

## Liberation and Translingualism in Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch*

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“Speech is Freedom”

Aycayia, *The Mermaid of Black Conch*

### **Abstract**

This study employs Dussel's philosophy of liberation and the concept of Translingualism to explore the capacity for surmounting obstacles encountered by the subjugated in a fluid realm free from center-focused paradigms, such as Eurocentrism, anthropocentrism, and patriarchy. The paper investigates the unprobed connection between Translingualism, Transmodern fluidity, as well as the notions of liberation and exteriority. Addressing a gap in existing research, this study attempts to explore new ground in examining Translingualism as a literary tool for achieving freedom from binary thought structures. Monique Roffey's novel, *The Mermaid of Black Conch*, is analyzed as a case study. The analysis revealed that Roffey employed fluidity resulting from Translingualism to challenge Eurocentrism, anthropocentrism, and patriarchy. Through the use of various languages and vernaculars, Roffey asserted the unique heritage and imagination of the Caribbean people, and promoted a fluid and dynamic identity. The novel's unconventional approach to storytelling and communication emphasized the value of non-verbal communication and contested the notion of human language dominance. Additionally, the novel's exploration of interspecies communication and the inversion of traditional gender roles demonstrated how Translingualism could serve as a tool for social transformation. The study presents new perspective on the power of Translingualism as a way to resist systems of oppression and to achieve liberation.

**Keywords:** Anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism, Fluidity, Liberation, *Mermaid of Black Conch*, Translingualism

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### 1. Introduction

Words have the power to shape and reflect reality, as they go beyond mere communication and shapes cultural, social, and individual mind sets (Bakhtin, 1981). This entails that language and literature are inextricably interconnected, and that their multifaceted relationship has profound implications. They hold significant positions within the fields of human expression and social construction, both as mediums to communicate and instruments to convey cultural heritage, values, and ideas (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997). On the one hand, literature is fundamentally language in action, providing opportunities for writers and readers alike to explore and express diverse worldviews, experiences, and relationships (Langer, 2011). As a written or spoken composition, it is an artistic expression that thrives on the use of language. On the other, language, as a communicative tool, conveys meaning and serves as the foundation upon which literature draws its representations and imaginative worlds (Halliday and Hasan, 1989). They both possess the power and ability to express the experiences, struggles, and aspirations of individuals and groups, as well as to reveal the complexities inherent in the dynamics of power, politics, and identity.

The intricate relationship between language and literature has been an area of interest for scholars across disciplines, often leading up to the development of interdisciplinary frameworks that deepen our understanding and insights into how they are connected. In the same vein, this study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines Dussel's (1985) philosophy of liberation and Canagarajah's (2013) Translingualism concept to analyze Monique Roffey's award-winning *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (2020). This interdisciplinary

approach fills a gap in the existing research, merging two theories into one cohesive framework for analyzing literature.

This study, by showing how Dussel's theory of liberation interacts with the translanguaging paradigm, aims to unveil new perspectives on how discursive practices sustain or resist systems of oppression and domination. It investigates how language serves as an instrument of power, resistance, and liberation, mirroring both individual and collective struggles for freedom. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to employ Translingualism as a literary narrative technique. In so doing, we attempt to illustrate how the author utilizes linguistic diversity, nonverbal and interspecies communication to challenge and overcome Eurocentrism, Anthropocentrism, and Patriarchal constraints deeply rooted in Western literature and societies. Moreover, we argue that the employment of these theoretical frameworks highlights the potential for language via the mode of literature to invoke social change. The study investigates the novel's portrayal of identity, resistance, and subversion, offering a powerful exploration of language as a transformative force of liberation. In brief, the study illustrates how fluidity – be it linguistic, cultural, social, or political in nature – lead to liberation.

## 2. Context of the Study

As mentioned above, the study investigates Roffey's novel *The Mermaid of Black Conch*. In the following section we shall introduce the novel as well as the linguistic landscape of the Caribbean.

### 2.1 *The Mermaid of Black Conch*

In her book, *The Mermaid of Black Conch*, Monique Roffey explores the relationship between oppression, linguistic diversity, and cultural traditions. On a surface level, the novel is a story of a mermaid caught by two American men but is saved by a local fisherman who takes care of her while she was becoming human, and they fall in love. However, the reader who would expect “and they lived happily ever after” would be disappointed because it is far deeper on several levels than that. The mermaid, who has become fully human then began turning again into a mermaid, is hunted by an American man and the local police but is eventually claimed back to the sea. The novel is depicting a harmonious utopian society living in peace except for the intervention of capitalist human beings who are hunting after profit and luring poorer people to assist them in their hunt. In the Caribbean imaginary island, animals, plants, the sea, and humans are getting along in a balanced way because everyone is taking what they *need* not what they *want*. Thinking and

living in this way brings liberation to all creatures from oppression and domination that marks Western Capitalist societies. Liberation from oppression comes in different shapes: liberation from linguistic, cultural and economic domination. Set in an imaginary Caribbean island in 1976, the novel depicts a panoramic view of the harmonious coexistence of several cultures and languages that will be elaborated in the next section.

## 2.2 The Linguistic Landscape of the Caribbean

The linguistic landscape in the Caribbean epitomizes a diverse, multilingual setting, with a rich combination of indigenous, European colonial, African, and evolving Creole languages (Schmalz & Meer, 2022). Numerous historical influences have left an indelible mark on the region's languages and dialects, shaping its linguistic landscape. Among these influences are colonization, slavery, and globalization. The Caribbean witnessed several waves of colonization each of which introduced the colonizers' own language as the superior one. Over the years, these languages have interwoven with indigenous and African languages. The latter were introduced as a result of slavery. Slave trade saw millions of individuals forcibly relocated from Africa to the Caribbean, where they had to abandon their native African languages. Subsequently, slaves were compelled to learn the languages of their captors – English, French, Spanish, or Dutch. This process led to the creation of Creole languages, such as Papiamentu, Haitian Creole, and Jamaican Patois (Nero, 2000). Creole languages emerge from language contact, typically forming when speakers of various languages interact and create a new language combining elements from each other. These languages represent a unique melding of various language and cultural influences (Faine, 2017). Additionally, social and cultural aspects have influenced the Caribbean language patterns. In the Caribbean, like other parts of the world, globalization has popularized English as a dominant language within the region. This domination was further solidified by the expansion of tourism industry.

