
Haitians in the City: Two Modern-Day Trickster Tales

by

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1. The Haitian short story is a doubly neglected genre, first because of the marginality in which Haitian literature still is located, and second because mainstream French and Francophone literatures downplay the short story in favor of the novel -- in contrast to British, Russian, North American and Latin-American literatures, where the short story has always been considered a respectable genre. This neglect is a paradox, as the short story most resembles indigenous narrative traditions, while the novel is an imported, colonial, adapted Western genre. [1] In recent decades, however, Caribbean short story writers, and in particular Haitian short story writers, have been prolific. [2] Several dozen collections of short stories have been published during this time, and the 1999 appearance of the *Oxford Companion of Caribbean Short Stories* proves that the genre is well established. Actually, the Caribbean short story has a long history, and even famous novelists such as Alejo Carpentier, Maryse Condé and V.S. Naipaul have alternated novels and short stories. [3] The genre is also blossoming in the younger generation and these authors also switch between short stories and novels. Significantly, the *Oxford Companion* finishes with Edwidge Danticat's famous short story, "1937," which she developed into her latest novel to date, *The Farming of Bones* (1998).
2. But more striking for my purpose here is that female writers prefer the genre. The Haitian short story writer and critic Yanick Lahens is a case in point. She appreciates the intimate and communal aspects of the genre, as in her view, a novel requires an

individual readership whereas the short story directly addresses a group. Because of the short time needed to read a short story, one can easily "perform" it in front of an audience, as in the "veillées" or creole folktales evenings. This tradition goes on today in Port-au-Prince, where literary evenings are organized for authors to read from their poetry and/or short stories. For Lahens, not only does the short story appeal to people familiar with oral traditions (Saint-Eloy 107-8) but it also offers unique opportunities for writers. She considers it a very practical medium for representing elusive emotional states:

Each medium has its constraints and possibilities, and the author who wishes it is able to explore the expressivity proper to each of them. [. . .] For me, the short story lets me seize a fugitive, striking event or an emerging, blossoming emotion. It lets me capture them, catch them in flight[. . .] The short story fortuitously brings together the ideological and formal presuppositions of minimalism, but not at all in the confined space of minimalism. (my translation)

Chaque médium a ses contraintes et ses possibilités et le créateur qui le souhaite peut explorer l'expressivité propre à chacun d'eux. (...) Pour moi, la nouvelle me permet de saisir un événement fugace, frappant ou une émotion qui émerge, qui effleure. Elle me permet de les attraper, de les saisir au vol (...). La nouvelle convient davantage aux présupposés idéologiques et formels du minimalisme, mais n'est pas du tout l'espace obligé du minimalisme. (Saint-Eloy 107-108)

In an interview with Anne Marty, Lahens further explains, in quite ambiguous terms, her preference for the short story by voicing her problems with the novel:

A novel's equilibrium is that point of articulation that stops one from falling into a blind narcissism and from diluting oneself in grand examples and grand descriptions. The novel is a modern genre, and our societies are not yet very apt to conform to it, at least those who become Haitian authors, and women in particular. In effect, the novel needs a freedom of expression that flows only from a climate of political tolerance, from a respect for the rights of criticism and critique, from a pluralism of ideas and opinions. That equally presupposes that one may question certain life practices. Alas! We are still a very intolerant society, and compromised by our intelligentsia. (my translation)

L'équilibre d'un roman, c'est ce point d'articulation qui fait qu'on ne tombe pas dans un narcissisme aveugle, et qu'on ne se dilue ni dans les grandes démonstrations, ni dans les grandes descriptions. Le roman, c'est un genre moderne, et nos sociétés ne sont pas encore très aptes à l'accueillir, du moins celui qui vient des auteurs haïtiens, et femmes de surcroît. En effet, il nécessite une telle liberté d'expression qu'il ne peut s'épanouir que dans un climat de tolérance politique, dans le respect du droit à la critique, dans le pluralisme des idées et des opinions. Cela suppose également qu'on soit apte à remettre en question certaines pratiques de vie. Hélas! nous sommes encore une société très intolérante, y compris parmi notre intelligentsia.

35A number of elements explain the pitfalls for Haitian women novelists: the absence of freedom of speech, the absence of a tradition, and what Edouard Glissant repeatedly

stresses in his *Caribbean Discourse*: "the irruption into modernity" (146). Lahens refers to the difficult conditions in which her writing has to take form, and which the sad events of Haiti's recent history confirm once more. The *lavalas* party of President Aristide has perpetrated some of the same brutal, terrifying acts as the "presidents-for-life," François and Jean-Claude Duvalier. The *dechoukaj* ("uprooting," such as the destruction of houses, offices, radio-stations) is widespread and the revenge can be pitiless. It is striking how Lahens stays cautious when she addresses these issues, using the plural "nos sociétés" when she talks about Haitian society, as if it were an example for what happens in the other Caribbean islands. There is no doubt that political turmoil and economical despair, alongside other problems, are the most dreadful in this country, intensified with its centuries-old troublesome relations with the neighbor, the Dominican Republic. More importantly, she links the genre to the impasses and general chaos, to the dictatorial regime in her country, a republic where writers and non-writers alike are oppressed, and where the upper class lacks tolerance, especially towards female intellectuals. Women, she concludes, still suffer from neglect and disdain in a society in which men rule, even if women are the "poto mitan" in family life and beyond.

