

## The Effective and the Controversial Uses of Code-Switching: Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* as Case Study<sup>1</sup>

Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract.** This article explores the different uses that Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat makes of code-switching in her last novel *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013). It also delves into the effects Danticat seeks to produce on her readers by the introduction of Creole words and expressions. While the incorporation of the mother tongue is not new in Danticat's fiction, critics have paid little attention to the diverse purposes such a tongue purports to serve in her books and to the kind of responses it has aroused from her audience. Her uses of code-switching are observed to pursue various purposes: some purely mimetic, others more closely related to her stylistic ambitions, and still others out of motivations that may be deemed debatable, as they pertain to the "exoticization" of her homeland. Ultimately, the use of code-switching in *Claire of the Sea Light* should be viewed as one of the most effective strategies that diasporic writers envisage to satisfy a number of important socio-pragmatic and rhetorical functions that are usually expected in ethnic fiction. These strategies also aim to guide the (mainstream) readers' affective responses to their work in the way(s) "minority" authors believe best suit their aesthetic and ethical goals.

**Keywords:** Code-switching and its functions, mimetic and stylistic uses, diasporic discourse, Edwidge Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*.

[es] Los usos eficaces y los controvertidos del cambio de idioma: *Claire of the Sea Light* de Edwidge Danticat como estudio de caso

**Resumen.** El presente artículo indaga en los distintos usos que la escritora haitiana-americana Edwidge Danticat hace del cambio de idioma (code-switching) en su última novela *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013). También considera los efectos que intenta producir en sus lectores en base al uso de términos y expresiones en criollo (Creole). Aunque la utilización de su lengua materna ha sido una constante en la obra de Danticat, hasta ahora se ha prestado poca atención a las diversas funciones que desempeña en sus novelas y a las respuestas que suele generar entre sus lectores. Su uso del cambio de idioma responde a varias razones: algunas puramente miméticas, otras más estrechamente ligadas a sus aspiraciones estilísticas y otras que se podrían considerar más controvertidas al contribuir a cierta "exotización" de su tierra natal. En último término, la utilización del cambio de idioma en *Claire of the Sea Light* debe entenderse como una estrategia de ficción importante que los escritores diaspóricos emplean tanto para satisfacer una serie de funciones socio-pragmáticas y retóricas típicas de las literaturas étnicas como para guiar las respuestas afectivas de los lectores de acuerdo a sus objetivos éticos y estéticos.

**Palabras clave:** Cambio de idioma y sus funciones; usos miméticos y estilísticos; discurso diaspórico; Edwidge Danticat; *Claire of the Sea Light*.

**Contents.** 1. Introduction: On Diasporic Writing. 2. Mimetic and Stylistic Uses of Code-Switching in *Claire*. 3. Authentic vs. Controversial Effects of *Claire*. 4. Concluding Remarks: Both Effective and Debatable Outcomes.

**How to cite this article:** Ibarrola-Armendariz, A. (2020) The Effective and the Controversial Uses of Code-Switching: Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* as Case Study, in *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 28, 35-43.

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this article was originally presented in the 4<sup>th</sup> International Colloquium on Languages, Cultures, Identity in Schools and Society held in Soria the first week of July 2018. I want to express my gratitude to co-panelists Stephen Dougherty and Ashma Shamail for their illuminating comments on my presentation. The research carried out to write this article has been funded by the Basque Government (Project Code: IT1224-19).

<sup>2</sup> Department of Modern Languages and Basque Studies, University of Deusto.  
ORCID: 0000-0001-9168-4679  
E-mail: aitor.ibarrola@deusto.es

Although boundary-maintenance and the preservation of identity are ordinarily emphasized, a strong counter-current emphasizes hybridity, fluidity, creolization and syncretism.

Rogers Brubaker, "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora"

Haiti is and will always be one of the two places, the United States being the other, that I call home. Haiti is where I was born and Haiti was my first home. I am like most Haitians living with my feet in both worlds.

Edwidge Danticat in Opal P. Adisa, "Up Close and Personal: Edwidge Danticat on Haitian Identity..."

