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sales Narratives from the Caribbean: Diasporic Literature and the Human Experience

Transcript

Author: Elvira Pulitano (EP)
In Conversation with: Karen Muñoz-Christian (KMC)
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Description: Transcript of a podcast of the discussion of the book, Transnational Narratives from the Caribbean: Diasporic Literature and the Human Experience between author Dr. Elvira Pulitano of ethnic studies and Dr. Karen Muñoz-Christian of modern languages and literatures.

[Music]

Brett Bodemer (Moderator): [Background Music] Welcome to Conversations with Cal Poly Authors. This episode was recorded on Friday, February 17th, 2017 at the Robert E. Kennedy Library at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. This conversation features Elvira Pulitano and Karen Muñoz-Christian discussing Elvira's book, Transnational Narratives from the Caribbean: Diasporic Literature and the Human Experience published by Routledge in 2016. Dr. Pulitano, professor in ethnic studies at Cal Poly holds a PhD in English from the University of New Mexico. There, she specialized in Native American literatures and postcolonial studies. Prior to coming to Cal Poly, she taught in Switzerland at the Universities of Geneva and Lausanne. Often focused on the Caribbean, Dr. Pulitano's research and teaching interest include theories of race, ethnicity, migration, and human rights discourse. Dr. Karen Muñoz-Christian is associate professor of modern languages and literatures at Cal Poly. Karen received her PhD from the University of California at Irvine, and in 2016, Cal Poly's Distinguished Teaching Award. Karen specializes in contemporary fiction of the Spanish Caribbean with a particular focus on Cuba during the "special period", an era of searing scarcity seen as beginning with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These two conversationalists open fascinating windows onto the nexus of personal experience, political identity, islands, and migration.

[Applause]

EP: Thank you, everybody for coming. Maybe—you don't mind—you are OK there because I have to move because I can't see everybody. Thank you. I'd like to—yeah, I'd like to try to look at everybody. So thank you for coming and for defying the rain. So I'm Elvira Pulitano as Brett said, and thank you so much for organizing this. This is actually the first official event in which I'm going to talk about this book so I'm very happy. And Karen was my first reader because the book hasn't been published—hasn't been reviewed yet. They came out late in spring and it usually takes a few months for the first reviews to appear. I was supposed to attend the Caribbean Studies Association Conference that meets every year in a different Caribbean island. So this past spring was in Haiti but then I couldn't go for several reasons and so I don't know—I sent flyers of the book to the conference, I don't know what happened but—so I'm very looking
forward to this. So thank you, Karen for taking your time in reading this book and thinking about things.

KMC: And I'm so happy to be obligated to read a book like this because as students probably know, you only read things you're assigned to read. And so—

EP: Yeah. And we don't have time.

KMC: —it was a treat.

