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SCUOLA DI DOTTORATO DI RICERCA IN: SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE  
FILOLOGICHE E LETTERARIE  
INDIRIZZO: LINGUISTICA, FILOGIA E LETTERATURE ANGLO-  
GERMANICHE  
CICLO: XXV

**CHAOS, LOSS, PASSAGE AND DESIRE.  
THE EXPERIENCE OF DIASPORA IN THE WORKS  
OF EDWIDGE DANTICAT, JAMAICA KINCAID, ANDREA  
LEVY AND DIONNE BRAND**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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When, in the introduction of her *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language and Space in Hispanic Literatures*, Sophia McClennen outlines a glossary of the terms conventionally employed in the discourse of exile, diaspora is presented as a noteworthy example of territorial displacement. By focusing primarily on the etymology of the word (which “comes from the Greek ‘diaspeirein’, ‘to spread about’, where ‘dia’ means ‘apart’ and ‘speirein’ means ‘to sow or scatter’”<sup>1</sup>), the author puts emphasis on the fact that diaspora is, above all, a question of movement. As a result, the space in which this kind of movement takes place acquires paramount importance and geographical coordinates become essential tools for both critics and writers. Indeed, a number of books whose titles contain words such as ‘map’, ‘chart’ and ‘atlas’ have been published about this subject in recent times, and the whole discourse of diaspora seems to be dominated by the idea of tracking routes.

However, since diaspora is also a major historical event, historical contextualization is as important as geographical localization. It would be impossible, for example, to fully understand the significance of diaspora without acknowledging the history of the Jews’ forced exile from the region of the Kingdom of Judah and Roman Judea, as well as from wider Eretz Israel. This expulsion which is known as *Galut*, began in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC when the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar, conquered the ancient Kingdom of

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<sup>1</sup> S. A. McClennen, *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures*. West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press, 2004, p. 15.

Judah, demolished the First Temple (c. 586 BC), and forced the Jews to abandon the land that had been promised to them under the Mosaic covenant. As a result, the Jews became a scattered people: some of them were allowed to remain in a unified community in Babylon, others settled in Egypt, in the region of the Nile delta, and a third group fled to Judaea. This turned Babylon into a symbol of hardship, exclusion and alienation, and provoked a huge loss in the Jews' cultural heritage. Wandering became the leading theme of their culture, whereas the feeling of incompleteness derived from geographical dispersion grew into a constant presence in their lives.<sup>2</sup> The occupation of Jerusalem thus originated a scattering that resulted in trauma. The Jewish collective consciousness was profoundly shaped by this event, the feeling of loss was never fully overcome, and the Jews' experience of dislocation acquired the status of model and paradigm. The risk, as James Clifford elucidates, is to make this model into an "ideal type":

We should be able to recognize the strong entailment of Jewish history on the language of diaspora without making that history a definitive model. Jewish (and Greek and Armenian) diasporas can be taken as non-normative starting points for a discourse that is travelling in new global conditions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> R. Cohen, "Diaspora and the State: from Victims to Challengers," *International Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3: 1996, pp 507-508.

<sup>3</sup> J. Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9: 3, 1994, p. 306.



The historical trauma brought about by *Galut* is the reason why the idea of diaspora was later extended from the Jewish to the African context. Indeed, what is now known as ‘African diaspora’ began when the Europeans started to use enslaved Africans as forced labourers in the American colonies. England and other European countries colonized the New World driven by the possibility of profit but, in order to be profitable, the newly-conquered wild territories had to be transformed into cultivable agricultural lands. This task was initially fulfilled through the enslavement of natives but, since Native Americans (who did not endure the inhumanity of the workload and suffered from numerous infections and diseases) could not provide the low-cost manual labour that the colonizers were looking for, Europe turned its attention to Africa and started to trade slaves across the Atlantic.

This slave trade (which involved Europe, as well as Africa and the Americas, and can thus be presented as a triangular passage) at the same time supplied the workforce required for the agricultural development of the American colonies, and was highly profitable in itself. The European naval powers provided the exports and the vessels, Africa provided the human inventory, and the New World provided the agricultural establishments. The slave vessels went to sea with a boatload of manufactured goods that were used to buy slaves on the coasts of Africa; whereas the African slaves, who were brought to the Americas, were exchanged for the raw materials produced in the colonies. The slave trade thus gave colonial Europe a threefold

economic motivation: Africans were purchased with European finished goods, slaves were sold, and raw materials were imported. In this way, since the economic resources achieved abroad allowed the European entrepreneurs to build more extensive working facilities at home, the triangular trade played a crucial role in the upsurge of European capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

Due to its latitude, the Caribbean archipelago was both the point of departure of colonial produce and the point of arrival of the African slaves. More poignantly, it was the place “where the fateful/fatal encounter was staged between Africa and the West.”<sup>5</sup> As colonies whose natives were brutally slaughtered and systematically replaced by Africans, the Caribbean societies “were created by colonialism –with the extermination of the native population, slavery and indentured labour as its most important constituting forces.”<sup>6</sup>

Today, as a result of its past, the region presents itself as the crossroads of multiple migratory movements and its communities are remote from the original indigenous population. According to Ruel Johnson (a young writer whose debut collection of short stories, *Ariadne and Other Stories*, won the 2002 Guyana Prize for Literature),

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<sup>4</sup> E. E. Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*. Richmond, Virginia: University of North Carolina Press, 1944, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> S. Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds.) *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: a Reader*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, p. 401.

<sup>6</sup> R. Gowricharn, *Caribbean Transnationalism: Migration, Pluralisation, and Social Cohesion*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006, p. 1.

Caribbean identity today is enmeshed between two diasporic events. The first was due to the globalized nature of the sugar trade, which brought slaves and indentured labourers to these shores. All of our ancestors, except the Amerindians, came to these lands with identities that were located elsewhere. Under the necessarily repressive plantation system, the blunt force trauma of exploitation and subjugation, the cultural memories of our ancestors were eroded or corrupted. [...] Today, the forges of history have given us our own distinguishable, if as yet nebulous, Caribbean cultural dynamic. And as a new paradigm of globalization is upon us, our peoples have been leaving their homelands, some in search of El Dorado of metropolitan wealth, some for higher learning, some for the sheer adventure of it.<sup>7</sup>

Two main ideas are expressed through these words. The first is that the peculiar feature of the Caribbean identity is to be doubly involved in diaspora. The second is that globalization has profoundly affected the dynamics of Caribbean culture. Referring, although implicitly, to Stuart Hall (who, in a lecture delivered at the University of Warwick in 1993, stated that the unique situation of the black British diaspora depends on the fact that its members have been ‘twice diasporised’), Johnson puts the forced passage of Africans, who were enslaved and transplanted, next to the contemporary exodus of West Indian migrants who leave their homelands in search of opportunities. At the same time, connecting today’s migratory movements to globalization and transnationalism, he translates the region’s complex reality into an even more complex global pattern. This last stance, which recalls

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<sup>7</sup> R. Johnson, “The Diaspora”  
[http://caricom.org/jsp/projects/uwicaricomproject/caribbean\\_diaspora.jsp](http://caricom.org/jsp/projects/uwicaricomproject/caribbean_diaspora.jsp)

Clifford's idea that the discourse of diaspora is travelling in new global conditions, is embedded in the awareness that the term that once described *Galut* "now shares meaning with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community."<sup>8</sup> In the same way, acknowledging the effects of globalization, Johnson rejects William Safran's homeland-oriented model of diasporic relocation and embraces the ideas expressed by Robin Cohen in his 1997 *Global Diasporas*. Drawing inspiration from Clifford's 'travelling cultures' as well as from Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*<sup>9</sup>, Cohen concludes that:

Diasporas are positioned somewhere between 'nation-states' and 'traveling cultures' in that they involve dwelling in a nation-state in a physical sense, but traveling in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside the nation-state's space/time zone.<sup>10</sup>

Diasporic subjects are thus to be described as citizens "who live physically dispersed [...] but who remain socially, politically, culturally, and often economically part of the nation-state of their ancestors."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> K. Tölölyan, "The nation-state and its others: In lieu of a Preface", *Diaspora*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1991, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997, p. 135.

<sup>11</sup> L. Basch et al. (eds.), *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, Deterritorialized Nation-states*, New York, Gordon and Breach, 1994, p. 8.

How, then, do we tell diaspora from migration and diasporic subjects from guest-workers, immigrants and refugees? Are these words synonyms? Is diaspora the exclusive domain of historical migrants? Should it be replaced with transnationalism when we refer to contemporary migrations? It is a problematic knot and finding a working definition is probably a chimera. My personal opinion, however, is that the term diaspora can be applied to both past and recent migrations, since the difference is made by the level of political, social and historical awareness connected to these events, rather than by their dating. Accordingly, referring to the ‘Caribbean diaspora’, my intention is to make reference to those experiences of migration that are grounded in self-consciousness. A consciousness that leads thinkers to speculate on the composite nature of this phenomenon, and impel writers to describe it through potent images of chaos, loss, passage and desire.

In order to illustrate these images, this thesis brings together the visions of four eminent women writers: Edwidge Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid, Andrea Levy and Dionne Brand. Its aim is to connect their writings to the most established theories of diaspora and postcolonial studies, while interpreting this complex phenomenon as both a historical event, a private happening and a socio-cultural revolution. At the same time, the idea of assembling the images produced by a group of authors rather than concentrating on one particular imagery is meant to foster a comprehensive vision of this

kaleidoscopic experience. Each chapter turns around one of these writers, whose work is interpreted according to one dominant image.

In the first chapter, the image of chaos is used to portray the multiple ways in which Edwidge Danticat deals with questions of political turmoil, social disorder and personal bewilderment. Looking at both highly praised fictions and less known works, this part of the thesis focuses on Danticat's awareness of the puzzling conditions of displacement and rootlessness faced by migrants, on her recurrent portrayal of Haiti's violence-ridden reality, on her painful depiction of the devastating 2010 earthquake and on her personal bewildering experience of the Jacmel carnival. The second chapter connects the prose of Jamaica Kincaid to images of loss and absence. Focusing predominantly on Kincaid's best-known works, this section questions the role played in her fiction by the (autobiographical) figure of the mother, explores the mechanisms through which Caribbean womanhood is constructed and performed, investigates the controversial interaction between sex and dominance and illuminates the liminal space between life and death. The third chapter, in which the image of passage is used to unravel the fiction of Andrea Levy, illustrates the author's interest in questions of historical memory and hybrid identity, investigates her lucid descriptions of frustrated great expectations, shattered dreams and unsettled lives, interrogates the profound implications of transatlantic crossings and sheds light on the transitional moment in which England finds itself today. In the last chapter, the image of desire is used to interpret the writings of Dionne

Brand. On the one hand, this section faces predominantly political discourses as it focuses on Brand's awareness of social injustice and witnesses her commitment to anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-sexist movements. On the other, it investigates the question of the black female corporeality concentrating on both the question of homosexual desire and the exploitation of the black woman's body.

In this way, resorting to a strategy based on the collection of apparently disparate images, this work aims at reinforcing the idea that the complexity of the Caribbean experience of diaspora cannot be interpreted univocally and that loss, desire, chaos and transition are the main forces pivoting this phenomenon.





**CHAPTER ONE**  
*Edwidge Danticat*

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## 1.1 THE IMMIGRANT ARTIST

There is a passage in Edwidge Danticat's "New York Was Our City on the Hill" (a condensed autobiographical essay written in 2004 for the *New York Times*) that encapsulates the story and the talent of this young writer:

If you are an immigrant in New York, there are some things you inevitably share. For one, if you're a new immigrant, you probably left behind someone you love in the country of your birth. In my case, I was the person left in Haiti when my mother and father escaped the brutal regimes of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier in the early 1970's and fled the extreme poverty caused by the Duvaliers' mismanagement and excess.<sup>12</sup>

These words contain *in nuce* all the major themes, the recurrent motifs and the bitter contradictions that animate Danticat's writing. Haiti, its history of violence and corruption, the poverty of its inhabitants; New York, the illusion of wealth and safety, the daily fight for a better future; the experience of migration, the physical distance between those who leave and those who are left behind, the razor-sharp cracks in their hearts. All these ingredients merge together in these few lines, thus speaking of the writer's life as much as of her literary production.

Edwidge Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince on January 19, 1969. The first child of André (a salesman from the mountains) and

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<sup>12</sup> E. Danticat. "New York Was Our City on the Hill", *New York Times*, November 21, 2004.

Rose (a beautiful textile worker from the provinces) she was born to a working class family whose standing was only slightly elevated by her uncle's position as a Protestant Minister. She was brought up in a small house in the popular district of Bel Air and educated according to rigid Protestant values: hard work, kindness, integrity. Her parents, aunts and uncles, who were essentially poor, maintained strong connections with the provincial environment of their origins and preserved with care their humble, peasant roots. It was through long summer family vacations in the mountains around Léogâne that Edwidge and the other children of the family were able to keep in touch with the folk elements of their culture. In particular, young Edwidge loved to listen to the stories that the older women of the family used to tell each other:

I think my 'insight,' if indeed that's what it is, comes from spending time with a lot of the older women in my family when I was a child. I was always intrigued by the bond between older women who gathered together and the things they told each other. A lot of the stories I have written, including the story of *The Farming of Bones*, came out of listening to those female family conversations, which Paule Marshall so wisely calls 'kitchen poetry.'<sup>13</sup>

Alluding to "From the Poets in the Kitchen," an autobiographical essay in which Paule Marshall connects her literary talent to the expressive talk she heard as a young girl among her mother's friends

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<sup>13</sup> These words are taken from the Penguin group website where a short interview by the author is used to promote the publishing of *The farming of Bones*.  
[http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/farming\\_of\\_bones.html](http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/farming_of_bones.html)

as they sat around a table in the basement kitchen of her Brooklyn brownstone home, Danticat aims at positioning herself among that group of black women writers whose fiction is deeply embedded in the Afro-Caribbean aesthetic heritage. Linking her being a writer to the oral heritage of her mother, Marshall praises the West Indian tradition for both the syntactic uniqueness of its dialect and its unparalleled inventiveness. According to the following declaration, it is thanks to her mother and her friends that the writer can find the right words and images to express her vivid imagination:

They taught me my first lessons in narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence. That is why the best of my work must be attributed to them: it stands a test to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on in the wordshop of the kitchen.<sup>14</sup>

That “legacy of language and culture” which is at the origin of Marshall’s fiction can also be found in Danticat’s writings. In the same way, Barbara Christian observations that Marshall’s works “present a black woman’s search for personhood within the context of a specific black community rather than in reaction to a hostile white society”<sup>15</sup> can easily be applied to many of Danticat’s novels.

When Danticat was two years old her father migrated to the United States in search of better living conditions. Two years later her mother followed him leaving her and her younger brother André

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<sup>14</sup> P. Marshall. “From the Poets in the Kitchen.” In *Reena and Other Short Stories*, 3-12. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1983, pp. 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> B. Christian. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1985, p. 104.

(better known as Bob) in the care of uncle Joseph and aunt Denise. Unfortunately, due to delays with the U.S. immigration their separation was much longer than they would expect.

The plan was for my parents to send for me and my younger brother, André, who were 4 and 2 years old at the time of their departure, when they found jobs and got settled in New York. But because of US immigration red tape, our family separation lasted eight years. The near decade we were apart was filled with long letters, lengthy voice messages on cassette tapes and tearful phone calls, all brimming with the promise that one day my brother and I would be united not only with our parents but with our two Brooklyn-born brothers.<sup>16</sup>

During those years in Haiti, Edwidge attended a modest private school, the Collège Elliot Pierre, where children were exposed to the official version of Haitian history, studied European Literature and were taught in French. As the language of formal education, French was perceived as the alien language of cultural prestige and supposed superiority. Since her family spoke Creole at home, the girl was immersed from the very beginning in a bilingual environment. In a similar way, her upbringing was made of both a strict school learning and a number of deeply influential popular phenomena: from algebra classes to grandmé Melina's tales, from French literature to Caribbean folk music, from geography to carnivalesque celebrations, her cultural imprinting was a mixture of Western (Eurocentric) notions and traditional elements.

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<sup>16</sup> Danticat, "New York Was Our City on the Hill".

In 1981, at the age of twelve, Edwidge finally moved to New York: her dreams of luxury and charm clashed with the harsh reality of migration and the precarious financial situation in which the family found itself was worsened by the language barrier, hateful episodes of racial discrimination and the ruthless bullying of schoolmates. These difficulties were partially relieved by the family's integration into the Haitian community in Brooklyn, as being part of a society within the society gave them the illusion of repairing the socio-cultural links that migration had shattered.

As a shy and introverted teenager, Edwidge enjoyed reading and writing. In particular, she became fond of African-American writers and discovered the greatest figures of Haitian literature.

My first "literary" influences were actually oral: my grandmothers and aunts and the stories they told, both in the structural forms of folktales and in the informal conversations they had with each other. I was also influenced by some very wonderful Haitian writers such as Marie Chauvet, Jacques Roumain, J. J. Dominique, and Jacques Stephen Alexis [...]. The works of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Amy Tan, Maryse Condé, and Jamaica Kincaid have also had a great impact on me.<sup>17</sup>

In 1990 Danticat received her BA degree in French Literature from Barnard College. During her time at Barnard she published a number of short stories and articles for teenagers' magazines. Three years later she received an MA degree at Brown University where she wrote the thesis that lies at the basis of her first novel.

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides\\_F/farming\\_of\\_bones2.asp#interview](http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_F/farming_of_bones2.asp#interview)

Today, Danticat is probably the best-known contemporary novelist of Haitian descent writing in English. Even though she started to speak this language only after moving to America, her talent for writing was evident since 1994. Her award-winning debut novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* tells the story of a young female Haitian immigrant to New York City, Sophie Caco. Skilfully investigating the question of gender at its intersection with violence, the book turns around the protagonist's experience of sexual abuse, her mother's earlier assault by one of Duvalier's secret police (the Tonton Macoute), while questioning the nature of Sophie's relationship with the two Haitian women who raised her before she moved to the United States. In this work, as well as in her equally praised 1995 short story collection *Krik? Krak!*, Danticat describes the joys and sorrows of Haitians, both at home and abroad, where poverty and political despotism are replaced by racism and rootlessness. Danticat's following creation, which was published in 1998, is called *The Farming of Bones*. It is a novel based on the atrocious story of the 1937 massacre of Haitians by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. A collage of historical facts and oral tales, this book received unanimously enthusiastic reviews. *The Dew Breaker* is at the same time a cohesive novel and a short story cycle. It tells the life of a pitiless member of the Tonton Macoutes who, after the collapse of the Duvalier regimes, re-invents his identity, eventually stumbling on his daughter's accidental discovery of the truth. *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007) won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was also



nominated for the National Book Award. This book is a truthful family memoir where love and loss painfully intermingle: from the age of four to the age of twelve, her parents gone in search of a better future, Danticat came to think of her father's brother, Joseph, as her second dad. Several years later, in 2004, the frail, eighty-one-year-old uncle makes his way to Miami, where he thinks he will be safe from political repression. On the contrary, he is brutally imprisoned by the U.S. Customs and dies within a few days. Widely acclaimed by both readers and critics, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* is the latest proof of Edwidge Danticat's talent for writing: dealing with the intellectual's responsibility, it can be interpreted as Danticat's manifesto.

## 1.2 IMAGES OF CHAOS

From the recurrent portrayal of Haiti's violence-ridden present and past to the painful depiction of the devastating 2010 earthquake, from the puzzling condition of displacement faced by migrants to the obscure sensation of rootlessness connected to the experience of diaspora, from the bewildering reality of the Jacmel carnival to the challenging process of artistic creation, Edwidge Danticat has always placed disorientation and chaos at the centre of her prose. Representations of political turmoil, social disorder and personal bewilderment can easily be detected in both her highly praised works and in her less known efforts.

All these books contain images of chaos that Danticat employs to portray the violent reality of Haiti, the bewildering condition of the displaced, the devastating effects of natural disasters, the shocking experience of carnival and the dangerous course which is at the basis of artistic creation. At the same time, these representations of chaos can (and probably) must be read in relation to that Caribbean tradition in which Danticat is so deeply entrenched. In everyday speech, the word chaos refers to a condition of total disorder or confusion. In mythological terms, it is the space out of which gods, men and all things arose. In mathematics, chaos is an advanced field of scientific investigation that involves the analysis of dynamical systems. But what about literature and literary criticism? How does Danticat's art

register, elaborate and represent this state of overwhelming confusion? And, above all, how do these representations interact with the history and culture of the Caribbean?

Chaos has always been a major literary topic: in its various forms of cosmological indistinctness, natural disorder, political anarchy, social conflict, domestic discord and personal unrest, it has been at the core of the narrations of all times inspiring both fictions and historical accounts, classic masterpieces and contemporary works. Harriet Hawkins' interpretation of this steady presence of the idea of chaos in literature is systematized in her *Strange Attractors: Literature, Culture, and Chaos Theory*. Lying on the premise that "modern chaos theory is currently influential everywhere in the creative arts"<sup>18</sup>, the book aims at demonstrating that the scientific models of interaction between order and disorder can usefully be applied to literary texts, thus offering valuable arguments also in terms of literary criticism. Looking at Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* together with Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*, focusing on both Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, considering chaos in literature as a creative necessity, Hawkins makes use of crucial notions of chaos science (fractals, strange attractors, the butterfly effect) to question established theoretical perspectives. Her main point is that

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<sup>18</sup> H. Hawkins. *Strange Attractors: Literature, Culture, and Chaos Theory*. New York: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995, p. 1.

art's complex nonlinear systems are [...] inherently chaotic and therefore at odds with comparatively linear critical, aesthetic, moralistic and ideological ideals of order. Indeed, the signature of a complex nonlinear work of art may be that it not only inspires diverse imitations and dialectically opposite critical interpretations but, in effect, elicits successive artistic and critical efforts to smooth out and impose order (either ideologically, or morally, or structurally) on its structurally, ideologically, and morally chaotic components.<sup>19</sup>

In this way, Hawkins' investigation links literature to chaos and chaos to criticism thus presenting disorder as both a recurrent subject-matter and a helpful interpretative tool. What is implicit in this position is that dialectical juxtapositions and contradictory interpretations are valuable critical devices rather than obstacles in the analysis of literary texts.

A similar position is adopted by Antonio Benítez-Rojo. In his *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (an illuminating study of the legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean region) the Cuban critic argues that, within the complexity of this heterogeneous socio-cultural context, order and disorder exist not in reciprocal antithesis but in creative exchange. Even more paradoxically, he presents chaos as an alternative form of order which, by providing a loose space of connections, pieces together the unstable fragments of the Caribbean meta-archipelago. His daring theory, which derives from the interplay between chaos and the main

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<sup>19</sup>Hawkins. *Strange Attractors: Literature, Culture, and Chaos Theory*, p. 5.

paradigms of modernity, finds easy confirmation in the natural environment of the islands:

the Caribbean is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity. It is, in the final analysis, a culture of the meta-archipelago: a chaos that returns, a detour without a purpose, a continual flow of paradoxes; it is a feed-back machine with asymmetrical workings, like the sea, the wind, the clouds, the uncanny novel, the food chain, the music of Malaya, Gödel's theorem and fractal mathematics.<sup>20</sup>

As this passage makes clear, Benítez-Rojo's point of departure is the connection between nature and culture. In this sense, particular attention must be paid to the detailed study of the plantation system that he brings about in the first part of the book: other than epitomizing the concept of geographical repetition (plantations can be found almost everywhere in the various islands and in South America), this powerful metaphor reveals the complex, consequential relationship between the native land and its colonial exploitation. In a similar way, Édouard Glissant's speculation discloses a strict connection between the peculiarities of the Caribbean cultural identity and the historical traumas of colonization and enslavement. Spurred by the observation of the apparently irreducible difference of the Other, the Martinican philosopher investigates the fluid nature of socio-cultural relations thus stressing the importance of the dynamic processes of mutual exchange. An analogous emphasis on movement

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<sup>20</sup> A. Benítez-Rojo and J. E. Maraniss. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. Durham, N.C. [u.a.]: Duke Univ. Press, 2001, p. 11.

and reciprocity is at the basis of his theory of the *chaos-monde*. As Celia Britton elucidates,

this concept of the “chaos-world” is derived from scientific chaos theory, which argues for the impossibility of explaining an entity (here, the totality of relation) in terms of classical causality or analyzing it via a single system of measurement; whereas an alternative, perhaps more intuitive, way of conceiving it is possible: “the forms of the chaos-world (the incommensurable mixing together of cultures) are unpredictable and guessable”.<sup>21</sup>

In so doing, two of the most acclaimed contemporary postcolonial critics link the question of chaos to the culture of the modern Caribbean.

But how is chaos portrayed in Edwidge Danticat’s literary texts? Why can we take it as ‘the’ image of her work? And more precisely, how does she convey its unstable and contradictory character? To answer these questions, the next pages will try to shed light on the various declinations that this state of utter confusion assumes in the texts. In particular, attention will be paid to the painful representation of the tangled psyche of the displaced self, to the distressing illustration of political violence, to the depiction of the shocking consequences of natural disasters, to the portrayal of the liberating potential of carnivalesque confusion and to the account of the hazardous process of artistic creation.

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<sup>21</sup> C. Britton. *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance*. Charlottesville, Va. [u.a.]: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1999, p. 13.

### *1.2.1 Unstable balances and displaced identities*

If, as Edward said puts it, “appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present”,<sup>22</sup> the difficult situation in which Haiti finds itself today can be looked at as the tragic outcome of yesterday’s imperialistic domination. Indeed, to sketch the history of this country is to run through a long list of colonial invasions and abusive exploitations, to make an inventory of rushed internal struggles and seemingly eternal foreign interventions. Since 1492, when Columbus established a makeshift settlement on the north coast of the island, Haiti has experienced paradoxical historical contradictions: it has been a Spanish possession as well as a French colony, a leading sugarcane producer dependent on slaves as well as the first self-governing black republic, the helpless victim of American interests and of its own dictators. As a result, political instability and social discrimination have always been part of the Haitian routine, shaping both fiction and real life.

While narrating the story of Edwidge Danticat’s old uncle, *Brother, I’m Dying* (which is at the same time a family memoir and a testimony of national history) provides the reader with a short but intense outline of the most uneven incidents in the history of Haiti:

The hill in Bel Air on which the house was built had been the site of a famous battle between mulatto abolitionists and French colonists who’d controlled most of the island since 1697 and had imported black Africans to labor on coffee and

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<sup>22</sup>E. W. Said. *Culture and imperialism*. New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 3.

sugar plantations as slaves. A century later, slaves and mulattoes joined together to drive the French out, and on January 1, 1804, formed the Republic of Haiti. More than a century later, as World War I dawned and the French, British and Germans, who controlled Haiti's international shipping, rallied their gunboats to protect their interests, President Woodrow Wilson, whose interests included, among others, the United Fruit Company and 40 percent of the stock of the Haitian national bank, ordered an invasion. When the U.S. Marines landed in Haiti in 1915 for what would become a nineteen-year occupation, Haitian guerrilla fighters, called Cacos, organized attacks against the U.S. forces from Bel Air.<sup>23</sup>

What surfaces from these lines is a collective experience of socio-political bewilderment enacting a persistent demand for liberation. At the same time, Danticat condenses facts and events, hints at the pervasive logic of subservience (and at the resulting sense of inferiority) produced by centuries of colonization and enslavement, and illustrates the harsh circumstances in which the Haitian diaspora is tragically embedded. In this sense, it is through both her insightful understanding of history and her first-hand experience of migration that her frequent allusions to the difficulties of geographical relocation can be explained. On the one hand, she describes the effects of displacement. On the other, she speculates about questions of cultural belonging and inclusion.

