persistence of past forms of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the emergence of new modes of cultural, economic, and political dominance” (Clarke 2018, 1).

In Marshall’s third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), the protagonist’s physical and emotional journey from the United States to the Caribbean takes Avey Johnson to her African roots in the islands of Grenada and Carriacou, where Avey discovers a “homeland”, “dancing up a nation in the island spaces and water crossings” (Thorsson and Marshall 2007, 651). The nation Avey charts is both imagined and real, determined by geography and a shared culture: she is a black, middle-aged, middle-class widow from New York who abandons an expensive cruise on the Caribbean and undergoes a series of unexpected events. The novel is written in the style of a fairy-tale or, better, a quest: there is something to discover and appropriate, but there are obstacles and various steps to overcome before the final stage of redemption and the happy ending.¹ The language of such a quest is characterized by a peculiar code-switching between Standard English, Grenadian English, Patois, and African American Vernacular English (AAVE), since it is through listening to some words in Patois that the widow starts her journey, changing her perspective about the places she visits. Edwidge Danticat shares a similar experience in *After the Dance. A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti* (2002), a first-person narrative that is a truly hybrid book – travelogue, memoir, historical account, and anthropological research – something that recalls Amitav Ghosh’s travelogues and essays collected in *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) and *Incendiary Circumstances* (2005). In 2001 Danticat returned to Haiti to attend, for her first time, the legendary carnival of Jacmel. She had never taken part in it, because of her uncle’s stories of terror and fear about the event. Hers is a journey of discovery of unknown aspects of her country, following a cultural timeline that takes her to the Carnival weekend.

The two female protagonists presented here have the common intent of breaking taboos about the places they narrate, going against prejudices (black cultural heritage for Avey Johnson and the Carnival for Danticat) being transmitted by the men of their

¹ About the novel’s structure see Maria Giulia Fabi’s “Postfazione” to the Italian edition of the novel, *Danza per una vedova*, ed. by M. G. Fabi and O. Brizio, Firenze, Le Lettere, 1999.

families. Avey Johnson had blindly followed her husband along the route to upward mobility and wealth to be accepted by white Americans, disavowing the cultural legacy of African Americans; Danticat had incorporated only negative aspects of the Carnival from her uncle, thus excluding a better, profound knowledge of the cultural and historical articulations within it. In their maturity, these women feel the need to travel alone to make things clear, to acquire an awareness of their transnational and transcultural identities, dismantling the rigid divisions between language and nation that do not really pertain to the Caribbean world.

Their travel experiences seem to be, recalling Homi Bhabha's reflections, "theoretically innovative and politically crucial for their need to think beyond the narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural difference" (Bhabha 1994, 1-2). Within this articulation, and with specific reference to the Caribbean space, the linguistic element participates in the production of "new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha 1994, 2).

Childs and Williams elaborate on Caribbean authors like Édouard Glissant and Wilson Harris in relation to the question of history, suggesting how the nature of Caribbean societies in the Caribbean is an issue which cultural analysts and historians continue to debate. According to Childs and Williams, the terms creole and colonial are not mutually exclusive, but rather "colonialism and creolization should both be recognized as constituents of Caribbean culture" (1997, 48). Glissant proposed the concept of creolization as a practice of resistance to Western hegemony, and he considered it as an inescapable fact of Caribbean life: "its cross-cultural transmission and fertilization represent the positive dynamic, processual becoming of Diversity, rather than the incorporative fixity of the being of Sameness" (Childs and Williams 1997, 48). Glissant calls the process of Caribbean creolization a system of transversality (1989, 66), meaning the convergence of intersecting points (cultures, ethnicities, origins) that forms a particularly Caribbean topography, and such a convergence of Caribbean histories has nothing to do with uniformity.

