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## Claiming the Politics of Articulation through Agency and Wholeness in Two Afro-Hispanic Postcolonial Narratives<sup>1</sup>

By Silvia Castro Borrego<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Following a context-based approach and the tenets of post-positivist realist theory, this paper will analyze two post-colonial Afro-Hispanic novels immersed in their articulation of moving towards Caribbeanness within the phenomenon of Diaspora Literacy: María Nsue Angüe's *Ekomo* (1983) and Michelline Dusseck's *Caribbean Echoes* (1997). As part of the Diaspora Literacy, these texts will be read employing the search for wholeness as a theoretical tool, towards an epistemology of anti-colonial feminist struggle. These texts take active part in a decolonizing process that fosters a definition and vision of agency which makes wholeness possible, becoming an active expression of black women's spirituality across the Caribbean and the African Diaspora. Both novels are written in Spanish, thus their classification as Afro-Hispanic. The texts are a mixture of traditional African and Caribbean elements inserted in European contexts; for this reason they will be studied as part of migrant literature, configuring as minor literature. Both writers the first from Ecuatorial Guinea, and the second from Haiti, follow the paradigm of the suppression of silence, in a process that relocates the word to do the telling from an original, agentive point of view. They share a compromise to disassemble the paradigm of resistance and replace it with the paradigm of growth, following a democracy of narrative participation. Presenting alternative ways of knowing that emerge from their femaleness and which may differ from the deconstructionist narratives produced by post-colonial male writers, they build a constructionist discourse. Relying in their "oral literature," they move from their communities to the community of readers. These writers affirm the place of black women as creative artists who have fought not only the racism of the dominant culture but also the sexism of their own men.

*Keywords:* Caribbeanness, post-positivist realist theory, diaspora literacy, decolonization, paradigm of growth, politics of articulation

It isn't privilege or pity  
That I seek  
It isn't reverence or safety  
Quick happiness or purity  
But

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The power to be what I am/a woman  
Charting my own futures/a woman  
Holding my beads in my hand  
- Grace Nichols, *i is a long memoried woman*

## Introduction

Afro-Hispanic and Caribbean women writers and activists are “cultural workers” because from their frontier-like standpoint they support and encourage cultural interaction. They bring forward a coherent body of knowledge which fosters self-determination and self-representation. The paper will follow a context-based approach<sup>3</sup> since it offers ways of reading texts and cultures rooted in the form of the story, and in the cultural expressions inherent to the tradition out of which the text grows, providing in many instances an oppositional reading, questioning conventions, and reworking European defining narratives. Both readers and literary/cultural critics need to chart a new path towards an epistemology of anti-colonial feminist struggle because women need concepts to question their reality and, as postpositivism reminds us, experiences count. Alexander and Talpade, both postcolonial and transnational feminist theorists aptly contend that critical tools are ways of reading our realities that produce liberatory knowledges which “enable collective and self-determination for colonized peoples” (1997, ix) because critical tools may have the potential to contest the already existing cultural paradigms in a dialogic fashion. The ethics of thinking should produce the kind of knowledge which aims at decolonization in the twenty-first century.

As critics, it is our intention to explore both the dialectic and the dialogic immersed in the relationships between the old and the new, the colonial and the postcolonial, in its humanist and political dimensions because we understand that these relationships and their dynamics will help us to theorize and better understand the nuances of hierarchical relations across time and cultures in the era of globalization. This paper will look at the gaps, the interstices as sites for creating alternative knowledge, theories that allow for the construction of critical, self-reflective selves. As Alexander and Mohanty suggest, an active view of decolonization coupled with a sense of being part of the collective feminist practice will enable readers to rethink and question patriarchal, heterosexual, colonial, racial and capitalist legacies in order to move forward in our lives as full agents of our struggles (1997, xxxiii), pushing further the concept of decolonization by actively and consciously taking part in it and fostering a definition and vision of agency which becomes central to the decolonizing process.

Experiences do not contain meaning in themselves; rather, it is the way that we interpret our experiences through the framework provided by the social narratives that govern our perceptions of how we live. The cognitive task of remembering means laying claim to a past and ultimately is developing the capacity of feeling with others. Remembering is dependent on an emotional achievement, on the labour of trusting oneself, one’s judgements, and one’s companions. This is why the realist theory of identity helps to explain how we can distinguish legitimate identities from false ones because it accounts for cultural decolonization, which involves an interrogation of the epistemic and affective consequences of our social location, of historically learned habits of thinking and feeling (Mohanty 2000, 63). Thus, there exists a need to theorize not only identity but also agency grasping agency, the “person’s socially acknowledged right to interpret and speak for her/himself” (Brent 2000, 229-50) is pivotal to achieve any degree of identity.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. delineates this approach in his book *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford UP, 1989).

