

Narrating African American Migrations: Mobile Literary Voices and Shifting Narrative Strategies

ABSTRACT: The essay starts with the historian Ira Berlin's assumption that African American culture is specifically shaped through continuous processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Through the analysis of exemplary texts by Olaudah Equiano, Ralph Waldo Ellison, and Edwidge Danticat, the essay traces shifting paradigms within the narration of black mobility in African American literature from late eighteenth-century colonial America to the present. The essay tracks narrative strategies that African American writers employ to tell stories of displacement and relocation. At the center of this discussion is the question of the respective author's positioning through discourse in the larger contexts of postcolonial, subaltern and decolonial studies perspectives.

KEY WORDS: migration, mobility, subaltern, decolonial, narration

Ira Berlin's African American Migration Patterns

Without doubt migrations on an individual as well as collective scale have repeatedly shaped African American cultural and social developments. While we can map the complex and multidirectional routes of many African Americans across seas and territories throughout the centuries, other strategic and discursive questions remain: What are the strategies of black self-positioning within oppressive, mobile and fluid historical conditions? What narrative devices do African American writers draw upon to tell stories of frequent deterritorialization and reterritorialization? This essay on narratives of migration departs from the hypothesis that multiple migrations lie at the heart of "the making of African America," to borrow a title from award-winning historian Ira Berlin, and that African American culture embodies perhaps more richly and with greater complexity than any other cultural experience in the Americas the idea of cultures as inherently mobile and in transit. Due to its close entanglement

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with mobility and change throughout history it comes as no surprise that African American culture has produced multiple aesthetic and culture forms from blues songs to Jacob Lawrence's Migration series in the visual arts, to oral and written storytelling from Zora Neale Hurston to Ishmael Reed that capture and narrate the experience of departures and arrivals, the tension between place and movement, and the dynamics of stasis versus change. "The traumatic loss of freedom, the degradation of enslavement, and the long years of bondage," as Ira Berlin puts it, are the results of the Middle Passage—"the transit from Africa to America" (Berlin, 2010: 14). Early in the history of the Americas black cultures had been subjected to a subaltern position, accordingly. At the same time African American culture started to produce alternative historiographies to counteract hegemonic knowledge production—both in oral and written discourse. According to Russell A. Potter, the initial denial of a core identity leads to a strong linkage between locality and mobility in African American endeavors to position themselves through voice and text:

Deprived by the Middle Passage and slavery of a unified cultural identity, African American cultures have mobilized, via a network of localized sites and nomadic incursions, cultures of the found, the revalued, the used and cultures moreover which have continually transfigured and transformed objects of consumption into sites of production (Potter, 2007: 458, italics in the original text).

Potter develops his discourse on black mobile cultural production with reference to 'Signifyin(g)' in hip-hop culture in particular and locates tactics of resistance within this tradition. As he points out, "Signifyin(g) is a tool of appropriation and reconceptualization within the process of telling the repressed and suppressed histories of African American culture" (Potter, 2007: 464). It makes possible to reclaim 'difference' that, as he maintains, lies at the very heart of African American self-knowledge: "How to know oneself without measuring with the oppressor's ruler? How to maintain dignity and a sense of historical place in the face of the pressures of assimilation?" (Potter, 2007: 473). No doubt, the African American storyteller of colonial times found himself directly confronted with Gayatri Spivak's by now famous question: "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak, 1995: 24). In the context of mobility studies this inquiry strongly correlates with a self-positioning of the African American writer facing repeated displacement. A complex task has challenged many African American writers, namely how to give a voice to multiple migrations on the one hand, and to establish one's own discursive positioning within the hegemonic power structures on the other. By selecting three exemplary texts by writers such as Olaudah Equiano, Ralph Waldo Ellison, and Edwidge Danticat, from different historical epochs, I want to explore textual strategies, their paradigm shifts and how notions of center and periphery are negotiated and redefined

Ira Berlin, in *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations*, pub-

lished in 2010, provides an alternative narrative to the linear historical account from slavery to emancipation. Tracing the movement of people of African descent over four centuries from the Middle Passage to contemporary globalization, he exhibits an innovative and perhaps controversial view of black America. He explicitly and provocatively moves away from linear progressive history to embark upon migration and mobility as core experiences of black America continually remaking all aspects of African American culture, from language to literature to music to the arts. Referring to a contrapuntal narrative between mobility and stasis Ira Berlin points out,