In the works of Marshall and Danticat we can trace transversality and intersecting cultural and linguistic points in the stories of female characters who truly experience the "state" of creolization of the Caribbean countries. Their writings reflect what Edwards and Graulund conceive as the critical aspect of postcolonial travel writing, which is not simply the way in which it presents counter-narratives and enacts oppositionality toward imperialism past and present, but rather "its potential to explore experiences, ontologies, and frames of reference that exist outside the boundaries of European knowledge production" (Edwards and Graulund 2010, 3). I investigate the way Marshall and Danticat have produced texts in contemporary multilingual contexts, since they have moved between multiple languages, so that monolingual paradigms are inadequate to read their worlds, shaped and transformed by colonialism, migration, and globalization. Gilmour and Steinitz recall Samia Mehrez's coinage of the term "radical bilingualism", "to describe the traces of multiple languages contained within one ostensibly monolingual postcolonial text, and to underline the counter-hegemonic power of such bilingualism to make the colonial language 'foreign' to its own monolingual native speaker" (Gilmour and Steinitz 2018, 2). The kind of linguistic relatedness I find in the works here examined is also reflected through peculiar postcolonial stylistics that the writers use to represent hybrid, multi-layered societies.

Moreover, the detailed descriptions of music and dance in the rituals of awareness and regeneration that we find in both works, permeate the texture of language, and contribute to constructing such new stylistics, in which code-switching is one of its most relevant features.

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*: on the Footsteps of Linguistic and Cultural Routes/Roots.

According to Hendrikson, "Paule Marshall's preoccupation with language as a space for celebrating culture and challenging hegemony speaks directly to her historical moment" (Hendrikson 2017, 2). Marshall intentionally manipulates voice and language as a means for affirmation and resistance within black communities, with specific attention to Caribbean and African American spaces. In her first two novels, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and *The Chosen Place. The Timeless People* (1969) she uses Bajan Creole (Barbadian Creole) and AAVE (also known as Ebonics or Black English) as distinct identities, for specific narrative and political purposes. Yet, as outlined by John Rickford, there are linguistic intersections of the two: "There can be absolutely no doubt that some pidgin/creole speech – whether home-grown or imported – was an element in the formative stage of African American English" (Rickford 1999, 3). He attributes this to the haunting similarities with Caribbean Creole English which we find in AAVE today; features regarding, for example, the double-negative and the lack of verbal conjugation for third person singular subjects. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, the writer's intention is to celebrate AAVE, the everyday language of a consistent part of the American population, and to put it in connection, and not in contrast, with Standard English, Grenadian English, and Creole languages like Patois. AAVE is a language that has gone through a process of decreolization, since it has come into extensive contact with the dominant language, Standard English (see Wolfram 2009). Marshall vividly reproduces this language in the dialogues between Avey and her husband and in the voice of some people from the street, for example, in a woman's outburst against her drunk husband: "...What kinda man is you anyway, spending all you money on..." "Goddamit, din' I tell ya don' mess with me this mornin'!" (Marshall 1983, 109).

Avey recounts the early years of her married life through flashbacks and fragments of memory, revealing the private history of an American black family living in New York in the 1950s, in pre-gentrification Brooklyn. Jerome had gone through racial humiliation in various workplaces but had persisted in trying to ascend the social ladder through study, annihilation, and a process of mimicry of the white American man.

To move upward at all costs, Jay had become Jerome, that was, from his wife's perspective, the passage from the man of their intimacy to a life only devoted to study, work, and money, where there would no longer be a place for "black things". Only after Jay's death, the time has come for her to "become" an African American woman who is part of the Black diaspora, entering that varied heritage of the Black Atlantic.

The creation of Avey's "transversality" is allowed by travel and by the possibilities of language, since it is through listening to a familiar word in Patois that she is literally transported to the authentic discovery of the Caribbean. As Pollards maintains: "While the claims for cultural connection between the territories of the Caribbean have been documented and have been implied with some consistency, in the imaginative literature of the region, the inclusion of black people from the USA in this connection has largely been the work of anthropologists and of linguists who have studied Gullah, the Creole language of the Sea Islands which lie off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina"

(Pollard 1988, 58). And South Carolina is the place where Avey's great-aunt Cuney lived, and where Avey first heard Gullah.