The linguistic ecosystem in the Caribbean attests to the various socio-cultural and political workings. Moreover, the linguistic contention over the status of Standard and Creole languages can be observed in various situational uses. Creole languages are generally linked to informal or personal interactions, while Standard English is reserved for formal or professional settings. This demonstrates an underlying socio-cultural and political structure that favors Standard English over Creole languages, which are often perceived as substandard or uneducated. Nevertheless, Creole languages hold an essential role in Caribbean culture through their

use in literature and music (Aljoe, 2004; Winedt, 2015). However, recent years have witnessed increasing widespread calls for Creole languages to be recognized as official languages and for the formation of language policies promoting their inclusion in education and public life (Brown-Blake 2014).

### 3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study employs an interdisciplinary framework that draws upon Dussel's (1985) philosophy of liberation and Canagarajah's (2013) Translingualism. We believe that the two theoretical concepts that constitute the framework share a common foundation. Though fluidity, they both challenge existing power structures and promote equality across communities – be it social, political, economic, or linguistic.

#### 3.1 Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation

Humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is beginning to realize its need for an urgent “major global mind change and a paradigm shift” that acknowledges we are all (humans, animals, plants) connected to one system “which makes us all interdependent, vulnerable and responsible for the Earth as an indivisible living community” (Ateljevic & Tomljenović, 2016, 26). Decades ago, Dussel (1985) suggested what he called “philosophy of liberation,” a revolution against all kinds of oppression and domination, and called for a world view that is not based on a Eurocentric, North American perspective. In the same vein, posthuman feminists revolted against the anthropocentric superiority claim and have demanded liberation of the environment from human domination (Ahmed, 2008; Alaimo, 2010; Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 1994; Grosz, 2004; Harraway, 1985). All these calls toward liberation and acknowledgement of interconnectivity, interrelatedness, interdependence, reciprocity, fluidity (to name just a few) found an answer in the pertinent paradigm of transmodernism. This paradigm shift has been naturally reflected in various fields like psychology, ecology, economy, linguistics and literature. In the following sections, we shall be briefly discussing the main key concepts in Dussel's theory.

##### 3.1.1 Dussel's Totality and Exteriority

Dussel's (1985) philosophy of liberation is based on the concepts of *Totality*, *Exteriority*, *Alienation* and *Liberation*. These concepts are interrelated by power relations and the traditional dichotomy of dominator/dominated, oppressor/oppressed. Totality builds its logic on totalitarianism, or “the logic of the alienation of exteriority” (Dussel

1985, p.42). Exteriority means the scope where other persons reveal themselves “as free and not conditioned by one’s own system and not as part of one’s world” (Dussel 1985, p.40)

### 3.1.2 Alienation and Liberation

The voice of totality dominates society and silences all others. Those who believe themselves to be superior establish the ontological knowledge of the center as the unquestionable truth. Totalizing exteriority or denying the other as other is alienation. When someone is forced to move away from their own center and revolve around the center of a totality that is foreign to them, it alienates that person's being (Dussel, 1985). The praxis of liberation depends on a restructuring of a new world order and a redistributing of the functions of the elements that compose it.

Since the culture that dominates in the present order is imperialist culture or culture of the center against which all other cultures are measured, local elites embrace the culture of the center and are, thus, stuck with an inferior sense of self: “Ideological cultural imperialism today surpasses all other types of anterior cultural influx” (Dussel, 1985, p.92). In order to construct a class conscious of longer history anterior to the dominating system, philosophy of liberation calls for generating a new elite whose “enlightenment” would not originate from the culture of the center, but would be integrated with the interests of the social bloc of the oppressed (Dussel 2012, p.33). The center continuously dominates and alienates the periphery, which is justified by the Philosophy of Modernity, which is the belief that the European man who perceives himself as rational, superior and absolute is the one responsible for civilizing the rest of the world. Thus, liberation comes not by escaping the center and standing outside it, but through mobilizing exteriority to a perspective that thinks in an alternative, out-of-the-mainstream way.

### 3.1.3 Fluidity: The Transmodern Paradigm

Transmodernity is a term coined in 1989 by Spanish philosopher and feminist Rosa Maria Rodriguez Magda to reflect the connectivity, fluidity and interrelatedness of the contemporary globalized world. For Magda, Transmodernity both transcends and combines elements of modernism and postmodernism. According to the Cartesian duality of mind and body, the mind is the higher part of reason while the body is the secondary part with the material world being but an extension of the mind and, accordingly, worthless on its own. This view results in situating the world as matter out there and creates the illusion of us as safe rational

beings (Alaimo, 2010 & Tofantsuk 2019) “licensed to control the irrationality of disorderly space” (Plumwood 2002, pp.104-5).

Modernism relies on dualistic structures that are exclusive and that involve inferiorization and control, so that the inferior pole is included into the selfhood and identity of the Master, as has been extensively theorized by Plumwood (1993). Nature is then overwhelmed and dominated by human needs in such a polarization. Transmodernity borrows from modernity the focus on dualities but reshapes alienated, hierarchical dualism into life-sustaining mutuality (Reuther, 1992).