## 1. Introduction: On Diasporic Writing

A significant number of readers of Edwidge Danticat's last novel, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), have noted that some of the main strengths of the book are its accomplished hypnotic prose style, able to catch the most recondite agonies and yearnings of her characters, and its forthright realism wherein the author represents the social and economic woes buffeting her native country (Kakutani 2013; Casey 2013; Shamsie 2013). This curious blend of highly painful realities and the invisible bonds they generate among a varied and resilient set of characters are fairly common in the fiction of diasporic writers, and especially in that of the Caribbean diaspora (cf. Pamphile 2001). The story of *Claire* takes place in the fictional coastal town of Ville Rose—a setting already referred to in Danticat's earlier works *Krik? Krak!* and *The Dew Breaker*. This town is a microcosm in which the more peaceful and less congested past of Haiti is portrayed not long before the catastrophic earthquake hit the island in January 2010. The book opens with the sudden disappearance of the title character, Claire Limyè Lanmè Faustin, on the evening of her seventh birthday. This happens right after her father, a poor fisherman, has agreed to give Claire away to a local fabric vendor, Madame Gaëlle. He did so because he was extremely worried about failing to provide her daughter with a safe and secure 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: 17). Nevertheless, as is the case with other novels by Danticat, after the opening chapter, we lose sight of the main character and her father, Nozias, and are retrogressed ten years (cf. Munro 2010: 147-61). Then, we begin to learn about the intricate and troubled lives of half a dozen other residents of Ville Rose belonging to different social strata and who, like Claire, see their existence marked by shocking deaths and unexpected affections. Gradually, the reader realizes that the fable-like stories of other characters (the fabric vendor; a young aspiring journalist; a returned expatriate and his father, who is the headmaster of a local school; the town's mayor; a hostess of a popular radio program; and a few others) are somehow linked to Claire's situation and destiny. This nexus is achieved through strange patterns of loss and restitution that are "eventually knit together in surprising ways that seem utterly right" (cf. Charles 2013).

As is often the case with other writers of the Caribbean diaspora—such as Julia Alvarez, Cristina Garcia or Esmeralda Santiago—Danticat also shows conflicting attitudes towards her homeland. While there are countless passages in which the author is profoundly captivated by the natural and human landscapes on the island, these are interspersed with other sections in which she seems visibly outraged by the kind of destitution, corruption, and violence that have become endemic in her country of origin (Nesbitt 2010). Readers are impressed by the author's ability to assemble those elements of Ville Rose's history and topography that are significant to the life stories that they will be learning about in the novel. In this regard, the extreme precision with which those details are rendered in an almost photographic way is just astounding:

[...] Twenty miles south of the capital and crammed between a stretch of the most unpredictable waters of the Caribbean Sea and an eroded Haitian mountain range, the town had a flower-shaped perimeter that, from the mountains, looked like the unfurling petals of a massive tropical rose, so the major road connecting the town to the sea became the stem and was called Avenue Pied Rose or Stem Rose Avenue, with its many alleys and capillaries being called épines, or thorns. (Danticat 2013: 5)

Safran (1991), Clifford (1994), Sommer (2004), Brubaker (2005) and Hall (2019) would surely justify the 'jouissance' that Danticat and her readers derive from these detailed descriptions by referring to the distinctive attachment that diasporic writers show to their homeland as a source of identity, values, and solidarity (see Safran 1991: 83-85). Still, these highly nostalgic parts of the text already incorporate clear signs of the immense suffering that a poor and exposed country may inflict on its inhabitants: the sea is seen as "unpredictable", the land has been "eroded" and the narrow alleys off the main street are thought to be as dangerous as "thorns" (cf. Kakutani 2013). Most likely, it is Madame Gaëlle Cadet Lavaud, the fabric merchant who offers to adopt Claire earlier in the novel, who describes best how most of the characters feel about their native land: "There were too many memories in this town to bind her and make her want to flee at the same time" (153). In a similar vein, Danticat seems to be deeply affected by the same contradictory impulses towards her homeland. There is a strong urge to reconnect with the landscapes and the people of her childhood on the island, but there is also a drive to keep a certain distance—aesthetic, ethical, or otherwise—with respect to the insufferable pains that her land has experienced during her lifetime. Oliver-Rotger (2015) and Clifford have described these different

forms of community consciousness and affiliation as the “roots *and* routes” that help diasporic individuals to “maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference” (1994: 308).

But, of course, as specialists have noted (see Zacaïr 2010; Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010), there are multiple ways in which the diasporic artist may choose to represent this double (divergent) pull both toward and away from their motherland. In the case of Danticat, several scholars have stressed the significance that recollections of the landscapes and mindscapes, as well as of the myths and traditions in her homeland, hold in her fiction (see Counihan 2012; Samway 2003-04). In this regard, Safran maintains that diasporic individuals often feel compelled to “continue to relate, personally or vicariously,” to their country of origin, in a way that ostensibly feeds “their identity and solidarity” (1991: 84-85)—but also their writing. *Claire of the Sea Light* provides abundant evidence of the author’s determination to retrieve cultural and community practices that keep her connected to her homeland. Yet, most critics would agree that what is especially remarkable about Danticat’s fiction is the empathy and compassion she shows for the innumerable compatriots who, for different reasons, have endured loss and desolation on the island (cf. Germain 2014; Bellamy 2012; Ibarrola-Armendariz 2010). A fitting example to illustrate these feelings is a procession of a grieving crowd which comes up in the reflections of Bernard Dorien, a young man who dreams of having a program on Ville Rose’s local radio station (Radio Zòrèy). In the program, Bernard would interview common folk from his poverty-stricken part of town who have lost some limb or other to the fierce violence invariably present in the neighborhood:

[...] He would open *Chimé* [the program] with a discussion of how many people in Cité Pendue had lost arms, legs, or hands. He would go from limbs to souls—to the number of people who had lost siblings, parents, children, and friends. These were the real ghosts, he would say, the phantom limbs, phantom minds, phantom loves that haunted them because they were used, then abandoned, because they were out of choices, because they were poor. (82)

