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THE CARIBBEAN HOLODECK: VIRTUAL EXPERIENCES AND VISIONS OF A TRIPARTITE SPACE IN THE LITERATURE OF EDWIDGE DANTICAT

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This paper focuses on perspective – specifically, the Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat's treatment of perspective. I propose that Danticat's manipulation of introspection or the variable internal points-of-view of her characters is akin to using certain visual techniques of cinematography. I will look at two of her books, *The Dew Breaker* and *Krik?Krak!* to illustrate her use of motion-picture scene construction using variable internal perspective. I will show how she facilitates an intimate, immersive virtual experience into which the reader can enter. I will also explore her presentation of a complex Caribbean, which spawns visions of a tripartite or three-dimensional space.

I argue that while texts on tourism create an exact location for the Caribbean (see fig. 1), Danticat seeks to provide, through introspection, a more spatially accurate picture of the region. She offers what Edward Soja calls the 'trialectics of space,' where the notion of space is three tiered. Firstspace is concerned with the physical place, Secondspace is the perceived, mental/cognitive representation of a place while Thirdspace is the lived experience. This argument is made within my larger thesis, which has two claims: First, the West Indian author's role is to challenge a one-dimensional, cartographic notion of the Caribbean and remap or redesignate the region to a broader space of lived experiences, memories, complex social relations and practices. Secondly, the West Indian novel offers a virtual space called the holodeck (of Star Trek origin) where experiences can seem real. However, before I connect Star Trek with West Indian literature through an analysis of Danticat's work, it is necessary to establish the significance of the link between the Caribbean and particular angles of looking.

Fig. 1. The words shown here are typical descriptors associated with Caribbean islands. Such words, along with images, like these here, are dominant in travel magazine literature. Words and imagery work together to construct a very specific place within the minds of readers/viewers. Images and text by author.

Academic editor and professor Jon Berquist asserts that 'the question of where always requires the question according to whom. Space is not neutral or objective; there is no magical [place] to stand, from which one can observe space without perspective' (Theories of Space). This question of *where* matters to the Caribbean, for as Berquist also observes, geography has been 'the science of colonisation' (Critical Spatiality). Therefore, point-of-view has always been important to how the region is visualised and experienced. Mimi Sheller observes how such European works as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* contribute to the fixing of thoughts about these islands into idealised landscapes, which together are seen as a single place (Sheller 47). Sheller writes: 'contemporary views of tropical island landscapes are highly over-determined by the long history of literary and visual representations of the tropical island as Paradise' (37).

With widely circulated Western travel narratives as part of a discourse of tourism, locating the region has come about by the dominant vantage point of a Euro-American centre viewing a peripheral, tropical 'Other.' Yet, from this angle of sight there is peripheral vision distortion. Those places beyond the centre are processed through constructed, organised gazes. John Urry articulates that one gaze in particular, the tourist gaze, presupposes experiences and perceptions that are not based on 'terms of…[the] intrinsic characteristics' of a place (1-2). Gavan Titley notes that Caribbean people must perform outside authentic or intrinsic culture to meet dominant visualisations and expectations: 'Locals…cannot…expect to be recognised as a member of the global community unless they step into the perspectival framework which sees the Caribbean in a very particular way' (Global Theory and Touristic Encounters). What Titley suggests is that a person or place that exists outside the defined boundaries of a mental map, becomes invisible. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which examines European views and knowledge about a specific place – the Orient – demonstrates how a mental map can coincide with a geographic map.

Where, then, is the Caribbean? Does the answer lie within dominant Euro-American mental maps or the exact coordinates of the archipelago bathed by the Caribbean Sea? In *Theories of Space and Construction of the Ancient World*, Jon Berquist declares, 'we need to rethink what we mean by where. The question of where is not answered on a map.' Therefore, the new zone to which the Caribbean is remapped or redesignated must be a liberating, boundless space of social relations rather than a fixed, cartographic place. Unlike place, which suggests a location demarcated by boundaries, space has connotations of a borderless, permeable realm where various contexts of social practices can intersect and come into relation with each other again and again. Depicting the Caribbean in terms of a space of social relations facilitates a more textured, complex, multilayered composition – one that can accommodate more than a perspective of the Caribbean as a one-dimensional, essentialised place of exotic escape.

