

Chapter 3

Tracing Afro Diasporic Histories: Translocational Storytelling and Entangled Afro Americas in Ntozake Shange's *Sassfrass*, *Cypress & Indigo* and Edwidge Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying*

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1. From African America to Afro Americas

Ira Berlin, in *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (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. (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. Departing from here, the question arises through what types of literary voices are migrations told and what is the discursive positioning of narrators within the texts to express the triad of body, self, and voice.

While Berlin directs his attention toward African America, I expand the concept to Afro Americas. Slavery, free trade, human migration, and cultural flows among others have had a tremendous impact on shaping cultures in the Americas from Brazil to the Caribbean, from the Gulf cultures of Veracruz, Mexico, to the Georgia islands, from the Deep South of the United States to Afro Canadian communities in Toronto. It is certain that throughout the Americas mobilities have brought forth displacement, disrupture, relocation, and transversal movement. Storytelling, testimonio, autobiographies, and life writings from colonial times onward have struggled to express the sense of disrupture resulting from frequent dislocation and the desire to develop narratives of connectedness and related imaginaries of rootedness and belonging. In this essay I direct my attention to contemporary writing and select two texts that share the characteristics of life writing and family story: Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), a polygeneric novel and Edwidge Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying* (2007), a transnational memoir. Despite the texts' evident differences in terms of diction, style, and spelling, their authors draw upon what I label translocational storytelling. This form of storytelling transports the consciousness of a coexistence of localities, near and far. Through variation and versatility, such a form of narrating embraces multiple voices or lends its voice to multiple positionings to create a narrative of interconnectedness on various levels, be they aesthetic, cultural, or

political. By defining this mode of narration in such a way I transfer Floya Anthias concept of translocational positionality to the realm of narrative. In her words “we need a new imaginary for studying the complex mobilities in the modern era of transnationalis” (108). In recent years Anthias has created such an imaginary by reframing the notion of intersectionality using the lenses of “translocation” and “translocational positionality” to account for the often shifting and contradictory spatial and temporal contexts within which social locations are produced. According to her, Transnational Migration Studies need to be conducted within an analytical framework that “recognises the interconnectedness of different identities and hierarchical structures relating to gender, ethnicity, ‘race,’ class, and other social divisions at local, national, transnational and global levels” (102).

Anthias’s approach is in particular promising since the two texts selected for interpretation express ways of interconnectedness on cultural, economic, historical, personal, and political grounds. As they address power asymmetry in intersectional ways, both highlight contact, conflict, and communication at the core of their creation of Afro Americas. Both narratives deal with dispersed families, address transversal patterns of mobility, and attempt to create diaspora and family community through narrative patterns that borrow from Afro-descendant folk traditions in the Americas. *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* as well as *Brother I’m Dying* follow the logic of a web, reminiscent of the spider-web model of the Anansi trickster figure and both draw upon Afro Caribbean and African American folk heritage in their texts to narrate the

ruptures and reconnections of black families.¹ To make this clear from the start, while Shange and Danticat include folktale elements on various levels in the narratives, they are not telling Anansi stories *per se*; still, though, both shape their narratives around web-like structures that break with simple linear and circular progression. As narrators and characters need to find forms to adjust to change, to express resistance and to rely upon improvisational skills, they recall the spirit of the trickster Anansi, originally a West African spider-god. This figure has gained long lasting prominence in the black cultures throughout the Americas. As Martha Warren Becksmith points out,

Anansi is the spirit of rebellion; he is able to overturn the social order; he can marry the Kings' daughter, create wealth out of thin air; baffle the Devil and cheat Death. Even if Anansi loses in one story, you know that he will overcome in the next. For an oppressed people Anansi conveyed a simple message from one generation to the next: that freedom and dignity are worth fighting for, at any odds. (n.pag.)

Shange and Danticat adapt the spirit of this trickster figure in their storytelling. As I like to argue, the web structure serves as a discursive extension of Anansi's power that permits translocational storytelling in both texts. What emerge are complex juxtapositions, oppositions, and syntheses of histories, temporalities, and places. Shange expands the notion of African America to Afro Americas with particular references to Caribbean and Latin American cultures from a U.S. womanist perspective nourished by rural African American imagination, Danticat unfolds her

¹ I thank Giselle Anatol for pointing out the important role of Anansi in Caribbean folklore during the CSA conference in Merida May 2014.

narrative of entangled black Americas from a Haitian diasporic perspective embracing the notion of multiple belongings in contemporary diaspora experience.

2. Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982)

Ntozake Shange's first novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* narrates the history of the Effania family. Drawing upon her versatility as an accomplished poet and playwright, Shange unfolds polygeneric stories showing the individual development of the three female protagonists, the Effania daughters: Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo. Shange mixes recipes, cartographies, poems, dramatic dialogue with prose passages to relate each daughter's life story to family history and to the history of Afro Americas at large. The individual stories of Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo in the novel are set against the historical background of the tumultuous 1960s and early 1970s, when the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements not only shook the foundations of white supremacy in the United States but advanced the anticolonial black struggles throughout the Americas and other parts of the globe. While the Effania mother's home in Charleston, Carolina remains a constant reference point for both narrative and character progression, the individual storylines take the characters on literal and imaginary journeys within the United States and beyond: Charleston, Gullah islands, San Francisco, Baton Rouge, Mexico, Brazil to name but a few. The characters transverse rural and urban zones, continental and island cultures, the U.S. South and the Caribbean, U.S. American and Latin American locations on their search for self and belonging. Whereas the history of the Black Atlantic is evoked in Cypress's story and her entanglement with dance and music culture from Europe, the stories of

Sassafrass and Cypress in particular express inter-American entanglements telling histories of extended African America in hemispheric ways.

In Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* family history and black history of the Americas at large is seen through de-colonial womanist eyes. What she draws together in her novel is a web of literary genres from oral and written cultures, interconnected temporalities, and spatialities. In doing so, she relates the experience of colored women in the Americas with the experience of coloniality, slavery, and oppression. In addition she narrates their contemporary struggle between continuity and change. Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo position and question themselves continuously encountering at times conflictive traditions, expectations, and neo-colonial experiences. Their stories reveal the search for their voices as women, as artists, as activists, as daughters, and as partners. Their struggle is embedded within locally and transnationally transmitted histories of black women's role in society. As Floya Anthias reminds us, "the issue of gender is particularly important, given the increasing recognition of the ways in which gender, ethnicity and class intersect in social relations" (Anthias, "Evaluating 'Diaspora'" n. pag.). In Shange's novel, it is the intersection of gender and race that is at the core of narrating the desire for and the historical burden of mobility within black histories in the Americas. Looking at black history through the eyes of individual women's life stories, Shange exposes differentiated and highly diverse forms of movement and settlement, be they local, national or transnational.

The translocational storytelling in Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* traces the life tracks of Hilda Effania's three daughters as an extension of complex black

diasporic history in the Americas. “Like the slaves who were ourselves” (27) Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo confront their individual lives with a historical consciousness “grown deep like rivers” to borrow an expression from Langston Hughes. Shange’s storytelling mobilizes black history at the intersection of race, gender, and the geopolitics of knowledge explicitly embracing the extended Caribbean as well as Africa as an alternative to the Black Atlantic version of history. Charleston, North Carolina, is the place of birth of all three Effania daughters and functions as transitory hub in the narrative whereas the Gullah islands, cities like New York, Harlem in particular, on the East coast, cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco on the West coast, New Orleans and Baton Rouge in the Deep South and the Caribbean at large are satellite locations that represent the larger network in which the cultures and histories of black America(s) unfold. Even Hilda Effania’s hometown Charleston is a site of mobility as a port city, the economic and historical importance of which ranges from the heydays of the Charleston slave market in colonial times to the yacht tourism of today. Similar to the port of Charleston, Hilda Effania’s home represents a location of constant arrival and departure for the children and neighbors, a location of transit yet rich with cultural heritage. Drawing upon Charleston as a contact zone for many cultures in the Americas and beyond, Shange develops a Panamerican imaginary of black cultural production. The mother Hilda Effania struggles to maintain a centrifugal position in the absence of her dead husband, a sailor, a colored man from the Caribbean islands who always cherished his mobility to escape racial hierarchy. Her letters mark an attempt to keep the web of family communication going, a family that is already dispersed within the United States and along the islands, and her letters are

an attempt at reconnecting her own story with the satellite life tracks of her daughters. But the center these letters suggest does not exist in Shange's novel. Her storytelling embraces fragmentation and ruptures in narration, genre, and time-lining alike. That Hilda Effania's letters sent from Charleston occur in different sections of the novel underscores that the rural South lies at the heart of Shange's historical imagination. Moreover, the letters are part of the novel's inclusion of a multiplicity of forms and genres. They respond to moments of crisis in the daughters' lives and they establish a dialogical pattern of communication in which rural values from the South interact with new forms of community-building among colored people in the urban centers East and West. Hence, they represent one important medium to connect the various locations that make up the black cultural network in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* but despite their content full of traditional values and motherly advice, they never constitute a fixed center. Rather they are part of a dialogical pattern within the narrative web of the novel. Reminiscent of call-and-response patterns of African American musical traditions, these letters respond to moments of crisis. While Shange uses the mother figure—"Mama was there" (225)—to signal continuity, her voice is not a static, rather it is ready to respond to the changing yearnings and problems of her daughters as they travel their individual routes in life. The letters by the mother that are interpolated in the storylines of three daughters reflect communication, interrogation, comparison, contrast, conflict, and reconciliation between generationally conditioned, gender, and race-related differences. The hub and spokes relation underneath the polyphonic and polygeneric text constitutes itself in the letters of the mother Hilda Effania that function as a discursive link between people and locations in the text.

