

"Silence, Voodoo, and Haiti in Mayra Montero's  
In the Palm of Darkness"

Danbhalah Wédo, gadé pitites ou yo, hé! Aïda Wédo, min pitites ou yo, hé!	Danbhalah Wédo behold your children, hey! Aïda Wédo, here are your children, hey!
Danbhalah Wédo, gadé pitites ou yo, oh! A yé, a yé, oh!	Danbhalah Wédo, behold your children, oh! A yey, a yey, oh!
Danbahalah, min z'enfants ou là	Danbhalah Wédo, here are your children.

In the last part of the twentieth century several Caribbean and non-Caribbean intellectuals have established a concerted and conscious effort to break with silence to redefine the very notion of Caribbeanness:

This designation [of Caribbeanness] might serve a foreign purpose--the great powers' need to recodify the world's territory better to know, to dominate it--as well as a local one, self-referential, directed toward fixing the furtive image of collective Being. Whatever its motive, this urge to systematize the region's political, economic, social and anthropological dynamics is a very recent thing. (Benítez Rojo 2)

Whether this current activity serves purposes that are foreign to our multiple Caribbean experiences, this designation, when devised from within, can be conducive to a better understanding of what the Caribbean subject or that "furtive image of collective Being" (Benítez Rojo 2) is or has been. Mayra Montero's novels and essays, through the exploration of Caribbean music, flora and fauna, ethnicity, and travel narratives

contribute to recent and evolving theorizations of a Caribbean experience. A novel such as In the Palm of Darkness (1997) belongs to a tradition in the Hispanic Caribbean started by intellectuals like Alejo Carpentier with texts such as The Kingdom of this World (1949), War of Time (1958) and Explosion in the Cathedral (1962).<sup>1</sup> It has been already well established that many of Carpentier's narratives are based on musicology and on attempting a revalorization of an Afro-Caribbean experience. By following Carpentier's efforts, Montero explores the features that form or give shape to our regional cultures within the Caribbean.

However, Mayra Montero's narrative, In the Palm of Darkness, is a metacritical elaboration of topics already explored by other Caribbean writers. Although one could argue that many novels interpret the Caribbean subject by reproducing musical experimentation and composition through literature, In the Palm of Darkness is a novel based on the literary strategy denominated as *rhetoric of silence*. In Montero's novel the strategy gives voice to the suppressed Other. Furthermore, it aids in the shifting process of the narrative point of view that acknowledges the presence and validity of other forms of knowledge production or of experiencing the Caribbean subject. This essay explores how Mayra Montero interprets the rhetoric of silence and the religious practice of voodoo as cultural strategies of survival.

Many critics of Montero's works have focused their attention on the main character of In the Palm of Darkness, Victor Grigg, a U. S. herpetologist who was hired to search for a specimen of the elusive frog called the *grenouille du sang* (*Eleutherodactylus sanguineus*). However, this essay emphasizes the importance of the quiet and often silent and mysterious Haitian guide called Thierry Adrien, because it is through his silence and religion that the novel offers a new voice to the Caribbean subject, Haitian in particular. In the same manner, although the narrative line or context of the novel is about the declining of the amphibian species in the Caribbean and the rest of the world, I believe that the realities of Haitian voodoo and the syncretic beliefs of its practitioners are also important, but before continuing with this analysis I would like to summarize the novel by using the words of its editor, Edith Grossman:

The quest for an elusive amphibian in the mountains of violence-torn Haiti brings together an unlikely pair of hunters--American herpetologist Victor Grigg and his Haitian Guide--whose individual stories unfold and intertwine in a mesmerizing tale of love, sex, and fraternal rivalry; of the propagation and extinction of species in the natural world; and of the mysterious forces of nature that govern the fate of all living creatures.

No one can explain the catastrophic disappearance of various species of amphibians all over the world, including the "blood frog" (*grenouille du sang*) pursued by Victor and Thierry from the bloody Mont de Enfants Perdus--littered with corpses, the work of Haitian *macoutes* (thugs)--to the remote Casetaches.