Agency as “the conscious and ongoing reproduction of the terms of our existence while taking responsibility of this process” (Alex and Talpade 1997, xxviii) understood from the dialogic perspective of engaging the world from its vantage point of view, makes wholeness—the dialogic interaction between self and other, past and present, possible. Agency and wholeness are at the core of this paper, which contends that the search for wholeness with the aid of remembering, double consciousness and agency, become the trigger for an active expression of black women’s spirituality throughout Caribbeanness and the African diaspora. By engaging in what Jamaican author and scholar Vevé Clark calls Diaspora Literacy readers will enhance their ability to comprehend the literatures of Africa, Afro-American and the Caribbean from an “informed, indigenous perspective” (1991, 42) thinking beyond linear Hegelian dualities which pose the world into eternally irreconcilable positive and negative axioms, in order to cope with the complexities, the differences, the borders, the multiplicities inherent in the realities and shared experiences of Caribbeanness. This sphere claims cultural differences, redefines unity in transnational terms, acknowledges and understands the dynamics of wholeness, or rather the search for it, as a theoretical tool to read diasporic texts.

Two postcolonial Afro-Hispanic texts representative of the phenomenon of diaspora literacy are María Nsue Angüe’s *Ekomo* (1983) and Michelline Dusseck’s *Caribbean Echoes* (1997). Nsue and Dusseck have undergone both the intellectual and experiential components of diaspora literacy that is generated by lived experiences. A native of Biyabiyán (Ebebiyín, Ecuatorial Guinea) where she spent her childhood, Nsue travelled to Madrid place in which she spent her adolescence and youth. Ever since, she has spent her life between Madrid and Malabo. Dusseck on the other hand, was born in Port-au-Prince and travelled first to Bruselles, and then to Cadiz, (Spain) in order to study medicine. At the break of the Civil Rights Movement in the US, she visited New York, where she gained consciousness about the oppression of black women under patriarchy. Now she lives and works in Cadiz.

The texts written by Nsue and Dusseck retrieve a female knowledge inherent to an oral tradition which functions as literary critic Tim Woods points out, as “a signifier of a past that has been censored by the rupturing cultural effects of colonial modernity and is now part of a process of postcolonial ‘working-through’” (2007, 55). Thus, the literature produced by Nsue and Dusseck is a hybrid product, a mixture of traditional Caribbean, African, and European elements, and for this reason we will look at these texts as part of migrant literature, because they have been born out of a frontier territory presenting linguistic contamination, identity superposition, configuring as a “minor literature” in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari understand this concept. A minor literature is not literature written in a minor language, but one written by a minority in a major language. For instance, the texts object of our study are written in Spanish, which is the dominant language in Spain and the Hispanic world, but they are written by individuals who carry racial and cultural markers that are different from mainstream Spaniards. A major language is the one that, given a socio-cultural context, dominates, and is in a superior hegemonic position with respect to other languages, in this case, Spanish. Minor literatures adopt the major language but give it another perspective. They adapt this language to the new context, some simplifying it, others loading it with symbolism, mixing it with the local, autochthonous languages to decentralize it and to create revolutionary literatures. For instance, Spanish as a major language in Spain is given a new postcolonial perspective by Nsue, who comes from Ecuatorial Guinea but who lived in Spain. In the case of Michelline Dusseck, she chooses to write in Spanish because she lives and works in Spain since 1968. In this way, the literature produced by Nsue and Dusseck give “other” alternative perspectives to Spanish literature, provoking changes in the major literary expression of Spanish

culture and its literature. Nsue and Dusseck have a paradoxically privileged position because the situation of living in the margins or outside of their fragile communities allowing the writers the chance “to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (Brown 2005, 2).

Both Nsue and Dusseck, are migrant subjects, one from Ecuatorial Guinea, the other from Haiti; they both follow the paradigm of the suppression of silence which is a process that relocates the word to do the telling from an original, agentive point of view. They both use flashbacks to continually rupture their lineal narrative timeline to insert the interior times of the protagonist, Nnanga in *Ekomo*, and the matrilineal saga of Simone, Lamercie and Erzulie in *Caribbean Echoes*. I argue that both Nsue and Dusseck share a compromise to disassemble “the paradigm of resistance” (Ryan 2005, 11) defined as “the binary interpretive framework within which Western interpretations of African Diaspora artistic and expressive cultures have been traditionally located” (2005, 11) and that is replaced with the “paradigm of growth” (2005, 11) by creating female characters focused on the building of an agentive self, envisioning their own growth towards self-empowerment, as powerful, independent subjects. The paradigm of growth has as one of its features a “democracy of narrative participation,” which entails the rejection by both Nsue and Dusseck of the binary design of central and marginal characters, in their aim to depict interdependent relationships. Through characters, readers envision their own human agency endowing a text with the potential to transcend the fictional realm to the reader’s very own community. African American scholar Johnnella E. Butler, questions postcolonial discourse as a valid critical tool to analyze agency in the African diasporic context when she claims that:

Postcolonial theory posits the oppressed as “the other” versus the realized self of the oppressor—or “the other” as the non-liberated group versus the liberated former colonizer. The works of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and others emanate from this representation of the binary, which, in the African diasporic context, reinforces the distancing of the agentive self, and lessens the envisioning of self-empowerment (2006, 151).