Geopolitically Charlestown remains a reminder of colonial slave trade, as the town represented a major seaport for slave mobility between the West Indies and the Carolina coast and hence represents an important location as well as transit for the emergence and development of black diaspora cultures across the Americas. Home and diaspora are multiplied in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* and even though the daughters unite with their mother for Christmas and for the birth of Sassafrass's child, it is obvious that the daughters will continue their lives along the lines of their chosen spokes. With reference to the youngest child, Indigo, the reader learns:

No one had ever expected it, but that child from Charleston, that Indigo moved into Aunt Haddy's tabby hut, just like she belonged there. It wasn't that she didn't have gifted hands or a tenderness that could last a lifetime. It was just folks weren't sure where she came from or how she came to be among them. Charleston was far away....Charleston wasn't her home (Shange 223-24)

Like the interaction between mother and daughters, the constellation of home and diaspora is relational. Similarly, like the daughters, their cultural traditions, recipes, medical practices, poetic, musical, and dance expressions travel and change over time. They form an important part of an alternative knowledge production and an optional way to preserving black cultural history. As part of Shange's translocational storytelling practice, traditional recipes, and cartographies handed down from generation to generation appear side-by-side in the narrative progression of the novel (30-31, 110-11). As cultural anthropologist J. Lorand Matory points out in reference to mobile Afro diasporic cultures:

when cultural forms are selected, inherited, borrowed, and imitated, their new users invariably inscribe them with new meanings. ... cultural artifacts, images, and practices do not simply 'survive' or endure through 'memory'; rather, they are interpreted and reproduced for diverse contemporary purposes by actors with culturally diverse repertoires, diverse interests, and diverse degrees of power to assert them. (169)

Shange rewrites black histories through the lens of optional forms of knowledge production as provided throughout centuries within the domestic sphere. Important, though, is that she lets these forms of optional knowledge (Mignolo) travel in her narrative, from location to location, back in time and forward toward the future. It seems that Shange joins what critic Andrée Nicola McLaughlin labels an intercontinental movement of black women's literary renaissance:

Transforming political systems necessitates changing human consciousness and human behavior. Hence, Black women bear witness against domination based on nationality, race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other indexes of difference. ... Creating a new reality rooted in diversity and equality, women of the intercontinental Black women's literary renaissance are redefining themselves as well as language, images, ideas, forms of expression within frameworks of cultural continuity. (xlvi)

Cultural continuity in terms of translocational storytelling emphasizes not only the mobility of ideas, concepts, and traditions but stresses the importance of place for the creation and practice. The narrative's alternation between location and dislocation functions as a strategy to capture the steady mobility of the Effania family in past and present. By locating and relocating her characters in different, frequently changing settings and at the same time letting them converse through different channels of

memory and communication with one another, Shange develops a narrative progression that links storylines through translocational imaginaries of black cultures. Her African America is one of pluri-locality within the nation and beyond. For Shange's translocational storytelling practice, place remains particularly important. Accordingly, the intense experience of locality is crucial. As Houston A. Baker emphasizes, "the time of *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* is, finally, not so much the space-time of theories of relativity as the place time in Bantu" (199). Already the opening of the novel underscores that Shange rejects a chronological set-up in favor of intensity. Time in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* is closely related to the immediate experience of place, be it the port of Charleston, be it the Caverns or the dance studio. Time then is psychic and affective. A sense of time passages is conveyed through memories called forth when characters live through the intensity of the here-and-now. Introspection marks most of the scenes evoking images of the past. The characters live through moments of crisis, pain or catharsis when they start thinking about history on a larger scale. The journal entries of the Effania daughters, for example, expose the psyche of the women and how they grow into an understanding of their role in history. This indicates as well how they define their social and political roles. History is internalized in the minds of the female protagonists and closely related to a sense of place and culture (cf. Raussert 145). As Shange's storytelling practice illustrates, translocational positioning is only possible if there is a close link to location. Shange's early depiction of Indigo reveals the larger pattern at work in linking place to a larger Afro Americas imaginary: "The South in her, the land and salt-winds, moved her through Charleston's streets as if she were a mobile sapling, with the gait of a well-

loved colored woman whose lover was the horizon in any direction” (4). As much as she contains the place within herself, Indigo does not remain a local, static presence in Charleston. From the very beginning Shange suggest her affinity to cultural mobility as well as to larger networks of black cultures in the Americas. Through her doll world and her practice of music Indigo expands the slave cultures of the past to the present black cultural work. At the same time Indigo’s Charleston experience gets linked to a larger trajectory of indigenous cultures in the Americas with their distinct forms of knowledge and cultural production. As Charles Joyner puts it,

the slaves created a unique and magnificent culture that has achieved worldwide recognition as an indigenous “great tradition” in its own right—including such internationally famed cultural forms as spirituals, blues, jazz, and the various permutations of rock in the American South; carioca, samba, and bossa nova in Brazil; calypso, mambo, mento, steel bands, ska, rocksteady, reggae, and dub poetry in the Caribbean. (23)