Significantly, Thierry's father was also a hunter, but his quarry was another species of fauna, wandering packs of the living dead (*zombies*). The rich and tragic tale of Thierry's family, his life and loves, and his curious destiny, informs the obsessive search of the two men from different cultures.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding Montero's literary production and interest in the black Caribbean, Margarite Fernández Olmos explains that:

The continued denial of the role of African-based traditions and popular experience in the definition of a national culture, as well as the exclusion of the significance of ethnic and gender minorities, confers an added importance and urgency to the role of artists such as Montero, the language and substance of whose works correspond to Edward Kamau Brathwaite's description of a "literature of African experience" in the Caribbean. (271)

Following Fernández Olmos' comments, one should further explore

the metacritical differences between In the Palm of Darkness and other texts, such as all those aforementioned, that have engaged in the same exploration. Roberto González Echevarría explains that writers like Carpentier have shown an interest in revisiting and recuperating the origins of Caribbean and Latin American cultures and history. His theory of "archival myth" theorizes that the Caribbean writers' return to the archives reflects a desire to create a new beginning based on our myths (that would be African based according to Carpentier's interpretation).<sup>3</sup>

In Carpentier's texts, as in García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, for example, exists an attempt to create a foundational myth of Latin America. This effort, according to González Echevarría, proposes Latin American history as a myth, as the history of the Other. This purposefully created otherness allows the writers to gain a critical distance from their cultural past. Therefore, those post-1920's literary works are turned into, or can be viewed as, anthropological meditation. The idea behind this type of discourse in the novel is to claim an origin that is clearly differentiated from Western civilization, which in the past has been considered as decadent. According to critics such as Mercedes López-Baralt, Carpentier viewed this civilization as "weak, narcissistic, excessively adorned, bohemian, inclined towards to pornography, perverse, deceiving, and bisexual" (85).<sup>4</sup> Consequently, revisiting the primigenial could give Latin Americans the opportunity to

reconstruct anew their cultural and historical identity.

Although anthropology was an important discourse in the 1920's and later, writers in that era thought that they could transcend it through their literary discourses. For them, the reason was simple. Literature opened the space for utopian imagination in the construction of a national or regional subjectivity. Hence, the interpretation of Latin America was to be searched and devised through the literary creation and the construction of meaning in the written word. Still, this type of discourse had its traps. Soon, Carpentier discovered that there is no epiphany or encounter with a mythical past. The voyage of return to the origins was deemed impossible.<sup>5</sup> He promptly realized that writers like him have been traveling only within their own consciousness, thereby disenfranchising those whom they intended to portray.<sup>6</sup> Using Carpentier's and Levi-Strauss's texts as examples, López-Baralt summarizes this point by saying that:

Beyond the problem of possible and reciprocal influences between both authors [Carpentier and Levi-Strauss], I am interested in the terrible doubts casted upon Western anthropology, condemned to sterility due to its ethnocentrism, underlined by the trip's failures in both texts. (89)

She continues by explaining that: "What contributes to the failure in both attempts of the main characters is precisely the

fact that none of them **opened a space that could give a voice to the Other**. They did not find the other because they did not listen to him" (emphasis mine) (89). Precisely, departing from silencing the Other's voice, Mayra Montero structures and produces her novel, In the Palm of Darkness.

Proving that silence has multiple manifestations in the literary realm would be easy, but in this essay (if the reader can forgive the contradiction) silence is directly tied to the voices of several Haitian characters such as Thierry Adrien, Victor Grigg's guide. In other words, what is uttered and what is kept silenced should be interpreted as a type of indirect discourse that needs to be actively deciphered by the reader. However, in the novel silence also has many avatars. As an example, the novel starts with a "thank you note" and the book is dedicated to a Puerto Rican Herpetologist and to the Task Force on Declining Amphibian Population devoted to explaining the current problem of the amphibians' disappearances in Puerto Rico.<sup>7</sup> Precisely, if we interpret the word *disappearance* as an empty space that leads to silence, the vanishing of the amphibians (of the *grenouille du sang* in particular) and their voices is the *leitmotif* of the novel. Yet Victor Grigg, the herpetologist, resists using the word *disappearances*, which denies the seriousness of this fact:

At first we avoided calling it by that name and used

less violent words: "Decline" was my favorite, amphibian populations were "declining"; entire colonies of healthy toads went into permanent hiding; the same frogs we had grown tired of hearing only a season earlier fell silent and became rare; they sickened and died, or simply fled, and no one could explain where and why. (7)

Thus, the idea of silence is present in multiple avatars throughout the novel and it is the main rhetorical element that structures the novel. Silence here is an isotopical presence.<sup>8</sup>