The great migrations or passages from Africa to the New World (the Middle Passage); from the seaboard to the interior, or black belt (a second Middle Passage); from the rural South to the urban North (a third passage); and the global diaspora to American (a fourth passage)—provide critical markers in the formation and re-formation of the African American people. Each initiated a reconstruction of black life on new ground, creating new measures of cultural authenticity and new standards of cultural integrity. To be sure, the old ways were incorporated into the new, blending what once was with what would be, and creating an illusion of a seamless, unchanging cultural concord that reached back to antiquity. But not even the most powerful continuities could suppress the arrival of the new, manifested in the most deeply held beliefs or the most transient fads. Thus

at various times, to be black meant to wear one's hair in an eel skin queue, to conk the kinks straight, to bush au naturel, to plait into tight braids, or to shave the pate clean. ... The cultures of movement and place penetrated one another, in part because change, no matter how revolutionary, was never complete. Old patterns coexisted and overlapped with new ones. More importantly, the vectors of change did not always point in one direction. Movement did not give birth to place or vice versa any more than the past necessarily summoned the present or than the present automatically fulfills the past. Often languages, religions, cuisine, or music created amid the flux of movement was transported back to the migrants' place of origins as well as forward to their place of arrival (Berlin, 2010: 31-34).

Berlin's account puts emphasis on the spatio-temporal complexity involved in a long both sequential and cyclical history of departure and arrival within African American culture formation. With a nod to Berlin, I argue that we need further investigation into the story-telling and narrative forms and processes which tell multiple migrations to fully understand the relationship between mobile bodies, narrating selves, and discursive strategies. Bodies move through space and time, selves are textually constructed, and strategies are discursively produced. Continuing from here the question arises through what types of literary voices are migrations told and what is the positioning of narrators within the texts to express the

triad of traveling body, mobile self, and narrating voice. From its very beginnings African American cultural production in both oral and written texts has contributed to individual as well as collective narratives about mobility and migration. We may think of literary works ranging from Olaudah Equiano's eighteenth-century autobiographical emancipation narrative from slave to free tradesman, to Ralph Ellison's modernist mid-twentieth century story of the great migration from the rural South to the urban North in *Invisible Man* to Edwidge Danticat's transnational memoir *Brother I'm Dying* in the twenty-first century narrating mobility in the context of Haitian diaspora. All three aforementioned narratives share the first person narrative perspective; while these all contain life writing features, they differ in degrees to the portions of fiction and life story they incorporate. As all three texts exemplify, bodies move through and voices move within fields of power structure and power relations. While my approach here is diachronic by selecting eighteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century texts, this approach does not aim for a linear story of narrative development. A historically broad range permits both a look at the continuity and changes in narrating mobility as well as allowing for a varied contextualization of storytelling and narrative production.

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself (1794)
The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself ranks as the first major slave

narrative that has equally been claimed by U.S. American, Caribbean and British literature as part of their canon. The frontispiece shows the author's self-conception as composite and hybrid embracing African as well as Western traits. The perplexing image exposes African features, whereas the attire that he wears illustrates his links to and status within Western society, British society in particular. The complexity and ambiguity called forth by the image is further intensified by his choice of double naming in the title of the slave autobiography replicating a side-by-side of African and Western identities. Throughout the narrative the reader encounters journey descriptions that follow Equiano's migratory paths transversally across the Atlantic, within the Americas and to the Mediterranean Sea. The spatial shifts are accompanied by a variety of facets of Equiano's character and positioning. He takes on roles and masks on his way from slavery to freedom. Equiano's displacements generally are imposed upon him; his status as slave and servant limit his agency. But the reader repeatedly notices that wearing the mask, while coming out of necessity, can turn into a powerful tool of self-empowerment. And Equiano makes clear in the narrative that the ultimate goal for him is freedom achieved through education, labor and entrepreneurship. As he emphasizes:

I thought now nothing but being freed, and working for myself, and thereby getting money to enable me to get a good education; for I always had a great desire to be able to read and write; and while I was on ship-board I

had endeavoured to improve myself in both (Equiano, 2001: 67).

