

## SEVEN

### **DUTCH CARIBBEAN WOMEN’S LITERARY THOUGHT: ACTIVISM THROUGH LINGUISTIC AND COSMOPOLITAN MULTIPLICITY**

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**Abstract:**

In a select group of works by late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century Curaçaoan women novelists and poets such as Nydia Ecury (1926-2012), Diana Lebacks (b.1947), Myra Römer (b.1946), Aliefka Bijlsma (b.1971), and Mishenu Osepa-Cicilia (b.1978), we see through what is often an autobiographical subjectivity, a “transnational collective plurality and difference” that describes the empowering physical and psychological possibilities that come with cross-national travel, immigration, cosmopolitanism, and linguistic multiplicity. This paper will present the politics of Curaçaoan-Dutch Caribbean women’s cosmopolitanism and linguistic multiplicity as transformative tools for personal and collective agency and activism for autonomy.

**Introduction**

There is a cultural and identity politics that underline the literary narrative in the Curaçaoan Dutch Caribbean diaspora. The colonial

history coupled with linguistic, social, political, and economic developments on the island certainly speak to the body of literature produced by Curaçaoan Dutch Caribbean novelists and poets. This region in the Caribbean has continued to produce literary works often times invisible to Euro-Dutch, non-Dutch, and non-Papiamentu/o speakers. There is fortunately a steady growing interest in Curaçaoan Dutch Caribbean literature with the understanding that these works may speak to the cultural core of the island. Translations of the works by Curaçaoan writers are now readily available, and complete journal collections and anthologies in English have been dedicated to Dutch Caribbean literature.<sup>1</sup>

This article is another contribution to the much-needed examination of Dutch Caribbean literature and culture. I introduce an overview of some of the literature by a select group of five Curaçaoan women novelists and poets who either introduce women characters or themes about women in their works. Among the five are the canonical novelists and poets from the 1970s and 1980s, Diana Lebac (b.1947), and Nydia Ecury (1926-2012), with the remaining three being the more contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century poets, Myra Römer<sup>2</sup> (b.1946), Aliefka Bijlsma (b.1971), and Mishenu Osepa-Cicilia (b.1978). I choose five novelists and poets to project a comprehensive and assorted overview of contemporary Curaçaoan Dutch Caribbean women's literature. The intention here is to: (1) extend upon the already established literary analysis about Dutch Caribbean women writers, (2) commence a critical dialogue about a women's literary thought from the Curaçaoan Dutch Caribbean diaspora, and (3) to interpret the vernacular of this literary thought. Though I do acknowledge the work that has come before this paper (Thierlynck, 1986; Eijck van, 1999; Abraham, 1999; Rutgers, 1988), I believe that the overview of the works by this combination of women novelists and poets from the Curaçaoan diaspora could offer an extended insight on a woman's literary thought.

My ambitious attempt to interpret the vernacular of a Curaçaoan Dutch Caribbean women's literary thought has led me to question whether we can even conceive of a philosophy or theory that

underpins women's literature from the Curaçaoan diaspora? If we look at the works by Caribbean women writers in general, we see that there are themes and patterns that suggest that the experience of the female characters in literary works particularly written by women comprise the quest for self-actualization and self-determination in multiple facets of their lives. This pursuit almost parallels the history of much of the Caribbean with many islands still caught in national struggles for cultural, economic, juridical, and/or political self-sufficiency, as they are still dependent on the former colonial metropolis for global direction and security. This is no different in the Dutch Caribbean which consists of islands still partially or fully dependent on the Netherlands. The ways in which islanders maneuver this status of partial dependence to project and perform an authentically Curaçaoan identity lies at the core of a Dutch Caribbean specificity to women's literary thought.

What is certain is that much of contemporary Curaçaoan Dutch Caribbean literature has and continues to come about within the historical context of an island and a people still juggling with different ways of affirming constitutional, juridical, political, and cultural autonomy within the Dutch Kingdom. The literature is then, by extension, a reflection of the Dutch Caribbean history that swirls around national challenges for self-determination within the Dutch Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> The federation of Caribbean islands that constituted the Netherlands Antilles had over decades undergone a steady move towards defining the kind of country they wanted to be(come).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is not until this 21st century that all of the remaining five islands that comprised the Netherlands Antilles separated into different factions within the Dutch Kingdom. The island of Curaçao chose an autonomous status within the Dutch Kingdom on October 10, 2010. Though this autonomous status is viewed positively by many who claim that Curaçao is becoming more independent, others continue to challenge the kind of autonomy the island agreed to, claiming the new status to be a continued form of colonization as the financial and justice systems remain heavily under the control of the Netherlands (*Geen reden voor vieren 10 oktober*, 2017, p. 7).

Not unrelated to the above mentioned double and triple consciousness with the experience of autonomy, Curaçaoan women's independence have also paralleled the psychological and constitutional trajectory on the island and its diaspora. Since the 1970s, we see an increase in legal, economic, and social independence of women (Cuales, 1998, p. 94). Though women's organizations had been present since the 1950s, we see them restructuring in the 1970s and 1980s to emerge as organizations that operate to support the self-reliance and self-sufficiency of women (Cuales, 1998, p. 94). These organizations responded to the continued gendered power relations in society whereby women continued to experience suppression and unequal citizenship even after the island's many stages of growing self-reliance. The literature produced by Dutch Caribbean women from the 1970s onwards highlight the paradox between the island's shift towards more autonomy and self-sufficiency and the entrapment felt by women amidst the national changes. Women novelists begin to introduce main female characters who, through personal and social conflicts, attempt to fashion a more autonomous and determined performance of the self in society.