Lisa Block de Behar understands that a *rhetoric of silence* is inherently a contradiction, but she also explains that it refers to a set of dialectical speculations that help writers to avoid the automatization of language. In other words, it can be viewed as a reaction against stereotypification. She also adds that resistance to write clearly about something is a constitutive and essential element of reading. Therefore, for her, writing and reading are events that manifest themselves simultaneously and that are tightly interwoven. Block de Behar continues by explaining that for writers like Sartre, being silent is not to mute ideas, but that it is more a type of resistance that communicates something. Somehow, it reveals a rebellious attitude toward abusing repetitious statements (stereotypes) or against the naivete of seeking truth only



through words. From this one can extrapolate that silence, as a rhetorical strategy, is an invitation to read and make sense out of silence. This strategy calls for the immediate and active participation of the reader. In the Palm of Darkness leads the reader into this process. However, silence is of no use if the reader is not aware that there is something to be done with it, that he or she should read beyond and interpret this apparent gap in words or ideas.

The representation of voodoo practices in the novel, including its music, work together with a *rhetoric of silence* as a relevant strategy that refers to the characterization of a Caribbean subjectivity. Voodoo uses music and dance to induce communication with the *loases*. Through their musical understanding and rhythmic body movements, listeners become more active participants. About this idea Michael Ventura explains that the music produced by the drums is not only meant for communication, but that contradictorily "in this culture the drum is so sacred an instrument that some are built only for display. They are too holy to touch. 'An instrument of significant silence, not reverberation.'" (31). He also argues that the Western musical notation system cannot capture the full complexity of the traditional African rhythms, also seen in voodoo ceremonies. Nevertheless, within that complexity of sounds there is a core of calm or silence, which he identifies as

"the focused silence of the Master, the silence out of which revelation rises" (31-31). This connection between silence and revelation is what Mayra Montero explores in her narrative.

Montero's texts have been compared with Alejo Carpentier's narratives, which commonly employ music as an important structural component. As an example, Carpentier's The Lost Steps (1953) is a novel that deals with music and the impulse of a composer to travel to the origins of Latin American culture through music.<sup>9</sup> In In the Palm of Darkness, Montero hints that some aspect of music, silence in particular, is a key element for the novel. In the chapter entitled *Indian Hut*, Victor meets the Haitian herpetologist Emile Boukaka, who is a symbolic figure in the novel because of his relationship to amphibians and to music:

We spent more time talking about other species; I made an effort to handle with some grace the enormous quantity of data provided by Boukaka. I was amazed by his capacity for detail, his precision, I can even say his erudition. When we said good-by he shook my hand; I was about to tell him that he reminded me of a famous musician, I had been trying to think who it was he resembled and then I looked into his eyes and decided it was Thelonious Monk. It may have been irrelevant but I remembered a composition of Monk's that wasn't played too often: \*See you later, beautiful frog+.

(97)

Although the narrator suggests that establishing a comparison between the Haitian herpetologist and Monk is a non consequential fact, Monk's style reveals that silence is a crucial or central compositional element in his jazz style. Some critics have said that Monk's compositions exhibit a "strange angularity that is not always easily assimilated" (The Thelonious Monk Website). That angularity or strangeness is based on long periods of silence integrated in his bebop jazz compositions.<sup>10</sup> This point is clearly stated by Thelonious Monk himself when he says to a friend: "You know what's the loudest noise in the world, man? The loudest noise in the world is silence" (Humphrey). One of the many intertextual aspects between Montero and Carpentier is their relationship to musical silence. In the Palm of Darkness is constructed on one of Monk's key musical elements (i.e., silence) in the same fashion that Carpentier's The Lost Steps (1953) is constructed following the anthropological and ethno-musical theories of Schaffner. The reader who can make the intertextual connections between Monk and Carpentier's comments will be able to read silence from a new point of view.

Silence in the text is also presented in many other avenues that contribute to a general and coherent literary strategy. For example, the communication between parents and sons, either for Thierry or for Victor, is always truncated. Thierry's father

would never utter the names of his beloved ones: "Thierry's father had been a wary man who avoided speaking the names of his children" (64). In the same fashion, Thierry never pronounces the names of those he loves. Victor, on the other hand, seems to ignore signals and messages that his family can interpret well and that nobody explains to him until he finds out after the fact:

My mother insisted that the fleshy blond was my father's girlfriend. She said this quite often, until one day I told her of my suspicions that she was really Vu Dinh's mistress. I remember her bursting into laughter: "Dino? You mean you don't know the little Chinaman doesn't like women? You mean your father hasn't told you?" And then she added: "You must be the only person who doesn't know, the husband is always the last to find out." It was a difficult blow for me to accept. I had been sitting next to her, and I remember that I stood up in a daze and left without saying good-by. (117)