Equiano clearly borrows ideas related to the Protestant work ethic and writes his self-positioning from within the colonial discourse. But his embrace of Western values is put in question through his relativist-relational pondering in which he compares African and Western cultural practices, frequently not in favor of the latter. Although Equiano makes clear that he, as a black writing subject, remains marginalized by race, nation and class throughout most of the narrative, he, too, cherishes the moments of crossing the borderline between margin and mainstream. Whereas the marginalized status looms large in the depictions of the Middle Passage and his servant years in the West Indies, as a free man he partakes in the power structure as commissary for the Sierra colony and overseer on a plantation on the Musquito coast temporarily. Equiano creates a shifting, hybrid self, as the narrative advances starting out from a position of negation initially: “I own offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant” (Equiano, 2001: 19). With this triple negation he underscores that his writing practice is dedicated to create a more complex sense of self beyond socially and discursively established categories. While the dominant discourse viewed ‘blackness’ along the parameters of either the ignoble or the noble savage in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century colonial system, Equiano turns blackness into a multiple signifier, not only on the phenomenological level—“a multitude of black people

of every description” (Equiano, 2001: 39)—but also as a signifier of cultural and economic equality in transcultural contexts. Hence his narrative talks about black masters and white slaves, too. As Geraldine Murphy reminds us, “many critics have noted that slave narratives are transcultural and hybrid productions” (Murphy, 2001: 369-70), an observation that also explains why narrative and reception go beyond national frameworks. Murphy underscores the multiplicity of genres present in Equiano’s narrative: “His narrative incorporates elements of spiritual autobiography, the newly emerging success story, and the political discourse of the humanitarian/abolitionist movement, not to mention travel writing” (Murphy, 2001: 369). The hybrid structure of Equiano’s narrative leads to an amalgamation of literary genres. What we witness on the generic level, I argue, is directly related to the narrating and narrated self. Equiano’s frequently playful self-conception as hybrid, migratory subject suggests a close link between spatio-temporal mobility of the body and fluid identity constructions of the self, narrated through a discursive strategy of multiple voices present in the text. Analyzing the rhetorical devices Equiano draws upon in his narrative, African American critic and intellectual Henry L. Gates points out that:

Equiano was an impressively self-conscious writer and developed two rhetorical strategies that would be used extensively in the nineteenth-century slave narratives: the trope of chiasmus ... and the use of two distinct voices.

These two voices were meant to distinguish, in language, the simple wonder with which the young Equiano approached the world of his captor, and the more sophisticated vision, captured in a more eloquently articulated voice, of the author's narrative "present." The interplay of these two voices is as striking as Equiano's overarching reversal-plot pattern, within which all sorts of embedded reversal tales occur. Rarely would a slave narrator match Equiano's mastery of self-representation (Gates, 1988: 8-9).

The presence of two voices is striking. Still I think a further differentiation is necessary to do even more critical justice to Equiano's mastery of multiple voices. Further shifts of voice correspond to the various roles Equiano takes on as travelee and traveler. Not only does he describe his roles as sailor, servant, and parson during his travels, the narrating voice itself becomes mobile in that it speaks for Equiano as tourist, Equiano as ethnographer, and Equiano as political activist. A few lines from the tourist Equiano shall suffice here:

We sailed to Naples, a charming city, and remarkably clean. The bay is the most beautiful I saw; the moles for shipping are excellent. I thought it extraordinary to see grand operas acted here Sunday nights; and even attended by their majesties. I too, like the great ones, went to those sights, and vainly served God in the day while I thus served mammon effectually at night (Equiano, 2001: 128).

It becomes obvious that Equiano's discursive strategy is one of multiple positionings. As he transverse many countries and continents and crosses between freedom and slavery he also moves between adaptation and resistance. While he is borrowing from major genres closely aligned with the discourse of coloniality and the colonial masters he inserts role reversals as subversive strategies in his narrative. As picaresque hero he challenges the dividing lines between colonizer and colonized. His embrace of fluid, hybrid identity patterns is both creative playfulness but more so an essential survival strategy in times of colonial times of slavery and racial divide. Subtly Equiano speaks to the reader from within the colonial discourse system. Klaus Benesch succinctly describes Equiano's memoir as a hybrid, border-crossing text that continuously "valorizes the colonized from within an ideology of the colonizer" (Benesch, 2003: 41).