*Breath, Eyes, Memory*, which is a vaguely autobiographical story about a Haitian girl who moves to New York City, connects Sophie Caco's experience of migration with her challenging process

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<sup>23</sup> E. Danticat. *Brother, I'm Dying*. New York: Vintage Books, 2008, p. 29. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym B.



of self-definition. While telling the story of a confusing relocation, Danticat explores the mind of her young character and discloses the psychological effects of geographical recontextualization since, eloquently, both Sophie and her abused mother suffer from posttraumatic stress disorders as well as from personality decompensations. (According to Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, these distorted behavioural patterns are the most visible effects of colonial subjugation.) On the same night of her arrival, after finding her mother in the midst of a violent nightmare, Sophie abruptly realizes that her split self shows on her face:

I looked at my red eyes in the mirror while splashing cold water over my face. New eyes seemed to be looking back at me. A new face all together. Someone who had aged in one day, as though she had been through a time machine, rather than an airplane. Welcome to New York, this face seemed to be saying. Accept your new life.<sup>24</sup>

Watching her new features in the bathroom's mirror, the girl becomes conscious of the fact that the person she used to be is now lost, that her identity is broken into pieces and that her life needs to be reinvented. Working as an immediate, though reliable, source of information, corporeality illustrates the condition of profound alienation in which Sophie finds herself: in the transfer from Haiti to the United States, the bewilderment linked to her country's problematic political situation combines with the disorientation arising

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<sup>24</sup>E. Danticat. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998, p. 49.

from a new and uncomfortable environment. It also proves that, for this young Haitian, moving from the Caribbean to the United States means more than going through space and that migration implies an unsettling transition within the self other than a physical dislocation. The result is a confused person, whose mind has been colonised even after colonization

A similar feeling of estrangement can be found in *Brother, I'm Dying*: remembering her (and her brother Bob's) first night in the American house where her parents lived with their two younger sons, Danticat quotes the very first bedtime exchange between Bob and the seven-year-old Kelly: "In the dark, Kelly, whose Creole was a bit halting but clear, whispered, 'Are you guys adopted?' [...] 'I'll tell you a secret,' Bob whispered back to Kelly in the dark. 'We're really spies from space. We have spy stuff inserted in our heads.'" (B, 116-117) Although humorous, this brief conversation provides priceless information about the distance existing between the younger brothers, born and raised in the United States, and the older children, born in Haiti and uneasily relocated in a new home. As if the worlds they came from were part of two different galaxies, as if Edwidge and Bob came from an alien-nation. At the same time, the children's words implicitly suggest a double articulation of the notions of 'space' and 'alien': the first is both the dimension of height, depth and width in which things (and persons) move and the outer-space of shuttles and UFOs, whereas the latter can refer to both an extraterrestrial being and a person coming from abroad. In this way, Danticat combines the

flimsiness of a family anecdote with the thoughtfulness of a political stance: the result is an in-depth analysis of territorial displacement, physical distance and intense disorientation. Once again, the fact of moving through space forces the subject to reconsider his or her sense of self (or to have it reconsidered by others) thus producing devastating effects of alienation.

Even more poignantly, in “I am not a journalist”, one of the most effective essays contained in the collection *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Danticat communicates her personal adult interpretation of the question of belonging. Written on Monday, April 3, 2000 (the day in which the most famous Haitian journalist – Jean Dominique– was killed) the essay opens with a declaration of envy: while praising her friend’s integrity, Danticat candidly admits that she had always been envious of the confidence with which he called Haiti his country.

‘My country, Jean,’ I said, ‘is one of uncertainty. When I say «my country» to some Haitians, they think I mean the United States. When I say «my country» to some Americans, they think of Haiti.’ My country, I felt, both as an immigrant and an artist, was something that was then being called the tenth department. Haiti then had nine geographic departments and the tenth was the floating homeland, the ideological one, which joined all Haitians living outside of Haiti, in the *dyaspora*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> E. Danticat. *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 49. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym CD

By naming Haiti “the floating homeland”, Danticat seems to link the idea of home to images of unstable balances and sudden shifts, thus positioning the experience of diaspora within the context of chaos in which the country finds itself. At the same time, this expression suggests the idea of staying afloat, eventually associating diaspora to safety and survival.

### ***1.2.2 Violence and vulnerability***

*Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* is an inspiring collection of essays dealing with life, death and art in Haiti and in the Haitian diaspora. Right from the first page, through the sketched account of a devastating past event, Danticat connects the history of her native country with questions of death and violence.

“On November 12, 1964, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, a huge crowd gathered to witness an execution” (CD, 1). The two men in front of the firing squad, Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, are being punished for their affiliation with Jeune Haiti, a group of political opponents whose open intention is to overthrow the Duvalier regime. To transform the deaths of these two young men into a spectacle of warning, President “Papa Doc” Duvalier has ordered that both government offices and public schools would be closed so that

hundreds of loyal employees and adolescent students could be in the crowd. In the meantime, radio, print and television journalists report purged accounts of the execution. Far from presidential censorship, Danticat translates this brutal chronicle into the touching story of a teenage boy who, after witnessing the execution, picks up the bloody eyeglasses that Drouin had been wearing. “Perhaps if he had kept them,” Danticat writes, “he might have cleaned the lenses and raised them to his face, to try to see the world the way it might have been reflected in a dead man’s eyes” (CD, 137). In so doing, Danticat introduces the character of Daniel Morel, a Haitian photographer now living in the United States whose outlook has been biased forever by this terrifying event.

‘A lot of people see my pictures,’ he says. ‘They tell me «you make the country look bad». People sometimes say my photos are too negative. They are shocked by them, but that’s exactly the reaction I want to get from people. I am not trashing Haiti or denigrating it. I am just showing people the way things are because maybe if they see it with their own eyes, they’ll do something to change the situation.’ (CD, 141)

Through the eyes of this disillusioned photographer, Danticat presents Haiti as it is rather than as it should be, putting its inner brutality on view and revealing the catastrophic effects of the socio-political chaos in which it is living.

In the same way, “I Speak Out” (the fifth essay of the same collection) is meant to shock the reader with the inhuman cruelty of Haitian political violence. Through the harrowing recollection of a

painful interview, Danticat exposes the atrocities perpetrated by the junta that followed President Aristide's coup. Alèrte Bélance, the mutilated victim of a brutal machete attack, testifies her martyrdom with strength and self-control:

They sliced me into pieces with machete strokes. They cut out my tongue and my mouth: my gums, plates teeth, and jaw on my right side. They cut my face open, my temple and cheek totally open. They cut my eye open. They cut my body. My whole shoulder and neck and back slashed with machete blows. They cut off my right arm. They slashed my left arm totally and cut off all the fingers of my left hand. Also, they slashed my whole head up with machete blows. (CD, 75-76)

The young and voluptuous wife of a welder who had supported Jean-Bertrand Aristide when he was a presidential candidate, Alèrte was kidnapped by a group of paramilitary men, called *attachés*, who took her to the killing fields and, after reducing her body to "chopped meat" (CD, 82) left her perched on the side of a hill. This story, which Danticat narrates with supreme grace and merciful empathy, speaks of abusive power, ignored rights, extreme cruelty, thus weaving an ordinary life into the larger patterns of Haiti's tragically chaotic recent history. Still, what might have been a hopeless narrative of despair is transformed by Alèrte into a public testimony of survival and eventually enacts a brave demand for social change. Accepting to share her story, the victim restores her agency, reinforces the notion of human dignity and presents social awareness as the only possible means to contrast bloodshed and injustice.

Alèrte's experience seems to follow faithfully the three phases of torture that Elaine Scarry theorizes in her authoritative study *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*:

Torture is in its largest outlines the invariable and simultaneous occurrence of three phenomena which, if isolated into separate and sequential steps, would occur in the following order. First, pain is inflicted on a person in ever-intensifying ways. Second, the pain, continually amplified within the person's body, is also amplified in the sense that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person's body. Third, the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power, a translation made possible by the obsessive mediation of agency. The working of these three phenomena will very gradually emerge during the following description of the place of body and voice in torture.<sup>26</sup>

According to the critic, torture develops through three fundamental and interrelated moments: 1) the infliction of pain, 2) the objectification of pain and 3) the transformation of pain into agent of power. The torturer is thus empowered through the pain imposed upon his (or her) victim while brutality becomes the only language through which he (or she) communicates. Interestingly enough, in the case of Alèrte Bélance, torture empowers the victim rather than the perpetrator: deciding to tell her story in public and to let others see her shocking mutilated body, Alèrte manages to regain control over her life thus replacing the language of abuse with her own voice of protest.

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<sup>26</sup>E. Scarry. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 28.

On the other hand, the torturer's character is at the core of *The Dew Breaker*, a deeply moving work of fiction that explores the world of an Haitian man whose violent crimes lie hidden beneath the new identity that he has built for himself in America. A seemingly harmless man, devoted husband and caring father, the unnamed protagonist of this story slowly reveals himself as one of the infamous thugs who arrested, tortured, and killed dissidents under the regime of "Baby Doc" Duvalier. Even worse, he is remembered as the most brutal of them:

The way he acted at the inquisitions in his own private cell at Casernes eventually earned him a lofty reputation among his peers. He was the one who came up with the most physically and psychologically taxing trials for the prisoners in his block [...] He liked questioning the prisoners, teaching them to play *zo* and *bezik*, stapling clothespins to their ears as they lost and removing them as he let them win, convincing them that their false victories would save their lives. He liked to paddle them with braided cowhide, stand on their cracking backs and jump up and down like a drunk on a trampoline, pound on the protruding bone behind their earlobes until they couldn't hear the orders he was shouting at them, tie blocks of concrete to the end of sisal ropes and balance them off their testicles if they were men or their breasts if they were women.<sup>27</sup>

Swinging in time as well as in place (the narration moves seamlessly from the 1960s to the 1990s and from Haiti to New York City), the book delves into the heated questions of guilt, forgiveness and redemption while connecting the history of Haiti to the bewildering

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<sup>27</sup> E. Danticat. *The Dew Breaker*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004, pp. 197-198.



reality of political violence and torture. At the same time, the cruelty of the character (who gradually regains some sense of humanity while being haunted by the past) is critically questioned rather than merely judged by the writer.

In *The Farming of Bones*, the novel that Danticat wrote to memorialize the victims of the so-called Parsley Massacre, violence and sadism are equally tangible. While telling the story of Amabelle (an orphan Haitian working as a maid for a Spanish family in the Dominican Republic), the book portrays the severe racial politics brought about by the Dominican President Rafael Trujillo and his merciless persecution of Haitians. In 1937, his ethnic cleansing resulted in unruly annihilation: over a span of about five days, 20.000 people of Haitian descent were beaten, tortured and executed by military troops as well as civilians and political authorities. The inability to pronounce the Spanish word *perejil* (parsley) was used to identify strangers among the crowd and those who could not say it properly were immediately categorized as unwanted strangers. It is the case of Amabelle and Yves (her run-away friend) who are seized in Dajabón:

Yves and I were shoved down onto our knees. Our jaws were pried open and parsley stuffed into our mouths. My eyes watering, I chewed and swallowed as quickly as I could, but not nearly as fast as they were forcing the handfuls into my mouth. [...] I coughed and sprayed the chewed parsley on the ground, feeling a foot pound on the middle of my back. Someone threw a fist-sized rock, which bruised my lip and left cheek. My face hit the ground. [...] The faces in the crowd were streaming in and out of my

vision. A sharp blow to my side nearly stopped my breath. The pain was like a stab from a knife or an ice pick, but when reached down I felt no blood. Rolling myself into a ball, I tried to get away from the worst of the kicking horde.<sup>28</sup>

Reporting this emblematic episode of group torture, Danticat sheds light on the tragic interplay between brutality and community: in its hectic aggregation, it is the mass, not the individual, who stuffs parsley, punches and kicks. In this way, brutality is both provoked and conveyed by chaos: on the one hand, political disorder and social turmoil are the spur of this shocking image of collective cruelty, on the other, anarchy and unrest find expression in Dajabón's muddled "kicking horde".

Representing slaughter and abuse in their historical dimension, *The Farming of Bones* proves that violence has always played a crucial role in the definition of Haitian identity. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat's decision to place the conception of the main character in the context of sexual abuse connects the life of the country with cruelty and exploitation in the same way as Sibylle Fischer's analysis of the reports written by white settlers during the Haitian Revolution bears witness of the relationship between the birth of the first independent nation in Latin America and "rape, material destruction, and infinite bloodshed"<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> E. Danticat. *The Farming of Bones: A Novel*. New York, NY: Soho Press, 1998, pp. 193-194.

<sup>29</sup> S. Fischer. *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, p. 4.

Nevertheless, the covert violations of human rights that take place in the American detention camps demonstrate that violence is not an Haitian prerogative and *Brother, I'm Dying* is a scandalous revelation of this shameful reality. In its peculiar, poignant style, the book tells the personal story of Joseph (Danticat's eighty-one-year-old uncle) while focusing on shared issues of racism and segregation. The scheme is simple: in spite of the proper documentation he is travelling with, on his arrival in Miami Joseph is held by immigration agents and sent to Krome Detention Center. Treated without regard to his failing health and old age, he dies the following day. Once again, political chaos and racial discrimination result in violence and disrespect.

### ***1.2.3 Shocking (shaking) nature***

In a different way, chaos can also be detected in Danticat's literary representations of natural disasters. Be it the result of a violent hurricane or of a sudden tsunami, geographical disarray is at the core of some of her most painful descriptions.

When, on Tuesday, 12 January 2010, a catastrophic magnitude 7.0 Mw earthquake, with an epicentre near the town of Léogâne (a few miles west of Port-au-Prince) changed the face of Haiti, Danticat was overwhelmed by the thought of her friends and family members

who lived there. With an estimated 230,000 people dead, 300,000 injured and 1,000,000 made homeless, countless residences and commercial buildings destroyed and most infrastructures severely damaged, Haiti had come to look like the most dreadful war zone, where rescue and recovery efforts had tragically replaced everyday activities and confusion and despair had taken the place of children's games. Out of these heartbreaking premises comes a number of documentary articles that Danticat wrote for *The New York Times* (such as "A Little While" or "A year and a day"), a short work of children's fiction and the last, poignant essay of the collection *Create dangerously*.

Danticat's *Eight Days: A Story of Haiti* is a narrative of hope and survival aiming at restoring the memory of Haiti as it was before the disaster while hinting at the possibility of a new beginning. Talking about her daughter's anxious reaction to the quake, Danticat said "I wrote this story to try to explain to her what had happened, but also to find a kind of hopeful moment in it so it wasn't, at least to a child, all devastation." Mission accomplished: hope surfaces through the pages. After being rescued from under his collapsed house eight days after the earthquake, the seven-year-old protagonist, Junior, reveals that he used the power of his imagination to survive the horrors of being trapped. On a strictly chronological order, he gives a systematic account of the games he played in his mind: on the first day, he flew his kite and played marbles with all the kids in his neighbourhood; on the second day he played hide-and-seek with his

little sister; on the third day, he stayed with his parents; on the following days he sang a solo in the Sainte Trinité children's choir, played soccer, got wet and muddy in the countryside, rode a bicycle on Champs de Mars Plaza. Finally, Junior describes the sweet sensation of being back home, the joy of eating the most sugary mango he has ever tasted, the warmth of his Manman's hug. Still, a bitter taste lingers in his mouth: "Sitting there on the living room floor, I thought about how much I missed Oscar." Oscar was Junior's best friend, he had been trapped with him in the rubble and had helped him in the creation of his make-believe games, but he had gone to sleep after playing soccer on the fifth day and never woke up. It is a brief moment of mourning which eventually brings us back to the harsh reality of the Haitian earthquake. Nevertheless, both the author's final note and the illustrator's paintings restore the initial sensation of an indomitable resistance. "Yet in spite of everything, Haiti's children still dream. They laugh. They live. They love", Danticat writes.

Geared at children aged four to eight, this book focuses on the happy memories of a stunning Caribbean island and on its young inhabitants' strenuous attempt to survive. By giving a picture of the breath-taking beauty of this place as it originally was, Danticat makes for an amazing tribute to both the land and its people. The same is true for the illustrator, Alex Delinois,<sup>30</sup> who successfully recreates the

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<sup>30</sup> Alix Delinois is a freelance picture book illustrator for HarperCollins Publishers and Scholastic Press as well as a certified New York State art teacher. A Bachelor of Fine Arts from Pratt Institute and a Masters of Arts in Art Education from Brooklyn College, his illustrations are mostly based on mixed media that consist of collage, acrylic and crayons. Delinois' subjects of interest include observations in Harlem

visual landscape of his native island as well as the beaming smiles of its children. Thanks to their artistic efforts, this book proves that, even though Haiti will bear the signs of this catastrophe for a very long time, its beauty can be brought back through art, life can be safeguarded by imagination, hope and endurance can be taught to children.

A pure matter of coincidence, a child with outstretched arms, Kiki, has become the iconic image of the devastating earthquake since a New York photographer working for Polaris Images, Matthew McDermott, portrayed him in the exact moment of his salvation, “They [the New York Task Force 1, a US search-and-rescue team] pulled him out and he immediately threw his arms out and smiled. He did it all on his own”.<sup>31</sup> McDermott said. “When it happened, we had to get back and look at the camera. It was an incredible moment. You start losing hope after eight days.” Significantly, the story of this boy, who was pulled alive from the rubble after almost eight days, has nothing to do with fiction: real life can still be a surprise.

In a similar way, after picturing the dreadful impact of this catastrophic earthquake, the twelfth chapter of *Create Dangerously* ends with a statement of hope. Death and suffering materialize amidst crowds of corpses and heaps of rubbles while disorganization and confusion manifest in the blank eyes of survivors and volunteers, yet,

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and NYC's urban setting, his Haitian background, as well as Black culture and history.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/kiki-provides-high-definition-of-catastrophe/story-e6frg6so-1225822692717>

by the end of the essay, Danticat transforms an unknown homeless resident of a refugee camp into the next Picasso:

While driving through Léogâne one morning, Jhon and I spot, past a cardboard sign with a plea for food in the entryway of a makeshift refugee camp, a large white tent with a striking image painted on it: a stunningly beautiful chocolate angel with her face turned up toward an indigo sky as she floats over a pile of muddied corpses. Jhon leaps out of the car to have a better look. Misty-eyed, he whispers, 'Like Picasso and Guernica after the Spanish Civil War. We will have our Guernica.' 'Or thousands of them,' I concur. (CD, 169-170)

Chaos, suffering and desolation are neither cancelled nor forgotten but despair and vulnerability are converted into productive sources of artistic creation and art succeeds in paving the way for survival and renovation.

#### ***1.2.4 The liberating potential of carnivalesque transformations***

A pack of street vendors is gathered on the sidewalk that runs along the flamboyant square of Jacmel, Haiti. Carnival celebrations are close at hand. People come and go, fanning their faces with pieces of paper. "Those who love pleasure will always be poor" shouts a preacher who

exhorts repentance while walking amidst the crowd. “Those who follow the desires of a sinful nature, their lives will produce [...] evils”<sup>32</sup> yells another. By portraying these two women in their attempt to warn passers-by against the immorality of pagan festivities, Danticat positions her unconventional travelogue *After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Haiti* within the context of her personal upbringing. As a child living in a destitute neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince with her Baptist minister uncle, Edwidge was considered both too young and too vulnerable to join the carnival. Those long days of wild dancing, the crazy parades of flatbed trucks, the thrilled revellers that inhabited the streets were unmistakably too dangerous for a twelve-year-old. Yet, her curiosity was so strong and her desire so intense that, for years, her uncle had to use frightening tales to keep her away.

People always hurt themselves during carnival, he said, and it was their fault, for gyrating with so much abandon that they would dislocate their hips and shoulders and lose their voices while singing too loudly. People went deaf, he said, from the clamor of immense speakers blasting live music from the floats to the viewing stands and the surrounding neighborhoods. Not only could one 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. (ATD, 13)

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<sup>32</sup> E. Danticat. *After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Haiti*. London: Vintage, 2004, p. 20. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym ATD.



While preventing the girl from getting hurt or harassed, this long list of warnings implies a twofold critique of carnival. On the one hand, Danticat's uncle condemns the lavish, immoral hedonism spurred by this event. On the other, he links carnivalesque celebrations to dangerous moments of disorder and unpredictability.

Although essentialist, this last position can easily find confirmation in the field of literary theory. As a point of departure for further, more in-depth investigations, the fact that carnival is the kingdom of chaos is a widely accepted postulation. As Stuart Hall makes clear in his faultless reading of Mikhail Bakhtin's legendary essay on Rabelais<sup>33</sup>, "Carnival is a metaphor for the temporary licensed suspension and reversal of order, the time when the low shall be high and the high, low, the moment of upturning, of 'the world turned upside-down'"<sup>34</sup>. More in detail, while praising the imaginative potential of this subversion, Hall shares Bakhtin's idea that a totally alternative aesthetics finds expression in popular events:

Based on studies of the importance of fairs, festivals, *mardi gras*, and other forms of popular festivity, Bakhtin uses 'carnival' to signal all those forms, tropes, and effects in which the symbolic categories of hierarchy and value are inverted. The 'carnavalesque' includes the language of the market-place –curses, profanities, oaths, colloquialism which disrupt the privileged order of polite utterance–rituals, games and performances, in which the genital zones, the 'material bodily lower strata', and all that belongs to

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<sup>33</sup> Bakhtin M. M. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

<sup>34</sup> S. Hall in A. White. *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing: Collected Essays and Autobiography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 6.

them are exalted and the formal, polite forms of conduct and discourse dethroned.<sup>35</sup>

In this way, the harsh condemnation expressed by the minister is enhanced rather than censored while carnival acquires the status of a revolutionary cultural phenomenon. Even more significantly, from the point of view of the Jamaican theorist, by subverting the norms of decency as well as the rules of the established powers, these extreme manifestations of chaos and disorder give access to a realm of cultural hybridity, political transgression and social inclusion otherwise inaccessible.

Driven by both the necessity to overthrow the terror that her uncle instilled in her mind during childhood and the desire to experience this peculiar form of national belonging, in 2002 Danticat ventures into the beating heart of carnival, Jacmel.

I was aching for a baptism by crowd here, among my own people. I wanted to confront the dual carnival demons, which I had been so carefully taught to fear: the ear-splitting music and the unbridled dancing amid a large group of people, whose inhibitions were sometimes veiled by costumes and masks. (ATD, 15-16)

A southern coastal town that tourist guides alternatively describe as the Riviera of Haiti or the Ibiza of the Caribbean, Jacmel hosts the most pervasive of carnival celebrations: it is the home of a long-lasting tradition of *papier-mâché* processions and of colourful street

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<sup>35</sup> Hall in White, *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing: Collected Essays and Autobiography*, pp. 6-7.

parades, the perfect site for collective sessions of foolish dancing and the ideal place for active participation. Danticat's mission to abandon her position of distant observer and replace its dull idleness with the sparkling energy of music and the vivid exuberance of masks and costumes could not be accomplished in a better location. With the help of Michelet Divers, a stocky forty-seven-year-old who works for the radio and serves as cultural adviser in the organization of the event, the young writer learns to appreciate the carnival of Jacmel and its environment. In the days before carnival, she explores the area, visits the local cemetery, gets lost in the lush rain forest, meets interesting people and discovers the wonders of the many characters, costumes and masks that are part of Haitian folklore. In the end, once that spontaneous personal impressions have been blended with witty cultural references, when every single detail has been recorded on the page and Bakhtin's theories have been verified, Danticat can finally merge with the crowd:

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 flames. I am one of those marchers and migrants, back from the purgatory of exile, expatriating 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. I feel like I am twirling around a maypole, and going much too fast, and I cannot stop. My head is spinning, but I don't care. There is nothing that seems to matter as much as following the curve of the other bodies pressed against mine. In that brief space and time, the

carnival offers all the paradoxical elements I am craving:  
anonymity, jubilant community, and belonging. (ATD, 147)

The result is a long-lasting sensation of liberty and overwhelming perplexity: “Was that really me? So unencumbered, so lively, so free” (ATD, 158) Danticat asks incredulous while watching random images of herself on a television screen.

Singing from the top of her lungs, shaking her body without inhibitions, draping her arms around strangers, Danticat generates a new version of her personality and becomes herself one of the “metaphors of transformation” theorized by Stuart Hall. While contributing to the imaginative creation of a world of transgression and subversion, these metaphors become powerful tools for the interpretation of the relationship between the social domain and its symbolic counterpart. In a similar way, masks and costumes reveal the contradictory nature of contemporary societies. During the parade the ambiguity of human relations is made public by the pacific co-existence of slaves and colonists. Time and space become inconsequential details as Gandhi, Mandela and Che Guevara stroll together along Jacmel’s main street. Racial discrimination is turned into mockery by the pale figure of the Wandering Jew who walks hand in hand with a man dressed in an army uniform. Chaos becomes the new order and the old interpretative categories must be renovated whereas segregation and estrangement are replaced by feelings of inclusion and belonging. Paradoxically enough, it is in this domain of

inconsistencies that the Haitian community finds itself whole and intact despite its bewildering socio-political reality.

### 1.3 CREATE “WORLDLY”

Danticat’s latest effort, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, has already seduced both readers and critics. This eloquent, moving and highly personal collection of essays was named a 2010 New York Times Book Review Editors’ Choice, won the 2011 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature and has recently been selected by the 2012 One Book, One Philadelphia Committee. The One Book, One Philadelphia program is a joint project of the Mayor’s Office and the Free Library of Philadelphia, whose goal is to promote reading and to encourage the entire greater Philadelphia area to come together through the discussion of one single book. According to their website, “the book illustrates the struggle of making art in exile – and what it’s like to exist in a country constantly in conflict, where even the act of reading means taking a stand against oppression”.

Combining memoir and criticism, Danticat presents herself as an immigrant artist from a traumatized motherland and writes twelve inspiring essays rooted in Haiti as well as in the Haitian diaspora. The collection purposely takes its name from Albert Camus’s last published lecture. “To create today is to create dangerously” Camus stated in that speech. He also added:

One may long, as I do, for a gentler flame, a respite, a pause for musing. But perhaps there is no other peace for the artist than what he finds in the heat of combat. ‘Every wall is a door,’ Emerson correctly said. Let us

not look for the door, and the way out, anywhere but in the wall against which we are living. Instead, let us seek the respite where it is – in the very thick of battle. For in my opinion, and this is where I shall close, it is there. Great ideas, it has been said, come into the world as gently as doves. Perhaps, then, if we listen attentively, we shall hear, amid the uproar of empire and nations, a faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope. Some will say that this hope lies in a nation, others, in a man. I believe rather that it is awakened, revived, nourished by millions of solitary individuals whose deeds and works every day negate frontiers and the crudest implications of history. As a result, there shines forth fleetingly the ever-threatened truth that each and every man, on the foundations of his own sufferings and joys, builds for them all.<sup>36</sup>

The artist is asked, then, to take the risk of creating despite all the imperfections of the human condition and to work with them as the foundation of brave creative achievements. In a similar way, within the pages of *Create Dangerously*, Danticat solicits herself and other immigrant artists to create out of hazard, to voice their countries' "legacy of resilience and survival" (CD, 14) despite, or because of, the horrors that drove them from their homelands and that continue to haunt them. In Danticat's words, "to create dangerously is [...] to create fearlessly, boldly embracing the public and private terrors that would silence us, then bravely moving forward even when it feels as though we are chasing or being chased by ghosts" (CD, 148).

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<sup>36</sup> A. Camus, *An Excerpt from a Lecture "Create Dangerously": Given at the University of Uppsala in December 1957*. [Pittsburgh]: New Laboratory Press, 1963, p. 4.

Moving with ease from personal memories to historical descriptions and from literary criticism to confidential details, Danticat tells the story of an aunt who guarded her family's homestead in the Haitian countryside, describes the tragic aftermath of the January, 2010 earthquake, testifies the demise of a cousin who died of AIDS while living in Miami as an undocumented alien, reports the experience of meeting a woman mutilated in a machete attack, recounts brutal political executions. With graceful restraint, she mourns the death of her friend Jean Dominique (whose political assassination shocked the world) while praising the vivid imagination of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the candour of Daniel Morel's photography.

