

The Use of Creole in Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*

Aitor Ibarrola-Armendáriz
University of Deusto, Bilbao

This paper looks into the possible reasons for, and effects of, the use of Creole words and expressions in the novel Claire of the Sea Light (2013), by Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat. This use of her mother tongue is not new in Danticat's fiction, but not much attention has been paid either to its diverse possible causes or to the purposes it pursues in the literature on her work. The paper will consider both what "drives" and motivations are encouraging the author to incorporate these mimetic and rhetorical elements and what effects they intend to produce on her readers.

Keywords: Code-switching and translanguaging, Edwidge Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, diasporic discourse, generation 1.5

Introduction

Most critics and reviewers of Edwidge Danticat's latest novel, *Claire of the Sea Light*, have agreed that one of the main strengths of the book is its masterly combination of a captivating prose style, able to catch with great insight the most recondite agonies and aspirations of her characters, and the blunt realism with which she represents the social and economic woes in her native country (Casey, 2013; Kakutani, 2013; Shamsie, 2013). The story is set in the imaginary seaside town of Ville Rose -which had already featured in some of her earlier works-, a microcosm in which the more peaceful and less cramped past of Haiti lives on, not long before the catastrophic earthquake that hit the country in 2010. The book opens with the disappearance of a little girl, Claire Limyè Lanmè Faustin, on the evening of her seventh birthday. This happens right after her father, a poor fisherman, has consented to giving Claire away to a local fabric vendor, as he is deeply worried that he will not be able to provide her with a safe and happy future: "He feared being lost at sea or getting hit by a car, or being struck with a terrible disease that would separate them forever" (Danticat, 2013, p. 17). However, as is fairly common in other novels by Danticat, after the first chapter, we lose sight of the title character and her father, Nozias; we are thrown back in time -ten years, in this case; and begin to learn about the interconnected and troubled lives of a half-dozen other residents of Ville Rose, belonging to different social strata and who, like Claire, see their existence marked by unexpected deaths and unlikely affections.

As is the case with many writers of the Caribbean diaspora, Danticat shows a dual attitude toward her birthplace. While there are passages in which the author is completely enraptured by the natural and human landscapes on the island, these are followed by others in which she seems to be utterly outraged by the kind of destitution, corruption, and violence that have become endemic in the country. Safran (1991),

Clifford (1994) and other experts in Diaspora Studies would probably explain the pleasure that Danticat -and her readers- derive from those descriptions by referring to the characteristic orientation of diasporic writers to their homeland as a source of identity, values, and solidarity. Nevertheless, these somehow nostalgic sections of the text already contain signs of the immense pain that a poor and vulnerable country may inflict on its inhabitants: the sea is “unpredictable”, the land “eroded” and the narrow alleys off the main street are as dangerous as “thorns”. Perhaps Madame Gaëlle, the fabric vendor who offers to adopt Claire early in the novel, expresses best how many of the characters feel about their land: “There were too many memories in this town to bind her and make her want to flee at the same time” (p. 153). Likewise, Danticat seems to feel these same contradictory impulses while writing about her homeland: there is the urge to reconnect with the landscapes of her childhood and the people of her country, but there is also a need to keep a distance -aesthetic, ethical, or otherwise- with respect to the severe consternations that her land has experienced during her lifetime.

As critics have noted, there are multiple ways in which the diasporic writer may manage to represent this double (divergent) pull toward and away from their native land. In the case of Danticat, some have insisted on the significance that memories of the landscapes and mindscapes, as well as of the myths and traditions in her homeland, hold in her fiction (see Counihan, 2012; Samway 2004). In this regard, Safran believes that diasporic individuals are often determined to “continue to relate, personally or vicariously,” to their country of origin, in a way that significantly feeds their identity and solidarity (1991, pp. 84-85). *Claire of the Sea Light* provides abundant evidence of the author’s investment in retrieving cultural and relational practices that keep connecting her with her homeland. But most scholars would concur that what is most remarkable about Danticat’s fiction is the empathy and compassion she demonstrates for her numberless compatriots who, for various reasons, have endured loss and heartbreak on the island (see Bellamy, 2012; Ibarrola-Armendariz, 2010). In Kakutani’s (2013) words, “the reader is made acutely aware of the patterns of loss and redemption, cruelty and vengeance that thread their way through the characters’ lives, and the roles that luck and choice play in shaping their fates.” What has been generally overlooked in Danticat’s depiction of Haiti’s local color and traumas is the inclusion of Creole terms and expressions that do not only pepper her gorgeous writing style (cf. Sontag, 2013), but are also seen to serve a variety of other important functions. Naturally, digging into those functions is essential for a full appreciation of the significance of Danticat’s text. In what remains of the paper, some of the functions that the use of Creole in Danticat’s fiction appear to serve will be considered, as well as the prominent role this use of her mother tongue plays in her creation of what has been called a “diasporic discourse” (cf. Nesbitt, 2010).

