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# "My mouth is the keeper of both speech and silence...", or The Vocalisation of Silence in Caribbean short stories by Edwige Danticat

Judith Misrahi-Barak

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- 1 The title of this paper is extracted from one of the short stories by the Haitian writer Edwige Danticat, "The Book of the Dead", the first story in her second collection *The Dew Breaker*. This reference to the Egyptian Book of the Dead<sup>1</sup> seemed to fit perfectly the core idea of this paper as it lays stress on the two horizons that seem to open up within the notion of "orality".
- 2 If the focus used to be more on "primary orality", defined by Walter J. Ong as "that of persons totally unfamiliar with writing" (Ong 1988 : 6), it seems that the centre of perspective has shifted over the past few decades towards a "secondary orality", one that "depends on writing and print for its existence" (3). Since the late 1980s, many writers, academics and critics have insisted on the interplay between speech and writing, orality and literacy. As Kenneth Ramchand demonstrates in an article published the same year as Ong's study, this interplay emerges at its best in the English-speaking Caribbean since "Caribbean societies may be defined as societies in which the mind-set of primary orality coexists with the mind-set of high literacy." (Ramchand 1988 : 107). Indeed, in the 20th century, the oral culture inherited from slavery days and African ancestry has been mingling with the written culture inherited from colonization and the Western world. Ramchand insists too on the fact that the combination of such a rich oral heritage and of the intricacies and complexities of the written word account for the "much admired vitality in West Indian writing" (108). Many West Indian writers have taken advantage of the interrelationships between the oral and the written word in fiction and poetry — Louise Bennett, Dionne Brand, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Fred D'Aguiar, Lorna Goodison, Velma Pollard, Denis Scott, Andrew Salkey, Sam Selvon, Derek Walcott, and so many others who write both to the eye and to the ear.

- 3 Yet, all the Caribbean writers do not weave orality and literacy together in the same way, depending on the period of writing and on their background mostly. If the earlier generations had a tendency to separate the voice of the narration from the voice of the characters, the closing of the gap between narration and characters became more and more pregnant in Caribbean fiction writing. Also, if a majority of writers seems to have worked on the penetration of oral forms upon the written forms, some writers have also looked at the penetration of writing upon the oral consciousness, as well as at all the crossovers between orality and literacy, composing the figures of a new Caribbean syncreticity.
- 4 If orality seems to be best grasped in its relationships with its most obvious opposite — literacy, or the written word — it also has to be grasped through its other opposite — silence, and this is where reading Danticat can be so enlightening because the young Haitian writer has a definition of the crossovers between orality, literacy and silence that belongs to herself only. In the context of the Caribbean short story, orality has often been pigeonholed as being linked mostly, if not only, with the use of creole, or dialect. This is hardly the case for Danticat, and yet orality permeates her stories, but it is an orality which is constantly played against the gaps between the words, the ellipses, and ultimately against silence. I would like in this paper to insist on the linguistic, thematic, stylistic, narrative and political as well as ontological use of silence in her short fiction, without which no voice can indeed be heard. It is my hypothesis that silence is used as theme and technique in her stories, making orality stream in, alongside the reconfiguration of self.
- 5 Edwige Danticat, who has lived in the US since the age of twelve, has published two collections of short stories: *Krik ? Krak !* which launched her as a major writer, and the recent *The Dew Breaker*, in which all the stories intimately echo each other. In fact, both collections are short story cycles, and in both, the burden of the untold history is such that it nearly crushes its characters. The whole point of Danticat's stories is to voice those words that have been bottled up for too long, all the unsaid, all the *unspeakable things unspoken*, to borrow Toni Morrison's phrase, all the repressed suffering. I would first like to examine the structural and narratological tools that Danticat gives herself in order to create this new resonance. All the echoes that the text creates within itself will indeed bring out a new voice and consciousness.
- 6 Both collections are short story cycles, defined by Forrest Ingram as "a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit." (Ingram 1971 : 15). Using the definition by Ingram, Rocio Davis also adds that such a collection "must assert the individuality and independence of each of the component parts while creating a necessary interdependence that emphasizes the wholeness and unity of the work. Consistency of theme and an evolution from one story to the next are among the classic requirements of the form." (Davis 2001 : 66). Form is actually used in order to present the main components of the collection, ie the interaction between uniting and separating the individual and the community — how distinct? how indissociable? — as well as the problematics of self-definition within a displaced community. The links between the individual and its community, be it host or native, may be analogical to those existing between the stories of the collections, all devoted to the depicting of the Haitian individual, in Haiti or in the diaspora, and this is one of the ways Danticat merges theme and technique. In order to ascertain first that Danticat uses a secondary orality that