Postmodernism revolted against the essentialist and dichotomous modern paradigms like center/periphery, civilized/uncivilized, colonial/colonized. It focused instead on “diaspora communities” (Bhabha 1994), “liminality” (D’haen & Bertens, 1994), “mestiza” (Anzaldúa, 1999) and “hybridity” (Brah & Coombes, 2000). Although able to deconstruct dualistic modern discourses, for some critics, postmodernism represents the ultimate product of late capitalism and new forms of global governance (Hardt & Negri 2000).

For Enrique Dussel, transmodernism tackles the aspects that are situated “beyond” (and also “prior to”) the structures valorized by modern European/North American culture which are present in the great non-European universal cultures and have begun to move toward a pluriversal utopia (Dussel 2012, p.43). Dussel uses the term “Transmodern” to denote theories from the Third World that guarantee a suitable place for Latin American cultures in front of Modernity and aim to cultivate the postcolonial other into it. Grosz (2010) shows how “concepts run into material practices, and practices come to function as exemplars . . . not by unifying, but by diversifying, proliferating, diverging, producing that which is different” (47). This enmeshment of the discursive paradigm and the material world can be described as Transmodern relationality; a paradigm where there is no interiority or exteriority, but “a way of being responsible and responsive to our others” (Neimanis 2017, p.38). Thus, the body/mind dualism is replaced by a body that is “in transit between the unstable inner self and the non-othered environment” (Kuznetski, 2021, p.198).

Irigaray’s (1994) approach to fluidity begins with this question: according to whom is femininity so associated with disruptive fluidity? The argument that feminism in particular, and critical theory in general, has concentrated its attention on “language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, mind [and] soul . . . as idealities fundamentally different from matter and valorized as superior to the base desires of biological material or the inertia of physical stuff” (Coole & Frost, 2010, p.2) has been met

with frank incredulity by feminists. The new materialist claim that feminism needs to “return” to a materiality that a previous “cultural turn” has encouraged us to overlook itself reproduces a “familiar or even habitual anxiety that feminism and poststructuralism have reduced ‘everything’ to language and culture, in what is often referred to as ‘textualism,’ and have forgotten the ‘real’ of the real world, or the materiality of what is given (Ahmed, 2008). Nonetheless, this does not mean that language is unimportant. On the contrary, language is of a great value in the process of liberation since domination of one language over the “other” languages can result in the totality and exteriority of languages, a process similar to that exerted by the oppressive systems over the oppressed. This brings us to the concept of Translingualism of which Roffey takes utmost care and finely incorporates in her novel to uncover linguistic totalitarian schemes and to eventually find a way toward liberation.

### **3.2 Translingualism**

Translingualism refers to the negotiation of linguistic boundaries, identities, and discursive practices that take place when individuals with diverse language backgrounds interact (Canagarajah, 2013). It promotes linguistic diversity, challenges the traditional monolingual paradigm, and seeks to empower language users by emphasizing their linguistic agency (Horner & Kopelson, 2015). Translingualism advocates the dynamic and fluid nature of language encounters and its ability to facilitate transcending geographical and cultural borders (Canagarajah, 2013). Thus, it proposes that language is a dynamic communication tool that reflects and influences social interactions, rather than a fixed artifact. Translingualism advocates the view that individuals possess a unique, complex, and dynamic language repertoire that is not confined to the boundaries of individual languages but extends to navigate the constantly changing linguistic ecosystems of the global multicultural and multilingual societies (Canagarajah, 2013, Wei, 2018). Originally devised for pedagogical purposes as a response to the limitations of traditional monolingual and multilingual frameworks, it promotes linguistic diversity, flexibility, and motivation for language learners to maintain their cultural and linguistic backgrounds while acquiring new languages and communicating in various contexts (Canagarajah, 2013). In other words, it highlights the fluidity, adaptability and the transformative potential of language use (Pennycook, 2010). It emphasizes the importance of both social equity and empowering

individuals to assert their linguistic backgrounds while they negotiate meaning with others (García & Leiva, 2014).

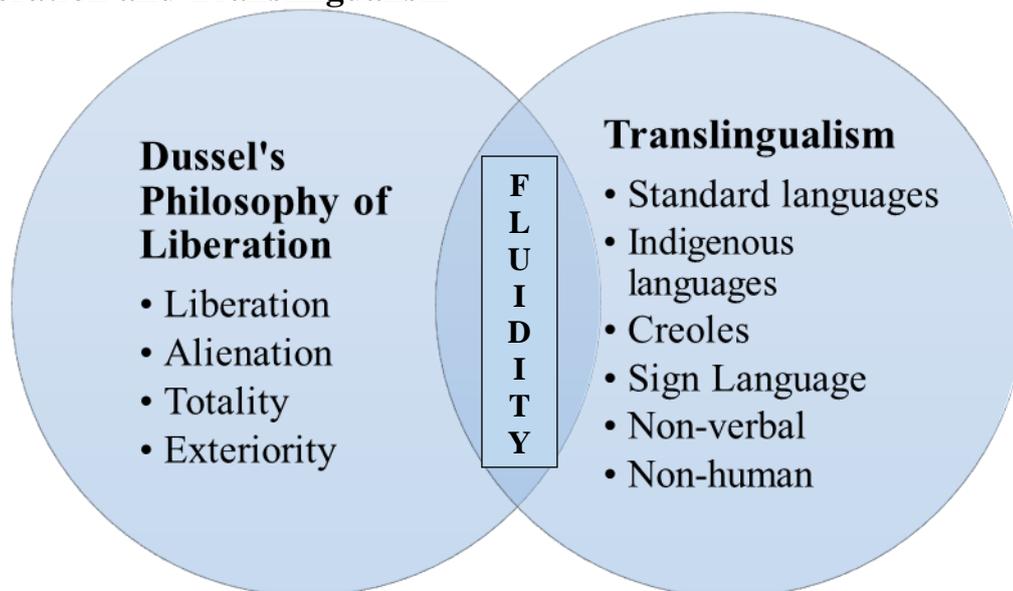
Translingualism advocates inclusivity and diversity with all languages and dialects hold equal value while linguistic hybridity is the desirable communication method (García & Leiva, 2014). Such notion contradicts the conventional language perspectives that endorse monolingual standards while disparages nonstandard or non-native varieties (Pennycook, 2010), stressing the role of transcultural exchange in building connections between communities and fostering mutual understanding (Pavlenko, 2012), Translingualism maintains that language serves not only as a communication tool but also as a means of expressing cultural values, beliefs, and practices (Horner & Kopelson, 2015). Moreover, it challenges binary structures through creating a third space that represents a larger entity than its constituent components. In literary works, as in real life, such third space facilitates the development of works that defies binary oppositions, such as 'native' versus 'non-native' languages, that enables authors to break down linguistic barriers, prompting a paradigmatic shift within literature. Thus, it provides writers with opportunities to give voice to their hybrid identities and, in turn, create literary works that challenge conventional societal narratives (Doloughan, 2017). It is closely linked with transformation, the subversion of power structures, and the emergence of novel ideologies (García & Kleyn, 2016).