67. In fact, Lahens' opinion is confirmed by another pioneer in Haitian's women literature. Paulette Pujol-Oriol rightly emphasized the strong correlation between the genre and women's education in Haitian society, an idea that Edwidge Danticat also highlighted in her short story collection, *Krik? Krak!* (see Gyssels 1996):

[L]es femmes-écrivains cannot live from their writing. (Pujol-Oriol 86)

Writing is considered a male activity and a woman should not make public her feelings: that's how Haitian society censors female voices. Lahens also underscores the modesty associated with the short story, contrasting it with ambitious projects of writing a "roman à thèse" or a "roman à clé." In these respects, one can understand why the majority of female Haitian authors are short story writers.

68. In this article, I want to demonstrate how two Haitian women writers have slipped out from under these societal constraints. I will look first at "A Plate of Lentils" by a relatively neglected author, Thérèse Colimon-Hall (Haiti, 1928 - 1998) [4] Originally published in Haiti in 1979, it has been translated into English by two different persons, and under two different titles: I will use here the English translation published in 1992 in *Callaloo*, only referring once to Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's version, entitled "A Pottage of Lentils," published in *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam* (1991). The second short story is "New York Day Women" by acclaimed writer Edwidge Danticat (1967-), which is included in her English-language short story collection *Krik? Krak!* (1995). As befits the liminal and limited position of Haitian women writers 'at home,' both stories' deal with the Haitian diaspora: how it is lived by those who stay behind, and by those who decide to move abroad ("sauter l'océan").
69. These short stories share many common elements. First, they borrow from different literary traditions, mixing high (classical, biblical) literature and the so-called fairy- or folk-tale tradition. Both employ the archetypal trickster motif of the Creole folktale and the theme of "masquerade," of showing oneself different from what one really is, in order to represent the problems first- and second-generation Haitians face in America. In fact, this theme of "doubleness" is and remains very important in all Black writing, as W.E.B. DuBois' 1903 analyses of 'double consciousness' attest. In the same way as Aimé Césaire revises "des contes" [folktales] in his poetry (Pestre de Almeida

103), Colimon-Hall and Danticat base their narratives on popular, indigenous cultural patterns. Instead of using linear logic to shape a complete narrative with answers to all the questions raised by the short story, the writers deliberately leave holes in the narrative. Second, the stories are "speakerly texts" to use Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s term for a deliberate confusion of narrative voices and a frequent use of free indirect discourse. In Colimon-Hall's story, the reader does not always know who is speaking. In Danticat's story, the mother speaks directly *to* the daughter expressing her fear, frustrations, disappointment, while the daughter speaks to us *about* her mother, and the uneasiness she feels when she observes her mother. During the narrative, the two voices never reply to each other, so we have two monologues rather than a dialogue. Third, the "conteur" or "conteuse" is first and foremost an observer. S/he stays outside the story: this produces an elusiveness, an implicitness which might puzzle the reader. Indeed, both short stories have an open end.

98. Together, the stories offer a contrastive view of Haitian migrants, as seen before (Colimon-Hall) and after (Danticat) the departure from the island, exploiting the tension between being here (Haiti) and there (New York). They thus explore the "ethnic passages" in twentieth- (and now twenty-first-) century America. Those who dream about leaving the Caribbean, as well as those who are already in the States, are forced to re-negotiate their identity. These short stories reveal "the double bind" that authors who aim to be spokeswomen for their people, *talking for* people who don't have access to the media, undergo when they decide to talk about the "underground" world of emigration. [5]



99. In order to explore the hot topic of Haitian migration, Colimon-Hall focusses directly on the apparent heterogeneity of the group of passengers for "Pan American World Airways Flight 427 to Miami and New York." Everybody wants to leave the island as soon as possible, but nobody wants to explain why. As individual motives for fleeing the island are hidden, the migrants resemble each other in that they must be tricky, inventive pretenders:

Those who were hungry, those who had enough, those who had nothing, those who had too much, those who had sold themselves, those who owned things to sell and were going to offer them to the whites, in their own land; those who had stolen money in order to "steal away" in order, at last, to be able to "steal home plate" -- over there. (585)

Haitian immigrants wear masks from the very moment of their departure; they are compelled to conceal their plans.

100. Yet however suspicious this group of travellers may be, the narrator portrays their common hope that, once their destination is reached, they will rebuild a Haitian community around a "plate of lentils." In *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam's* translation,

not only does the title becomes "A Pottage of Lentils," but Paravisini-Gebert also adds a biblical exergue as "paratexte." Both elements then make clear the biblical framing of the story, since the very "moral" has become proverbial: "to give up one's birthright for a pottage of lentils." Also, Colimon-Hall's story is introduced here by *Genesis*, 25:29-34:

And Jacob was making pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint:

And Esau said to Jacob, "Feed me, I pray thee, with pottage, for I am faint . . .