depends on writing and print for its existence, and only then set into perspective the constant interaction of speech and silence, I think it essential to give a few examples of the intertextual echoes of the two collections of stories.

- 7 Thematically speaking, some stories are devoted to the more than difficult social, political and economic situation of Haitians at home, mostly women but not only ("A Wall of Fire Rising", or "The Missing Peace" for instance), others to the dilemmas of emigration ("Children of the Sea" again, "New York Day Women", or "Caroline's Wedding"), all of them compose a web of words, stories and narratives, rising against the wall of silence that was maintained by the Duvaliers dynasty, father and son, until 1986, and by a history of colonisation and invasion. Numerous stories address history as the great silencer, or rather the history makers — in *Krik ? Krak !* "Children of the Sea" literally gives a voice to those in the 1980s who tried to flee the country on board little boats as well as to those who stayed in Haiti; "Nineteen-Thirty Seven" takes as background the massacre of Haitians organized by the Dominican General Trujillo in 1937, and the silencing that has ensued for generations, echoed ever so forcefully by the silence imposed through torture by the Haitian *tontons macoutes* during the dictatorship, a period that is also covered in "The Missing Peace" in the same collection. *The Dew Breaker* takes up those early threads from the first collection to weave them more tightly, dealing more specifically with the period of the Duvaliers, the silence, the torture, the violence of it — "The Book of the Dead", "Monkey Tails" and "The Dew Breaker" particularly.
- 8 In fact both collections bring the stories together in a network of characters passing from one story to another, echoes, reminiscences, and intertextual allusions that have to be deciphered by the reader himself. For instance, on the level of characters, in the last story of *Krik ? Krak !*, Grace, the narrator and Caroline's sister, and her mother, attend a funeral service which the reader understands is for the pregnant girl, Célianne, who was on the boat trying to reach the American coast in the first story "Children of the Sea": "We make a special call today for a young woman whose name we don't know', the priest said after he had recited all the others. 'A young woman who was pregnant when she took a boat from Haiti and then later gave birth to her child on that boat...'" (Danticat 1996 : 167). Célianne's death, instead of being swallowed by the sea she was hoping would help her in her flight, will not be completely shrouded in silence since there is still an echo of her in the last story. In "Between the Pool and the Gardenias", the main character looks after a dead baby that she has found on the street, haunted and disturbed as she is by all her miscarriages. She is related to other characters in other stories in the collection, "Nineteen-Thirty Seven" and "Wall of Fire Rising" particularly:
 

There was my grandmother Eveline who was killed by Dominican soldiers at the Massacre river. My grandmother Défilé who died with a bald head in a prison, because god had given her wings. My godmother Lili who killed herself in old age because her husband had jumped out of a flying balloon and her grown son left her to go to Miami. (94)
- 9 Parallel to the bonds that are formed between characters, often women, we also find echoes to merge the stories one with the other : the song *Beloved Haiti* that is mentioned in "Children of the Sea" is actually sung in "Caroline's Wedding", bringing the wheel full circle. The narrator of "Between the Pool and the Gardenias" calls out all the names she would have liked to give to her child: Eveline, Josephine, Jacqueline, Hermine, Marie Magdalène, Célianne — all names of characters in the stories of the collection.