EP: Thank you. So I'm—I would like to start by explaining maybe a little bit the subtitle because the first part of the title, I think it's fine. We can get—and we will be talking about that more specifically but I want to explain—clarify a little bit more on the subtitle which is "Diasporic Literature and the Human Experience". And I would like to start with this term "Diaspora" because if you are not familiar a little bit with this region, you might wonder wait a minute, what does it mean to talk about the Caribbean Diaspora? This is a term that we often associate with the specific groups. Originally this term was used to talk about, specifically, Jewish and Armenian dispersion. And the term “diaspora” literally means to scatter, so wherever there are people that throughout history have been forced to, you know, spread and move away from the original homeland then you have a diaspora. But obviously, in the past few years, other groups with the similar historically of forced dispersion have begun to claim this term because they obviously recognize their experience and they draw parallels between their experience of dispersion and what the original diasporic communities might have gone through. So—and this brings us to the Caribbean. However, the Caribbean is an interesting geographical space also to consider when it comes to diaspora because, as one of its key critics, Professor Stuart Hall whom I quote actually in the epigraph of the book, he talks—he said—he characterizes the Caribbean as a double diaspora. If you think about, except for the indigenous people, so the descendants of the indigenous people who still live in the area, none of the people who populate the area are actually indigenous to it. Today, you go to the Caribbean, you obviously have people coming originally from Africa, so they are already part of an African diaspora, an original diaspora. And then you have—so that started with the slave trade in the 1500s. Then you have—starting in the 1800s, new populations were brought in once the slavery was abolished. And so, this was the population coming from India, the Indian continent and subcontinent. And so we're talking about Indian indentured laborers that added to this, you know, formation of the makeup of the region. And so, fast forward to the 20th century, then after World War II, the people from the Caribbean begin a migration out of the area. So back to Europe to the former mother countries whether England, France, the Netherlands. And then once these countries made difficult migration, you know, they begin to close the borders in the 1960s. You had migration to here, to the United States and Canada. So in that sense Stuart told us it is a double diaspora because you have the, you know, people like the writers I select in the book, who, now live in the United States but they're all the descendants of African—an African, you know, population. So they are—diaspora is twice as writers who live here or in Canada, but originally, you know, their ancestors came from Africa. So that's, I think—and, you know, there has been a lot of debate to what extent this is a term that is helpful to describe the Caribbean.
But as many critics point out, of course, the terms usually get—they change and they get more defined in translation as they're being applied to new groups. And I strongly believe that this is the case for the Caribbean context. This is also a term that overlaps with the moment we are currently living, the transnational moment because, obviously, we're talking about movements of people that, obviously, settle elsewhere. And wherever they settle, you do have the disperse of what we call diasporic communities. So that's a little bit about the term. The other part I wanted to address was some features of what constitutes a diaspora in the classical sense of the terms. Some people—and here again, the Caribbean defies this kind of rigid definition because, originally, people had said that well, in order for the group of community to be considered diasporic, you need to have these characteristics. There has to be, number one, for instance, a dispersion from an original center. Number two, there has to be a mythic homeland to which the disperse populations always aim to go back to. And, number three, there has to be a continuous maintenance or you know, of this ideal homeland. And now, for the Caribbean, this becomes really complicated because number one, where is this original center? What is the original center from which the populations that now make up the area were disperse from? Is it Africa? Is it—you know, there were indigenous people. There still are indigenous peoples in the Caribbean despite the narratives that we continue to listen that they've all been exterminated and it's not true. That's the first thing I always tell students. So that's really complicated. And then this question of the ideal return, where would this return be? I mean, can they return to Africa assuming they came—I mean, if they came from Africa. Africa became, you know, sort of, the original homeland fades away with, you know, layers and layers of settlements. So it's a really bit complicated. And so what authors, you know, what the critics and writers who are from the area are doing? And that's, I think, the take I have in the book is that these rigid definitions get really disrupted when you talk about the area, which is an area characterized by a really interesting disruptive history as you might be familiar with. So that's a little bit my take on the term. And then what I would like to explain is the selections of the writers I decided to include in the book. I don't know if you are familiar with any of them but I would strongly suggest you to read them. I selected these writers based on, obviously, personal biases because these are writers I really like, but also because I thought they would make an interesting group to just be—to sort of address them comparatively, because I selected two writers—there are three women and one man. The two women belong to what I call the first—the first I would say wave of migration to the United States started in the 1960s. And these are Jamaica Kincaid and Michelle Cliff. They are both from Anglophone writers. Actually, Michelle Cliff passed away this past summer, unfortunately, a great loss for us because she is, in my mind, a great writer. And then, I selected two younger, so to speak, younger writers who belong to a second wave of migration and they were brought to this country in different circumstances. One is a writer from Haiti, originally from Haiti, Edwidge Danticat. And her interesting—her situation is interesting because she came to this country when she was 8—12 years old in 1980, early '80s. She couldn't speak a word of English and she ends up becoming great writer in English. You know, it's one of those cases like, oh I wish I could do that that, you know, how is it possible? She couldn't speak English and now she—her books are amazing and her writing is beautiful. And then the other writer—I selected this writer who has an interesting geographical background because he grew up in the Island of Saint Kitts, Anglophone Islands in the Caribbean. He was brought to England as part of that a, you know, double diaspora that his
parents lived through. So after the World War II, they moved to England. The parents and brought this infant son with them. And so he spent most of his life in England and then in his adult life, in the early '90s, he made this—they voyaged back to the United States. You had this interesting triangle that comes—gets completed. And so, having somebody like him, I was aware when I was writing the book could raise some questions because people begin to ask me, well, you know, how can you put him in connection or he's not really Caribbean, he grew up in England, he's a British writer. No, he's not. I mean, it's really problematic to try to put these writers into boxes because Caribbean writers—immigrant writers in general, I would argue—the Caribbean writer, more so defy categorization and being boxed in. And the other point I want to make about the title is the concept of narrative. Much like the author's background, these writers defy literally genre. Michelle Cliff writes poems that are, however, literally are longer prose, you know, pieces, beautifully written, very poetical language, but they are marketed as poems. Sometimes even publishers don't know what to do with these books. And they have a hard time fitting them into a category. Jamaica Kincaid writes novels that border autobiography and, you know, she's notorious for writing this very long auto—I mean, all her novels are really a longer autobiography as some critics have said. And people have this time—have a hard time with that too. And then Caryl Phillips is the same. He writes novels, but his novels are very much historical in a way because he plays a lot with his story. So I didn't want to call his book, you know, novel because I discussed mostly novels and stories in the—yeah, mostly novels and a few short stories that, however, don't really fit to the category of short stories. So I didn't want to restrict it to a category of novels. So I use the term narrative as a way to sort of—to allow this flexibility and moving in and out of genre which is intrinsic to Caribbean authors. So I think that's pretty much what I wanted to say about the introduction and then we can talk a little bit about the argument of the book later as Karen, I think, proceeds with her questions.