Obviously, most readers will find their attention caught by the sensibility that Bernard—and the author—demonstrate in portraying the suffering of many of the people in this particular slum and in the town at large. In Kakutani’s (2013) opinion, “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 generally been neglected in Danticat’s representation of Haiti’s local color and traumas is the introduction of Creole terms and expressions that do not merely “pepper” her gorgeous writing style (cf. Sontag 2013), but are also seen to fulfill a variety of other essential functions in her fiction. In the short passage quoted above, for instance, the use of “Chimé” (a Creole term for “chimeras or ghosts”) instead of just “Ghosts”—which is the heading of the chapter—is significant because it is the epithet employed by the natives to refer to the members of a gang. As readers are told, these gang members were mostly “street children” who had lost their parents and had been recruited by unscrupulous “business owners and politicians” to fill the ranks of their “popular organizations” (2013: 65). Evidently, becoming aware of these other ramifications of the meaning of “Chimé” is crucial to understand Bernard Dorien’s decision to choose this term as a suitable sobriquet for his imagined radio program. While the creation of a new diasporic discourse has been, according to Clifford, integral to the development of modern types of struggle and to the recovery of non-Western models of social life, he also admits that this process is not without its obstacles, for nation/language hegemonies and globalization forces keep putting a constant pressure on the process (cf. 1994: 328). The rest of this article dwells upon some of the key functions—some of them mimetic, but others stylistic, and even critical—that the use of Creole serves in Danticat’s novel. It will also consider the important role that the use of code-switching plays in her creation of what has been broadly called a “diasporic discourse” (cf. Nesbitt 2010). As will be argued below, Danticat’s use of code-switching should be viewed as fulfilling some effective socio-pragmatic and rhetorical functions in her “fiercely beautiful new novel” (Tobar 2013); however, there are other “exoticizing” effects she seems to achieve which may prove a bit more controversial and which will also be addressed in the last part of the essay.

## 2. Mimetic and Stylistic Uses of Code-Switching in *Claire*

A number of decades ago, it was often pointed out that the mixing or switching across different languages in natural speech or in writing was a conspicuous sign of a lack of required linguistic competence or even of illiteracy (see Timm 1975). Nevertheless, with the passing of time and the considerable advances—especially in the fields of bilingual education and minority languages—code-switching has mostly lost that derogatory treatment and attained a high level of acceptance and legitimacy instead (Jonsson 2005; Montes-Alcalá 2015). Often seen as a resource in the transition towards bilingualism, the stage of mixing elements from two different languages is deemed only natural (Torres 2007). Undoubtedly, the flowering of ethnic and postcolonial literatures around the globe since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century has contributed decisively to the recognition of mixed-language fictional texts as products that deserve the attention of experts in different disciplines (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010; Shafiq 2013). As Lipski argued in the early 1980s, “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: 191). Although it is true that until recently most studies of code-switching have covered either writers of

the Indian subcontinent (Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, and so on) or Caribbean authors whose mother tongue is usually Spanish (Junot Díaz or Giannina Braschi), many features that resonate with these artists' undertakings are also found in writers from other regions of the globe—Africa, Asia, Latin America, etc.—and who speak other languages. In this sense, Danticat has been viewed as “the bard of the Haitian diaspora” (Sontag 2013), since she is voicing the concerns and tribulations of many second- and 1.5-generation Haitian-Americans by straddling two remarkably different worlds and shuttling quite swiftly between two languages (Kaussen 2015). In order to do so, she usually anchors her novels firmly in specific locations and communities in her homeland. And, although her main language of communication is English, she provides them 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 and Keller 1993: 165-66). As Sankoff (1998) has remarked, although there is a degree of unpredictability about when instances of code-switching are going to happen, there are also certain situations that, for different reasons, seem to trigger the appearance of this linguistic resource or ‘license.’ Danticat shows that she has developed a sense of where the incorporation of terms or expressions in her mother tongue seems particularly effective, as her selection of those forms activate very singular meanings and intentions at a conceptual level.