Works by West Indian authors offer the potential of counter perspectives. When we ask *where*, we must give our attention to responses from Caribbean people in various contexts, under different conditions and the region's authors engage in the strategic vocation that can give voice on our behalf. The role of Caribbean writers is to erase boundary lines and expose the Caribbean as being what Berquist describes as a 'fractal space.' This term does not echo the familiar label of the region as fragmented – a descriptor that takes its cue from the physical arrangement of the islands. Rather, a fractal space suggests visualising the Caribbean as myriad communities,

innumerable nuances, countless social relations and infinite intersections of such factors as 'class, gender, age, agency, individuality [and] economics' (Berquist). Berquist asks that we consider *where* in terms of a close look at society. Therefore, whether it is a space in Trinidad that reveals the social subtleties of the Spiritual Baptists and the warrior spirit of the stick fighting tradition in Earl Lovelace's *The Wine of Astonishment*, a space in New York that shows Barbadian immigrants adjusting to a different environment and the coming of age of a Caribbean-American girl in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* or the space of memory where the Caribbean is relived in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, the region is painted through such accounts with greater depth than any attempt at geographic renderings.

Seeing the Caribbean as a broad, fluid space of people reacting to and performing within different environments, makes it possible to adopt Antonio Benítez-Rojo's vision of the region as a 'meta-archipelago.' For Benítez-Rojo, the Caribbean defies place – the Caribbean as social space transcends the island-chain in the Caribbean Sea and impacts the world. In Edwidge Danticat's books, she oscillates between the worlds of Haiti and the United States of America. Through her character's thoughts, Danticat allows readers to envision the Caribbean as a three-dimensional space that incorporates these worlds. Danticat's depictions of First, Second and Thirdspace are discussed later but I look now at the virtual space of experience that novels generate – indeed, what Danticat's novels offer.

While the content of West Indian literature offers vistas of variegated Caribbean social contexts or spaces, the reader's interaction with the book or novel also presents a kind of space – a virtual one. When we watch a movie or read a book, we enter immersive spaces. We feel scared, uneasy, overjoyed depending on the protagonist's circumstances. Yet, there are no 'real' reasons for such feelings as the on-screen or printed characters are not functioning in reality. 'The basis for [this] virtual experience is the human imagination' (Mizrach). Virtual experience is a prominent feature of the science fiction series *Star Trek*. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the character Captain Picard uses virtual technology called the holodeck in more than one episode for the purpose of recreation. Although he is in the twenty-fourth century and in outer space, he enters the holodeck and assumes the character of Dixon Hill, a private detective working in San Francisco, 1941. The holodeck is an enclosed room in which the user can interact with simulated environments and holographic projections. When we read novels we enter a holodeck of sorts. Michel de Certeau observes that 'space is a practiced place…[the] act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text' (qtd. in Mitchell viii). Therefore, when we read the

works of V.S. Naipaul, Merle Hodge, Derek Walcott, Claude McKay, Lakshmi Persaud – the texts of any West Indian writer – we enter, what I call, the Caribbean Holodeck. In the Caribbean Holodeck, the technology of narrative manipulation – including diction, dramatic irony, symbolism, exposition, flashback and foreshadowing – coupled with the reader's imagination generate projections with high chroma, images with a high degree of verisimilitude. They create a convincing space – one that allows for easy immersion.

Danticat facilitates an intimate, immersive, virtual space through her stylistic employment of a type of perspective: focalisation (Gérard Genette). Through variable or alternating internal focalisation, she presents the Caribbean diegesis, that is, the objects, events, characters and attitudes of the world she constructs. In *The Dew Breaker* and *Krik? Krak!* Danticat lets the reader get extremely close to the characters and their environment through their thoughts. Danticat focuses on one character's thoughts then blurs this presentation and moves to a different plane, setting sharp focus on the mind of another character. She delivers introspection like executing the film or cinematic technique of rack focusing (see fig. 2), where the focus of the camera lens is changed so that an element in one plane of an image goes out of focus and an element in another plane in the image comes into focus – this technique also links two spaces or objects (Cinematography). Danticat's treatment in this way allows her reader to picture characters and locations set at different planes or levels within an image, yet these people and places remain connected within one composition.