Both Nsue and Dussek react against this binarism, crafting alternative pathways of representation towards wholeness and agency. These writers react against the de-constructionist discourse inherent to the postcolonial condition by focusing on the creative, moving towards the constructive, defying social conventions, and subverting silence, away from the western, colonizing discourse, suggesting that the postcolonial condition, as a critical category, should also be de-colonized, thus aiming at new dialogic spaces. Nsue and Dusseck enter into a “politics of articulation,” built on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act because black women have suffered imposed silence from white patriarchal discourse, so they “represent discursive and material terrains where there exists the possibility for the active production of speech, desire, and agency” (Hammonds 141). This paper argues that these Afro-Hispanic writers and the type of literature that they produce need to be read with new interpretative models since they are emergent literatures, in part migrant, and in part born out of the colonial experience but that have followed, in the case of María Nsue, a different path from the rest of African literatures. For instance, in Ecuatorial Guinea, there was no anti-colonialist literary movement as it was the case of other English, French, or Portuguese colonized African countries, where literary and national movements developed hand in hand as it happened, for instance, in Haiti. Nobile claims that Nsue’s writing is doubly “eccentric”—and we can add this label to

Dusseck as well, because as black women, one originally from Africa and the other one from the Caribbean, they have chosen to create and live in Spain and to write and publish in Spanish, moving in this way from the periphery into the centre.

### **Mapping a Grammar of Identity in *Ekomo***

*Ekomo* is the first novel written by or published by an Ecuatorial Guinean woman writer. The novel focuses on the search for identity of a young woman, who has just lost her husband, due to a gangrened leg. *Ekomo* is a post-independence novel. Even if the novel is written in Spanish, the referential world of the novel is clearly African, since the setting is an unnamed African village. Memory plays an important role in the novel's writing process, since the narrative is a recollection of the past of the protagonist, that is a recollection of the past of the African tribe Fang to which both the protagonist and the writer belong. Memory within this context shapes narrative forms and strategies, to reclaim a past that needs to be recovered in order to gain control over one's life and future. The novel delineates a grammar of identity which questions the established order at different levels. First of all, the status of the writer as a liminal subject at the crossroads of cultural realities—Spanish and African, second, her use of a transgressive poetics, which blurs the duality inherent in the postcolonial and gender traditional discourse, and third, her incursion in the politics of identity from a gender perspective, introducing a “degraded masculinity, a questioned femininity, a fragmented West, and an African world in dispute” (Aponte Ramos 2004, 102).

Nsue's choice of a poetic language to tell her story situates her in an outsider space away from the traditional, discursive limits of the narrative, creating a literary universe where the emotional and the rational are part of the same epistemology, contributing to the legitimacy of fluid identities articulating a real and an aesthetic space. She proposes gender as a meeting point for difference. Thus, it is no coincidence that the protagonist, Nnanga, chooses dancing as a mode of expression since she regards the spoken word as insufficient to express both her intuition and her rationality in an effort to re-define language, a way of resisting the regulations inherent to discourse, opening possibilities for alternative constructions of both the masculine and the feminine. *Ekomo* deals with unresolved identities, identities in crisis, the search for new limits, and possible answers across the unknown territories of a conflicted identity. The tension generated by the dualities is overcome when Nsue redoubles her efforts to keep a lyric and intimate language which takes the reader into an oral tradition linked to an understanding of identity which is no longer double, but multiple and whole because it stems out from autochthonous socio-cultural patterns with the Fang ethnicity at its core. This whole identity contrasts with what Bolekia Boleká defines as instrumental or fictitious identity, or the one taught at the Spanish schools in Ecuatorial Guinea and which entails the abandoning of the oral tradition and its subsequent transmission to future generations. This fact has brought about the impoverishing of the population (the indigenous/ tribal culture) of Ecuatorial Guinea (2004, 83). As Bolekia Boleká furthermore points out, identity is not built on a written culture, or on a specific literature (2004, 77), but the initiation of African women and men on their journey towards identity including the spoken word—Nommo, through silence, meditation, and observation, core values every speaker should possess as a member of the community. The recent “adoptive” literatures of Ecuatorial Guinea such as the Spanish or the French, should be nourished by orality because orality helps the socialization of individuals, it strengthens unity within ethnic group, and guarantees communication between the community and its ancestry

through invocations, ceremonies, by focusing on their own history and ideology. Thus, in Nsue's text, Nommo (the spoken word) coexists with the written word in a liberatory, discursive practice that provides an alternative interpretation and a harsh critique of patriarchy and colonialism from a lyric, intimate perspective, against the realist psychologism of other Ecuatorial Guinean male writers such as Ndongó and Mbomío (Fra-Molinero 2004, 126-7).