Translingualism is employed to interpret the linguistic landscape of the novel as we believe it can capture the dynamic and fluid nature of language use and negotiation in the multilingual Caribbean context. The study explores how language functions as a tool of power, resistance, and liberation, reflecting both individual and collective struggles for freedom. It is worth noting here that this paper employs the concept of Translingualism as distinct from that of code switching. While both concepts share some similarities, they reflect different linguistic behaviors and serve distinct communicative purposes. As a linguistic concept, code switching assumes that there are clear-cut linguistic borders and boundaries between languages (Gumperz, 1982) and is strategically used for special purposes. On the other hand, Translingualism is characterized by its recognition of linguistic fluidity as well as its being a constantly adaptive process that is part of the actual linguistic ecosystem of the speakers, (Blommaert, 2010; Canagarajah, 2013; Vázquez, 2017). These two linguistic aspects of Translingualism distinguish the Caribbean linguistic landscape in general and the novel in particular.

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

In this section, we examine Monique Roffey's novel, *The Mermaid of Black Conch*, in light of the intricate relationship between Dussel's philosophy of liberation and Translingualism, both of which operate through the notion of fluidity (See Figure 1). Roffey's novel, we can venture to say, is a remarkable fictional exemplification of both Dussel's philosophy and the powers of language to liberate, establish and dismantle cultural boundaries. This novel emphasizes the transformative power of communication and the complex power dynamics in a postcolonial Caribbean context. The following section will shed light on how Roffey employed these concepts in her narrative to challenge Eurocentrism, defy anthropocentrism, and subvert patriarchal gender roles.

**Figure 1**  
**Liberation and Translingualism**



#### 4.1 Liberation from Eurocentrism

In the novel, the imperialist culture of the center is represented in the American man, Thomas Clayson, “a banker, a golfer, a bridge player, husband and a father, bad at everything he ever did. He could not love; he could not make anyone love him back” (Roffey, 2020, p.168). The father represents the relentless capitalist culture in its most ferocious form of greed that urges him to get back his “property” (the mermaid) even if not alive, then as a trophy to be sold to a museum or a research center and with the money he “would buy a bigger boat, definitely” (Roffey, 2020, p.27). The son, Hank Clayson, objects to his father’s greedy pursuit and is thus accused by his father of not being a “man” because of his soft heart

and love of poetry and the classics: “[Thomas Clayson] was furious over the theft of his catch, with the incompetence of the villagers, and mostly with his weak-minded sissy of a son” (Roffey, 2020, p.38). Thomas Clayson gave himself the traditional colonizer’s rationale to judge the locals: “Goddamn village of Black Conch, goddamn backwards fishermen and their kin, all married to each other, all interrelated and backwards and lying and cheating each other” (Roffey, 2020, p.168). The locals, thinking from the imperialist capitalist point of view are going after profit: “Every jack man in St. Constance was looking to make money” (Roffey, 2020, p.8). When the American boat caught the mermaid, Nicer, a local who was hired by the Americans, “had begun to see dollar signs” (Roffey, 2020, p.16). Porthos John, the local policeman and Priscilla, a local woman, though full of hate to white people, dream of helping Thomas Clayson get back his “property” and, with their bonus money, of leaving Black Conch.

Since the Transmodern paradigm calls for a “major global mind change,” here comes the role of the protagonist who thinks from an “exterior” point of view, not tainted by the imperialist culture of the center. David Baptiste, the local fisherman who saves Aycayia, the mermaid, and Life, Arcadia Rain’s husband, learn about themselves and about their surrounding from Aycayia, the mermaid: “She had inspired an outbreak of chivalry in [David’s] heart . . . She had caused his heart to wake up, to writhe free from its constraints of mistrust” (Roffey, 2020, p.75). David wonders at how his heart softened for her loneliness and how much patience he found in himself in teaching her everything. Later, when hearing the mermaid sing, David thinks “of how things had been in that time before time, when the archipelago was a garden” (Roffey, 2020, p.114). The best lesson of all he gets from the mermaid is to learn “how to be a man. How to be myself, behave well. Is like she teach me how to be on the right side of good” (Roffey, 2020, p.159).

David, in thinking from his own exteriority, meditates why white people come and “take” from the Caribbean land: “I sat and wondered just what kinda men get murder here in this bay and for what reason? White men arrive from far away and then sail back to where they come from. I always figure is feelings of being insecure that make someone want to take from others. The white men who came here were full of jumble spirit, always restless” (Roffey, 2020, p.87). The mermaid, also thinking from her exteriority, after turning human and learning language, tells Miss Rain that “Land is not to be owned” (Roffey, 2020, p.89).