KMC: OK.

EP: It's OK.

KMC: Thank you, thank you, Elvira. So as I alluded to at the beginning, I was thrilled to have reading this book as my homework assignment. I—you probably know that here at Cal Poly, we teach a lot of classes that—and keeps us very busy. And those of us who have strong research interest have to find ways to sneak that in round and about. And so, when Brett I asked if would be willing to this with Elvira, I was really excited because I do have this interest in the Caribbean, particularly, the Spanish speaking Caribbean. And I mean, it is probably the most interesting area on earth, probably, but, you know, that's just a little professional bias. But what was—what I didn't realize was going to happen was how much this book, which is, you know, I mean, this is a scholarly book. This is not a light read that you, you know, read on the airplane or at the beach per se, but how much it resonated with this moment we're living right now. And this was completely unexpected. And I found myself, OK, I just said you can't read it on the beach, but I would often read it while on the machines at the Rec Center because I could prop the book up there and not notice how tired and sweaty I was getting. But the weird thing was, and many of you who use the Rec Center know up on the second floor, there's a bank of
machines with a six TV screens in front of you and I was doing this during the fall. So you can imagine what kinds of things were on those TV screens leading up to the November elections. So it was this surreal moment of reading this book that's extensively about Caribbean literature. But what I was finding is these arguments that Elvira makes in her book, how much they resonated with the questions of migration, of refugees, of borders, of oppression based on gender and sexuality, on environmental destruction, on silenced histories and these questions just seem so urgent to me. And so it was—that was an unexpected bonus from reading this book. So my questions are varied and we'll just have to see how much time we have for Elvira to answer them. One of them—and this something I always like to hear from authors about. So, Elvira, you're an immigrant from Sicily and you're living in San Luis Obispo. How did you become interested in the Caribbean and Caribbean writers specifically?

EP: Yeah, that's a question that makes a lot of sense. It's a complicated answer. I'll try to address the several parts of it. I think I have a both the personal and academic interest. I grew up in an island, which is obviously not the same as the Caribbean, but an island nonetheless. And I was just fascinated. Y first encounter with this literature came in graduate school obviously because you heard my PhD was in postcolonial studies and the Caribbean is one of the areas that you most likely discuss if you chose this field of expertise. And so—but I was just, you know, I—the more I read these books and the more I recognized my story in a way, my growing up, in a different, however, context. So first, I think I was fascinated by this geography in itself. This concept of the landscape of islands being small spaces, so you always hear these courses around insularity and at the same time islands also being connected to the continents and having this interesting double face. And I was just fascinated by that, by the fact that, you know, people who live in the islands always try to get away and always want to return. OK. So that's usually the double bind. But, obviously, what really intrigued me more was the complicated history of this area and fascinating history that is linked to the place where I came from, ironically. And I think it's not until I began reading—I became wiser and began reading more theoretical context for that I made the connection because there was something about the history that attracted me and it didn't occur to me how intricately connected the history of the Caribbean is to the history of the place where I came from. Because if you think about—I mean usually in—I give you the dates in modern European history if we take for granted that the history begins with the so-called discovery that I always tell my students to quote, you know, carefully. You know, that's pretty much of the history I was familiar with. So I—Europe live through the 14, 15, 16, 1700s, et cetera without realizing that actually what made Europe in those centuries was precisely what was going on in the Americas. And so you can walk around European—major European cities today like a sea port town, whether it's Liverpool, Marseille, Bordeaux and now think about the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. Those cities exist precisely because of the slave trade. And that's something that many Europeans are not aware of because this is a history, much like in this country, there is no talk to us. So I was growing up—I always tell students, you know, you cannot understand the French revolution if you do not know what happened in Haiti at the same time when the French Revolution was happening. So I was just fascinated. To me was really—I went through some of the things that my students go through now when they take my classes, you know, shock, disbelief. It's like why didn't I—why wouldn't I be exposed to this history in my classes, in my education growing up? Because
my education was very much Eurocentric, very much focused around Europe. But forget the history of colonialism that made Europe, right, that links Europe to this part of the world. So it was an eagerness on my part to basically wanting to know more, wanting to know more about this history and these connections and this silence in Europe which unfortunately still persist because, you know, I left Europe 20 years ago to come to this country, but I keep in touch a lot. Italian or European students in general have very little exposure to this history and to the intricacies that connected the two worlds basically. And so, to me that was very, very important. Then I think [inaudible] puts it beautifully when it came up with this interesting term modernity coloniality. So the history of European modernity needs to be linked and studied and looked at along with the history of coloniality which obviously happened here, you know, obviously, and in the America's not just the Caribbean but the whole continent. And then I think the other personal reason has to do with my own experience of migration which is obviously different from these writers. You know, I came to this country. I think identify a little bit more with the second generation, with these young writers because, you know, they came here. I mean Caryl Phillips in particular he came to this country because he wanted to explore. He wanted to be able to write, you know, the—a possibility that he felt a little bit confined growing up in Margaret Thatcher’s England. So he left England to be able to have the freedom to become an artist. And the artist he wanted to be in this country. And, of course, for Edwidge Danticat, she came to this country to follow her parents but then she discovered her voice as a writer while living here. Now I’m not a writer, a fiction writer as they are but I came to this country to pursue my studies. And so, I—in the process, I think I identified a lot with these issues that some of these writers are dealing with that we—questions of belonging, you know, being an insider and outside, questions of home, questions of how do you, you know, what do you identify with when you are a migrant. You know, do you consider yourself a Caribbean? In my case, do I think of myself as an Italian or, you know, American now that I have citizenship, whatever that means. OK. So it’s really an interesting process for me. So I was reading these books and I was just—I mean to me, they were like a learning experience into my own story. And I think that's actually fascinating with what you said earlier about the Caribbean, you know, how this area so complex with such a complex history and so interesting in itself is actually a mirror for the contemporary reality that we are living in terms of migration. Because it's like a microcosm of a bigger picture that we see right now in the world outside with all these cultures and so that's another point that maybe we can talk about at some point. Growing up in Sicily which is this island in the middle of the Mediterranean that has had the multiple levels of colonization of a different nature obviously not the same kind of what we’re talking about when we're talking about the Caribbean. Obviously you start to think a lot about questions of mixing of culture, what in the Caribbean we call creolization, layering of cultures of different languages different, you know, this kind of interaction that you see reflected in languages. It's a multilingual area much like the area I come from. It's—the Caribbean is—you know, you see reflected these issues of creolization in the food, in the cultures, you know, even though when I show a map to my students and I say, you know, look at these islands, they look like the same but no Caribbean island is the same as any other. There is an amazing diversity. And to me, that's why—that's what makes it an attractive area to become interested in and to just learn from personally because I think it's a learning experience for students who want to learn beyond the tourist aspect that we can talk about maybe later because I discuss in the book. And
they want to have just a different experience about the kind of contemporary reality we're living today in this time and age.