And Jacob said, "Sell me this day thy birthright."

And Esau said, "Swear to me this day, " and he swore unto him, and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.

Then Jacob gave Esau bread and a pottage of lentils.

126. These "paratextual" elements, added by the translator, suggests the reader will interpret the story as a modern-day "parable" of hunger and deprivation which pushes people to give up almost everything, which forces whole communities to migrate (think of the Irish starving families coming to New York in the 19th century). Moreover, African writers in Diaspora seem to favour the process of unveiling biblical resonances: Danticat, as well as African-American writer Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, 1987), also inserts a paragraph from the book of *Judges* (12:4-6), to make clear that *The Farming of Bones*, the massacre of thousands of Haitian sugarcane cutters in 1937 at the Dominican border under the reign of Trujillo, all started as a Shibboleth story (see Gyssels 2000). As Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert rightly states in her Introduction to the collection, that "next to the oral/folk/fairy tale tradition, the Bible is perhaps the only other narrative universally familiar to the Caribbean audience" (xxi). But other heritages slip into Colimon's text.
127. The narrator stresses the passengers' necessary secrecy by referring to a famous tale by another French "conteur," Jean de La Fontaine:

Many had gone, that very morning, to report to their offices or workshops, to punch in, going about their work quietly so that nobody would know that they were leaving before the last minute (everyone knows that, before getting on the place, the departure remains uncertain, and the smallest hitch can prevent the fabulous takeoff). Therefore, mum's the words, and lips are sealed until the critical moment. *Otherwise, goodbye calf, cow, pig, and brood.* (585)

The last sentence makes a deliberate disruption in an already "speakerly text": the orality is highlighted by an intertextual play to one of the most popular, yet classic French authors, La Fontaine and his tale "La laitière et le pot au lait" ("The milkmaid and the pot of milk"). La Fontaine's tales have been learned by heart by generations of Haitians who went through the French school system and who, as a consequence, paid tribute to the metropolitan's prestigious culture and literature. The tales' success is proven by the fact that Georges Sylvain translated them into the second language of the Republic, creole (*Cric? Crac! Fables de la Fontaine Racontées par un montagnard*,

1901). La Fontaine's moral lessons have become proverbial (e.g., one should not triumph too soon) and they remain important today.

151. After Colimon-Hall's description of the airport as a gathering place for passengers who behave cunningly, a transit zone for individuals who take care not to reveal their real intentions and who do not form a community, the narrator takes us back to the past, to elements that should explain this first wave of migration to the States. She introduces us to the Labédoyère family, a patronym that goes back to French Napoleonic history. [6] Platon Labédoyère seems to await the recovery of illusive property, and the former wealth of the family is made clear through descriptions of their neighborhood:

Of all the districts of Port-au-Prince, Bolosse is one of those with the most ephemeral glory. Toward the end of the century, several big bourgeois, having been granted comfortable incomes by politics or business, two great providers, were tempted by this suburb that offered the splendour of the mountain as well as those of the sea. Here and there, among the little people of the neighborhood, they built hefty manors and country palaces with high turrets. These places all symbolized opulence and well being. Even today, looking at what remains of those old dwellings, you can easily imagine their former pomp; you think you hear the gallop of horses returning to the stables and the revived echoes of the barbecues under the flowering arcades. (586)

Yet the narrator emphasizes the ruin of the Bolosse quarter: "The diasappointed bourgeoisie withdrew and the insolently beautiful dwellings emptied little by little. [. . . Only] the "penniless descendents of those wealthy families remained" (587). A reader familiar with Haitian literature might expect here allusions to the political impasses, the multiple "coup d'états," bombings, and conspiracies during the Duvalier regime to be the source of the family's financial crisis and decline. But in the hermetic discourse that can characterize a speakerly text, the narrator withholds such information. We can only guess that it happens somewhere in the late sixties, when Pan-American Airlines was making regular flights from Haiti to the States. By inviting readers to complete the narrative, to supply missing background, the narrator cajoles us into "participative reading" (Toni Morrison). For example, a probable narrative completion would situate the aristocratic Platon Labédoyère (negatively portrayed as an irresponsible father), his wife and eight children within the Haitian light-skinned bourgeoisie who lived in a part of the city that developed during American rule (1915-1934). The area lost its prestige and "lustre" when François Duvalier came to power in 1957, imposing "noirist" ideology which he and Lorimer Denis had proclaimed in part to disempower the mulatto class, thereby generating a first wave of Haitian migration.

152. Although the mulatto class appears to be under siege, its traditional values remain strong. "Sacrifice, Abnegation, Devotion, Submissiveness, Dignity" (588) are the values strongly recommended by mother Aline to her daughters, nicknamed the "Three Graces." This female attitude towards "déveine" (bad fortune), this strong resistance to the point of martyrdom, has been portrayed by many French-Caribbean authors. Patrick Chamoiseau and Edouard Glissant, for instance, pay tribute to these strong women, a direct consequence of the "matrifocal structure" of Caribbean families. Whereas the Labédoyère family struggles with financial problems and worse, starvation, the girls behave as the proud, dignified daughters, their mother's password being: "death before humiliation."