Before proceeding to the actual analysis of some examples of code-switching in Danticat's latest novel, it is important to point out that most studies of this nature can be divided into two distinct categories. On the one hand, there are studies (Montes-Alcalá 2001; Callahan 2003) which try to determine whether literary code-switching in ethnic fiction responds to socio-pragmatic motivations similar to those to be found in natural bilingual speech. The idea in these contributions is to establish whether code-switching in those texts follows the same lexical and syntactic patterns that have been reported for oral code-switching, and whether a certain level of mimesis and authenticity has been achieved (Callahan 2004). Although, generally speaking, some degree of parity is to be expected between oral and written code-switching regarding the discursive functions they serve, some qualification will be needed in the case of Danticat's fiction. While it is true that she often uses the resource as an identity marker and, as Laura Callahan underlines, mostly in “informal and colloquial contexts”—rather than as part of a formal register—(2003: 14), it is more arguable that she is employing it to raise socio-political issues, which are quite common in Latino and other diasporic fiction. In this regard, Danticat's use of code-switching could be considered rather “modest,” since her introduction of Creole words and phrases is rather sparse and transparent, thus causing little difficulty to English monolingual readers (cf. Torres 2007: 78). On the other hand, there are other studies that have centered on how code-switching may be incorporated in literary works to achieve symbolic meanings and rhetorical effects (Jonsson 2005; Shafiq 2013). Curiously, although some editors and prescriptive linguists were initially reluctant to think of these more experimental uses as commendable, according to Aparicio, “a postmodern and transcreative approach would validate [them] as a positively creative innovation in literature” (1994: 797). The paragraphs that ensue will evince that Danticat is fond of introducing Creole terms whose meaning is fairly apparent from the context itself, but she may also occasionally incorporate some lexical items and popular phrases in her mother tongue that prove much more imaginative and artistically-oriented.

With regard to the tokens of code-switching that seem quite natural in oral exchanges in *Claire of the Sea Light* and, consequently, may primarily pursue a mimetic function, these appear to encompass mostly lexical items and linguistic routines that convey very precise meanings in the Haitian cultural context. Hence, terms such as *revenan* (“returned from the dead,” 16), *restavèk* (“household help,” 8) or *chèche lavi* (“looking for a livelihood,” 8-9) spring up recurrently throughout the novel, since they are essential to gaining a full understanding of the difficult relationship between Claire and her father, Nozias Faustin. Terms of this kind intend to capture aspects of daily life—and death—on the island that are heavily charged with social, cultural and, even, religious connotations that would not normally be reflected in their equivalent words in English (cf. Montes-Alcalá 2015: 274). Even if the hazards of childbirth, of being given away as a servant at a young age or of one's occupation—in this case, as a fisherman—may definitely happen in other places around the world, they seem to be such an integral part of the existence of certain segments of the population in Haiti that their use seems fully justified and natural. Furthermore, the reader is allowed to comprehend much better the fears that constantly disturb Claire, her father and Madame Gaëlle, as they are closely related to the socio-cultural connotations of the terms:

“A few moments earlier and it would have been me,” her father [Nozias] had told her [Claire] that very morning. And what would she have done if it had been him [who had been taken by the freak wave]? Where would she have gone if the fabric vendor had said no yet again? Who would have taken her in for the rest of her life? (2013: 216-17)

Similarly, common words of salutation, greeting, gratitude, and respect are generally consigned in Creole, since they do not interfere with the natural flow of the conversation. Important figures in Ville Rose such as the mayor—and undertaker—of the town, Albert Vincent, or the headmaster of the local school, Maxime Ardin, Sr., are addressed by other people as *Msyè*, rather than mister; and priests' names are preceded by *Pè* or *Pastè*, depending on the specific denomination of the church. Likewise, expressions such as *Mèsi anpil* (“Thank you,” 30), *Ale tanpri* (“Please go,” 111) or *Di Mwen* (“Tell me,” 171) appear with relative frequency in the text, contributing to both the rendition of the

informal speech of some characters in a more credible way and the unconscious or semi-automatic nature of some of their reactions and responses.

Besides those spontaneous words and expressions, another socio-pragmatic use of code-switching that also crops up quite regularly in Danticat's novel is the insertion of Creole words or phrases for emphatic purposes. Unlike the previous tokens—mostly used by lowbrow individuals—these sober expressions may be uttered by both uneducated and highly learned characters alike. So, we hear the members of a gang called Baz Benin cheering on Bernard Dorien rather crudely after they have learnt 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” (71). Belonging to the higher social strata Ville Rose, Louise George, a popular radio journalist and part-time teacher at École Ardin, also retorts furiously to her boss and lover, Max Ardin, Sr., using a Creole term. After Max has allowed the mother of one of her students, Odile Désir, to slap Louise in the face, she tells him: “‘So this was a konplo,’ she said, cutting him off. ‘A plot to humiliate *me*?’” (142; italics in original). Depending on the situations, Creole words may also spring up in conversations between characters belonging to well-educated social groups, such as Madame Gaëlle or Max Ardin, *père*, especially if they are interacting with characters from a lower stratum.

Moving on to the more rhetorical or stylistic modes of code-switching in the novel, it should be clarified that these do not necessarily appear in the dialogued parts of the text, but can often turn up in the more “stream-of-consciousness style” sections of the novel (Callahan 2003: 12). Danticat is especially aware of the potential of proverbs and popular sayings to capture important dimensions of the local culture in Ville Rose. While discussing the use of these resources in recent U.S.-Latino fiction, Torres notes that the incorporation of Spanish catchphrases in their texts allows the authors to establish and “negotiate their relationships with homelands, languages and transnational identifications” (2007: 76). Danticat is apparently doing a similar exercise when she introduces the readers, through Bernard's point of view, to the restaurant that his parents keep in the treacherous slum of Cité Pendue where they all live:

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. (64)

Naturally, it is not only Bernard's mother who feels this way about their destitute way of life in the city, but her sarcastic reply reverberates within the experiences of several other characters in the novel. As Torres maintains, the use of code-switching in this more rhetorical fashion is not just “metaphorical,” but helps to represent the type of reality—full of deprivation and dangers—in which important “segments of the population are living” (2007: 76).