This commentary reveals a painful side of Victor's marriage with Sarah, and it also demonstrates his lack of communication with his parents, until it comes to him as in a white blinding light. This silence is accentuated by the letters he is attempting to write to his father, but that he ultimately destroys since they cannot fully express his ideas:

The letter to my father was totally different, I wanted to be affectionate, I began by telling him about Thierry and his great interest in ostriches. It was a way of telling him that I was thinking about the ranch and the birds, that I often thought of him. But the letter came out so cold that I began another one, and then a third, and finally tore up all three. I made a little heap of torn paper on the ground and then kicked the pieces away with the toe of my shoe. (149)

Victor's inability to communicate with his wife and parents condemn him to silence. Guided by Thierry's conversation, and after having a talk with his mother, Victor realizes that Martha is probably having an affair with Barbara. His relationship with her is ridden with resentments due to his sustained silences: "Martha was capable of resorting to any kind of trick to get the secret out of me" (6). This silence is reciprocal and at the end it contributes to the destruction of their relationship: "Martha closed her eyes and didn't say another word to me, not even good-bye" (42).

Victor's inability to read his family's body silences is paralleled by his inability to read other body silences. Victor and Thierry are searching for the frog in the regions of the Casetaches, a mountain that will soon turn into a forbidden area. A secret society wants to secure the region for their illegal and violent activities. To warn off all intruders, including Victor,

the mutilated body of a killed man is placed for public display:

That night, just before we went to bed, we listened to the radio. They mentioned the disfigured corpse we had seen at the entrance to Jérémie: They suspected it was the body of a school teacher who had been missing for five or six days. In addition to the mutilation of his face, the body was missing a finger, the index finger of his left hand. Thierry asserted that even though they didn't say so on the radio, the lack of that finger was like a message. (115)

In the novel, Thierry explains that based on the missing limbs or body parts the Haitian people know why and by whom this man was killed. Evidently, the message is sent to those who can understand. Clearly, persons like Victor cannot possibly know or understand this information, and so are limited to observe in awe.<sup>11</sup>

Thierry is one of the few, being the only Haitian within the group of whites in the expedition to the Haitian hinterland, who can understand the hidden meanings of the signs and marks in the displayed bodies. But his reaction is merely to relay the warning message without explaining the precise meaning of it. He silences the full meaning he has gained from his participation in the cult of voodoo, where the body becomes a metaphorical crossroad between the human and the divine.<sup>12</sup> After interpreting the messages written on the dead body, Thierry understands that

"The mountain is occupied" (41) and that they have to go down while they still can. Contrary to Thierry's advice, Victor's reaction is to obtusely ignore this message: "I shook my head and turned my back. I wanted to find a phrase, a single word, that would melt his fear, but he spoke first" (42).

In the novel, Thierry is introduced to the cult of voodoo when he is initiated into one of the Haitian secret societies of voodoo. He will become a *rayado* (or marked one). Emile Boukaka, the Haitian herpetologist mentioned before, is also the priest or *houngan* who marked and initiated him into the society. Thierry explains his initiation by Boukaka:

Then Cameroon asked if I wanted to join the Society. I told him yes, as soon as I could, but that couldn't happen until I underwent many trials of sorrow and trials of joy, which are the most difficult. They shaved my head, they took off my clothes so as man could paint my body, lines on my skull, lines on my arms and legs. Do you know who the man was who painted me? Emile Boukaka himself, you met him there in Port-au-Prince. Boukaka is the Mpegó of the Power, the Priest of the Symbols and Signs, the Master of the Casts, the Tracer of Marks. (127-8)

Here, Thierry is speaking about a ceremony that is woven with the ability to interpret the marks of the Other's symbolic order,

represented in this voodooist initiation. This a crucial passage the novel because it puts into a cultural perspective the strategy of silence devised by the characters and utilized by the Montero. The immediate effect is to engage the reader in a process of decoding, to position him or her within the symbolic order presented by Thierry. As a counterpart to silence, this invitation appears throughout the narration, thus turning it into a literary isotopy. Along the same lines, if one would attempt to identify a nuclear action in the novel, it would be the *invitation to search*. In fact, the novel starts with Victor being invited, by a Harvard herpetologist called Vaughn Patterson, to search for the *eleutherodactylus sanguineus*. As in the novel written by Wade Davis, The Serpent and the Rainbow, the white scientist receives the distinction and honor of being asked to conduct this search.