Moreover, cultural oppression disrupts the relationship between Miss Arcadia Rain, the white woman who almost owns most of the

island, and her husband, Life, a local Black man: “a Mandingo warrior-type black man, the kind white people afraid. He only have to set up his face to frighten them away. He have a way about him, a confidence from how he think” (Roffey, 2020, p.163). Both love each other since they were children and their love grows even more by time, but Life could not bear the pressure of being the “house nigga” as people used to say. He flees once he knows that Miss Rain is pregnant and goes away for ten years to try and build a career and be worthy of his wife. On his return, and after meeting the mermaid and his son, something in his heart softens just like in David’s case: “This unusual woman with the webbed fingers who could make the rain cease with her unfathomable language, his son, who couldn’t hear, but who’d arrested his heart in the very instant of their meeting; and the feeling that had sprung in his chest, his gut, his arms and legs, instantaneously, maybe even disastrously, for this white woman he’d known” (Roffey, 2020, p.129). Only judging from his exteriority as a black man and as a poor man, Life discards the dichotomies of colonizer/colonized, rich/poor, white/black and follows his heart. He decides to stay with his wife, the love of his life, and his son, Reggie.

Although Miss Arcadia Rain is white and has inherited most of the land in Black Conch Island, she is more local than white: she speaks and acts like Black Conch people. In her encounter with Thomas Clayson, she is the one in control. Roffey uses “sturdy” in describing Miss Rain and “weak” with Clayson. When Clayson complains about the theft of his mermaid, she tells him no one took or keeps this mermaid in his home, but he insists on demanding his “property” back, at which “Miss Rain snorted. She wanted to pelt the damn book at his head, except it was a first edition of Derek Walcott’s *In a Green Night*” (Roffey, 2020, p.40). Miss Rain treats him with disdainful inferiority, unlike other local people who adopt the mentality of the center and rush to help him regarding his orders as decrees from a master to be obeyed unquestioningly. Roffey presents the reader with an exemplary situation where cultural liberation from the master/slave dichotomy comes about from the exteriority of the dominated/marginalized culture.

Meanwhile, Roffey employs the concept of Translingualism to resist the hegemony of Eurocentric notions. She introduces different languages and dialects as resistance against Eurocentric dominance. Such diverse linguistic approach in which she blends English, Spanish, and Caribbean Creole allows readers to experience cultural diversity beyond Eurocentrism. Roffey, from the early beginning of the novel, introduces the protagonist Aycayia’s opening monologue referring to the ancient Taino people: “I disappear one night, in a big storm long long ago/ Island

once where Taino people live and the people before Taino” (Roffey, 2020, p.2). This sets the tone of the entire novel foregrounding indigenous ancestral identities.

She introduces indigenous Creole dialects as a discursive move to challenge the hegemony of Standard English. This also serves to foster intercultural dialogue by recognizing the Caribbean history of oppression and resistance. The characters utilize the Creole language to emphasize their sense of belonging and to challenge the authority of English – a language that signifies a history of colonization and cultural suppression. Thus, when David spots Aycayia in the sea, he calls upon her "Ayyy .... Dou dou. Come. Mami wata! Come. Come, nuh." (Roffey, 2020, p.1). Such use of indigenous Creole simultaneously highlights Caribbean linguistic identity and obscures marginalizing Eurocentric perspectives.

Indigenous and Creole words are often displayed without translation. The introduction of Aycayia’s Taino language as well as other Creole languages without translation highlights the value of preserving indigenous tongues. For Aycayia, her language serves as a bridge to her ancestral heritage and stands as a means of resistance. Sometimes indigenous and Creole languages are presented with translation such as the word “*casike*” and “*casika*” (meaning ‘chief’). Aycayia asks Miss Rain: “Who is the chief here the *casike*? She told me I am. Miss Rain is not a *casika*” (Roffey, 2020, p.85). In other cases, the translation is a contextual one where the word is referred to in the text in another language (usually English), as shown in the example when Aycayia and Reggie were attacked by dead *carite* (fish). “It was then that a live *carite* hit the ground. Astonished, they watched as it flipped and writhed ... Another *carite* landed, *wap*. This too flipped and bounced in a frenzy of shock. ... Another fish fell. Then another and another, until six or seven smallish silver fish ... and the ground was alive with thrashing *carite*” (Roffey, 2020, p.98). Yet, in other cases, there is no translation as in the word ‘*wap*’ in the previous example or the words *jiguera* and *toa* in the following example in which Roffey describes how Aycayia started to recall back her own lost language: “Her own words began to loosen themselves, too. When she reached for the jug she remembered its name, *jiguera*, and then what was inside, *toa*” (Roffey, 2020, p.84). The inclusion of untranslated Patois phrases between various characters serves to foreground their shared Caribbean history and stresses the value and legitimacy of the vernacular language. Moreover, David, throughout the novel, uses multiple language variations and forms: English, Creole and non-verbal communication. He is portrayed as a character who adopts translingual practices and thrives in linguistic diversity. David's

interaction with Aycayia exposes Eurocentric language limitations when portraying the non-human world.

Roffey defies Eurocentric literary hierarchies by fostering the Caribbean oral poetry traditions that advocates oral vernacular and natural unconstrained methods of narration in defiance to Eurocentric standards of literary values. This is illustrated in Aycayia's chant-like poetry which represents a celebration of the story telling technique in the Caribbean: "I swim away fast fast but hook inside ketch me good/I swim deep deep for a long time down, down to the floor of the Ocean/ It was not simplicity but/ Yankee man boat at the end of the line" (Roffey, 2020, p.12). Songs and poetry are employed to highlight the significance of non-Western languages in literature. In addition to Aycayia's songs, the novel also introduces the fishermen's song, blending Creole and English to underscore the central theme of life's interconnectedness.