In the chapter “Starfish,” which is mostly narrated from the perspective of Louise George, the faddish radio hostess, she tries to explain to a couple of uneducated parents (Nozias Faustin and Odile Dèsir) during an adult literacy class that their educational shortfalls 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’” (129). Probably, the fact that she herself had also been born into a family that had “absolutely nothing” and had experienced a number of childhood traumas “made her realize that she did care” (127) about these people living on the margins of the town's society. The inclusion of these more rhetorical and artistically-oriented instances of code-switching can be seen to pursue very different goals, which may range from various forms of social criticism to fine instances of ethnic or class pride and dignity. Claire's father, for example, when her mother, Claire Narcis, finally agrees to come to live with him in the opening chapter of the novel, avoids referring to her as “*fanm mwen*” (“my woman”) due to the unpleasant connotations of the term:

He called her “wife,” my wife, *madanm mwen*, when it should be really “woman,” except he didn't like the words “*fanm mwen*.” “My woman” sounded illicit to him, like a mistress. They were never officially married. Still, it wasn't hard to convince her to come to live with him. She was sleeping in one of the sheds in the market while every day she'd go to the funeral home [...] (19)

On the other hand, comic intentions are a bit more difficult to come across in the novel. Still, they sporadically surface, especially in relation to Albert Vincent, the town's mayor, and Louise George who, as a result of their notorious public posts and rather striking appearances, become the targets of the sarcastic comments from the more ordinary residents of Ville Rose:

[...] She [Louise] was such a mystery to most people in town that once, while attending Mass in the town cathedral, she heard a man who was sitting behind her say that it was rumored *ke li manje chat*, that she ate cats, which implied that she was also an alcoholic, a lonely lush who somehow kept herself under control only to tape her show. (126)

As was the case with the previous tokens of code-switching for stylistic purposes, in these more comically-oriented instances too, it is very common to have the characters reporting in direct or indirect quotations what other people—often belonging to the lower classes—have said about themselves or about others (see Montes-Alcalá 2015: 271). Louise George is particularly good at picking up these witty tidbits from the “teledyòl” (or “gossip mill,” 124) and the interviews she gives on her radio program. Although it is conspicuous that the general tone of the novel is by no means funny or amusing, these occasional humorous touches also provide some weight to the realism and to the degree of cultural specificity of the novel. No matter how vexing the circumstances of most of the characters usually are on the island, there are still brief moments of respite when their lives appear to take less somber hues.

### 3. Authentic vs. Controversial Effects of *Claire*

As mentioned in the section above, the use of code-switching in Danticat’s fiction may pursue a wide variety of different purposes: credibility, emphasis, criticism, ethnic pride, identification or alienation, and others. Perhaps the effects that become most apparent in the case of *Claire* are, on the one hand, her success in constructing a fictional microcosm similar to those famously created by Faulkner or García Márquez (cf. Casey 2013; Tobar 2013) and, on the other, the incredible ability she has to pull her readers into the interior lives of her characters so as to make us feel their short-lived joys and deep afflictions. With regard to the former of these skills, Hector Tobar (2013) observes that the further she takes us into the unique world of Ville Rose, the more impressed we are by her exhaustive understanding of the place and its history. In this sense, the interpolation of a number of terms in the local language contributes to “defamiliarize” her descriptions in English, since features such as “*Món Initi!*” (“Useless Mountain”) or “*Anthère Hill*” and Lighthouse (10) are fraught with social and historical connotations that the reader only gradually becomes acquainted with through the text. John Gumperz (1982) was one of the first scholars to draw our attention to these more contextual and situational conditions triggering code-switching, which do not always coincide with the linguistic ones. In this regard, Danticat’s in-depth knowledge of the local flora and fauna adds much specificity and an “exotic flavor” to some expository passages that in the hands of another writer could have resulted rather trite. She proves very proficient in exploiting those local-color features that are likely to captivate the readers’ imagination precisely because they are so singular to the landscapes and topography of the island. These spaces are conveniently used by the author to convey certain fears and emotions that the characters experience. In the short passage below, for example, Claire is anxiously breaking away from her father and Madame Gaëlle, 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. (230)