The novel is a bildungsroman, since it explores the process by which the protagonist, Nnanga Sara, frees herself from the traditional tribal rites of her culture, to find out the path towards freedom and self-realization. This getting rid of the chains of tradition is a difficult task for Nnanga, but her life and her spiritual wholeness are at stake if she does not do it. Her nickname as a dancer gives us an idea of her inner strength and possibilities: Dove of Fire Standing on a Steel Pole. Dove, because she is soothing, meek and innocent, Fire because inside she is strong and powerful. The sustenance of her life, her values, are strongly African, and thus made of steel. On the one hand she is Nnanga, the African, a dancer, a wife, and later, a widow. All these aspects of her life provide the protagonist with an unquestionable African identity. On the other hand, she is Sara, because she has been baptized in the faith of Christian Protestantism. It is her father, and his influential situation within their tribe, and the opinion of the Protestant priest, who finally save Nnanga from dying. Thus the presence of religious syncretism stands as a cohesive element in the novel, as part of the reality of postcolonial Africa. Christian faith coexists in the novel with voodoo beliefs, sacred dancing, and secret herbs administered by powerful male witches.

Although *Ekomo* presents a woman who rebels against the impositions and manipulations of tribal tradition, her life is immersed in it, and the culture dictates the costumes and the daily rhythm of her life, providing her an identity as an African woman. Even if her family does support her when she joins a dancing group which goes around the neighboring villages offering music and entertainment, Dove of Fire insists on becoming a dancer because through the art form she is able to explore her identity as a young woman becoming conscious of her body's beauty and possibilities. When she becomes a dancer, Dove of Fire is almost fourteen years old. Through dancing she is able to express her emotions of grief after the death of a very close friend, Mba the dwarf. Her father and the rest of the villagers forbid her or anyone else to show any sorrow for the loss of a dwarf. Nnanga decides that when she dances, she will pay tribute to her friend, who had always faithfully taken care of the children in the village. She will not dance for her public, but for her friend and is a total success. In the following lines she uses the conventions and costumes of her tribe, interpreting them to her own benefit:

Due to his death, our daily trip was put off until after the funeral, and two weeks later, when our dancing finally took place, I cried for him in my own way, since I couldn't cry for him before. I understood for the first time what it meant to cry through singing, or dancing, or any other manifestation of emotion that wasn't just tears. I danced for a cause for the first time, and I understood what anybody who dances for a special reason feels. . . I knew then why I had learnt to dance. I knew that from that very moment I had become a different person. I was an artist, and my life was dancing (Nsue 74, my own translation).

Dancing, as a sacred ritual for the Fang people is very important in the novel. The novel begins with the celebration of a traditional healing dance to help and protect the villagers against powerful negative omens such as the breaking apart of the top of their sacred tree the ceiba (silk cotton tree) that protects the village, along with a strong and young branch. The ceiba is the tree

of goodness (Granados, 12). The breaking away of the tree hit by lightning during a storm meant death for the villagers; two men will die: the chief, and a strong, healthy young man. This original premonition will be literally fulfilled: the old chief dies, and Nnanga's husband, Ekomo, whose father is one of the most powerful witch doctors in the area, will also die in the end. The ceiba's death will also play a metaphorical role in the novel because it refers to the tragic death of the African hero Patrice Lumumba, as the frustrated hope of Africa for the creation of a national discourse against the lethal presence of colonialism. Thus, as Fra-Molinero suggests, the death of Lumumba situates the historical time of this novel at the crossroads of the years 1959 and 1960 (2004, 126). Nnanga dances first, to prevent the death of a young man in the community who she suspects could be her husband, since he returns from the city with a gangrened leg. In the second place, Nnanga dances for fertility; she wishes to become a mother.

Nature is always present in the narrative of Nsue, emerging as a main character that invades and wraps up the village. The night when the old chief dies is described as "stormy and bewitched" and the only silence is human: "on the other side of the village the fight moves the beasts, the birds and nature. The trees fall down by themselves. The wind howls, as a dog, passing through the trees, going into the forest" (Nsue 47, translation mine). The narrative of *Ekomo* is full of music and lyricism, evoking the orality inherent in African storytelling. The book is dedicated to Nsue's old friend also called Nnanga, "what a shame she cannot read" (Nsue 5). As Limonta suggests, the book searches for an audience that might be illiterate (2000, 93). The oral quality of this book asserts the African inspiration and identity of the writer towards her mother country, going towards the roots of her culture, linking orality and re-memory as a vehicle that transforms and illuminates the ancestral values, which define African identity without European contamination. One of the properties of the novel *Ekomo* as a post-independence text in Ecuatorial-Guinean literature is precisely the absence of anti-colonial comments or themes. The presence of a conscience among the fang tribe as being Ecuatorial-Guinean is not there, and the villagers consider themselves just Africans. There is no reference of the Fang people towards Spain, nor any Spanish influence in the subject matter of the novel besides the fact that it is written in Spanish. For instance, throughout the novel the protagonist and her husband refer to themselves as Guinean only once, to distinguish themselves from other Africans who speak French.