In the first essay, Danticat uses a shocking representation of murder (such as the pitiless execution of the political activists Marcel Numa and Louis Druin) to connect the image of her native island to heated questions of systemic violence and ignored human rights and to expose the artist's challenge of creating under such dangerous circumstances. Behind the facade of a bittersweet family memoir, the second essay, "Walk Straight", is Danticat's recognition of her own split nature: the Haitian niece of an old and stubborn aunt on one side, the American writer on the other. The essay "I am not a journalist" is a tribute to the memory of her friend Jean Dominique, an acclamation of his intellectual consistency and a considered analysis of topics such as diaspora, cultural identity and national belonging. Chapter 4 is about remembrance and removal: through the works of Jan



Dominique, the orphan daughter of Jean, Danticat investigates our safeguarding temptation to forget, the writer's necessity to remember and the dangerous collusion between (biased) memory and corrupted power. In the fifth essay (eloquently entitled "I Speak Out") Danticat records Alerte Bélance's testimony of torture and political abuse. Spurred by the real story of her cousin Marius (the name is fictional), who died of AIDS while living as an illegal immigrant in Florida, the sixth essay plays on the double meaning of the elegiac Haitian idiom "the other side of the water". Usually implied to indicate the world of the dead, it can also refer to a migrant's country of destination. Poignantly enough, the awareness that migration, as death, creates an irreparable divide between those who go away and those who stay behind is made explicit by the linguistic fact that afterlife and diaspora are defined by the same expression. Chapters 7, 8 and 9, respectively originated by the bicentennial anniversary of the Haitian declaration of independence, the aftermath of hurricane Katrina and the memory of 9/11, sensibly investigate the connections (and disconnections) between the US and the rest of the world. In "Welcoming Ghosts" Danticat compares the 1980s graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat with the legendary Haitian painter and Vodou priest Hector Hyppolite: focusing predominantly on the ancestral presences that inhabited their works, she discusses questions of cultural heritage, collective memory and inspiration. In the eleventh chapter (which turns around the figure of a disenchanted photographer, her friend Daniel Morel) Danticat defines the social role of the contemporary artist while reflecting on

questions of iconography and representation. This piece is an open call for responsibility, an invitation for all artists to create fearlessly as if there were no other meaning in art than to be the voice, or the icon, of the human condition. “Our Guernica”, the last chapter of the collection pictures the effects of the catastrophic 2010 earthquake while hinting at the possibility to translate suffering and desolation into sources of artistic inspiration.

Through these essays, Danticat positions her personal story within the broader context of the troubled history of Haiti and locates her own experience as a writer within that community of immigrant artists who create despite the horrors of their worlds. At the same time she tries to explain what it means to be an artist “when both the creation and the reception, the writing and the reading, are dangerous undertakings” (CD, 11), accounts for the silent heroism of these artists’ audiences and struggles to define the public function of the diasporic intellectual. What does it mean to be a reader in a time of political abuse and violent repression? How rebellious is the act of creating under a regime of fear and silence? Which huge responsibility burdens the intellectual? Danticat’s point is straightforward:

Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I’ve always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them. Coming from where I come from, with the history I have – having spent the first twelve years of my life under both dictatorships of Papa Doc and his son, Jean-Claude –this is what I’ve always seen as the unifying principle among all writers. This is what, among other

things, might join Albert Camus and Sophocles to Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Osip Mandelstam, and Ralph Waldo Emerson to Ralph Waldo Ellison. Somewhere, if not now, then maybe years in the future, a future that we may have yet to dream of, someone may risk his or her life to read us. Somewhere, if not now, then maybe years in the future, we may also save someone's life, because they have given us a passport, making us honorary citizens of their culture. (CD, 10)

A different perception of the world is needed, Danticat seems to be saying. The immigrant artist has to bear witness of the unstable (and unpredictable) reconfigurations of reality, be aware of the risks connected to political oppression and geographical dislocation and find alternative sources of artistic inspiration. His (or her) work has to be a synthesis of historical consciousness, socio-political engagement and creative talent; it must serve as a testimony for future generations and as a fierce declaration of intellectual independence. Even more importantly, both of them (the text and its author) have to be located in the world.

This idea of *worldliness* links Danticat's position to Edward Said's analysis of the role of the intellectual in contemporary society. In his 1993 Reith lecture series, titled *Representations of the Intellectual*, the Palestinian critic investigates the troublesome relationship between intellectuals and power, thus providing concrete evidence of what it means to be an independent thinker. While celebrating the figure of the artist in exile, whose liminal existence produces a prolific creative tension between personal disorientation and cultural dynamism, Said stresses the necessity of speaking truth to

power and puts the accent on the political responsibility connected to cultural activities. In particular, he states that the intellectual's role

cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place [it] is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them) to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.<sup>37</sup>

The ground-breaking essays contained in *Create dangerously*, the critical sense of their author, her being “unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say”<sup>38</sup> prove that Danticat embodies Said's model of the contemporary intellectual. At the same time, the text's multiple connections with the chaotic reality of Haiti and the Haitian diaspora and its geo-historical situatedness provide evidence of her capacity to get involved in the socio-political dimension. In this sense, from a saidian standpoint, Danticat's position of immigrant artist from a country in crisis allows her to be in the world and to intervene in it, eventually creating “worldly” other than dangerously.

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<sup>37</sup> E. Said. *Representations of the Intellectual*. New York: Vintage, 1994, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p. 23

## CHAPTER TWO

*Jamaica Kincaid*

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## 2.1 NEVER AT PEACE

In a famous interview conducted by Selwyn R. Cudjoe in 1987 Jamaica Kincaid details her life in public for the first time. At the very beginning of this conversation, Kincaid declares: “I left Antigua shortly after my sixteenth birthday, in June of 1965. I came to America and became an au pair girl.”<sup>39</sup> Although strictly motivated by the circumstances of the interview, the decision to place her intentionally abrupt separation from her native island at the beginning of the talk reveals Kincaid’s determination to present herself as a turbulent outsider. At the same time, such a premise discloses the duplicity of Kincaid’s existence, since an implicit (though radical) distinction is drawn between the Antiguan girl of the past and the western woman of the present, as well as between the poor au pair of the beginnings and the successful writer of today. Again, it opposes the Caribbean island of her origins to the American environment in which she eventually gave birth to a new, ground-breaking version of herself: as a consequence of geographic relocation, a world-famous writer with an exceptional talent has taken the place of an anonymous inexperienced teenager.

Nevertheless, Kincaid’s unruly nature has not changed over the years. Quite the opposite, her desire to feel free from conventions and

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<sup>39</sup> S. R. Cudjoe, “Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview,” *Callaloo*, 12 (Spring 1989), pp. 396-411. Reprinted in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, edited by Cudjoe (Wellesley, Mass.: Calaloux, 1990), pp. 215-231.

to unleash her wild creativity is made explicit in a 1990 interview with Leslie Garis. “Do you feel that finally you’ve made a world in which you’re at peace?” asks Garis. “I hope never to be at peace!”, Kincaid replies,

hope to make my life manageable, and I think it’s fairly manageable now. But – oh, I would never accept peace. That seems death. As I sit here enjoying myself to a degree, I never give up thinking about the way I came into the world, how my ancestors came from Africa to the West Indies as slaves. I just could never forget it. Or forgive it. It’s like a big wave that’s still pulsing.<sup>40</sup>

Acknowledging the pulse of that wave, Kincaid connects her life and her writing to the enslavement of Africans, the colonization of the Caribbean islands and the alienating effects of imperialism, thus revealing the socio-historical genesis of her unremitting restlessness.

Jamaica Kincaid was born Elaine Potter Richardson on May 25, 1949 in St John’s, Antigua (an island that would not gain full independence from British colonial rule until 1981). The girl never met her biological father, a taxi driver named Roderick Potter, and was brought up by her Dominican born mother, Annie Richardson Drew, and her stepfather, a cabinetmaker and carpenter whose name was David Drew. Kincaid (who, at the age of three, had already been taught to read by her assertive mother) was enrolled in the Moravian School and later attended the Antiguan Girls School. She was well

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<sup>40</sup> L. Garis, “Through West Indian Eyes”, *New York Times Magazine*, October 7 1990.



educated under the British educational system and won a scholarship for the Princess Margaret School where her critical mind and sharp tongue identified her as a rebel and a troublemaker. For the first nine years of her life Kincaid was very close to her mother, but things changed when her three brothers were born in quick succession. Not only did her mother's focus shift from her (who once was the centre of her attention) to the younger children, but the family's financial difficulties became more and more evident. Here is Kincaid's mature recognition of that experience:

I don't know if having other children was the cause for our relationship changing – it might have changed as I entered adolescence, but her attention went elsewhere. And also our family money remained the same but there were more people to feed and to clothe and so everything got sort of shortened not only material things but emotional things, the good emotional things I got a short end of that. But then I got more of things I didn't have, like a certain kind of cruelty and neglect.<sup>41</sup>

The sudden interruption of the mother-daughter relationship, the feeling of betrayal that originated in the girl's mind and the bitterness that it provoked nourished Kincaid's critical sense. On the one hand, she started to condemn British colonialism and to blame the colonized subjects for having internalised the attitude of the colonizer; on the other, she became critical of gender hierarchies. As a brilliant student who loved to read and had a way with words, she should have been

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<sup>41</sup> J. Kincaid, BBC World Service, February 11 2003. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/features/womenwriters/kincaid\\_life.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/features/womenwriters/kincaid_life.shtml)

encouraged, by both her parents and her teachers, to go on with her studies. Quite the reverse, no one expected anything from her but subservience. As a female who “would have been lucky to be a secretary somewhere,”<sup>42</sup> she was pulled out of school at thirteen to help her ailing father and to allow her brothers to achieve university education. In 1965, her parents heard of an American family who needed a live-in baby sitter at their home in Scarsdale and Kincaid left Antigua without regrets.

Kincaid lived this event as a definitive departure from her native island and a crucial moment of emancipation from both the narrow-minded Caribbean society and her uncomfortable family. In Scarsdale, the au pair job was stressful, the girl felt hopeless and depressed, the host family treated her as a servant and she was eager to explore the metropolitan environment. For these reasons, a few months later Kincaid decided to move to New York, where she started to take care of four little girls for a wealthy family in the Upper East Side of Manhattan. She quitted after three years, won a full scholarship to Franconia College in New Hampshire, took classes for some months, then went back to New York City, worked at a series of menial jobs and finally started publishing in a magazine for teenagers.

It was then, in 1973, that she ceased being Elaine Potter Richardson and became Jamaica Kincaid. Changing her name, she says, was a way of disguising herself, a stratagem to write anonymously:

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<sup>42</sup> Garis, “Through West Indian Eyes”.

One reason I changed my name is because when I started to write I didn't want anyone I knew to know I was writing, because I knew – and I was not wrong – that they would laugh at me, they would say that I was a daughter of a vain woman attempting doing this terrible thing.<sup>43</sup>

Around that time Kincaid met George Trow, a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* who introduced her to her editor William Shawn. Since Shawn was particularly impressed by her work as a freelance, the writer was hired for the “Talk of the Town” column. Under the editor's mentorship, Kincaid began to write fiction, which was often published as installments in *The New Yorker*. Encouraging her efforts and helping her to develop a distinctive voice, Shawn eventually offered her the possibility to save her life: “I can't imagine what I would do if I didn't write”, Kincaid says:

I would be dead or I would be in jail because – what else could I do? I can't really do anything but write. All the things that were available to someone in my position involved being a subject person. And I'm very bad at being a subject person.<sup>44</sup>

Today, Jamaica Kincaid lives in a secluded clapboard house in Vermont, teaches at the African and African-American Studies

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<sup>43</sup> S. Nasta. *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 85.

<sup>44</sup> Garis, “Through West Indian Eyes”.

Department at Harvard University and is internationally acclaimed as a resourceful writer with a singular voice.

Her first literary work, “Girl”, appeared in the June 26 issue of *The New Yorker*. A dramatic verse composition about the condition of young women in the Caribbean, it marked the beginning of her long and rewarding literary career. A few years later, in 1984, the text was included in *At the Bottom of the River*, Kincaid’s first collection of stories. In 1985, the novel *Annie John* was published: while featuring an Antiguan girl’s coming of age, the book covers issues as diverse as family relationships, homosexuality, racism, clinical depression, and the struggle between scientific knowledge and indigenous medicine. In 1988, Kincaid wrote the essay *A Small Place*: highly provocative both in shape and in substance, this short composition denounces the corruption hidden beneath the beauty of white Caribbean beaches and points the finger at the government of Antigua, the industry of tourism and the legacy of British colonialism. *Lucy* (1990) is a sort of autobiographic account. The first of Kincaid’s stories set completely outside the Caribbean, it tells the young protagonist’s experience of migration, her feelings of alienation and displacement, her troubled relationship with her white, wealthy employers and her painful transition into adulthood. Five years later, *The Autobiography of My Mother* complemented Kincaid’s fictional life story. While telling the poignant tale of an orphan child growing up in Dominica, the book faces questions of colonial oppression, racial discrimination and gender subservience. Again, *My Brother* (1997) is a thoughtful

memoir of her youngest brother's AIDS-related death. In 2002 a new chapter of Kincaid's familial saga was published under the title *Mr. Potter*. The life of her biological father is presented in this novel as an unremitting quest for legacy, forgiveness and identity. Finally, Kincaid's love of horticulture has taken centre stage in *My Favorite Plant: Writers and Gardeners on the Plants They Love* (1998), *My Garden (Book)* (1999), and *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalayas* (2004).

## 2.2 IMAGES OF LOSS

Be it the result of negligent behaviour or sudden fatality, loss is commonly perceived as an experience of absence or lack. Talking about loss, we can refer to the casual act of dropping something, to the feeling of grief originated by the departure of a loved one, to a defeat in sport (or war) or to the amount by which the costs of a business exceed its profits. As such, it is generally associated to temporary conditions of scarcity or permanent states of deficiency. Less often is our thought of loss connected to the idea of being deprived. However, deprivation, dispossession and denial are the keywords of the colonial (and postcolonial) experience of loss.

Urged by imperial aspirations of conquest and control, the colonial enterprise involved the illegitimate appropriation of land, the unruly exploitation of resources and the (supposed) civilization of indigenous peoples. For millions of natives around the world, this system of oppression and abuse resulted in forced separation from their land, deprivation of natural supplies, linguistic alienation and cultural annihilation. In a few words, colonization was a devastating experience of collective dispossession spurred by the enlightenment doctrine of European cultural supremacy.

As a consequence of this euro-centric attitude, from the early nineteenth century the so-called literature of empire established its own canon by the repetition of images and metaphors aiming at reinforcing the superiority of the colonizer over the colonized. One of the most striking examples of this tendency is the representation of the discovery of an English book in the middle of the jungle. Described by Homi K. Bhabha as an event “between epiphany and enunciation,”<sup>45</sup> the scene is set in a vast timeless space and tells the story of a book that, after being mysteriously abandoned in the middle of a wild forest, is finally discovered by a group of indigenous people who spontaneously perceive it as a source of knowledge. Being illiterate, these men sit around the volume and begin to worship it in hope that it starts to speak.

This biased myth of origin leads to the unsurprising assumption that native people are ignorant and that colonial empires have the duty to share (which inevitably implies the right to impose) their set of cultural values. Indeed, it is the uncomfortable presence of the book, its being an outstanding emblem of foreign knowledge and a symbol of imperialism, that causes the natives’ inability to react. This effect of cultural displacement (which is the result of the loss of culture produced by colonization) is typical of all the countries that were arbitrarily considered inferior and subjugated by imperial

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<sup>45</sup> H. K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 102.

command. But what really happens when the polished civilization of the colonizer meets the supposedly barbaric customs of the colonized? Does empire really make a profit out of the suppression of native knowledge?

In the attempt to answer these questions, at the beginning of his famous essay on colonialism, Aimé Césaire asks: “Has colonization really placed civilizations in contact? Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of establishing contact, was it the best?”<sup>46</sup> The Martinican philosopher rejects this option and struggles to demonstrate that colonization was undoubtedly the most destructive way of creating a common cultural background because, as he says, “between colonization and civilization there is an infinite distance.”<sup>47</sup> While confronting the causes and the effects of the colonial enterprise, Césaire aims at revealing the hypocrisy of its supposed civilizing mission. The goal is achieved by the accumulation of negative statements. In his own words, colonization is “neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease and tyranny”. At the same time, it is neither “a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law.”<sup>48</sup>

However, the most significant outcome of this fierce indictment of imperialism is the idea that, while European

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<sup>46</sup> A. Césaire and J. Pinkham. *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2000, p. 33.

<sup>47</sup> Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, p. 34.

<sup>48</sup> Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, p. 32.



nations promote and support colonial activity as a form of transmission of culture and progress, the colonizer dehumanizes, brutalises, degrades and weakens himself as well as the colonized.

Colonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man; [that] colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal.<sup>49</sup>

Shedding light on both the harms produced by the imperial process of civilization and its brutal boomerang effect, Césaire proves that, in the attempt to develop an ideology of racism that validates the invasion of distant territories and the exploitation of indigenous people, Europe proceeds towards savagery and is dangerously blind to its own cultural and moral impoverishment. “A civilization which justifies colonization [...] is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased.”<sup>50</sup>

Within this perspective, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* can be read as a proof that, not only is Europe seriously diseased, it is also contaminating the colonies and their inhabitants with its toxic infection. Soon after his arrival in Congo, Marlow

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<sup>49</sup> Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, p. 39.

encounters a group of natives who, after being forced into the Company's service, are deliberately ignored and left to die of starvation and overwork:

they were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, – nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.<sup>51</sup>

The evident defeat experienced by these men, their state of confusion and inefficiency, their being ultimately neglected reflects the subjugation suffered by their civilization as well as the dramatic loss of dignity underwent by their cultural values. The dismissed cultural heritage of these dying men thus embodies what the celebrated social theorist Michel Foucault calls “subjugated knowledge” (i.e. “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity”<sup>52</sup>). At the same time, the negligence shown by the

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<sup>51</sup> J. Conrad, and R. C. Murfin. *Heart of Darkness: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996, p. 32.

<sup>52</sup> M. Foucault. *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. Translated by Kate Soper. New York: Pantheon, 1980, p. 82.

Company's director proves that the process of cultural erasure is driven by precise political mechanisms.

Strictly connected to the obliteration of native cultures (and equally related to questions of power and hierarchy) is the issue of language. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin eloquently put it, linguistic hegemony is one of the main aspects of colonial domination.

The imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities. [...] Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetrated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established.<sup>53</sup>

Consistently presented by postcolonial critics and scholars as a means to interpret contingent reality rather than to express it, language plays a key function within the colonizer-colonized interaction. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's elaboration of this topic, which is contained in his notable 1981 essay "Decolonising the Mind", lies on the premise that, during the colonization of black Africa, "language was the means of the spiritual subjugation."<sup>54</sup> Since "culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation on

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<sup>53</sup> B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 287

the next”<sup>55</sup>, linguistic imposition aims to create forms of mental hierarchy based on the fact that an unknown language is used to elaborate a well-known reality, thus provoking a deep sense of displacement that exacerbates the distance between the culture of the colonizer and the culture of the colonized.

The positions expressed by these and other eminent critics prove that the colonial oppression of indigenous people is part of a more complex dynamics of loss, dislocation and replacement: other than stripping away the fundamental markers of national identity (i.e. territorial sovereignty, ancestral culture and local language), colonization instils in the mind of the colonized a series of distorted images, racist believes and false histories. As Frantz Fanon makes clear, “colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content”: through the progressive dismantling of their cultural patterns the colonizer “turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it”<sup>56</sup>. In this way, colonization replaces the indigenous values with deformed self-representations and imposes a biased perception of history.

The result of this attitude is a vicious circle of concatenated deprivations and surrogates in which defeat and loss, while constantly reinforcing each other, eventually shape

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<sup>55</sup> Ashcroft, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, p. 289.

<sup>56</sup> F. Fanon, J. P. Sartre and C. Farrington. *The wretched of the earth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, p. 169.

the postcolonial present other than the colonial past. The Caribbean diaspora, for example, can be considered as both a product of western imperialism and a contemporary condition of voluntary exile. In the same way, Jamaica Kincaid's decision to leave Antigua can be seen as both a personal choice and a socio-political stance. On the one side, her desire of escape depends on the narrow-minded environment in which she was born (a poor, chauvinistic family turning around the oppressive figure of an authoritarian mother). On the other, it is due to the difficulties of living under the legacy of colonization. The events of personal life become one with the historical dimension of migration and the individual experience of defeat merges with the collective occurrence of deprivation connected to imperialism and colonial domination. Estrangement becomes the common thread of her existence, while both the political (postcolonial) themes and the personal events that constitute her fiction are infused with images of loss and separation. In the words of Diane Simmons,

at heart Jamaica Kincaid's work is not about the charm of a Caribbean childhood [...]. Nor is it about colonialism [...]. Nor, finally, is Kincaid's work about black and white in America [...]. At heart Jamaica Kincaid's work is about loss, an all but unbearable fall from a paradise partially remembered, partially dreamed, a state of wholeness in which things are unchangeably themselves and division is unknown.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> D. Simmons, "The Rhythm of Reality in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid" in *World Literature Today*. Norman, OK: World Literature Today, 1994, volume 68, p. 466.

### 2.2.1 *The lost mother*

By stating, as early as 1987, that her mother is her source of literary inspiration (“The fertile soil of my creative life is my mother”<sup>58</sup>), Kincaid paved the way for all those scholars who, in the following years, stressed the role played in her fiction by both maternal figures and metaphors of motherhood. With this sentence Kincaid establishes a dynamic reciprocity between the idea of fertility and the question of creativity, thus linking motherhood to the act of writing and vice versa. As a result, the mater develops into a *matrix* of artistic imagination and literature becomes the canal through which the daughter voices her personal experience of being a woman inspired by another woman, questions the construction and performance of Caribbean female identity, and denounces the brutal dynamics of power hidden beneath family relationships. At the same time, with these few words Kincaid reveals the centrality of the ‘woman’ figure in her books.

However, as in a word game, this constant presence is experienced (biographically as well as fictionally) through absence. Kincaid’s relationship with her mother (a grand and impressive woman with an intimidating personal power) is often described as a brusquely interrupted love story. After nine years of exclusive romance, the entrance of three new brothers into the family put an end to the special mother-daughter attachment and Kincaid interpreted the

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<sup>58</sup> Cudjoe, “Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview”.

birth of her siblings as a sudden deprivation of maternal care. This withdrawal of affection originated that intense and profound sense of betrayal which is the hallmark of Kincaid's prose. The treachery of the mother, her emotional remoteness and painful unavailability take centre stage in the daughter's writing and images of loss, isolation and deceit keep surfacing through the pages.

This imagery dominates the surrealistic stories of Kincaid's first book, *At the Bottom of the River*. The collection does not follow standard narrative conventions but the plot is easily recognizable. Spanning from hope to despair, combining blind love and cynical disillusionment, Kincaid tells the story of a girl who elaborates the betrayal of her once-adored mother, while introducing her own lifelong commitment to questions of identity construction and gender discrimination. The opening story, "Girl", which is a long one-sentence composition, was first published in a 1978 issue of *The New Yorker*.<sup>59</sup> It is an intense quasi-monologue, a long list of instructions and warnings that a mother delivers to her daughter. The story begins abruptly, there is no trace of action or reference to setting, only the voice of an authoritative woman, going through an array of admonitions, comes out of the page. While dispensing seemingly harmless pieces of advice about laundry, sewing, ironing, sweeping, setting the table for different occasions, this mother struggles to instruct her adolescent daughter about the role of women in Caribbean society. The child, who speaks only twice, tries to object to her

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<sup>59</sup> J. Kincaid, "Girl". *The New Yorker*, June 26, 1978.

mother's accusations but her voice significantly remains unheard. In the attempt to turn her daughter into a hard-working, subservient female subject, the older protagonist depicts the subaltern condition of Caribbean women and reveals the harsh stereotypes connected to femaleness. As the story progresses, the mother's tone becomes more and more critical and her caveats shift from the domain of domesticity to the realm of sexuality. On three different occasions, she warns the girl about her supposed promiscuity:

On Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming. [...] This is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming. [...] This is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming.<sup>60</sup>

An anxious concern for decorous sexual behaviour fill these words and respectability and virtue acquire unquestioned centrality in the relationship between men and women. Training her daughter to accomplish her domestic duties and to behave according to conventional standards of decency, the mother forces her to accept the degrading terms of women's oppression, eventually giving up on her (unspoken) righteous claim to self-determination. The story ends in medias res: no resolution is given, the exchange is interrupted and the voice of the younger protagonist seems to have been silenced forever.

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<sup>60</sup> J. Kincaid. *At the Bottom of the River*. New York: Plume, 1992, pp. 3-4.



On the contrary, this abortive conversation enhances the girl's awareness of her mother's betrayal and triggers her future rebellion. At the same time, this moment marks the beginning of Jamaica Kincaid's long and in-depth speculation on gender: the fact of voicing a mother's (her own mother's) attempts to impose the biased paradigm of Caribbean womanhood on a young powerless daughter (the fictional version of herself as a teenager) together with the fact of doing it from the position of a victorious female immigrant, allows Kincaid to denounce the failure of such a narrow-minded behavioural pattern. It also lets her distance herself from the submissive woman that her mother (as well as the society she was born into) would have liked her to be, and to connect with the self-confident person she is determined to become.

Kincaid's second book, *Annie John*, is a more conventional narrative in which the author uses the classical features of the *bildungsroman* to narrate her personal story and to continue her investigation of the mother-daughter conflict. Many aspects of the protagonist's story are similar (at times even identical) to Kincaid's personal experiences, but there is one main difference, and it deserves to be acknowledged. Whereas Kincaid reports that the divide between herself and her mother was sparked by the arrival of her younger brothers, the reason why Annie John is discarded by her family remains unknown throughout the novel. Overlooking this detail, Kincaid shifts the focus from a rationale that would still be useless to the problematic intercourse between a charismatic mother and her

impressionable daughter, thus drawing the reader's attention to the painful implications of this unbalanced relationship.

At the beginning of the story, the title character is portrayed as a pampered daughter who inhabits a paradise of maternal warmth and care. Sharing her mother's name (Annie John), following her wherever she goes, replicating her exact attitude in a mixture of admiration and respect, the girl presents herself as a miniature version of her mother. It is the presence of the older Annie that validates her identity making her feel worthy: "How important I felt to be with my mother."<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, later in the novel, Mrs. John's retreat will provoke in the daughter a consistent sense of loss, which will eventually develop into anger and rebellion.

Annie's transformation from a replica of her mother into a distinct and independent self is a long and difficult process explicitly connected to the girl's physical growth. During the summer of the year in which she turned twelve, having grown taller and with most of her clothes no longer fitting her, Annie is happy when her mother decides to take her to buy some new outfits.

I immediately said how much I loved this piece of cloth and how nice I thought it would look on us both, but my mother replied, "Oh, no. You are getting too old for that. It's time you had your own clothes. You just cannot go around the rest of your life looking like a little me." To say that I felt the earth swept away from under me would not be going too far. It wasn't just what she said, it was the way she said it. [...] In the end, I got my dress with the men playing their

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<sup>61</sup> J. Kincaid, *Annie John*. New York: Plume, 1986, p. 15. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym AJ.

pianos, and my mother got a dress with red and yellow overgrown hibiscus, but I was never able to wear my own dress or see my mother in hers without feeling bitterness and hatred, directed not so much toward my mother as toward, I suppose, life in general. (AJ, 26)

Annie's reaction to the idea of being dressed in a different pattern from her mother's is a metaphor of her inability to imagine herself as an autonomous person. Wearing dresses tailored from the same piece of cloth from which her mother's were molded allowed her to perceive her body as an extension of Mrs. John's corporeality, thus substantiating the processes of aesthetical mimicry and existential symbiosis on which their insane mother-daughter relationship was based. On the other hand, the fact of looking different from her model forces her to walk out of her imitative utopia and to become a person of her own. The major effects of this renovated self-image are a profound feeling of alienation and a strong desire of escape that eventually lead Annie to rebel against her mother and to distance herself from her native island.