Especially through the storylines of Indigo and Sassafrass the black American South appears interconnected with the histories of Afro cultures on the Gullah islands and Afro Caribbean cultures at large. Frequent references to mobility, delocation, and relocation as major traits of black cultures infuse the novel. This is expressed early in the first depiction of Indigo, the youngest child of the Effania family: “whose lover was the horizon in any direction” (Joyner 4). Indigo is enchanted with mobile bodies and selves: “Indigo liked folks who worked with things that took ‘em some place: colored folks on ships, trains, trolleys, & horses” (24). Tropes of mobility are also defining characteristics in the depiction of the dead father “who was a man from

islands and turned to sea again as he cherished his independence and freedom from racial hierarchies above all” (34). The daughters are storytellers and conjure women who wander larger black worlds tracking relations and creating connectedness, as in Indigo’s imagined slave communities: “African dolls filled with cotton root bark, so they’d have no more slave children. Jamaican dolls in red turbans, bodies formed with comfrey leaves because they’d had to work on Caribbean and American plantations and their bodies must ache and be sore” (6). Similarly, Sassafrass conjures a rainbow network of colored people, a community of cloth-making women that links the histories of indigenous and black women in the Americas. “Toltecas spinning shimmering threads; East Indian women designing intricate patterns for Shakti, the impetus and destruction of creation; and Navajo women working on thick tapestries” (92). Memories of oppression, dispossession, and enslavement emerge on a Pan-American scale. What emerge, too, are narratives of empowerment that celebrate Black American creations throughout the centuries.

The most powerful force behind black women’s empowerment is certainly music.² The ways in which the daughters of the Effania family define their repertoire as musicians, poets and dancers—“Lilah James, Eleo Pomare, Rod Rodgers, Royal Brown All gonna be in this special gala for that grand lady of black dance, Sevilla Forte” (Shange 162) go beyond Paul Gilroy’s conceptualization of the Black Atlantic. Instead, Shange opens the reader’s eyes to an awareness that black cultures have

² With respect to Shange’s mode of writing Sandi Russell reminds us that “It is music, bebop, jazz that inform much of Shange’s writing” (181).

developed multiple sonic and rhythmic traditions within the Americas outside the colonial Old World-New World axis. With references to Afro Colombian and Afro Cuban modern dancers in the above quote, Shange rewrites the history of modern dance in the U.S. through the lens of Pan-American black cultural heritage. Among others Ntongela Masilela points out reductionist and exclusionist aspects of Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic: "Gilroy defines the 'Black Atlantic' as essentially a dialogical intellectual system of discourse between the United States and Europe about the nature of modernity concerning cultural and national identities" (88). As Masilela continues: "With such a conceptualization, Gilroy excludes Africa and Latin America ... from the historical parameters of the 'Black Atlantic'" (88).

During the heydays of the Civil Rights and the Black Power movement, soul songs such as "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black" by Nina Simone, "We Got More Soul" by Dyke and the Blazers and in particular "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)" by James Brown turned into hymns for the struggle of black liberation throughout the Americas and other sections of the globe concerned with anti-colonial struggles.³ The lives of the three Effania daughters revolve around black music of the

³ Referring to the diffusion of black cultures and politics during that epoch, Thomas Fawcett writes about new identitarian links between African American and Afro groups throughout Latin America and the Caribbean that travel via music—funk and soul—in particular: "the globality of soul and funk music ... shows that music can create linkages between distinct groups of the African diaspora. ... Soul and funk music linked distinct communities of the diaspora despite the potential barriers of linguistic and cultural differences. Fans and musicians alike adopted elements of the soul aesthetic—such as the afro hairstyle—in a

1960/70s and its dialectics of cultural heritage and renewal. Indigo improvises blues, soul, and funk tunes on the fiddle, Sassafrass absorbs the female blues tradition as a poet, and Cypress pursues black dance as career. In particular in the imaginary flights of Indigo, Sassafrass, and Cypress, we as reader follow the tracks of oral and musical traditions beyond the U.S. and throughout the Americas. In the images of the Charleston port, of bars and juke joints, and in the figures of colored sailors, the interconnectedness between the American South and the larger Caribbean crystalizes:

Sassafrass stayed by the wharf whenever she cd/after school she watched the men tyin knots/fixin nets & she figured her daddy knew all that/& he cd sing too like the sailors & dance like the west Indians/who was crew on a lotta boats in the seamy port of Charleston. Sassafrass wd sit on barrels wid the men & help them straighten out their nets/& listen to the tales of colored folks' lives in the islands & as far off as new guinea ... did they believe in jesus or were there other gods/& other heavens/like there were drums & special dances the Bermudans & Trinidadian sailors played in the

show of solidarity and as an implicit protest against the status quo” (24). Describing the impact of funk and soul for black liberation throughout the Americas, William L. Van Deburg in *New Day in Babylon*, states that “Transcending the medium of entertainment, soul music provided a ritual in song with which blacks could identify and through which they could convey important in-group symbols. Music was power and considered to be supremely relevant to the protracted struggle of black people for liberation. To some it was the poetry of the black revolution” (205).

evenin/showd sassafrass what they called the “jump-up”/or the mambo/sassafrass picked up a slight accent/& put her hand on her hip the way the men did when they were imitatin’ their girls at home/& sassafrass prayed she cd live like that/free in the country/surrounded by orange trees & men makin drums & goin out to fish & feasts for the different spirits.. sassafrass decided/bein with the colored sailors & dock workers/that she shd go everywhere there were dark folks at all/all over the world where her people lived/& she wd write it all down so other children wdnt feel lost (Shange 108-09)