Nsue in her postcolonial narrative searches for her own identity when Nnanga is defined through a rejection towards the Spanish tradition as a way to create and identity on her own. The cultural identity of Ecuatorial Guinea focuses on the reaffirmation of its vernacular tradition. In this way, the main elements of the Western-Christian Spanish culture come in dialectic conflict with the traditional elements of the African tradition. An act of self-empowerment as an African woman writer comes from the fact that *Ekomo* becomes a *Praisesong for the Widow*,<sup>4</sup> functioning as an epic, initiation story, dismantling the hierarchies of power inherent in language, and in these types of narratives, associated to nationalistic agendas, and to military might. Claiming orality is establishing the authority of the African woman writer, who stops being a mere observer of tradition and African identity to become consciously active in her own ordeal towards subjectivity.

There is a link in the novel between immigration and loss of identity since the novel is narrated from an African point of view. There is a warrior, Nfumbaha who had traveled to Europe and had been there too long, losing respect for the tribal Fang tradition and becoming "half-

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<sup>4</sup> The writer of this essay acknowledges the novel entitled *Praisesong for the Widow* written by Black American writer of Barbadian descent Paule Marshall and published in 1983.



white” (Nsue 60). According to Nnanga, he was not one of them anymore. At one point, when Nfumbaha cannot stand the reclusion within the village ordered by the old chief, he carries his gun and goes towards the forest, thus disobeying the command. Nfumbaha ends up getting lost in the forest, and not returning in a long time, and when he finally comes back, he has become an old and very sick man, who only wishes to die. The warrior gets lost in the wilderness of the nearby forests, because after his stay in Europe, he has lost his identity signs, and his native skills to be able to defend himself from the dangers of the forest. His disconnection, furthermore, reflects his spiritual death, unable to follow the costumes and spiritual directions of the Fang chief leader and the witch doctor.

There are several ways by which the identity of Nnganga Sara is defined through the traditions of her Fang tribe. Besides her role as a dancer, Nnanga or Dove of Fire defines herself through her marriage to Ekomo, and later, as a widow. In each of these stages of her life the marked African tradition enters in conflict with the rebellious character of Nnganga. We have already mentioned this aspect in her dancing stage above. With respect to marriage, there are two aspects significant for our argument. First, Nnanga is traditionally engaged through the wish of her parents, to the son of a neighboring Christian catechist preacher. It will obviously be a loveless marriage, and initially, Nnganga Sara agrees to it. When Ekomo, the son of a witch doctor arrives in the village and after seeing her dancing expresses a wish to become her husband, attracted by her beautiful, long, red hair, she asks her old friend, Nnanga, to cut it off. With this action she provokes a scandal in the village, and she discourages Ekomo, who leaves the place immediately. Nnanga Sara’s felt “an infinite happiness” at her success (Nsue 64). Later, Ekomo, helped by Nnanga Sara’s brother, Samuel, kidnaps her on her wedding night, but by this time Nnanga Sara is already in love with him.

When Ekomo dies, due to the gangrene in his leg, Nnanga Sara becomes a widow: a major disgrace among Fang women. Rites of mourning take place, especially painful for young Nnanga, who lies in the floor for days, without water or nourishment, bitten by ants, and hit by the villagers in a harrowing act of purification. Ekomo died far away, where they traveled looking for a cure for his sick leg. Because Ekomo was not baptized, he could not be buried on the cemetery of the mission, and Nnanga without money and without help had to touch his decomposing body to bury him in the forest. Her village taboos forbid a widow from touching the dead body of her husband, and Nnanga Sara had broken it. She is rescued by the Protestant priest of her tribe, who refuses to watch her die, defying, in this way, the ancestral African tradition. She lives to tell us her story of suffering, survival and mourning. The last pages of the novel are a tribute to the African woman, obliged by her circumstances to choose between her costumes and taboos, and the more “liberal” norms of the Christian church. A profound syncretism invades the novel, and the protagonist undergoes an internal fight between her faith in the ancestors, and her faith in a Christian God. The result is an unresolved state of confusion that tears her apart, a feeling that permeates in the tone and the style of the whole novel.