The women novelists and poets also introduce the cosmopolitan identity of Curaçaoan diaspora women in their narratives. This identity becomes a vehicle for channeling clash, agency, and autonomy. The characters are often able to move within and between cultures and languages allowing them to experience and negotiate different levels of sovereignty, while poetic narratives often teeter around themes of self-determination, self-sufficiency, and freedom. Though not described directly as a cosmopolitan identity, we do see the late Curaçaoan sociologist Rene Römer (1998) reflect upon the multicultural and multi-lingual nature of Curaçaoan diaspora people. He identifies their global identity as a Caribbean, Latin American, and European morph. I contend that Rene Römer's description of the Curaçaoan people is in line with the characters and subjects in the works by the novelists and poets discussed here. Indeed, we see various ranges of this hybridized

culture in the stories and poems. Moreover, this hybrid culture facilitates the main women characters' affirmation of a cosmopolitan background that gives them the psychological and physical freedom to morph the ways in which they realize themselves in the (post)colonial Curaçaoan state, or in any other global nation state they choose to establish themselves.

I do find that notwithstanding the women characters' multilingual abilities and numerous global residential options, they still seem to struggle with a "rooted" version of Curaçaoan culture and identity that continues to tug at their "cosmopolitan" performances. What we see in the works by the select novelists and poets is that regardless of the possibilities for physical and psychological autonomy afforded to women in the narratives, there is still often tensions between national affiliation and de-territorial notions of cosmopolitan identity. This tension, which I believe yarns through much of Dutch Caribbean women's literature, parallels the experience of many Curaçaoan novelists and poets who have themselves experienced migration and travel as part of their growth process as Curaçaoans. These writers often introduce an autobiographical lean by using their personal Dutch Caribbean experience which includes travel, to inform the stories. This is why in reading this select group of works by the aforementioned late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century Curaçaoan women novelists/poets, we see, through what is often this autobiographical objectivity, a *transnational collective of plurality and difference* that describes the empowering physical and psychological possibilities that come with cross-national travel, immigration, cosmopolitanism, and linguistic multiplicity. Consequently, in my overview of the literature, I introduce some of the pertinent autobiographical experiences of the women novelists/poets.

To further explore this literary trend, I examine the types of cultural and political agency/activism of Curaçaoan women, whether real or imagined, in the literary tradition on the island and its diaspora. I further explore the identity shifts overtime in the presentation of a woman's narrative in Curaçaoan-Dutch Caribbean

literature. These focal points may allow us to better understand how the narratives allow women to maneuver their contested autonomous Curaçaoan positionality, and how they assist the cosmopolitan and multi-lingual women to design autonomy.

Ultimately, this paper will give an overview of Curaçaoan-Dutch Caribbean women's cosmopolitanism and linguistic multiplicity in the select group of literary works. This analysis emphasizes that the cosmopolitan identities and linguistic multiplicities are part of the transformative tools for personal and collective agency and activism for the establishment of self-determined autonomous selves and communities. I realize that no concrete determination can be made from a critical analysis of a select few works; however, I do hope that this analysis opens the door for an increased conversation, continued inquiry, and sincere quest for a *Dutch Caribbean Women's Literary Thought*, particularly as this pertains to the multi-lingual and cosmopolitan ABC islands (Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao) of the Dutch Caribbean.

### **Contemporary Curaçaoan-Dutch Caribbean Women Writers**

The Dutch Caribbean women novelist and poets discussed here produce works in a combination of languages. Dutch and Papiamentu, English and Papiamentu, Dutch and Spanish, or any other combination of the four languages is used to express their creativity.<sup>5</sup> These women writers are diverse in background; with some being residents of multiple islands within the inter-regional cultural spaces of the ABC islands. Beyond the national and citizenship lineages with the Netherlands, some of these women novelists and poets have direct genealogical lineages to Venezuela and Suriname. This is not surprising, as there is a cultural, economic, political, colonial, and slave history between the ABC islands and these South American locations.

The works produced by these novelists/poets is rich in embracing various views and incorporating various standpoints and genres. Dutch Caribbean women novelists from Curaçao produce

adult, young adult, and children's literature. Many of the works produced by these women can easily fall into the literary genre of the travel narrative, as emigration and immigration are constant recurring themes that drive the storylines. In general, Curaçaoan women novelists have made children's and young adult literature the starting point from which they have expanded to more adult works. Diana Lebac is famous for her young adult literature with *cross-over* qualities. Myra Römer has also produced children's literature and young adult literature. From the group of women novelists and poets discussed here, it is only Aliefka Bijlsma, who has dabbled firmly in adult literature. Her debut novel published in 2007 entitled, *Sandblasted* is set in Curaçao and is semi-autobiographical, leaning in the direction of creative non-fiction—this is also the case with the works by the other women novelists and poets discussed here.

