

Roberto Strongman
University of California, San Diego

**Women Writing Creole: Deyita's *Esperans Dezire*,
 Sistren's *Lionheart Gal*, and Mamita Fox's
*Identifikashon***

Nous, Antillais créoles, sommes donc porteurs... d'une double solidarité:

—d'une solidarité antillaise (géopolitique) avec tous les peuples de notre Archipel, quelles que soient nos différences culturelles: notre Antillanité.

—d'une solidarité créole avec tous les peuples africaines, mascarins, asiatiques et polynésiens qui relèvent des mêmes affinités anthropologiques que nous: notre créolité.

—Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la Créolité*.¹

Hierarchical divisions which have split Caribbean societies from the time of slavery persist, interestingly, in the simultaneous usage of standard European languages alongside native-born Creole languages. This division between high, prestige language and stigmatized, local “dialect” presents a veritable situation of diglossia which extends beyond the life of the everyday into literary production. In the same manner in which formal public discourse has been dictated in the European languages of the area—English, Spanish, French and Dutch—and the informal, private discourses vocalized in Creoles, so has the written been coded as the domain of European languages and the oral as the territory of Creoles. This linguistic division of labor between written and verbal discourses accounts for the scant existence of literary texts in Caribbean Creoles² and for the intense oral quality of these few texts, a feature which often ascribes to them the separate, syncretic classification of “oraliture.”³

In this essay, I want to analyze three texts written by female authors writing in different Caribbean Creoles: Deyita's *Esperans Dezire* (1988) written in Haitian Creole, Sistren's *Lionheart Gal* (1986) written in Jamaican Creole, and Mamita Fox's *Identifikashon* (1997) written in Curaçaoan

Papiamentu. My purpose here is historical, comparative, and hermeneutic. I want to place these texts within a diachronic tradition of Creole writing, establish a synchronic dialogue among these texts, and trace the emergence of a subjectivity which is dually linguistic and gendered as writing in Creole is related with *écriture féminine*. More specifically, I want to propose that Creole languages become an important medium for the expression of female subjectivity because of their association with the private sphere of the home and their subaltern linguistic status. By highlighting the similar articulation of female subjectivity in mutually-unintelligible Creole languages, I hope, furthermore, to strengthen the notion of a common Caribbean culture which exists despite the apparent fragmentation by language.

Historically, Creole writers have faced the problem of writing in languages which are stigmatized and erroneously perceived as deformations of standard European languages and as “mixtures” between European and African languages. These misinformed and negative perceptions of Creole are, by extension, ascribed to its speakers and those who attempt to utilize Creole for literary discourse. In fact, Creoles are neither the result of language deformations nor mixtures; Creole languages are, in essence, the result of an unusually fast-paced process in which structural transformations—which under regular circumstances would have taken hundreds and thousands of years to take place—occur in a matter of a few decades. The catalyst for this accelerated language change was the abrupt meeting of diverse language groups that need to communicate, often in the native language of a small but powerful minority. The Caribbean plantation formed the right demographic situation for such a process of linguistic “creolization” to take place. A re-evaluation of the stigmatization of Creole needs to take into account the ways in which European culture, with language as its referent, has been utilized as a standard by which everything else is measured and valued in Antilles. That the inferiorization of Creole has more to do with political colonization than linguistics is aptly expressed in the truism that “a language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”

Aside from overcoming stigmatized, popular perceptions of Creole, the most important obstacle for the Creole writer to overcome is what Raphaël Confiant, the Martinican writer of the Créolité movement, calls “le passage de l’oral à l’écrit.” In his seminars at l’Université des Antilles et de la Guyane in Schoelcher, Martinique, Confiant says it is important to declare Creole’s status as a language with literary abilities while at the same time to acknowledge the reduced lexicon of Creole which challenges the production of Creole literary discourse: “si j’écris en créole, je me trouve dramatiquement confronté à cette absence de vocabulaire descriptive qui saute aux yeux quand on examine le tout premier roman dans cette langue,