Mimetic and Stylistic Uses of Code-Switching in Edwidge Danticat

In the mid-20th century, it was sometimes argued that the mixing or switching across different languages in natural speech was a clear sign of a lack of required linguistic competence or even of illiteracy. Nevertheless, with the passing of the decades and the significant advances, especially in the field of bilingual education, code-switching has mostly lost that derogatory treatment and achieved a high level of acceptance and legitimacy. No doubt, the flowering of ethnic and postcolonial literatures around the globe has contributed decisively to the recognition of mixed-language fictional texts as products that deserve the attention of specialists in different disciplines. According to Lipski, “it is obvious that language switching in literature is not a result of confusion or inability to separate the languages, but rather stems from a conscious desire to juxtapose two codes to achieve some particular literary effect” (1982, p. 191). For some analysts, Danticat can be said to have become “the bard of the Haitian diaspora” (Sontag, 2013), as she is voicing the concerns of many 1.5- or second-generation Haitian-Americans by straddling two conspicuously different worlds and shuttling between two languages. In order to do so, she usually plants her novels firmly in specific communities in her homeland and, although her main language of communication is English, she provides it with a bicultural flavor by resorting to code-switching in particular contexts in which it will contribute to identity marking, characterization, criticism, stylization or simply as a source of realism and credibility (see Keller & Keller, 1993, pp. 165-66).

Before moving on to the analysis of some examples of code-switching in Danticat’s latest novel, it is important to clarify that most studies of this kind can be divided into two distinct groups. On the one hand, some studies try to determine whether literary code-switching in ethnic fiction responds to socio-pragmatic motivations similar to those found in natural bilingual speech (Callahan, 2004). The idea here is to figure out if code-switching in these texts followed the same lexical and syntactic patterns that have been reported for oral code-switching, and thus if a certain level of mimesis and authenticity was being achieved. While it is true that Danticat uses it as an ethnic marker and, as Callahan (2003) explains, mostly in “informal and colloquial contexts” (p. 14) -rather than as a formal register-, it is more arguable that she is employing it to raise socio-political issues which are quite common in Latino fiction. On the other hand, there are other studies that have centered on how code-switching may be incorporated in literary works to achieve symbolic meaning and rhetorical effects. Again, although some prescriptive linguists and editors were initially reluctant to view these more experimental stratagems as productive, in Aparicio’s words, “a postmodern and transcreative approach would validate [them] as a positively creative innovation in literature” (1994, p. 797). As will be seen below, Danticat occasionally employs some words and phrases in Creole in these more innovative and imaginative ways in her fiction.

Regarding the tokens of code-switching in *Claire of the Sea Light* that appear to resemble those found in oral exchanges and, therefore, are seen to pursue more

mimetic functions, these seem to encompass primarily lexical items and linguistic routines that could be said to carry quite specific meanings in the Haitian cultural context. Thus, terms such as *revenan* (p. 16), *restavèk* (p. 8) or *chèche lavi* (pp. 8-9) come up recurrently throughout the novel, since they prove critical to understanding the difficult relationship existing between Claire and her father, Nozias Faustin, in depth. These terms intend to capture aspects of life -and death- on the island that are heavily charged with social, cultural and, even, religious connotations that would not usually be present in their equivalent words in English. Although the hazards of childbirth, of being given away as a servant at a young age or of one's occupation may definitely happen in other places around the world, they seem to be such an integral part of the existence of certain groups of people in Haiti that their use seems fully justified and natural. Likewise, words of salutation, greeting, gratitude, etc. are generally consigned in Creole, thus not interfering with the flow of the conversation. Important men like the mayor -and undertaker- of the town, Albert Vincent, or the headmaster of the local school, Maxime Ardin, Sr., are addressed by most people as *Mye*, instead of mister, and priests' names are preceded by *Pè* or *Pastè*, depending on the denomination of the church. Expressions such as *Mèsi anpil* (p. 30), *Ale tanpri* (p. 111) or *Di Mwen* (p. 171) appear with some frequency in the text contributing to both the portrayal of the informal speech of some characters in a credible way and the unconscious or semi-automatic nature of some of their responses.