Comparisons between Gullah and the Creoles of the Caribbean have established relationships, undoubtedly the result of similar linguistic histories. "The African substrate to which all these languages are heir has come to be regarded by some linguists as the basis for most of the similarities between the Creoles no matter to which European language their lexicon is related" (Pollard 1988, 58). Marshall makes use of the available results of linguistic research and connects them with cultural and historical issues in a process that aims at disclosing the relatedness of languages of black people between the US and the Caribbean. "For the heroine whose language is American English must relate to a culture which is articulated mainly in a creole whose lexicon is based in French" (Pollard 1988, 58-59)

The four chapters that compose the novel reflect such a feature: "Runagate", "Sleeper's Wake", "Lavé Tête", "The Beg Pardon". Each one is a distinctive step of the woman's transnational journey: the novel begins with the protagonist's escape from the cruise after a strange dream she had the night before and because of a pain in the stomach that constantly recurs. Marshall illustrates the change in the protagonist's trajectory, showing that her postmodern and postcolonial journey starts in her mind and proceeds with fragments of memory, alternating past and present in a non-linear way.

In those summers together, Aunt Cuney used to take Avatara (the way she called Avey, from the Sanskrit *Avatar*, meaning descent, appearance) for a walk in the forest, up to the Ibo Landing, a place connected with the stories of the slave trade and the Middle Passage. Aunt Cuney would tell her in Gullah, and for the umpteenth time, the story of the Landing:

It was here that they brought 'em. They taken 'em out of the boats right here where we're standing. Nobody remembers how many of 'em it was, but they was a good few 'cording to my gran' who was a little girl no bigger than you when it happened. [...] And they seen things that day you and me don't have the power to see. 'Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you 'bout things happened long before they was born things to come long after they's dead. Well, they seen everything that was to happen 'round here that day. The slavery time and the war my gran' always talked about, the 'mancipation and everything after that right on up to the hard times today. (Marshall 1983, 37-8)

Aunt Cuney would explain that the Ibos, just arrived from Africa on the boats, saw the future that expected them, gave the white people a hard look and went away, walking on the river water.

And talking about her granma, Aunt Cuney would say: "Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind was long gone with the Ibos..." (Marshall 1983, 39)

Granma's refrain appears in various moments of the novel, working as a reminder of that story, of the black diaspora and the slave trade.

In the dream aunt Cuney is incredibly furious with Avey, she hits her and they start a fight. This creates an unsettling and strange sensation in the woman for the whole day after. She cannot stand the life on the cruise any longer. Aboard the "Bianca Pride", dining at the Versailles Room, she starts thinking of past events and, for the first time,

of some episodes connected with racial issues, such as, for example, the severe beating of a black man by the police that she witnessed with her husband one night a long time before.

When she finally escapes from the boat, she finds herself in Georgetown, the capital of Grenada, and desperately looks for a taxi to the Airport to fly back to New York. She stops a young man and asks him:

he turned to her with a polite smile and, pointing toward the empty roadway, spoke rapidly in Patois [...]. She realized then with a start that everyone around her was speaking Patois. She had been so busy examining them she had failed to take in their speech. Or her ears had perhaps registered it as the dialect English spoken in many of the islands which often sounded like another language altogether. But reaching her clearly now was the flood of unintelligible words and the peculiar cadence and lilt of the Patois she had heard for the first time in Martinique three days ago. She had heard it that first time and it had fleetingly called to mind the way people spoke in Tatem long ago. There had been the same vivid, slightly atonal music underscoring the words. She had heard it and that night from out of nowhere her great-aunt had stood waiting in her sleep... (Marshall 1983, 67)

From this moment on, linguistic relatedness becomes a predominant feature of the narrative:

A man calls her Ida, and then tells her: "Pa'don, oui [...]. But if you didn't look everything like a woman I know named Ida from the back. Is the same way she stands, oui." [...]

She was so rattled and outdone, she failed to register that the man had spoken in English until he had disappeared still laughing in amazement and shaking his head. (Marshall 1983, 72)

It is as if the woman, escaped from an alien monolingual environment (the cruise), had to enter a new multi-lingual space (the island), and had to recognise old and new sounds. The taxi driver informs Avey about the people she saw on the wharf. They are from the tiny out-island of Carriacou, but work in Grenada and return "home" once a year for the Excursion, a big festivity.

"I tried asking them about a taxi, but they all spoke Patois – at least that's what it sounded like..." [...]. He nodded. "Oui, Patois, creole, whatever you want to call it", he said. "Is just some African mix-up something. You used to hear the old people 'bout here speaking it when I was a boy but no more. Only the out-islanders still bother. That's another thing about them. They can speak the King's English good as me and you, but the minute they set foot on the wharf for the excursion is only Patois crossing their lips. Don't ask me why". (Marshall 1983, 75)

Here comes the varied linguistic landscape of Avey's quest. Meanwhile, in the luxury hotel where she will spend the night, the widow's memories go back to the twenty years spent in Halsey Street with her husband and their three daughters.