KMC: Yeah. No, I appreciate that because I think for a lot of us, there is—our professional interest and personal interest start to fuse into each other. And so this makes a lot of sense. And what you were talking at the beginning also about this idea of the inward and outward flows, and the movement back and forth and I remember you also discuss Benítez-Rojo and the idea of the repeating island, which is I think a really beautiful metaphor too for some of the movement in the Caribbean as well. So I—one of the things that I particularly appreciated in this book was your emphasis on stories. And I am going to quote Elvira very briefly at one point she writes, "I begin to question the lack of narrated lives for most of the theoretical accounts of diaspora." And so, what she does here is to challenge the way that the humanities and the social sciences tend to be separated in diaspora studies as if they were somehow exclusive fields. And so I was hoping you could comment on the question that you pose in the book how do these stories illuminate the experience of migration.

EP: Yeah that's actually the central argument of the book. So I was waiting for this question to come up. That's why I didn't say at the beginning. If you don't mind I would like to start with the epigraph to the book which is actually the second one. Actually the first one is the one I read by Stuart—the one I mentioned with Stuart Hall’s notion of the double diaspora. The first one is actually from a Caribbean writer, George Lamming who writes, "The literature of the social sciences often forces one to consider a distinction to be made between the statistical mind and a creative imagination. The first seeks evidence everywhere except through direct observation of people in the act of living, men and women who never think of themselves as a percentage of anything." To me this quote was illuminating, when I came across, I don't remember how many years ago I read it, but it really—when I was trying to find a way to connect the central ideas in this book, I said that's it, because that's exactly what it was, so how this book—this project started, I was reading different theoretical accounts of diaspora that, that's usually written by a social scientist. And I don't mean to be negative on the social sciences in the book although it might come this way. Actually my book is an invitation to hopefully in my ideal world to merge these two disciplines because, you know, usually when you read the theoretical accounts of diaspora, they give you these really interesting numbers, statistics, so, you know, yes diasporic communities, you have these flaws and you see all these charts. And I say, well, wait a minute, I said, where are the people here, you know? I—People have no numbers. I mean people live through these experiences on their daily lives. And as a person who appreciates literature, because that's my first degree, I would say where are—usually you get the stories from literature. You know what, Achebe puts it beautifully when he says "To be human, you must have a story." There is no humanity if you don't look at the people's stories. And I was missing those stories from these theoretical accounts. And I said, OK, I can get that but I want—So what I was trying to do is find a way to humanize these theoretical accounts of diaspora in this book. And, of course, in order to do that, you have to go to the stories. And where can you find the stories? You find the stories in literature. So that's why I focused—I made the point of focusing on writers who are giving me, are filling in with stories for the numbers and the statistics that the social sciences usually provide us. So those are helpful in
themselves, but I hope in this book that, first of all, it will get some attention among the social sciences because despite what we call a significant turn in the humanities in general to do interdisciplinary work, I strongly believe that the boundaries are still actually very much in place and it's difficult I mean for people who try to break these boundaries to make a point. So I don't know. I'll be really curious to see how the social sciences responds, but my hope was it would be really interesting if the social scientists actually begin to read these books because they will learn a lot. Because what—where are—the statistics don't tell me what it means to leave your homeland and not be able to go back there for whatever reason, you know, whether it's for your, you know, sexual orientation, political reasons that most of these stories of immigrants are basically are highlighting so beautifully. To the statistics or the numbers of the social sciences report, don't tell me what it means, you know, to basically struggle with these questions of belonging and where you really fit when you're moving to—into a new country and how you related back to your old country which sometimes becomes another foreign land after living for so many years in this country. So that's why I would—I was focusing so much on this. So I wrote at some point in the book, stories tell of individuals who carry the diaspora condition imprinted in their lives. And that's exactly what I was—I was trying to demonstrate, so.

