

María [REDACTED]

Professor Natalie Catasús

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Narrating The Journey from The New Land

Political and societal turmoil during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries impacted countries worldwide, including many islands in the Caribbean. The Greater Antilles of Cuba and Hispaniola experienced rebellions, national coups, dictatorships, and governmental censorship. Apart from the political struggles, natural disasters and other economic factors also increased poverty and crime among the vulnerable communities. These resulted in immigration waves, later known as diasporas, of islanders from diverse social backgrounds who fled with the hope of finding a better life and more opportunities. According to the U.S. Census conducted in 2005 and a study led by the University of Nevada: “Framing Haitians and Cubans in the New York Times: Enduring Imprints of Political History”, Cubans and Haitians were considered two of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the U.S. in 2010, with a combined population of over 2.5 million. Among immigrants who arrived in New York and Florida were authors Edwidge Danticat and María Irene Fornés. They later published works narrating their struggles and those of others who fled their natal countries. Even though the short story “Children of the Seas” and the play “Manual for a Desperate Crossing” were written in different literary forms, both pieces successfully constructed fictional stories that portrayed the realistic immigration struggles of people from the authors’ extended national communities.

María Irene Fornés was a Cuban playwright born in 1930 that migrated with her family to New York in 1945. Even though Fornés did not take part in the migration waves escaping the

Communist Cuban Regimen, she wrote and produced a play related to these events in 1997: “Manual for a Desperate Crossing”. As suggested by the title, the drama conveys the struggles of rafters fleeing to Florida, based on testimonies of survivors from these tragic events that occurred during the last decades of the twentieth century. Fornés did not personally experience these events, but she produced an emotionally appealing play that immersed audiences into the different situations that many rafters faced during their journey through the use of theatrical elements like scenography, repetition, music, director’s notes, and the development of the characters.

As the first element visually observed by the audience, Fornés utilized the scenography of this production to emerge viewers into the journey. A platform at the center of the stage stood as the sea vessel and resembled its movements as the actors balanced it. Furthermore, she also incorporated the auditive sense with the incorporation of opera music and a chorus. The music assisted in setting the mood of tension and distress according to the stage directions in each scene. The chorus also supported the emotional connection with the audience as they created an ominous tone repeating or accompanying the cries of the actors in scenes eleven through sixteen. The chorus also served as narrators in the last scenes to facilitate the progression of the story.

Furthermore, integrating repetition throughout the play strengthened the sense of despair felt by these immigrants that the author wanted to transmit. In scene eleven “The Storm”, Fornés slowly build up the tension by repeating the phrases: “And the pounding!”, “Couldn’t bear the pain”, “We’re sinking”, and “Hold on!” (Page 109). These quickly became “hysterical screams”, as indicated by the director's notes, while the characters searched for the matches to signal for help. Later they repeated each time slower while sobbing: “Where are the matches” and “They can’t see us” (Page 110). The changes in these repeating phrases and their tones portrayed

overwhelming emotions as the characters lost hope. In addition, integrating the repetition with live music causes stimulation of the spectator's senses which may result in a significantly impactful response. Similarly, providing the reader with detailed acting and stage directions enables a better understanding of the author's vision for the live performance.

Moreover, Fornés created an emotional connection with the audience as she slowly introduced elements about the characters that humanized them. At first, they were all unnamed “balseros”, but as the play unraveled, the audience learned about their fears and attitudes. This technique can be observed in scene 3 “The Risk” as it is revealed that “Balsero 2” is a father who begins to question what is best for his kid. On page 88, he shows signs of desperation and makes his decision based on fear for his child's wellbeing, a feeling any spectator that is also a parent can relate to. This proceeded until scene 20 “Thirst”, when character i named after the chorus narrates his death. Finally revealing Horacio's name is a way for the author to prove that these are not the mere characters in a fictional story, but the reality of thousands of people who have families, dreams, and hopes.

In contrast to Fornés, Danticat immigrated while the power of the dictatorship (The Duvalier Dynasty) was strong, and the Haitian people suffered greatly from poverty, hunger, persecution, and governmental oppression. Edwidge Danticat is a Haitian novelist born in Port-au-Prince in 1969 that migrated to the United States in 1981. She further reflected upon her struggles and the responsibility of immigrant artists to express the suffering and truth they witness through their art in “Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work” (2010). Before this personal reflective book, Danticat published a fictional short story in 1995 titled “Children of the Sea”. With reflexive language, detailed descriptions, and imagery, the author successfully

connected the reader with the emotionally appealing tale of two lovers separated by the horrors of the oppressive Haitian regimen.

The short story was narrated by both characters as they wrote letters to each other after being separated. Utilizing reflexive first-person language in the letters and not naming the characters helped immerse the reader into the story without giving specific ownership of the fears and feelings shared. The reader was immediately exposed to the nature of this short story in the first paragraphs as intimate thoughts of the male protagonist were shared: “I am afraid I am going to start having nightmares once we get deep at sea... Whatever you do, please don’t marry a soldier. They’re almost not human” (page 4). The word choice of these lines presented the blunt honesty throughout the story that resembles the transparency that one has in an environment of love and security. This is ironic since they are both trapped in environments filled with fear and uncertainty.

As the story unravels, the author constructed the scene and imagery surrounding the characters through the use of detailed descriptions that were often raw and unsettling:

“Today was our first real day at sea. Everyone was vomiting with each small rocking of the boat. The faces around me are showing their first charcoal layer of sunburn” (page 8).

“When we sing, *Beloved Haiti*, there is no place like you. I had to leave you before I could understand you, some of the women start crying. At times, I just want to stop in the middle of the song and cry myself. To hide my tears, I pretend like I am getting another attack of nausea, from the sea small. I no longer join in the singing” (page 9).

This passage narrating his experience at sea creates realistic imagery for the reader to understand the physical state of the boat, but also the emotional one. Danticat succeeded in providing enough details to construct a tale that shares both the violent and cruelly repulsive scenery the

protagonists endured while showing the humanity forgotten in it. The author humanized the immigration story by appealing to the readers' emotions through the universal language of love instead of just showing the horrors behind the immigration statistic reported in the news.

Through different techniques, Edwidge Danticat and María Irene Fornés succeed in narrating raw and emotionally awakening stories that represent the struggles of many immigrants from their communities and worldwide. The authors had different backstories related to their immigration stories, but that did not stop them from exposing the cruelty and humanity that brutally coexist during this journey, which is often forgotten by many. The short story “Children of the Seas” and the play “Manual for a Desperate Crossing” reflect the authors' intentions of sharing the pain of their extended compatriotic natal communities through their work and art.

Works Cited

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