They had fights in those years, because of economic problems and hard work, because of the *Too much!* repeated thirteen times in a few pages, meaning all they had to endure. In the course of time, they had put an irreparable distance between them. However, their early married life had been one of happiness, "playfulness and wit", a life made up of music, jazz and blues records. She asks herself why they ended up that way, why they did not care about the black movements for civil rights and why Jay came to

disregard black people, talking about them in the third person. “Couldn’t have they done differently? Hadn’t there perhaps been another way?” (Marshall 1983, 139) Now, bursting in tears in her hotel room, she knows the answer: they could have done both,

That is to have wrested, as they had done over all those years, the means they needed to rescue them from Halsey Street and to see the children through, while preserving, safeguarding, treasuring those things that had come down to them over the generations, which had defined them in a particular way. The most vivid, the most valuable part of themselves! (Marshall 1983, 139)

After this painful awakening, and in a confused state of mind, Avey departs for another journey, wandering aimlessly on the beach, until she enters a rum shop and has a bizarre conversation with the old owner. He is a man from Carriacou, who is leaving for the Excursion and tells Avey about the ceremony of the Beg Pardon, a ritual to honour the ancestors. “Is the Old Parents, oui,” he said solemnly. “The Long-time People. Each year this time that does look for us to come and give them their remembrance” (Marshall 1983, 165). The man keeps asking Avey what nation she is, mentioning the African nations she might come from.

“What’s your nation?” He asked her, his manner curious, interested, even friendly all of a sudden. “Arada...? Is you an Arada?” He waited. “Cromanti maybe...?” And he again waited. “Yarraba then...? Moko...? [...] I’m from the States. New York...”. And she repeated it, “New York”. And the man replies: “I has grands and great-grands born in that place I has never seen!” It was a bitter outburst. “Joseph who has never gone on the excursion! Who has never been to a Big Drum! Who don’ know nothing ‘bout the nation dance!”

Those nations are supposed to be part of Avey’s heritage, but the woman gets more and more confused.

In characters like the taxi-driver, the rumshop owner Lebert Joseph and his daughter Rosalie, Marshall reproduces a mixture of Grenadian English and French-African Patois or Grenada Patois or Grenada Creole, some of the names of Grenada’s vernacular languages.² Joseph’s daughter, for example, speaks a Grenadian English in which the substrate of French is not as much evident as it is in her father’s language, where the interlayer *oui* is always present.

Lebert Joseph asks Avey to go with him and his people to Carriacou for the Big Drum ceremony. She forgets about the flight she is supposed to take to New York and embarks for another journey. The boat trip is a nightmare, the widow suffers from seasickness and almost faints. She is rescued by the women around her, and taken to Joseph’s daughter to recover, until she is able to take part in the Beg Pardon.

Some people speak to her before the ceremony: “So you’s come on the excursion to see the Big Drum, oui” [...] And how you like Carriacou?” (Marshall 1983, 235).

Marshall now displays the soundscape in which Avey finds herself, starting from the rhythm and the lilt of the people’s names, those who have gone: “*DeGale Clement. Edmund Joseph. Antoine Vespry. Clarice St. Hilaire. Cedros Joseph. Fifi Munday. Josiah George. Ophelia Joseph. John-John Placide.* Names euphonious and lyrical. They belonged

² The language of Grenada evolved from its heritage of English (the country’s official language), French and African ancestry. For the question of English and vernacular languages in Grenada, see <https://www.thegrenadarevolutiononline.com/page18.html>; see also Aceto 2009.

to the oldest among Lebert Joseph's friends and relatives gathered in the yard" (Marshall 1983, 235; italics in the text).

Finally, the Beg Pardon is performed, with its refrain in Grenada Creole: "Lebert Joseph slowly opened his arms, raised his tremulous head to the sky and, abruptly, like a shock wave on the air: "Pa'doné mwê...! Si mwê mérite/Pini mwê/ Si mwê ba mérite/ Pa'doné mwê...'" – singing in his quavering yet piercing falsetto" (Marshall 1983, 236). She remembers Joseph's words when they first met: "*when you see down on my knees at the Big Drum is not just for me one... Oh, no! Is for tout moun*" (Marshall 1983, 236; italics in the text).