*Lucy* (1990) is a slim volume in which Kincaid is able to combine autobiography and fiction, and to condense literary themes and theoretical assumptions. At the same time she continues her investigation of the question of detached motherhood, delves into the issue of female subservience and establishes new connections between her personal experience and the lives of her characters. The story, which "explores the physic, emotional and social consequences of the

loss of the mother and the motherland,”<sup>62</sup> turns around the character of Lucy, a girl from Antigua who leaves her home at a very early age to become an au pair and study nursing in America. As a faithful alter ego of her creator, Lucy experiences the pain of being rejected by her family and reacts with fury to her mother’s hypocrite indoctrination. At the same time she stages Kincaid’s life and voices her awareness that Caribbean female subjects are dramatically overwhelmed by both the burden of political inferiority and the load of gender submission.

Since Lucy has been “a girl of whom certain things were expected, none of them too bad: a career as a nurse, for example; a sense of duty to my parents; obedience to the law and worship of convention,”<sup>63</sup> her decision to change her destiny acquires strong political meaning. Distancing herself from her mother(land), Lucy takes over the reins of her life and fights for an agency from which, otherwise, she would have been excluded. Migration becomes the catalyst of her personal realization and her American experience must be read as an attempt to build a new life for herself rather than an escape. In order to emerge as a self-governing subject and to be able to consider herself as an active part of society, Lucy struggles to reject the principles of colonial inferiority and gender submission imparted by her family. If her mother has accepted to be someone who is spoken for (i.e. the object of both colonial discourse and sexist

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<sup>62</sup> E. Ty, “Struggling with the Powerful (M)Other: Identity and Sexuality in Kogawa’s *Obasan* and Kincaid’s *Lucy*”. *The International Fiction Review*, 20.2 1993, p. 123.

<sup>63</sup> J. Kincaid, *Lucy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002, p. 133. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym L.

discrimination), Lucy strives to become the subject of her own story. A challenging endeavour for an inexperienced young girl who suddenly finds herself in a foreign world.

At the beginning of the novel, after flying to America, Lucy is alienated and disillusioned: her fantasies of breaking the chains of colonial oppression and sexual subjugation clash with the (unconscious) authoritative attitude of her wealthy American employers, and the colonizing metropolitan environment around them exacerbates her feeling of powerlessness. Only towards the end of the story, when almost a year has gone by, her father has died and her employers' familial empire has collapsed, can Lucy find her way to self-determination, eventually dismissing the subservient person that she had been with the resolute recognition that "that girl had gone out of existence" (L, 133). In her new life, a rented apartment, a different job and a series of one night stands become synonyms of freedom and self-government. Eloquently, Kincaid uses the metaphors of economic independence and unconstrained sexual conduct to represent her heroine's new condition of power. It is through these achievements that Lucy is finally able to rebel against her mother's moralistic attitude and to reject colonial subjugation. Being able to earn her living, the girl experiences an unprecedented feeling of self-mastery ("I could do what suited me now, as long as I could pay for it. 'As long as I could pay for it.' That phrase soon became the tail that wagged my dog." –L, 146), while her newly-acquired sexual

emancipation allows her to outrage her bigot family. In her last letter to her mother, the once-moderate Lucy writes:

I reminded her that my whole upbringing had been devoted to preventing me from becoming a slut; I then gave a brief description of my personal life, offering each detail as evidence that my upbringing had been a failure and that, in fact, life as a slut was quite enjoyable, thank you very much. (L, 127-128)

Even though Lucy finally accomplishes her mission to become the subject of her life (the person who writes rather than the one whose story is told), the absence of the mother is severely felt throughout the narrative: feelings of isolation and betrayal permeate the book and, as Diane Simmons makes clear, the theme of loss is more effective than ever.

The sense of loss may be even more powerful here than in the other works, as the rich beloved contradiction of the childhood world is not only figuratively but also literally lost. Lucy [...] has been expelled from both the Caribbean and her mother's life. Warm, vivid Antigua has been replaced by the pale chill of a North American winter. Lucy's mother, source of all intelligence, power, beauty, and magic, has been replaced by Lucy's wealthy employer, the affectionate but sheltered and naïve Mariah, who proffers books on feminism to help Lucy over her deep sense of loss and despair. In one way, Kincaid's young protagonist has, by leaving home, triumphed over her mother's wish to keep her forever infantilized or criminalized. She is still, however threatened by the mother's power. She keeps her mother's

letters but does not open them: “I knew that if I read only one, I would die from longing for her.”<sup>64</sup>

In this way, the scholar connects the theme of loss and its recurrence in the narration to questions of duplicity and ambiguity. On the one hand, Lucy’s past life, her native island and her mother all seem to have been replaced by surrogates: premature adulthood has taken the place of youth, a cold American city has substituted Antigua and Mariah (a rich white woman whose name suggests the idea of holy maternity) has replaced the natural mother. On the other, the three main characters are portrayed as catalogues of internal contradictions. The mother, for example, is at the same time the image of absence and the driving mechanism in the novel: despite her physical estrangement, she occupies Lucy’s thoughts and motivates much of her behaviour, simultaneously inspiring and undermining her quest for freedom. With her, Lucy experiences the ups and downs of a desperate love story: what the girl considers her mother’s betrayal leads her to the decision that she must break with her past, but the intense feelings of loss and hostility originated by this separation are never fully overcome. Not only do they persist, they also shape Lucy’s attitude towards men, and mourning determines her pathological inability to love: “For ten of my twenty years, half of my life, I had been mourning the end of a love affair, perhaps the only true love in my whole life I would ever know” (L, 132). Mariah, on her part, is

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<sup>64</sup> Simmons, “The Rhythm of Reality in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid”, p. 467.

described as an alternative mother figure who embodies both the best and the worst of the real parent: “The times that I loved Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother. The times that I did not love Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother” (L, 58). On the one hand, the woman tries to mould Lucy in her own image and to impose her set of cultural values; on the other, she brings warmth and care into her life, eventually taking her back to the tenderness of childhood. With both of these women Lucy waves between deep affection and hatred, blame and pity, thus embodying ambivalence and inconsistency. When she blames Mariah for her lack of strength, she appreciates her mother for being such a resolute woman; when she appreciates Mariah’s good humour and tolerance she exposes her mother’s biased mentality.

Mariah placed the flowers before me and told me to smell them. I did, and I told her that this smell made you want to lie down naked and cover your body with these petals so you could smell this way forever. When I said this, Mariah opened her eyes wide and drew in her breath in a mock-schoolmistress way, and she laughed so hard she had to put the vase of flowers down, for she was afraid she would break it. This was the sort of time I wished I could have had with my mother, but, for a reason not clear to me, it was not allowed. (L, 60)

With *My Brother*, an autobiographical text written in 1997 to memorialize the AIDS-related death of her younger brother, Kincaid digs deeper into her personal story to investigate the mother-child conflict and to expose her mother’s lack of coherence. Her brother’s



sickness, his slow and painful death are at the core of the narration, but the theme of loss and the feelings of solitude and alienation originated by the mother's betrayal are evident as usual. In particular, in this book Kincaid makes public her mother's unpredictability and presents her as a perfect synthesis of maternal instinct and egoism. On the one side, Annie Drew is capable of untiring care and devoted tenderness. As an example, the daughter recalls that, when she was a child with a clogged nose, her mother would suck the mucus from her nostrils, and, when eating felt too fatiguing, her mother would chew food for her and then return it to her mouth. Still, on the other side, she is totally unable to establish stable and unprejudiced relations with her grown-up children. A woman who refuses to apologize, who regularly gives harsh replies to her teen-age daughter struggling to become a writer in New York City, a mother who throws stones at her adult son for dating a woman without permission, Annie is the kind of person who never subordinates to anyone. Vacillating between nurture and withdrawal, her reliability ends when her children become adults.

Her love for her children when they are children is spectacular, unequalled I am sure in the history of a mother's love. It is when her children are trying to be grown-up people –adults– that her mechanism for loving them falls apart; it is when they are living in a cold apartment in New York, hungry and penniless because they have decided to be a writer, writing for her, seeking sympathy, a word of

encouragement, love, that her mechanism for loving falls apart.<sup>65</sup>

This mechanism and the harsh consequences of its failure are the themes around which Kincaid's writing is constructed. From fiction to autobiography the absent mother is always present, loss and alienation are the undisputed dominant feelings and the author's experience of daughterhood inspires the narration.

### ***2.2.2 Blurred identities, intertwined histories and horticulture***

If, in her critical study of black women's literature, Susheila Nasta has written that the multiple connections existing between mothers and motherlands "have provided a potent symbolic force in the writings of African, Caribbean and Asian women,"<sup>66</sup> Moira Ferguson, in her *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body*, has successfully applied this principle to texts such as *At the Bottom of the River*, *Annie John*, and *Lucy*. Discussing the constant and ambiguous relationship between the physical mother and the colonial motherland, Ferguson concludes that "all references to a mother [in Kincaid's works]

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<sup>65</sup> J. Kincaid, *My Brother*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998, p. 17. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym MB.

<sup>66</sup> S. Nasta, *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. New Brunswick N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992, p. xix.

allusively resonate with colonial as well as maternal signs.”<sup>67</sup> This idea, which is shared by the great majority of critics, leads to the assumption that the mother figure is to be interpreted as a reflection of colonial England. At the same time, her conflicting relationship with the daughter should be read as a metaphor of the awkward cycle of colonization. The mother’s uncomfortable ‘presence in absentia’ becomes the sign of the distant sovereignty of the empire, her blind authority and chauvinistic rhetoric mirror the burden of colonial pressure and the difficulties of the mother-daughter conflict reflect the disparities of the relationship between colonizer and colonized.

This structure of cross-references is particularly productive in the interpretation of those texts that are explicitly based on the mother’s betrayal, since her treachery is turned into evidence of colonial exploitation: “Like the betraying mother, the colonial system, in pretending to nurture the child, actually steals her from herself.”<sup>68</sup> *The Autobiography of My Mother* both holds to and departs from this model. Because Xuela, the protagonist, is the orphan of a mother whom she has never had the chance to meet, death significantly replaces betrayal: on the one hand, it constitutes the deceit *par excellence*; on the other, it forces the author to find alternative images to represent the dominant role of the colonizer and the resulting disempowerment of the colonized. Kincaid’s strategy is to delve further into the question of naming, the issue of British-oriented

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<sup>67</sup> M. Ferguson, *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994, p. 34.

<sup>68</sup> Simmons, “The Rhythm of Reality in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid”, p. 466.

colonial education and the theme of botany. As a result, in this book, blurred identities, antagonist cultures, and powerful images of flowers, trees and gardens supplant the imagery of the deceitful mother.

Eloquently, the main character of the story is the offspring of a Carib Indian mother and a mulatto father. Her conception becomes the symbol of the innumerable side effects of colonization and her composite name, Xuela Claudette Richardson, at the same time signals her mixed heritage and represents British command over the Caribbean natives. In the following quotation, while sketching her family tree in the attempt to recreate an image of her lost mother, Xuela discusses the origins of her name and reveals the severe implications of the act of naming:

And your own name, whatever it might be, eventually was not the gateway to who you really were, and you could not ever say to yourself, "My name is Xuela Claudette Desvarieux." This was my mother's name, but I cannot say it was her real name, for in a life like hers, as in mine, what is a real name? My own name is her name, Xuela Claudette, and in the place of the Desvarieux is Richardson, which is my father's name; but who are these people Claudette, Desvarieux, and Richardson? To look into it, to look at it, could only fill you with despair; the humiliation could only make you intoxicated with self-hatred. For the name of any one person is at once her history recapitulated and abbreviated, and on declaring it, that person holds herself high or low.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> J. Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*. New York: Plume, 1997, p. 79. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym AMM.

With these words, Kincaid skilfully intertwines history, conquest and identity. In a heartfelt investigation of her personal story, Xuela presents European names as containers of foreign rule and bitter exploitation, thus linking the act of naming to the commanding attitude of the colonizer, and colonial control to feelings of hatred and despair. Furthermore, the sharing of names between mother and daughter (which also occurs in *Annie John*) forces the girl to partake of her mother's identity and to be involved in her cruel destiny of subjugation. As Lang-Peralta makes clear, "The result of this convergence of identities makes a powerful statement about the history of the Caribbean and the legacy of conquest and colonialism."<sup>70</sup> At the same time, the intersection of literary genres reveals that the book "takes on the complexity of identity by using genre as a method of analysis,"<sup>71</sup> while the existential blur of the character, her composite name and inclusive identity match to perfection the author's decision to simultaneously combine fiction, biography and autobiography.

On the other hand, since Kincaid portrays Xuela as a doubly colonized subject who suffers from both colonial oppression and male dominance, the book can be considered a paramount example of the interplay between postcolonial awareness and feminist sensitivity. Struggling against oppression and inequality, rejecting the established

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<sup>70</sup> L. Lang-Peralta, "Crossing Borders and Transforming Genres: Alain Robbe-Grillet, Edward Said and Jamaica Kincaid", in Gonzalez, M. and Pittin-Hédon M. O. *Generic Instability and Identity in the Contemporary Novel*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> Lang-Peralta, "Crossing Borders and Transforming Genres: Alain Robbe-Grillet, Edward Said and Jamaica Kincaid", p. 8.

hegemonic system, discarding the supremacy of white masculinity, postcolonial studies and feminist criticism face similar political discourses. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela is the raging voice through which Kincaid denounces both colonial subjugation and gender discrimination while her story is used by the author as an undisputable piece of evidence that (supposed) male superiority and colonial political dominance can obliterate a woman's chance of making a life for herself. Nevertheless, a parallel reading is possible since, despite her initial subordinate condition, Xuela's unremitting endurance and willpower culminate in her assuming the attitude of the colonizer. As a consequence of this decision, she happens to ignore the price of her actions and to concentrate exclusively on their outcomes. As an example, this brutal pragmatic approach is the reason why she silences her feelings and marries Philip, a wealthy friend of her father, an English doctor, one of the victors, a man who adores her despite her open insolence: "he grew to live for the sound of my footsteps, so often I would walk without making a sound; he loved the sound of my voice, so for days I would not utter a word" (AMM, 217-18). Within this reversal of roles, Xuela rejects "the noisiness of the world into which he was born, the conquests, the successful disruption of other peoples' worlds" (AMM, 223-224) and becomes the conqueror of her dominated husband. Significantly, after moving him from the city into the mountains of her Carib ancestors, she becomes his only point of cultural reference:

He now lived in a world in which he could not speak the language. I mediated for him, I translated for him. I did not always tell him the truth, I did not always tell him everything. I blocked his entrance to the world in which he lived; eventually I blocked his entrance into all the worlds he had come to know. (AMM, 224)

In this way, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits Xuela personifies Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry, the process by which the colonized subject is reproduced as "almost the same, but not quite."<sup>72</sup> As "a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline,"<sup>73</sup> this attitude entails a double articulation. On the one hand, the mockery implicit in the act of copying the colonizing culture, its behaviour and its values is meant to disclose the limitations in the authority of colonial discourse. On the other, it threatens its so-called civilizing mission.

Mimicry, as the metonymy of presence is, indeed, such an erratic, eccentric strategy of authority in colonial discourse. Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It is the process of the fixation of the colonial as a form of cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge within an interdictory discourse, and therefore necessarily raises the question of the authorization of colonial representations, a question of authority that goes beyond the subject's lack of priority (castration) to a historical crisis in the conceptuality of colonial man as an object of regulatory power, as the subject of racial, cultural, national representation.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 89.

<sup>73</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 86.

<sup>74</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 90.

However, Xuela's ambivalent position can also be read as a bitter reaction to the failure of her numerous attempts to find her place in the world. In Frantz Fanon's words, Xuela has come "into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, [her] spirit filled with the desire to attain the source of the world, and then [she] found that [she] was an object in the midst of other objects."<sup>75</sup> This pitiful recognition of helplessness might be interpreted as the driving force that urges her to reject any form of belonging, thus resulting in her firm determination to be her only family and community. For this reason, in order to acquire its true meaning, her multiple declarations of independence ("I did not want to belong to anyone; I did not want anyone to belong to me" –AMM, 104; "I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation" –AMM, 226) must be read together with her admission of resolute self-love ("The impulse to possess is alive in every heart, [...] some people choose high mountains, some people choose wide seas, and some people choose husbands; I chose to possess myself" –AMM, 174).

The question of colonial education, another issue raised by Kincaid to endorse the idea of betrayal in a story that actually transcends the life of the betraying mother, is evident in Xuela's dissatisfaction with her British-oriented school:

This education I was receiving had never offered me the satisfaction I was told it would; it only filled me with questions that were not answered, it only filled me with anger. I could not like what it would lead to: a humiliation so

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<sup>75</sup> F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967, p. 109.



permanent that it would replace your own skin. (AMM, 78-79)

On the one hand, Xuela's unanswered questions, her open skepticism and frequent surges of anger imply the idea of a distant Eurocentric culture that is unable to satisfy her hybrid curiosity. On the other, the act of skinning the body in order to cover it with humiliation connects the supposed civilizing mission to brutal corporeality. It also takes us back to Fanon's image of a black face hidden beneath a white mask, as well as to Kincaid's autobiographical experience of colonial education: talking with Selwyn Cudjoe about the culture that her mother and her teachers imparted to her, the writer suggests the idea of a split self: "My whole upbringing was something I was not: it was English. It was a sort of middle-class English upbringing."<sup>76</sup> The weight of such an alienating experience of cultural doubling is confirmed by the frequent return of this issue in both *Lucy* and *Annie John*. Even though both Annie and Lucy acknowledge and reject the concealed violence of the colonial school system, the enduring idea of the white man's superiority is always dangerously effective. For example, when, after a visit at a modern art museum, Lucy connects her experience of migration to Paul Gauguin's decision to start a new life in a new place, the black female nanny risks to submit to the glamour of the European male artist.

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<sup>76</sup> Cudjoe, "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: an Interview", p. 219.

I identified with the yearnings of this man; I understood finding the place you are born in an unbearable prison and wanting something completely different from what you are familiar with, knowing it represents a haven. I wondered about the details of his despair, for I felt it would comfort me to know. Of course his life could be found in the pages of a book; I had just begun to notice that the lives of men always are. He has shown to be a man rebelling against an established order that he found corrupt; and even though he was doomed to defeat –he died an early death– he had the perfume of the hero about him. I was not a man; I was a young woman from the fringes of the world, and when I left my home I had wrapped around my shoulders the mantle of a servant. (L, 95)

Fortunately, Lucy senses the irony hidden beneath her own naïve identification with this famous rich man: even though they meet each other in their restless search for a soothing sense of belonging, Gauguin occupies a position of indubitable superiority. He is the hero, the discoverer; she is a servant, a “Visitor” (L, 15) who inhabits the position of an inferior.

One last topic sustains the idea of betrayal in *The Autobiography of My Mother*: horticulture. Through the character of Xuela’s husband, Kincaid establishes a meaningful relationship between gardening and imperialism thus presenting the activity of cultivating the ground for growing flowers and ornamental plants as a (benevolent) act of conquest:

He had an obsessive interest in rearranging the landscape: not gardening in the way of necessity, the growing of food, but gardening in the way of luxury, the growing of flowering plants for no reason than the pleasure of it and making these plants do exactly what he wanted them to do; and it made

great sense that he would be drawn to this activity, for it is an act of conquest, benign though it may be. (AMM, 143)

Belonging to a stock of colonizers, Philip seems unable to give up on the habit of possessing the land: embellishing the landscape he marks the presence of the white man in the Caribbean and imprints the memory of colonization on its wild natural environment. The garden thus becomes the icon of imperial power and an allegory of conquest, whereas the gardener embodies the idea of absolute dominance. In this way, botany marks the divide between those who conquer and those who are conquered. As Kincaid eloquently puts it:

The ignorance of the botany of the place I am from (and am of) really only reflects the fact that when I lived there, I was of the conquered class and living in a conquered place; a principle of the condition is that nothing about you is of any interest unless the conqueror deems it so.<sup>77</sup>

In this sense, the regained control of horticulture, which is at the basis of *My Garden (Book)*, must be read as a powerful act of political resistance.

In *My Brother*, a memoir of the death (and the dying) of her brother Devon Drew, who was a gardener, Kincaid provides another example of the interplay between gardening and imperialism. In his illuminating essay “Death and the Diaspora Writer: Hybridity and Mourning in the Work of Jamaica Kincaid”, Ramón Soto-Crespo skilfully connects the story of

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<sup>77</sup> J. Kincaid, *My Garden (Book)*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999, p. 156.

Devon's lethal disease to "the intertwined histories of horticulture and colonialism."<sup>78</sup> More explicitly, he writes:

In *My Brother*, Kincaid analogizes AIDS, the multisymptom illness spreading throughout her brother's body, with the spread of colonialism in the West Indies, an analogy she develops by suggesting that her brother's subaltern body becomes bereft of life in postcolonial Antigua, just as the West Indies were depleted of their flora during colonization.<sup>79</sup>

Devon's talent for horticulture is shared by his (and his sister's) mother: throughout the book, in the attempt to bare her ambivalent maternal instinct, Kincaid presents Annie Drew as both a passionate gardener with a natural sense for growing all sorts of vegetables and herbs, and as a pragmatic 'vegetal-killer'. The most emblematic illustration of this metaphor relates to an old soursop tree. When Kincaid returns to Antigua, after spending twenty years in the United States in the attempt to distance herself from her family, and finds out that the luxuriant plant she remembers from her childhood is nothing more than a charred trunk, the mother explains that the tree had become the home of a colony of parasites and so she had burned it down. Kincaid associates this ease with destruction to her mother's lack of consideration for the lives of her grown-up

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<sup>78</sup> R. E. Soto-Crespo and J. Kincaid, "Death and the Diaspora Writer: Hybridity and Mourning in the Work of Jamaica Kincaid", *Contemporary Literature* Vol. 43, No. 2 2002, p. 343.

<sup>79</sup> Soto-Crespo and Kincaid, "Death and the Diaspora Writer: Hybridity and Mourning in the Work of Jamaica Kincaid", p. 343.

children, eventually extending to the flora her mother's deceitful behaviour.

### ***2.2.3 Thresholds of death***

Too lucid to create some romance about it, Kincaid portrays death as one of the inevitable, tragic proceedings of everyday existence. "It happens", she says, "it happens every day, but when you see mourners, they behave as if it were so new, this event, dying –someone you love dies– it has never happened before" (MB, 121-122). Within such a pragmatic mind-set, what really deserves to be looked at is not the event of death itself but its interaction with life, the hole that cracks between them and the effects that they have on each other. As a matter of fact, "Kincaid writes about mourning in such a way as to suggest that it is less a psychological phase to be superseded than a political condition of existence."<sup>80</sup>

*Annie John* can be considered a good example of this political stance, as Kincaid aims to depict the child's transition into adulthood rather than the ephemeral nature of the human

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<sup>80</sup> Soto-Crespo and Kincaid, "Death and the Diaspora Writer: Hybridity and Mourning in the Work of Jamaica Kincaid", p. 343.

condition, eventually drawing attention to the alienating effect that mourning has on the protagonist. Annie grows from considering death as an inconsequential detail, something of which she does not perceive the tragic onset, to the mature recognition of its dreadful presence. However, Kincaid uses the girl's newly-achieved awareness of death mainly to indicate the commencement of her separation from her mother. In particular, referring to Mrs. Drew's involvement in the funeral of a little neighbour, the author has Annie say: "For a while, though not very long, I could not bear to have my mother caress me or touch my food or help me with my bath. I especially couldn't bear the sight of her hands lying still in her lap" (AJ, 6). In this way, Kincaid presents death as a catalyst in Annie's progressive recognition of independence.

A similar authorial intent finds expression in *Lucy*, where the seemingly neglected death of the protagonist's stepfather marks the beginning of her new life. Until that moment, the physical distance that the girl had taken from her troublesome Caribbean family had not succeeded in freeing her from the idea of black women's subservience. Quite the opposite, she had established a surrogate but still insane mother-daughter (master-servant) relationship with her female employer, eventually giving up on her rightful desire for self-determination. Paradoxically, the death of her mother's husband gives birth to a new, untried, creative version of herself:

The person I had become I did not know very well. Oh, on the outside everything was familiar. [...] But the things I could not see about myself, the things I could not put my hands on –those things had changed, and I did not yet know them well. I understood that I was inventing myself, and that I was doing this more in the way of a painter than in the way of a scientist. I could not count on precision or calculation; I could only count on intuition. I did not have anything exactly in mind, but when the picture was complete I would know. (L, 133-134)

On the contrary, in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, it is the daughter's birth that leads the mother to death:

My Mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind. I could not have known at the beginning of my life that this would be so; I only came to know this in the middle of my life, just at the time when I was no longer young and realized that I had less of some of the things I used to have in abundance and more of some of the things I had scarcely had at all. And this realization of loss and gain made me look backward and forward: at my beginning was this woman whose face I had never seen, but at my end was nothing, no one between me and the black room of the world. I came to feel that for my whole life I had been standing on a precipice, that my loss had made me vulnerable, hard, and helpless; on knowing this I became overwhelmed with sadness and shame and pity for myself. (AB, 3-4)

With birth and death occurring in the same place at the same time, Xuela's life acquires the characteristics of an everlasting moment of "Entstellung, a process of displacement, distortion,

dislocation, repetition.”<sup>81</sup> Her present state is uncertain and dangerous, “Xuela conducts her life as if standing on a precipice, from which she risks falling into an abyss.”<sup>82</sup> Her past is filled with the void left by her mother and her only access to it is through “a bleak, black wind”. Her future lies in the inhospitable “black room of the world”. As an orphan Xuela feels lonely and vulnerable, as one of the last survivors of an extinct people, the Carib, she feels alone and endangered. In a *crescendo* of loneliness and defencelessness, Kincaid portrays her as both the unexpected daughter of death and the offspring of a people undeservedly defeated “it was through no fault of their own that they had lost, and lost in the most extreme way; they had lost not just the right to be themselves, they had lost themselves” (AMM, 198).

An analogous interplay between unstable life and impending death animates the pages of *My Brother*. The book, which provides an unconventional narrative of mourning and memory “that requires getting acquainted with the person at the same time that one is grieving his loss,”<sup>83</sup> includes the depiction of Devon’s decaying body, the account of Kincaid’s helpless intervention in his life and the representation of her particular

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<sup>81</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.105.

<sup>82</sup> M. Mårdberg, “‘A Bleak Black Wind’: Motherlessness and Emotional Exile in Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother*” in Theile, V. And Drews, M. (eds.) *Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History: African American and Afro Caribbean Women’s Literature in the Twentieth Century*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009, p. 8.

<sup>83</sup> Soto-Crespo and Kincaid, “Death and the Diaspora Writer: Hybridity and Mourning in the Work of Jamaica Kincaid”, p. 363.



relation with mourning. From its very beginning, the narrative is punctuated by a long list of mournful events and Devon's life is presented as fatally intermingled with death. In the following excerpt, Kincaid describes what happened the day after his birth, as he was lying in bed, close to his mother:

while they were both asleep, he snuggled in the warmth of his mother's body, an army of red ants came in through the window and attacked him. My mother heard her child crying, and when she awoke, she found him covered with red ants. If he had been alone, it is believed they would have killed him. (MB, 5-6)

Devon's vulnerability, the defencelessness of a newborn baby attacked by a swarm of poisonous insects, finds a significant counterpart in his mother's prompt reaction but, more than enhancing Annie's portrait, with this scene the writer means to anticipate her brother's destiny of death.