174. As in popular folktales, usually a problematic situation would remained unchanged if not, one day, something unpredictable happened. A letter from NYC arrives, containing a proposal for marriage by one of family's neighbours who had arrived in the States years ago, and who had not been worth consideration because of his inferior socio-racial status. "Simon, Lormelise's son, really!" registers the mother's disbelief when she hears about the marriage offer. She at first firmly protests against a suitor who, under normal circumstances, would be unworthy of one of her daughters, probably because of his skin color and social background. The reason that Simon makes this offer is explained in his letter to the youngest of the Three Graces. He definitely wants to marry a Haitian woman, even if American women (colored or not) are easier to date, less complicated when it comes to "courtship":

Anyway, he said, after these ten years of harsh life, he had suddenly felt alone, yes, alone. There was no question of getting involved with one of those girls he met in New York! American women are ideal for short love affairs, because they have no problems. *Anyway*, for marriage he absolutely had to turn to his homeland." (589; italicized words are in English in the original)

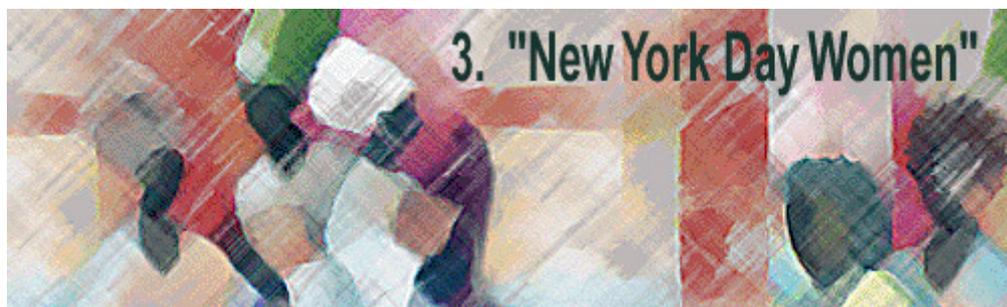
175. This passage reveals the barrier between Haitian men and non-Haitian women when it comes to courtship and marriage. The two elements make up a bilingual discourse in which the narrator's voice mimics this new speech infiltrated by the foreign language, English. For Hoffmann, "Colimon underscores the popularity of English. The significant thing is that Colimon has not felt the need to translate or even to explain the "bizarre sounding" English words for her Haitian readers" (85). Colimon-Hall is making up a "speakerly text" in which she mocks an Americanized Haitian who tries to impress his narratee by using evident words which do not need translation, and who, unconsciously, does not make a very nice compliment on Haitian women, when he pretends American women do not have problems! In fact, it might be more likely that Simon failed to date a non-Haitian woman, [7] masking through bilingualism his discomfort and embarrassment about telling the truth. He tries to display a successful Americanization, but does not at all impress the younger daughter Euphrosyne, who is already engaged to another man. That's the point where the trickster element comes in.

176. Aglaé, the eldest and most intelligent of the Three Graces, spins the plan of tricking Simon. Her first name is well chosen: although French, it resonates with vodou -- in particular, with it near-rhyme Agwé, the "loa" (represented by a boat) who protects fishermen and those who travel the sea. Aglaé convinces her sisters and parents that she will cross the sea to new shores in order to take Euphrosyne's place in New York. Like an Anancy, or Compè Lapin, she will switch identities and, as in most of these oral stories, she ultimately conquers. She understands that she and her whole family can profit from Simon. Promising a furnished apartment and a car, he is their key to success: "offering travel, and salvation. And all in exchange for a trifle, a little 'yes'" (590). By sending money to the family regularly, he will permit them, one by one, to follow. The arranged marriage will be the start of a whole network of semi-legal immigration to New York City. Aglaé decides to sacrifice "son droit d'aînesse" [right of sisterly age priority] in exchange for "un plat de lentilles." Like Esau, she will give up the honourable position of "first born," eldest in the family: if normally the eldest sister marries before the youngest, here the situation is ironically reversed, since the dark-skinned Simon asks the most beautiful, youngest of the Three Graces. So in other words, Aglaé does not really give up her "right of sisterly age priority," since the truth

is that no one was courting her at all. This cunning woman does not consider herself a victim: "she did not want to be led to the stake" (586). Thus Colimon-Hall's women are not victims, as Myriam Chancey rightly claims (7). Instead, the one who believes he is in control, Simon, is in fact the victim of cunning behavior, and rendered powerless.

195. The title, "A Plate of Lentils," is not only a culinary description which stresses the importance of "ethnic" food for minorities. The brown of the lentils refers in my eyes to the "mulatto" color and thus to the cult of superiority of the Haitian "élite" who, still today, often despise darker-skinned individuals. A dark-skinned Haitian man usually does not have the insolence to ask to marry a light, "lentil-brown" woman. He can only do so when he has wealth and fortune to offer. Indeed, the sisters' striking resemblance to each other -- like lentils on a plate -- offers the key to the trickster's "success." Shared color and shape make the sisters indistinguishable, allowing the eldest to replace her younger sister and fool an American Haitian who will not recognize the woman he dates because she has the "same complexion, the face was shaped the same, the lips, the eyes. The rest, a less slender waist, shorter hair, could be taken care of" (591). This man who made it in the American metropole is, in spite of his material success, still the object of mockery in the Labédoyère family: he receives three biblical nicknames: "Simon, the Leper, Simon the Cyrenean, Simon Peter" (591), who will turn out to be the family's gateway to heaven: "Goodbye misery! A regular, substantial check, useful gifts sent to all, and then, from year by year, the departure of the others to Eldorado. It was salvation" (591).