In the second chapter of the book, entitled “The Frogs,” which is narrated from Madame Gaëlle’s viewpoint, we are told how all the frogs in the region begin to mysteriously explode, hence causing the brooks and ponds to be covered in their multi-colored carcasses. Although the fabric vendor’s sense of smell has grown particularly keen during her difficult pregnancy, she does not seem to be much affected by “the clammy odor of dead frogs” (45). As a matter of fact, near the end of the chapter, she decides to swallow “a tiny red koki lodged between two rocks” (58): “Here they were, she thought, drawing her thought out in her mind. Two types of animals were now inside of her, in peril: her daughter, Rose, and now this frog. Let them fight it out and see who will win” (59). A few reviewers have underlined that scenes like this, in which elements of the local color—and language—are incorporated to capture both highly specific but also universal conditions, could be viewed as instances of magical realism (see Sontag 2013; Shamsie 2013). In this sense, it is true that some spaces (*Món Initi!*) and characters (Madame Gaëlle or Claire, herself) in the book seem to be endowed with a number of fairy-like qualities that serve to enrich—and somehow exoticize—the particular physical and human landscapes. However, it is also a fact that the author rarely misses a chance to connect those elements to decisively real and closely-observed aspects of life on the island: its distraught history, environmental hazards, endemic poverty, child abuse, and the like. When Claire runs away from her father and her prospective guardian, she is afraid of what could happen to her if she went into one of the hotels or seaside restaurants in which, as rumor had it, young girls were transformed into women overnight. Notice how effectively Danticat uses the repetition of a number of Creole verbs sounding very much alike to reinforce the idea of the dangers threatening young girls in this context:

[...] They also said that he [the schoolmaster’s son] had stolen (vòlè) or he had violated (vyole) a girl who had (vole) flown away. Vòlè vyole w, ou vole. The girl who had vole, flown away, wasn’t a girl anymore but a woman. A woman who later had a child by the schoolmaster’s son. It was like one of those stories Madame Louise George used to read to the preschool matènèl classes when Madame Louise was still coming to the school. (214)

It is no coincidence that in these lines we are given a summarized—and creolized—version of Flore Voltaire's rape in the hands of Max Ardin, Jr., which we had heard about in great detail from the victim in the previous chapter of the novel. What is interesting, though, is that in Claire's mind this very real story of a "restavèk" (or housemaid) should resemble the type of fables that the radio hostess told the children at the school to protect them against the many looming dangers. This example comes to show that the use of code-switching may sometimes contribute, not only to blur the boundaries between two cultures or languages, but also to "connect creatively" different levels of reality—and fictionality—that usually prove essential to the development of a diasporic consciousness (cf. Shafiq 2013: 81-84). Of course, as mentioned above, this conflation of different levels of reality can be highly productive as long as the bicultural individual uses them as a form of mediation and not so much as a system of hierarchization and prioritization.

Therefore, the use of code-switching helps a great deal in terms of transporting the reader into an unknown microcosm—with its mountains, shacks, mansions, beaches, marketplaces, radio stations, schools, restaurants, jails, and so on—which, as some reviewers have remarked, could well "stand for life in Haiti" (Germain 2014: 215; Sontag 2013). But nothing less should be affirmed about its capacity to draw us into the minds and feelings of an immensely diverse set of characters. In spite of the unsparing portrayal of a corrupt and violent society where almost all lives are at risk, there is a great deal of fondness and compassion in the manner Danticat treats all her characters, who, regardless of their social position, are striving for human connection in a cruel and unfair world (cf. Charles 2013). Claire's mother, for instance, who is presented early in the book as a poor woman working for the town's undertaker by preparing the corpses for burial, offers her unconditional support to Madame Gaëlle Cadet when she finds out about the trials of her uncertain 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'" (54). Gestures of this kind are abundant throughout the novel, since it is evident that almost no character is free from the fears and anxieties that the precarious context constantly generates in them. Clifford has argued that diasporic consciousness and solidarity are produced by identifying with experiences of loss and desperation of this sort, wherein humans feel compelled to "make the best of a bad situation" (312).

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" (76). Whenever signs of solidarity or mutual affection spring up in the novel—be it between father and daughter, between two close friends, a man and the woman he abandoned long ago, a father and his expatriated son, along with others—terms or expressions in Creole are likely to emerge in order to increase the emotional temperature of the scenes. Keller and Keller (1993), among others, have written at length about the additional affective impact that switching into another language has on readers that gradually come to see and understand the suffering and endurance of communities in faraway areas of the globe (cf. Sommer 2004). It is also a fact, though, that a writer may easily cross over the red line that separates those feelings of empathy and solidarity from an over-sentimentalization of the desolate situation in those communities and the exploitation of their systematic pain and arrested evolution. A few native writers from Haiti have complained that it is sometimes unclear whether Danticat's fiction is, in fact, creating that looked-for space for the emergence of a transnational (or bicultural) identity or, unwittingly, she is just reinforcing some of the commonplaces and stereotypes that Western readers have about life in Third World countries (Caruth 2004: 7). Does code-switching, in this latter sense, not contribute to marking a distance between different cultures and people by putting the emphasis on their "exoticism" and difference, rather than bringing them closer to each other? Are there any features in Danticat's novel that enhance this effect? As has already been observed above, the answers to these questions are never easy since some of her uses of code-switching will arouse different reactions and emotions from their readers depending on their previous familiarity with the culture and their position regarding the current situation in the country (cf. Glick-Schiller 2011: xxii).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks: Both Effective and Debatable Outcomes