One last socio-pragmatic use of code-switching that also emerges with a certain frequency in Danticat's novel is the inclusion of Creole words or phrases for emphatic purposes. Unlike the previous tokens, these sober expressions could come up in the mouths of both uneducated and highly learned characters alike. Thus, we hear the members of a gang called Baz Benin cheering rather crudely on Bernard Dorien after learning that an army officer stole his idea about a radio program in which clashing social factions would be confronted: "Tiye and his guys were chanting from their tables, 'Kraze bouda yo! Kraze bouda yo! Kick their asses! Kick their asses!' Their voices were so loud that Bernard could barely hear Max Junior anymore" (p. 71). Louise George, a popular radio journalist and part-time teacher, on her part, retorts furiously to Max Ardin, Sr., after he has allowed the mother of one of her students to slap her across the face: "'So this was a konplo,' she said, cutting him off. 'A plot to humiliate *me*?" (p. 142; italics in original). Depending on the situations, then, Creole may also come up in conversations between characters belonging to well-educated social groups.

Turning now to the more rhetorical or stylistic uses of code-switching in the novel, it must be said that these do not necessarily appear in the dialogued sections of the text, but can frequently turn up in the more "stream-of-consciousness style" passages of the book (Callahan, 2003, p. 12). Danticat is fully aware of the potential of sayings or popular proverbs to reflect important dimensions of the local culture in Ville Rose. Talking about recent U.S.-Latino fiction, Torres has explained that the inclusion of Spanish catchphrases in their texts allows the authors to "negotiate their relationships

with homelands, languages and transnational identifications” (2007, p. 76). Danticat could be said to be doing a similar exercise when she tells us, from Bernard’s perspective, about the restaurant that his parents keep in the treacherous slum of Cité Pendue:

The place was called Bè, Bernard’s parents’ nickname for him. Bè also meant “butter,” and Bernard’s mother liked to say when everyone asked her how she was doing that she was churning butter from water -m ap bat dlo pou m fè bè- which meant that she was always attempting the impossible, trying to make something worthwhile out of little or nothing. (p. 64)

Obviously, it is not just Bernard’s mother who feels this way about their destitute way of life in the novel. In the chapter “Starfish,” mostly told from the viewpoint of Louise George, the radio hostess, she tries to explain to a couple of uneducated parents (Nozias Faustin and Odile Dèsir) that their educational limitations should not be a handicap in other spheres of their lives: “And she reminded them both of the well-known saying ‘Analfabèt pa bèt’ or ‘Illiterates are not stupid’” (p. 129). The inclusion of these more rhetorical instances of code-switching pursues very different goals, which may range from social criticism to ethnic pride.

Key Effects Sought by the Use of Code-Switching

As mentioned above, the use of code-switching in Danticat’s fiction may seek different purposes: credibility, criticism, alienation, ethnic solidarity, etc. Perhaps the effects that become most evident in the case of *Claire of the Sea Light* are, on the one hand, her success in constructing a microcosm similar to those created by Faulkner or García Márquez (cf. Casey, 2013; Tobar 2013) and, on the other, the great capacity she has to pull her readers into the interior lives of her characters to make us feel their short-lived joys and afflictions. Regarding the first of these skills, Tobar (2013) remarks that the deeper she takes us into the world of Ville Rose, the more impressed we are by her exhaustive knowledge of the place and its history. Here again the interpolation of a number of terms in the local language contributes to “tropicalize” her descriptions in English, since features like *Món Initil* (Useless Mountain) or *Anthère* Hill and Lighthouse (p. 10) are loaded with social and historical connotations that the reader only gradually becomes acquainted with through the text. Likewise, her in-depth knowledge of the local flora and fauna adds much beauty and an exotic flavor to some expository passages that in the hands of another could have resulted rather trite. Here is Claire, escaping from her father and Madame Gaëlle Cadet Lavaud, right after learning that her father is giving her away to the wealthy fabric vendor:

She ran through the alley [èpine] that snaked between the shacks, up to the coco de mer palms at the entrance of a path that led to the lighthouse. Her sandals became entangled in some ylang-ylang creepers that bordered the trail where sandstones turned to hill gravel, then

mountain rock. She was relieved when, at last, the trail curved and made an incline up toward Anthère [anther] Hill. (p. 230)