KMC: Well—and it will be interesting to see and you probably already started forming some theories about this, if these stories support the statistics or challenge them. And maybe it's a mix, I don't know.

EP: Yeah. I don't know. It will be—I don't know. I mean I would like think they challenge them because obviously they add more than—So I don't really know how the—I had a hard time nailing the argument down because I was trying to find a way how I could, and I didn't want to write a book convincing the social scientist, you need to read your stories, OK, and be the one to do that. But I was hoping that the stories did speak for themselves. So I'm—I strongly—I'm a believer in the power of stories. And so, I think the stories speak for themselves. I don't need to make any convincing argument. Whoever reads a book or whoever reads Edwidge Danticat’s moving account of her 81-year-old uncle who came to this country holding—talking about present times. Holding a valid visa, as he had come many other times from Haiti. He came to this country as an 81-year-old man, cancer survivor. And he was stopped at Miami International Airport. He was basically detained because the authorities didn't believe that he was telling the truth, why he wanted—whether or not he wanted to stay in this country. So the fact that the visa—he had a visa didn’t really mean anything, once he said he wanted asylum. And so he was detained, put in a detention center and he died three days later there. OK, without his family being able to have any contact with him. So it's a heart-wrenching story that really speaks volume about what we hear or even right now what we just heard about this, you know, policies to stop so-called illegal immigrants. So to me that is a story that speaks for itself. It doesn't really need to challenge any stats—I mean he obviously challenged the—

KMC: Yeah.

KMC: Yeah. And you've already talked some about this idea of diasporic identities as being fluid and destabilized and so on, but I'm curious if you can connect this a little more to our present reality of border and ocean crossings and mass migrations and returns if you'd like to talk specifically about the current refugee crisis in Europe and if you're studying that sort of in the same framework.

EP: I did and the reason why I chose Caryl Phillips actually is because in one of the chapters I pair Danticat's book on her uncle which is more of like an autobiographical book, although it's not really—it's not a novel, but it's—it's an interesting, but it's not really an autobiography. So it's another of those books that defy rigid definition. And the title is *Brother, I'm Dying*. So because what she does in the book, and not only she relates these tragic events that led to her uncle's death, she also—we see her story of migration through her family. So it's about these two brothers, you know, the uncle who died and her father who came here as an immigrant. And so—And that book obviously allowed me to discuss the United States at that time when it happened, you know, this was in 2004 after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was, you know, ousted in Haiti. That's when her uncle came. So, different political climate than what we're living now. But nonetheless, this was close to 9/11 when this country basically began what critics have called a war on immigrants. And at the same time, I paired the book with Caryl Phillips novel called *A Distant Shore*, which is about the story of a refugee from Africa who tries to get into England and who will end up dying there as a result of the rampant racism of the—he—that he and other refugees encounter in that country. And so, it was interesting to put these two stories together because, you know, Europe is facing that kind of issue still today. They haven't disappeared. Actually they have become wars. You know, Phillips novel came before the refugee crisis that we are witnessing now with Syria. But obviously it speaks volumes to—as to what Europe is experiencing right now, and, and what it means for, you know, the issues about borders. What I see happening in Europe is an increasing, actually rhetoric about a militarization and walling up of states and protection and all of these against stories of individuals who were really trying to come to—for the reason why immigrants have always moved, which is to find a better life for themselves, for their families, and in some cases to save their lives in the case of, obviously, refugees. So I look at the—the U.S. response to the refugee crisis and the Europe response to the refugee crisis. And I do that again through stories, because I think it's the way that I chose to engage in this book. And I'm sorry, what was the other part of your question?