*Ekomo* is a novel of intense personal growth with the protagonist undergoing a process of identity construction that projects towards assertiveness, ideological independence, and spiritual wholeness. Nnanga’s/Sara’s identity is not only feminine within the patriarchal parameters of traditional African culture and society, but it is also black, vernacular and African within the parameters of European literature. Her development towards wholeness however, does not get easily resolved as the subject journeys in transgressive and fluid terrains which legitimate alternative epistemologies that complement one another in order to create a real and aesthetic space throughout the geography of identity (Aponte Ramos 2004, 106). In the end,

Nnanga/Sara/Dove of Fire remains in conflict, and the result is pain, distress, and a certain degree of confusion, but not chaos. Nsue's novel belongs to Ecuatorial Guinean literature, not to Spanish literature and as such, the novel is part of the literary world of the African novel and the novel of the African Diaspora.

### **The Ignition of Identity through Agency in *Caribbean Echoes***

Haitian writer Michelline Dusseck, a native speaker of both French and Creole writes in Spanish. Her first novel *Caribbean Echoes* was published in 1996 and follows the destinies of three generations of Haitian women, Simone, Lamercie, and the youngest, Erzulie. Dusseck has prevailed with the writing of her narrative over the binary western discourse resisting being left to the margins of her language and culture. Dusseck and other Haitian writers such as Edwidge Danticat (who writes in English), have altered the monosemic hegemonic discourse their subaltern discourses. However, Dusseck's writing is bilingual and bicultural, which makes it part of the literature of the frontier. Dusseck writes that her marginality is a stylistic and aesthetic tool, that when engaging with politics brings together a deep sense of agency merging an interior, personal self with the collective self, and revisiting her experiences with exile and marginality.

The novel confronts the abandonment of an indigenous style of life, and the approach of a colonial status for the people of Haiti after the invasion of the North American army ending in the 1970s. North Americans went to Haiti with the purpose of reestablishing the social order and democracy. However, Dusseck describes them as intruders, marked by racial difference and cultural superiority. This is how Maxi, one of the protagonists of the novel sees them:

Whites ... they are people of white skin, like a chicken's without feathers. Their eyes are like glass balls, shiny and of different colors: gray, green, blue. I wonder if they can see anything through those weird eyes. The hair, some of them have it like corn ears, others like horsetails. They look like fragile and bland puppets. They smell like raw meat...they told me they have come to bring order and progress to our country. Every child will go to school to get an education and to learn their language (Dusseck 33, my own translation).

This is the beginning of a long history of cultural imperialism for the Haitians, which brings the loss of freedom, of economic and social status, and that makes Haitian people ill with suffering. The large corporations take away the lands and houses of the natives. Young men will then escape to the mountains, organizing "guerrilla" groups. Women are left alone, without a means of survival, migrating from the countryside into the cities looking for jobs as domestics. Migration, first to neighboring countries, like the Dominican Republic, and later on to the US seems a possible solution for these sad, dismembered communities who have lost their dignity, forgetting about their ancestral beliefs and costumes, absorbed by a boring westernized way of life. Representing the black woman as cultural agent, Dusseck denounces the institutionalization of patriarchy socially and politically, linking it to Haiti's colonial history. Sexual violence against women represents in the novel on the one hand, the misogyny inherent to the Duvalier regime as a way of intimidation and the imposition of political power, and on the other, the rape of the slave woman by the white plantation owner. However, in this case, the rapist is the black man, who exploits the black woman's body to reaffirm his desire to possess and control. According to Collins, these black men "wish to become "master" by fulfilling traditional definitions of

masculinity—both Eurocentric and white-defined” thus becoming a potential threat for black women around them (1991, 186). The real danger for these women lies in the fact that “the sex/gender hierarchy and the sexual politics that black women encounter within it represent a powerful system of repression because they intrude on people’s daily lives at the point of consciousness,” thus limiting “potential sources of power as energy that can flow from love relationships” (Collins 1991, 182). Gender and sexual violence becomes a constant in Haitian women’s lives through the three generations spanned in *Caribbean Echoes*. Of all sorts of violence employed against women, rape is according to Bringas, the most effective subjugating device since it deprives the victim of her will to resist” becoming “the ultimate assertion of the masculine authority over women” (2005, 115).

However, in the novel, as Kerpen suggests, the bodies of women become war zones where the intersecting factors of gender, race, class and sexuality compose the hierarchical dynamics of power (2013). For instance, Simone, is raped by Boss Antoine because she had questioned his virility in public. However, endowed with iron will-power, she resists his efforts to subjugate her when she responds with a controlled sexual response, limiting his desire to control and manipulate her through her body and her sexuality. She would give herself to him not full of fear, but with a mixture of hate and irony: “She sharply discarded her clothing, lying on the floor ... and opening her legs. Come on, Boss Antoine! Collect! I’m very busy—she said rather coldly” (Dusseck 85, my own translation).