The literature discussed here span from 1971 through 2009. One major theme that the literature all have in common is the idea that one's identity is shaped across multiple national borders allowing thus for a nuanced understanding of the self in the world. Herein lays the centrality of travel and/or being "on the move" and constantly shifting cultural spaces. We see that cross and transnational travel is a part of the personal journey of most all of the main female characters. It is through their travels that they express a gamut of emotions that allow for self-reflection and ultimately self-affirmation steeped in "vernacular (forms of) cosmopolitanism" (Werbner, 2006a, p. 496), mainly: "rooted cosmopolitanism" as discussed by Stuart Hall (Werbner, 2006b) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (1998), and "cosmopolitan patriotism" as discussed in the work of Kwame Anthony Appiah (1998). These forms of cosmopolitanism suggest a connectedness to a locale or a community all while maintaining an openness and appreciation for national and cultural differences. Appiah (1998) describes these forms of cosmopolitanism best when he notes: "the cosmopolitan patriot can entertain the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of his or her own, with

its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different, people” (p. 91). In the case of Curaçao, it is a rootedness to a local multicultural and multi-lingual existence from which the characters and poetic subjects extend to include the global sphere. The range of connectedness is plural and different for each main female character and affects how they all perform agency and activism towards autonomy. This is particularly evident in the works by Diana Lebac, one of Curaçao’s most famous women novelists of inter-state<sup>6</sup> and young adult literature.

An exploration of the main characters in Diana Lebac’s (1971; 1983) early young adult works, respectively, *Sherry: The Beginning of a Beginning* and *Sugar Cane Rose* unmasks main female characters that travel to different countries to either improve their socio-economic condition or to enhance their educational opportunities. Sherry travels from Curaçao to the Netherlands for higher education, and Rose travels inter-regionally from a fictional English-speaking Caribbean island called Irbisca to Dutch Caribbean Curaçao to be a domestic worker. Beyond the themes of travel and immigration, Lebac’s approach in her literary works has thus far always incorporated non-fictional social realities from specific time periods on Curaçao. It just so happens that migration and travel have remained central in the process of modernization, economic progress, and educational advancement of the cosmopolitan female islanders. As such, Sherry and Rose fit squarely into the situatedness of Dutch Caribbean women in the literary themes written by women—these characters journey across borders for the betterment of themselves and, in the process, they inadvertently experience accelerated confusion, conflict, resolution, self-growth, and eventual autonomy.

Sherry is struggling with issues of self-esteem. She grows from being uncomfortable with her blackness to developing a great sense of pride in her blackness. She is a rebel from the start, reinforcing her love for Papiamentu over Dutch. This linguistic preference in the narrative of this novel is no coincidence, as many literary works

produced after the mid-twentieth century were catered towards a more creolized outlook for Curaçao. Advocating for Papiamentu was part of the social rhetoric of the time (Broek, 2009, pp. 44-48). This was also a reflection of Curaçao's move towards more cultural autonomy and patriotism. Clearly, by allowing Sherry to come into herself as an advocate for the native creole language, Lebac's gives the Curaçaoan woman character a stable center rooted in a local affirmation. From there, the character is able to build a more expansive cosmopolitan outlook for herself. I liken this to the earlier discussed approach of Kwame Anthony Appiah (1998) in his ideas about a "cosmopolitan patriot" where he suggests that one can experience, appreciate, respect, and incorporate other global cultures into one's existence, while at the same time, maintaining a rooted and uninhibited appreciation for one's national or local culture (p. 91).

Lebac's literary works have a semi-biographical lean to them, as she tends to incorporate her own experiences in her narratives. *Sherry* is in fact a compilation of Lebac's experiences growing into womanhood. Lebac also claims the main character in this young adult novel to be a symbol of all Antillean girls (*Kinder- en jeugd literatuur*, 1986). Indeed, as alluded to earlier, the common experience of travel is, in real life, embodied by many Curaçaoan women. Like Sherry, many undergo, consequent of among other things, the experience of racial discrimination, colorism, and classism on the island and in the Netherlands, a re-affirming metamorphosis that comes with educational advancement and self-love—as in love for one's blackness and community. This experience of self-love and eventual autonomy, where there is often a shift towards increased local expressions, is very different for the protagonist in Lebac's next novel, *Rose*.

In *Sugar Cane Rose*, we see the main female character becoming a socialized Antillean. Rose is not a Curaçaoan; she is an immigrant worker from an English-speaking Caribbean island. Her eventual isolation from the English-speaking immigrant community on the island supports her interaction with the multi-cultural locals. Rose's

socialization with Curaçaoans is challenged by instances of racial and ethnic discrimination and relationship conflict. Yet, she navigates these challenges by securing her voice and determining her directions and choices. She moves from an insecure and shy “outsider” to a confident and secure “outsider within” (Collins, 1986; 2000). Rose’s agency towards her independence from her English roots and autonomy in a developing Curaçao are in part possible because of the moments of self-reflection and objective analysis during the moments of impasse in her cross-national travels between Curaçao and Irbisca. Certainly, Rose is also a vernacular cosmopolitan, rooted in her Irbisca traditions, yet open to Curaçaoan opportunities for progress and independence. Rose in fact picks and chooses what is beneficial for her existence moving forward on the island of Curaçao, and this includes being culturally and linguistically fluid.