Atipa du Guyanais Alfred Parépou datant de 1885.” (Confiant 172-3).⁴

These lexical limitations which drive many writers to over-reliance on the standard European language drive Confiant to believe that “le Créole n’est pas encore une langue écrite souveraine.”⁵ A reduced lexical base, he upholds, is not grounds upon which to discard any language as not possessing literary potential. It is important to consider, Confiant argues, how oral lexicons in all languages have more limited vocabularies than their literary or written counterparts. In languages with well-established oral and literary discourses, a high percentage of words for highly technical and abstract concepts are only found in written discourse and are hardly ever used in oral speech. The rare occasion of hearing someone speak in literary discourse, Confiant points out, is exemplified in the statement “Il parle comme un livre!” The average speaker needing to make occasional allusion to these technical and abstract concepts is more likely to utilize circumlocution than the precise literary term. Certain writers such as Georges de Vassoigne, also from Martinique, advocate the use of linguistic borrowing in order to “enrich” and make possible literary production in Créole. For de Vassoigne, Creole’s borrowing from French is no more problematic than French’s borrowing from Latin for its medical and scientific discourses. A much more authenticist solution is proposed by Confiant’s *pawòlnèf*, which promotes enriching Creole through its own internal resources by means of neologisms. In short, the problems of writing literary discourse in Creoles spring from the languages’ largely oral function and not from any intrinsic deficiencies of the languages themselves. Likewise, it becomes important to highlight that this orality is a feature characteristic of “new languages”; prestige languages such as English encountered similar obstacles, as evidenced in medieval texts reflecting the linguistic effects of the Norman invasion such as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.⁶

In spite of the challenges of “oraliture,” Caribbean Creoles have long-standing written traditions which have expanded considerably in the last half of the twentieth century. Caribbean French-based Creoles have perhaps the longest continuous written tradition of the region. There are important early documents written in French-based Creoles such as the Creole adaptations and re-workings of La Fontaine’s fables: Paul Boudout’s fables published in 1860 in Guadeloupe, Georges Sylvain’s *Fables de la Fontaine racontés par un montagnard Haïtien* in 1902 in Haiti, and François Marbot’s famous *Les Bambous, Fables de La Fontaine travesties en patois créole par un vieux commandeur* published in 1846 in Martinique. There are also a series of literary ethnographies such as Lafcadio Hearn’s work in Martinique *Trois fois bèl conte* (1890) and Elsie Clew Parson’s *Folklore of the Antilles French and English* (1933). There exists among the earliest text *Le Catéchisme*

de l'Abbé Goux in 1842, a text whose distribution was forbidden by King Louis Phillipe. The earliest works of original literary value are generally considered to be the Haitian poem "Lissette quite la pleine" written in the seventeenth century, Oswald Durand's Haitian poem "Choucone" written in 1885, and the first Creole novel, *Atipa* by Alfred Parépou, written in Guyanese Creole in 1885.

From the early twentieth century to the 1970s, the only work of great importance is Gilbert Gratiant's collection of poetry, *Fab Compè Zicaque*, published in Martinican Creole in 1958. The 1970s witnessed a veritable explosion of writing in French-based Creoles in the publication of the works of Jobi Bernabé, Soni Rupaire, Hector Pouillet, Monchoachi, plus Raphaël Confiant's Martinican Creole trilogy—*Bitako-a* (1985), *Kòd Yanm* (1986), *Marisose* (1987)—and the important publication of Frankétienne's *Dezafi* in Haitian Creole in 1975. *Dezafi* exploits "the phenomenon of zombification in order to denounce the horrors and alienation bred by all forms of tyranny and totalitarianism" (Rowell 389).

In French-based Creoles, women writers are historically absent. Several female writers have appeared recently and need to be highlighted as constituting an emerging group in a field largely dominated by men. Térèz Léotin from Martinique has published novels such as *An ti zyédou kozé* (1986) and *Lespri Lanmè* (1990), as well as the short-story collection *Ora Lavi* (1997). In 1993, Maude Hertelou published *Lafami Bonplezi*, an important novel dealing with a Haitian family's adjustment to a new life in the United States.

In English-based Creole, women occupy a much earlier and historically central role in literary history than they do in French-based Creoles. While the poetry of male writers such as Claude McKay (in the first decade of the twentieth century) and Linton Kwesi Johnson and James Berry (in the 1980s) punctuate a history of written Creole, it is the poetry of women which has been the most accomplished. The works of Una Marson in the 1930s and Louise Bennett in the 1940s and 50s stand as the two indisputable canonical collections in the history of Jamaican Creole.