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952)

While Equiano positions his narrating self within the colonial system, Ralph Waldo Ellison, in his novel *Invisible Man*, consciously decides to let his narrator speak from below. Hiding in Harlem underground and writing his life story with the help of light tapped from the white electric power system, the narrator speaks from a position that is clearly marked as different in temporal and spatial terms from upper ground New York. Ellison intentionally chooses a subcultural position for his invisible protagonist to tell an individual as well as a collective African American migration narrative from a conflicted perspective.

Overall the protagonist's journey suggests an up-and-down movement between the public and the underground, between the white power structure above and the black world below. The main plot of the novel "signifies a black rite of passage" (Raussert, 2000: 50). Metaphorically the protagonist's journey exhibits major periods of African American history—from Reconstruction to the Harlem riots in the 1940s and the invisible man's journey parallels the migration of thousands of black families at the turn of the century to the urban areas in the North. Many left the South because of a lack of social and economic opportunity. Similarly, the invisible man has to leave the South being expelled from college. The narrative follows his tracks up to New York City where he faces urban social problems and loses his first job after having caused an explosion in a paint factory that ironically produces 'Optic White'. His experiences in New York City and his witnessing the eviction of an old black couple in Harlem recalls the rough days of the Great Depression. Being disillusioned with his surroundings in the urban environment he chooses to join the Brotherhood, a communist organization, to become a political activist. Being eventually denied his individual role within the party and being confronted with race riots in Harlem led by the black nationalist Ras the Destroyer, he decides to escape underground. To the invisible man, neither the communist utopia of Brother Jack nor the black nationalist utopia of Ras the Destroyer bears potential for defining his own social positioning. In the underground he burns all documents and signs of his former identities.

What is at stake is a narrative self-positioning torn between a wish for recognition and a desire for resistance. Trying to define one's own role in history the invisible protagonist tests various narrative strategies in a polyphonic rendering of literary voice. That the protagonist's voice of the prologue in particular refers to the polyphonic and polyrhythmic quality of Louis Armstrong's music shows Ellison's conviction that African American musical expression can function as both counter-hegemonic and integrationist. "Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat" (Ellison, 1972: 8). To mark an optional conception of time, the narrator continues: "Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead" (Ellison, 1972: 8). Occupying an underground space, the invisible man imaginatively produces an alternative vision of history. As Dick Hebdige explains with a nod to Stuart Hall, "Hegemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes 'succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range', so that subordinate groups are, if not controlled, then at least contained within an ideological space ..." (Hebdige, 2007: 438). He further claims that "the symbiosis in which ideology and social order, production and reproduction, are linked is then neither fixed nor guaranteed" (Hebdige, 2007: 439). The time-space vision that Ellison's protagonist creates in the underground hints toward the possibility that "the consensus

can be fractured, challenged, overruled” (Ellison, 1972: 439). Not only does he enter a historical journey into the past while listening to Armstrong’s music he also unfolds a vision of black history, “the blackness of blackness” (Ellison, 1972: 9). The novel itself playfully introduces various literary styles to reflect reality, dream and nightmare of a personal journey directly related to African American migrations on a larger scale. And Ellison’s narrator answers Spivak’s famous question “Can the subaltern speak?” with a voice that holds the craftsmanship of many oral as well as written texts and mingles them according to flows and ruptures characterizing the invisible protagonist’s patterns of movement from south to north, from upper ground to the underground. And the narrator’s voice is given a clear African American twist. Letting the narrator speak through a polyphonic voice, Ellison alludes to a rich spectrum of African American oral texts from street talk, blues songs to sermons. “Ha! Booming success, intoning, Ha! acceptance, Ha! A river of word-sounds filled with drowned passions ...” (Ellison, 1972: 111). While the reader is accompanying the narrator on his various journeys and shifts in self positioning from college student to factory worker to political activist and finally creative writer he metaphorically traverses several eras of African American history. When the narrator and protagonist listens to Armstrong’s recordings, the four musical tempos are conceived of as distinct temporal layers. They also express at least four different levels of consciousness expressed by the modulating voice from the underground. As Ellison adopts a poly-

phonic pattern for narrative progression, the voice clearly assumes various modes of expression. We encounter omniscient realistic storytelling, an impressionistic mode of rendering idyllic reminiscences of college days, an expressionistic mode voicing urban disorder and chaos and a surreal mode of telling violence and trauma in the main plot of the novel. While all these can be related to earlier literary movements from realism to avant-garde surrealism, Ellison equips his narrator with a mastery of cross-cultural polyphony that give the narrative an African American off-beat rhythm and marks the narrator’s self-positioning below and outside the mainstream context. While every major dislocation of the narrator corresponds to a major shift in tone and style reflecting the cognitive as well as affective response to change, modernist literary discourse gets infused and modulated by African American cultural expression throughout the novel.