This experience of travel assists the women characters in Diana Lebac’s work to come into themselves. The women experience spiritual and social emancipation while at the same time struggling to find a comfortable space free from the confines of traditional gender and colonial norms. Travel also fosters an ability to be verbally critical of the local Curaçaoan culture when necessary, and to navigate the culture with a new-found knowledge—which at once signifies personal power. Clearly, we see Lebac introducing a psychology of the migratory Afro-Curaçaoan woman. These sojourners “labor” through geographical spaces to obtain psychological, spiritual, physical self-determination, and autonomy. The Afro-Curaçaoan woman seeks distancing from all forms of containment, and uses her multiple identities and linguistic versatility to increase her independence. Shame, confusion, resistance, resolution, self-determination/self-love, and incorporation of an evolving gendered Curaçaoan blackness seem to be some experiential themes in the trajectory of this literary development. But what if the cosmopolitan female protagonist is white? And what if her linguistic multiplicity does not include the native creole language, Papiamentu? What type of agency or

activism towards self-determination does she employ on herself and the island?

The debut novel of Aliefka Bijlsma in 2007 might offer answers to the above questions. Bijlsma's novel, *Sandblasted*, introduces the reader to Janera, a white woman who was born in Curaçao, left at a young age, and has now returned to the island as an adult. She does not really know the island or the culture very well, and she does not speak Papiamentu; hence she is an "outsider." Her outsider position can also be interpreted as an "entrapped status," wherein she feels restraint to express the fullness of herself on the island. Ultimately, Janera makes a conscious decision to define her Curaçao-ness on her own terms. Her cosmopolitan background allows her the psychological freedom to choose her state/national affiliation. She decides that "home is not where you are but who you are" (Bijlsma, 2007, p. 190), hence, making her identity hospitable onto the geographical location of her own choice. In so doing, she challenges the firmly held belief that race, language, culture, and family lineage are markers of an authentic national affiliation and positionality. Janera's lack of connection to the dominant Curaçaoan cultural imagination is what gives her the freedom and ability to create her own Curaçaoan woman's culture (Cornet, 2013, pp. 97-99). Bijlsma makes it a point to challenge the black and white historiography on Curaçao by introducing a main character with a nuanced historical connection to the island, thus forgoing the racial and cultural imagination of the Curaçaoan woman (Cornet, 2013, pp. 97-99).

The earlier idea discussed of Curaçao containing a "hybrid diasporic culture" with cosmopolitan people performing multiple forms of agency towards autonomy is really evident in Bijlsma's work. It is in fact this *hybridity* that the main character embraces as her local affirmation; this hybridity becomes the space from which she performs her agency on the island (Cornet, 2013, pp. 97-99). The fact that she is white with Dutch European roots, gives her an initial access to the island. She then maneuvers the tarnished history of the Euro-Dutch on the island, to give herself permission to design her own connection to Curaçao as opposed to socializing on the

terms of already established national views of the Curaçaoan woman. Hence, Janera inscribes the Curaçaoan woman with an alternate option for individual identity formation.

At the same time, it cannot go unnoticed, that Bijlsma's novelistic female character re-introduces a Euro-Dutch outlook on Dutch Caribbean women's consciousness, arguably then, tempering the emancipatory outlook within the confines of a Euro-Dutch Caribbean historicity. This then could be seen as a reversed centering of Western European whiteness ideals onto the marginality of Dutch Caribbean women, thus further complicating the patriotic framework that many Dutch Caribbean writers introduced after the mid-20th century. Still I find that though Bijlsma's main character is a threat to the cultural establishment, she also offers a controversial perspective for the discussion on Caribbean women's cosmopolitan and national subjectivity. The move towards an authentic "Afro-Curaçaoan creole" culture that started in the mid twentieth century (Broek, 2009, pp. 44-48) is loosened and infused with a controversial global cultural outlook. Mainly, Bijlsma's novel shows a re-centering of plural and transnational modes of cultural identity production whereby a cosmopolitan and diasporic Euro-Western character, product of European modernism, imbues a postmodern identity onto the peripheral nation and offers an opportunity to re-memorize European syncretism in the liberation process of Curaçaoan women.

It is important to note here that this novel patterns a portion of Aliefka Bijlsma's own life. Bijlsma is a cosmopolitan woman born on the island of Curaçao, but she has lived her entire childhood in multiple countries. Her lineage to Curaçao is a direct result of the Dutch-European colonial and economic history with the island. As an upper class "Dutch girl" her cultural access to the locals remained restricted. In Bijlsma's own words, she was "a privileged white girl, attending expensive international schools" (Garman, 2012, final answer). Her writings, as she notes in the online journal *World without borders*, reflect her attempt to treat the "ills" inflicted around the world as a result of Dutch imperialism and colonialism

(Garman, 2012, final answer). I therefore introduce Bijlsma as a cosmopolitan Dutch Caribbean writer, who debuts with a novel that stretches the range of “rooted” and “patriotic” cosmopolitanism in national literatures. She conflicts and deconstructs the often symbiotic development of womanhood and nationhood in patriarchal societies by allowing for an alternate narrative. Bijlsma's novel suggests a development of Dutch Caribbean womanhood not subjected to a local patriarchal national framework. Rather, Bijlsma's female character performs agency by infusing an intercultural performance of womanhood that in fact stretches beyond local normativities.