At the same time, the sister presents Devon's fate as somehow embedded in his irresponsible sexual behaviour and reckless moral conduct. Even though, throughout the book, she tries to describe him with coherent rationality and balanced prudence, at times anger surfaces through the pages exacerbating the tone of writing. Kincaid blames her brother for his failure to heed her warnings of becoming infected with the HIV virus, accuses him for his inability to dominate sexual desire and charges him for his vile lack of concern about the danger to which he exposes his sexual partners. In particular,

she rages against his ridiculous rationale, feeling offended by his strenuous attempts to present himself as a “a powerfully sexual man”(MB, 67):

My brother told me that he could not go two weeks without having sex, he said it made him feel, and he lifted his shoulders up and then let them drop down; he looked sad, he looked defeated, but that did not stop me from saying cruelly, Every man I have ever known has said the same thing, two weeks without sex makes them feel funny. (MB, 67)

Nevertheless, Kincaid’s reaction to her brother’s illness transcends mere resentment and her book goes beyond “the typical AIDS narrative where ‘shame is linked to guilt,’ and where victims are part of a ‘tainted community that illness has judged’ (Sontag 112, 134),”<sup>84</sup> promptly dismissing her prejudices as petty “quick judgement” (MB, 7). Instead, she engages in a profound search for his brother’s authentic self. “Who is he?” (MB, 69), she keeps asking herself. “How does he feel about himself, what has he ever wanted?” (MB, 69). Unfortunately, these questions remain unanswered and Devon’s true identity dies with him. Only after his death, and only for a pure matter of coincidence, is Jamaica told the truth about her brother’s covert homosexuality, his coming-out being performed by an Antiguan acquaintance:

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<sup>84</sup> L. Down, “‘Stepping out of the Kumbala’ –Jamaica Kincaid’s AIDS Narrative, My Brother”, *Sargasso* 2006-2007, I, p. 73.

I said, "Did you know my brother?" And she said yes. And then she said that she had been a lesbian woman living in Antigua and how deeply sad it made her to see the scorn and derision heaped on the homosexual man; homosexual men had no place to go in Antigua, she said, no place to simply meet and be with each other and not be afraid; and she had opened up her home and made it known that every Sunday men who loved other men could come to her house in the afternoon and enjoy each other's company. My brother, she said, was a frequent visitor to her house. (MB, 161)

In this way, that "something unique about him" (MB, 67) that Devon had been trying to tell his sister on several occasions is finally disclosed, his gay identity is revealed and his promiscuity is explained as a desperate endeavour to protect himself from bias and prejudice. In homophobic Antigua, public recognition of homosexuality would have caused him social alienation and isolation; for this reason, he had to mask his same-sex relationships by having frequent sexual encounters with women; for this reason he led a schizophrenic double life.

Even more poignantly, Devon's life can be defined as a doubly double existence. Other than articulating a sexual dichotomy, this young, dying man inhabits that zone of indistinction that the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben places between and beyond the border separating life and death. In Kincaid's words,

His reality was that he was dead but still alive. [...] We are all acquainted with death; each moment, each gesture, holds

in it a set of events that can easily slide into realities that are unknown, unexpected, to the point of shock; we do not really expect these moments, they arrive and are resisted, denied, and then finally, inexorably, accepted; to have the HIV virus is to have crossed the line between life and death. (MB, 95-96)

In this way, the fatal disease marks Devon as homo sacer and his existence, which is always already exposed to death, performatively realizes Agamben's state of exception. Between life and death, Devon "exists on a threshold that belongs neither to the world of the living nor to the world of the dead: he is a living dead man."<sup>85</sup> Between faked heterosexual behaviour and covert homosexual desire, his authenticity is dead even though his body is still alive. In this sense, it is dying, in its long and painful coexistence with life, rather than the ephemeral event of death, that performs that political condition of existence that Soto-Crespo identifies as the diaspora writer's hybridity of mourning. It is on the threshold between a half-lived life and a long-looming death that Devon's sick body repeats imperial degeneration, thus leading Kincaid to mourn a "memory that is both personal and historical, [...] of social urgency and literary significance."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 99.

<sup>86</sup> Soto-Crespo and Kincaid, "Death and the Diaspora Writer: Hybridity and Mourning in the Work of Jamaica Kincaid", p. 370.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Andrea Levy*

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### 3.1 ENGLISH (BORN AND BRED) AND BASTARD

When the young protagonist of Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* finally recovers from the nervous breakdown that has spurred her to leave England (where she was born) and visit her parents' native island (Jamaica) in search of origins and roots, genealogical awareness and historical understanding converge into a proud declaration of self-awareness: "Let those bully boys walk behind me in the playground. Let them tell me 'You're a darkie. Faith is a darkie'. [...] Because I am the bastard child of Empire and I will have my day."<sup>87</sup> Through these few words, the writer's political stance, latent throughout the book, is eventually made explicit and the speech of one of Salman Rushdie's most exploited quotations echo with clarity: "I am a bastard child of history. Perhaps we all are, black and brown and white, leaking into one another [...] *like flavours when you cook*".<sup>88</sup> Be this resonance a pure matter of coincidence or a foxy authorial exercise (this latter assumption is reinforced by the fact that the character's name, Faith, recalls the title of Rushdie's essay, "In Good Faith"), what emerges is Levy's desire to position herself in the wake of the contemporary discourse on hybridity. As a black Briton of Caribbean descent who gradually learns to accept and enhance her compound identity, Faith at

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<sup>87</sup> A. Levy. *Fruit of the Lemon*. London: Review, 2004, p. 327. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym FL.

<sup>88</sup> S. Rushdie, "In Good Faith" in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books, 1992, p. 394.

the same time embodies postcolonial mongrelisation and reflects Levy's autobiographical condition.

Like Faith, whose parents crossed the Atlantic on a banana boat, Levy was born to a couple of Jamaican migrants: her father Winston arrived in 1948 on the famous *Empire Windrush*, he was "one of the pioneers. One of the 492 people who looked around the old British colony of Jamaica, saw that there were no jobs, no prospects and decided to chance his arm in the Mother Country."<sup>89</sup> Her mother Amy joined her husband six months later. Retrospectively, their experience can be looked at as the paradigm of the post-war West Indian exodus: their anguish was the pain of all those who had to leave their island and say goodbye to family and friends, the illusion of a better future that fuelled their crossing was the fire of everybody's journey and the harsh reality that they encountered when they finally relocated among strangers in London was the same as a whole generation's. They were making history, and they did not know. Nor did they envision what they would find across the ocean. Without doubt, their image of Britain was very much distorted:

They believed Britain was a green and pleasant land – if not the centre of the world, then certainly the centre of a great and important Empire that spanned the world, linking all sorts of countries into a family of nations. Far from the idea that he [Levy's father] was travelling to a foreign place, he was travelling to the centre of his country, and as such he

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<sup>89</sup> A. Levy, "This is my England", *The Guardian*, 19 February 2000.



would slip-in and fit-in immediately. Jamaica, he thought, was just Britain in the sun.<sup>90</sup>

For Mr. Winston and Mrs. Amy (as well as for all the others) such a confident vision of the mother country, which also deceitfully implied the illusion of being welcomed in the host society, clashed with the open hostility of the British population; collided with the difficulties of finding a job and a place to stay; and produced a disempowering feeling of social alienation.

Some fifty years later, Levy merges the first-hand experiences of her parents into narratives that attempt to dismantle (or at least destabilize) the myth of the unified/unifying Empire through the reconstruction of historical truths. Similarly, her work translates her own challenge of being at the same time a black person and a British citizen.

Born in London in 1956, Levy was raised in a council flat next to the Arsenal football ground and educated among “white children who would never have to grow up to question whether they were English or not.”<sup>91</sup> As a teenager, she studied John Donne, watched English sitcoms, spoke with a cockney accent and consistently presented herself as a north Londoner. Most of the times, she struggled to conceal what she considered her family’s cultural oddity, because she desperately wanted to fit in and to forget about her black skin, her father’s frizzy hair or her mother’s rice and peas. “We didn’t

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<sup>90</sup> Levy, “This is my England”.

<sup>91</sup> Levy, “This is my England”.

know that many black people,” she said talking with Gary Younge about the condition of racial estrangement that she experienced in those years:

There was another black family at my church. But I just used to feel terribly sorry for them because I knew how difficult it was, and we would never have spoken. I’m not proud of who I was then. But I was just dealing with things as they came.<sup>92</sup>

Growing up, Levy learnt to acknowledge the specificity of her parents’ Caribbean heritage and to make the most of her hybrid identity. In particular, it was thanks to a late-night history documentary about the *Empire Windrush* that the girl discovered the details of her father’s exodus and started to acknowledge the new tide of Caribbean migration that was affecting Britain. Stumbling on something that linked the story of her family to the history of her country, listening to the testimony of those who had made their way to England in the forties, witnessing the uncomfortable condition of the younger generation of migrants, Levy changed her perspective and acquired an unprecedented political awareness. The young woman in her twenties who had never shown interest in politics suddenly grew into a civil rights activist and developed a fervent sense of pride in having a black skin. In a short time, this newly-acquired ethnical consciousness drew her to African-American literature.

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<sup>92</sup> G. Younge, “‘I started to realise what fiction could be. And I thought, wow! You can take on the world’ Andrea Levy interviewed by Gary Younge”, *The Guardian*, 30 January 2010.

But the works of Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Audre Lord, Martin Luther King and W.E.B. Du Bois only partially satisfied her hunger as she looked for a writing dealing specifically with the fact of being black in white Britain. In her own words: “I wanted to read about being born black and British, about people who grew up like I did.”<sup>93</sup> In order to fill that gap, after having studied as a weaver and textile designer, worked in the costume departments of the BBC and the Royal Opera House, and eventually retrained herself as a graphic designer, Levy decided to enrol in a writing class and to try to write her own version of the story. The workshops confirmed that the stories she had in mind were worth telling and provided her with confidence and determination.

*Every Light in the House Burnin'*, which was published in 1994, is Levy's debut novel. Drawing explicitly on autobiography, it tells the story of a black British girl, of her Jamaican parents and of the racist metropolitan institutions around them. Angela, the protagonist, details her father's illness, denounces the National Healthcare Service which neglects him, and remembers the years that her family spent on a council estate in Highbury. In *Never Far from Nowhere*, two black British sisters of Jamaican descent live through completely different experiences: Vivien studies at college, goes to discos and is always surrounded by friends; Olive is shy and solitary and struggles to find her place within British society. *Fruit of the Lemon*, Levy's third novel, is “the story of Faith Jackson, a Londoner

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<sup>93</sup> R. Prasad, “Two sides to every story”, *The Guardian*, 4 March 1999.

of Jamaican parents who realises that calling Britain home leaves a bitter taste in her mouth.”<sup>94</sup> Turning around Faith and her quest for belonging as well as around the centennial transnational saga of her family, this book faces both the heated question of black British identity and the discourse of diaspora. With it, Levy starts to look backwards in history and to extend her gaze from black Britain to the Black Atlantic.

A 2006 interview with Susan Alice Fischer proves that a significant change in perspective is at the basis of Levy’s shift from the ‘here and now’ of the first two novels, which basically fictionalised some aspects of her private life, to the diasporic dimension of her latest prose, whose target is the transatlantic history of the empire.

Before [Fruit of the Lemon] I wasn’t so interested in the link between Jamaica, the Caribbean and Britain. I was much more, “we’re black British, we’re here, and how are we going to move on”? And that’s absolutely part of what I do, too, but I didn’t think that looking backwards was so important, whereas now I think it is absolutely important and so fascinating.<sup>95</sup>

As a result of this new look, *Small Island* (which won the Orange Prize for fiction in 2004 and was selected by *The Guardian* as one of the defining books of its decade) tells the story of the Jamaican post-war migration to Britain through the voices of four apparently

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<sup>94</sup> Prasad, “Two sides to every story”.

<sup>95</sup> S. A. Fischer, “Andrea Levy in Conversation with Susan Alice Fischer”, *Changing English* 12 (2005), p. 362.

disparate characters. Completely different from Levy's previous works, it is based on scrupulous historical research and feels definitively more political. Levy's latest publication, *The Long Song*, is the intense fictional autobiography of a slave woman born on a Jamaican sugar plantation in the nineteenth century. It is an ingenious narrative of slavery written without trace of documentary intent, the imagined story of a single life rather the historical account of a collective experience.

Overall, these works represent a significant contribution to the development of the postcolonial counter-discourse. Helping to reconfigure the slanted geography of empire and rewriting part of its history, Levy profitably questions the relationship between centre and margins, she voices stories that have long been silenced and fights for the political rights of black British citizens. In particular, she defends her own right to be, at the same time, "a bastard child of Empire" and a born and bred English:

I am English. Born and bred, as the saying goes. (As far as I can remember, it is born and bred and not born-and-bred-with-a-very-long-line-of-white-ancestors-directly-descended-from-Anglo-Saxons.) England is the only society I truly know and sometimes understand. I don't look as the English did in the England of the 30s or before, but being English is my birthright. England is my home. An eccentric place where sometimes I love being English.<sup>96</sup>

Levy reminds us of the fluid nature of identity and bears witness of the multiple passages (intended here as both profound

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<sup>96</sup> Levy, "This is my England".

historical transformations and transatlantic geographical relocations)  
that led to the formation of that tangled contemporary reality which is  
the subject of her fiction.

### 3.2 IMAGES OF PASSAGE

In the last few years the centrality of the idea of passage within contemporary culture has been repeatedly emphasized, and the versatility of the word ‘passing’ has often been used to anticipate its many connotations.

In American race relations, “passing” means being taken for someone else, usually a black person appearing to be a white. “Passing over” means to skip or ignore. “Passing by” means moving on without stopping. “Passing up” means to reject, “passing out” means to lose consciousness, “passing around”, means to not keep but “pass along” to someone else. “Passing through” connotes an entrance into a new place or state of being, though usually not to stay and, of course, “passing away” means to die. In literary terms, a “passage” is a textual part of the whole. It has also been used as a literal, imagined, perceived, observed or metaphorical journey, as in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* or Kenneth Roberts’ *Northwest Passage*. In the academic genres formerly known as Commonwealth Literature or Post-colonial Literature (sometimes referred to as Postcolonial Literature) there was a lot of “passing” going on. Works from the periphery were “passed by”, “passed over”, “passed up” or “passed around” on their academic way to the Canon.<sup>97</sup>

This paragraph, which introduces a recent essay on the evolution of postcolonial epistemology, proves that both ‘passing’ and ‘passage’ are connected to literature as much as to the issue of development and

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<sup>97</sup> R. D. Klein, “Just “Passing Through”: the brief “Passage” of Postcolonial Literature.” *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies*. Vol. 2, No 3, July 2011.

transformation. 'Passing' (whose peculiar feature is to lend itself to the construction of countless idiomatic expressions) refers to the difficulties encountered by the literature of the margins on its way to the canon. 'Passage' provides the idea of real or imagined literary journeys, eventually hinting, although implicitly, at the idea of diaspora. At the same time, this preamble shows that these words, which are highly evocative *per se*, disclose an even more profound meaning when they are applied to the postcolonial context. Postcolonial writing, for example, can simultaneously be presented as the product of multiple passages (i.e. historical developments, geographical transitions, political negotiations) and the acknowledgment of countless experiences of passing (intended here as social and cultural transformations).

A similar position was at the core of *EnterText 9*, a special issue in which scholars and critics discussed Andrea Levy's approach. Through an accurate textual analysis (that focused predominantly on the idea of dislocation as a composite system referring to both the passing of time, the movement through space, the evolution of identity and the narrative strategies through which these are related) they scanned the author's political intentions and literary responses, eventually presenting her work as an overall site of passage. Here is how Wendy Knepper substantiated the dislocating character of Levy's novels in the essay's introduction:

At a discursive level, her narratives move to-and-fro through time and space, shift among various voices, explore various



and often differing points of view, mix genres and idioms, and incorporate other techniques of textual dislocation. Thus, stories of dislocation and dislocating narrative techniques are central to her work, enabling a strategic representation of the past from a postcolonial vantage point.<sup>98</sup>

With these words, Knepper emphasizes the topicality of Levy's politics of place, stresses the role played in her fiction by colonial dislocation and diasporic relocation, and exposes her most effective narrative techniques. She also hints at the idea that, since "Britain [...] cannot be considered an autochthonous society of *True-Born Englishmen*"<sup>99</sup> anymore and the groundbreaking effects of its extreme historical makeover have become a major literary concern, Levy (who positions herself both at the core and on the margin of contemporary British literature) benefits from a privileged observation point.

Indeed, Levy's writing (which "not only deals with the situation of those who came from former colonies and their descendants, but also with the society which they discovered and continue to shape"<sup>100</sup>) relates to the colonial past as much as to the post-colonial present, and her family's story reflects Britain's transition from a supposedly uniformed white country to a hybrid, multicultural reality. Her books thus chronicle the milestone process of transformation that changed the texture of British society starting

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<sup>98</sup> W. Knepper, "Andrea Levy's Dislocating Narratives" in W. Knepper (ed.), *EnterText*, "Special Issue on Andrea Levy," 9 (2012), p. 1.

<sup>99</sup> M. Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*. Columbus: Ohio State University, 2004, p. xiii.

<sup>100</sup> Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*, p. xii.

from the middle of the twentieth century (a process that originated in the collapse of the empire and developed through the large-scale immigration of the post-war period), prove that Britain has become a globalized country with an ethnically stratified way of living, show that postcolonial literature has allowed the expression of a new cultural sensibility, and skilfully recovers the history of slavery. Exposing both the profound transformations that affected Britain in the last decades, and the hidden history of colonial exploitation, Levy's work goes beyond mere textual dislocation and exemplifies passage through images of social, political and cultural change.

Since the connection between passage and the Middle Passage is also linguistically explicit, the institution of slavery and the triangular slave trade are the most evident among these images. Levy, whose cultural background includes both Gilroy's speculation on the Black Atlantic, Toni Morrison's notion of re-memory, and the whole process of historical recovery in which British intellectuals were involved from the late 1980s, is certainly aware of the topicality of these discourses, and uses her recent neo-slave narrative, *The Long Song*, to rewrite the image of the African diaspora. In particular, she re-elaborates the traditional chronotopes of capture, labour and escape, and the classical categories of time and space.

In a similar way, the idea of transition is illustrated by the *Empire Windrush*, an old troop-carrying steamship that arrived at Tilbury on 22 June, 1948 and disembarked 493 West Indian immigrants wishing to start a new life in the United Kingdom.

According to Stuart Hall, “this event signified the start of postwar Caribbean migration to Britain and stands symbolically as the birth date of the Afro-Caribbean partner black diaspora.”<sup>101</sup> For Louise Bennett, this moment marked the beginning of a reversed form of colonization, whose result was a strengthening of the connection between Jamaica and its colonial motherland and a radical subversion of the narrative of empire:

Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie,  
I feel like me heart gwine burs'  
Jamaica people colonizin  
Englan in reverse.  
By the hundred, by de t'ousan  
From country and from town,  
By de ship load, by de plane-load  
Jamaica is Englan bound.  
[...]  
What a islan! What a people!  
Man an woman, old and young  
Jusa pack dem bag an baggage  
And tun history upside dung!<sup>102</sup>

For Levy, the arrival of the *Windrush* is both a significant historical event and a major familial experience. Biographically, since her father was one of the ships' passengers, the author positions herself among the inheritors of that experience; historically, she perceives that episode as the climax of a long process of transformation that turned England from an “exclusive club” into a

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<sup>101</sup> S. Hall, “Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts from Abroad”, *Small Axe* 6 (1999), p. 1.

<sup>102</sup> L. Bennett, *Selected Poems*. Kingston: Sangster's, 1983, p. 179.

“hybrid nation,” and prompted the emergence of multiculturalism.<sup>103</sup>

The relentless movement of the ship (whose passengers live through the pages of *Small Island*) represents the migrant’s physical relocation as well as the gradual transformation of Britain’s national identity, whereas the image of its transatlantic passage evokes both the hybridity of contemporary British society and the fluidity of postcolonial cultural identities. The watery imagery thus channels the idea that we have moved from a solid to a liquid phase of history, in which nothing keeps its shape, identity is unstable and social changes radically transform the experience of being human. It also proves that, since globalization has developed into the hallmark of modernity and mobility (which is paradigmatically encapsulated in the increasing transfer of capital and social elites) has become the defining characteristic of our times, passage can be employed to portray both Britain’s political evolution and the anthropological condition of contemporary societies.

Like the ship is exposed to winds and currents, cultural identities

are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned

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<sup>103</sup> Levy, “This is my England”.

by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.<sup>104</sup>

### ***3.2.1 Time, space and the fluidity of identity***

In a 2005 interview with María Helena Lima, Andrea Levy condensed in a few lines all the profound motivations that led her to write about black immigrants in Britain:

for me [Levy] the starting point of writing books has always been about wanting to make the unseen visible, wanting to show the experience of [my] parents' generation and the children that came after, having to live in this country, quite a hostile environment, and how [they] cope with that.<sup>105</sup>

Committing herself to the cause of visibility, Levy embarks on a consequential process of historical, geographical and social redefinition in which the story of her parents, the exodus of their peers, and the lives of the following generations all converge into the intricate reality of contemporary Britain, eventually amending the classical mythology of British history. Being an inside witness of the

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<sup>104</sup> S. Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds.) *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: a Reader*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, p. 395.

<sup>105</sup> M. H. Lima, "Pivoting the Centre": The Fiction of Andrea Levy' in K. Sesay (ed.), *Write Black Write British: From Postcolonial to Black British Literature*. Hertford: Hansib, 2005, p. 57.

radical transformation that is affecting her country and a privileged beholder of the story of post-war West Indian migration to England at the same time, Levy rightfully attempts to piece together the loose fragments of a world whose historical course is not as straightforward as we would expect. With equal determination she struggles to correct the lame topography of empire and to shorten the distance between centre and margins.

As a result, rather than standing silently in the backdrop, in her fiction, historical and geographical categories speak of a modernity *in fieri* where time is dynamic, space is negotiable and identity (be it personal or national) is fluid. It is in this accommodating flexibility, that the temporal and spatial settings of novels such as *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, *Never Far from Nowhere*, *Fruit of the Lemon* and *Small Island* can be interpreted as telling images of passage. The passing of time and the unstable nature of historical truth on the one side, and the crossing (and re-crossing) of space on the other, signal Levy's intention to portray a swiftly mutating reality in which passage epitomizes the ideas of transition, transformation, movement and growth.

Levy's interest in the transitional character of time has been evident since the beginning of her career. In her debut novel, for example, the story of Angela (a daughter struggling to protect her dying father from the brutal racism of British institutions) is narrated through flashbacks, and the passing of time simultaneously functions as a plot-driving mechanism and a metaphor of transformation. On the

one hand, it is only reliving in memory certain passages of her life, going back to the years spent on a council estate in Highbury and appealing to her childhood's awareness of difference that this adult woman can achieve the sense of her compound identity and eventually learn to cope with the discriminatory environment around her ("as if a return to the past is required [...] to be able to move on"<sup>106</sup>). On the other, her father's physical decay is both the proof of the passing of time and the testimony of the fluidity of identity. In the same way, with this book Levy presents the idea of moving through space as both part of the narrative and a powerful metaphor of the characters' unsteady sense of self. Although living a pretty boring, geographically stable existence in the London borough of Islington (where their parents settled soon after their arrival from the West Indies), Angela and her brothers are destabilized by the idea of being bound to a chronic lack of roots and position themselves within an uncomfortable third space: "settled but waiting to move"<sup>107</sup> is how they see themselves. As a result, the story, which draws on Levy's autobiographical experience of growing up in 1960s Britain, is at once a portrayal of passage (from life to death, from Jamaica to England, from invisibility to recognition) and a lucid acknowledgment of social and political transformations. Both Angela's quest for self-awareness and her family's righteous desire of social inclusion, for example, can be looked at as miniature reflections of their country's social reality.

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<sup>106</sup> Lima, "Pivoting the Centre", 57.

<sup>107</sup> A. Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*. London: Review, 2004, p. 217. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym EL.

However, as a representation of the main character's development from childhood to adulthood, this story can also be read as a *Bildungsroman*. In particular, Levy's choice to retrace (through memory) Angela's personal growth within a troublesome social context, fits into Marianne Hirsch's comment on the novel of formation: "while the picaresque novel is turned outward toward society and the confessional novel is turned inward toward consciousness, the novel of formation maintains a peculiar balance between the social and the personal and explores their interaction."<sup>108</sup> In this sense, with the development of the protagonist going hand in hand with the renovation of society, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* comes to be included in what Mark Stein meaningfully defines "novels of transformation."<sup>109</sup> It is, as the scholar would put it, "about the formation of its protagonist[s] as well as the transformation of British society and cultural institutions" and joins without effort that "large section of black British literature [that] describes and entails subject formation under the influence of political, social, educational, familial, and other forces."<sup>110</sup>

The same logic can be applied to both *Never Far from Nowhere* and *Fruit of the Lemon* since, like Angela, their characters struggle to define themselves and to find their place in British society. But, whereas *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Never Far from Nowhere* are mainly concerned with the intimate time of the family

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<sup>108</sup> M. Hirsch, "The Novel of Formation as Genre: Between *Great Expectations* and *Lost Illusions*." *Genre* 12 (1979), p. 299.

<sup>109</sup> M. Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>110</sup> Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*, p. xiii.



(and the domestic space of the council estate), in *Fruit of the Lemon* Levy extends her gaze to the history and the transatlantic geography of diaspora. In the same way, while the former books stage the difficulty of shaping the single identities of individual characters, the latter turns around the construction of a shared, transnational identity and carefully investigates the issue of black Britishness. In particular, it points towards the need to reject a unitary vision of Black identity and to acknowledge the specificity of the Caribbean-British experience.

The book, which is at once the synthesis of multiple relocations and the analysis of compound identities, exemplifies the connection between spatial movement and self-discovery. It is the story of Faith (born and raised in England), of her immigrant parents (who dream to retire back home to Jamaica) and of their family's scattering around the world. At the same time, it is the story of the protagonist's instability, of her loose sense of self and of her therapeutic first trip to her family's native island. In this way, the novel features at least three geographical dislocations (the parents' exodus to Britain, their envisioned return journey and Faith's visit to Aunt Coral) and one in-depth expedition into the main character's mind. Perplexed at the idea that her parents might leave England and go back to a country that they have almost never mentioned before, frustrated and disillusioned by a couple of shameful episodes of racist discrimination, confused about her problematic black British identity, Faith needs to go back to her origins in order to make sense of her

troublesome hybridity. Through the stories of her aunt, Faith can finally retrace the history of her ancestors, shed light on their rich cultural legacy and establish a connection with her own past. The result is a radical makeover: strengthening the Jamaican side of her personality, the trip reinforces the girl's sense of self and allows her to feel at ease with her non-white, but still British, identity. Significantly enough, Levy uses clothes (the most superficial but also the most visible layer of corporeal identity) to represent her character's process of self-discovery and transformation:

I changed my clothes. Out of my jeans and into a cotton blouse and a skirt that I could flap at my knees. I put sandals on my feet and pulled my hair back tight off my face and into a bun on the top of my head. When Auntie Coral saw me, she gave me that look I had wanted before—the misty-eyed tearful look. She gasped, threw her hands into the air, clapped and shouted, 'Ahh, my Faith, but now you look like a Jamaican! (FL, 238)

Changing her style of dress, Faith symbolically rejects the vulnerable person that she used to be and liberates a new, more self-conscious version of herself. Looking Jamaican in Jamaica allows her to reposition herself within the great narrative of her family's scattering and obliterates her invalidating feeling of rootlessness. Finally, the newly-discovered Caribbean side of her identity helps Faith to solve the enigma of her geographical positioning and provides her with a socio-historical context to hold on to.