The history of Papiamentu literature is much less extensive than that of either French- or English-based Creoles and until recently it had been limited to children's literature and translations from works in other languages. Guillermo Rosario's novels *E Angel Pretu* (*Pa motibu di mi koló*) and *E Rais ku no Ke Muri* stand out as exceptional works articulating a powerful racial politics in the mid-twentieth century. Signaling an optimistic trend for women writers is the amazing popularity of the prolific Aruban female writer Yolanda Croes whose novels *Acompaña pa un Angel* (1998) and *Perdi*

Riba Lama (1999) have become best-sellers in the Dutch Antilles.

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Written in Haitian Creole, Deyita's *Esperans Dezire*—"Desired Hope"—takes its title from the name of the novel's protagonist.⁷ The novel's episodic structure and sentimental tone give it certain soap-opera characteristics which are counter-balanced by the more serious political subtext about the Duvalier regime. *Esperans Dezire* is the illegitimate child of Yaya, a servant of Madan Jan Klod's household, and Madan Jan Klod's son, Jilyen. The scandal forces Yaya out of the household. After having a prophetic vision, Yaya names her daughter "Esperans Dezire." Esperans' formal education takes her abroad to Boston. Upon finishing her degree, Esperans returns to Haiti, where she becomes involved in the political scene and eventually becomes the first female president of the country, a messianic figure embodying the national aspirations of political stability and social equality. The novel closes with the laudatory chants of the crowds around the *Palè Nasyonal*: "Viv Esperans Dezire, Premye Fanm Prezidan Dayiti!" (191).⁸

Mamita Fox's Curaçaoan-Papiamentu *Identifikashon* is the autobiographical account of Fox's struggle for autonomy and dignity through a narrative of family history on the Dutch Caribbean island of Curaçao and personal travel to Holland and New York. Fox begins her narrative by explaining how the differences between her Protestant/Anglophone father and her Catholic mother led to her parents' divorce. She recounts the oppression of her gendering experience when, as a young girl, she is made painfully aware of the behavioral restrictions imposed on women. The cultural imperative of female virginity is criticized by Fox: "Pa motibu ku si bo no ta señorita bo no por haña un mucha hòmbler di bon famia pa kasa ku bo i den mayoria kaso bo no ta haña niun hende ku lo ke kasa ku bo" (17).⁹ Sexism in the society-at-large is experienced in the close confines of the family as Fox describes her father's patriarchal values: "Su kreensia mas grandi ta ku un hende muhé t'ei pa sirbi i obedesé un hende hòmbler" (11).¹⁰ Prejudices according to socio-economic class and race are some of the most vivid memories of her school years in Curaçao: "[S]i bo ta biba na Punda nan ta konsiderá bo mas mihó hende ku e hendenan ku ta biba na kunuku" (22).¹¹ Fox notes that her mother was not invited to a particular wedding because "Mai ta un hende muhé, divorsia i pretu, i e tipo di hendenan ei no kombidá hende pretu na nan kas. Mi no ta lubidá e kos ei nunca mas" (24).¹² As alien as she feels abroad, her experience away, especially in New York, is comfortable compared to the racism she endures in her own Caribbean island. Returns to her homeland always mean a return to psychological

instability: “A konfrontá mi ku e konfushon di mi identifikashon asina mi a regresá Kòrsou bèk” (37).¹³ As the product of her personal narration, Fox concludes: “Awe mi ta un muhé pretu, soltera i orguyoso di mi mes, ku ta duna masha importansha na e oportunidat ku mi a haña pa sa mi balor propio, i asina logra mi IDENTIFIKASHON” (87).¹⁴

Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women is a collection of testimonials which exemplifies the concept of “oraliture” at its best. Part oral-history research, part literature, the text transcends traditional classification as Honor Ford-Smith interviews the members of the Jamaican Sistren women’s collective, tape-records their folk-tales, transcribes and edits them to form an anthology of fictionalized autobiographical stories narrated in Jamaican Creole. “For Jamaican women, it is often extremely liberating to begin to write and read in the language of Creole,” says Ford-Smith (*Sistren Women’s Theatre* 127).