Next to the works of Curaçaoan Dutch Caribbean women novelists, Curaçaoan women poets also provide a voice on the positionality of women from this particular diaspora. Poets like Nydia Ecury, Myra Römer, and Mishenu Osepa-Cicilia reflect multi-lingual and cosmopolitan ways for women from the Curaçaoan diaspora to re-write and re-memorize themselves and claim autonomy. These women poets not only argue the importance of establishing an ordered home, free from the oppressive colonial imaginations, but they also present the idea of a plural society, in which many cultures and languages, along a vertical—yet not quite hierarchal—line, become the norm. With a somewhat *Kantian* outlook, these women poets introduce the psychological tensions of the subjective cosmopolitan and multi-lingual condition in various spaces (linguistic, spiritual, and physical).

### **Modern Postcolonial Poetry: Facing Historical Frictions of the Cosmopolitan Caribbean**

The first of the poets to be explored here is the late Nydia Ecury. She was born on the island of Aruba in 1926 but has lived in Curaçao since 1957 until the time of her death in 2012. She has written various poems and short stories and has contributed her poetry in various edited publications. Women, identity, mother-daughter relationships, daughter-father relationships, and family ties, are some of the themes in her work. Most of Ecury's work is produced

in Papiamentu and English. She has written three major works of poetry, *Bos di Sanger* [Voice of Blood] published in 1976, *Na Mi Kurason Mara* [Tied to My Heart] published in 1978, and *Kantika pa Mama Tera* [Songs for Mother Earth] published in 1984. She has also produced another major work in collaboration with Sonia Garmers and Mila Palm<sup>7</sup> entitled, *Tres Rosea* [Three Laments] which was published in 1972. Ecury's bilingual and inter-state approach to Dutch Caribbean literature encompasses the memory of the islanders, highlighting continuity in the history and future of women from the Papiamentu and English-speaking islands of the Dutch Caribbean.

I focus specifically here on a selection from Ecury's collection of poems in the aforementioned *Kantika pa Mama Tera* [Song for Mother Earth], which also appeared in the journal *Callaloo* in 1998. The poem is entitled, "*Ruina*" [Home Sweet Home]. In this poem, Nydia Ecury writes of finding order in disorder. Symbolically, it seems her presentation of order versus disorder reflects the tension between this bi-polar modality of operation in the human condition. In the case of the Curaçaoan-Dutch Caribbean human condition, the tensions are woven firmly into the colonial (past) versus postcolonial (present) national condition that grates against the self-defining urgencies of the postmodern and cosmopolitan gendered bodies (Curaçaoan people). Ecury's poem is produced in both Papiamentu and English. "*Ruina*" is the Papiamentu word for "ruin" or "destruction." Hence, the conceptual suggestion of order and stability that one would get from the English translation of the poem's title, "Home Sweet Home," does not coincide with the Papiamentu title. Yet the seemingly reversed symbolism in the two titles collapses with an analysis of the poem's content in both languages.

The poem is about a deteriorated house that was once a well-kept home. This home, a space once inhabited by bosses and servants, is now abandoned and in shambles. The described condition in the house suggests that "even the most faithful [servants] have departed" (Ecury, 1998, p. 561). It seems the

animals have taken over the house, and are enjoying the material regalia that is in disorder. Ecury includes a crab, a baboon, termites, and other pertinences that signify a social hierarchy where the upper class lived in privilege and wealth with “mirror[s] made of golden frame[s]” (Ecury, 1998, p. 561). However, “The Crab can now walk into the parlour and sit down in the rocking chair of guaranteed authentic origin,” “the termites are having a ball,” “the Baboon admires himself in the [golden framed] mirror ... that if reasonably priced, [he would take]” (Ecury, 1998, p. 561). It is clear that the animals are metaphors, and represent people with certain human characteristics, and people who once had no access to the space (house).

Nydia Ecury is using the metaphorical human subjects to signify the ways in which “the animals” now behave and interact in the once forbidden home. The irony amidst the ruin lies in the “tattered sampler that pleads: God, bless our home” (Ecury, 1998, p. 561). Though the interpretations of this poem are many, a parodic interpretation of the psychological tensions in Dutch Caribbean subjectivity is evident here. The plea for order in disorder reflects the tension and contradiction between the old and the new, the colonial and the postcolonial, the modern and the postmodern. Certainly a recipe for psychological, social, and political chaos that cosmopolitan Dutch Caribbean subjects are regularly straddling consequent of their multiple positionalities of national affiliations and citizenship that have shifted and continue to shift over time. Women from the Dutch Caribbean diaspora practice survival by adapting and politicizing their syncretic identities to the ever changing political and cultural Dutch Caribbean landscape.

We see a similar parody and tension in the poetic work of Myra Römer (2001) who also introduces a poem about the home entitled, *Mi Kas Nobo/Mijn Nieuwe Huis* [My New House]. This poem is a selection from her book of poetry, *Na Mi Nomer/Bij Mijn Naam* [In My Name]. Notably, with the exception of the poem entitled *Kòrsou* [Cuaçao] and *No Yamami* [Don't Call Me], the entire poetry collection consists of poems written in Papiamentu followed by their

twin versions in Dutch. There is no question that Römer is (re)presenting the linguistic and cultural plurality that frames and will continue to frame the Dutch Caribbean experience, and subsequently, also the Dutch Caribbean woman's experience, regardless of her social class. The affiliation with the Netherlands as a continued trace in the Dutch Caribbean fractal consciousness is what Römer seems to be showing.