Listening to Armstrong’s *What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue* in his subterranean retreat, the narrator begins a spatio-temporal journey that leads him into a deeper understanding of the meaning of blackness. To his physical move underground he adds a gradual meditative descent into Armstrong’s music and lyrics, an immersion that is defined through various uneven temporalities indicated by the changing tempos of Armstrong’s music:

And beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz

as flamenco, and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body, and below I found a lower level and more rapid tempo and I heard someone shout: "Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness'" (Ellison, 1972: 9).

In *Invisible Man* the underworld is part of a subculture and the lighted basement signifies the removed place of the artist. Interestingly enough, Ellison chooses no 'ivory tower', as many white modernist writers would have, to let the self-empowering artist evolve. As Ellison has it, only through a subcultural alternative voice can black culture infuse white culture and modify the mainstream. But there is hope, as Hortense Spillers prophetically claims: "He must emerge. Spatially underground, he will come up into the light of the day again with his dark-skinned self, a little more noble and fierce when he entered" (Spillers, 1987: 149).

Edwidge Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying* (2007)

As Walter Mignolo remembers, Eveline Trouillot opened her intervention in the Sixteenth International Conference of the Academy in Lima 2006 with the words: "I am a woman, I am black, and I am Haitian" (Mignolo, 2011: XVI). In the interpretation by Mignolo this statement means to "delink from imperial imaginary", to subjectively engage in "knowing-making" or knowledge production as a Haitian, to "break away" as black

woman from the Western code (Mignolo, 2011: XVI). Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat might add: "I am moving back and forth between Haiti and the US embracing roots and routes simultaneously while narrating histories from a shifting point of view of multiple entanglements." Danticat develops a complex transnational narrative pattern already in her first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and even more so in her recent transnational memoir *Brother I'm Dying* (2007). Here she depicts the autobiographical self and her related families in Haiti and the US in constant transition within the countries and between them. Airport scenes frequent place the narrator herself in a location of transit. Mobility in *Brother I'm Dying* is narrated in the larger framework of diaspora experience and the text is both memory work and a narrative of family migrations. Through telling the life stories of her father and uncle, Danticat creates a memoir that stretches far into colonial history and connects colonial networks to postcolonial and neo-colonial structures characterizing Haiti's multiple political and economic entanglements in the larger framework of Caribbean histories and their relations to French and US foreign policy.

Let me classify the voice of Danticat's transnational memoir as a nomadic and decolonial voice. In the words of Ana Luz: "The key elements to describe the transition are her/his body, her/his spatial language and behavior. ... These nomads use their body as the vehicle of sensory experience, the membrane between perception and cognition" (Luz, 2006: 152). Ana Luz establishes a triad between movement,

body and cognition, a triangulation that is also a key to the workings of memory in Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying* (2007). Already the opening lines of the memoir establish vital connections between the three touchstones mentioned by Luz:

I found out I was pregnant the same day my father's rapid weight loss and chronic shortness of breath were positively diagnosed as end-stage pulmonary fibrosis. It was a hot morning in early July 2004. I took a six thirty a.m. flight from Miami to accompany my father on a visit to a pulmonologist at Brooklyn's Coney Island Hospital that afternoon. I'd planned to catch up on my sleep during the flight, but cramping in my lower abdomen kept me awake. ... My father picked me up at the airport at nine a.m. (Danticat, 2007: 3).

The initial paragraphs narrate an intense connectedness between daughter and father despite the spatial separation here defined between south and north within national boundaries. Both bodies are described as in pain. It is through the physical pain the narrator feels that the initial link between daughter and father are established. "I interpreted the cramps as a sign of worry for my father" (Danticat, 2007: 3), she tells us. As readers we get to know her from the very beginning as a body in transit flying from Miami to New York. And her self-positioning as narrator is closely connected to changing bodies, breeding bodies, and aging bodies. She presents herself as complex mobile self, thinking, aching, and creating.