One of these stories, “Rebel Pickney,” is a woman’s retrospective view of herself as a young mischievous girl named Betty. She presents this self-portrait of a child rebel through a series of vignettes. Fear of ghosts cause her to delay an errand for her father, and which causes her father to beat her. Next, she steals some yams and a chicken from the neighbor and lies to conceal her theft. Her rebel behavior culminates in her stabbing the neighbor child who accuses her of stealing. The stabbing is avenged by another child, who chops Betty with a hoe: “Dem chop me inna me head wid di hoe. Blood!” (15). The common feeling in all these different acts of childhood transgression is a fear of patriarchal reprimand and punishment. “All my life me live in fear,” begins the narration. The benevolent mother, as a foil to the father’s severity, becomes a comforting image at the conclusion. The story ends with an adult critical evaluation of child physical abuse and a call to better parenting: “Me would a like mek a plea to parents dat dem no grow dem children as me grow...Me no beat my pickney” (17).

The three characters of these Creole texts function as allegories of their national communities. Esperans Dezire’s allegorical association with her nation is perhaps the most salient of all three. Esperans Dezire, as the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy, French-speaking Haitian and his peasant servant, stands as the personification of Haiti, birthed through the confluence of French and African populations into a state of unrecognized nationhood.¹⁵ Most importantly, the incarnation of the state into the character of Esperans Dezire is fully achieved as she is elected president of the Republic. Betty, in Sistren’s story “Rebel Pickney,” stands as the quintessential female revolutionary of the Caribbean, spearheading revolt against colonial authority. The editor of the anthology, Honor Ford-Smith, in her

introduction, suggests the replication, in the story, of the image of Nanny, the maroon leader of the eighteenth century whose opposition to the English was so great that the colonial authorities were forced to grant her and her runaway community a sizable, autonomous land grant. In the spirit of Nanny, Betty becomes the very personification of Jamaican revolt against tyranny. Mamita Fox's fight against the gender, race, and class discrimination which she faces in Curaçao speaks to the desire for freedom from oppression which is associated with the island's desire for independence from Holland. Fox's clever usage of the language of political independence to speak of her own personal freedom is noteworthy:

Mi a tuma e desishon di keda Kòrsou definitivamente i no laga niun hende kore ku mi for di MI isla. Mi tabata determiná pa traha i logra mi independensia spiritual i mental.¹⁶

Fox's disappointment with her visit to the colonial center, evident in her Dutch co-worker's ignorance of Curaçao's geographical position, mirrors Curaçao's own dissatisfaction with the cultural recognition it receives from Holland. Another example in which the political becomes personally embodied is Fox's desire to divorce her European husband which mirrors the fight for Curaçao's independence from Holland:

Sierto momentu mi ta kòrda ku e único kos ku tabata importá mi den mi bida tabata mi divorsio. Mi kier a divorsiá. . .mi ke ta liber. Na varia okashon mi tabata haña mi konfrontá ku hendenan ku tabata haña masha straño ku mi kier a divorsiá for di un hòmbler blanku. (70)¹⁷

Fox's articulation of female subjectivity through divorce is particularly relevant insofar as female development, in these three Creole texts, is narrated as a movement away from male authority. The three women in these texts experience a very similar form of development which propels them away from and beyond masculinities associated with patriarchy and colonization and towards a female freedom with undertones of political independence. Esperans and Yaya's flight from Madan Jan Klòd's and Jilyen's house is the initial movement which instantiates Esperans' quest for identity. Jilyen's repudiation of Yaya and Esperans becomes clear in the text:

...Tazi al kontre ak li lopital la. Li pwoche su li, li di bonjou...
 —Msye Jilyen, ou konnen Yaya te gwòs pou ou?
 —Mwen? M pa jouk konnen ki moun yo rele Yaya

menm.

—Ou konnen wi...Ti fiyèl manman ou lan.

—Yo pa janmen rele l Yaya lakay. Se toujou Enwalya m konnen.

—Enben Enwalya te fè de marasa pou ou...Ti gason an mouri. Ti fi a rele Esperans Dezire. Sa w ap fè pou manman an?