- 10 Symbolically speaking, clusters of images are also used in order to make the stories coalesce, echo one another and speak back to you<sup>2</sup>. The butterfly flutters its way in and out of the stories, becoming "a symbol of both continuing life and transformation" (Davis 2001 : 70). The girl who has stayed in Haiti in "Children of the Sea" for instance says : "i don't sketch my butterflies anymore because i don't even like seeing the sun. besides, manman says that butterflies can bring news. the bright ones bring happy news and the black ones warn us of deaths." (Danticat 1996 : 5) And indeed, a black butterfly will land on her hand at the end of the story. The butterfly reappears in "Night Women", when the female narrator gazes at her son sleeping, comparing him with "a butterfly fluttering on a rock that stands out naked in the middle of a stream." (85). The dead baby of "Between the Pool and the Gardenias" wears a "butterfly collar". The girl narrator in "The Missing Peace", close to the adolescent who works for the military, is "playing with leaves shaped like butterflies." (103). The symbol of the butterfly is even carried into another collection of which Danticat was the editor, *The Butterfly's Way : Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States, an Anthology*.
- 11 The desire for escape, translated literally into images of flight, also inhabits the stories. Dreams of flight lead Guy to his death in "A Wall of Fire Rising" as he falls from a hot-air balloon. The imprisoned women in "Ninety-Thirty Seven" are brutalized by the guards who thought they were witches developing wings and flying away at night, so instrumentalized they were by the regime that had been using Haitian *vodou* myths to create an atmosphere of paranoia, hatred and violence.
- 12 Death, of adults, children, and often infants, is another motif that haunts all the stories, sewing them all up together, bringing together the individual and its community, reuniting in the case of "Children of the Sea" the refugees and the Africans, dead or alive, thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. Célianne gives birth to a stillborn child, and joins her in the water over board. The girl-narrator of "The Missing Peace" is called Lamort because her mother died in childbirth, unwittingly transmitting this legacy of death to her daughter. In "Between the Pool and the Gardenias", the disturbed tentative mother retrieves the corpse of a discarded newborn baby and nurses it : "In the city, I hear they throw out whole entire children. They throw them out anywhere : on doorsteps, in garbage cans, at gas pumps, sidewalks. In the time that I had been in Port-au-Prince, I had never seen such a child until now." (93) Death is everywhere.
- 13 The same narrative interweaving and echoing is used in *The Dew Breaker*, in which the rarely seen former torturer is in fact the main protagonist, refracted in the consciousness of his wife and daughter, in the nightmares of his neighbours and former victims. The collection moves from 1960s Haiti to present-day New York where the eponymous 'dew breaker' has moved, trying to make a new life for himself and his family. In "The Book of the Dead", the narrator-focalizer, Ka, a sculptor who has made a statue of her father, has always believed she is the daughter of a former victim of the Duvalier dictatorship. But the confrontation, through the statue, of the image his daughter has of him and of the image he has of himself, proves too much for the father who flees in distress. When he comes back, he can do nothing but embark into a confession : "You see, Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the prey." (Danticat 2004 : 20) Ka is going to fit to the Egyptian etymology of her name : "A ka is a double of the body, [...] the body's companion through life and after life. It guides the body through the kingdom of the dead." (17). The Book of the Dead is indeed a valid metaphor for Ka's journey, "dead hearts being placed

on scales and souls traveling aimlessly down fiery underground rivers". But there is hope in the uncovering of silence through oral confession in the written text.