The effects of movement are even more explicit in *Small Island*. The novel, which simultaneously retraces the first wave of West Indian migration and sheds light on the swiftly mutating character of post-war Britain, links the idea of moving through space to the complexities and contradictions of national identity. While telling the interweaving stories of four unforgettable characters, Levy stages the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* and portrays the groundbreaking encounter between the newly arrived black immigrants and the deep-rooted, often unwelcoming British society. A national saga unfolds through the lives of the characters, and the personal stories of Gilbert, Hortense, Queenie and Bernard are narrated with the intent to expose the collective dimension of both the west Indians' exodus and its troublesome aftermath. On the one hand, the geographical relocation of a young man and his prissy beautiful wife, their stubborn determination to leave Jamaica, cross the Atlantic and settle in England, and their overwhelming feelings of estrangement and alienation become the symbols of a shared experience of migration. On the other, the disorderly life of Queenie Bligh (a solid Londoner who fights the disgust of her neighbours and opens her house to black servicemen while waiting for her long-lost veteran husband) comes to represent the state of confusion in which Britain finds itself during and after the war. In the same way, by claiming a space for herself, a symbolical space in which a single woman is free to accommodate black soldiers in the empty rooms of her big house without being discarded by the biased environment around her, Queenie embodies

her country's necessity to reinvent itself after the end of the colonial era. In this way, Levy skilfully reveals Britain's inability to rethink itself in multicultural terms and brilliantly captures the bewilderment of those years. On the one side, west Indian immigrants considered themselves legitimate British citizens, on the other, the English looked at them as unknown and unwanted strangers. Particularly touching is, in this sense, Joseph's painful realization that the history of his island is completely ignored in England and that his loving attachment for what he considers his mother country is scornfully neglected. In his attempt to explain the reason why he decided to volunteer in the Royal Air Force, the man illustrates the difficulties of geographical relocation and proves the topicality of the discourse of geographical passage and its interaction with the question of identity:

Let me ask you to imagine this. Living far from you is a beloved relation whom you have never met. Yet this relation is so dear a kin she is known as Mother. [...] Then one day you hear Mother calling – she is troubled, she need your help. Your mummy, your daddy say go. Leave home, leave family, leave love. Travel seas with waves that swell about you as substantial as concrete buildings. Shiver, tire, hunger – for no sacrifice is too much to see at Mother's needy side.<sup>111</sup>

Despite his dreams of inclusion and recognition, Joseph's awkward experience of displacement ('the shiver', 'the tire', 'the hunger') results in a frustrating misidentification and the man ends up

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<sup>111</sup> A. Levy, *Small Island*. London: Headline Review, 2009, p. 139. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym SI.

wondering “how come England did not know me?” (SI, 141). With this unanswered question, Levy positions both Joseph and the swiftly mutating reality in which he has come to live at “the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.”<sup>112</sup> In a similar way, the images of elapsing time, crossing spaces and fluid identities that her novels convey mirror the process of hybridization that is taking place in Britain. In their transitional dimension, spatial and temporal categories exceed the traditional roles of chronological order and geographical setting to become functional cognitive guidelines.

### ***3.2.2 Dis-illusionment***

Illusions and disillusions, affected fantasies and shattered dreams, great expectations and bitter miseries: all of these abound in the fiction of Andrea Levy. Once again though, what she is most concerned with is not the obstinacy of hope or the unchanging reality of despair, but their utter mutability, the easiness with which the one turns into the other, subverting plans and changing lives.

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<sup>112</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 1.

Eloquently, this trend is evident from the very first page of her earliest novel. At the beginning of *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, remembering one of her rare childhood trips, Angela describes her family's coach journey down to Devon and carefully depicts what happened when the bus stopped at the motorway café and she and her brothers found themselves in front of a mouth-watering display of snacks:

‘Fish and chips please, Dad,’ I said hopefully. ‘Cake and cola please,’ from my sister. We had never been out with our dad for a meal so we had no idea what his response would be. My dad sucked his teeth and jangled loose change around in his pocket as he looked at the prices on the menu. Then he ordered six cups of tea and six buttered rolls. We were all disappointed. [...] One by one with our roll and tea in front of us we said we didn't feel hungry any more. (EL, 1)

Staging the children's ravenous desire of sweetness as it suddenly changes into bitter-tasting disenchantment, Levy sets the tone of her whole literary production and, consciously or not, anticipates the most recurrent topics of her fiction. Both the everyday struggle of the Jamaican migrants living in England and the ambivalence of their existence (which is always precariously balanced between hopeless dreams of glory and fooled expectations) come to light in this paragraph. On the one side, through the potent image of a taciturn father with loose change jingling in his pockets, Levy introduces the figure of the penniless immigrant who works hard to make ends meet. On the other, portraying a host of hungry children who gradually lose

their appetite, the writer represents the experience of ‘disillusionment’, the moment in which the impossibility of a dream is painfully revealed through the passage from illusion to disillusion.

A similar transition from (unattainable) fantasy to (deluding) reality is at the core of a chapter whose title, “The Dream”, is a paradoxical anticipation of disappointment. Harking back to one of her family’s annual outings to the Ideal Home Exhibition,<sup>113</sup> Angela describes the long tube journey to Earl’s Court, the blurred megaphone announcements that herded the visitors to the packed booking hall and the masses of families who patiently queued for tickets. The admission was a relatively inexpensive pleasure, but it provided them with the impression of entering a foreign country. The family looked at the exhibition as a treat which made up for the fact that they couldn’t afford real holidays and eventually helped them to elude the monotony of everyday life. In particular, it allowed them to fantasize about the house in which they would have loved to live and to replace the harsh reality of the council estate with the illusion of a luxury dwelling.

We moved from stall to stall saying, ‘That’s great!... Oh, that would be handy!... Oohh, that’s good!... Ooh, that’s just what I need!’ [...] But the place we all liked the best, the place we all agreed was the best, the reason we came, were the houses. [...] We queued up, then when our turn came we edged through the house looking at each room. [...] And on the way home we argued about which house to get. [...] Then

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<sup>113</sup> Now called the Ideal Home Show, this fair is a once-a-year trade event whose main aim is to showcase the latest fashions in architecture, furniture, and home design.

we went into our flats.[...] We went inside our little council home, chocked full of furniture – bulging with items for family of six. In need of decoration, in need of being ten times the size, in need of a staircase. And the row started again. ‘No, I think we should get that nice bungalow,’ my mum insisted. I got agitated. ‘Not the bungalow – not the bungalow. Dad, you don’t want to get the bungalow, do you – you want somewhere with stairs too – don’t you Dad?’ My dad looked at me. ‘Calm down, Anne – we’re not getting any of the houses really.’ ‘What do you mean!’ I said shocked. ‘We can’t afford those houses, Anne – it’s just talk.’ (EL, 41-42)

Juxtaposing the gloomy “red brick with long open balconies built round a grey, concreted yard” (EL, 41) where the family lives, to the dreamlike houses that they cannot afford, Levy establishes a mutual exchange between what is real but offers no relief and what is financially unachievable but aesthetically satisfactory. Angela’s world is thus split between what is undesirable (a dull block of flats “built in the thirties to house the poor” –EL, 41) and what is desired (a mansion with stairs and fountains).

More significantly, this episode reveals that the question of defining the meaning of home in diaspora is not limited to the colonial past. Quite the opposite, as Avtar Brah carefully points out in her *Cartographies of Diaspora*, this idea plays a fundamental role in the contemporary context:

on the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place to desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. [...] The question of home,



therefore, is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of 'belonging'. As Gilroy (1993) suggests, it is simultaneously about roots and routes.<sup>114</sup>

Adapting the idea of frustrated desire to the problem of housing, Levy assumes a precise political position: not only does she call into question the concept of home (which becomes a paramount metaphor of empire and, as such, involves the "social regulation of 'belonging'"), she also substantiates it with a pragmatic financial preoccupation. Being unable to provide his family with a suitable accommodation, Angela's father unwillingly replicates the imperialistic attitude: on the one side, he denies his children the privilege of a comfortable house; on the other, he condemns them to social alienation.

This political stance acquires even more resonance when the harshness of the passage from fantasy to reality is translated into historical terms and the experience of dis-illusionment involves the way in which post-war Caribbean migrants were treated by the British population. Like Levy's father, who envisioned England as a sun-less Jamaica in which he would feel at home, those who crossed the Atlantic to join the mother country imagined to be travelling to a welcoming land where they would be given a good job and a decent place to stay.

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<sup>114</sup> A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 192.

The idea underlying the logic of the new-comers was that of coming to the ‘Mother Country’; a country that was waiting for them; a country portrayed in the colonial imaginary as a place of opportunities; a country immigrants from the British ex-colonies were eager to defend: “‘They need men like my son. Men of courage and good breeding. There is to be a war over there. The Mother Country is calling men like my son to be heroes whose families will be proud of them’” (Levy 2004: 59); a country they thought they were entitled to reside in.<sup>115</sup>

Unfortunately, these dreams clashed with the reality of a country suffering from the outcomes of the war and what should have been a glorious land of opportunities presented itself as an unwelcoming environment where migrants were systematically classified as second-class citizens. Unemployment and overt racism shattered the illusion of a bright future and the feeling of ‘being at home’ was hard to achieve.

Staging the pursuit of this sentiment, *Small Island* portrays its characters as they struggle to find their positions in a country that seems unknown even to those who have always lived there. England’s post-imperial configuration forces both Gilbert and Hortense and Queenie and Bernard to come to terms with an alien reality. The experience of migration and the resulting deterritorialization provoke in the newly-arrived migrants a feeling of estrangement and isolation, while the process of profound social transformation that affects the

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<sup>115</sup> I. Perez Fernandez, “Representing Third Spaces, Fluid Identities and Contested Spaces in Contemporary British Literature”, *Atlantis*, 31.2, p. 149.

country in the post war disrupts the nationalistic imagery of Queenie and Bernard. Once more the passage from a linear idea of history and a precise partition of territories to a postcolonial diasporic imagination provokes a fluidity in identity that is not easy to understand and acknowledge. Again, the encounter between the mother country and her prodigal Jamaican son results in a mutual misidentification: the child who expects to be welcomed by a loving mother is greeted by a repugnant stranger and the mother does not recognize her offspring. In the words of Gilbert,

The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she. Ragged, old and dusty as the long dead. Mother has a blackened eye, bad breath and one lone tooth that waves in her head when she speaks. Can this be that fabled relation you heard so much of? This twisted-crooked weary woman. This stinking cantankerous hag. She offers you no comfort after the journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, 'Who the bloody hell are you?' (SI, 139)

Not only does the experience of translation from the colonies originate in the former colonized subject a bitter experience of disillusionment, it also blurs the concept of national identity, as proved by the fact that Gilbert's struggle to recover his sense of self takes place within a country that is questioning its own position in the new world balance. As a result, the melodramatic question "Who the bloody hell are you?" reflects both Gilbert's disorientation and Britain's inability to cope with its socio-historical renewal.

Dis-illusionment can thus be read as both a personal and a national experience of passage: for the migrant, it implies the transition from the illusion of social inclusion to the painful recognition of being alien; for the nation it entails the move from the grandeur of the empire to the sordidness of post-war decadence.

### *3.2.3 Shifting voices*

Narrating the complexity of Britain's postcolonial identity is a challenge that Levy has faced with masterly creativity. On the one side, she has used the image of passage to represent how the lapsing of time and the movement through space have transformed a predominantly white country into a multicultural society. On the other, she has portrayed the shattered dreams of the migrants living in England through the transitional experience of dis-illusionment. However, there is a third aspect of her writing that can be interpreted as an image of passage: multivocality. As the moment in which the narration slides from one perspective to another, this narrative device implies the existence of more than one point of view, conveys the idea of a multilayered social reality and proves that, since "the mediating

lens by which she [Levy] understands and negotiates her writing”<sup>116</sup> is her split cultural background, one single authoritative voice cannot suffice to articulate the complexity of her world.

*Every Light in the House Burnin'*, which might easily be mistaken for a classical first person account, is indeed a significant variation on the theme of multivocality. Since the story is narrated by Angela alone, the book initially presents itself as a univocal narration, but, as soon as Angela starts to speak for her dying father (of whom she becomes the cultural mediator) other than for herself, it becomes evident that it expresses two different positions. An interesting insight about this daughterly figure is offered by Charlotte Beyer's recent study on the representation of ageing in contemporary British novels. Comparing Levy's *Every Light in the House Burnin'* to Joan Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight*, the scholar concludes that, as a “highly significant figure [who] enables the continuation of intergenerational and community bonds, and embodies the processes of female individuation and subject formation”, the daughter who mediates between her ageing black father and the British institutions around them represents “the evolution of black British identity and a younger generation successfully negotiating black Britishness” (109). In particular, about Angela's responsibilities, she writes:

it falls to the daughter to take up a mediating role of helper/translator for her father, to enable communication between him and the white-dominated establishment:

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<sup>116</sup> I. P. Fernandez, “(Re)Mapping London: Gender and Racial Relations in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*”, *Interactions*, 19.1-2, 2010, p. 29.

“Dad—would you like me to see the doctor for you? See if I can get some stronger pills for the pain?” This offer of help is gratefully received, as the ageing father presumes his daughter more capable of translating his needs across cultural and racial barriers: “Yes, you go—you know how to talk to him—you know what to say.” This important passage illustrates the reversal of roles between the father and the daughter mediator, with the latter assuming linguistic control and social authority.<sup>117</sup>

Following this position, in *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, multivocality should be read as a proof of the expressive and political agency acquired by second-generation immigrants and an endorsement of their ability to mediate between different cultural contexts.

More straightforwardly, in *Never Far From Nowhere*, multivocality is the effect of the presence of two distinct narrators: Olive and Vivien. But, since the sisters, who were born into the same family and educated according to the same system of values, have almost nothing in common, their voices become symbols of difference and misunderstanding. At the same time, the narrative structure (which is divided into sections whose titles “Olive” and “Vivien” depend on who is narrating) presents their lives in both their physical proximity and reciprocal isolation. Nevertheless, articulating the parallel experiences of these teenage sisters, and providing each of them with the possibility to speak for herself, Levy goes beyond the mere counterpoint and positions herself within the long tradition of the

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<sup>117</sup> C. Beyer, “Representations of Ageing and Black British Identity in Andrea Levy’s *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and Joan Riley’s *Waiting in the Twilight*” in W. Knepper (ed.), *EnterText* 9, 2012, p.115.

'double'. Sliding from philosophy to psychoanalysis, and from literature to cinema, the idea of the alter-ego keeps surfacing throughout western culture. Particularly relevant in this sense are Carl Jung's notion of the 'shadow', our darker double,<sup>118</sup> and Otto Rank's speculation on the literary transpositions of this psychological phenomenon.<sup>119</sup> As concerns literature, a potentially limitless array of models might be quoted: there is the classical example of Echo and Narcissus (from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), the 'strange case' of Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the uncanny story of *Dorian Gray*. Moreover, through the story of Olive and Vivien, Levy voices the troublesome coexistence of self and other, eventually contributing to the postcolonial discourse on otherness.

In *Fruit of the Lemon*, multivocality serves to connect the disconnected Faith Jackson (a black British girl who has lost contact with her Caribbean heritage) to the entrenched stories of her extended Jamaican family. At the beginning of the story, Faith is profoundly disoriented by the idea of being somehow connected to the history of slavery and the experience of migration and cannot formulate her own narrative: in particular, she is unable to cope with the painful experience of racial discrimination and struggles to understand her parents' desire to return to their native island. Gradually, as she becomes more and more acquainted with the narrative of Caribbean diaspora, she acquires historical awareness and personal insight and

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<sup>118</sup> C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. London: Routledge, 2001, p. 35.

<sup>119</sup> O. Rank, *The Double; A Psychoanalytic Study*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971.

finally becomes an active political subject. Handing over to Aunt Coral, Vincent and Violet (whose stories reposition the family within a broader transatlantic context), Faith fills in the gap left by historical erasure.

The same spirit animates the pages of *Small Island*, whose plot and narrative structure are (once more) based on the juxtaposition of paired selves: empire/colonies, white/black, male/female. In particular, Levy's strategy of employing four narrators is functional to her aspiration to portray Caribbean migration (and the social makeover that it brings with it) as a collective experience rather than an event belonging exclusively to Britain's black community. On the one side, as Bonnie Greer puts it, existing in two diverging versions, the characters of this novel embody the theme of the double which runs uninterruptedly through Levy's work and is powerfully epitomized by the cover of the book ("Two beautiful women, one white, one black, striding in opposite directions, behind them St. Paul's, the divine, and the Oxo tower, the secular"<sup>120</sup>). On the other, their juxtapositions are meant to convey the idea of a slick reality where historical and geographical categories are being shaken, black Jamaicans and white Britons are doomed to share the same spaces, and the traditional notion of gender role is at stake.

Through their shifting voices, the characters of *Small Island* provide the idea of a world that needs to be reinvented. A world that

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<sup>120</sup> B. Greer, "Empire's child", *The Guardian*, 31 January 2004.



acknowledges contradictions and inconsistencies in the name of of  
hybridization and multiculturalism.

### 3.3 CHRONOTOPES OF THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

Although authentically autobiographical slave narratives are rare, some of them have lived on as classics, eventually affecting both contemporary African-American literature and black British writing. The twentieth century's reappraisal of these first-person testimonies (which took place within the broader context of a critical meditation on the overall institution of slavery) has given birth to a global experience of retrospective literature that successfully corroborates the topicality of the discourse of slavery in history and politics.

Indeed, if the so-called neo-slave narrative now plays a fundamental role in English fiction, the merit goes to the process of self-recognition that began to shake Britain's perception of its imperial history towards the end of the 1980s. In those years, through the voices of their fictional enslaved characters, the books of David Dabydeen, Fred D'Aguiar, Caryl Phillips and a few others allowed an unprecedented amount of visibility to the involvement of Britain in slavery and the slave trade, exposed the transnational nature of these phenomena, and made possible the recovery of stories that had been hidden beneath the myth of British abolitionism. The role of slavery in the history of the Empire, the global patterns of the slave trade and the interconnected destiny of Africa, Europe and the Americas were finally uncovered through narrative.

Working at the recovery of historical truths and geographical interconnections, these writers struggled to represent the spatial and temporal coordinates of the experience of slavery, in order to make it increasingly more accessible. In particular, they focused on the rewriting of those events in which the chronological setting and the topographical location become one symbolic figure, able to grant visibility to disregarded images and subjects and audibility to stories which have long been ignored. To do so, they resorted (most of the times implicitly) to a series of chronotopes.

But what exactly is a chronotope? And where does it come from? Time and space have been of paramount importance in literature and literary theory at least since Aristotle introduced the classical unities of time, space and action in the Hellenistic age (*Poetics*, c. 335 BC). However, it was only during the twentieth century, and thanks to the cultural renovation spurred by Albert Einstein's theorization of relativity, that the complex interaction between them gave birth to a proper philosophical (and philological) discourse. A discourse that borrowed the terminology and the theoretical imagery of other disciplines to speculate on the composition and interpretation of the literary text. The chronotope is one of these calques. Towards the end of the 1930s, the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin adopted (and adapted) the scientific notion of chronotope in order to describe how the spatial element and the temporal dimension are reproduced by language and represented by literature. Within his disciplined system of beliefs, the chronotope

became “a unit of analysis for studying language according to the ratio and characteristics of the temporal and spatial categories represented,”<sup>121</sup> a cognitive concept with a narrative function whose main aim is to provide a tangible representation for abstract ideologies. More recently, the famous anthropologist James Clifford has written that “the chronotope is a fictional setting where historically specific relations of power become visible and certain stories can ‘take place.’”<sup>122</sup> The chronotope thus transforms time and space from mere fictional backgrounds into complex (symbiotic) strategies of representation.

A telling example of this strategy is Paul Gilroy’s image of the sailing ship. In his theorization of the Black Atlantic, the British scholar employs this chronotopical figure to exemplify the experience of transnational black modernity: in its relentless movement, the vessel conveys both the idea of shifting boundaries and the memory of the middle passage. In his own words,

The image of the ship –a living, microcultural, micro-political system in motion– is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons [...]. Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> M. M. Bakhtin and M. Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004, p. 425.

<sup>122</sup> J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 236.

<sup>123</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, p. 4.

The result is that “the specificity of the modern political and cultural formation” that he calls the Black Atlantic can be defined through the ship’s desire “to transcend both the structures of nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity.”<sup>124</sup>

It is with this spirit of border crossing, and with the clear intent to recover the voices of those who have long been silenced, that the latest generation of black British women writers are approaching the issue of slavery. Works such as *The Long Song* (but also Jackie Kay’s *The Lamplighter* and Bernardine Evaristo’s *Blonde Roots*) demonstrate that the black British female versions of the neo-slave narrative can effortlessly align themselves with the existing literary tradition, eventually contributing to the demolition of geographical boundaries and the reconstruction of historical truths. Authors like Andrea Levy prove that womanly sensibility can skilfully be employed to delve into the history of slavery with a transatlantic look, a truthful voice and a touch of innovation. Nevertheless, the originality of these contributions must not be mistaken for a definitive departure from the norm. Quite the reverse, they position themselves right at the core of the established conventions of the genre and rewardingly succeed in invigorating it from within. Through these narratives, the chronotopes of tradition are restored; the images that distinguish this literature are brought back and rejuvenated; and the moment of capture, the space of the plantation and the experience of

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<sup>124</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, p. 19.

escape revive thanks to these women's emotional and political responses.

### ***3.3.1 The Long Song***

*The Long Song* (published in the UK in 2010) is Levy's latest publication. Welcomed with enthusiasm by both critics and readers, it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2010 and won the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction in 2011. Skillfully combining novelistic imagination and historical research, it presents itself as a fictional memoir in which July, a slave woman born on a Jamaican sugar plantation in the nineteenth century, tells a tragic story of exploitation and defiance with a feel of humour and a touch of optimism.

The first chronotope that can be of use in the interpretation of this novel is capture, the moment in which the experience of slavery (intended here as personal incident, rather than historical institution) comes to life through violence. Since being kidnapped is the first step into a life of brutal exploitation, capture embodies the time/space in which freedom and dignity are lost in favour of slavery and abuse. This traumatic passage from self-determination to captivity is at the core of most narratives of slavery and is usually presented as a sudden

and unexpected kidnap that marks the beginning of a new life. A life dominated by solitude and subjugation in which family and community relations are drastically interrupted and everyday activities are replaced by forced labour and rough stuff. Powerful testimonies of abduction are traditionally employed to present capture as the foundational event of her characters' experience of slavery and Levy's novel (which is based on the story of a slave by birth) might easily be mistaken for a deviation. Quite the opposite, Levy is skilful at modifying the chronotope in order to adapt it to the novel, without altering its narrative function. July, who was born a slave and never had to confront seizure is not the product of brutal kidnapping. Nevertheless, as the illegitimate daughter of the overseer who raped her mother, she is the outcome of an act of violence which eventually leads to a life of abuse and exploitation. Sexual violence takes the place of capture and the moment in which the experience of slavery comes to life through violence is signalled by rape rather than by abduction.

The second chronotope that can be used to get the inner meaning of this text is the plantation. As the *locus* of indentured labour, the plantation represents both the slaves' everyday struggle for survival and the masters' claim to benefit from the work of their captives. According to the pervert logic of slavery, productivity is a profit for both the workers and their owners: on the one hand, it contributes to the wealth of the master while, on the other, it saves the slave from punishment and death. For this reason, within the

narratives of slavery, forced labour can be considered as both an effective plot-driving mechanism and a powerful metaphor of exploitation. The plantation, as a consequence, is both the setting in which abuse takes place and the container of the prosperity produced by slaves: it extends from the master's Great House to the fields to the slaves' huts. In the case of July work takes place in the luxury dwelling of her mistress, Mrs Caroline Mortimer: as a house-servant, the girl is supposed to please her missus and to fulfil all of her wishes. Hers is a privileged position (if compared to the toil of cane-cutting) which implies an intimacy otherwise impossible between master and slave, and the troubled relationship with Caroline, which lies at core of the novel, is portrayed by Levy with the clear intent to reveal its paradox. In the following excerpt, for example, the mistress is presented more as a caricature than as a character.

The missus's favoured punishment was to strike July sharply upon the top of the head with her shoe. Although hopping and hobbling, the missus could chase July around a room for several minutes to deliver her blow. At these times July would jump, weave and spin to avoid her. For she knew that soon the tropical heat would so exhaust that demented fatty-batty missus that she would fall upon her daybed in a faint of lifelessness.<sup>125</sup>

As Nicola Barranger has insightfully pointed out,

another writer might have made the plantation owners stereotypically evil, but Andrea Levy was careful to avoid

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<sup>125</sup> A. Levy, *The Long Song*. London: Headline Review, 2010, p. 64. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym LS.



the pitfall, to dehumanise the perpetrators as easily as they did slaves. ‘I’m not interested in demons,’ she says. ‘As human beings, when we go into our periods of extreme cruelty to one another, it’s not because the person perpetrating it is evil, it is because the circumstances somehow have conspired to make the doing of something truly awful an easy proposition’.<sup>126</sup>

In this sense, not only does Levy assert the fundamental role played by slaves in the running, other than the establishment, of the plantation (of which the mansion is the mirrored image), eventually positioning July within the community of industrious workers who produce the capital of which their lazy masters benefit; she also farcically portrays the weakness of the human nature. The image of July jumping around the house to avoid her mistress’ lethargic fury thus enhances the chronotope of the plantation with a tinge of farcical *divertissement*.

Another image that can be adopted to examine this work is escape. Intended as the moment in which the chains of slavery are broken and freedom is finally achieved, escape plays a critical function within the narratives of slavery, implicitly presenting itself as the occasion that released their creation. Since autobiographical writing would have been out of question for slaves in captivity, emancipation is to be read as the necessary condition for the production of these stories, whose fictional authenticity would otherwise be irreparably disavowed. July’s narrative, for example, is

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<sup>126</sup> N. Barranger, “Andrea Levy Addressing the Question of Slavery”, online interview available at <http://www.newbooksmag.com/left-menu/author-coverage/andrea-levy-the-big-interview.php>

made possible only by the fact that her life spans from the last period of slavery to the years that followed the 1838 Proclamation of Freedom. In particular, her testimony is originated by her fortuitous encounter with her son, Thomas: as a publisher who learnt his trade in Britain after being abandoned on the doorstep of a mission, the man is determined to publish his mother's memoir, "a chapbook—a small pamphlet. My mama's words printed upon paper" (LS, 2), as he writes in the introduction. Shy and reticent at the beginning, in a few months July becomes surprisingly involved with the task, "puffed up, emboldened to the point when my advice often fell on to ears that remained deaf to it" (LS, 4). What comes out of this effort is the engaging autobiography of a resourceful slave who lives through the Jamaican Baptist War and remains bound to the plantation despite her newly-acquired freedom, the story of a woman who never experiences the thrill of running away or the sweet taste of self-determination, a tale that excludes emancipation from its range of possibilities. Nevertheless, rather than blindly ignoring the image of escape, *The Long Song* reconfigures it through the vivid description of a non-conventional funeral:

Although the hour was midnight, the elation that rose from all glowed like a sunrise to light this splendid occasion. As the coffin with the words, 'Colonial slavery died July 31, 1838, aged 276 years', was lowered into the ground, a joyous breeze blew. It was whipped up from the gasps of cheering that erupted unbounded. When the handcuffs, chains and iron collars were thrown into that long-awaited grave to clatter on top of slavery's ruin, the earth did tremor.

For at that moment every slave upon this island did shake off the burden of their bondage as one. (LS, 181-182)

In Levy's interpretation of the experience of liberation, the individual attempt to escape, its cathartic accomplishment or dramatic failure, is replaced by a collective ritual of discharge.

Proven that Levy gives a significant contribution to the restoration of the conventional images of the neo-slave literary tradition and that hers are coherent (even though innovative) interpretations of the moment of capture, of the figure of the plantation and of the experience of escape, there are other aspects of this text that deserve to be taken into consideration. In particular, it would be misleading to disregard the theme of memory or the rhetorical strategy of irony. As effective literary strategies, they can be used to establish a conversation between *The Long Song* and other neo-slave narratives; as political stances, they can help us to bare the authors' real intentions.

Since remembering is part of the global discourse on historical responsibility, it can be useful to compare Levy's attitude towards memory to that of other writers dealing with the same topic. Jackie Kay's involvement is probably the most evident, as the reader of *The Lamplighter* is repeatedly implored to remember. In a chorale stream of consciousness, its narrators recall the brutal moments of their captures, the experience of the middle passage, the distress of enslavement in order to keep alive (and operative) the memory of slavery. Remembrance becomes both the leading spur and the final

purpose of their telling. They narrate what they remember (and what they cannot forget) but also what they want others to remember: they share their stories of violence and exploitation hoping that their memories will replace silence and forgetfulness.

MARY

I tell my story to remember.

BLACK HARRIOT

I tell my story to forget.

[...]

CONSTANCE

I tell the story to pass it on.