What Danticat engages with in *Brother I'm Dying* is an emotionally charged and self-reflective endeavor to relate her present, past and future to the life lines of her two father figures. Repeatedly she inserts a self-referential voice in the narrative. "Both of you, together, tell me more. About you. About me. About all of us" (Danticat, 2007: 161). The few months of 'lived intersectionality' in their lives trigger off a much larger narrative than the one the narrative voice proposes: "What I learned from my father and uncle, I learned out of sequence and in fragments. This is an attempt at cohesiveness, and at re-creating a few wondrous and terrible months when their lives and mine intersected ..." (Danticat, 2007: 26). As she explains further, this process of memory writing and reconstruction forces her: "To look forward and back at the same time" (Danticat, 2007: 26). The small connectedness of three human lives expands to a narrative of history on a grander scale. While always relating historic details to specific family members in Haiti and the US, Danticat selectively recollects moments, events and periods through which she narrates a particular history of US-American-Haitian entanglements stretching back to Haitian colonial history and its struggle for independence. What she creates in the memoir is a complex web of temporalities and spatialities that include flashback, zigzag narrative progression, and non-linear mode of narration. She lends her voice to others. "I am writing this only because they can't" (Danticat, 2007: 26). Literally the voices of her uncle and father are doomed to fade. Her uncle undergoes a "radical laryngectomy"

(Danticat, 2007: 38) and loses his voice completely. Her father's voice drowns in coughing due to his "pulmonary fibrosis" (Danticat, 2007: 1). The medical histories of her father figures give Danticat a special mission. First she needs to fill the gaps of oral history; in a second step, she needs to transfer the oral text into the written. And frequently she translates from Creole into English: "How do you feel, Papa?" I asked in Creole. "Ki jan wsanti w?" (Danticat, 2007: 13).

Danticat's narrative makes the personal global and the global local with reference to rural and urban sites in Haiti and the US. In moderating her own discourse on the subaltern in the late 1990s, critic Gayatri Spivak expresses her conviction that "today the 'subaltern' must be rethought. S/he is no longer cut off from the lines of access to the centre" (Spivak, 2007: 231). Responding to recent global flows and changes Spivak affirms that "the question of subaltern consciousness has once again become important, now displayed to the global political sphere" ... (Spivak, 2007: 236). In Danticat's memoir, collected and reconstructed stories from the past trace family history as intertwined with the frequently violent political changes of Haiti and the Americas at large. By tracing the life lines, migratory patterns and physical changes of family members she imaginatively creates complex diasporic communities. As Sneja Gunew provocatively suggests, "it may be time to consider the role of the writer as inventor of community where community is conceived not in the sense of the nostalgic return to the past and a lost place but as the impulse forward, the

potential carried by the seeding of diaspora in hybridity." She adds that "the attempt here is to analyse the components and strategies of a kind of belonging that has not yet been established which [...] is assembled precariously out of the shards of individual lives and their 'imagined relations' to genealogies (private histories) and public events, that is, global or national histories" (Gunew, 2004: 109).

Danticat narrates multiple journeys. And by relating her own life-story to the life lines of her father who emigrates to New York and to her father's brother who raises her during her childhood years in Haiti she creates what I like to label a narrative of multiple entanglements. Frequently she travels back and forth between Haiti and the States to show her attachments to both worlds and her affection for both men as father figures in particular. Hence her story is not one of U.S. America as safe haven for migrants from Haiti, nor is it one of idealizing a left behind life in Haiti; it is rather an exemplary story of transversal migrations and manifold affiliations in the Americas, both conflictive as well as enriching. Metaphorically and geopolitically Haiti and the U.S. continue intertwined not only in the opening section of the novel but throughout.