- 14 The presence of the dew breaker is seen lurking from one story to another. In "Night Talkers", Dany's parents were killed by that same man who has become a barber in New York. In "The Bridal Seamstress", the retired bridal seamstress who is being interviewed by a young journalist, while constantly postponing the moment of delivery of speech, is one of his former victims: "We called them *choukèt laroze*," Beatrice said [...]. "they'd break into your house. Mostly it was at night. But often they'd also come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they'd take you away. He was one of them, the guard." (131) He haunts her like a ghost from her former life: "This man, wherever I rent or buy a house in this city, I find him, living on my street." (132). The last story in the collection, "The Dew Breaker", gathers all the threads, and gives all the missing clues – how the abduction of a preacher turned sour, how the guard got his scar, how he had to flee the country.
- 15 The intricacies of the intertextual echoes between the stories have hopefully been made clear now, which shows that an *effet d'oralité* (of the same type as Barthes's *effet de réel*) is actually obtained through the organization of the written space, of the echoes that reverberate between written voices, of the reflections that flutter from one motif to the next. A writer can be involved in a dialectics of orality, and also involve the reader, without actually using the obvious tools of orality, dialect or creole, or very little. Orality can also materialize elsewhere and find another mode of being.
- 16 Not only are the two collections moulded after an oral tradition of narrative in the way each story echoes the other ones, but one may say that the stories are soaked in orality. Even the title is already an indication of it, a call-response which is an invitation to take part – the storyteller says *Krik ?* and the audience answers *Krak !* both stepping into the fictional world of the story, as well as into the world of orality. Rocio Davis in her article argues that :
- The short story cycle looks back to oral traditions of narrative while embodying signs of modernity. One of its most salient features is its attempt to emulate the act of storytelling, the effort of a speaker to establish solidarity with an implied audience by recounting a series of tales linked by their content or by the conditions in which they are related. (Davis 2001 : 66)
- 17 The intertextual allusions that I have underlined (and that are examined in detail by Davis) are a means to establish the connection between storyteller and audience, making them actively participate in the narration. Danticat uses many other ways to foreground orality – the second-person narration in the epilogue of *Krik ? Krak !* "Women Like Us" for instance is also a means to enter into immediate contact with the addressee/narratee. Thematically speaking, storytelling figures in several of the stories : in "Children of the Sea" the refugees tell each other stories to pass the time : "We spent most of yesterday telling stories. Someone says, *Krik ?* You answer, *Krak !* And they say, I have many stories I could tell you, and then they go on and tell these stories to you, but mostly to themselves." (Danticat 1996 : 14). Speech is the only refuge available to the boat refugees, providing a tenuous but organic link between people, a paradoxical link too since in Haiti words were often forced out of people's mouths. Trinh T. Minh-ha speaks of storytelling as "the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community", underlining that the coloured women writers have often chosen to "un-learn" the dominant language by "re-establishing the contact with [their] foremothers, so that living tradition can never

congeal into fixed forms, so that life keeps on nurturing life, so that what is understood as the Past continues to provide the link with the Present and the Future." (Trinh T. Minh-ha 1990 : 148-149).

- 18 Verbal rituals of recognition are also repeatedly played in the stories of the collection when it is necessary re-establish a lost connection with people or with the past: in "Caroline's Wedding" mother and daughter have kept up a question-and-answer game which harks back to 'Nineteen-Thirty Seven' and to the secret society formed by the women at the time of the massacre :

I remembered a Jacqueline who went on the trips with us, but I was not sure this was the same woman. If she were really from the river, she would know. She would know all the things that my mother had said to the sun as we sat with our hands dipped in the water, questioning each other, making up codes and disciplines by which we could always know who the other daughters of the river were. (Danticat 1996 : 44)

- 19 The obsession with saying, telling, narrating, is kept up in *The Dew Breaker* and even emphasized. In "Night Talkers", the young man whose parents were killed by the *macoutes* goes back to his village in Haiti to see his aunt who has raised him before he emigrated to the US. Aunt and nephew are alike in that : "They were both palannits, night talkers, people who wet their beds, not with urine but with words. He too spoke his dreams aloud in the night, to the point of sometimes jolting himself awake with the sound of his own voice." (Danticat 2004 : 98). Another character in the story, Claude, an Haitian-born young man who was expelled from the US after committing patricide, is also a palannit. After the death of Dany's aunt, at her burial, Dany keeps Claude speaking : "Claude was already one of them, a member of their tribe. Claude was a palannit, a night talker, one of those who spoke their nightmares out loud to themselves. Except Claude was even luckier than he realized, for he was able to speak his nightmares to himself as well as to others..." (120) By speaking out their nightmares, an *effet d'oralité* is called up. Words are once again used to raise a wall against suffering and keep silence at bay. As the narrator of the Epilogue says in *Krik? Krak!* : "Silence terrifies you more than the pounding of a million pieces of steel chopping away at your flesh." (Danticat 1996 : 223).