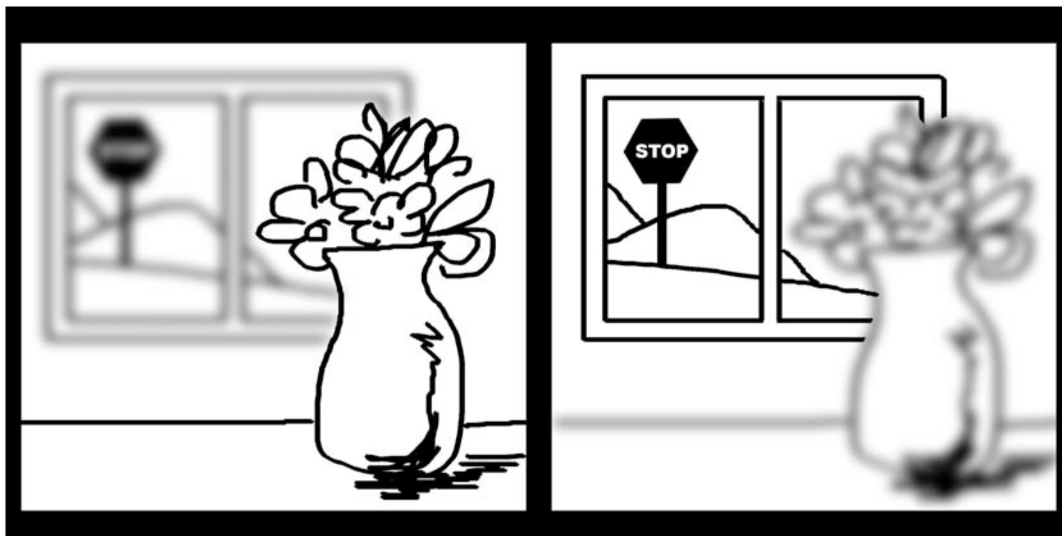

Fig. 2. The technique of rack focusing. Illustration by author.

In Danticat's book *Krik? Krak!* the technique of rack focusing is vividly employed. *Krik? Krak!* is constructed as nine separate but connected stories, nine planes of one grand, cohesive, Caribbean image. In chapter or story one: Children of the Sea, Danticat moves between the thoughts of a girl in Haiti and her boyfriend who has fled the island by boat as they write each other letters to experience a sense of closeness. Story one, a plane in itself, appears to have two sub-planes as Danticat makes her shift obvious, setting the girl's mental landscape in bold text and the boy's thoughts in plain text. He writes:

> Today was our first real day at sea. Everyone was vomiting with each small rocking of the boat…Someone has a transistor and sometimes we listen to radio from the Bahamas…Do you want to know how people go to the bathroom on the boat? Probably the same way they did on those slave ships years ago (8, 14 &15).

She writes:

> **a group of students got shot in front of fort dimanche prison today…a lot of people think you are dead like the others…at night i can't sleep. i count the bullets in the dark. i keep wondering if it is true. did you really get out?** (7-8).

He writes:

> There is a pregnant girl on board…Célianne spent the night groaning…[she] had a girl baby…The baby still will not cry… I never knew before that dead children looked purple…Purple like the sea after the sun has set…She threw it overboard…And quickly after that she jumped in too. And just as the baby's head sank, so did hers…They say I have to throw my notebook out…The water is rising again and they are scooping it out. I asked for a few seconds to write this last page and then promised that I would let it go. I know you will probably never see this, but it was nice imagining that I had you here to talk to…I must throw my book out now. It goes down to them, Célianne and her daughter and all those children of the sea who might soon be claiming me…I know that my memory of you will live even there as I too become a child of the sea (5-28).

She writes:

> **…manman says that butterflies can bring news…the black ones warn us of deaths…and then there it was, the black butterfly…i know what must have happened…now there are always butterflies around me, black ones…last night on the radio, i heard that another boat sank off the coast of the bahamas** (5 & 28).

Danticat then compresses space and time and goes deep into her Caribbean image to link this account with her deepest plane, story nine: Caroline's Wedding. She blurs Haiti and pulls the U.S. experience into focus. Now, in Brooklyn, Danticat presents a Haitian family. Gracina (Caroline's sister) and her mother attend a mass for dead Haitian refugees and Gracina thinks:

> the priest...recited a list of a hundred twenty-nine names, Haitian refugees who had drowned at sea that week. The list was endless and with each name my heart beat faster, for it seemed as though many of those listed might have been people that I had known at

> some point in my life…[the priest said] we make a special call today for…a young woman who was pregnant when she took a boat from Haiti and then later gave birth to her child on that boat. A few hours after the child was born, its precious life went out, like a candle in a storm, and the mother with her infant in her arms dived into the sea (167).