The novel also uses muteness as a defiant mode of expression. Aycayia is incapable of interacting with the human world. Her understanding of language undergoes a decline as a result of centuries-long isolation. She lost her language when she was cursed: "I had forgotten mine thousands years old language, vanished from my mouth (Roffey, 2020, p. 88). This silence symbolizes muted indigenous voices in the face of colonialism. Roffey empowers marginalized narratives by later bestowing upon Aycayia the gift of communication, first through sign language and then through learning Patois. As she says, she "cannot use language/Boy teach me his language first and I learn quick quick to use my hands to talk/Boy is my first friend in Black. *Conch*" (Roffey, 2020, p.82). Roffey's incorporation of Patois, Creole, and Standard English epitomizes resistance to historical linguistic subjugation, embodying a distinctly Caribbean identity. The text's linguistic plurality subverts Eurocentric homogeneity, asserting the Caribbean people's distinctive heritage and imagination.

#### 4.2 Liberation from Anthropocentrism

The two key features of Anthropocentrism are language and agency. As for language, there has been a debate on the boundaries between matter and discourse. Some scholars argue that such boundaries are in a state of constant shift and negotiation (Butler, 1993). Others hold that such absolute boundaries do not exist between entities, including humans and non-humans (Kirby, 1996). Speech is viewed as inherently anthropocentric. However, in order to relate with nature more benevolently, one must first grasp the subject that lies behind the ostensibly voiceless Other. As such, nature should be recognized as a

voice in its Otherness. Hence, humans have no more monopoly over what counts as intelligence, language or scientific inquiry (Gamble, et al., 2019, p.124). Meanwhile, in anti-anthropocentrists' view, Agency, which is the capacity for change and acting, extends so as to refer to the nonhuman material world (Shapiro, 2006),

In *The Mermaid of Black Conch*, Roffey challenges the human-centric dominant narrative and promotes a deeper understanding of the plot's themes and characters by using many narrative voices. In the novel, for instance, animals and plants are depicted as beings with consciousness and voice. The mermaid is the most obvious example of the interrelatedness of both the human and the animal/fish worlds. David knew “she was from ancient times, from times when people knew magic, when people saw gods everywhere and talked to the plants, the animals and even the fish in the sea” (Roffey, 2020, pp.49-50). She is caught from the sea as a mermaid, she turns into a woman in David's home where she feels “happy, but also trapped and forsaken” (Roffey, 2020, p.113). She loves David and feels warm, safe and taken care of in his home, but she feels she is bound to go back to the sea in a signal of the circularity, fluidity and interconnectedness of all creatures, human and non-human with their surrounding environment.

Moreover, in the novel, the complex structure of dialects, languages, and communication techniques obscures the boundaries between humans and other species. It is through Aycayia, who stands for interspecies communication, that Roffey challenges anthropocentrism by showing how humans and nonhuman animals are intertwined. Roffey employs Translingualism to express her departure from anthropocentric views. Aycayia's transformation from mermaid to human and the accompanying development of her language serves as a manifestation of the notion of liberation from anthropocentrism. She first appeared as a mermaid who spoke only in an incomprehensible lost tongue which sounded for other listeners as a series of "chirps and clicks" (Roffey, 2020, p.11). Yet this mythical character manages to communicate via music and melody. After becoming a human, she learns English before finally converting to the native Patois Creole, as she says: “Miss Rain teach me plenty things and new words too ... in a nutshell table chair heart *wajang*” (Roffey, 2020, p.88). Though this may be seen as a victory of anthropocentric notions, looking deeper into her mix of Taino, Patois, and English in her discourse undermines the primacy of a single human voice.

Aycayia's language development represents both her transition from a purely human-centric worldview as well as her existential change.

In Aycayia's life, Roffey defines language as an empowering and equalizing tool as she puts it "speech is freedom" (Roffey, 2020, p.88), freeing her from the constraints of anthropocentric notions. Moreover, she is represented as a guardian of forgotten history by teaching David about ancient Taino, helping to combat anthropocentric viewpoints. Her link to the animal kingdom, as shown by her mention of the extinct bird "feka mekoni," emphasises the power of words as a vehicle for liberation.

Moreover, the words Roffey employs to describe non-human species on the island denote their being equal in thoughts and feelings to the human species. Thus, the two white peacocks that guard Miss Rain's house regarded Thomas Clayson "with righteous disdain" (Roffey, 2020, p.39). In addition, Aycayia, as she starts to learn how to speak the languages of the people on the island, finds herself able to communicate with other non-human species, thus the dog at David's home (Harvey) "sat and watched over [the mermaid] day and night. They watch each other like they were talking" (Roffey, 2020, p.42). They have "some kind of secret language between them" (Roffey, 2020, p.102) and upon entering the forest Aycayia communicates with Papa Bois, the giant fig tree, she nods a "hello" to the giant king, and the tree nodded back" (Roffey, 2020, p.96).

Not only do animals and plants have a voice and are as agentic as humans, but the sea (water) and sky do as well. Water serves as a manifestation of transmodern fluidity across bodies and nature, challenging the human master vs. the world "out there." The human self is no longer "a solid autonomous block with a mind inside, but rather a collectivity of fluid, watery, transanimalistic, permeable selves which . . . stand in a transcorporeal relationship with a world that is similarly fluid and fragile, too fragile to be simply and rationally 'mastered'" (Kuzentski, 2021, pp.210-211). When Dauntless, Thomas Clayson's boat, was sailing in the sea, Roffey describes it: "The sea was the giant woman of the planet, fluid and contrary. All the men shuddered as they gazed at her surface" (Roffey, 2020, p.10). Before catching the mermaid, the sea warns them: "The sea said, *Be careful what you ask for. I am bigger than you. Take only what you need*" (Roffey 2020, p.10). The sea thinks and judges away from totality (capitalism, imperialism) and advises the men to discard their own mentality of the center and follow its (his/her) exterior point of view. However, for David and Aycayia, the sea was their "matchmaker." The mermaid asks David to take her for a swim in the sea and there he describes her: "she was in my arms and floating like a woman who was trusting and giving of herself. She let me hold her and float her on the turquoise sea" (Roffey, 2020, p.103). When their bodies

are immersed in the sea, there is some kind of affectionate fluid trust among the three of them (man, woman/fish, sea). David is loving and caring, Aycayia is trusting and the sea is offering calm and peace. Not less agentic and humanlike is the sky that rains fish at one time and that obeys the mermaid's order to stop raining at another. "These cultures engaged in relationships of mutual respect, reciprocity, and caring with an Earth and fellow beings as alive and self-conscious as human beings" (Booth 2003, p.331).