- 20 Speech and voice, the absolute, vital, adamant necessity of it, certainly form the backbone of the two collections, but the obsession with saying, telling, narrating, is very effectively paralleled by the obsession with silence, as if one was supporting the other. Silence is made to function in the text in a dual and paradoxical way : speech is certainly geared against silence, and the virtues of words are being waged in the healing process, be it on the torturer's side, as in the father's confession in "The Book of the Dead", or on the victim's side, as in "The Bridal Seamstress". But silence is also worked into the text as an empowering tool. If silence is a tool of oppression, it can also be used as a tool of liberation, just as language and literature were once used in the imperialist scheme and revertedly in the decolonising process. When Myriam Chancy dedicates herself to articulating women's absences and silences in Haitian history and literature, she argues that the absences that are uncovered are also significant as "sites of affirmation": "It is through the consciousness of absence, then, that identity is recovered and preciously defended." (Chancy 1997 : 16). In order to define her *Haitiennité*, she elaborates the concept of *culture-lacune*, based on her own former definition of herself filled with gaps, holes, *lacunes*. In all the novels by Haitian women that she analyzes in her study, "absence is palpable in the form of marginalization. But from this marginalization emerges a sense of a women's culture that defines herself *through its silencing*." (16-17). In Danticat's short



stories, silence is indeed used in order to reveal the burden that has been crushing Haitian women to this day, but by doing so, it becomes a tool for self-expression. It is through silence that the retrieval of voice appears to be made accessible.

- 21 Technically speaking, Danticat does it in a number of ways, but the most striking one is the way she uses monologue and dialogue, as well as the different types of speech. In "Children of the Sea", the text is visually split between the young man who has left Haiti on a refugee boat, and his girlfriend who has stayed. The distance between the two interlocutors is a maximal one since they are physically separated, the speaker and the listener being fused into one and the same person ; yet they are communicating with each other, using the second person singular to reestablish the missing connection — the boy is writing his diary on scraps of paper and the girl is talking to him, almost responding, though in a discrepant way. The fact that communication is closed upon itself not only heightens the pathos but also ties in with what is being said in the story. The context is that of the darker years of the Duvaliers regime in the 1980s, one of silencing and abducting, systematic rape and torture. The boy had taken part in resistance actions that involved a radio broadcast, the private voice thus being projected into the public sphere. The girl tells him how her father wants her to "throw out those tapes of your radio shows. i destroyed some music tapes, but i still have your voice. I thank god you got out when you did. all the other youth federation members have disappeared. no one has heard from them." (Danticat 1996 : 4). It is also one of the fears of the boy : "We go under and no one hears from us again." (6). It seems as if the text itself was obsessed with words, oral and written, all the words that have been forced out, extorted, violently pulled out of people :

Last night they came to madan roger's house. papa hurried inside as soon as madan roger's screaming started. [...] they were shouting at her, do you belong to the youth federation with those vagabonds who were on the radio ? she was yelling, do i look like a youth to you ? can you identify your son's other associates ? they asked her. [...] she cursed on their mothers' graves. [...] they kept at it, asking her questions at the top of their voices : was your son a traitor ? tell me all the names of his friends who were traitors just like him. madan roger finally shouts, yes, he was one ! he belonged to that group. he was on the radio. [...] they start to pound at her. you can hear it. you can hear the guns coming down on her head. it sounds like they are cracking all the bones in her body. manman whispers to papa, you can't just let them kill her. (16)

- 22 It seems to me that in the way her text actually makes silence heard, on both sides of the Atlantic, Danticat reproduces the complexity of this association of speech and silence — the *macoutes* are reducing the opposition to silence, they say they want information, yet we know that the aim of torture is not to obtain information but simply to spread terror ; madan roger does not give them new names, she gives them information they already have. The family of the girl disagrees over whether they should intervene, they listen in, the father forcing his wife to remain silent. Silence is linked to existence — if you don't give any names, if you keep silent, you will go on existing.
- 23 On the boat, stories are being told to pass the time and keep up hope. On the boat, words, stories, tears, screams, vomit and groans are brought into a frightening equation: "Some of the women sing and tell stories to each other to appease the vomiting." (9) Orality is as much defined here by eating (not much) and vomiting, as by screaming and telling stories :
- The pregnant girl, Célianne, I don't know how she takes it. [...] I have never seen her eat. [...] She woke up screaming the other night. [...] Some water started coming into the boat in the spot where she was sleeping. There is a crack at the bottom of



the boat that looks as though [...] it will split the boat in two. The captain [...] used some tar to clog up the hole. (10)