Victor's mother comments also stimulated this curiosity and quest for knowledge: "My mother always said you had to look at life as if it were the suspicious start of a crime: tying up loose ends, finding clues, following the trail coldly, as if it didn't even concern you" (20-1). It is precisely she the one who tells him that nothing is the result of randomness and it is also she the one who will instill in him a desire to become a scientist. Precisely, a scientific discourse is present in the novel as short excerpts, after every chapter, accounting for the



declining or disappearance of amphibians in different parts of the world. This scientific discourse is also present in the form of a travel narrative that is attempting to explain those disappearances. At the end of the novel, this attempt is presented as one advocated to failure since this discourse cannot account for anything beyond the material world.

As already said, the cultural and religious context of voodoo in Haiti puts this searching and the silence present in the novel into perspective. The presence of Thierry mediates both aspects: a character that functions as a metaphorical hinge between the scientific and anthropological discourses, and the religious world. In other words, the novel is developed as a locus where several discourses contend for attention and recognition. Thierry seems to be the pivotal point of that tension. Again, the novel seems to be an intertextual reference to The Serpent and the Rainbow. In both novels, anthropological observations are disseminated along with the scientific search expressed by the white main characters, the searchers, who are guided by a local Haitian character believer in the syncretic practices and religions of voodoo. However, Montero will take this novel a step further to establish a difference between Carpentier's, Wade's, and her own narrative.

In In the Palm of Darkness, Thierry has the mission to incorporate in his personal narrative the voices of those who are in danger of being obliterated:

The first time they told me that story I was very little, but the first thing I asked was what had happened to the woman carrying the sack of bottles. That's a defect of mine when people tell me something I always keep track of the ones in the background, the ones who disappear for no reason, the forgotten ones.

(12)

Clearly, his faith in his *loas* guides his concerns, which are a reflection on the situation of Haiti at the turn of the century. Thierry's thoughts and preoccupations are also integrated to his general identification with nature, which is a basic component of the cult of voodoo. He describes the feelings he experienced when he saw the *grenouille du sang* for the first time with Papa Crapaud:

I could have squashed it if I wanted to, or put it in the jar and kept it for Papa Crapaud, who would have given anything to see it, but it occurred to me that maybe bad luck came with the *grenouille du sang* because everybody killed it. If I let it live, maybe it would go to the *loas*, who are its natural masters, and quiet them by telling them how well I had treated it. (30)

It is evident then that his religion is intertwined with ecological preoccupations. Another instance that reveals this connection is the law that guides all his actions and that gets

him close to his *loas* and to nature: the "Law of Water." This is the law that he will attempt to teach Papa Crapaud and Victor. This communication effort with the two white scientists is related to his mission in life of not only helping them to fulfill their scientific objectives, but he also wants to save them by teaching them this Law. In the novel, Thierry becomes fond of both Papa Crapaud and Victor; he identifies with their sorrows and difficulties in love. Papa Crapaud, the previous white scientist who was also researching amphibians, fall madly in love with Ganesha, but this relationship eventually leads him to a strange death.<sup>13</sup> The scientists' interest in the frog's fates parallels Thierry's interest in the fates of Papa Crapaud and Victor.

In some fashion one could argue that Thierry sees both of them as avatars of the same entity, somehow respecting the sacred in them.<sup>14</sup> Their love stories, interest in the amphibians, sorrows, Haiti, and Thierry (as their guide) are the elements linking them, thus giving the novel a cyclical structure. For Thierry, saving the lives of those two white scientists is teaching them about a new human perspective based on tradition and spirituality. Victor summarizes this when he says:

What you love, he said, you must respect, and the principle of all love is memory. I could commit his words to memory, and he advised me to learn them, but

repeating them without the authorization of the "mysteries" brought severe punishment. Since he hadn't been able to save Papa Crapaud's life, perhaps now, after so many years, he could save the life of another frog hunter. (74)