KMC: No, no, no that was it just about the connecting with the current refugee crisis, I think we could say. And I don't know I mean if you're interesting in getting to what these crisis could mean—

EP: I think it—what I would like us to argue is, and to make the point and response to that also, what does it mean for the identity of the countries, you know, that they're living through the situation, because Caryl Phillips puts it nicely when he says, when immigrants move to other countries or you had these interesting situations, it's not just that the immigrant has to adapt to the reality of the new country, it's also the new country has to adapt to the immigrant. Because
obviously this is a situation that goes, you know, both ways. The immigrants both in Europe and—I mean in this country, obviously in a different way because it has a different history, but in Europe, immigrants right now are remaking, you know, the face and nature of these European states that didn't start in the way in which the United States started. So, it doesn't have—Europe doesn't have the kind of history that United States has as a country, you know, being formed by immigrants. But I contested the fact that Europe has never been really either homogenous either, right? So the idea that you had Europe and it's always been made of European people, it's a dream because with the Transatlantic Slave Trade, people would argue, you begin to have the people coming from different parts of the world populating Europe. I mean you read Shakespeare and you have an example of how Europe began—it's always been obviously multicultural. And even before that. So I mean Caryl Phillips says—mentioned Shakespeare, in particular to just make us think about the African presence in Europe, because he said the African presence in Europe doesn't start now, it doesn't start in the 20th century, it goes way back. And so, I think people forget this history. And so—and with—as a result of those immigration waves that we started to see in World War II, I mean the reasons why Caribbean people began to go to Europe after the world war was because Europe was calling as much as the United States has always called for immigrants to come. After World War II, Europe needed labor force to rebuild these devastated countries. And so, they needed work force. So Europe was calling, immigrants arrive. So they were ready to take their work but they were not ready to accept them as human beings living with the same rights as everybody else, just because of the color of their skin. So that's I think something that people forget and that people forget still now because you have, again, the same story being repeated. You have waves of immigrants coming from Northern Africa or former Eastern European countries or the Middle East, coming to Europe and doing the work that many Europeans don't want to do. So that's fine for the government. But then when it comes to, you know, talking, treating them as humanely as everybody else, then you have the problem. Then the immigrant becomes the scapegoat, you know, the scapegoat for all the problems, social tensions, you know, unemployment that obviously are usually the target of the current conversations, so.

KMC: Yeah. And it's fascinating how powerful the myth of unified national identity is.

EP: Yeah, everywhere, isn't it?

KMC: I mean we see it here and everywhere else. So, this also brings me to think about another one of your points because you explore the idea of home. And particularly the idea of home as an impossibility for some—or for many immigrants and I was hoping you could talk about that a little bit.