- 24 When she gives birth, it is Célianne herself who becomes the vacant hole : “ I have moved to the other side of the boat so I will not have to look *inside* Célianne. People are just watching. The captain asks the midwife to keep Célianne steady so she will not rock any more holes into the boat. Now we have three cracks covered with tar.” (18).
- 25 Danticat uses the device of a dialogue that is in fact the juxtaposition of two monologues while adding some variations according to the necessities of the story. In “New York Day Women” a young woman watches her mother as she is walking the New York streets. The text delivers in parallel the two streams of consciousness, visually differentiated on the page — and this is another proof if need be of the importance of the organization of the written space in the problematics of speech and silence. But beyond the physical silence worming its way into the page, a strange kind of dialogue unwittingly operates between the two women as they seem to respond to each other in spite of the cross-generational and cross-cultural divide. In “Night Women” a prostitute speaks her thoughts while her son is asleep. In the three stories mentioned, silence is at the heart of speech, but the consciousness of it brings the characters closer to the constitution of a self outside and away from silence.
- 26 The second device Danticat uses is the manipulation of the different types of speech. In “Children of the Sea”, because there is no possibility of a direct dialogue between the two protagonists, which accounts for the fact that indirect speech and free indirect speech are quite obviously dominant —“she asked me what really happened to you. she said she saw your parents before they left for the provinces. they did not want to tell her anything. i told her you took a boat after they raided the radio station.” (13) ; the other passage where madan roger is beaten up by the macoutes is also a case in point, the confrontation being thoroughly organized through the way speech is actually split up. The fact other people are listening in, trying not to make themselves heard, also comes across in the doubleness of free indirect speech.
- 27 That the basis of speech is silence is nothing new in western thinking. In an article about Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir *The Wowan Warrior* and African-Caribbean Canadian women writers like Marlene Nourbese Philip and Makeda Silvera, Richard Teleky sums it up perfectly : “Writers live poised between the power of silence and the power of language. Silence is essential not only to the writing process itself but to the process of building an identity as a writer. In a quite literal sense, claiming and transforming silence is a crucial aspect of finding a voice.” (Teleky 2001 : 207). Edwige Danticat wages her battle with silence in such a way that it enables her to transform it into an act of self-discovery, self-definition and ultimately an act of liberation. This is the process in which Josephine is involved in “Nineteen-Thirty Seven”, how not to be struck dumb any more. If it is true that a writer can be involved in a dialectics of orality, without actually using the obvious tools of orality, it is also true that silence, when inserted within the text, heightens the possibility of speech. In incorporating the orality of silence within the written words of her stories, in using silence against silence, in turning it inside out like a glove, Danticat’s stories of oppression are converted into narratives of self-narration and self-empowerment.

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## ABSTRACTS

L'oralité dans la littérature a souvent été associée à l'utilisation du créole ou du dialecte, surtout dans le contexte caribéen où l'anglais, plus ou moins créolisé, est la seule langue, et où tant d'influences se sont mélangées, du conte africain au roman anglais. Mais on peut aussi appréhender le concept et la pratique de l'oralité à travers son interface avec les notions de voix et de silence. L'écrivain haïtienne Edwige Danticat, auteur des deux recueils de nouvelles *Krik ? Krak !* et *The Dew Breaker* et qui écrit en anglais, amène à la surface du texte l'histoire non dite, source de souffrance, et utilise aussi le silence tant comme thème que comme outil rhétorique. La façon dont le texte écrit fait résonner la voix qui parle ou la voix qui se tait, la façon dont ce texte s'organise autour de la voix et du silence, contribue à transformer un texte d'oppression en texte de libération.

## AUTHORS

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Judith Misrahi-Barak, Maître de Conférences HDR, Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier III, France, read English Literature at the University of Paris III and at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Fontenay-aux-Roses. She wrote her Doctorate on the Writing of childhood in Caribbean literature (1996). She has published many articles on Caribbean writers belonging to the Caribbean diaspora, as well as on African-Caribbean-Canadian authors, in *Commonwealth*, *Alizés*, *Annales du Monde Anglophone*, *Journal of the Short-Story in English...* as well as an interview with Cyril Dabydeen in *Commonwealth* (2001).