What authorial subject does the text reveal? Jo Collins in a recent article entitled "Bricolage and History: Edwidge Danticat's Life Writing in *After the Dance*" makes an important observation. As a diasporic writer, according to Collins, Danticat's work develops "mobile, relational and decentred authorial stances" (Collins, 2013: 12), which challenge Eurocentric notions of a monadic and au-

tonomous 'self'. In Collins' argumentation, Danticat moves beyond earlier life writing concepts such as *métissage* which posit the politicized integration of written and oral sources to recover marginalized histories. With reference to the travel narrative *After the Dance* in particular, Collins argues that Edwidge Danticat develops an alternative textual praxis namely, *bricolage*. By working with the diverse and contingent materials available (from other travel narratives to Kreyòl proverbs to pop songs), Danticat's text avoids retrieving marginalized Haitian history. Thus Danticat avoids closure and opposes totalizing connotations. Instead she opens doors for provisional and relational signification. In *Brother I'm Dying*, as I argue, Danticat does not write from a postcolonial position, rather from a decolonial position. For her multiple worlds and voices can coexist as can so called real memory and fiction memory. She does not tell Haitian history as colonial subtext, she rather tells its as relational history, related to domestic politics as well as global politics; and she posits flows, mobility, traveling as paradigmatic for a relational and transversal mode of narration within the multilayered framework of her transnational memoir. In rendering Haitian-U.S. relations as diachronically as well as synchronically linked she neither reproduces the classical immigration narrative nor does she create a postcolonial bashing of the "empire"; rather she seems equally critical of political exploitation in Haiti as of U.S. American immigration politics and imperialist expansionism. Clearly memory and literary vision collide and produce discordance at the end, when both father figures are

remembered. Together they are buried in a New York graveyard, yet in the Danticat's final act of imagination the brothers return to Haiti walking together in the hills and conversing in Creole. This provisional strategy seems natural for a transnational memoir that is at the same time a decolonial narrative of Haitian-US relations and a healing narrative overcoming the trauma of family separation.

Her telling of her family story connects personal history with history on a larger scale. Thus she not only reconstructs the historical entanglements between her country of birth Haiti and her country of residence the U.S. but also simultaneously creates a family history that follows a transnational and pattern of entanglement. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot explains in relation to his conception of historical narrators, "Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators" (Trouillot, 1995: 2). And he distinguishes a two-part process of history, the "sociopolitical process" and "our knowledge of that process" (Trouillot, 1995: 2). Moreover, "in the play of power in the production of alternative narratives ..., the production of traces is always also the creation of silences" (Trouillot, 1995: 29). Danticat positions herself as self-referential narrator as well as actor in her memoir. And she is more than aware of the silences historical narratives are bound to produce. Voices fail, crack go silent, get lost, as she repeatedly makes clear. As cross-cultural historical narrator she taps many sources, fables, oral history, journalism and history books and integrates them into a multilayered provisional narrative shuffling back and forth

between remembering, forgetting and imaginatively constructing. What is even more important she not only establishes her own black female voice; through it, she lends her voice to otherwise lost and fragmented male biographies as well as to relational histories of Haiti and the US. In doing so she provides an inter-American historiography of self and nation in flux told through a woman's voice.

Conclusion

What this article illustrates is the long durée of literary and textual versatility that characterizes African American narratives of mobility. Alterations of voice, polyphonic literary style and meta-level reflections on the relationship between narrative voice and narrated subject position shape a long tradition of African American narrative inventiveness that "creates dangerously" (to borrow from a term from Danticat's recent essay collection; Danticat, 2011: 1) in order to come to terms with the challenges of fluid and mobile identities torn between reconciliation and resistance. While the analysis of the texts chosen exposes a common versatility on the level of narrative voice, it also hints at the individual differences inherent

in the texts that are also due to their differing historical contexts. 'Colonial', 'sub-cultural' and 'decolonial' seem important cultural markers to classify the authorial self-positioning of the three authors provisionally. Olaudah Equiano consciously establishes a black protean self by writing against the hegemonic system of slavery but from within its narrative framework. Ellison symbolically places his narrator underground to develop a subcultural—partly counter-hegemonic partly integrationist—concept of an emerging self that infuses established literary traditions with black discursiveness. Danticat assumes the role of a powerful agent who speaks not only for herself but for her two father figures giving voice to private and public black history by discursively intertwining Haitian with U.S. American history. While hegemony looms large behind the family story both in the guise of French colonialism, Haitian dictatorships and U.S. imperialism, she narrates historiography from a multiple and decolonial perspective that views her own black self as mobile agent, moving freely between cultural realms and capable of providing alternative historiographies of transnational U.S-Haitian relations.

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