From that moment on Thierry tries to teach Victor "La ley del agua," which is the foundation of his beliefs. However, at the beginning Victor ignores Thierry's lessons. Victor's identification with Haiti is minimal, his obsession is just finding the frog, his world is his own. The search for the little frog is turned into a self-conscious exploration that closes the door to his social, religious, and political surroundings. In fact, Victor has a distorted vision of Haiti and his remarks are in more than one instance racist. In the chapter entitled *Pereskeia quisqueyana* he makes several comments that reveal contempt for Haiti and its inhabitants. When Victor sees Yoyotte's photo, he describes her by focusing on traits that have fueled racist thoughts about ugliness in human aesthetics: "To have her picture taken she had put on a little hat with flowers, and probably had painted her lips, though I wasn't sure about that, the photograph was black and white and her mouth would have been prominent with or without lipstick" (152). Victor continues her description by focusing now on her daughter's hair: "Her daughter, on the other hand, was a tall,

heavysset young woman with short, spiky hair; for the picture she had laughed and placed her arm around her small mother, tilting her head until her porcupine bristles touched the other woman's gray hair" (112).

In the same chapter, when he talks about his barber, he uses the following phrase: "the man who passed for a barber in Marfranc, a scarecrow of a man called Phoebus, to give me a haircut" (158).<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, he also describes Sarah (a white botanist who is also searching for a rare species of plants) in harsh terms but he is nevertheless looking for a certain beauty in her.

Also, as with his endangered amphibians, Victor animalizes Thierry by seeing as a rare species that should be recorded before it disappears too. When Victor is at the hospital, after being attacked as a warning that he should leave the mountain where he is conducting the search, he attempts to record Thierry's description and explanation of the "Law of Water." But Thierry asks Victor to turn off the recorder since "The law he was about to teach me could exist only in the mind and on the tongue of men." (74) However, Victor cannot understand at that moment the spiritual laws that Thierry is explaining for him. Before Thierry leaves the hospital, Victor again conveys the idea that Thierry is equal to an animal not to be trusted: "He walked out of the room, not making a sound, and I was reminded of Bengali servants in the movies, the ones who always end up stabbing their

masters" (66). Evidently, at the beginning of the novel there is no identification with his guide and what he represents.

In another chapter, Victor purposefully ignores the explanation that Emile Boukaka gives him about the disappearances of the amphibians. However, it is clear that Boukaka's explanation is central to the novel and the character's representation:

They say that Awé Taroyo, the god of waters, has called the frogs down to the bottom. They say they have seen them leave: Freshwater animals diving into the sea, and the ones that don't have the time or strength to reach the meeting place are digging holes in the ground to hide or letting themselves die along the way. (95)

Victor is confused by Boukaka's criticism about the prejudices and limitations of the Western scientific thought:

"The great flight has begun," he repeated. "You people invent excuses acid rain, herbicides, deforestation. But the frogs are disappearing from places where before of that has happened.

I wondered who he meant by "you people." You people, the professional herpetologists. Or you people, the biologists who hold their conferences in Canterbury, in Nashville, in Brasilia, hold them behind closed doors and walk out more perplexed than when they came in. You people, fearful, finicky people,

incapable of looking at the dark, recalcitrant,  
atemporal side of the decline. (96)

This explanation signals the beginning of Victor's discomfort with who "you people" implicates.

However, Thierry's efforts to save Victor are metaphorically placed in the correct person and are moving in the right direction. Victor's transformation is gradual, and although not total one has to recognize that Victor is not completely blind to Haiti's crucible. Initially, the reader can perceive an indication of this gradual transformation:

In Haiti my perspiration had turned rank, almost thick, and when it dried, it stiffened my shirt. Several times a day I found myself sniffing under my arms; I was intrigued by the odor, my own unfamiliar odor like the odor in a dream. Inhaling that intense, personal, unexpected smell gratified a part of me I can't define, it stimulated my senses, I thought it made me more attractive. (22)<sup>16</sup>

He continues by explaining about the particular light of Haiti and how that light gives vitality to men such as Thierry. Again, in the chapter *Pereskeia quisqueyana*, Victor's increasingly critical point of view helps him to see Haiti as a desolated land. This preoccupation grows stronger and toward the end of the novel he seems to feel for and understand Haiti in a

different light. The chapter entitled *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is an important one since it witnesses and ratifies this transformation:

[H]ow would I explain that Haiti wasn't simply a place, a name, a mountain with a frog that had survived? How would I tell him about Cito Francisque, the man who had driven me off the Mont des Enfants Perdus? [. . . ] how would I make him see that Haiti was disappearing, that the great hill of bones growing before our very eyes, a mountain higher than the peak of Tête Boeuf, was all that would remain? (170-1)

The words quoted above are the same words uttered by Thierry at the beginning of the novel. Therefore, once recycled by Victor they demonstrate how Victor is engaged in a process of identification with Thierry and in a process of a theoretical shifting of point of view.