In the poem "My New House," Römer writes a 21<sup>st</sup> century outlook on freedom and flexibility of choice afforded to the individual in her new house. Rather than introduce a network of metaphorical individuals as is the case with Ecury's "Home Sweet Home," Römer (2001) introduces the angular experience of one character with a set of parallel material objects in the house, mainly, stairs. The two stairs in the house function as objects of control, order, stability, and direction. The protagonist uses one to go upstairs and the other to go downstairs. However, as mentioned by the protagonist, "[there are days] of sun and shimmer" (p. 51) when she chooses to do things differently by breaking the monotony of order. She uses the stairs designated for downwards travel to go upwards instead of downwards. This power of choice allows the character to feel empowered. She says: "I am rich with my two sets of stairs" (p. 51). She can choose her own journey, and her own way of doing things in her new house. The assertion of self-rule here grates against the allure of an earlier state of dependence in the old home. In fact, the traumatic experience of repression symbolized by the old house becomes very visible by way of its diachronic erasure. The character chooses autonomous innovation over restrictive tradition, thus signaling a future cloaked in subjective sovereignty.

One can argue that autonomy of choice afforded to the individual is in many ways a universal quest. However, when applied to the Dutch Caribbean, autonomy holds political and constitutional limitations, that are specific to the relationship with the Netherlands, and the particular positionality of Curaçao in the Caribbean. We can explore the meaning of this autonomy in Römer's poem through its twin language, and thus the twin reality

or “double consciousness” of the Dutch Caribbean subject. The twin languages used in Römer’s work are firmly planted in a geo-national structure that appreciates the relationship between Papiamentu and Dutch, and by extension, Curaçao and the Netherlands. Römer is herself a cosmopolitan Curaçaoan woman with experiences that bifurcate between the periphery and the metropolis. Römer has lived in the Netherlands since 1965, and has in fact developed much of her womanhood in the metropolis while maintaining an eye towards her syncretic roots in the Caribbean. Her embrace of both Papiamentu and Dutch in her poetry represents a cosmopolitan modernist woman who is integrally connected to her colonial language and the metropolis. Römer’s poetry does not necessarily erase the tradition of postcolonial poetic approaches in the Dutch Caribbean whereby an authentic national creole culture is affirmed; rather, her poetry embraces the tensions entrenched in the cultural ambiguities that Curaçaoan-Dutch Caribbean colonial history continues to affect on the postcolonial reality of its people. The cultural exchange between the Netherlands and Curaçao is part of the framework upon which the cosmopolitan protagonist in Römer’s poem establishes gradations of autonomy.

### **Choosing Autonomy through Poetry**

Mishenu Osepa-Cicilia, the youngest and more contemporary of the three poets discussed here, publishes her first poetry book entitled *Librami* [Free Me] in 2009. The contents of the book are accompanied by illustrations that highlight the messages conveyed in the poems. While Römer’s poetry suggests a continued hybrid dialogue between Dutch Caribbean colonialism and post-colonialism, modernism and postmodernism, the poetry of Mishenu Osepa-Cicilia is one that calls for a postcolonial liberation in every aspect of life. Osepa-Cicilia expresses a gradation of autonomy that leans strongly towards celebrating the cultural consciousness of the nation-state. Her brand of cosmopolitanism it seems, embraces a local consciousness that is nurtured by international experiences. The dialectic in this case comes from the ability to reflect on the “here” and “there,” and to reflect upon how the experience beyond

the borders of the local fortifies one's ability to appreciate the particularities of the provincial/national.

Osepa-Cicilia, like the other novelists and poets addressed in this paper, traveled and lived abroad. She completed her higher education in the Netherlands, returned to Curaçao after her studies, and began teaching in the school system. Ironically, Osepa-Cicilia was teaching the Dutch language in the Curaçaoan school system at the time *Librami* was published. Though many of the poems were written during Osepa-Cicilia's younger years, the time of publication reflects a moral drive to rebel and reject the Euro-Dutch linguistic particularities in the Curaçaoan education system to which Osepa-Cicilia had to conform. This is also emblematic of her strong love for the Papiamentu language and its ability to speak to the consciousness of natives.

Her poetry collection is in keeping with the post-1960s move towards fully embracing Papiamentu as the language through which to convey Curaçaoan sentiments. There are no translations in the book; the audience then, is clearly those who speak Papiamentu/o. *Librami* is divided into five sections with the following titles: (1) Life, the challenge, (2) Death, the fear, (3) Human, who's not? (4) Love, the (dis)illusion, (5) Free. The poems fixed in each section operate like vignettes, offerings a self-reflective outlook on multiple aspects of the Papiamentu/o speaking Dutch Caribbean reality. Osepa-Cicilia's poems advance strategies for agency specific to those who include Papiamentu/o as part of their ethos. *Librami* speaks to the natives in that the antics, cultural implicitness, inflections, and folklores, are captured in every poem. To Osepa-Cicilia's Papiamentu/o speaking audience, the poems operate like encouraging companions to assist through life's journey as a Curaçaoan-Dutch Caribbean. The poems ultimately support the holistic freedom of the self from all constraints enforced on the postcolonial Dutch Caribbean body and mind. This freedom by extension then includes a release from Euro-Dutch imposed traditions on the Curaçaoan body, voice, and psyche. The drawings

in Osepa-Cicilia's poetry book show Curaçaoan bodies performing this freedom.

