

UNCANNY CARNIVALESQUE EFFECTS IN CURAÇAO:

THE LONGEST MONTH BY DIANA LEBACS

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Abstract

This work calls for a re-dimension of literary creation regarding female writers from Curaçao – mainly catalogued as literature for young people – through an analysis of two publications: firstly, *Mundu yama sinta mira. Womanhood in Curaçao* (Ansano *et al.*), which gathers poems, short stories as well as essays written in Papiamentu, English, Dutch and Spanish and deals with the role of women within cultural life. The other book, *The longest month (De langste maand)*, written by Diana Lebac, is a novel written in Dutch and should be considered as a valuable document for future research with regards to modernity in the Caribbean. *Key words:* Curaçao, literature, female writers from Curaçao, Papiamentu, Diana Lebac

Resumen

Este trabajo convoca a redimensionar la creación literaria de las escritoras curazoleñas –catalogada en su mayoría como literatura para jóvenes– mediante el análisis de dos publicaciones: *Mundu yama sinta mira. Womanhood in Curaçao*, Ansano *et al.*, obra que reúne poemas, cuentos así como ensayos escritos en papiamentu, inglés, holandés y español acerca del papel que desempeña la mujer dentro de la vida cultural. El otro libro, *The longest month (De langste maand)*, de Diana Lebac, novela escrita en holandés, debe considerarse como un valioso documento para futuras investigaciones sobre la modernidad en el Caribe. *Palabras clave:* Curazao, literatura, escritoras curazoleñas, papiamentu, Diana Lebac

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MISTERIOSOS Y CARNAVALESCOS EFECTOS EN CURAÇÃO:

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Résumé

Ou la creation littéraire des femmes écrivains de Curacao. Deux publications: *Mundu yama sinta mira. Womanhood a Curacao*, Ansano *et al.*, reunissent poèmes, contes, essais écrits en papiamento, anglais, hollandais et espagnol, sur le rôle de la femme dans la vie culturelle. “The Longest Month” (*De langste manad*), de Diana Lebacks, roman écrit en hollandaise, contribuera à la recherche sur la modernité dans la Caraïbe.

Samenvatting

Dit artikel analyseert het literaire werk van de Curacaosche schrijfsters, dat beschouwd wordt als jeugdliteratuur. Twee publikaties worden geanalyseerd, de eerste heet *Mundu yama sinta mira. Womanhood in Curaçao* (R. Ansano *et al.*), en is een bundel van gedichten, verhalen en essays, die geschreven zijn in Papiamento, Engels, Nederlands en Spaans en betreffen de rol van de vrouw in het culturele leven. De tweede is het boek *The longest month (De langste maand)* van de schrijfster Diana Lebacks, een roman die geschreven is in het Nederlands en die beschouwd wordt als een waardevol document voor toekomstig onderzoek over moderniteit in het Caraïbisch gebied.

Little attention has been paid so far to female authors in Curaçao, who write in Dutch although belonging to the native Papiamentu-speaking community. In a first handbook on the literary history of the Netherlands Antilles, *With the own voice (Met eigen stem...)* (Heuvel & van Wel, 1989), important but rather unknown poets such as Oda Blinder and Alette Beaujon are mentioned. Most women, meanwhile, are found in the category of literature for the youth and the narrative field in literature in Dutch is occupied entirely by their male colleagues. It is well deserved, therefore, to recall the fact that the relevance of female creative writing was discussed in two publications at the beginning of the 1990s. In the co-edited volume, *Mundu yama sinta mira. Womanhood in Curaçao* (Ansano *et al.*, 1992), we find poems, short stories, and essays in Papiamentu, English, Dutch, and Spanish on the role of women in cultural life. The second book, in contrast, *The longest month (De langste maand)* is a novel written in Dutch by Diana Lebacks (1994). Notwithstanding this choice of different genres and languages, it is obvious that both publications reflect a profound interest in popular culture in Papiamentu absent from the works in Dutch by their male contemporaries.