—Tazi, sa ou vle pou m fè? M ponkò ap travay...Se sou kont manman ak papa m ye...Sa m kab fè? Se pa fòt mwen si l gen yon pitit... (28)¹⁸

Jilyen's refusal to acknowledge Esperans as his child speaks to the bastardization of the colonial subject whose final attainment of missing identity occurs in an allegorical identification with the nation—an identification which in this particular text entails the conclusive representation of the protagonist as head of state. Jilyen's repudiation of Esperans Dezire as his daughter is followed by another event which further marks Esperans Dezire as a woman whose identity remains independent of patriarchal authority. In her refusal of Yangi's marriage offer, Esperans declines societal expectations which drive women to seek a sense of purpose by virtue of their association with a man. In her desire to forge a political career for herself, Esperans finds she must make a choice between her professional aspirations and marriage:

—Esperans, si vreman ou renmen m, w ap chwazi...

—E sa m ap chwazi a Jangi?

—Mwenmenm, osnon moun sa yo... (168)¹⁹

Esperans refuses to give up her affiliation to the political party in order to appease Jangi, whose political pessimism contrasts sharply with Esperans' hope in the future of Haiti:

—Enben, Jangi, m ta mouri pou sa mwen kwè.

—Esperans mon amour, peyi a ap toujou rete konsa, se desten nèg nwè pou yo toujou kraze yo anba pye.

—Non, Jangi, mwen fanm, m pa pe asèpte reziyen m...Peyi m nan se yon GRAN TI PEYI (169).²⁰

Displaying the anxiety of competing societal expectations of women, Mamita Fox and Esperans Dezire find themselves forced to make decisions between their professional careers and their romantic attachments. Both sacrifice relationships for professional advancement. For both Esperans Dezire and Mamita Fox, the movement away from men is not confined to the romantic attachments taking place in their adult lives; the flight begins

early, as in the case of illegitimate Esperans, forced to leave her father's house, and in the case of Mamita Fox, whose father's sexist ideology prevents his daughter's educational growth:

Un otro frustrashon ku mi a pasa aden i ku a pone mi sinti ku mi ta ménos ku otro hende, spelshalmente ménos ku mucha hòmber ta, ku Grandfather i mi tata su leinan tabata, ku no ta nodi pa dispidí sèn pa ku edukashon di un mucha muhé, pasobra tarea di un mucha muhé ta pa kasa i biba pa komplasé su kasá i kria su yunan i sòru pa su kas ta limpi, punto!!!(21)²¹

Mamita Fox's metaphorical escape from her father—attaining her medical degree and establishing her own business—becomes much more literal in Sistren's text through the description of Betty's running away from her father.

As me realise seh a me fadda inna him waterboots, me figat seh di road rocky-rocky a di stone can cut yuh. Me figat bout di marl hole and di duppy dat a boil him pot. By di second lick fi ketch me, switch pon di next side a di gully. Me no know how me reach over deh. Me pass me fadda like jet plane running through di darkness to reach home and hide from di licks. (4)

Betty's father is presented as the personification of violence as a man who "no believe inna no discipline at all, but murderation" (5). Betty's running away from his lashes emblemizes more than female determination to survive: it signals that the preferred direction of female development is a path leading *away* from the paternal figure. Moreover, the road's difficulties—cutting stones, holes, gullies, and duppies (ghosts)—signal the perils of this development towards liberation from patriarchal constraints. Ironically, the goal of this flight is "home," the domestic sphere infused with the paternal image. For Betty, returning home involves confronting her father once more, this time under the protection of her benevolent mother: "She nah go tell Papa seh me under di bed." For Mamita Fox and Esperans Dezure, the domestic encounter with the father along the developmental route involves the consideration of a man as a partner. Their rejection of marriage in favor of professional growth is seen as the preferred, ideal, and victorious choice of female development. The strong oral-tale and mythical qualities of the Sistren's "Rebel Pickney" are responsible for the literalization of the metaphorical trope of "escape" present in Deyita's *Esperans Dezure* and Mamita Fox's *Identifikashon*.