Avey remembers the ritual of the Ring Shout performed in Tatem and starts dancing, feeling that she has fulfilled a process of awareness and reconciliation:

She had finally after all these decades made it across. The elderly Shouters in the person of the out-islanders had reached out their arms like one great arm and drawn her into their midst. And for the first time since she was a girl, she felt the threads, that myriad of shiny, silken, brightly colored threads (like the kind used in embroidery) which were thin to the point of invisibility yet as strong as the ropes at Coney Island. (Marshall 1983, 248-9)

Once back home in New York, she promises herself she would do many things to spread the word about Carriacou. She would go back to Tatem and spend the summer there, fixing Aunt Cuney's house up. And "[s]he would enlist Marion in her cause. Marion whom she had tried to root from her body by every means possible, repeatedly throwing herself one day down the five flights of stairs. *Pa'doné mwê*. Of her three children, Marion alone would understand about the excursion and help her spread the word" (Marshall 1983, 255). This is a history to pass on, paraphrasing Tony Morrison: a history that has passed through female lines, from great-aunt Cuney to Marion and will proceed this way.

Avey's travel experience in the Caribbean has shown what Hendrikson writes about Marshall's use of language as a "transformative instrument, representing the layered tapestry of its power in conversation with the challenges of the twenty-first century" (Hendrikson 2017, 14). In *Praisesong for the Widow*, the black people of the Sea Islands of the Southern US share the languages of the black people of the Caribbean and, by implication, of all diaspora people, forming "a unity resulting from the cultural retentions from a common ancestor, one or other of the kingdoms of the African continent, from which the black populations were taken" (Pollard 1988, 58).

Edwidge Danticat's *After the Dance*: A Journey into the Heart of the Country

In a different country of the Caribbean, and for different reasons, Edwidge Danticat, like Avey Williams, succeeds in making the most important journey of her life. Transcending mere touristic testimony, Danticat's intense love for her country is rendered in the creativity of the carnival, as a communing with the spirits of the past. The writer goes beyond the fear of an unknown that becomes progressively familiar, embracing a transcultural renovated identity. Danticat's much deserved success, since the publication of her first novels and collections of short stories,³ is understood in the

³ *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is her first novel, published in 1994. Then came the collection of short stories *Krik? Krak!* (1995), the novels *The Farming of Bones* (1998) and *The Dew Breaker* (2004). Her most recent book is the collection of stories *Everything Inside* (2019).

context of the current preeminence of Haitian writing in general. As Munro underlines “Hers is the case of the ‘split identity’ of the exile, and the relative importance of either part of the Haitian-American hyphenated tag” (Munro 2007, 207). Unlike famous Haitian writers (among others, Alexis, Depestre, Ollivier and Laferrière), Danticat has known Haiti primarily as a place of childhood, while New York and Miami have provided the physical contexts for her movements into adolescence and adulthood. However, “Danticat in fact seems keenly aware of her particular in-between status and locates herself in what she calls the ‘tenth department of Haiti’, the floating homeland, the ideological one, which joined all Haitians living in the *dyaspora*” (Munro 2007, 207). In the travelogue, the term *dyaspora* left in italics is often used, indicating people like her who live in this tenth department, “a self-contained entity, which does not necessarily have to be pulled in one direction or another” (Munro 2007, 208). The most notable thing about her “double belonging” is that she writes in English and not in French, the official language of Haiti. Danticat emigrated to the US when she was twelve and attended schools in New York where French-speaking Haitians (the “Frenchie”, or “the boat people”, as white Americans would call them) were excluded and marginalized. To be accepted and integrated into American society, “she wanted to sound completely American” and started to write fiction in English at an early age. She has continued to do so, against the attachment that Haitian intellectuals, despite the colonial heritage, have historically had for French. In an interview she declares: “my writing in English was as much an act of personal translation as it was an act of creative collaboration with the new place I was in” (Lyons and Danticat 2003, 188). The only linguistic remnants of her Haitian self are Creolisms – words and expressions in Kreyòl (French creole in Haiti) – that in turn creolize English, so that a new, subtly hybrid language emerges. This relates to Edouard Glissant’s investigation into the complexities of (post)colonial language relations, stressing the need to relativize the French language and to see it pass into the world’s multiple relations.