MARY

I tell my story so the story will stop.<sup>127</sup>

Through her multiple poetic voices, Kay links memory to trauma and trauma to identity, thus establishing a close relationship between what we remember and who we are. Her intention is to start a process of remembering able to dismantle the biased ideology of the past and to guarantee restoration to her characters' stories.

Levy, on her part, is not afraid to admit that, despite the great deal of time that she has spent researching eighteenth and early nineteenth-century slavery in Jamaica, "*The Long Song* is not a book about slavery. It's a book about a person who happens to be living her life within a slave society."<sup>128</sup> In her own words:

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<sup>127</sup> J. Kay, *The Lamplighter*. Tarsset, Northumberland [England]: Bloodaxe Books, 2008, p. 36.

<sup>128</sup> From an interview available at The Man Booker Prizes website.

Instead of a sense of horror, I have emerged from the experience of writing the book with a sense of awe for those millions of people who once lived as slaves. [...] our slave ancestors were much more than a mute and wretched mass of victims [...] they did more than survive, they built a culture that has come all the way down through the years to us. Their lives are part of British history. If history has kept them silent then we must conjure their voices ourselves and listen to their stories. Stories through which we can remember them, marvel at what they endured, what they achieved, and what they have bequeathed to us all. *The Long Song* is my tribute to them and, I hope, an inspirational story not only for their descendants, but for us all. (LS, 416)

Another theme that cannot go unnoticed in the interpretation of this book is humour. In her ground-breaking study of black laughter, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, Glenda Carpio writes that “black writers and artists have utilized heterogeneous forms of humor [...] as a uniquely invigorating kind of epistemological response to the situation of forced migration and transatlantic alienation.”<sup>129</sup> This is particularly true for Bernardine Evaristo whose novel, *Blonde Roots*, is the successful parody of a world turned upside down in which blacks are the masters of white slaves. Her characters are well-crafted caricatures and the historical truths, and national boundaries, that she portrays are provocatively distorted. Humour helps her in the construction of a world where everything is the exact opposite of what we expect, a deformed reality in which enslavement is presented as a job opportunity (“The terms of my engagement stipulated that it was a job for life. [...] I would

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<sup>129</sup> G. Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 8.

receive an annual wage of nothing with an added bonus of nothing for good behaviour”<sup>130</sup>).

In *The Long Song*, humour is presented as both a peculiar feature of July’s character and an effective strategy to deal with the brutality of the Caribbean slave society. From the beginning, a blend of keen sarcasm and mild comedy marks the narration: in the first chapter, for example, July rejects her son’s editorial suggestions by contrasting her tale to the many books written by spoiled white ladies. With open sincerity she puts her “forthright tongue” (LS, 7) next to “the puff and twaddle” (LS, 8) of a white woman’s mind and cautions her readers about the stereotypes of colonial writing:

That white missus will have you acquainted with all the tribulations of her life upon a Jamaican sugar plantation before you have barely opened the cover. Two pages upon the scarcity of beef. Five more upon the want of a new hat to wear with her splendid pink taffeta dress. No butter but only a wretched alligator pear again! is surely a hardship worth the ten pages it took to describe it. Three chapters is not an excess to lament upon a white woman of discerning mind who finds herself adrift in a society too dull for her. And as for the insolence and stupidity of her slaves [...], only need to sleep would stop her taking several more volumes to pronounce upon that most troublesome of subjects. (LS, 8)

Through this humorous interlude, Levy means to blame the moral weakness of these women and to denounce the bigotry of their culture. Mixing serious subjects and humour, Levy presents a reality of abuse

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<sup>130</sup> B. Evaristo, *Blonde Roots*. London: Penguin Books, 2009, p. 24.

and exploitation with a touch of originality. Once more, history simultaneously inspires her imagination and is re-imagined.





## CHAPTER FOUR

*Dionne Brand*

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#### 4.1 THE STRUGGLING SISTER

*A Caribbean dozen* is a 1996 collection of children's poetry in which John Agard and Grace Nichols blended together the verses of thirteen poets of West Indian descent (including themselves, Dionne Brand and others) and the illustrations of the collage artist and painter Cathie Felstead. As editors, Agard and Nichols were very determined: they wanted to expose the issue of migration and to translate it in terms suitable for children as much as they wished to familiarize their young American readers with the typical flavours and distinctive rhythms of the Caribbean, and to shorten the long-established distance between writer and reader. Driven by these ambitions, they asked the poets involved in the project to introduce their own compositions and to present themselves to the book's intended audience. The result was a captivating array of intimate childhood memories. Here is how Brand recapped her life on that occasion:

I was born deep in the south of Trinidad in a village called Guayguayare. Our house was so close to the ocean that when the tide came in the pillow tree logs on which the house stood were almost covered by surf. When I was four or so my grandmother, who brought me up, moved to San Fernando, but every holiday we would return to Guaya where my grandfather lived. It is the place I remember and love the most. I now live in Toronto, Canada, but each time I go back to Trinidad I always go to Guayguayare just to see

the ocean there, to breathe in the smell of copra drying and wood burning and fish frying.<sup>131</sup>

Even though it was written to satisfy the curiosity of young readers, this passage must not be mistaken for a trivial account. On the contrary, it is a substantial indicator of Brand's perception of herself. In particular, through these words the author acknowledges her peculiar connection with space and reveals the fundamental role played in her life by her maternal grandmother. Referring to Guayaguayare, San Fernando and Canada all within a few lines, Brand suggests a strong connection between who she is and where she positions herself. At the same time, hinting without embarrassment at her repeated relocations, she shows the topicality of her experience of migration and presents herself as both rootless and rooted. Being rootless, Brand moves from one village to another, as a child, and from her native island to an adoptive foreign country, as an adult. Being deeply-rooted in the culture of her origins (a culture of which the grandmother, an old black woman who takes care of her daughters' children, is the quintessence), Brand articulates a poetic voice that remains uncompromisingly Caribbean. These apparently contrasting conditions give birth to a rare combination of political stances and aesthetic sensibility. The following poem, which is taken from the collection *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*, proves the originality of this approach while disclosing Brand's ability to tackle

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<sup>131</sup> J, Agard, G. Nichols and C. Felstead, *A Caribbean Dozen*. London: Walker, 1996, p. 61.

awkward political themes (such as nomadism, statelessness and unbelonging) without sacrificing the traditionally Caribbean feeling:

I am not a refugee  
I have my papers,  
I was born in the Caribbean,  
practically in the sea,  
fifteen degrees above the equator,  
I have lived here all my adult life,  
I am stateless anyway.<sup>132</sup>

Now a prominent figure in poetry, fiction and critical writing, Dionne Brand was born on January 7, 1953 in Trinidad and Tobago. The daughter of a young migrant (a woman who had “walked the streets of London [...] in order to send those brown envelopes”<sup>133</sup>), she was raised by her grandmother and lived the first seventeen years of her life in a household full of children.

We were an ever growing bunch of cousins, sisters and brothers. My grandmother’s grandchildren. Children of my grandmother’s daughters. We were seven in all, from time to time more, given to my grandmother for safekeeping. Eula, Kat, Ava and I were sisters. Eula was the oldest. Genevieve, Wil and Dri were sister and brothers and our cousins. Our mothers were away. Away-away or in the country away. That’s all we knew of them except for their photographs which we used tauntingly in our battles about whose mother was prettier. (SS, 54)

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<sup>132</sup> D. Brand, *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*. Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1984, p. 70. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym CHS.

<sup>133</sup> D. Brand, *Sans Souci, and Other Stories*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1989, p. 75. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym SS.

In the sixties Brand attended the local primary school and was educated according to British colonial standards (“none of the books we studied were about Black people’s lives”<sup>134</sup>); however, it was through her unbridled passion for reading that she developed her distinctive critical judgement. “Arriving at desire” (a brief testimony in which she discusses the power of literature through a skilful blend of autobiographical memory and political awareness), recalls her precocious engagement with books that offered a different perspective on history and culture. In particular, it chronicles her experience of being seduced by *The Black Napoleon*, a biography of Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the Haitian revolution. “In it,” Brand writes, “I met a history I was never taught. The history I had been taught began, ‘In 1492 Christopher Columbus [...] discovered the new world’”<sup>135</sup>. With it, she acquired the awareness that “Black people’s experiences were as important and as valuable, and needed to be written down and read about”<sup>136</sup>. This book thus represents the catalyst of her desire to write, as well as the spur of her political commitment.

After graduating from Naparima Girls’ High School in 1970, Brand migrated to Canada to attend university. There, she earned a BA in English and Philosophy from the University of Toronto and a MA in the Philosophy of Education from the Ontario Institute for

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<sup>134</sup> Agard, Nichols and Felstead, *A Caribbean Dozen*, p. 61.

<sup>135</sup> D. Brand, “Arriving at Desire” in *Norton reader an anthology of nonfiction*. 11<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004, p. 419.

<sup>136</sup> Agard, Nichols and Felstead, *A Caribbean Dozen*, p. 61.

Studies in Education. However, it is her relentless political commitment that takes centre stage in those years:

When I moved to Canada in 1970 I joined the civil rights, feminist and socialist movements. I was only seventeen but I already knew that to live freely in the world as a Black woman I would have to involve myself in political action as well as writing.<sup>137</sup>

As a social activist, Brand has collaborated with black and feminist communities: she has chaired the Women's Issues Committee of the Ontario Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, helped to organize the Black and Native Women's Caucus of the International Women's Day Coalition, worked for Toronto's Black Education Project, and served on the board of the Shirley Samaroo House (a Toronto shelter for battered immigrant women). As a political actor, she has been a supporter of Marxist ideals: in particular she has dedicated herself to the fulfilment of the principles of equal distribution and fair treatment.

Thanks to this commitment Brand has developed a style that masterly combines politics and poetics, and rightfully positions her within the context of engaged black writing. In commenting on her influences, she said,

What some white reviewers lack is the sense of what literature that is made by Black people and other people of colour is about. If you read my work, you have to read Toni Morrison, you have to read Derek Walcott, Rosa Guy, Jean Rhys, Paule Marshall, Michael Anthony, Eddie Brathwaite,

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<sup>137</sup> Agard, Nichols and Felstead, *A Caribbean Dozen*, p. 61.

and African writers and poets [...]. I don't consider myself on any margin, on the margin of Canadian Literature. I'm sitting right in the middle of Black Literature, because that's who I read, that's who I respond to.<sup>138</sup>

Among a number of minor works, her poetry includes the early *Winter Epigrams and Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia*, the legendary *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* (which is a reaction in verses to her personal experience of the US invasion of Grenada) and the more recent *No Language is Neutral, Land to Light On, Thirsty* and *Ossuaries*. As concerns prose writing, her work consists of several volumes of non-fiction (as for example *Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots: Speaking of Racism; No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Women Working in Ontario 1920s to 1959s; Bread out of Stone*; and the groundbreaking *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*) as well as three novels (*In Another Place, Not Here; At the Full and Change of the Moon* and *What We All Long For*) and the collection *Sans Souci and Other Stories*. Along the years, Brand has achieved unquestionable critical recognition: her books have gained multiple literary awards and her contribution to literature has been recognized by both Canadian and international literary communities. In 1997 the collection *Land to Light On* won both the Governor General's Award for Poetry and the Trillium Book Award; in 2006 *What We All Long For* won the City of Toronto Book

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<sup>138</sup> D. Brand, as quoted in C. Morrell (ed.), *Grammar of Dissent: Poetry and Prose by Claire Harris, M. Nourbese Philip, and Dionne Brand*. Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 1994, p. 170.



Award; and in 2011 *Ossuaries* won the Griffin Poetry Prize. Brand was also named Toronto's third Poet Laureate in September 2009.

In addition to writing, Brand has held several prestigious academic positions; has been editor, writer, and researcher for a number of alternative journals and papers; and has worked as a successful filmmaker. Indeed it is from one of her documentaries, *Sisters in the Struggle*, that the title of this biographical section was derived. Featuring a group of politically active black women as they share their intimate experiences of racism and sexism with the open intent to overthrow systemic discrimination, the film presents itself as an unintentional self-portrait: what emerges is the image of Dionne Brand, a woman who struggles among sisters.

## 4.2 IMAGES OF DESIRE

Desire (which in everyday speech describes a pervasive sense of longing, and can thus be placed in relation to a whole variety of motivational terms, such as need, demand, drive, wish, intention and many others) is both a major literary topos, a consequential philosophical issue and a salient psychiatric and psychoanalytical concern. In literature, it takes center stage in fiction as well as in poetry, and is ideally exemplified by works such as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. In philosophy, it positions itself at the core of the speculation of eminent thinkers and is often related to questions of power. Hegel, for example, maintains that even in its most basic primitive form of necessity, desire aims at incorporating subject and object in the attempt to achieve a state of dominance, control and assimilation of the external world. In psychoanalysis, it is central to some of the most substantial Freudian theories. Freud, who sees sexuality as the main arena within which desire is expressed, repeatedly uses the term libido to refer to the psychic/biological energy that fuels human motivation.

Desire, however, is also a crucial component of the contemporary critical discourse. For example, it is at the core of Robert Young's *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1994) and of Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic*

*Approach to Literature and Art* (1980). Young's work portrays Empire as a desiring machine driven by capitalism, while tracing the genealogy of the concept of hybridity. Kristeva, whose stance results from an active dialogue with Mikhail Bakhtin's texts, concentrates on the interaction between language and desire, eventually contending that the relationship between linguistic practices and social realities can be used to explain the construction of meaning that takes place through literary narratives. In particular, she is concerned with establishing the manner in which a text is made up of already existent discourses. She argues that authors do not create their works out of their own mind, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts. Thus, the text becomes "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text," in which "several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another."<sup>139</sup>

The literature of Dionne Brand at the same time supports and rejects this theory. On the one hand, it is difficult to imagine her highly personal works as a product of other texts. On the other, the idea of permutation (intended here as variation, or the repetition of a musical theme in which the rhythm, harmony, or melody is altered or embellished) is implicit in her multifocal approach. Indeed, Brand's focus shifts without effort from politics to affect and from transnationalism to gender, while fiction, poetry and critical writing

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<sup>139</sup> J. Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, p. 36.

are all skillfully combined in a corpus whose inner meaning is expressed through potent images of desire.

The first of these images is located in the controversial terrain of belonging, the second lies in the black woman's body and the third finds expression in passionate anti-colonial, anti racist and anti-sexist commitment. Since Brand is at the same time a migrant struggling to cope with the experience of dislocation, a homosexual woman trying to define herself and her sexuality within a chauvinist society, and a fervent political activist, all these images are reflections of her own lived life, other than of the invented stories of her characters. As such, they combine autobiography and fiction and skillfully incorporate literary and political stances. Even more significantly, they present desire as both a literary subject matter and an existential condition.

Brand herself, in a 1996 interview, advocated a sense of politics that transcended the conventional preoccupations, and incorporated political responsibility and unbridled desire:

ultimately, politics is about pleasure [...] I think Eros is ultimately what we have been fighting for. To express ourselves in the most lustful and pleasurable ways. When you're fighting for or organizing towards a society that you would want to live in, it surely would be a society which is not just about making rules, but about making life pleasurable, and opening spaces.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> N. Abbas, "An interview with Dionne Brand and Nuzhat Abbas." *Herizons* 13.3 (1999): p, 6.

This attitude results in a writing punctuated by the desire of freedom. Brand craves to be free to live in a transnational diasporic dimension without being boxed by the stale rhetoric of roots. Free to experience the (same-sex) other's body and to manifest even the most intimate appetites. Free to fight against the legacy of colonialism, and to discard the prejudices of a homophobic society. This desire is at the same time the spur that drives her actions, and the outcome of her struggle.

#### ***4.2.1 (Be)Longing***

If for first-class citizens belonging is a given, for migrants, expatriates and refugees (as well as for former colonized peoples) the feeling of being in mutual connection with a place and its inhabitants is an often frustrated aspiration. As a consequence, the insatiable hunger for familiarity brought about by the experiences of diaspora and colonization transforms the traditional notion of belonging into a revolutionary act of longing: to belong becomes to desire. Desiring to fit in, to feel at home and to be recognized as part of a community, these subjects engage in a complex process of self-definition, interrogate themselves about origins and routes, and tackle the

byzantine questions of where and how the I positions itself among others.

Dionne Brand has faced these issues both on the personal and the professional level: as a migrant, she has struggled for decades in order to define herself among strangers; as a writer, she has focused on the difficulties of geographic relocation. Since the beginning of her career, belonging has been one of her major concerns and the relationship between place and identity has taken centre stage in her work. From *No Language Is Neutral* to *Land to Light On* and from *Thirsty* to *Inventory*, Brand has never ceased to translate into poetry the controversial issues of settlement and rootlessness. In the same way, she has never stopped to use her prose to chart the routes of diaspora, eventually converting her writing in a potent vehicle for the expression of her political engagement. The result is that her books can now be adopted to “follow the trajectory of her changing vision”<sup>141</sup>. Indeed, over the years Brand’s articulation of the relationship between identity and place has undergone a gradual process of transformation: a transnational approach has supplanted the binary opposition of home and abroad, a growing socio-political awareness has smoothed the initial antagonism between self and other and the swinging movement from here to there has been replaced by a more inclusive poetics of drifting. Following Kit Dobson, who quotes Marlene Goldman, the notion of drifting can usefully be employed

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<sup>141</sup> D. Brand and L. C. Sanders. *Fierce Departures: The Poetry of Dionne Brand*. Waterloo, Ont: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009, p. ix.

to show how Brand “offers an alternative to the boundedness of home and the nation-state” (13). Drifting, Goldman states, becomes a “legitimate resistant practice” (13) against “both the model of the Euro-American modernist exile, whose desires for belonging are typically nostalgic and directed toward a lost origin — and the model of the immigrant — whose desires are reoriented toward a new home and a new national community” (26). Instead of pledging allegiance to the nation state or longing for a lost home, drifting between or beyond such positions offers a possibility for creating a new and liberating politics.<sup>142</sup>

Drifting thus embodies both a way of living and a political stance. On the one hand, it illustrates the attitude of the contemporary, post-colonial migrant who, although moving painfully from here to there, is able to maintain a connection with both places. On the other, it represents Brand’s desire to find a metaphorical space that transcends both homesickness and the frustrated illusion of belonging. Accepting to position herself (as well as her *dramatis personae*) at the crossroads between a home that is lost and one that seems unattainable, Brands liberates herself and her characters from the burden of territorial positioning and lays the foundations for a politics of diasporic identity that goes beyond the traditional notion of national belonging.

This shift from national to transnational and from the juxtaposition of here and there to their creative incorporation is

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<sup>142</sup> K. Dobson. “‘Struggle Work’: Global and Urban Citizenship in Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For*.” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 31.2 (2006), p. 89. About the notion of drifting see also M. Goldman. “Mapping the Door of No Return: Deterritorialization and the Work of Dionne Brand.” *Canadian Literature* 182 (2004), pp. 13-28.

particularly evident in the works of poetry published in the 1990s and early 2000s. In point of fact, whereas *No Language Is Neutral* (1990) portrays the migrant's anguished movement between home and exile and *Land to Light On* (1997) voices the poet's gradual departure from the identification of self and country, "*Thirsty* [2002] establishes a new relation with place and takes up the question of "where is here" in a new fashion"<sup>143</sup>. In particular, it is the evolution of Brand's relationship with Toronto that calls the reader's attention in this book. What once was a mere point of destination, is now presented as an extraordinary city, an unprecedented mixture of destruction and construction, chaos and vitality:

just me and the city  
that's never happened before, and happened  
though not ever like this, the garbage  
of pizza boxes, dead couches,  
the strip mall of ambitious immigrants  
under carcasses of cars, oil-soaked  
clothing, hulks of rusted trucks, scraggly  
gardens of beans, inshallahs under the breath,  
querido, blood fire, striving stilettoed rudbeckia.<sup>144</sup>

This city, which at the same time is new (because "all of these different types of people, sharing different kinds of experiences, or what we call identities, have just not been in the same place together before"<sup>145</sup>) and worn, effortlessly features Italian pizzas, Islamic prayers and North-American jargon all together. At the same time, it

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<sup>143</sup> *Fierce Departures: The Poetry of Dionne Brand*, p. xiii.

<sup>144</sup> D. Dionne. *Thirsty*. Toronto [Ont.]: McClelland & Stewart, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>145</sup> P. Da Costa, "An interview with Dionne Brand." *Entrevista*. June 7, 2004.



welcomes the poet as she positions herself in the middle of its physical as well as cultural hybridity and proposes a poetics (and a politics) of incorporation that transcends the boundaries of geography. Even more eloquently, in *Inventory* the speaker is a wanderer who refuses to assume a stable geographical position, a twentieth century's female *flâneur* whose task is to witness and record the merciless catalogue of global (unbounded) sufferings:

I have nothing soothing to tell you,  
that's not my job,  
my job is to revise and revise this bristling list  
hourly.<sup>146</sup>

However, Brand's ambition to connect the fact of moving through space to the heated question of identity is not a prerogative of poetry. Quite the reverse, the most successful example of her relentless commitment to this issue, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, is written in prose. Combining the intimacy of a memoir with the thoughtfulness of a critical investigation, the book (which is tellingly dedicated to "the other dwellers of the door"<sup>147</sup>) positions the author's personal story within the great narrative of the Middle Passage. Spurred by Eduardo Galeano's confession<sup>148</sup>, "I'm nostalgic for a country which doesn't yet exist on a map" (MDNR, 52 and 85), Brand

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<sup>146</sup> D. Brand. *Inventory*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006, p. 100.

<sup>147</sup> D. Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym MDNR.

<sup>148</sup> Eduardo Galeano (born 1940) is a Uruguayan journalist, writer and novelist who describes himself as obsessed with remembering the silenced histories of America.

takes her readers on an imagined journey from Canada to Africa across the Atlantic. Moving through space, as well as through time, the writer points towards the Door of No Return while exploring the shifting borders of diasporic identity and its knotty relationship with place. Once again, what emerges is the centrality of the idea of movement and the impossibility to position the self in a distinct, ultimate site of belonging. Within this perspective, the rufous hummingbird's migration becomes the symbol of a journey that complicates the stereotyped concepts of origin and destination, acknowledges the possibility of multiple relocations and considers challenge and desire as integral components of the migrant's experience. Although poetic in their form, Brand's words hold an undeniable political drive:

The rufous hummingbird travels five thousand miles from summer home to winter home and back. This hummingbird can fit into the palm of a hand. Its body defies the known physics of energy and flight. It knew its way before all known map-makers. It is a bird whose origins and paths are the blood of its small body. It is a bird whose desire to find its way depends on drops of nectar from flowers. (MDNR, 6)

These lines simultaneously disclose Brand's determination to emphasise the idea of movement within the discourse of diaspora and establish an unspoken (yet revealing) connection between identity and location. Allowing the reader to understand the bird's "desire to find its way" as both the search for a geographical destination and the

exploration of its own nature, the author presents its journey as a dynamic strategy of self-discovery rather than a mere migration.

A similar process of self-revelatory dislocation is at the core of Brand's debut novel —*In Another Place, Not Here*— where the characters' experiences of geographical displacement are used by Brand to hint at the disorienting instability of the self. Elizete, a rural sugar-cane worker who leaves her native island in search of a better future, and Verlia, a cosmopolitan political activist who returns to the island of her origins to educate the field hands, are both presented as displaced persons whose sense of self is tragically impaired. Moving from one place to another, parting from their traditional roles, experiencing different ways of being, these two women struggle to make sense of their erratic identities. The result is a fluid narration in which identity can be traced only in motion, geographical mobility becomes the catalyst of a journey within the self and belonging proves insufficient, bounded as it is by the limits of a “politics of identity that relies upon static modes of being”<sup>149</sup>.

But if in this novel Brand focuses again on the swinging movement of diasporic subjects, it is only in her latest work of fiction, *What We All Long For*, that she stages a mutual exchange between those who travel and those who stay put. According to Diana Brydon, this is undoubtedly the most notable change in direction that Brand's fiction has ever taken. Moreover, her shift “from the mourning of a

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<sup>149</sup> Dobson. “‘Struggle Work’: Global and Urban Citizenship in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*,” p. 89.

lost route homeward [...] to the more multiply constituted engagements with how history haunts the present in *Thirsty, What We All Long for* and *Inventory*”<sup>150</sup> has had a significant impact on postcolonial Canadian thinking. *What We All Long For*, in particular, “interrogates the much-vaunted potential of Toronto as a global city”<sup>151</sup>. And Toronto plays such a crucial part in the novel that Brand handles it as a real character rather than a background, eventually placing its detailed description at the very beginning of the novel. In her words, Toronto is a city that “smells of eagerness and embarrassment and, most of all longing”<sup>152</sup>, a space where “at any crossroad there are permutations of existence” (WWA, 5), a multifaceted reality where “lives [...] are doubled, tripled, conjugated” (WWA, 5).

At the same time, Toronto is the setting of a novel that, turning around the lives of four young second-generation migrants, faces the issue of belonging from a radically new perspective. Juxtaposing the stories of Tuyen (the Canadian-born daughter of a Vietnamese family) and her friends to those of their parents, Brand puts rootlessness next to rootedness and explores the political margins of globalization and multiculturalism. Writing a narrative that comprises the first

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<sup>150</sup> D. Brydon, “Canadian Writers Negotiating Home Within Global Imaginaries”, p. 7. <http://myuminfo.umanitoba.ca/Documents/1169/Negotiating%20Home.pdf>

(This essay, which is available only online, contains the keynote speech that Brydon delivered at the conference *Moving Cultures, Shifting Identities* that took place at Flinders University, Adelaide in December 2007)

<sup>151</sup> Brydon, “Canadian Writers Negotiating Home Within Global Imaginaries”, p. 7.

<sup>152</sup> D. Brand. *What We All Long For*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2008, p. 1. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym WWA.

generation's experience of migration as well as the second's attempts to find a connection with the city in which they were born, she allows the reader to familiarize with both the parents' feeling of displacement and the children's search for identity. But who are these children and how do they interact with Toronto? Tuyen, whose family has left Vietnam for political reasons, is a lesbian avant-garde artist whose boisterous installations serve to rebel against the traditional values of her parents and to commemorate the urban space in which she lives. Oku, who dreams of becoming a poet but has dropped out of university, is scared to scatter the dreams that fuelled the exodus of his Jamaican parents. Carla, who is of Italian and Caribbean origin, at the same time struggles to make sense of her mother's suicide and to prevent her younger brother from breaking the law and works as a bicycle courier. ("Bike riding not only energizes her body and soul but also constitutes a way of making sense of the city and her position in it"<sup>153</sup>). Jackie is the owner of a second-hand shop on Queen West, her parents are Canadians of African descent and all of them have recently arrived in Toronto from Nova Scotia. Altogether, the four form a community of mutual support that crosses class, gender and race, and gives new meaning to the former generation's perception of life in diaspora. If migration has forced the parents to live in a state of in-betweenness and to confront both the nostalgia for the lost homeland

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<sup>153</sup> A. M. Fellner "'Translating Toronto on a Bicycle': Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* and the Challenges of Urbanity" in *Transcultural Spaces: Challenges of Urbanity, Ecology and the Environment in the New Millennium*. Stefan Brandt, Frank Mehring (eds). REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature. Narr: Tübingen, 2010. p. 233.

and the frustration of not belonging to the new country, the children's sense of identity is connected to the awareness of living within the borders of the city where they were born: it might not fully recognize them but it sure allows them to discover who they are.