Danticat shifts effortlessly between stories, between characters, between locations. She moves the reader from plane five, forward to plane two, then back to plane three as she connects the characters in these stories. She presents a picture of related Caribbean episodes or experiences. The reader discovers that Marie, a maid in Port-au-Prince who suffered many miscarriages in story five, is the granddaughter of Défilé in story two, the woman who sprouted wings and flew to escape the massacre of 1937, the woman who 'leaped from Dominican soil into the water, and out again on the Haitian side of the river' (49). Marie is also the goddaughter of Lili in story three, the woman whose husband jumped out of a flying balloon because he was enslaved by a life of poverty, because – in keeping with the spirit of Haitian revolution agitator Boukman – he would rather die than not live freely.

The reader's eye is never stationary within the virtual space offered by Danticat as she changes focus, guiding the reader's attention. Her character's thoughts create an enveloping space where everything in the composition or narrative is blurred out or obscured except the in-focus internal perspective of a particular character. She brings her characters close by playing with focus. What engulfs the reader is all that one character thinks and feels. The visual effect – if executed with a camera – translates on screen as shallow focus, where the plane closest to the camera remains in sharp focus and everything else in the frame is blurred. It is a filmic effect that gives the spectator a sense of 'psychological introspection' (Cinematography).

Danticat creates clear, stirring moments of shallow focus. In story four of *Krik? Krak!* entitled *Night Women* the female character thinks:

> …my son slips into bed. I watch as he stretches from a little boy into the broom-size of a man, his height mounting the innocent fabric that splits our one-room house into two spaces, two mats…He wraps my long blood-red scarf around his neck, the one I wear myself during the day to tempt my suitors…Emmanuel will come tonight. He is a doctor who likes big buttocks on women, but my small ones will do…Should my son wake up, I have prepared my fabrication. One day he will grow too old to be told that a wandering man is a mirage and that naked flesh is a dream. I will tell him that his father has come, that an angel brought him back from Heaven for a while (83-89).

Yet, Danticat is careful to connect these moments. The author justifies the ties she makes between her characters and stories; she accounts for the links she makes between the various planes within

her Caribbean image through such statements as the one offered by the character Gracina: 'Ma says all Haitians know each other' (169).

In *The Dew Breaker*, all the Haitians are connected in some way to a torturous prison guard, one of Haiti's dew breakers, men who would '…come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they'd take you away' (131). Again, Danticat presents her characters in and out of focus. Haiti and the U.S. alternate between obscurity and prominence as she weaves together separate accounts of the psychological and emotional scars left by the former prison guard. In this book, Danticat uses a combination of rack focusing – creating those moments of shallow focus – and tracking shots. A tracking shot is another cinematic technique that allows for mobile framing on screen. The camera is used to follow characters. The impression achieved is that of closeness to the experiences of a moving character since the spectator is not just watching but moving with the character seen. Danticat focuses on one character, sometimes exposing this character's thoughts with her use of interrogative statements, which punctuate the descriptive prose but there is always the sensation of tracking the character. The reader moves with a preacher who is captured by the dew breaker and is transported to the barracks:

> A shot was fired somewhere. In the air? At him? At the woman calling Jean?…Someone dragged him by the legs, pulled him forward, removing his jacket, and then he felt himself falling from the back of the truck onto the concrete…He was being dragged by the legs over the rise of a curb. With each yank forward, a little bit of him was bruised, peeled away. He felt as though he was shedding skin, shedding voice, shedding sight, shedding everything he'd tried so hard to make himself into, a well dressed man, a well spoken man, a well-read man. He was leaving all that behind now with bits of his flesh in the ground, morsel by morsel being scraped off by pebbles, rocks, tiny bottle shards, and cracks in the concrete. He tried to make himself as limp as possible as he was pushed down some uneven steps that at different moments in his descent wedged themselves between his ribs. He was probably in a cell now, for he heard the rattling of bars… (213)

The preacher's thoughts are offered in the questions at the beginning of the excerpt but they do not match Danticat's presentation of thoughts in *Krik? Krak!* where she uses personal pronouns such as 'I' and 'my' to clearly establish the reader's position within a character's mind. In *Krik? Krak?* the prevailing sense is that many of the reader's movements are from one plane to another, jumping from observations and reflections, from story to story. In *The Dew Breaker* the reader moves back and forth, from one plane of thought to another but is also able to move extensively within each plane. The reader stays close to the preacher, going from the street to a prison cell, feeling his terror and pain as he fears being shot and is dragged and pushed down some steps. Danticat's combined manipulation of focus and tracking makes this intimacy possible.