In another moment of enlightenment, Victor also assumes and repeats Thierry's phrase about frogs and the understanding of the world: "And in that I was like Papa Crapaud: Frogs were my whole world, and the guts of a frog, as Thierry said, cannot enlighten a man" (174). Evidently, the process of transformation here is irreversible once initiated. Suddenly, Victor discovers his connection with Thierry when he realizes that their suffering and respective sorrows have joined them, that they refer to a common



emotional and existential space:

Suddenly he said something that struck me: A man never knows when the grief begins that will last forever. I looked at him and saw a tear running down his cheek.

"Not grief, not joy," I said very quietly. "A man never knows anything, Thierry, that's his affliction."

(97)

From that realization occurs an illuminative leap at the end of the novel when Victor realizes that Thierry is a special person surrounded by the darkness of violence in Haiti. In this moment Thierry's initial animalization is reverted:

Thierry sat looking at me and began a sad monologue, it was like a confession, he talked about the man he had stabbed to death and about his entire family. I realized that he too was a dying species, a trapped animal, a man who was too solitary. (178)

Victor's use of the absolute "a man" rewrites his earlier use of "trapped animal."

The penultimate chapter of the novel is a reflection of Thierry about his life, past, and religious beliefs, once they have captured the last exemplar of the *grenouille du sang*. This chapter is a voodooist theorization on the cyclical aspect of life and how any man or woman is destined to repeat his or her path:

A man repeats all his roads, he repeats them without realizing it, his illusion is that they're new. I have no more illusions, but I do have to walk my own steps, the few I have left, and you have to walk yours, and the woman who stayed up there and will be dead tomorrow, she will walk again on the path that is hers.

(180-1)

This idea is directly connected to voodoo and the notion of humanity as an image, model and integral part of a spiritual world that intersects with it. Therefore, every human being has to repeat the path of the *loas* since what is at stake, what is longed for is the realization of his or her spiritual self and the order that he or she belongs to. In this sense, we can relate repetition to a ritualistic connection with the *loas*.

Not surprisingly, In the Palm of Darkness ends with the death of all the main characters. They die just as they fulfill their search: the *grenouille du sang* is found and Thierry's mission when Victor gains wisdom and understanding. Although all those deaths could function as a denunciation of Haiti's violent world (which Victor continuously criticizes in the novel), they could be also related to the Petro *loas*, who are acrid, blood thirsty, and demanding of big sacrifices. In fact, the bloody Haitian revolution in the eighteenth century started under the auspices of the Petro *loas*. Still, what is probably more

important to consider based on this kind of ending is that in the face of total annihilation there is the possibility of transformation: Upon dying, according to voodoo practices, one will join with the *loases*.

This last point will bring us back to the issues of anthropology, science, voodoo, and silence. López-Baralt explains that intellectuals such as Carpentier and Levi-Strauss (and one could add Davis) failed in their attempt to engage in an understanding of the Other. Those authors's characters' travels, and adventures are failed attempts since none of them opened a space that would give room for the voice of the Other. As an example, a novel such as The Serpent and the Rainbow closes its last chapter with a statement that reveals this deafness:

I was watching all this when I felt something fluid--not water or sweat or rum--trickle down my arm. I turned to a man pressed close beside me and saw his arm, riddled with needles and small blades, and the blood running copiously over the scars of past years, staining some leaves bound to his elbow before dripping from his skin to mine. The man was smiling. He too was possessed, like the youth straddling the dying bull, or the dancers and the women wallowing in the mud. (267)

Statements like the one above are typical of a Western and white mentality that understand Haiti only under the light of the

uncanniness of a possession.<sup>17</sup>

Characters like the scientists Papá Crapaud and Victor S. Grigg are trapped, at least initially, in the same tendency to silence that Haitian Other. They are somehow observing the Other in the same manner shown in the paragraph quoted above and they do not look at themselves when they speak with Thierry. Therefore they were not able to understand the Other and their relationship to that Otherness. In the Palm of Darkness the evolution of a point of view and break with a silence responds to the obliteration of the Other's voice. That is why the structure of the novel is dialogical in its alternation of narrative voices from one chapter to the other: Thierry is not only talking to Victor and attempting to teach him the Law of Water, but Victor is in the process of following and accepting this conversation. One could argue that both characters and narrators are coauthors of the text's narrative.