These bodies come alive and appear free from the fears and anxieties that can be imbedded in the physical and mental memories of postcolonial subjects still restricted by colonial remains. In the introduction to Mishenu Osepa-Cicilia's *Librami*, she writes that she had "broken the chains of fear, and had liberated herself a little, after taking the courage to read her poems out loud for nearly twenty times on the *Hanchi di Pleizi Literario* in Willemstad Curaçao in 2008" (Osepa Cicilia, 2009, p. 4). Hence, the city's urban center in the local island environment became a therapeutic core to the psychological liberation of Osepa-Cicilia. This freeing experience has instigated her need "to encourage the reader to take a step of faith, and slowly but surely, break all chains that keep them trapped" (Osepa Cicilia, 2009, p. 4), including the chains of fear.

Fear is seen as one of the constraints to Dutch Caribbean self-sufficiency and freedom. Valdemar Marcha (2003) writes specifically of Afro-Curaçaoans' historic use of fear and silence to protect themselves from imperial and Euro-Dutch interference into their existence as a people. Unfortunately, this culture of fear and silence has worked against the contemporary cosmopolitan Curaçaoan who is navigating cross-national and paradoxical spaces of existence, wherein the earlier modes of local agency no longer work to his/her benefit. These spaces of cosmopolitan existence are now motivated in part by stark technological improvements and increases in social media participation, thus allowing for the immediate immersion in a complex transmission of cultures and ideas in a broader global sphere. It seems Osepa-Cicilia is well aware that Curaçaoans can no longer function in fear and silence. The global public exposure of the Curaçaoan in contemporary societies forces other modes of agency that include modes of intervention mitigated by a politicized and diplomatic use of speech—the mere use of fear and silence no longer work in the quest for autonomy on Curaçao.

Arguably then, for the Curaçaoan diaspora woman, it becomes a matter of deconstructing constricting relationship with the local cultural and psycho-social landscape, and re-memorizing, re-mapping, and verbalizing new connections with the environment. Osepa-Cicilia created a new connective map with her environment when she voiced her poetic affirmation in the local city square. Her poetry blatantly strives for the audibility of a *Curaçaoan subaltern diaspora expression* that is grounded in a local appeal and is inclusive of a worldly and cosmopolitan experience that speaks up to the multiple forms of linguistic and cultural oppression imposed through Dutch colonialism.

This cosmopolitan diaspora identity of the Curaçaoan woman in particular is addressed in Osepa-Cicilia's poem entitled *Buska Muhé* [Search Woman]. This is the final poem in the book, and it addresses Dutch Caribbean women directly by instructing them, in multiple ways and through life's multiple journeys, to "hold on" and continue the search for consciousness, growth, and autonomy. From an interview conducted with Osepa-Cicilia in 2010, I conclude that the entire book harkens back to the semi-autobiographical characteristic of the works by Dutch Caribbean women writers. This poetry collection is in fact a self-reflective work about the way in which Osepa-Cicilia has come to voyage her own womanhood.

*Buska Muhé* makes the woman responsible for her own freedom. The poem reminds Dutch Caribbean women that only they hold the key to their freedom/liberty. Hence, autonomy comes from women's ability to persist and overcome the difficulties they will encounter in their lives as they develop and grow from a childhood to a womanhood tacitly molded in a Dutch colonial historicity. Embracing only Papiamentu as the language through which to communicate with Curaçaoan-Dutch Caribbean women further acknowledges an autonomy from within the creolized Dutch Caribbean space. In fact, the periphery becomes the center, and Papiamentu becomes the vernacular for holistic liberation and freedom.

The achievement of freedom, as expressed in this poem is void of tangibles. It is a poem filled with the acknowledgement of the emotions that come from the senses as we experience the tangibles of life. The dialectic balance between contrasting emotions are acknowledged and affirmed as part of a woman's mechanism of survival. I compile here a translation of a portion of *Buska Muhe* [Search Woman] by Osepa-Cicilia (2009):

There is fear and bravery in you  
 Don't keep hiding, you must shine  
 There is hate but also love in you  
 Love yourself, avoid resentment

Den bo tin miedu i tambe brio  
 No keda skonde, bo tin ku bria  
 Den bo tin odio, pero tambe amor  
 Stima bo mes, odia renkor

There's pain, there's happiness  
 Choose to live with intensity  
 There's lots of anxiety, there's lots of relief  
 Pay all debt, think positive

Tin sufrimentu, tin felisidat  
 Disidi di biba ku intensidat  
 Tin hopi nérvio, tin hopi alivio  
 Paga tur debe, pensa positivo

Yes. Dig. Search. There's Freedom  
 Wipe your face don't cry anymore  
 There's lots of peace, lots of good things  
 They are inside you, release them (p. 62)

Sí. Koba. Buska. Tin libertat  
 Pasa man na kara i no yora mas  
 Tin hopi pas, hopi kosnan bon  
 Den bo nan ta, saka nan afó (p. 62)

This segment of Osepa-Cicilia's poem *Buska Muhe*, reads like an empowerment sermon that could be framed and/or memorized as a source of strength and encouragement. Osepa-Cicilia, like Nydia

Ecury, Myra Römer, and Diana Lebac, though constantly flirting with inter-cultural hybridizations between the Dutch Caribbean and the Netherlands, offer women of the cosmopolitan Curaçaoan Dutch diaspora survival mechanisms rooted in local affirmations.