Popular culture in Papiamentu is framed in rhythmical movement, which was emphasized as a postmodern feature in *The repeating island* (1996), Antonio Benítez Rojo's famous essay on Caribbean cultures. Benítez Rojo claims that popular performances traditionally avoided historical homogenization, obtaining their energies from local activities which celebrate their difference and keep it alive. In Papiamentu culture, these festivities are organized around the *tambú* and the *tumba*. René Rosalia has discussed their particularities at length in a voluminous study and we only address here the importance of African influences as well as the use of Papiamentu for the text of the songs. The *tambú* is a key activity in the *tumba*-festival and supports the claim for Papiamentu-culture and its musical traditions since the Revolution of May 30, 1969. The festival is organized just before the yearly carnival parade and dedicated

to the election of the road march. The lead singers train very long in order to be successful at this event and Joyce Clemencia calls attention to the fact that the first tumba-queen of Curaçao, Elia Ilenia, was crowned in 1991. In an interview with Clemencia, Ilenia recounts that she comes from a family of tambú-performers but that she started as a professional singer with music from Latin America. She changed to the tambú with the song "Reina" (Queen) and explains her reasons with the following argument:

Reina is a woman's name. Only a woman can become a reina. You use the word reina to make fun of someone who thinks she is a queen. That is what I did in my first *tambú*. There was this woman who used to bother me whenever I was on stage. So I called her reina and sang her at the drum so she would leave me alone. I asked her not to underestimate me, to leave me alone so I would not get angry and start revealing things. And it helped. She never troubled me again [Clemencia, 1992, 212].

Ilenia's words testify the intimate role of the tambú for community life. In the past, the tambú and the more commercialized tumba were seen as having a subversive meaning and were more or less forbidden in public life until 1952. What also matters here is that the role of the women as lead singers of the tambú has been predominant until the 1950s, when it was taken over by male performers. The commercialization of popular music ran parallel with a change of gender, thus, fact that makes Ilenia's position even more exceptional.

When taking this shift in the representation of gender into account, the fact that Lebac, in *The longest month*, focuses on the role of women in the context of the preparations for the tumba-festival and the carnival is equally important. In addition to this remarkable fact, Lebac is the only native female writer of fiction who has ever published a novel so far. She is well known as an actress and as an author of books for the youth, in which she highlights the importance of education for social mobility and professional involvement in the Netherlands Antilles. She repeatedly makes the point that this education has to serve the local community. *The longest month*, in contrast, is announced

as a novel 'for adults' and has an older woman as the main character. Ambrosia Petronilia Biriña Faneyte or Bir of the Hill is a 69-years old widow who lives on the *kunuku*, the territory of a former plantation in the countryside of the island. Likewise her neighbors, Bir has never left the island and she is a copy of the traditional Mama Grandi, the center of community life with warm meals, healing herbs, and sympathetic words. The book opens in January at the beginning of the 1980s, when the preparations for the tumba-festival and the carnival parade absorb all the energies. Simultaneously, the community is confronted with other problems. Their backwardness in administrative and environmental matters is obvious. Bir receives an abnormally high water bill and the construction of a highway threatens to destroy the modest local business. The confrontation with modernization is translated into concepts such as a widow pension, trade unions, a study loan, a bank loan, a mortgage, drug problems, crime, etc.

Lebacs' novel was neither particularly well received in the Dutch nor in the Papiamentu press. There were only a few reviews and style was definitely more emphasized than the details of the plot exposed in this fictional account. Carnival and the tumba-festival are no common denominators for Dutch literary criticism and, therefore, it is necessary to delineate some theoretical assumptions for applying a postcolonial strategy in order to uncover the typical Caribbean subversive meanings in this text. The essays in Homi Bhabha's *The location of culture* (1994) depict the schizophrenic state of mind of contemporary migrants from former colonies to the more promising centers of the world in terms of economic opportunities. In "Articulating the Archaic", Bhabha argues that those migrants are familiar with the conspiracy of silence around the colonial truth and the repression of writing on cultural differences. In order to denounce the act of colonization Bhabha attempts to articulate an enunciatory disorder with an ambivalent signification. He pleads for the creation of a paradox, in which the narrator insists on his or her authority to differentiate. This paradox is condensed in the "fable of the Double uncannily, in-between Freud's analytic distinctions" (Bhabha, 1994, 136), which questions a post-colonial

reality reminiscent of the persistent neo-colonial continuities, notwithstanding the New Economy and the multi-national division of labor. Post coloniality, so-to-speak, is the effort of the relocation of history through the display of 'new' cultural agents for social mobility. Are they or are they not the same agents as in the colonial past and what does their newness consist of? To indicate these agents, Bhabha points to the perception of forced passivity on the characters, on their feeling of lack of homeliness revealed by a violent cut that causes death.