EP: Yeah. So, I think I would like to go back to the division of the book, so that will give us a little bit—the audience a little bit of an idea. So I set up the book by picking up, I think, three ideas that are central in diaspora studies, but not necessarily, I don't prioritize if one is more important than the other. To me, they all blend in, they all interact. That's why I started with the idea of home then the second part is around the concept of exile which is a term that has been used in almost like interchangeably with migration. And again I quote Caryl Phillips again
here, he says that, "to me, exile is a much more problematic condition of migration." It's forget the idea of exile in the old sense. We'd like political banishment. I mean there is death, of course but not just that. And then in part three, I talk about the Caribbean, The Caribbean landscape because if it's too—if that's—all of these writers do not live in the Caribbean, do not return to the Caribbean I asked actually that they do return through the writing because all the writing is always focused around their homelands, their original homelands. So for people like Edwidge Danticat, home is a reminder of painful history that it manifests itself especially through the violence of women's bodies, on women's bodies. Danticat’s family escaped from brutal, dictatorial regime of the Duvalier in Haiti who reigned for, you know, basically over 50 years, father and son. And during this time, women paid a high price because they were the victims of brutal oppression and physical and psychological violations. So all her stories focus around the women dealing with the style, with this violence and therefore the home for her is painful because it's impossible to return to if you are a victim of rape and you had to move away from that place and you came to this country to escape that, of course, you go back and it's really painful to go back to those locales. But nonetheless, she finds a strength, I think of protagonist to find strength in stories that have been passed down through the family line especially the women, so it's the strength of women stories so that to give her fiction a sense of hope in the end. For people like Jamaica Kincaid, the question of home becomes complicated when she searches for what I call a linear history and she finds that she cannot find one in the Caribbean because as she begins with the indigenous histories, she's actually one of the few writers that have taken up this notion of researching the indigenous legacy which I think in our case has to do with the fact that her grandmother was a descendant of the Carib's native sect. And so, she says much like—you know, to me she said when I search and search and search, I want to go beyond—you know, I want to—I only come up with a number which is 1492. And to me, that number is basically the origin of all sorts of rapture, of all sorts of disruption. And so, it's a disruption that basically meant to the genocide of indigenous—or near genocide of the indigenous peoples and then of course the violence unleashed by the Transatlantic Slave Trade. And then for Michelle Cliff and what is interesting for Jamaica Kincaid that home becomes an impossible place to return to because she finds only absences when she goes and searches for the family line. She knows who her mother is, she cannot their father’s genealogy. She says there is a certain point in which, like many descendants of the African diaspora, you have to stop because you can't find anything, yeah, there is only an X. So that's why I titled that part I think I said Crumbling— "Absent Fathers and Crumbling Origins, Jamaica Kincaid and the impossibility of Home". So she's just talking about in the sense of a family line, family story. For Michelle Cliff, home is impossible because she's a lesbian so she has this interesting, you know, racial and gender and sexual orientation component that add to the complexity of the situation. And she says I could never return to Jamaica, she originally came from Jamaica, because Jamaica is a very homophobic place. I would not be welcomed there and in fact—I don't think she ever returned to Jamaica since she came to this country. So she writes about Jamaica which is the irony of all the writers obviously. So home is impossible because of who you are because of your identity and it's not—it's far away from the romantic idea. I was having this conversation actually at one of the conferences with a colleague of mine who likes to quote a Robert Frost poem. If you are familiar, you know, “Home is the place that when you go back, they have to take you in.” And I said that's not really so easy because for some people in some
cases home doesn’t take you in and so definitely she fits—would fit that. And then for Caryl Phillips who repeatedly has written about the Atlantic Ocean being his home, it becomes really fascinating to try to locate a place and that’s really part to think of what—one of my attractions to these writers is the way in which they put things in conversation, the land and the sea. Because, you know, he said, I can go back to the Caribbean. You know, to me the Caribbean is only a distant not even a memory because he was an infant when he was brought to England. I made a home in England but I knew it was never my permanent home, it was a temporary home because he grew up in England and experiencing, all experiences, all forms of racism. Growing up in Northern England and he said he couldn’t wait to leave, and he said would I call home the United States? I’m not sure either. So home and considering that all his work revolves around the triangular geography of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, then you agree with him that he says I like to think of the Atlantic Ocean as my home because that’s where my ancestors came from. So I think he’s a—it’s a concept that, it gets fascinating, it gets complicated in a fascinating way. And I think it would definitely be an interesting lesson for the social scientist to think about, to go back to my original argument.

KMC: And I think and since we’re talking about the idea of history and history that disappears and so on, I’ll ask one final question. I have a couple more and so we’ll see how many questions come from the audience but I—something else that really struck me, you point out that many of these writers’ words provide what you call a historical counter narrative to the language of the tourist brochure which with respects to the Caribbean seem such a relevant topic. And so you talked about these works as beginning to unearth and rewrite history that has been buried or erased or silenced, so my question is do you have advice for those of us who are travelers who want to go beyond the tourist brochure?

EP: Read Jamaica Kincaid, "A Small Place".

KMC: OK.

EP: A book I've always wished I had written. I was mesmerized the first time I read that book, it's, you know—yeah. It's difficult because I teach a course at Cal Poly as you know exposing students to this area and to the complexity of this area and that's actually the first topic that we discuss. You know, our notion of the Caribbean no matter where whether in Europe or in the United States is a tourist notion, it's a tourist brochure. And what these writers—you know, beautiful places, which is true obviously of many other places that have a history of colonization. I mean think about why. It's the same thing. So students who come to the class with the idea, yes, it's a beautiful place, beautiful beaches, beautiful sands, we go there vacationing but what about the history of this place? What about the connections, you know, the way in which this history intersects with the history of the United States, United States foreign policy in particular? And, of course, it's difficult because when you are a tourist, you know, you don't want to think about this thing, you want to go on vacation, you want to go and relax. So my students say I cannot possibly give this book, you know, the Jamaica Kincaid book, which by the way they love. After reading the book, there is one book they will remember from the course, it's that book. And they say I cannot give this book to my friends because they will
not go otherwise if they read this book. Because what does the book do is precisely exposing this history, exposing this history in such a way however that makes the potential traveler and tourist the question his own role as a tourist. And make one to go to the Caribbean to see a different Caribbean beyond the precisely the tourist brochure. So the advice is, I always tell students, you know, as a student, as a traveler, you are always going to ask questions. That's the purpose of being in college, writing or asking questions, so don't just stop at the surface. And so, actually one of the things that we do which is fun in the class, and I'm sorry for bringing material from the class to now into the second [inaudible] discussion, I have students that look at a tourist brochure, you know, from any of the websites that you can find and it's a lot of fun to deconstruct that brochure, you know, after reading Jamaica Kincaid's narrative. And so, I think it makes them think and it's obviously it makes—it raises a lot of questions and, you know, to the average tourist traveling to the Caribbean, then I leave it up to your personal judgment, you know, if your friend is going and they—I'm sure you get that a lot because I get a lot from lots of friends. You know, we're going to Barbuda. What can you recommend? What would you advise us to see? So I leave that to your personal, you know, discretion. You know, you don't want to be aggressively saying oh, you know this place and start talking about, so—

KMC: And make everyone depressed.