196. Aglaé leaves the island forever, using her sister's passport. Yet, it remains unclear whether the hoax will work or not: "Afterwords, well, afterwords she would see. . . . If the hoax should ever been discovered, after the consummation of the marriage, well, than she would see" (593). The immediacy of leaving the "damned" place is primordial: the only thing that matters is a safe arrival in the new metropole, and the sisters do not bother how this man might feel if, one day, he finds out about the tricks used on him. Glissant has explained how sudden changes in rhythm are part of the versatile character of the Creole folktale, the structuring principle of the folklore narrative (84). The unpredictable, even illogical shifts in Caribbean tales seem as if they are intended to deliberately mislead the audience, contributing to their speakerly nature. Our own questions are cut off by the call "Pan American World Airways flight 427 to Miami and New York will be departing. . . . All passengers are requested to board" (593). With this announcement, we embark upon the second short story, which deals with Haitians who have moved to the States.



197. "New York Day Women," the eighth story in *Krik? Krac!*, elliptically records the lives of a Haitian immigrant woman and her Americanized daughter, both of whom live in New York City. Like "A Plate of Lentils," Danticat's work also uses storytelling to hide painful truths, employs an elusive and distanced narrative perspective, and shows a debt to Haitian folklore and Creole tales. Moreover, Danticat also displays the inherent

doubleness and complex ambiguity in the attitude of the postcolonial, Haitian individual. The important idea of doubles and duality, of double standards for Haitian women and the difficult identification and mirroring process of Haitian children living with their parents, is tied to "marassa" or twin-symbolism, which is, in my opinion, a key to understanding all of Danticat's writing. In vodou, twins are seen as exceptionally powerful, representing the doubling integral to the crossroads between the spiritual and the mundane worlds and, thus, the mysteries of the dual reality in which we all reside; living or dead, twins must be 'served' with special care so that they exercise their power in beneficent rather than harmful ways. Metaphorically, they can be seen as incarnations of the ambiguities of Haitian histories and identities, past and future, and utilizing a twinned and twinning structure allows Danticat to explore and unveil resemblances and differences between persons and situations.

213. For example, "New York Day Women" is doubled with "Night Women," the fourth story in *Krik? Krac!*. "Night Women" features a Haitian immigrant mother who hides from her son the fact that she works as a prostitute. She receives strangers in her little flat but by telling her son stories, she spares him the odd reality:

Should my son wake up, I have prepared my fabrication. One day, he will grow too old to be told that a wandering man is a mirage and naked flesh is a dream. I will tell him that his father has come, that an angel brought him back from heaven for a while." (88)

By opposing "New York Day Women" to "Night Woman", Danticat displays some of the puzzling convergences in behavior between Haitian mothers and their children when it comes to work and adapt in this new context of Haitian lives and lifestyles in America.

214. If "Night Women" refers to the subaltern world of prostitution and illegal jobs, "New York Day Women" ostensibly means "women who work during the day to make a living," implying membership in the cheap labour force of (il)legal workers who fulfill difficult, badly paid jobs in global economies. More specifically, a day woman reads here as the uncertain and underpaid housekeeper ("da" or "gouvernante"), or childkeeper: "Une femme à la journée" is the black domestic servant who works in white families in North American and European cities, as do several fictional mothers in Danticat's stories (see also "Between the Pool and the Gardenias", in the same collection). Yet, as the plural in the title suggests, the daughter with a white-collar job may be as much of a day woman as her mother. This doubling is redoubled by the pairing with "Night Women," a pairing that implies that gender and age influence the success of doubleness and dissimulation, as the night woman can lie to her young son but it is the day woman's adult daughter who surreptitiously follows her mother and discovers some of her 'secrets.'
215. "New York Day Women" recounts how the daughter secretly follows her poor 59-year-old mother as she wanders through a part of the city that the daughter had believed to be unfamiliar to her. In so doing, she discovers previously unknown things, such as her mother's enjoyment of window-shopping. The fact that her mother gazes at luxury goods simply astonishes the daughter, but that she admires 'ethnic' clothing draws the daughter into the complexities of her mother's negotiations of the immigrant experience. The daughter notes, "I can tell that she is looking at an African print dress, contemplating my size" (149). This African dress is a first element of the complex identity-construction, in that it neither corresponds to secure "Haitianness" of first-

generation Haitian immigrants nor to the "Americanness" of the second- and third-generation, who turn to typical American clothing styles (t-shirts and sneakers, baseball pullovers and jeans). The spying daughter is bothered when she sees her mother ready to purchase an African dress for her: "I think to myself, Please Ma, don't buy it"(149). The mother also tries out, as a way of agreement between competing identities, a mixed or "creolized" clothing style: "sew[ing] lace collars on [her] company soft-ball T-shirt" (154), which the daughter does not want to wear.