The wharf of the port of Charleston expresses the spirit of locality and local identity. It also turns into a gateway for following sonic migrations throughout the Americas. Commenting upon black musical expression in the Americas, Roger D. Abrahams reminds us that

Not that these black expressive forms are not associated with specific places: the Cuban Habanera, the Samba of Rio, Reggae and Kingston, the Mississippi blues. But these are also recognizably vernacular inventions that achieved a place in the transnational entertainment industry rather than providing the kind of cultural reflexiveness that leads to the formation of a patria. (99)

What Abrahams suggests here is the diffusion of a larger black imaginary in market circles beyond the boundaries of nation-states. As he concludes, “These musics, and the peoples identifying themselves through them, knit together the entire region, even as they advertise local cultural invention to worldwide popular audiences” (100). What emerges is a vision of black Americas far beyond the U.S. South: “It is a region which not only includes the Caribbean and the U.S. South, but many coastal

outposts in South America on both the north, east, and west coasts, and many areas of the latifundium of Central America, including Mexico, Belize, and Costa Rica” (100). As I argue, modelling her female characters around Afro musical expression enhances the knitting of black histories in the novel. Being capable of drawing upon the rich transcultural imaginary of black musical expression, that also recalls the Anansi spirit of rebellion, Shange fuses oral, sonic, rhythmic, and written cultural expressions into a narrative that captures local spirit, transcends local boundaries and creates a translocal connectedness of black cultures in the Americas embracing Afro Latin America as well as Afro Brasil and Afro Caribbean as vital part of larger Afro Americas.

To conclude this part, the cotton and cane fields in Jamaica and the Southern United States come back to life in Indigo’s doll world and call for resistance and liberation: “Jamaican dolls in red turbans, bodies formed with confrey leaves because they’d had to work on Caribbean and American plantations” (Shange 6). Shange’s *Africa America* in the plural builds upon the historical link between black cultures in the Northern and Southern hemisphere of the Americas dating back to colonial systems of slavery. As Peter Wade stresses, “Both societies were slave societies, built on racially ranked stratification” (51)

In Shange’s novel, acts of resistance and liberation occur on the level of narrative, knowledge production, and spatial imaginary. Translocational storytelling in Shange’s rendering embraces optional forms of knowledge production (Mignolo) from different Afro and Afro-indigenous cultures. Cultural products, such as music, dance, recipes, alternative medicine, and folk beliefs among others, gain status as equally important historical and textual sources for the storyteller to narrate the mobility and

connectedness of black cultures. Translocational storytelling for Shange also means to give voice to different textualities, transcriptions, and translations; a side-by-side representation of Standard American English, the Black Vernacular and its variations; idiosyncratic spelling, chant-like poetic style and straightforward prose, oral and written discourse to capture the rich diversity of black women's cultural production in hemispheric black Americas.

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

Edwidge Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying* is a transnational memoir. Relating the life stories of her Uncle Joseph and her biological father in a family narrative of Haitian diasporic history with her own life as Afro Haitian writer living in the United States, Danticat creates a narrative of multiple entanglements. She uses a time in 2004 when she finds out about her own pregnancy and the life threatening diseases of both father figures to frame her memoir in which she lends her voice to both of them to tell their stories. During a short time of immediate personal interaction between all three, the two father figures are literally on the verge of losing their voices: Uncle Joseph is diagnosed with throat cancer and her father with end-stage pulmonary fibrosis. While both die in the end (Uncle Joseph detained by U.S. Customs, brutally held by the Department of Homeland Security in Miami after having fled from an angry mob in Haiti), their personal stories retell the tumultuous events in Haitian history at the beginning of the twentyfirst century and establish links to colonial history at large, such as frequent U.S. American interventions, and Haitian diasporic experiences in the U.S. Danticat integrates historical material, Haitian folk tales from her Grandmè

Melina's and family memories into a polyvocal narrative that connects various places in Haiti and the U.S.

Danticat position is a diasporic one. As Anthias notes, "the focus on location and translocation recognizes the importance of context, the situated nature of claims and attributions and their production in complex and shifting locales" (Anthias, "Beyond Feminism" n.pag.). In a similar vein, Stuart Hall alludes to the multiplicities of locations and identities of diaspora artists by asserting that "There's no place to speak from except from somewhere. But at the same time as somebody has to speak from somewhere, they will not be confined to that person or that place" (398). What we can derive from both Anthias and Hall is that one's native land is no longer necessarily home once the writer has left. What emerges are fractured lives and a desire to reconnect what seems multiplied and in flux, lost and forgotten. Writing from a diasporic perspective also requires complex self-positioning. Eveline Trouillot, French speaking educator and writer 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." In the interpretation by Walter 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 (xvi). Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat might add: "I am moving back and forth between Haiti and the U.S. embracing roots and routes simultaneously while narrating histories from a shifting point of view of multiple entanglements." By analyzing Edwidge Danticat's transnational memoir *Brother I'm Dying* (2007) as translocational storytelling and transnational knowledge production, I intend to explore

further how the black Americas at large can be read as a complex space of inter-American entanglement(s). Jo Collins, in a recent article with the title “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” (n.pag.), which challenge Eurocentric notions of a monadic and autonomous ‘self.’ In Collins’s 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 Danticat develops an alternative textual praxis namely, “*bricolage*” (n.pag.). By working with the diverse and contingent materials available (from other travel narratives to Kreyòl proverbs to pop songs), she opens doors for “provisional, discordant and relational signification” (n.pag.).