Danticat’s work complicates the issue of Haiti’s colonial language and tests the flexibility of the country’s peculiar linguistic-literary framework, in which literature in creole, unlike other Caribbean nations, has slowly developed. On one hand, Danticat dismantles the monolithic version of the identity-language bond, echoing postmodern and poststructuralist issues; on the other hand, there are no reservations for Danticat’s “Haitianness”, as one of the most renowned Haitian writers, René Depestre, remarks: “It is the first time that a Haitian has written Haitian literary works in English [...]... Thus Haitian literature has increased its scope: we have literature in French, Creole, English too, and why not Spanish, as there are many Haitians living in hispanophone countries? What this means is that it is not essential that every culture corresponds with a precise language...all these divisions will fall apart” (Depestre in Munro 2007, 212).

In *After the Dance. A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti*, the author reconstructs the carnival history through linguistic hybridity (English, French, Kreyòl), a feature that represents the texture of Haitian society, where these languages are used in different contexts and for different purposes. “In Haiti you’re always flipping between French and Creole [...], language is a social mechanism and a source of power” (Lyons and Danticat 2003, 189).

In 2001 Danticat returns to Jacmel for “a baptism by crowd” (Danticat 2002, 15), to attend the famous carnival of the city. She writes “the travelogue and the personal diary of an initiate; her voice draws the reader into the complex reality of historical and contemporary Jacmel” (Nesbitt 2004, 194). As the writer explains: “In carnival period

Jacmel becomes a country, the country of festivities. The place is called the Ibiza of the Caribbean in tourist guides, and it is indeed very different from the capital Port-au-Prince, dirt-poor, politically troubled, and certainly lacking any celebrations" (Danticat 2002, 12). Her uncle had told her the single story about the carnival, to borrow from the title of Chimamanda N. Adichie's famous TED talk (Adichie 2009), and this is exactly what "the danger of a single story" can do in the listener's mind:

Not only you could be punched, stabbed, pummeled, or shot during carnival, either by random hotheads or by willful villains who were taking advantage of their anonymity in a crowd of thousands to settle old scores, but young girls could be freely fondled, squeezed like sponges by dirty old, and not so old, men. Or they could be forced to participate in a *maryaj pou dis*, a "ten-cent or ten-minute marriage", that is acting as if they were wed while simulating sex with a total stranger". (Danticat 2002, 13-4)

Danticat tends to explain and translate into English the meaning of words and expressions in French or in Creole. There are key concepts related to the carnival in these two languages, and the traveler's aim is to make them known to the reader using all her linguistic assets.

Haitians, like the ancient Greek comedians, have always balanced their tragedies with laughter, using distressing situations as the subjects of satirical songs and jest. I have also always linked the French expression *Jeter la masque*, which means to show one's true colors, to Haitian Carnival, imagining Carnival as one intense moment during which so many colors are shed that each person might seem to be walking in the street parade with a rainbow above his or her head. (Danticat 2002, 16)

When she meets Michelet Divers, Jacmel's best known carnival expert, she herself wears a mask, since she does not reveal her feelings towards the carnival. Danticat acts like an anthropologist, a journalist, and a social researcher: she keeps asking questions to Divers about every single aspect of the upcoming event, and in the meantime, she travels around the area of Jacmel to see the environment that constitutes the Carnival, starting from the cemetery, the place for "the Carnival of the Dead". Each chapter is devoted to a specific place or character, and to the mask that allegorizes them and that will be performed at the Carnival.

After briefly recounting the history of the town, Danticat traces the heroic and tragic history of her home island, "interrogating the signs of the past strewn about and overlooked in the glare and noise of the present" (Nesbitt 2004, 194).