The subsequent rejection of masculine authority—which for Deyita and Fox involve a marriage-proposal decline and a divorce respectively—is also literalized in Sistren’s text in Betty’s stabbing of a little boy:

Me decide seh me nah tek wah Howard a tell me. Me a go kill him same time. Papa used to have him knife weh him use fi stick cow and him knife weh him use fi kill goat. All a dem clean and sharpen and in di kitchen...Me run over di fence, pull out di wattle and go inside di kitchen and tief out di knife and keep ti wid me...When me done wid him [Howard], di head stab up!, Stab up!, Stab up! Stab up! Me never give him no chance. (13)

Betty’s act of phallic appropriation of her father’s knife stands as women’s utilization of patriarchal tools of domination towards the dismantling of patriarchy itself. The theft of the knife highlights the necessity of subversive and furtive tactics to secure these tools before employing them against their previous owners. The flight from the father is only the beginning of a long, arduous journey towards the safety of a mythical home of female connotations. Sistren’s text reminds us of the difficulty of this development as it literalizes the warning of patriarchal encounters, the “duppies” along the road towards emancipation from masculinist domination.

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These three texts occupy an important place within the Caribbean tradition of writing Creole as they serve to establish a female canon which is thematically and stylistically distinct from Creole writing by male authors. In addition to the merits of the three writers discussed in this essay, the stylistic experimentation of Haitian-American writer Maude Hertelou, the centrality of Louise Bennett and Una Marson in Jamaican Creole writing, and the emergence of Yolanda Croes as a Papiamentu literary superstar in the Dutch Antilles demand an exploration of the female-Creole literary nexus.

The centrality and distinctiveness of female authors within the Creole written tradition is most strongly displayed in the fluency and comfort with which female writers manage to express themselves in the indeterminate realm of “oraliture.” Female writers are much more at ease with writing the oral than their male counterparts, who appear always anxious to enrich the language by “enlarging” its literary vocabulary and producing a quality of work which can be recognized as “high-literature,” even when the final product proves difficult to read, even for native speakers of the language. Women Creole authors, as can be seen in the works by Deyita, Sistren, and Mamita Fox transcribe oral language into the written without

much difficulty and are not overly concerned by criticism cataloging their autobiographical works as soap-opera, folk tale, and non-fictional account. Generally, women Creole writers use everyday language to speak of everyday concerns. Their utilization of Creole's rich vocabulary to express the tangible, concrete, amorous, local, and domestic reveals the "high-literature" ambitions and vocabulary anxieties of writers such as Confiand and de Vassoigne as masculinist in nature.

These three texts from Caribbean women provide local answers to the more general postcolonial question on language posed by Françoise Lionnet in her dialogue with Gayatri Spivak:

However unfeasible and inefficient it may sound, I see no way to avoid insisting that there is a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me? (Spivak "French Feminism" 179)

And, I would add, *how does she name herself* in her own narratives? How does she find meaning in her own experiences, and how does she understand the role of language in her effort to name these experiences? (Lionnet *Postcolonial Representations* 3)

It would appear that Deyita, Helen Ford-Smith, and Mamita Fox respond to the theoretical concern about language raised in this dialogue by saying that, for Caribbean women, the local, stigmatized, and oral languages of the area constitute a domain that is distinctly female, one that contains the appropriate elements for Caribbean women's self-representation because it is better able to record women's experiences in writing. The reasons for women's close association with the oral is explained by Sussane Mühleisen through the role of women as preservers of culture and tradition (170). Thelma Perkins builds on this argument by suggesting that childhood narratives are rooted in oral culture and the transmission of this culture to younger generations. Therefore women's relation to children through maternity solidifies the nexus between women and the oral discourses commonly associated with children: folktales, legends, and songs.

Moreover, if Caribbean women appear to be more fluent writers of Creole than their male counterparts who insist on transforming the language before proceeding to write it, it is because the dualistic split between prestige and stigmatized languages is replicated in the female and male gender division, a parallelism which guarantees an equation between the subordinate elements of women and Creole. The shared subaltern status of

women and Creole ensures the articulation of Caribbean female concerns in local languages. The successful coincidence of the two should not be surprising when the traditional associations of women and Creole with the realm of the home are also considered. The domesticity ascribed to these gendered and linguistically subaltern categories explains the association between the two and the great degree of importance achieved by female authors in Caribbean Creole writing. Furthermore, the denial of subjectivity ascribed to women and Creole foments a solidarity at the moment of emergence into written discourse which accounts for their co-occurrence. In this way, female authors' use of Creole in these autobiographical texts from the Caribbean demands to be seen as an attempt to linguistically reiterate the thematic content of female attainment of subjectivity achieved through the narration of women's development.