### **Conclusion**

The works discussed here speak to a Dutch Caribbean Woman's Literary Thought that centers a cosmopolitan patriotism. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1998) notes how one can have a love for and loyalty to places beyond the nation where they were born. They can love (inter)national places where they grew up and/or lived while still remaining patriots to their national birth place (p. 95). I find that it is through the principles of cosmopolitan patriotism that the characters in the works by these women writers challenge their personal development and their sense of identity. They maneuver the double and triple consciousness that is so much a part of them as cosmopolitan and multilingual Dutch Caribbean women—allowing them the psychological and physical freedom to morph the ways in which they realize themselves in the (post)colonial state, or any other national affiliation they choose. Hence, though women are often symbolically connected to nationhood and national culture, thus limiting their choices to perform their identity, the Curaçaoan-Dutch Caribbean women's literature addressed here, highlight strategies wherein women characters and poetic narratives show an acceptance of the multiple juxtapositionalities fostered within the hybrid cultural collective that is a part of Dutch Caribbean national identity.

This acceptance does not suggest ignorance to the gendered racialized undertones imbedded in the Dutch colonial historicity that continues to influence the experiences of those from the Curaçaoan diaspora. Rather, this acceptance, operates along a scale where on one end we see women writers, such as Aliefka Bijlsma, introducing a gendered whiteness on local culture in an attempt to heal the racial wounds imbedded in Curaçaoan Dutch colonial history, and on the other end of the scale we see, through the work of Osepa-Cicilia and

Diana Lebacs, sophisticated modes of Euro-Dutch rejection through the affirmation of Papiamentu/o, and the enrichment of the local culture highlighted as an essence that is implicitly understood by Curaçaoan women. These modes of accepting the multiple juxtapositionalities fostered within the hybrid cultural collective ultimately facilitate women's autonomy.

The works also show that polyvocality and the embrace of various dialectic sensibilities are tools for "survival" in the quest for a holistic and autonomous self. Papiamentu, English, Spanish, and Dutch become empowering tools for personal and collective agency and national affiliation. Myra Römer and Nydia Ecury strike a chord here in that they play with reversed and inverted interpretations of words from different languages to extend the meaning in their poetic expressions. This multi-lingual approach allows for an agency that contributes to forwarding a heterogeneous autonomy—hence, an autonomy relative to each woman's individual experience with gendered restriction.

Furthermore, the continued tension between past and present, colonial and postcolonial, modernity and post-modernity, the personal and the collective, are all addressed from the spaces of transition: inter-regional transitions, cultural transitions, migratory transitions, linguistic transitions, and ethnic transitions. These are the syncretic and hybrid spaces that intersect, to create frenzied spaces of operation. It seems these hyper-blended spaces of cognitive, spiritual, and physical operation sometimes nullify hybridity for the purpose of local affirmation and cultural authentication. Hence, the chaotic tension in the lives of Curaçaoan Dutch Caribbean women, as is evident in the poems by Nydia Ecury and Myra Römer, sometimes call for them to choose one language or one space of national affiliation as a strategy for survival, and a way of finding autonomy, liberation, and freedom, as is evident in the poetry of Mishenu Osepa-Cicilia.

The vernacular cosmopolitan and multi-lingual forms in Dutch Caribbean women's literature mediate the ebb and flow of the

“Antillean condition.” The ability to morph positionalities as needed is a survival skill that has facilitated Curaçaoan women’s adaptation to the national and cultural changes that the island will certainly continue to experience.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Issues dedicated especially to Dutch Caribbean literature appeared in *Journal of Caribbean literatures*, *Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters*, and *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*.

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<sup>2</sup> Myra Römer had been writing for some time in the Netherlands. However, her more recent novels and book of poetry catapulted her to broader recognition on the island in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> The Dutch Kingdom consists of the Netherlands, Aruba, Curaçao, Sint Maarten, and the BES islands.

<sup>4</sup> The Netherlands Antilles had received an autonomous status (*status aparte*) in 1954. This status gave the federation of islands the freedom to run their own government as a country. Curaçao was the capital of the federation. Governmental and financial businesses were deployed from Curaçao. Aruba abandoned the federation of islands in 1983 and an autonomous country within the Dutch Kingdom. The remaining islands of the Netherlands Antilles followed through with their decision to dissolve from their political and national position as a federation of Dutch islands in 2010. This final split of the islands had been a long time coming, as talks and constitutional actions in the direction of increased independence were growing over the years.

<sup>5</sup> Papiamentu/o is the local creole language spoken on the islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao (ABC islands). Papiamentu is the creole Portuguese-based version of the language spoken in Curaçao and Bonaire, and Papiamentu is the creole Spanish-based version of the same language spoken in Aruba. Most of the time, I interchange Papiamentu/o with Papiamentu, as I am primarily focusing on Curaçao. However, Papiamentu/o is at times used when talking about the general community of people that speak this language.

<sup>6</sup> Many of the early young adult literature produced by Diana Lebac address main characters that travel between sister islands (Example: between Curaçao and Bonaire).

<sup>7</sup> Sonia Garmers has also produced children's and young adult literature; Mila Palm is a Curaçaoan poet.