A few more young men have joined the group sitting on top of the colonnaded walls around the square. The walls stand in the shadows of *sabliye* trees, whose flowers, it is said, blossom each day at high noon. People who leave Haiti and don't call, write, or return are said to have gone under the *sabliye* tree, for the word *sabliye* with the last two syllables placed before the first is *blye sa*, or forget it. The *sabliye* is the "forgetting" tree, which African slaves were made to walk under soon after arriving in the so-called New World, in places like Jacmel. (Danticat 2002, 19)

She explains that Haiti occupies a western third of the island of Hispaniola, and that its original inhabitants, the Arawak Indians, called it Ayiti, the land of the mountains. Then she continues telling the history of the Arawak kingdom, the arrival of Columbus and then of the French, who imported slaves from West Africa; the battles between the

French, the Spanish and the slaves and the figures of the *affranchis*, free blacks and mulattos who claimed rights over the land as the whites. Slaves and *affranchis* united against the white French colonists and won Independence in 1804. “In the Carnival there will be a group of white colonists, commanding black slaves hauling heavy logs along the parade route” (Danticat 2002, 43). In old Carnivals it was also possible to see people wearing hats *à la* Simon Bolivar, in memory of the short period the Latin American revolutionary spent in Haiti on his way to Venezuela in 1816.

All the characters and figures Danticat mentions and describes compose the varied ensemble of Carnival actors who have relationships with Haitian literature, history, and popular culture. An important example is Hadriana, the celebrated female protagonist of René Depestre’s novel (*Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, 1988), who has become a myth in contemporary Haiti, as well as two other figures described in that same work, the *chaloska* and the zombie. The *chaloska* is a character in military garb with a protruding mouth and clawlike teeth, based on an actual military officer, Charles Oscar Etienne, who terrorized Jacmel in the early 1900s: the children run away from him or confront with him singing this rhyme in Kreyòl:

Chaloska m pa pè w;
Se moun ou yé.
(*Chaloska* I’m not afraid of you;
You’re a human being.)
(Danticat 2002, 68)

Danticat shares Depestre’s idea of a zombie as one who “has never been as simple a creation as the bleary-eyed villains of 1930’s Hollywood. Instead, zombification is a state of deterioration based on the loss of one’s *ti bonanj*, one’s good angel, which turns one into a vacuous shell of one’s former self” (Danticat 2002, 69).

At the carnival Danticat would also see the mask of a national hero, Makanani, an American sergeant sent by the US to repress Haitian military forces in the early 1990s; she would see the famous Yawe, a giant mass of cowhide half covered with red satin. “The thrashing of the Yawe is a re-creation of a hunting scene, a shared memory of the Arawak Indians, the African slaves, and the French buccaneers, in which a wild bull that has already been shot with arrows and wounded is still attempting to run away. [...] The Yawe has its parallel in *Lu bov fint*, or the false ox of Italian carnivals” (Danticat 2002, 84).

The Jacmel devil mask is seen as a representation of the Yoruba war deity, Ogun, who is also the god of metal and iron. The carnival is the occasion to revive West African culture and its rituals, and to remember the African cultural roots of the country. Like the Beg Pardon in Carriacou in Marshall’s novel, the African rituals that arrived in the Caribbean and encountered the native populations and the European colonizer, have gone through various processes of transformation.

In her route towards the Carnival, Danticat meets painters and artists, whose works are related to the event, and she explains the meaning of a peculiar Haitian figure and concept, the *lamayòt*.

When I was a child living in Port-au-Prince, along with the *chaloska* there was another carnival character that came to find me, even though I never went looking for it. It was the *lamayòt*. The *lamayòt* is a secret, a benign Pandora’s box one willingly unveils for one’s pleasure. [...] Often a *lamayòt* was an interesting object

– a large marble, a prism – but sometimes it was a small animal – a lizard, a frog, a turtle, or a snake, a marvel for city kids. Later I would notice that the word *lamayòt* was also used in a broader context in adult conversations. If someone tried to show you something too quickly, it was a *lamayòt*. If you were buying something sight unseen, you were getting a *lamayòt*, as was a false personal or political promise. (Danticat 2002, 99-100)

Along with the explanatory and documentary aspect, Danticat's travelogue involves a continuous cultural and linguistic translation that does not ignore the political and economic problems of the country. We often find references to the dictatorship of Papa Doc Duvalier and to his successors, together with the dramatic conditions that the people of every social class and environment have endured in the decade after the 2010 earthquake. Danticat underlines that issues such as inflation, unemployment, illiteracy, political corruption, soil erosion, and contraband trade could be represented through Carnival masks performing "the devil of hunger, the devil of misery, the devil of sadness, the devil of greed" (Danticat 2002, 113). Carnival is a suspended time, as her friend Divers reminds her: "It's like the proverb says, 'After the dance, the drum is heavy'. But during the dance, you're not thinking about the weight of the drum. You forget your troubles and have a good time" (Danticat 2002, 118).