In this way, Dussek refuses to present her female characters as cringing victims, but on the contrary, these women become smart agentive powers of their own realities. In order to do this, they reach for strategies which go from agentive submission, to open rebellion, claiming ancestral powers like those of voodoo. As Francilia, stoically accepts her husband’s infidelities, Lamercie is sent as a restavec developing a variety of strategies to survive the household’s abuses. When she is finally kicked out exploited and pregnant, she finds solace at her mother’s house, and when her own daughter is raped by a tonton macoute, she kills him. It is only then that she finds the inner power to stand up for her own family, reaching out to the long, lost voice after her own trauma, recovering her balance, discovering a feminine power which resides in her indigenous culture. In her journey from voiceless to speech, Lamercie feels “like a zombie who has tasted salt ... with her feet on the ground (Dusseck 291, translation mine) recovering the use of her faculties, freeing her daughter Erzulie from the state of fear that had locked her, thus breaking the oppressive circle of silence and abuse which surrounded her. Lamercie overcomes her aphasia gaining a voice that contributes to the building of her subjectivity because moving from silence to speech entails healing, the making of a new life, and growing from object to subject (hooks 1989, 9).

These three generations of Haitian women, who suffer multiple oppressions determined by the interactions of race, gender and class, begin a healing process of sorts, reclaiming personal wellness through building self-esteem and recovering the “discredited” knowledge (citing Toni Morrison) of Haitian culture. The protagonists of *Caribbean Echoes* are aided and empowered by the use of magic voodoo, or by a supernatural event in their quest for wholeness, self-love, and a sense of belonging. In fact in her writing, Dusseck identifies with the indigenous school of intellectuals and writers who reacted against the North American colonization of Haiti focusing on the problems of country people and the middle class.<sup>5</sup> Dusseck, by creating this saga of Haitian women passes on her feminine wisdom for the survival of all Black people. Through the

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<sup>5</sup> Among these are writers such as Dr. Price Mars, Jacques Stephen and Jacques Roumain (Interview *Siglo XXI* in <http://www.diariosigloxxi.com/texto-diario/mostrat/70806/haiti-en-la-prosa-de-su-diaspora>).

use of Voodoo the protagonists acknowledge their ancestors and the loas, they learn the importance of integrating their pasts into their Haitian life, shaping a cultural identity that often leads to a heightened sense of community because it offers a counter balance with both deities and ancestors. Many black women of the African diaspora, as is the case with Dusseck, search for wholeness in a world intent on marginalizing, sexualizing, and exploiting them. They nurture and participate in their communities by actively appreciating their African cultural roots as educators of present and future generations, in order not to fall prey to “spiritual barrenness ... personal disintegration and disconnectedness” (Denniston 1995, 136).

The magical environment of *Caribbean Echoes* reinvigorates Afro-Caribbean communities by using the supernatural events of Caribbean life as a tool to reintegrate ways of knowing capable of healing these sick societies and their individuals. For instance, Simone knew her mother-in-law, Francilia, was about to die the instant she observed black butterflies in the room around her. Later on, Francilia wakes up from the dead to reproach her daughter Zette her late arrival at the funeral. Francilia’s ghost appears after Simone gives birth to a new baby, and literally drags her to Charité’s house, in order to get help. They even celebrate the *boulé zin* ceremony at the Voodoo temple in the belief that Francilia’s spirit is still around. There, women told stories about Saint Francilia, whose spirit had come down from the heavens to help women of the family to deliver their babies without pain. Later on Zette’s ghost appears to Simone, to inform her that her own baby is alive inside her own dead body, and years later, Zette’s spirit would travel overseas to meet Francisco, her former lover, to inform him about their daughter’s birth.

As the novel reminds us, in order to reach individual wellness, it is absolutely necessary that the characters are in touch with their true selves, and their heritage. After realizing this, Olivia, starts a new life when she claims that

It was time to remove the mask and let go of her true nature, to claim her legitimate desires and wishes. She had to forget about Tchaikovski and Boudelaire and any other symbols from her mistress’ world, to allow the rhythm of her African blood’s “tam-tam” to speak, remembering the old tales she was told as a child in her Caribbean home, forgetting the affairs with her boss and allowing her heart to develop the tenderness she felt for her lover (Dusseck 163, my own translation).

The old tales Olivia was told as a child, the love she had for her family and her immediate community in the rural areas where she grew up shape up the contours of Haitian women’s identity in the novel, based on dignity, self-love, respect, and owe for the core values of their communities. These are the values they have inherited from their West African ancestors, claiming a rich spirituality that is the source of Dusseck’s creativity. Her female characters depend on each other’s help to surmount the difficulties of the extreme poverty and daily abuse they suffer both in the country and the city. The bonding of women, their unconditional support, and the strong mother-daughter ties which place the daughters under the safety of the mother’s love reveal the ways Haitian women have not only of surviving, but also of empowering themselves.