Danticat also ensures powerful visions of First, Second and Thirdspace – that is, a three-dimensional or tripartite Caribbean space. She reveals a colourful Firstspace, which refers to the physical place. In *Krik? Krak!* back in Haiti, 'a tin roof…makes music when it rains' (22) and Ville Rose is 'the city of painters and poets, the coffee city, with beaches where the sand is either black or white, but never mixed together, where the fields are endless and sometimes the cows are yellow like cornmeal' (34). The Haitian sky is 'indigo…like the kind [used] in the wash' (136).

Secondspace is the perceived or mental representation of a place. In *The Dew Breaker*, a character's impression of Haiti defies time and geography. He links Haiti and Egypt: 'The Egyptians, they was like us…The Egyptians worshipped their gods in many forms, fought among themselves and were often ruled by foreigners. The pharaohs were like the dictators he had fled…' (12). Mrs. Fonteneau, a Haitian living in North America feels fortunate that she can return every year to Jacmel in Haiti. She shares her perception: 'we have a place to go where we can say the rain is sweeter, the dust is lighter…' (29).

Krik? Krak! also, reveals Secondspace. The Caribbean, or Haiti specifically, is a heaven at the bottom of the sea, a place where '…those who have escaped the chains of slavery…form a world beneath…the blood-drenched earth…' (27). Caribbean memory is also a Secondspace. Gracina observes that riddles and jokes from the past '…were…bedtime stories. Tales that haunted [her] parents and made them laugh at the same time.' She continues, 'we never understood them until we were fully grown and they became our sole inheritance' (180).

Thirdspace is the lived experience. The reader is inundated with Caribbean lived experiences in Danticat's work. In *The Dew Breaker*, the experience of Carnival in Jacmel is relived: '…on the day before Ash Wednesday, when a crowd of tired revelers would gather on the beach to burn their Carnival masks and costumes and feign weeping, symbolically purging themselves of the carousing of the preceding days and nights' (48-49). When Dany's aunt dies in Haiti, he experiences a ritual in which pieces of cloth are removed from his aunt's last dress:

> …he watched as Ti Fanm handed a pair of rusty scissors along with the dress to one of the oldest women, who proceeded to clip three small pieces from the inner lining. As the old woman "marked" the dress…some [shouted] "Estina, this is your final dress. Don't let anyone take it from you. Even if among the other dead there are some who are naked, this is your dress and yours alone"…Now, in his pocket he had three tiny pieces of cloth…and he would carry them with him forever…' (113).

In *Krik? Krik!* Caroline, who was born in the U.S. without her left forearm to Haitian parents, shares the fact that she has been feeling pain at the end of this arm – what her doctor calls phantom limb pain. She declares: 'With all the pressure lately, with the wedding, he says that it's only natural that I should feel amputated' (199). Her Haitian mother's response describes the experience of Caribbean people who have left the islands to make their home in other places. She replies: 'In that case, we all have phantom pain' (199). When Gracina (Caroline's sister who was born in Haiti) finally receives her American passport, she reveals the anxieties of Caribbean immigrants:

> For the first time in my life, I felt truly secure living in America. It was like being in a war zone and finally receiving a weapon of my own, like standing on the firing line and finally getting a bulletproof vest. We had all paid dearly for this piece of paper, this final assurance that I belonged in the club. It had cost my parent's marriage, my mother's spirit, my sister's arm. I felt like an indentured servant who had finally been allowed to join the family (213-214).

Through introspection, Danticat is able to present the social intricacies that help to redefine the Caribbean as a multifaceted, heterogeneous space, rather than a single entity or a mapped place. This paper explores three broad dimensions of the Caribbean to demonstrate how West Indian writers, like Danticat, seek greater spatial accuracy; how they seek to give greater depth to a Caribbean image. Danticat – like other West Indian authors – provides another vantage point from which the region can be viewed and understood. Yet, dominant, Euro-American views of the Caribbean are not to be altogether negated. When we consider perceptions of the region that come from both Caribbean people and people from North America and Europe, we take steps towards creating a stereoscopic picture. Both perspectives can work much like our eyes, which function in a process called stereo vision: The left and right eyes capture two separate images which are combined to give a picture that is richer in information. The combined image is more than the sum of its parts. With stereo vision, we can answer the question *where is here* for we can see *where* things are in relation to ourselves with much greater precision.

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