In a similar vein, but with regard to *Brother I’m Dying*, I argue that Danticat chooses translocational storytelling. By constructing a web of story lines she develops relational signification from a decolonial rather than postcolonial perspective. For her, multiple worlds and discourses need to coexist to fill the gaps and breaks within Uncle Joseph’s and her father’s stories. In a similar vein, she does not tell Haitian history as marginalized history; rather she tells it as relational history, related to domestic politics as well as global politics; and she posits flows, mobility, and traveling as paradigmatic for a translocational narration within the multilayered framework of her transnational memoir. In rendering Haitian-U.S. relations complex and transversal 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 she is of U.S. American immigration politics and imperialist expansionism. While she creates relational and dialogic patterns in her writing, she also pays attention to what Floya Anthias suggests, namely that “[i]f social locations can be thought of as social spaces defined by boundaries on the one hand and hierarchies on the other hand, then we are forced to think of them in relation to each other and also in terms of some of the contradictions we live in” (108). Class differences and political turmoil in Haiti, U.S. media stigmatization of Haitians as colored “boat people” without a home, and the detainment of Danticat’s fatally-ill uncle by U.S. Homeland Security affect the social spaces in and through which the members of the Danticat family move. Not surprisingly, memory and literary vision collide and produce discordance at the end of the memoir. Both father figures are remembered, buried together in a New York graveyard, and, simultaneously, envisioned walking the hills of Haiti while conversing in Creole. Likewise, fact and imagination clash and fuse in Danticat’s weaving of storylines. In her own words Danticat explains:

Real memory is fragmented, messy, disorganized, has no clever dialogue and you don't always get the ending of your choice. That's why I prefer to write fiction, though it is fiction that draws heavily from certain moments in my life. With my fictional memories, I can use lies to tell a greater truth, winding a different type of tale out of myself, one in which the possibilities for tangents and digressions are boundless; I can also weave a more elaborate web, where everyone's life can serve as a thread, including my own. (qtd. in Maynard 2)

As the metaphor of the web suggests, reminiscent of Anansi's survival spirit, Danticat's writing aspires to create stories of connectivity that may function as survival and a healing strategy for a diasporic people in constant processes of delocation and relocation. Her telling of her family story between different locations, nations, and black cultures 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 she creates at the same time a family history that traces a translocational and transversal pattern of entanglement. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot explains as regards his conception of historical narrators, "Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators" (2). And he distinguishes a two-part process of history, the "sociopolitical process" and "our knowledge of that process" (2). Moreover, "in the play of power in the production of alternative narratives ..., the production of traces is always also the creation of silences" (29). Danticat positions herself as self-referential, a self-critical narrative voice, as well as an actor in her memoir. She is also more than aware of the silences that historical narratives are bound to produce. Voices fail, crack, go silent, and may get lost. Danticat, as storytelling narrator, taps many sources such as 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. Literally and metaphorically 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 a safe haven for migrants from Haiti—socially the move of her father to New York

does not provide an upward movement, her uncle even dies in a contention camp in Florida—nor is it one of idealizing a life left behind in Haiti—too strong is the impact of violence in Haiti as a result of various colonial and neocolonial histories of inequality; it is rather an exemplary story of multiple migrations and manifold affiliations in the Americas, both conflictive as well as enriching. Metaphorically and geopolitically, Haiti and the U.S remain intertwined from the beginning of the text to its very end.

We may ask what is the voice behind the voices the reader encounters in *Brother I'm Dying*? Danticat posits herself as related to many worlds. She narrates and reflects mobility as a permanent existential condition. Departure and arrival, movement and transition form a constant dialectical presence in the text. Ideally, a narrative of mobile interconnectedness addresses the transversal, multidirectional, and interconnected nature of historical processes, political developments, and economic changes that one may consider fundamental for a more comprehensive understanding of the Americas as entangled space(s). In Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying*, traveling body, shifting voice, and wandering memory intersect. Hence, let me call the voice of Danticat's translocational storytelling a nomadic voice; a highly self-reflective one at that. In the words of Ana Luz: "The key element to describe the transit(ional) element is 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" (152).

Ana Luz establishes a triangular connection between movement, body, and cognition; a triangulation that is also a key to the workings of memory on a more

abstract level in Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying*. Already the opening lines of the memoir signal this complex connectivity:

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.