The two epigraphs at the outset of this article put forth two crucial ideas with respect to writers belonging to any diaspora. To begin with, all of them reveal a strong feeling of attachment to their homeland and make efforts to preserve parts of their original identity (see Mooney 2009). As Brubaker points out, this preservation of a distinctive identity is frequently made easier by the confrontation "vis-à-vis a host society" (2005: 6). This clash may be the result of processes of discrimination and exclusion—as has been the case of Haitians in the U.S.—or it may come from a deliberate resistance to assimilation by the group (Pamphile 2001). Of course, one of the elements of that original identity that a diasporic writer may decide to preserve in order to keep alive a sense of belonging to a distinct community is the language, which, as has become apparent in this essay, fulfills more than just a communicative function. The various uses of code-switching considered in this article should have made clear that, besides the socio-pragmatic purposes sought in the use of Creole in informal conversations and descriptions, there are other dimensions of Haitian history and culture that are also represented in the language. Literary artists in particular are deeply aware of the potential of language alternation and interaction within a text to achieve specific effects that may range from ethnic affirmation

to alienation or, even, criticism. The second important idea appearing in both epigraphs is that, although identity preservation and boundary-setting are essential activities, the diasporic writer should never lose sight of processes of hybridization and syncretism, since, after all, she is a subject/citizen of two different worlds that she is bringing into contact (cf. Adisa 2009: 345-46; Safran 1991: 84-85). Needless to say, the work of a mediator/translator between two cultures is never uncomplicated because she is exposed to forces from both worlds that will try to privilege narratives that confirm their expectations and do justice to their particular interests. The diasporic writer, in our case Danticat, does her best to represent those interests and realities in ways that are recognizable and acceptable to both communities... but, of course, something will always get lost in the translation. As the above discussion has shown, despite the author's efforts to retain specific aspects—landscapes, problems, ways of speaking, and so on—of the life in her homeland, there is always the inclination to adapt them to the needs of particular audiences. In this sense, the aspiration to authenticity—which Danticat achieves for most readers—is somehow modulated by other aesthetic and, even, practical considerations which also have a bearing on her use of resources such as code-switching.

The main goal of this article has been to explore some of the principal—socio-pragmatic, rhetoric-stylistic and transcultural—uses that Edwidge Danticat makes of code-switching in *Claire of the Sea Light* and to determine some of the effects that the incorporation of this resource intends to produce on her readers. It has been observed that Danticat's use of code-switching derives quite often from issues of verisimilitude and credibility, as she often reproduces patterns found in oral speech, but also from her stylistic and artistic pretensions. It is in these latter uses where the author is seen to employ this resource more creatively, since she can delve more deeply into the socio-cultural implications of some catchphrases. Some experts could complain that perhaps she is not taking too many risks in the use of this rhetorical device, as most of her expressions in Creole usually come accompanied by a translation into English (Torres 2007: 87). As mentioned above, this is also probably the reason why some Haitian artists and readers have looked upon her work with a certain degree of suspicion. Unlike other Caribbean writers, such as Braschi or Díaz, who produce highly bilingual texts with sustained code-switching, which makes them only accessible to bilingual readers, Danticat prefers to use the linguistic resource less intensively. This fact could be interpreted as a sign of her adoptive land getting the upper hand in the tensions between her “two homes” and, in this sense, the question of the “exoticization” of the Other would again come into the picture. Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that she manages to give foreign readers a sense of how the mother tongue still plays a significant role in the identity and art of diasporic writers. Not only that, but beyond its effectiveness as an identity marker and a stylistic resource, there are certain emotional chords that seem to vibrate more easily when in the presence of this creative device.

## References

- Adisa, Opal P. (2009). Up Close and Personal: Edwidge Danticat's on Haitian Identity and the Writer's Life. *African American Review* 43, 2-3: 345-355.
- Alonso, Andoni and Pedro J. Oiarzabal, eds. (2010). *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community*. Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press.
- Aparicio, Frances (1994). On Sub-versive Signifiers: U.S. Latina/o Writers Tropicalize English. *American Literature* 66, 4: 795-801.
- Bellamy, Maria 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: 177-197.
- Brubaker, Rogers (2005). The “Diaspora” Diaspora. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, 1: 1-19.
- Callahan, Laura (2004). *Spanish/English Code-switching in a Written Corpus*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Callahan, Laura (2003). The Role of Register in Spanish-English Codeswitching in Prose. *Bilingual Review* 27.1: 12-25.
- Caruth, Cathy (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Casey, Ethan (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-claire-of-the-sea-\\_b\\_3870496.html?guccounter=1](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/ethan-casey/review-claire-of-the-sea-_b_3870496.html?guccounter=1). Accessed 11/06/2017.
- Charles, Ron (2013). Edwidge Danticat's Eagerly Awaited New Novel, *Claire of the Sea Light*. *The Washington Post*, 27 August 2013. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/book-world-edwidge-danticats-eagerly-awaited-new-novel-claire-of-the-sea-light.html>. Accessed 11/06/2017.
- Clifford, James (1994). Diasporas. *Cultural Anthropology* 9, 3 (August): 302-338.
- Counihan, Clare (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, Edwidge (2013). *Claire of the Sea Light*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Danticat, Edwidge (2004). *The Dew Breaker*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Danticat, Edwidge (1995). *Krik? Krak!* New York: Soho Press, Inc.
- De la Cruz Cabanillas, Isabel, coor. (2001). *La lingüística aplicada a finales de siglo XX: Ensayos y propuestas*. 2 volúmenes. Alcalá de Henares: Universidad de Alcalá.