New economy, in *The longest month*, means the economic crisis since the beginning of the 1980s. Violent death is translated into two criminal acts. The first one is drug-smuggle, the more conventional case. The youth is seduced by drug-dealers and, on their turn, the dealers are unmasked and arrested during the carnival parade. But Lebac records another violent crime at a less obvious level of her account. We learn from two accidents within the Papiamentu community. Children are killed in a car accident (Chap. 7) and then, we assist an act of vengeance with a revolver that again kills a child (Chap. 32). All people involved belong to the local group around the Mama Grandi in the kunuku. The accidents are reported in their own Papiamentu newspaper, *Voice of the people (Stem van het volk)*, whose journalist is familiar to everybody. This Ibis, nicknamed Malus, is the prototype of the paparazzo, the pursuer of privacy, and the photographer of the details of mutilated bodies. With such pictures he aims to increase the circulation of the daily as well as his own salary and the author's voice in the novel criticizes this vulgar style of the local press.

Bir's community, in the meantime, is absorbed in preparing for the yearly event, which includes tumba dancing, parades and masquerades, as well as ever lasting parties. This event is so important that a film team arrives from the Netherlands in order to shoot a documentary on this outstanding happening. One member of the team is Bir's rebellious daughter Loudrid, who stayed in Holland after her studies because she could not find an equivalent job on her home island. Loudrid has been away for a long time and did not experience the changes after May 30, 1969, represented by the emancipation of the Papiamentu

culture. Therefore, Loudrid registers the efforts put into the carnival celebration notwithstanding the financial crisis on the island from a typical Dutch viewpoint. Her personal despair has the effect of a storm or even a hurricane. Loudrid's despair is also professional, because she finds out that the film team is unable to grasp the emotional involvement in the carnival preparations in a convincing way.

It is obvious that Lebac operates with a double level in her narrative discourse. On the one hand, she identifies with Bir and her community and gives them clear instructions with the auctorial voice in Dutch. From this perspective, the author is able to display and analyze the local conflicts and to criticize its press organ. On the other hand, Lebac introduces the visitors coming from Holland who keep their distance to this reality and, in the case of Loudrid, even feel irritated and ashamed. Within the framework of this doubling, the author stands for the local community. Her Bir, albeit a series of misfortunes, represents her own attachment to the kunuku and in order to convince her readers of this fact, Lebac proceeds with a rhetorical shift. One of Bir's regular visitors is a man in a wheel chair, who at the culminating point dismantles his real identity. The climax is portrayed as a miracle because he is suddenly not only able to walk but also turns out to be a woman. This man/woman is the killer of the children, a theme that touches upon the ultimate taboo in local terms, a woman who causes the violent death of innocent children. The fable of the Double uncannily is represented in this personality who dresses like a man and takes armed revenge.

When we look closer to this secondary level of crime, it is clear that Lebac leaves no doubt about the motif for the acts. The woman was the driver of an old white Toyota 1000 and tried to surpass a new, beautiful Corvette at all means. In her endeavor, she failed to avoid the pedestrians on the sidewalk and its horrible consequences were portrayed by the reporter who included every morbid detail in the daily. The accident and the publication of the photos struck the driver in such a way that she lost the power in her legs and changed her gender identity for the outside world. During the *bientu di kuaresma*, after the carnival and just before elections, the fatal situation comes to a climax.