(3)

The initial paragraphs narrate an intense connectedness between daughter and father despite the spatial separation here defined between south and north within the family's U.S. diaspora. 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" (Luz 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 identifies herself as a complex mobile self, thinking, aching, feeling, and creating. For the mode of narration this means that she challenges and delinks the Cartesian self—"I think therefore I am." Rather, she gives voice to a discourse of memory that is cognitive, sensory, emotional, and discordant at the same time; a shifting yet, at the same time, honest voice addressing its own involvement and shortcomings. The narrative expresses Danticat's desire for related and connecting stories, memories, and visions. In *Brother*

I'm Dying Danticat relates her own present, past and future as well as that of her soon to be born child to the lives of her two father figures. Repeatedly, she inserts her voice into the narrative. "Both of you, together, tell me more. About you. About me. About all of us" (161). The few months of 'lived intersectionality' in their lives trigger off a much larger narrative than the one the 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" (26). As she explains, this process of memory writing and reconstruction forces her: "To look forward and back at the same time" (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 U.S., Danticat selectively recollects moments, events, and periods through which she narrates a particular history of U.S.-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 linking, and non-linear modes of narration. And it is important to note that she lends her voice to others. "I am writing this only because they can't" (26). Literally the voices of her uncle and father are doomed to fade. Her uncle undergoes a "radical laryngectomy" (38) and loses his voice completely. Her father's voice drowns in coughing due to his "pulmonary fibrosis" (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 discourse into the written. And frequently she translates from Creole

into English: “How do you feel, Papa?” I asked in Creole. “Ki jan wsanti w?” (13). What is at stake here are different and at times oppositional modes of knowledge production. The memoir unfolds a complex process of mediation that also sheds light upon optional ways of writing history and producing knowledge. Facing his throat surgery, her uncle ponders the importance of voice: “But if you had no voice at, he thought, you were simply left out of the constant hum of the world, the echo of conversations, the shouts and whispers of everyday life” (39). Danticat might add that you are in danger of being kept outside of history and being excluded from the production and diffusion of memory, history, and knowledge. Spivak’s famous question “Can the subaltern speak?” (24) reverberates with new meaning here. While both uncle and father are economically, politically, and socially active agents in their lifetimes, the slow process of losing their voices threatens them with silence and oblivion. Even the nomadic voice of the memoir is not always confident and in control. When she tries to announce her pregnancy to her parents she admits: “My voice cracked” (46). What this small instance reveals is that Danticat’s writing of history cannot be separated from subjectivity, emotionality, and personal involvement. Through a subjective voice she challenges the “instrumentalized reasoning,” the rationality discourse of “Enlightenment’s dialectical totalitarianism” (Saldívar 37). And through her translocational storytelling practice she rewrites the histories of Haiti and the U.S. at the same time “destabilizing U.S. nationalism, its nationalist historiography, and its various centers” (Saldívar 59).⁴

⁴ In his recent book *Trans-Americanity*, José David Saldívar moves beyond the well established paradigm of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands as contact zones to begin

For Danticat, if home exists, it is in motion and multiplied. She gives us news so-to-speak ‘on the move.’ Arrival and departure scenes at airports, like the anticipation of birth and death frame the narrative. Airport scenes frequently and deliberately interrupt and transit the stories set in Haiti and the U.S. underscoring the ruptures and reunions of family life: “Answering a final boarding call. My mother hurried away, her tear-soaked face buried in her hands. She couldn’t bear to look back” (57). Danticat’s first arrival in New York, too, is framed by airport scenes that reflect traumas of departure and arrival. Leaving one father figure for another does not come easy. “‘I suppose that’s how it is sometimes,’ my father said in a whisper of a voice. ‘One papa happy, one papa sad’” (111). Danticat exposes the harshness of experiencing

destabilizing U.S. nationalism” and its nationalist historiography (cf. 59). He unfolds a series of discourses along the lines of rediscovering vernacular knowledge and imaginaries as part of “subalternist discourses of the Américas” that open doors for alternative or optional historiographies (56). With a nod to Julio Ramos and his recent *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, Saldívar revisits José Martí’s key phrase “Latinamericanism” and exposes a double meaning within: “For ‘Latinamericanism’ ... both refers to the field-imaginary located in the metropolitan centers of the Américas (Havana, New York City, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Santiago) and names a vernacular knowledge in the longstanding tradition of subalternist discourses of the Américas, of the colonial world upside down described by Waman Poma as Pachakuti and, more recently, by Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas’s dictum ‘A world in which many worlds can co-exist.’” (56)

dislocation and relocation even within the family: “I felt my old life quickly slipping away. I was surrendering myself, not just to a country and a flag, but to a family I’d never been really part of” (106). The experience of home in the plural in *Brother I’m Dying* is conflictive, painful, and challenging, as Danticat embraces a nomadic self gradually and out of necessity. Home is not confined to a closed space; it is bound to a mobile and traveling sense of memory, be it oral or written. Twice she refers to her father’s cab, “a car he used as both a gypsy cab and a family car” (4); and “My father’s cab is named for wanderers, drifters, nomads. It’s called a gypsy cab ... It belongs entirely to the driver, who roams the streets all day looking for fares” (120). As Anthias reminds us:

Narratives of belonging involve both claims and attributions. As well as having an important social and political role, they function to ask us to find, discover or rediscover belonging and a shared place where we can feel “at home,” not just in the literal sense of place but also in the imagining of a collectivity, whether it be ethnic or national or a community structured by a shared gender or one about our class position. Such collective places, spaces, locales or positions are constructions that disguise the fissures, the losses, the absences, the borders within them. (“Beyond Feminism” n.pag.)