Moreover, the book emphasizes the value of nonverbal communication and challenges the presumption that human language is dominant by teaching David, Arcadia, and Reggie human language and employing nonverbal signs. David's sensory interactions with Aycayia, which included nonverbal communication, show that humans are capable of understanding other animals beyond spoken language. In addition, the bond between Aycayia and David shows that meaningful relationships may still be made despite linguistic difficulties. She comments that she was drawn to David's "music," not the words (Roffey, 2020, p.3). This emphasizes the importance of nonverbal communication in overcoming the limits of human language. Meanwhile, in the book, some humans are not given a voice like Reggie, Miss Rain's half-black child who was born deaf and the mermaid in the early part of her stay at the island before learning to talk. This is a reversal of the traditional voiceless nature/voiced human dichotomy: to be human is not an essential indication of having a voice and to be non-human does not necessarily mean not having a voice.

In short, Interspecies communication is a celebrated theme in the novel, which is regarded as an embark from anthropocentric viewpoints. Roffey combines the freedom of themes from anthropocentrism with linguistic diversity. The complex network of languages, dialects, and communication channels transcends species and disguises the distinctions between beings that are human and those that are not. In the novel, nature is given voice while that of human is blurred. Roffey turns nature into a cultural (speaking) creature. Attributing nature with voice and agency, she suggests abandoning anthropocentrism in favor of a more pluriversal agency. The author challenges rigid boundaries by re-examining conventional understandings of nature, culture, voice, and agency. She offers a new, less anthropocentric perspective on the world. The novel encourages us to think beyond dichotomies in this way, allowing us to recognize the reciprocity of our startlingly natural cultural world.

### 4.3 Liberation from Patriarchy

Roffey's novel also disrupts patriarchal gender conventions. As a result of the multilingual, multicultural, and historical viewpoints in the book, Roffey's characters are able to successfully negotiate the complex world of gender roles and expectations. By carefully examining the textual and linguistic components of the book, one can see how language and Translingualism may be used as a tool of resistance to help the female characters challenge and disrupt oppressive gender stereotypes.

Traditional gender roles are reversed in the novel. From the very beginning, we are informed by David that in *Black Conch*, they talk about 'mermen' not 'mermaid': "He thought of all those stories he'd heard since childhood, tales of half-and-half sea creatures, except those stories were of mermen. Black Conch legend told of mermen who lived deep in the sea (Roffey, 2020, p.2). In addition, it is the mermaid who is enchanted by the music and hymn of the fisherman not the opposite. We argue that the dialectical opposites of the Sirens' song, which lure and repel audiences, can be seen as an example of the transformational force of Translingualism. The song is presented as combining English, Creole, and the language of the sea. This musical tapestry is a defiance to mythical conventions, expected gender roles as well as the blending and crossing of language borders. In addition, Aycayia and David's complicated relationship is also a sophisticated challenge to conventional gender dynamics. David is the caregiver for the mermaid: David is described in more than one occasion as being "soft" with a "soft" voice, singing "soft" hymns. After he rescues her from the American fishermen, he keeps her in his house where he cleans and feeds her in sharp defiance to expected conventional gender roles. Moreover, their sensitive verbal and nonverbal communication, which depicts their relationship, can be interpreted as a symbolic breakdown of linguistic boundaries and the patriarchal systems they sustain. Thus the linguistic flexibility and charisma of David helps to reshape gender relations. David communicates with Aycayia while recognizing her autonomy and dignity, free from the constraints imposed by the repressive mechanisms that have left her silent. Therefore, his persona serves as an ally in the fight against patriarchal dominance and the subversion of gender norms. With his use of the Creole language and his rejection of traditional gender norms, David challenges traditional patriarchy and eventually paves the way for a more equitable relationship with Aycayia.

Roffey introduces two other female characters who disrupt patriarchal gender conventions. Miss Arcadia Rain and CeCe are the ones who run the island: Miss Rain the hills and CeCe the island. The two