The feelings of revenge become so strong that the character decides to act. But at this point Lebac's inserts the anticlimax with the effect of a catharsis. Instead of the reporter, the woman hits his little daughter. Readers understand that the real culprit is the stress of modernization which produces a 'collective basic fear' to stay behind. This fear makes no sense and the community must be freed of this tension. That's why nobody is guilty at the end that explains the change to melodrama in the rhetoric of the narrative. People have to approach each other in a peaceful way again, creating stability and confidence for finding back a local sense of community.

A healing force is obviously at work in Lebac's novel, for which the fictional Bir figures as the responsible person. Her knowledge of herbs is not decisive for this healing ability. Bir is indifferent when it comes to giving information to an academic researcher from Holland in reference to the potentials of the plants. Her interest goes to the healing forces capable of instructing her local community and, in this sense, Bir displays similar characteristics as Elia Ilenia in reality. In the article, "The semiotics of dark clouds," Clemencia points to Ilenia's work as a healer and singer and explains this in one of her most famous songs, "Sinta mira" (Sit and see):

[The song] holds a whole gamut of elements, strongly rooted in Curaçao's traditions. [...] "Mi yama sinta mira" (My name is sit and see) is based on the old expression "mundo yama sinta mira" (the world is sit and see), which holds a conception of wisdom, of standing aside and observing the greatness of the universe. The universe has in it everything a person needs, including justice. That is why we do not need to proceed in a hasty manner. Everything has its right moment in the universe.

From history, we learn that *sinta mira* also conceptualized a form of resistance of black people during slavery. Black people used it to express their mental superiority over the white man, although the latter had all the power. The concept is generally linked with men, white and rich men, representing power. It speaks of the fact that the world changes all the time. The ones who are up today, can be down tomorrow [Clemencia, 1992, 206-209].

This procedure of spiritual relativity is the key to the understanding of the philosophy of the kunuku community in *The longest month*. They manage to resolve the financial constraints and to enjoy life again in their authentic way. The book ends with the sentence: "A beautiful evening was it, so full of light" (*Een prachtige avond was het, zo vol licht*), and in this scenery walks the Mama Grandi along with a *padrino* who helps her to balance the communal well being. Is this a conventional solution, thus, this coupling and happy end in a culture reminiscent of the slavery past?

For the answer of this question, it is important to insist on the fact that the novel is written in Dutch. What does this mean? Most of the female authors in Curaçao are poets who use primarily Papiamentu, such as Lucille Berry-Haseth, Nadia Brito, Maria Diwan, Lusette Fairbairn, May Henriquez, Reyna Joe, Imelda Valerius, among others. In an article on this topic, "The contribution of female poetry to the development of Papiamentu" (Brute, 1992, 119-124), Ithel Brute observes that, since that day in May 1969, the female voice has become increasingly strong and he adds an extended bibliography to stress this point. Surprisingly, however, no text in the co-edited volume on the role of women in Curaçao can be found on writing in Dutch. Is writing in Dutch doomed in the island's community?

The discussion on language questions is certainly long, conflictive, and unresolved. Lebac approaches this problem in an innovative way. She elaborates the tensions in relationship with the visual perception of the Papiamentu-speaking community from the Dutch film team viewpoint. It is in the course of this debate that the author mentions Pierre Lauffer's short narrative, *Kwadro na sjinishi* (*Painting in grey*, p. 138). The initial plan for the scenario of the documentary was to open with Lauffer's text translated into Dutch. The first shock, on this point, comes after landing in Curaçao. Due to the rain period, the island is green and not grey as during the dry period. The cameraman cries: That light! Those colors! No one will believe it! Lebac quotes referential landscapes in Holland to illustrate the difference and Loudrid even asks: is there literature in Papiamentu about the rain period? This unresolved conflict with the visual

perception interlaces the narrative argument until the film team leaves and it loses its relevance.