The holistic notion of feminine spirituality sends the message that women cannot live without acknowledging their own true nature, in connection with their family and their community. For instance, Erzulie is named after the loa Erzulie Fréda Dahomey, “the flower-

woman, the vampire, the love goddess who knows how to conquer men to gain power and wealth” (Dusseck 204, my own translation) since she was born around an intense smell of flowers, a sign of the spirit visiting the earth (Muñoz 1999, 241). Although Erzulie’s beauty brings her wealth, it will cost her her integrity, because it will be through prostitution at the hands of Bobú who exploits and abuses her that she will escape poverty. The novel is structured around the character of Erzulie, the youngest of the three generations of Haitian women. Each part of the novel begins with Erzulie who in the first paragraph of the novel is introduced in the company of snakes, depicted as a Sirene in the river. According to Voodoo Erzulie represents the cosmic womb where both humans and deities are conceived. She is also considered a symbol of fertility and the mother of all worlds. She is seen as a combination of exquisite beauty and sensuality, and the protagonist of numerous erotic scandals (Verson 2003). Erzulie is destined in the novel to find a way out from misery and unhappiness for the three generations of Haitian women, and she accomplishes this by paying homage to the Goddess after which she had been named, Erzulie Freda daughter of Dambalah Wedo, the snake, and thus claiming love as therapeutic, “it was love’s distinct perfume: the smell of sea-waves, of sky blue, a smell of hope, of promises, of whispered sentences...” (Dusseck 102, my own translation) in a novel where the hardness of human destiny is complemented with the restoration of what is being lost.

## **Conclusion**

In moving towards Caribbeannes, Dusseck’s and Nsue’s narratives are expanding their respective cultures’ colonial methods of identification and self-expression by articulating the shared postcolonial ways of recognizing, crafting, and manifesting wholeness, in the face of colonial fragmentation and marginalization. Expressions of caribbeanness are realized through hybridity rooted in agency, claiming identity as a spring board of sorts that combines the ancestry of one’s past heritage with one’s contemporary cultural identification and values, leaving room for individual expression, following a paradigm of articulation and growth as a response to the silence imposed on them by white patriarchal discourse. Following the “paradigm of growth” both Nsue and Dusseck search for a new language and a cultural context for cultures that with the passing of time and due to the process of cultural imperialism have become underprivileged, so that readers may start a similar process, viewing these sick cultures as beautiful, deserving not only our respect, but also our admiration. In their novels, these writers go back to autochthonous ways and places in order to incorporate a possible identity which pushes them forward after having experienced a life full of paradoxes under polarized cultural mores which limited women’s access to spiritualism and creativity in favor of more scientific and logical premises. Black women writers of the 1980s and 1990s strongly claim their authority to control discourse, achieve power, and re/write history.

Dusseck’s and Nsue’s narratives bring forward the importance of the tale, of the traditional oral narrative in the healing process, towards the construction of valid identities, contextualizing healing rituals and ceremonies that explore the social construction of cultural sickness provoked by the uprootedness of the colonial experience. Through orature, paying homage to Caribbean and African orality, both Nsue and Dusseck rescue the African cosmogonic myths. The repetition of oral expressions or formulas, invoke the empowering uses of the word—Nommo, through which humans become a Muntu, a being endowed with spirituality, that is, with intelligence and soul. Nommo becomes a concrete entity and alludes to a person’s well-being and happiness. Thus, through orature, these women writers construct alternative epistemologies,

creating “independent self-definitions and self-evaluations as well as articulate core themes as forms of subjugated knowledge, they challenge the very process by which the epistemologies of dominant groups are constructed and legitimated” (Collins 1991, 201-203). As Walter Ong points out, narrative is “widely functional in oral cultures” since according to Havelock “knowledge cannot be managed in abstract categories.” Thus narratives become “repositories of an oral culture’s lore” bonding thought permanently (Ong 1982, 140-41). Presenting alternative ways of knowing that emerge from their femininity and their Caribbean and African heritage, and which may differ from the world as defined by men—we are referring to the deconstructionist narratives produced by post-colonial male discourse, these writers suggest that women may have other ways of telling as well—what we call the constructionist narrative discourse. These ways of telling are intricately related to ways of knowing and passing on the resulting knowledge to future generations. In this way, the search for selfhood of person and nation is “integrally tied to the creation of stories” (Busia 1988, 3). Through the telling of their stories the authors discussed in this paper extend the cultural practices of the communities to which they belong. In their “oral literature” (Wilentz 2000, 117) they move from their communities to the community of readers. The traditions that they re/create and the methods they use are not static, but they are instead constantly renewed by the flow of voices that remember other stories and create them anew. These writers also affirm the place of black women as creative artists who have fought not only the racism of the dominant culture, but also the sexism of their own men.

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