Danticat’s search for connecting and belonging does not stop at sites of mobility: “Walking through the terminal, I called friends, people” (60), she tells us announcing her pregnancy and sharing the news about her father’s deadly disease. She is literally in transit—in space, body, and time. Since she multiplies home and routes in her narrative reconstruction of trauma, violence, and black history, translocational

storytelling becomes the key to an optional historiography that attempts to capture flow, movement, migration, and the pluri-locality of place.

In *Brother I'm Dying* Danticat discursively creates a matrix to think locality, region, and nation with the prefix “trans” added. In Danticat’s narrative web of different story lines the cycle of life from birth to death remains interwoven throughout the text with the multiple displacements of family members. “Death is a journey we embark on from the moment we are born” (73), Danticat quotes a friend in the narrative. Retelling segments of her grandmother’s life, Danticat tells us:

She’d been told by her parents, that she was born when a man named Canal Boisrond was president of Haiti. Boisrond’s three year rule from July 1876 to July 1879 put Grandmè Melina’s age at somewhere between ninety-seven and one hundred years. Illness had brought Granmè Melina from the mountains of Léogâne, where she’d been living since her daughter moved to Port-au-Prince with Uncle Joseph She spent most of her days sitting on the front gallery watching people go by. But as soon as the sun went down she would be at the center of things as she livened up and told stories ... A woman, an old woman, who had traveled a long way from home and who had lived a *long* life. (75)

Grandmè Melina’s life and her continuous practice of storytelling confirm what Stephen Greenblatt claims about the historicity of mobility and cultural production. As Stephen Greenblatt states:

A vital global cultural discourse then is quite ancient; only the increasingly settled and bureaucratized nature of academic institutions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conjoined with an ugly intensification of ethnocentrism, racism, and

nationalism produced the temporary illusion of sedentary, indigenous literary cultures making sporadic and half-hearted ventures toward the margins. The reality, for most of the part as once again for the present is more about nomads than natives. (6)

The metaphorical view of death as a journey again reveals the triangular connection of body, time, and space that shapes the various narrative threads involved in reconstructing memory and history in the text. If Danticat can be called a “history teller,” she is a multilayered historical narrator embracing print history, oral history, and translation. Numerous storytellers appear in the transnational memoir whose presence indicates that Danticat moves beyond closed spaces both narratively and spatially. By relocating herself in Little Haiti in the midst of Miami, Danticat also topographically expresses a vision of the Americas as transversally connected and as entangled within and beyond national boundaries. Grandmè’s stories become the reservoir for memories, fables, and myths of rural Haiti, while her father becomes the teller of urban legend reflecting diaspora experience in New York: ““New York, like today’s Haiti,” he said ... ““is a place where only the brave survive”” (93).

To conclude this part, let me briefly turn to Rosi Braidotte who calls the nomadic subject “a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity” (22). Now contrary to that, Danticat’s returns to Haiti may be read as a nostalgic longing for the past and certainly many journeys in the narrative rather are of travelees, few of travelers. But she is looking for links and relations not for fixity and unity. In the words of Mary Ellen Brown: “The nomadic self must continue to act and

seek out new representations to temporarily ‘complete’ and centre her- or himself” (57). In *Brother I’m Dying*, I think, Danticat’s narrative voice pursues centering without a center, a form of mobile anchorage. Danticat’s nomadic voice crosses many boundaries and knits histories together of two important male figures in her life from a daughter’s perspective as an optional and relational way to think about the history of (black) Americas as entangled, translocally connected, and multi-relationally constituted. The web she creates discursively is at the same time a safety anchor for her diasporic self.

4. Conclusion

Ntozake Shange’s and Edwidge Danticat’s web-like storytelling practices connect the black Americas diachronically and synchronically. They permit us to rethink “African America” in the context of Latin American, Caribbean, North American, and Diaspora Studies. While they draw upon various Afro descendant cultures and histories, they reflect them through the lens of inter-American connectivity. Ntozake Shange with her polygeneric novel about mobile family life and Edwidge Danticat with her transnational memoir about black diaspora experience inscribe themselves in a long tradition of black migratory fiction in the Americas. But they develop explicitly translocational forms of storytelling to keep the importance of place in its multiplicity alive. As I pointed out at the beginning, Ira Berlin, in his *The Making of African America. The Four Great Migrations* (2010), describes migratory experience at the very heart of black experience in the Americas:

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.

(33)

What Berlin describes is a non-linear interrelation of time and space that marks a constant change between place and movement within African American cultures. From a historian's perspective he emphasizes the dynamics and tensions of arriving and departing and the often vicious cycle of constant repetition. In Ntozake Shange's and Edwidge Danticat's storytelling practices, Berlin's assumption of black cultures as not only inherently but extensively mobile finds expression in migratory patterns back and forth that show the black family as physically separated, divided geographically, constantly in motion, but also as connected; be it through means of letters, long-distance technology, recorded tapes, oral history, recipes, folk tales, taxis, and planes that help form complex webs of connecting what appears to be in constant threat of departure, disappearance, and change.

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