228. The daughter tracks her mother as she drifts through Midtown New York on her way to Central Park. The amazement and even adventure experienced by the mother are puzzling for the daughter who apparently considers herself to be a real New Yorker. Thus, in a sense, the mother spies on the city, and the daughter spies on the mother. The principle of spying brings us both to the folktale tradition and to the spiritual principles of vodou. Danticat on the one hand revises the Anancy tale, in which Anancy the spider, on her invisible thread, observes everything in the Master's House. On the other hand, she refers to the vodou concept of the protecting and caring "angel spirit" (*ti bon ange*) who can see everything from a distance, who can discover everything that its ward may be hiding, and who can guide and protect a beloved one. Danticat opposes two generations who don't speak with each other, who don't reply to each other (in fact, we can go as far as to assume that the mother speaks Creole, while the daughter speaks English). While the mother, in dual mode, registers the frustrations of Haitianness and the betrayals of her Americanized daughter, and expresses her "recommendations" about how to be educated and to behave as a Haitian daughter, the narrator discovers that this "mother of mine" is also interested in city life and American ways of eating, clothing, behaving. In the short story, symbolically, the narrator seems to resign to "subaltern speech" to avoid arguments which would only cause more pain. The daughter acts as the *ti bon ange* who, voiceless and invisible, can fly out of the body and stay near the person whom s/he wants to protect: [8]

I have never seen her in this kind of neighborhood, peering into Channel and Tiffany's and gawking at the jewels glowing in the Bulgari windows. My mother never shops outside Brooklyn. She has never seen the advertising office where I work. She is afraid of the subway, where you may meet those young black militant street preachers who curse black women for straightening their hair. (145)

229. The daughter's description makes tangible that her mother is "displaced" and "dispossessed" in New York City. This dislocation is translated through anxieties. For instance, the mother is very anxious about African-American "radicals" who blame Black women for straightening their hair: this second element in identity-affirmation shows the uncertainties of race, sex and class, since she would accept African dresses but is afraid of those African-Americans who claim the "Black is beautiful idea and who are proud of "bad" hair. The mother is intimidated by such "positive action" and searches desperately for identity markers that might help her to feel more at ease and at home in the city. The general discomfort has also to do with fear, a fear of young New Yorkers who might behave disrespectfully towards her, a fear of velocity and of modernity, of fast cars and bicycles, a fear of American food and beverages, a fear of difference:

Ifollow my mother, mesmerized by the many possibilities of her journey. Even in a flowered dress, she is lost in a sea of pinstripes and gray suits, high heels and elegant short skirts, Reebok sneakers, dashing from

building to building. (148)

240. Cut from social contact and friendship with other New Yorkers ("My mother, who won't go out to dinner with anyone" [148]), depending every day upon a phone call, the mother also feeds herself on "cheap food," as her daughter discovers with some indignation, since her mother pretends to abhor American beverages and "junk food":

This mother of mine, she stops at another hot-dog vendor's and buys a frankfurter that she eats on the street. I never knew that she ate frankfurters. With her blood pressure, she shouldn't eat anything with sodium. *She has to be careful with her heart, this day woman.* (150, my emphasis)

241. A third element in the re-negotiated cultural identity of Haitian immigrants in North American metropolises, food is for the younger generation a powerful tool to display their integration and adaptation to the American society, while the older generation proudly sticks to "plates of lentils" and "cow bones soup" (see another short story, "Caroline's Wedding"). Sociological research (see Zéphir 2001) has proven how Haitians of the second generation go undercover, hiding their "Haïtianité" in the public sphere, while only respecting at home those identity-features recognized as "Haitian." Language (which is not at stake here) might be another of those aspects, since young Haitians practice American English also in an attempt to avoid that they would be taken for (Creolophone/Francophone) Haitians, since "Haitianness" is still very negatively perceived because of the AIDS blood-label and, in the United States, the 'problem' of Haitian 'boat people' (see Zéphir 2001).
242. A "stranger in the city," afraid of its dazzling modernity (the subway, the messenger's bicycle), and of disrespectful and badly mannered young people, the mother dwells as a lost soul or zombi, strangely unaware of her own alienation and of her daughter's stealthy yet protective pursuit:

Realizing the ferocious pace of my pursuit, I stop against a wall to rest. My mother keeps on walking as though she owns the sidewalk under her feet.

As she heads toward the Plaza Hotel, a bicycle messenger swings so close to her that I want to dash forward and rescue her, but she stands dead in her tracks and lets him ride around her and then goes on. (149)

Even if she appears to need protection, however, the mother protects others -- in particular, the little white boy whom she cares for when his mother is busy, the little white boy who is the end point of her Manhattan wanderings. When the daughter makes this unpleasant discovery, complicated by what appears to be an intimate conspiracy between her mother and that child, she is struck by envy of the child's intimacy with her mother.