They all, Tuyen, Carla, Oku, and Jackie, felt as if they inhabited two countries—their parents and their own—when they sat dutifully at their kitchen tables being regaled with how life used to be “back home,” and when they listened to inspired descriptions of other houses, other landscapes, other skies, other trees, they were bored. They thought that their parents had scales on their eyes. Sometimes they wanted to shout at them, “Well, you're not *there!*” But if any of them had the temerity to say this, they would be met by a slap to the face or a crestfallen look, and an awful, disappointed silence in the kitchen. Each left home in the morning as if making a long journey, untangling themselves from the seaweed of other shores wrapped around their parents. Breaking their doorways, they left the sleepwalk of their mothers and fathers and ran across the unobserved borders of the city, sliding across ice to arrive at their birthplace—the city. They were born in the city from people born elsewhere. (WWA, 20)

Following Caroline Rosenthal, Toronto facilitates the second generation's process of emancipation from family history, eventually liberating the children from their parents' obsession with the past. Experiencing the urban space (and taking pleasure in its multicultural surroundings), the children construct an alternative home for themselves, “one without the fatalism, deep secrets, and uncanny expectations of commonality. The city becomes uncharted territory where the four young people feel they can evade restrictions and be

reborn”<sup>154</sup>. As Brand herself writes in the novel, as second generation these young adults are given the chance to “step across the borders of who they were” (WWA, 213) and reinvent themselves. In other words, it is their condition of borderless rootedness that allows them to engage in an otherwise unachievable open-ended experimentation with identity and to transform their parents’ frustrated desire of belonging into a cathartic longing for being.

#### ***4.2.2 The body of desire***

There is an essay in *Bread Out of Stone*, called “This Body for Itself”, in which Brand debates the sexualisation of the black woman’s body. It is a personal recognition of the First Caribbean Women Writers Conference, which was held at Wellesley College, Massachusetts in April 1988 and coordinated by Professor Selwyn Cudjoe. The symposium, in which more than fifty women writers from the English-speaking Caribbean discussed their works with critics and commentators, put Brand right in the middle of an emerging community of West Indian intellectuals including legendary authors (such as Jamaica Kincaid and Paule Marshall) and talented reviewers.

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<sup>154</sup> C. Rosenthal. *New York and Toronto Novels After Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban*. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2011, p. 223.

“For the first time [...] these women and men were able to come together to talk about their writings and to let the world know what they seek to achieve when they set out to write about their experiences”<sup>155</sup>.

The essay, which starts as innocent auto-analysis, soon develops into overt criticism. Brand, whose original plan for the conference was to raise a debate about poetry and politics, fights tooth and nail to defend her awkward decision to break the silence surrounding the issue of sex, and finally engages in a discussion on the role of the body in contemporary society. Her message is a clear call for responsibility: even though “in a world where Black women’s bodies are so sexualized, avoiding the body as sexual is a strategy”<sup>156</sup> and “leaving pleasure to men, that’s a strategy, too” (BOOS, 27), her idea is that women writers should retrieve confidence and control over the politics of the body, and work to instil new meanings into this conservative and conformist manly domain. In practical terms, Brand suggests to give birth to queer versions of the black woman’s body and to rebuff the colonial inscriptions and Victorian rhetoric of the British literary tradition. Her claim is addressed to both male and female writers: men are guilty of creating women whose bodies are “either motherly or virgin, which amounts to the same thing—like land to be traversed or owned” (BOOS, 34-35), whereas women have

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<sup>155</sup> S. R. Cudjoe, *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*. Wellesley, Mass: Calaloux, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>156</sup> D. Brand, Dionne, *Bread Out of Stone: Recollections, Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming, Politics*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1995, p. 27. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym BOOS.



the responsibility of having privileged safety (of which the character of the mother/grandmother/auntie is a container) against freedom and self-determination. To these traditionalist positions, Brand opposes the idea of the female body ‘for itself’ and encourages the portrayal of the homosexual woman in literature: “for me the most radical strategy [...] is the lesbian body confessing all the desire and fascination for itself” (BOOS, 46). The last part of the essay contains the description of the effect that this stance had on the audience. In particular, Brand focuses on the indignation provoked by her choice to read a couple of passages from “Madame Alaird’s Breasts”.

This short story, which is part of the 1988 collection *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, represents the eroticization of the Black female body and is Brand’s earliest exploration of the issue of homosexual desire (“Madame Alaird’s Breasts’ was my first overt admission of that desire and also an honest rendering of what really happens” –BOOS, 46). The narrator is a teenage girl who reports her (and her friends’) infatuation for the French teacher’s body, but the real protagonist is the teacher’s breasts:

We loved Madame Alaird’s breasts. All through the conjugation of verbs – *aller*, *acheter*, *appeller*, and *écouter* – we watched her breasts as she rested them on the top of her desk, the bodice of her dress holding them snugly, her deep breathing on the *eu* sounds making them descend into their warm cave and rise to take air. We imitated her voice but our *eu*’s sounded like shrill flutes, sharpened by the excitement of Madame Alaird’s breasts. (SS,79)

Through this story, in which same-sex desire is portrayed more as a childish voyeuristic practice than as a consuming passion, Brand means to position the experience of the black female body within a larger discourse of physical and sexual awareness. Fantasising on their teacher's breasts, the girls discover themselves and their corporeality and come to the realization that they can find pleasure in their own black female bodies. Homosexual fascination thus offers these young women the possibility to be agents rather than objects of desire and puts them in a position of power that is traditionally manly. A masculine dominance which is at the core of another story of the same collection, "Sans Souci".

"Sans Souci" opens with the description of a female character struggling to eradicate the rough grass that grows overwhelmingly around her house. It is a young woman who remains nameless until her name is spoken by a male character, a man whose identification depends on the act of naming her: "a man would come often, but it was difficult to know him. When she saw him coming, she would never know him, until he said her name. Claudine. Then she would remember him, vaguely." (SS, 2). From this destabilizing tangle of familiarity and strangeness the identities of the characters emerge, but whereas the man reveals himself, Claudine is revealed by him. Being the object of his speech rather than the subject of her own discourse, the girl seems to be as overwhelmed by his control as she is by the bush around her house. On the contrary, the man, who presents himself as the agent of both his and her identity, reasserts his

hegemony through rape. Once again, his violence relies on his ability to stop her from speaking (“he had grabbed her and forced her into his little room and covered her mouth so that his mother would not hear her screaming” –SS, 12) and his attitude results in brutal objectification. Preventing her from screaming as he fulfils his sexual desire, the man transforms Claudine into a mute (and thus harmless) source of pleasure, while her abused body is turned into worthless property:

From then, everyone explained the rape by saying that she was his woman. They did not even say it. They did not have to. Only they made her feel as if she was carrying his body around. In their looking at her and their smiles which moved to one side of the cheek and with their eyelids, uncommonly demure or round and wide and gazing. She came into the gaze of all of them, no longer a child – much less a child who had been raped. Now, a man’s body. (SS, 13)

Exposing this *crescendo* of injustice, in which the violated woman loses her childhood (as well as the dignity of her suffering) whereas the violating man wins ownership and social recognition, Brand means to charge the male chauvinism of the Caribbean society and to reject the myth of the native’s body as land to be possessed perpetrated by the colonial literary canon. At the same time, revealing Claudine’s disdain for pregnancy and maternity (which are presented as reiterations other than effects of rape), she dismantles the narrative of motherhood that dominates the literature of Caribbean female writers.

With this short story Brand does not aim at the annihilation of the sheltering mother figure of the Caribbean tradition, but points toward its de-idealization and ultimate reconstruction. Her intention is to provide a more realistic portrayal, one in which the mother's ephemeral nature is replaced by tangible corporeality and her faults and qualities are exposed without frills. Molding the story on her own experience of being raised by her grandmother as her mother was abroad to work, Brand stages the main contradiction of Caribbean motherhood, eventually separating the figure of the natural mother from its mother-like surrogate. This departure is made explicit by the juxtaposition of the grandmother's proximity and the mother's remoteness. The grandmother, who is always physically there ("she rarely left the house" –SS, 55), is presented as a boundless source of warmth and beauty: "she was round and comfortable", "she had a full lap and beautiful arms", "her cocoa brown skin smelled of wood smoke and familiar" (SS, 60) The mother, who first leaves and then comes back, has a forced smile that Dionne and her sisters repeatedly associate to England's cold weather: "Those winters in England [...] must have hardened the smile which my grandmother said that she had" –SS, 70). Even more eloquently, the grandmother's body sends messages that the mother's is not able to emulate. Its tenderness, for example, communicates protection and refuge, to the point that the children fight over the woman's physical contact:

We jockeyed with each other, lied to each other, quarrelled with each other and with her for the boon of lying close to

her, sculpting ourselves around the roundness of her back. Braiding her hair and oiling her feet. We dreamed in my grandmother and we woke up in her, bleary-eyed and gesturing for her lap, her arms, her elbows, her smell, the fat flesh of her arms. We fought each other for the crook between her thighs and calves. (SS, 75)

On the contrary, the mother, whose detachment speaks of hostility and bitter resentment, is drastically excluded from bodily interaction: “my mother would find herself standing outside these gestures into which her inroads were abrupt and incautious” (SS, 71). Through this stratagem Brand reveals an idea of maternity based on physical contact and daily routine, and rejects the axiomatic identification of genetic parenthood and maternal instinct. At the same time, she (re)asserts the centrality of the body and the fundamental role of desire. Intended here as innocent craving for cuddles, desire must be read as a revelatory practice: looking for the grandmother’s touch, the children reveal their aspiration to welcome the surrogate mother figure into an intimacy whose code is unknown to the natural mother. Keeping the mother at a distance, they bare the dramatic split produced by her long absence and the unrecoverable lack of familiarity that it provoked. Once again, rather than avoiding the issue of female corporeality, Brand puts it at the core of her unconventional narration.

The body and its desires take centre stage also in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, a novel “that makes the sexuality of the characters the objective correlative of whatever potential for change

they have in themselves”<sup>157</sup>. It is the story of Marie Ursule (a Trinidadian enslaved woman in the early 19th century), the acknowledgement of her leading role in a slaves’ mass suicide and the chronicle of the lives of her descendants. It ranges from the 1800s to the end of the twentieth century and tracks the routes of six generations of characters who thrive on both sides of the Atlantic in a sort of matrilineal diaspora, connect the Caribbean with the rest of the world and release rootedness and belonging in favour of emancipation and freewill: “No one is anyone’s”<sup>158</sup>. The book opens in 1824 when Marie Ursule and the other members of the secret society Convoi Sans Peur are plotting to escape slavery through militant suicide. Brand introduces Marie Ursule as the “queen of rebels, queen of evenings, queen of malingerings and sabotages; queen of ruin” (ATF, 5) and presents her body, which was flogged, enchained and mutilated for her role in a failed rebellion, as both a reminder of the violence of slavery and the container of unremitting self-determination:

While some had been put to death, their heads hung on sticks near the bell and their bodies tied to the walls in chains, she had been given a ten-pound ring to wear. She had been given thirty-nine lashes. She had been given her own ear in her mouth. She had been given a heart full of curses and patience. (ATF, 5)

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<sup>157</sup> S. Bertacco, “Imagining Bodies in the Work of Dionne Brand”. *Altre Modernità*, Numero 1 (15 dicembre 2009), p. 14.

<sup>158</sup> D. Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon: A Novel*. New York, NY: Grove Press, 2000, p. 289. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym ATF.

Marie Ursule's damaged body is, at the same time, the tangible evidence of the slaves' dehumanization and the living testimony that brutal exploitation can somehow be resisted. With her amputated ear and fierce spirit, this woman embodies the idea of resilience and performs an act of rebellion that radically subverts the slave system's dynamics of power. Advocating, through the extreme measure of mass suicide, their right to dispose of their bodies, Marie Ursule and the other slaves eventually overwhelm their master, de Lambert, and invalidate the very foundations of slavery. In the same way, aborting the children that would be born in slavery, Marie Ursule claims for herself the right to control her body, and transforms corporeality into a revolt strategy: "she had vowed never to bring a child into the world, and so to impoverish de Lambert with barrenness and disobedience" (ATF, 8).

Bola, the only child Marie Ursule has ever borne, is sent away to Terre Bouillante soon before the slaves' suicide. Despite her mother's plan to have her stay with a community of maroons, the girl finds her home in Culebra Bay, an isolated cove overlooking the Main of Venezuela, and lives her life (which lasts a century, from 1821 to 1921) in complete isolation. This untamed creature, whose whole existence is driven by "the sting of her body" (ATF, 62), becomes the lover of all the men that visit Culebra Bay along the years and the mother of fourteen children. If her sexual emancipation can be read as the outcome of her mother's struggle to control her body through abortion and suicide, her insatiable lust and reiterated experience of

maternity serve to reclaim the bodily pleasures that Marie Ursule was made to reject. In other words, desire is for Bola a means to avenge her mother's oppression as well as a way of asserting her sovereignty. Her body thus becomes the ultimate site of a rebellion that was started, before the abolition of slavery, by her mother's decision to escape enslavement and forced labour even at the price of sacrificing her life.

Years later it is through Bola's granddaughter, Cordelia, that Brand translates this issue into the vocabulary of modernity. Cordelia is a fifty-year-old mother who suddenly discards her well-established image of respectable wife and caring parent in order to explore the dark side of her sexual self.

She was greedy for everything she had not had. What she had not had was the enjoyment of her body clear and free. Her father had terrified it. Her mother had found in it the enemy. The boy from up the river way had put a baby in it and dressed it in a kind of passion that had felt hurtful, burning and unfinished. The woman in Socorro had loosened the baby from it. She had gone since done opening her body to Emmanuel Greaves [her husband], she had only done that long enough to make Hannah, Gabriel and Alicia. She has done it in that purposeful way of hers. (ATF, 121)

As Marlene Goldman makes clear, rejecting the role imposed on her by society, "Cordelia rejects the master's notion of order"<sup>159</sup> and enhances her life with new forms of desire. Quite the opposite, the

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<sup>159</sup> M. Goldman, "Mapping the Door of No Return: Deterritorialization and the Work of Dionne Brand". *Canadian Literature*. no. 182: 13, 2004, p. 21.



story of Maya (set in Amsterdam in the 1980s) hints at the idea that unrestrained sexuality can be dangerous and frustrating. Maya is both an upscale hooker who parades her body through the frame of a window and a young immigrant who feels menaced by the white man's lust and struggles to reclaim her body (and her pleasure) for herself. This claim finds expression in a form of obsessive body care:

So she oiled and sunned. In the summer she took boats and wore the skimpiest clothes to make sure that the sun reached each part of her. She sculpted her calves for running and her thighs for lifting, she pruned the biceps and triceps and she cultivated the deep river running down her back hardening the ridges on either side. She made herself strong and liquid. (ATF, 221)

Whereas the enslaved Marie Ursule had to sacrifice her life in order to win control over her body, Maya has to strengthen her body to be able to run her life. Because, as Brand herself asserts, the black body implies a number of cultural and political stances that proceed directly from the Door of No Return,

as if those leaping bodies, those prostrate bodies, those bodies made to dance and then to work, those bodies curdling under the stinging of whips, those bodies cursed, those bodies valued, those bodies remain curved in these attitudes. They remain fixed in the ether of history. (MDNR, 35)

In *In Another Place, Not Here*, Brand combines this idea of the black body as crystallized by history with the unambiguous portrayal

of homosexual attraction, eventually bringing to completion her plan to represent in literature “the lesbian body confessing all the desire and fascination for itself”. Through Verlia and Elizete’s love story, she engages in both the representation of issues related to gender (and gender discrimination) and the performance of corporeality. On the one hand, she discusses the traditional role of women in rural societies where “all it have for a woman to do is lie down and let a man beat against she body, and work cane and chop up she foot and make children and choke on the dryness in she chest”<sup>160</sup>; on the other, she brings to light the inner workings of lesbian eroticism:

Grace. Is grace, yes. And I take it, quiet, quiet, like thieving sugar. From the word she speak to me and the sweat running down she in that sun, one afternoon as I look up saying to myself, how many more days these poor feet of mine can take this field, these blades of cane like razor, this sun like coal pot. Long as you have to eat, girl. I look up. That woman like a drink of cool water. I see she. Hot, cool and wet. I sink the machete in my foot, careless, blood blooming in the stalks of cane, a sweet ripe smell wash me faint. With pain. Wash the field, spinning green mile after green mile around she. See she sweat, sweet like sugar. (IAP, 3-4)

The sweetness of sugar (whose commonplace meaning within postcolonial Caribbean culture is to hint at the bitter conditions of the field workers) is used here as a powerful metaphor for pleasure and erotic enjoyment. The body is once again the protagonist of a narrative

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<sup>160</sup> D. Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*. New York: Grove Press, 1997, p. 4. Further references to this work will be included in the text under the acronym IAP.

in which desire is meant to dismantle traditional notions and to allow an otherwise denied plenitude of life.

#### ***4.2.3 Revolutionary passions***

As both a Caribbean immigrant, a Marxist intellectual, an openly gay woman, and a fervent political activist who lives in the words of Che Guevara (“At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love” –IAP, 165), Verlia, one of the protagonists of *In Another Place, Not Here*, can effortlessly be read as Dionne Brand’s fictional alter-ego. Brand herself, discussing the genesis of this character in an interview, explained that Verlia is a reflection of herself as much as she is an echo of “all the women that [she, Brand] knew, studied with, worked with, hung with, flyered with. Women who were committed to political action in their own lives”<sup>161</sup>. As such, Verlia stands for the dedicated black woman whose whole existence is governed by the political. The poetical, on the other hand, is masterly embodied by Elizete, the other protagonist of the novel.

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<sup>161</sup> E. Tihanyi, “Unredeemed Grace: Eva Tihanyi speaks with Dionne Brand.” Interview. *Books in Canada* 26.2, 1997, p. 8.

Following a similar logic of correspondences, the Black Liberation Movement in which Verlia is so passionately involved can be taken as an exact replica of the Canadian Black Power organizations through which Brand and her (black female) friends expressed their keen desire for social justice in the 1970s. Again, both her eager devotion to the anti-colonial struggle, which eventually drives her to travel to an unnamed insurgent island to assist the revolution from within; the relationship she establishes with the local field workers; and the outrage provoked by the failure of the revolutionary project mimic Brand's autobiographical experience. Indeed, when the U.S. invaded Grenada in 1983, Brand (who was working in the country as an information officer for the National Agency for Rural Transformation, and had to be airlifted during the raids) witnessed the abortion of Maurice Bishop's revolution and lived through the violence of military occupation. It was a shock and a distress that profoundly affected both her feelings and her writing.

Explicitly, this tragic event served as an inspiration for the 1984 *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* and for some poignant essays included in *Bread Out of Stone*. However, as George Elliot Clarke makes clear in his survey of the most influential criticism concerning the writings of Black Canadian women writers<sup>162</sup>, it also affected the collections *No Language Is Neutral* and *Land to Light On*. In a rare combination of pain and passion, revolutionary zeal and political

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<sup>162</sup> G. E. Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, pp. 253-274.

disillusionment, these works together track the evolution of Brand's anti-colonial commitment ranging from the blind enthusiasm of the first years to the grim pessimism following Grenada's occupation, and ultimately state the author's hard-earned awareness that decolonization is an inward-bound process of emancipation rather than an abrupt act of force. "I felt it in my skin," Brand writes, "revolutions do not happen outside of you, they happen in the vein, they change you and you change yourself" (BOOS, 138).

In "Bathurst" (which is a lucid recollection of events that took place in the Seventies), Brand portrays a younger idealist version of herself as she becomes an adult within a group of inspirational black activists. Bathurst Street was the hub of Toronto's black community and "the "site of new definitions" (BOOS, 69), and those "were vibrant and hopeful days [...]. We argued, we debated, we came into the joy of being black, we discovered parts of ourselves that we didn't know existed" (BOOS, 136). What this essay expresses is "the feeling of common purpose, the intensity of the new black Pride, the possibility of justice and the joys in these" (BOOS, 67) that animated the Civil Rights Movement after "Martin Luther King's passivity had been repudiated" (BOOS, 67) and armed struggle had become "a much debated possibility" (BOOS, 68). "Cuba" (in which the author recalls her ultimate decision to take part in the Grenadian revolutionary project) at the same time presents active participation as the natural evolution of Brand's political apprenticeship, and aligns her anti-colonial attitude with the narrative of her family. Through the

story of her uncle who, “in 1959 or 1960 [...] took a fishing boat [...] and headed to Cuba to see what was going on” (BOOS, 85), Brand positions herself at the core of her Caribbean family tree and explains her decision to travel to Grenada as one explains a genetic disease: “uncle had infected me [...] and nothing had felt right until getting there” (BOOS, 96). Only by getting there and taking active part in the rebellion, can Brand substantiate her revolutionary passion and alleviate her distressing feeling of helplessness. Towards the end of the essay, which closes with the American invasion, the author candidly admits that 1983 was the best year of her life and that not even the several headlines alluding at the death of communism could dissipate the enthusiasm of those days.

*Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*, however, speaks of a different reaction. The collection, which was composed soon after the failed revolution as an immediate response to the American intervention, reveals the brutal executions of the revolutionaries, the violence of the raids and the helplessness of the Grenadians, and conveys a vivid impression of failure as well as an overwhelming feeling of frustration. At the same time Brand bares the deadly unevenness of the conflict and hints at the futility of anti-colonial efforts. In particular, it is the inadequacy of the non-violent enterprise that takes centre stage:

america came to restore democracy,  
what was restored was faith  
in the fact that you cannot fight bombers  
battleships, aircraft carriers, helicopter gunships  
surveillance planes, five thousand American soldiers  
six Caribbean stooges and the american war machine,

you cannot fight this with a machete,  
you cannot fight it with a handful of dirt,  
[...]  
you cannot fight it with free education  
you cannot fight it with women's cooperatives  
[...]  
certainly you cannot fight it with dignity. (CHS, 42)

Wrath and despair surface through the lines of this poem, and the bitter awareness that “mighty ideas are not the same as military might”<sup>163</sup> replaces both Brand’s early confidence in the revolution and the abiding optimism that permeated her previous collection:

When I wrote *Winter Epigrams* [...] the wings of the American eagle hadn’t clamped themselves over so much of the world as they have today [and] I felt that it was quite possible for a whole population to have a vision of equality, to see the possibility of living without being dominated by the kind of patronizing and patriarchal governments that we have in the Caribbean.<sup>164</sup>

As the title suggests, *No Language Is Neutral* deals with the issue of language as well as with the idea of bias. The work that officially sealed Brand’s international literary recognition, this 1990 collection presents itself as a skilful combination of free verse and prose poems and easily incorporates the issue of power (which is explored in all its inflections) and the question of language. The poems are written in a kind of poetical heteroglossia that juxtaposes the consecrated Standard

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<sup>163</sup> D. Brand, as quoted in F. Birbalsingh (ed.), “Dionne Brand: No Language Is Neutral”, *Frontiers of Caribbean Literatures in English*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1996, p. 128.

<sup>164</sup> F. Birbalsingh. “Dionne Brand: No Language Is Neutral”, p. 126.

English of the canonical tradition and the despised Trinidadian patois, while disguising the discriminatory practices connected with language. With this work Brand continues her anti-colonial struggle: even though from a different standpoint, her attempt to demolish the same notion of domination is carried out with zeal and acumen. Linguistic hierarchy thus becomes a metonymy of colonial oppression and race, gender, sexuality, politics and language are all simultaneously addressed. As Teresa Zackodnik eloquently puts it,

As a lesbian of colour, Brand is triply aware of language as a powerful sign that creates and regulates racial, gender, and sexual identities. Consequently she locates her critique of language not in an attempt to resurrect or construct a neutral language, nor from a liminal position between standard English and nation language, but in the heteroglossia of both languages, which articulates, even while it determines, her identity as dialogic and dialectical.<sup>165</sup>

In other words, Brand's language at the same time challenges racial inferiorization, patriarchal subjugation and heterosexual discrimination, fights colonial oppression and allows the subject to rediscover his (or her) identity. It is a revolutionary stance (animated by the same desire for social justice that spurred the anti-colonial enterprise) that results in a poetics that assimilates both tender poems of homosexual love and brutal references to slavery, and positions the history of Cuba next to the Grenadian experience of failed insurgency.

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<sup>165</sup> T. Zackodnik, "I Am Blackening in My Way': Identity and Place in Dionne Brand's *No Language is Neutral*" in W. Siemerling (ed.), *Writing Ethnicity: Cross-Cultural Consciousness in Canadian and Québécois literature*. Toronto: ECW Press. 1996, p. 199.



Through a paradoxical *continuum*, Brand once again corroborates the topicality of politics, and emphasizes the intimate connection between love, passion and desire on the one side, and political commitment and revolutionary fever on the other.



## **CONCLUSION**

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If, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo carefully elucidates,

the main obstacles to any global study of the Caribbean's societies [...] are exactly those things that scholars usually adduce to define the area: its fragmentation; its instability; its reciprocal isolation; its uprootedness; its cultural heterogeneity; its lack of historiography and historical continuity; its contingency and impermanence; its syncretism, etc;<sup>166</sup>

writing about the Caribbean diaspora, in which the problematic realities of the Caribbean societies combine with the distress provoked by the experience of relocation, is an even more challenging task. Due to the geo-political isolation, historical discontinuity and cultural hybridity that characterize the Caribbean region, the fundamental categories of time, space, cause and effect usually employed by scholars to decode reality are insufficient to understand the complexity of the diasporic subjects' point of departure. At the same time, since the experience of diaspora complicates the migrant's relationship with place and originates a painful condition of estrangement and unbelonging, both the individual and the collectivity are profoundly destabilized. At a personal level, diaspora blurs origins and routes and forges the traditional notion of identity. At a communal level, it affects politics by questioning issues such as globalization, transnationalism and cultural assimilation. The study of the Caribbean diaspora thus implies the acknowledgement of a long list of social,

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<sup>166</sup> Benítez-Rojo and Maraniss, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, p. 1.

cultural, political and economic complications, as well as the realization that every single experience of relocation is a narrative of its own.

Since literature is the privileged canal through which these narratives are shared, the literary text acquires paramount importance and literary analysis, which becomes a valuable investigative device, plays a fundamental role in the comprehension of this complex phenomenon. The different ways in which these experiences are lived (and re-lived through writing) require an interpretative strategy that comprises and enhances, rather than flattening, diversities and peculiarities.

For the most part, the methodological approach of this thesis has depended on these premises. Indeed, since my major concern was to convey the idea of Caribbean diaspora as a tangle of multiple, disparate experiences of dislocation/relocation, working on four different writers and reading their works through four different images seemed the most rational way to translate the heterogeneity of these events. More in detail, by choosing to illustrate the works of Edwidge Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid, Andrea Levy and Dionne Brand through images as distinct as chaos, loss, passage and desire, I intended to provide a reading of the literature of Caribbean diaspora that, at the same time, focused on the specificity of each of these writers and accounted for the density of their experiences. I also wished to give an original contribution to a discourse whose reach offers countless opportunities of interpretation.

The image of chaos allowed me to illustrate how Danticat portrays the turbulent reality of Haiti, and to delve into questions of identity formation, political violence and cultural syncretism. Loss, absence and mourning were useful in the interpretation of Jamaica Kincaid's personal and artistic experience and contributed to shed light on her troubled relationship with both her real mother and the idea of motherhood expressed in her work. The image of passage conveniently translated Levy's ambivalent position. Indeed, as a black British writer, Levy struggles both to define herself as a fully recognized British citizen, and to position herself at the core of British literature. This image also interpreted the Middle Passage, the modern migrants' experience of drifting, and the profound socio-political transformation that is affecting contemporary Britain. Desire helped me to understand Dionne Brand's personal experience of political commitment and to interpret her relationship with the female black body in literature. The outcome of this strategy was the creative interpretation of a vast *corpus* of wide-ranging texts whose particularities are maintained and emphasized rather than flattened.

Even though I realize that a number of different approaches would have been possible, and that a transversal reading would have been a reasonable alternative, I am persuaded that this choice helped me to achieve goals that would, otherwise, have been difficult to attain. A cross-sectional analysis, for example, would have stressed the connection between chaos and Dionne Brand's representation of urban wildness, or would have extended the discourse of desire to

Andrea Levy's description of the migrant's frustrated aspiration to settle in England and be part of the British society; but would also have levelled the features that make each of these writers' works absolutely unique. On the contrary, the aim of this thesis was to acknowledge the differences among the attitudes of Danticat, Kincaid, Levy and Brand and to stress the peculiarities of their literary productions, in the attempt to restore the complexity of a phenomenon that has changed and is still changing both the personal, the political and the literary domain.



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