As a compensational device, for the past silencing of the Haitian Other and in spite of all the violence that surrounds all the characters, the novel ends with the chapter narrated by Thierry. In this chapter Thierry will ratify his voodoo beliefs. He ends by repeating the prayer that is a mirror for the whole process of growth of the two main characters:

I will see everyone I've been waiting for, probably everyone who loved me, I will stretch out my arms to them and speak to them slowly so they'll understand:

"You, darkness...:

Then they will show me the light. (181)

"You, darkness, enfolding the spirit of those who ignore your glory" (181) is therefore a summary or a lesson that opens up or illuminates the life of the characters. At the end, the light of understanding shuns all darkness, by learning to listen to the Other, and by the other ratification of his Otherness. This understanding refers to a theorization of a Caribbeanness based on the acknowledgment and recognition of a voice that refers to a black experience of the Caribbean. This requires from anybody *reading* the Caribbean to abandon the automatization of culture and language in order to be able to look deep, beyond the surfaces, at the black and Haitian experience of the Caribbean.

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#### Notes

1. The novel In the Palm of Darkness was originally written in Spanish in 1995 with the title of Tú, la obscuridad. It was translated into English by Edith Grossman in 1997.

2. This summary appears in the book jacket of the English edition.

3. Here I am making reference to the theories of myth and history presented by Roberto González-Echevarría in his book Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative.

4. From now on, all López-Baralt's translations are mine.
5. The issue of an impossible return to the origins was foreseen in the nineteenth century by writers such as Eugenio María de Hostos. His novel entitled La peregrinación de Bayoán is an excellent example of this kind of abstraction.
6. When one considers the narrator in The Kingdom of this World one can conclude that the narrator is Europeanized. In the best of all cases he goes through a process of hybridization that leaves apart the experiences of black Haitians, since their reality already falls under the "real maravilloso" category.
7. This "thank you" note and dedication appears only in the Spanish version.
8. According to Gerald Prince, an isotopy is defined as "The repetition of semiotic features that institutes the coherence of a text" (47).
9. Roberto González Echevarría, in *Myth and Archive*, interprets this novel as the "founding archival fiction" (3).
10. To better understand this point one could listen to Monk's compositions such as *Rootie Tootie*, *Consecutive Seconds*, *Trinkle Tinkle*, or *Blue Monk*. All of these songs can be found in the record entitled Monk's Blues.
11. This violence corresponds to the extremely turbulent moments in Haiti's political history in the 1980's and 1990's. Between 1990 and 1994, while the United States of America poorly negotiated the return of the deposed Jean Bertrand Aristide (who won the elections by getting 70 percent of the votes) to Haiti, the country suffered from one of the worst repressions and human rights abuses in their political history. Morris Morley and Chris McGillion, in their article "Disobedient Generals and the Politics of Redemocratization," explain that the Bush and Clinton administrations ignored the Haitian voices that claimed for a true redemocratization process.
12. This essay does not want to imply that the violence that takes place in the novel is fostered by the multiple aspects of voodoo, but one has to recognize also that Duvalier's regime utilized this popular religious practice to terrorize the population. He frequently appeared in public dressed as the loa Baron Samedi (guardian of the cemeteries).
13. In the Hindu mythology, Ganesha was born from death and destruction. Although it is identified as male, in this novel a female impersonates his qualities. This is perfectly acceptable

for the tradition of voodoo, since most entities have multiple avatars which include male and female versions. For example, Chango can be male and also female.

14. In voodoo practices the *loa* and the "horse" are tightly interconnected. One cannot exist without the other. In fact, Victor seem to be a son of Chango, since he dies by immersion in water or drowning. In voodoo practices it is said that "el agua apaga la candela" (water puts off fire) and this is a clear reference to Yemayá and Changó.

15. In the original, the phrase used is "un adefesio llamado Phoebus" (153). The implications of the word *adefesio* are even stronger than with scarecrow. In Spanish the word *adefesio* is related to a person who is extravagant, fool, ridiculous, or ugly.

16. The expression used in the English edition differs from the original in Spanish. For the expression "I thought it made me more attractive" (22) the original used, "presiento que me enriquecía" (39). The latest can be interpreted as a statement of personal or internal transformation not about physical or external beauty.

17. As a matter of fact, the shameless military and political intervention of Haiti in the twentieth century was originally supported by a moral and religious superiority of the Western world that condemned the "primitive" and "savage" practices of voodoo.

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