243. She seems to think that the close bond between herself and her mother has vanished forever. One reason may be that, due to her mother's 'day job,' the boy has been twinned with her, not only because they are now both 'children' of the mother but also because the mother's conspiracy with the boy involves food, a crucial part of all marassa rituals (it is a common belief that twins are always hungry, and therefore always rivals, as they competed for food in the womb; dead twins are served with sweets, and living twins must be given the exact same amounts of food). Another

reason for the daughters jealousy leads to another issue of identity-construction and of generational clash, namely schooling: the mother cannot follow her daughter's socialisation process through the education system, because she educates the children of white New Yorkers. This is a wound in the daughter's heart. She feels frustrated about her mother's absences at school gatherings: "My Mother, who never went to any of my Parent-Teacher Association meetings when I was in school" (154). Instead, her mother is part of a group of older Haitian women who raise white children; when the women gather, they give the impression that they are a Third World Parent-Teacher Association (152).

250. The story unfolds two totally different lives in the same city; mother and daughter live in separate but doubled worlds. We feel the huge loneliness of the mother who, besides some rare contacts with other, older Haitian immigrants, and the company of her taxi-driver husband, is alone. This is the stunning reality of Caribbean diaspora today: Hispanophone, Francophone and Anglophone immigrants all separated, "divided among themselves by national origin and island loyalties; separated from African Americans by their cultural practices and, often, by their binational identities, and excluded from dominant White society by the North American color line that sees only distinctions of black and white" (Buff 613). Whereas the daughter feels at home, the mother, confined to her poor flat in Brooklyn, considers herself a "bird of passage" (Zéphir 2001), i.e. temporarily relocated to the States, even if it is obvious that she cannot travel back, or that she would only face new (and old) problems, once back home. She indeed would have "many graves to kiss. Many graves to kiss" (151).

251. While the mother is unable to adapt and acculturate, the daughter relegates Haitian culture almost to a state of oblivion. The mother clutches at her "roots" and makes the daughter embarrassed and ashamed. In a shock of recognition, the daughter goes through a "dédoublement": her mother becomes the mirror of so many other displaced persons in the streets of New York, and who are in turn watched, gazed at, perceived as strangers in the city. Anonymous old black people whom she happens to see in the streets are the parents of sons and daughters such as herself, and she goes so far as imagining tracking another woman whom she would mistake for her mother:

It occurs to me that perhaps one day I would chase an old woman down a street by mistake and that old woman would be somebody else's mother, who I would have mistaken for mine. (152)

The eventuality of mistaking another old lady for her own mother, the probability of confusion and amalgamation, inspires a change in her behavior towards these "unadaptated" individuals who stray through the city:

Tonight on the subway, I will get up and give my seat to a pregnant woman or a lady about Ma's age. (153)

252. Well aware that she is the object of devotion and infinite mother love, the daughter stays in retreat, but certain that she never wants to become her mother, refusing to be her mirror. The "mirror and mothering" process resolves into a failure, hence the daughter's silence. Yet her silent observations make us complicitous in pitying her mother's appearance and in denying resemblance: "this mother of mine" has "lost three more molars to the dentist last week" (146-47) and wears "her bathrobe, with pieces of newspapers twisted like rollers in her hair" (145). The emphasis on outward appearance here leads to another aspect of the mother's duality and profound

ambivalence towards the American way of living and thinking. She rightfully dreams of a bright future for her daughter, but she employs traditional gender values, thinking that her daughter's beauty ("pretty enough to be a stewardess" [150]) should pave the way to a better life. Using a different set of values, the daughter, unable to identify any longer with typical Haitian features and with her mother, renounces another female "rite of passage," maternity and mothering. While the mother hopes she will have grandchildren, the daughter accomplishes her "wholeness" through her career. We suspect that this 'wholeness' is an illusion because she has not come to terms with the mirror that is her mother. She alludes to the problematic paradox of seeing-and-not-seeing via anxiety and questioning: following her mother, she is afraid that "she might see her" (150), but then finally asks herself: "Would Ma have said hello had she been the one to see me first?" (152)

256. How do we have to read the daughter's reaction to her mother's errancy through the city? The daughter's reaction to her mother -- this strange cocktail of respect and shame -- is finally explained through a Creole proverb: "shame is heavier than a hundred bags of salt" (150). In Caribbean societies, in Creole cultures, "respect" for one's parents is mandatory. The daughter's ambivalence is self-canceling, as she wants her mother to keep her pride and dignity, but if she criticizes her she will add to the older woman's painful sense of dislocation. Yet the mother can read her daughter's ambivalence: "I don't want to make you ashamed of this day woman" (150), she says, in preface to the 'salt and shame' proverb.
257. We can understand her statements in a variety of interconnected ways. First, she is aware of her displacement and marginality in American society. She is conscious about the burden her 'Haitianness' may place on her assimilated daughter, and hopes to alleviate it. Second, she makes this statement after discussing her high cholesterol and explaining that she can't eat salt for health reasons. In other words, she seems to pledge that she will sacrifice herself if she can spare her daughter embarrassment, a sacrifice here symbolized by giving up an important "épice" in the traditional Haitian kitchen, salt. Third, she may refer to the fact that salt has a symbolic, ritual value in vodou, [9] being the substance a zombi must take in in order to live again. We have seen that the mother lives like a zombi in the city, condemned to hard and 'soulless' (caring for white children while in some senses neglecting her own) work. Eating the salt-laden frankfurter (see 150) may 'awaken' her from her deadened state, helping her through the day, since the night is her relief and her protection. She strengthens her spirit even at the risk of her physical well-being. It may also be a small step toward adapting to American life and, thus, reducing the weight of her daughter's shame. In this way, the mother may be a cunning trickster too.