If code-switching does its job in terms of taking the reader into a distant microcosm -with its shacks, mansions, beaches, marketplaces, restaurants, schools, radio stations, jails, and so on- which, as some critics have argued, could well “stand for life in Haiti” (Germain, 2014, p. 215), nothing less can be said about its capacity to transport us into the minds and feelings of a very diverse set of characters. Despite the unsparing portrayal of a corrupt and violent society where almost all lives are at risk, there is a great deal of warmth and compassion in the way Danticat treats all her characters, who, regardless of their position, are striving for human connection in a cruel and unfair world. Claire’s mother, for instance, who is a poor woman working for the town’s undertaker by preparing the corpses for burial, offers her unconditional support to Madame Gaëlle when she realizes about the trials of her pregnancy: “Claire’s eyes were once again lowered, her shoulders slouched. ‘Fòk nou voye je youn sou lòt,’ she said before walking out. ‘We must look after each other’” (p. 54). Gestures like this are abundant throughout the novel, since it is clear that almost no character is free from the fears and anxieties that the precarious context constantly awakens in them. Even the members of the brutal gangs are sometimes seen to sympathize with the relatives of those who are in danger, like Bernard Dorien: “Piye had told his parents to stay calm. The case was a lamayòt, a vapor, he said. Nothing was going to stick. Give it a few more hours. Let it cool off” (p. 76).

Conclusion

The main object of this contribution has been to delve into the reasons that may explain Edwidge Danticat’s reliance on code-switching in her latest novel and to determine some of the effects that the inclusion of this resource intends to produce on her readers. We may conclude that Danticat’s use of code-switching derives, on the one hand, from issues of verisimilitude and credibility, but also from her own stylistic preferences. Some could argue that perhaps she is not taking too many risks in the use of this rhetorical resource, since most of her expressions in Creole come accompanied by a translation into English. This is probably the reason why some of her Haitian readership has looked upon her work with a certain degree of suspicion. However, it is also a fact that she manages to give foreign readers a sense of how the mother tongue still plays a significant role in the art of diasporic writers.

References

- Aparicio, F. (1994). On sub-versive signifiers: U.S. Latina/o writers tropicalize English. *American Literature*, 66(4), 795-801.
- Bellamy, M.R. (2012). More than hunter or prey: Duality and traumatic memory in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*. *MELUS: The Journal of the Society of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 37(1), 177-97.
- Callahan, L. (2004). *Spanish/English codeswitching in a written corpus*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Callahan, L. (2003). The role of register in Spanish-English codeswitching in prose. *Bilingual Review*, 27(1), 12-25.

The Use of Creole in *Claire of the Sea Light*

- Casey, E. (2013). Review: *Claire of the Sea Light* by Edwidge Danticat. *The Huffington Post: The Blog*, 9 September 2013. <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/ethan-casey/review-daire-of-the-sea-light-3870496.html?guccounter=1>
- Clifford, J. (1994). Diasporas. *Cultural Anthropology*, 9(3), 302-38.
- Counihan, C. (2012). Desiring diaspora: "Testing" the boundaries of national identity in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 37, 36-52.
- Danticat, E. (2013). *Claire of the Sea Light*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Germain, C. (2014). Review of *Claire of the Sea Light* by Edwidge Danticat. *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*, 3(2), 214-15.
- Ibarrola-Armenariz, A. (2010). The language of wounds and scars in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, A case study in trauma symptoms and the recovery process. *Journal of English Studies*, 8, 23-56.
- Kakutani, M. (2013). Where sorrow is as constant as the tides. *The New York Times*, 5 September 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/06/books/edwidge-danticats-novel-daire-of-the-sea-light.html>
- Keller, G. and R. Keller (1993). The literary language of United States Hispanics. In F. Lomelí (Ed.), *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Literature and Arts* (pp. 163-65). U. of Houston: Arte Público Press.
- Lipski, J. (1982). Spanish-English language switching in speech and literature: Theories and models. *Bilingual Review*, 9(3), 191-212.
- Nesbitt, N. (2010). Diasporic politics: Danticat's short works. In M. Munro (Ed.), *Edwidge Danticat: A Reader's Guide* (pp. 73-85). Charlottesville: University of Virginia.
- Safran, W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora*, 1(1), 83-99.
- Samway, P., SJ. (2003-04). A homeward journey: Edwidge Danticat's fictional landscapes, mind-scapes, genescapes, and signscapes in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. *The Journal of Southern Cultures*, 57(1), 75-83.
- Shamsie, K. (2013). Review of *Claire of the Sea Light* by Edwidge Danticat. *The Guardian*, 28 December 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/28/daire-sea-light-edwidge-danticat-review>
- Sontag, D. (2013). Island magic: Review of *Claire of the Sea Light* by Edwidge Danticat. *The New York Times*, 30 August 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/books/review/daire-of-the-sea-light-by-edwidge-danticat.html>
- Tobar, H. (2013). Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* brims with enchantments. *Los Angeles Times*, 23 August 2013. <http://artides.latimes.com/2013/aug/23/entertainment/la-ca-jc-edwidge-danticat-20130825>
- Torres, L. (2007). In the contact zone: Language, race, class, and nation. *MELUS: The Journal of the Society of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 32(1), 75-96.