The Carnival celebrates the island's syncretism, past and present, with the living and the dead, "with zombies and apes greeting each other, white colonists kissing Arawak Indians, a lion sharing a bottle of juice with a baby alligator, and slaves shaking hands with ghosts and devils" (Danticat 2002, 118). Yet, there is also a man dressed up as SIDA (AIDS in French), wearing a black dress with the acronym painted in white. AIDS educators walk along with this figure, and a woman explains how SIDA can be destructive and how it kills people: Haitian people must be warned against this peril, and it is important that the mask takes part in the carnival.

The narrative of the Carnival through the presentation of its most important masks with their names and anecdotes in French and Kréyol seems to be for Danticat more than a stylistic choice: it is certainly a kind of literary foregrounding, in which structural elements – the masks – are foregrounded to ensure the reader notices or understands their centrality in Haitian culture. Yet, it is through this foregrounding that the author's trilingualism emerges as her distinctive literary feature. The masks contain an issue, a story, a concept: they represent a piece of that multilingual world that is Haiti and the *diaspora* people.

As the parade starts, Danticat is surrounded by an incredible mixture of religious and profane, political, and popular symbols, and the author often quotes Bakhtin and his study on Carnival to express the aesthetics of such an environment.

But where is she now, or better, what is she now?

I can no longer resist the contagious revelry, *I am* one of those women now, loving and fearing the sensation of red-hot nails pricking me all over, and all *I can* do is dance and dance for relief from their sting. *I am* among the clergy and soldiers in flame. *I am* one of those marchers and migrants, back from the purgatory of exile, expiating sins of coldness and distance. At last, my body is a tiny fragment of a much larger being. *I am* part of a group possession, a massive stream of joy. (Danticat 2002, 147; emphasis added)

The immersion of an *I* into a group possession is the ultimate stage of the writer's "quest". She has now overcome fear and hesitation and constructed an in-depth knowledge and awareness of the Carnival: she has discovered its pervasiveness and importance in Haitian culture, and, finally, she has taken part in it.

So, it did happen after all. I had really been there. Even as others had been putting on their masks, just for one moment, I had allowed myself to remove my own. (Danticat 2002, 158)

I go back to sleep, returning to my own dreams, which are less like dreams now and more like recollections, a series of mental slides of all that I have seen and experienced on what is already a day away. (Danticat 2002, 153)

The author celebrates Haitian cultural transversality until the end of her memoir, referring it especially to the younger generations. She is impressed by the listening of Jennifer Lopez's famous song "If You Had My Love" with lyrics in Kreyòl and recalls the Canadian Indie rock band Arcade Fire's performance in 2014 in Jacmel that closed the carnival weekend. She is happy to share what Régine Chassagne, "the Canadian born female lead and the child of Haitian immigrants, who spontaneously shouted: 'Je t'aime, Jacmel'. I love you Jacmel" (Danticat 2002, 161).

In conclusion, the investigation of the works by Marshall and Danticat has led us to explore contact zones, sites of colonial encounter and of postcolonial dislocation, and its related phenomenon elaborated by M. Louise Pratt, of transculturation, "to depict how subordinate or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture". These groups "do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for" (Pratt 1992,6).

In the process of transculturation those materials transmitted by a dominant culture can be represented by language too, and it is language that goes through re-definition and metamorphosis. It is a complex and dramatic process, it produces losses, erasure, oblivion, but also different formations, hybrid structures.

The writers have shown their "language repertoires" to denote, as Gilmour and Steinitz observe, "the complex array of symbolic resources which constitute most people's experience of language in the world, the way in which they practice communication within it, and the ways in which literature explores and mediates those experiences and practices" (Gilmour and Steinitz 2018, 5).

Despite the time lag between the two works considered, they can both be read as innovative travel narratives, in the sense of enabling possibilities for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, being postcolonial travel texts that, according to Edwards and Graulund, "foreground new ways of encountering the world, thus bypassing exploitative and hierarchical relations by seeking out new stylistics, new grammars, fresh vocabularies and innovative narrative structures for experiencing and writing travel" (Edwards and Graulund 2012, 9-10).

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