This gendered diglossia is most palpably felt in the usage of French and Haitian Creole in *Esperans Dezire*. In Deyita's novel, the Creole-language, female-centered narration of the novel is interrupted by an epistolary section presenting a long letter in French from Jilyen to Esperans in which he apologizes for his paternal irresponsibility. His signature as "Ton père Julien" (142) contrasts sharply with the narrator's account of Yaya's rationale for opening the unexpected envelope, "Enpi tou, se te papa l li te ye" (124),²² strongly evidencing the organizing of gender through language in the text and the inability of patriarchal authority to truly dialogue with its bastardized offspring, in spite of the latter's merciful disposition. Furthermore, an earlier bilingual discussion between Madan Jan Klod and her husband marks French as the language of the masculine standard and Creole as the language of female discourses, including those related to the derived social status of women. When she returns home horrified by the fact that her former servant and mother of Esperans, Yaya, has scaled the social ladder through marrying a doctor, her husband attempts to comfort her:

- Chérie, tu devrais être contente que ta filleule se soit mariée.
- Kisa w ap vin di m la a? Sa fè dezyèm fwa li fè m pran kabann.
- Cette fois-ci, ce n'est pas de sa faute, Irène.
- Ou wè jan lavi enjis, yon vakabon konsa pou l marye ak yon doktè, enpi pitit fi nou, se yon vye pwofesè lekòl li ranmase.
- Mais Irène, notre fille est heureuse. (103)²³

Illustrating the role of masculinity as the unmarked gender in a patriarchal society, Misye Jan Klod uses the "standard" language of formal

discourse. His privilege does not allow him to understand the anxieties of women who, in male-dominated contexts, derive their social status from the men they marry. Meanwhile, the condition of women across social classes and generations—the wealthy housewife, her female servant and their respective daughters—is expressed in Creole. In *Esperans Dezire*, as in many Creole texts by women, Creole becomes the language to narrate female struggles and the standard European language speaks from an unmarked, masculine perspective that is peripheral to the central concerns of the text.

In their manifesto, *Éloge de la Créolité*, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant speak of a double solidarity between peoples of the Caribbean Archipelago and between those around the world who, as a result of similar historical processes, speak a Creole language. The thematic similarities in the work of Caribbean women writing in different Creoles speaks to this cultural solidarity which the discourse of “La Créolité” promotes. The highlighting of women’s experience and the establishing of a dialogue between mutually-unintelligible regional Creoles in this essay stands as the potential of criticism to advance some of the most pressing issues of the Caribbean today.

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Endnotes

- ¹ We, Antillean Creoles are the bearers of a double solidarity:
 - of an Antillean solidarity (geopolitical) among all the peoples of our Archipelago, whatever our cultural differences: our "Antillanity."
 - of a Creole solidarity among all the African, Mascarine, Asian, and Polynesian peoples with the same anthropological affinities as ours: our Creoleness.
- ² "Indeed, popular belief in creole-using societies has it that these languages cannot be written. The lack of written norms also reinforces popular ideas that they are not 'real' languages, but corrupt and bastardized versions of some other (usually European) language. Such views have been held by both Europeans as well as speakers of pidgin and creole languages. . . [In addition to this,] pidgins and creoles have generally suffered from misguided beliefs that they are not suitable vehicles for serious literature and artistic expression . . ." (Romaine 273).
- ³ The separate and parallel Anglophone and Francophone traditions of the term "oraliture" point to the need to establish a cross-linguistic critical dialogue. Within Anglophone scholarship, Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh ascribe to Carolyn Cooper the coining of the term "oraliterary" (24). However, Cooper's *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the "Vulgar" Body in Jamaican Popular Culture* (1993) makes no reference to the rich tradition of French Caribbean cultural criticism on "oraliture," whose leading figure is Édouard Glissant. Glissant, in *Le discours antillais* (1981), mentions how "Les Haïtiens ont inventé le néologisme oraliture pour remplacer le mot littérature, marquant ainsi leur détermination à rester dans le champ de l'oral" (345). He continues this interest in much of his subsequent work, particularly in his essay "Le chaosmonde, l'oral et l'écrit" (1994) in which he speaks of the syncretic oraliterary as a developing genre: "Ce que je crois intéressant pour des littératures comme les nôtres — les littératures des pays du Sud et les littératures des pays antillais — c'est de placer la dialectique de cette oralité et de cette écriture à l'intérieur même de

l'écriture. Pourquoi? Parce que nous n'avons pas encore libéré en nous l'écriture, telle qu'on nous l'a enseignée, telle que l'Occident nous l'a enseignée. . . C'est à dire qu'avant d'en arriver à une nouvelle dialectique de l'oralité et de l'écriture, nous devons premièrement récupérer notre oralité. . ." (Glissant 116)