258. Both Colimon-Hall and Danticat borrow from different literary traditions, creolizing a century-old "indigenous" narrative genre to give insight into the Caribbean postcolonial and diasporic condition today. Both condemn a society which forces its

members to seek fulfilment abroad (Colimon-Hall explicitly, Danticat implicitly), and they deconstruct the "idyllic vision" of new life in the United States. Colimon-Hall dismantles the Eldorado myth by exposing the dislocation, rampant inequality and racial prejudices Simon has to endure (Hoffmann 85). As diaspora and migration remain topics which are difficult to treat directly, both authors use a "forced poetics" (Glissant 120) characterized by deliberate opacity and strategic silence. They take care not to externalize feelings. Critics have repeatedly stressed how Danticat's short stories blur frontiers between facts and fiction, the real and the magic, the material and the spiritual. Feminist readings have purportedly pinpointed the psychological nuances in the portrayal of the mother/daughter bonding process. What has been unacknowledged is how Danticat weaves out of the fabric of a creole culture a modern-day trickster tale. She does so to emphasize a frequently unvoiced, hidden, painful truth: second- and third-generation Haitian immigrants (the daughter) choose to be less "ethnic," and grow into the "multiple identities" through which people negotiate a multi-ethnic and multicultural society. Interweaving proverbial and classical 'voices', spinning a dialogic web uniting new lives and old ones, Danticat and Colimon-Hall offer us trickster texts, revealing yet concealing the cunning of the characters, masking the turbulent emotions attending migration and resettlement with a neutral, matter-of-fact tone. When read as companion texts, "A Plate of Lentils" and "New York Day Women" comment eloquently, albeit elliptically, on the aspirations and defeats of the Haitian diaspora as seen and told by its arguably most vulnerable members, Haitian women.

Notes

1. As Kenneth Ramchand has claimed, "continuing research has led to the conclusion that the short story is the most indigenized of the literary forms introduced to the region by Western education. The traditions of storytelling that pre-existed literary arrivals were so entrenched that they were able to absorb the new without losing their own character, and were able to modify the new because they had their own qualities to bring to it" (366). [Back](#)
2. A commercial aspect might explain the proliferation of short stories all around the world nowadays, as people lack time to read long novels and publishers see a growing market in short fiction. Yet in France, editors consider the novel as the only accomplished, successful genre, as Naïm Kattan, a Jewish-Canadian francophone writer born in Baghdad, who published several short stories collections, could conclude from his own experience (interview in Brussels on Nov 23, 2001). [Back](#)
3. The first Dutch Caribbean literary work was a short story, "Mijn zuster, de negerin," translated as "My Sister, the Negro" (1955), by Cola Debrot from Curaçao. A recent example is Hans Vaders' *Tropische Winters* (2001), classified neither as a novel nor as a short story collection. Important for our interest is his report of the bloody events of Baby Doc's reign. [Back](#)
4. In her panorama of Haitian literature, Anne Marty does not mention Colimon-Hall and the same is true for Charles Arthur and Michael Dash in their *Libète, A Haiti Anthology* (1999). [Back](#)
5. "When individuals from genuinely illiterate or impoverished backgrounds become writers, they pass through or somehow short-circuit far more common and reliable forms of mobility, freely choosing the special kind of marginalization involved in becoming a writer. Typically, they are alienated from family and the friends of their youth[. . .] As writers in the making, they [. . .] cannot but take special note of the conventions of representing ethnicity within canonical and popular art, and they frequently undertake the study of 'our classic ethnic literature' before deciding

- whether and what to write" (Ferraro 9-10). [Back](#)
6. General Labédoyère (1786-1815) was charged with arresting Napoleon; instead, he joined him in Grenoble, a treason for which he was executed. [Back](#)
 7. "Haitians consider the American system of racial classification nefarious since it deprives them of a more elevated status. From being members of a privileged segment of Haitian society, they have involuntarily joined the ranks of America's most poorly regarded groups, namely the Blacks, with whom negative attributes have been traditionally associated. Therefore, bilingual Haitians seek strategies to remedy this situation which is, in their view, untenable. One such a strategy is to emphatically utilize a resource that is held in high esteem by Americans, their 'Frenchness'" (Zéphir 1997: 397-8). [Back](#)
 8. Other Haitian novels or novels with a Haitian setting use the image of the guardian spirit. Madison Smart-Bell invests his maroon character Riau in *All Souls' Rising* (1995) with the same magical power. [Back](#)
 9. This practice threads through many Black Diaspora texts, Toni Cade Bambara's *Salt Eaters* being just one example. [Back](#)
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