EP: And making one depressed upon learning about the history because there is so much beauty in this area. So it's not—I mean the history is obviously is an interesting and sad I think for the most part but there is so much beauty that comes out of the creativity that this place also has generated which makes a lot of sense. You know, usually—I mean I don't know, I remember when I was young, I always heard this cliché, I don't know if it's cliché, that great art usually comes from oppression. And that probably makes a lot of sense why this is such an amazing, a creative, an area that continues to bless us with talents, you know, of individuals and how it's ironic then that this is common feature among Caribbean artists, you know, that these talents are not often recognized in the area, for different circumstances, you know, a writer in the Caribbean has to leave the Caribbean to become acknowledged, to become awarded because this is an area that doesn't really do much to encourage this talent for many complex reasons. You know, I'm not trying to be negative on that, you know. Yes? [Inaudible]. Yeah, yeah.

KMC: But this is—it's interesting, this—I mean a tourist brochure hits very close to home because the day after tomorrow I'm leaving for Cuba and I'll be accompany group of Cal Poly and UC alumni. And I mean we got the brochure and Cuba is antique cars and it's cigars and it's very happy people playing music on every corner. And so, my job is very challenging because I don't want to ruin everyone's trip by saying, yeah, but there's the other side of this, but there is such a rich and such an important history behind those antique cars and the cigars and so on. And so, it's the challenge of striking the balance because we want people to be informed, it's important. And I think I'll close—because there is a quote that both Elvira and I just love that—

EP: You read it, yeah.
KMC: —she recites toward the end of her book because I think it kind of brings all of this together. And this is from Caryl Phillips that she's mentioned and in 2011, Phillips lamented that the American public is and this is the quote, "The American public is indifferent to any narrative and interested only in pursuing their own non-scripted roles as studio guests in a reality show called 'The United States of America'." And so I wondered if Elvira would like to close before questions with any thoughts about that.

EP: In the epilogue, I wrote the epilogue on the anniversary of 9/11. I think it was the 14th anniversary of 9/11, yes. Actually the first time, it was the 12th so then the book was published two days later, two years later I had to revise the date. So I was trying to find what—I was watching, you know, the commemoration ceremonies and I was trying to find the rational to ask myself what does this book mean, you know, in the face of a post-9/11 America, what can writers like these tell this country right now? And so, I think of the quote by Caryl Phillips. He's talking specifically in an essay in which he talks about post-9/11 America. How more than ever he said at that time right after 9/11 and obviously fast forward to today, writers have a significant especially immigrant writers have a significant role to play because he says “I am appalled at the politics of this country." You know, I was talking about how the reluctance and the way in which American writers didn't—American intellectuals in general didn't really speak up after—in response to the policies the government enacted after 9/11. So he's lamenting this intellectual tradition in this country. But he said that thank God I am hopeful because the most vocal voices are immigrant writers. They are the ones who speak up because they are the ones affected by these policies in their communities, you know. And so he says, I think it says here I am—I read another quote, "While I remain dismayed by the domestic and foreign chaos that the United States continues to unleash upon her own people and upon millions of foreign citizens, I am comforted by the knowledge that her folly will be recorded and exposed by the narratives of those whose private and public lives have been thrown into turmoil by the inequities of the policies emanating from the White House." This was 2011. OK. So I think he's hopeful as all of the writers as hopeful. I was able to interview him and Edwidge Danticat for the book, for this project. And I asked both of them if they still have any faith in the power of literature in the current time in which we're living? And it was very heartening to see that they do obviously. So writers they too have faith because they're like—there are always going to be people who read and we are hopeful that our work will get, you know, will get disseminated, will get people's attention and Danticat fully beautiful she says, “there is no such a thing as a dangerous book, the danger is in the reader.” And so once the reader reads, the book then becomes dangerous. And so, I think to me, that's definitely more important than ever. I already told students that we're going to see great art coming out of these times. You know, 10 years from now, new generation of writers, they're already denouncing and exposing the chaos unleashed by the current administration. And I think that's I think the hope that we all have to look forward to.

KMC: So we hope we have a room full of dangerous readers here.

EP: Yes.
Moderator: [Background Music] This broadcast is a 2017 Production of the Robert E. Kennedy Library with music by Doug Irion. Visit our blog at Kennedy Library Outloud at lib.calpoly.edu/outloud. There you can find other stories and media from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

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