- Germain, Christine (2014). Review of *Claire of the Sea Light* by Edwidge Danticat. *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 3, 2: 214-215.
- Glick-Schiller, Nina (2011). Locality, Globality and the Popularization of a Diasporic Consciousness: Learning from the Haitian Case. In Jackson., Regina O., ed., xxi-xxix.
- Gumperz, John (1982). *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, Stuart (2019). Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts from Abroad. In Morley, David, ed., 206-226.
- Ibarrola-Armendariz, Aitor (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.
- Jackson, Regina O. (2011). *Geographies of the Haitian Diaspora*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Jonsson, Carla (2005). Code-switching in Chicano Theatre: Power, Identity and Style in Three Plays by Cherrie Moraga. PhD Dissertation, presented at the Umea University, Sweden.
- Kakutani, Michiko (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-claire-of-the-sea-light.html>. Accessed 11/06/2017.
- Kaussen, Valerie (2015). Migration, Exclusion, "Home" in Edwidge Danticat's Narratives of Return. In Oliver-Rotger, ed., 25-43.
- Keller, Gary D. and Randall G. Keller (1993). The Literary Language of United States Hispanics. In Lomelí, Francisco, ed., 163-165.
- Lipski, John M. (1982). Spanish-English Language Switching in Speech and Literature: Theories and Models. *Bilingual Review* 9, 3: 191-212.
- Lomelí, Francisco, ed. (1993). *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Literature and Arts*. University of Houston: Arte Público Press.
- Montes-Alcalá, Cecilia (2015). Code-Switching in U.S. Latino Literature: The Role of Biculturalism. *Language and Literature* 24, 3: 264-81.
- Montes-Alcalá, Cecilia (2001). Oral vs. Written code-switching contexts in English-Spanish bilingual narratives. In De la Cruz Cabanillas, Isabel, coor., vol. 2, 715-720.
- Mooney, Margarita A. (2009). *Faith Makes Us Live: Surviving and Thriving in the Haitian Diaspora*. Berkeley and L.A.: University of California Press.
- Morley, David, ed. (2019). *Stuart Hall: Essential Essays, Vol. 2 – Identity and Diaspora*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Munro, Martin, ed. (2010). *Edwidge Danticat: A Reader's Guide*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia.
- Nesbitt, N. (2010). Diasporic Politics: Danticat's Short Works. In Munro, Martin, ed., 73-85.
- Oliver-Rotger, M. Antònia, ed. (2015). *Identity, Diaspora, and Return in American Literature* (Routledge Transnational Perspectives on American Literature). New York and London: Routledge.
- Pamphile, Leon D. (2001). *Haitians and African Americans: A Heritage of Tragedy and Hope*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Safran, William (1991). Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return. *Diaspora* 1.1: 83-99.
- Sankoff, David (1998). A Formal Production-Based Explanation of the Facts of Code Switching. *Bilingualism, Language and Cognition* 1: 39-50.
- Samway, Patrick S.J. (2003-04). A Homeway Journey: Edwidge Danticat's Fictional Landscapes, Mind-scapes, Genescapes, and Signscapes in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. *The Journal of Southern Cultures* 57, 1: 75-83.
- Shafiq, Muna (2013). Code-Switching between Cultures and Languages: *Creative Connectivity*. PhD Dissertation, presented at the Université de Montréal, Canada.
- Shamsie, Kamila (2013). Review of *Claire of the Sea Light* by Edwidge Danticat. *The Guardian*, 28 December 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/28/claire-sea-light-edwidge-danticat-review>. Accessed 11/06/2017.
- Sommer, Doris (2004). *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Sontag, Deborah (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/claire-of-the-sea-light-by-edwidge-danticat.html>. Accessed 11/06/2017.
- Timm, Leonora (1975). Spanish-English code-switching: el porqué and how not to. *Romance Philology* 28: 473-82.
- Tobar, Hector (2013). Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* Brims with Enchantments. *Los Angeles Times*, 23 August 2013. <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/aug/23/entertainment/la-ca-jc-edwidge-danticat-20130825>. Accessed 11/06/2017.
- Torres, Lourdes (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.
- Zacair, Philippe, ed. (2010). *Haiti and the Haitian Diaspora in the Wider Caribbean* (New World Diasporas). Gainesville: University Press of Florida.