The difficulty with tropical stereotypes is a regular trope in the Caribbean. Michael Dash makes the point in his chapter on "Tropes and Tropicality." He remembers the myth of the noble savage and the overwhelming realm of the natural with its hedonist eroticism from a Eurocentric and enlightened perspective. According to Dash, this trope is first counterpointed in the Caribbean with the black experiment of independence since 1804. It results in a "foundational poetics and a collective self-invention in the face of the colonial refusal to grant opacity to the subjugated other" in the 1930s. A similar opacity resides in the Papiamentu logic versus Dutch logic and when we apply this criterion to poetics, Pierre Lauffer's work becomes crucial. Cola Debrot, the nestor of the literature in Dutch in the Netherlands Antilles, argued that Lauffer is part of foundational poetics of African-American literature due to his drumming rhythms and local vocabulary (Debrot, 1985, 207-208). Debrot puts Lauffer in line with Nicolás Guillén or Luis Palés Matos when interpreting the merits of Lauffer's poem: "Shi Kanina." Lauffer himself had suggested "Rapsodia di nostalgia" as a title, because the poem recounts the melancholy of aging from the perspective of a formerly beautiful woman who loved to dance and sing.

There is no doubt about the fact that Lauffer speaks from a male perspective. Notwithstanding their aging, Bir and all the members of the *kunuku* in *The longest month* are actively involved in popular performances and this same preference is found in poetry by women in Papiamentu. In "Salú!" for instance, Lucille Berry-Haseth describes how an older woman with "white hair and a wrinkled face" (*kabei blanku, kar'i kanchi*) (Berry-Haseth, 1992, 43-44) prefers to dance until her last moment. Female authors seem to have quite a different interpretation of their own aging than their fellow male authors. Simultaneously, Lebac boldly includes the theme of transgression of sexual boundaries by way of a female character who dresses like a man. Literature of the Netherlands Antilles uses to be quite conservative in this respect with few exceptions (Broek, 1992). It misses the ironic flexibility that is typical for works of Spanish-Caribbean authors.

Luis Rafael Sánchez from Puerto Rico, for example, operates with rhythms and word plays and theatrical acts for displaying the variability of sexual assessments in the local world. His point is that these local assessments travel along with the migrants to the North. In his famous short story, *La guagua aérea* (The airbus) about the passengers on the regular flight from San Juan to New York, Sánchez elaborates on the coming encounter with cultural otherness. He shows how Puerto Ricans learn their first lessons about being Puerto Rican in the United States and their instinctive reaction against homogenization. His narrative ends with a statement on their voyage: "It is the legitimate reclamation of a space, furiously, conquered. The space of a floating nation between two havens of smuggled expectations." (Sánchez, 1994, 22).

When considering the popular culture of Curaçao as an integral part of the floating nations of the Caribbean, in which migration figures as the overall alternative for finding a job, Lebac's characterization of the local soup gets a specific meaning. She points to the *sopi di bestia chiki* (Lebac, 1994, 146) as a national symbol, indisputably connected with the Mama Grandi's life style, whereas her daughter Loudrid represents the furious reclamation of a space. The author is quite clear about the fact that Loudrid finds the doors on her island closed for proposals of renewal. At a certain point, Loudrid even calls for a new Revolution in the style of May 1969, and the author supports this claim by focussing on the passivity imposed on her. The issue of change is central to *The longest month* and it is difficult to overcome the perception of a community who lives in a dead-end situation from the Dutch viewpoint. For Lebac, however, it is important to counterpoint it with the energies of community life, of which her novel gives a precise account and whose moral survival roots in the heritage from the times of slavery and African-American wisdom. The author displays the limitations of these strategies through the Dutch camera eye, which judges this 'otherness' as incompatible with technical and emotional professionalism. This reading with postcolonial criteria exposes quite a critical interpretation of multicultural coexistence in this respect. Holland has nothing to offer to facilitate

this claim and even suffers from oblivion when it comes to the responsibility of its colonial past. Is this an explanation for the non-existent reception of this novel in the Dutch press? Edouard Glissant formulated a similar dilemma so adequately in *Le discours antillais* (1981) with his description of the numerous interpretations of "Pa roule tro pre" or, in a free translation, "don't push too hard on my neuralgic points." The involvement in popular culture and community life in a local society in train of modernization seems to have its antecedents rather in Spanish American narratives than in Dutch traditions. In the Latin versions, gender authority becomes transparent and part of cultural history. For this crucial shift, Lebac's book serves as a pioneering contribution and has to be taken into account very seriously in future research on strategies of modernity in the Caribbean.

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