women are depicted as helpful to their own local people and defiant to the snobbish capitalist Thomas Clayton. The relationship between the couples, Aycayia and David on the one hand, and Miss Rain and Life on the other, is not based on who dominates and who obeys. They are struggling to find a way to make their relationship work in an essentially dichotomous world: for the mermaid and the fisherman, the world is divided into nature/culture and for Miss Rain and Life colonizer/colonized or master/slave. Thomas Clayton and Porthos John together with other local people regard Aycayia as mermaid or fish at best and a “thing” at worst. David and Miss Rain could not convince them she is not a fish but a woman; consequently, Clayton insists on claiming his catch and David had to smuggle her back to the sea. Moreover, because Aycayia and David’s relationship is far from normal, marriage is not the ultimate end to it. When David proposes to Aycayia, she gets upset and “her face cloud over” (Roffey, 2020, p.114). David, in thinking out of the totality of patriarchy defines what kind of relationship should be there between man and woman, “I wanted to keep her safe, or so I told myself, but maybe I fool myself; maybe ‘keep’ was the problem. I learn things hard and slow. Man, you need to give deep feelings of affection and care, not keep them” (Roffey, 2020, p. 114). In Bodies are understood both as having a material specificity and as a field of intersecting forces and spatio-temporal variables, as a series of dynamic processes and not a natural entity (Butler,1993; Irigaray, 1993). David cannot “keep” Aycayia because her body is not stable and fixed but is in constant fluidity and transformation. This focus on the body and its materiality is in itself a return to the importance of matter as valuable and not inferior to the idealities of “language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, mind [and] soul” (Ahmed 2010, p. 2). Fluidity may enable a “transgression and confusion of boundaries”, but it does so always as part of the (very conventional) construction of femininity, and of the materiality it represents, as essentially other to the logic and rationality of the “ruling symbolics” (Stephens 2014, p.199). These ruling symbolics deemed humans as objective observers and matter as intrinsically passive and self-contained, thus denying matter any self-determining agency. Lacan associated the Symbolic with the “Law of the Father” and the Real with “Woman,” the Real is a domain of plenitude and wholeness only by virtue of its absolute lack or absence of (always fractured) meaning (Miller, 1998, p. ix).

Meanwhile, Miss Rain and Life are trying to reach a midway solution to avoid the social master/slave dichotomy and the personal dominator/dominated one. Miss Rain never pushes Life to stay in order to

take care of her or her son; for she is already running her big house and a large part of the island by herself. Their mutual need for each other goes beyond the traditional care of husband and wife for their child. Life leaves in order to be better and be worthy of her. Miss Rain thinks “he already was a man in her eyes. He don’t need to make himself better, she said. She loved him” (Roffey, 2020, p. 67). If she feels this way for him, he feels double fold that way for her: “He felt himself surrender to his want, his twin, his only real friend in the world. Home was her fingers, her elbows and her ribcage; home was her face, her eyes, her gaze, the way she said things, anything” (Roffey, 2020, p. 135).

Furthermore, the novel's representation of female characters as storytellers challenges conventional hierarchical narrative frameworks in which women are often marginalized and silenced. In the novel, female characters are presented using multiple languages, Taino, Spanish, English and Patios which serve as examples of how multifaceted these women's voices are. Roffey opposes the monolithic character of patriarchal discourse and culture by combining these tales, glorifying the polyphonic, multivocal, and multicultural fabric of Caribbean society.

Translingualism is used as a catalyst in Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch* to challenge and reformulate patriarchal gender conventions. The text provides a complex tapestry of linguistic innovation, cultural syncretism, and a thorough analysis of how language and gender interact.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper examines Roffey's (2020) novel, *The Mermaid of Black Conch*, employing a theoretical framework that combines Dussel's theory of liberation and the concept of Translingualism. The analysis shows how the novel, through the concept of fluidity, which is central to both Dussel's philosophy and Translingualism, challenges the notions of Eurocentrism, anthropocentrism, and patriarchy.

Roffey's use of Patois, Creole, and Standard English exemplifies resistance to historical linguistic subjugation and represents a distinctively Caribbean identity. The text's linguistic diversity subverted Eurocentric homogeneity, thereby asserting the Caribbean people's unique heritage and imagination. In the novel, the characters' multilingualism was frequently depicted without translation. This emphasized the significance of language in shaping an individual's identity and highlighted the value of the vernacular language. In defiance of Eurocentric literary standards, Roffey adopted the Caribbean storytelling technique that promoted the use of oral vernacular and

natural, unrestrained methods of narration. To serve the same purpose, she also employed non-verbal communication. She focused on the importance of nonverbal communication and challenged the notion that human language was dominant.

The celebrated theme of the novel is interspecies communication, which is regarded as a departure from anthropocentric perspective. When depicting the non-human universe, Roffey revealed the limitations of Eurocentric language. The intricate structure of dialects, languages, and communication methods obscured the distinction between humans and other species, and undermined the primacy of a single human voice. The novel promoted a deeper comprehension of the plot's themes and characters through the use of multiple narrative voices. Roffey integrated the freedom of anthropocentric themes with linguistic variety. In the novel, nature speaks while the human voice is obscured.

In addition, the novel used Translingualism as a catalyst to challenge and reformulate patriarchal gender conventions. Traditional gender roles were inverted. The complex relationship between the characters, mirrored by the distinctive linguistic features of each of them, challenged conventional gender dynamics. Due to the book's multilingual, multicultural, and historical perspectives, Roffey's characters were able to navigate the complex world of gender roles and expectations.

To sum up, the study examined how Monique Roffey, in *The Mermaid of Black Conch*, adopted Translingualism as a literary technique. In the novel, Translingualism transcended the notions of human languages and verbal communication to nonhuman language and nonverbal communication. Roffey utilised Translingualism to portray the versatility and plurality of the Caribbean linguistic landscape. Thus, Translingualism, as a narrative tool, served to emphasize the cultural dynamism and fluidity of identities within the Caribbean region. Furthermore, Aycayia's metamorphosis from a mermaid to a human symbolized the malleability of identity and culture within the Caribbean context. The incorporation of various languages, including Creole and standard English, mirrored Translingualism that is emblematic of the linguistic diversity found in the Caribbean, a tool that negated the totality of the English language and the exteriority of the "other" languages for the sake of the liberation of the self-identifying languages. Thus, embracing Translingualism as a key literary tool, *The Mermaid of Black Conch* empowered the author to reshape the social fabric and challenge traditional power dynamics, creating a space where marginalized voices can be heard and are capable of enacting change. Furthermore, the study highlighted the powers of Translingualism to challenge monolingual and

monocultural narratives, and break down linguistic barriers to promote inclusive narrative and foster intercultural communication. It also highlighted the empowering capabilities of language and its transformative impact on society as a whole. However, further research is necessary to deepen our understanding of its impact in different contexts and to identify best practices for its use.

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