⁴ If I write in Creole, I find myself terribly confronting an absence of descriptive vocabulary that is salient as one examines the very first novel written in the language, *Atipa* by the Guyanese writer Alfred Parépou, dated 1885.

⁵ Creole is not yet a sovereign written language.

⁶ "For a considerable time, even the English language seems to have fallen into disuse as a vehicle for written literature, for very little survives of English between the [Norman] Conquest and the year 1200. Initially, educated people who continued to produce literary works wrote either in Latin or in Anglo-Norman, the dialect of French that was spoken by the new rulers of England. . . But even if the educated were writing literature in other languages, the uneducated were undoubtedly continuing to compose — if not to write — in English. When English literature begins to reappear at the end of the twelfth century, the larger part of it carries the stamp of popular or at least semi-popular origin. . ." (Abrams 6)

⁷ Literally: "Desired Hope."

⁸ Hurrah to Esperans Dezire, the first female president of Haiti!

⁹ If you are not a virgin you cannot find a man of a good family to marry you and in most cases you cannot find anyone at all.

¹⁰ His greatest belief was that a woman was made to serve and obey a man.

¹¹ If you lived in Punda they consider you better than the people who lived in the country.

¹² Mother was a woman, divorced and black, and that type of people did not invite black people to their house. I never forgot that.

¹³ I had to face the confusion of my identification upon my return to Curaçao.

¹⁴ Now I am a black single woman, proud of myself, who gives a lot of importance to the opportunity which I have found to have self-worth and thereby achieve IDENTIFICATION.

¹⁵ After the revolution secured the independence of Haiti, France refused to acknowledge the new Caribbean country. Creating a world-wide embargo on Haitian products unless Haiti were to reimburse France for their losses, Haiti was forced to pay millions of Francs yearly in order to obtain international recognition and the right to sell in the world-wide market. This launched Haiti into a state of severe financial hardship from its very inception as a country.

¹⁶ I made the decision to stay in Curaçao and to not allow anyone to kick me out of MY island. I was determined to work towards and to achieve my own spiritual and mental independence.

¹⁷ I remember that at a certain moment, the only thing which mattered in my life was my divorce. I wanted to divorce... I want to be free. In several occasions I found myself confronted by people who found it strange that I wanted to divorce a white man."

- ¹⁸ Tazi goes to find him at the hospital. She approaches him, saying hello to him.
—Mr. Jilyen (Julien), did you know Yaya was pregnant by you?
—Me? I don't even know anyone called Yaya.
—Yes, you do. Your mother's maid.
—They never called her Yaya at the house. I always knew her as Enwalya.
—Well, Enwalya gave you twins... the little boy died. The little girl is called Esperans Dezire. What have you done for the mother?
—Tazi, what do you want me to do? I am not working yet. I live by means of my mother and father. What can I do? It is not my fault if she has a baby...
- ¹⁹ —Esperans, if you really love me, you are going to choose...
—What am I choosing between?
—Myself or those people.
- ²⁰ —Well, Jangi, I will die for what I believe in.
—Esperans, my love, the country will always be like that. It is destiny of blacks to always oppress each other.
—No, Jangi, I am a woman, I cannot accept to resign myself. My country is a GREAT SMALL COUNTRY!
- ²¹ Another frustration I felt and which made me feel inferior to others, particularly to men, had to do with my grandfather and father's lack of support for the education of a girl due to their belief in women's duty to please their husbands, raise their children and keep their house clean.
- ²² After all, he was her father.
- ²³ Sweetie, you should be happy that your servant girl got married. / What have you come to tell me? That is the second time she makes me take to bed. / This time it is not her fault, Irene. / You see how life can be so unfair that a nobody like that can marry a doctor and our own daughter ends up with a damn school teacher./ But Irene, our daughter is happy.