

Memory and Trauma in Edwidge Danticat's Fiction

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Abstract

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The traumatic history of the 20th century in Haiti is a topic often addressed by Haitian author Edwidge Danticat. In four of her works—*Krik? Krak!*, *The Farming of Bones*, *The Dew Breaker*, and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*—the traumas of The Parsley Massacre and the Duvalier Regime are interrogated. The characters in these fictions experience trauma either directly or through generational links. The shared nature of the trauma lends itself to both commemoration and healing. The lack of official recognition for the pain experienced by the Haitian people creates commemoration that is personal rather than “official.” My work approaches Danticat’s fiction, and its treatment of historical trauma, through close readings of these four texts. These readings reveal what Danticat is saying about the immigration experience and about the ways individuals experience and recognize traumatic memories.

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Introduction

You remember thinking while braiding your hair that you look a lot like your mother and her mother before her. It was their whispers that pushed you, their murmurs over pots sizzling in your head. A thousand women urging you to speak through the blunt tip of your pencil. (Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* 222)

The fiction of Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat pulls the whispers and murmurs of the past out of their silenced state and gives them voice and power in the present. These whispers reveal memories, both institutional and personal, and the traumas linked to these memories. The characters within her works are not, however, limited to an unending cycle of trauma. Instead they are given the ability to heal the traumatic wounds of the past through acts of commemoration. Commemoration in her work comes in the form of pilgrimages, memory objects, and vocalization or listening. The performance of commemorative acts shows the significance of personal remembrance in the face of national denial. The combination of physical, oral and cognitive acts makes the term loosely defined in this work, but valuable in understanding Danticat's attempts at understanding the trauma and memory in the Haitian people and Diaspora. The acts of commemoration within her novels are often intergenerational and unending. This, however, should be distinguished from the act of healing. Healing, in Danticat's fiction, occurs upon a return to the home and an acceptance of past traumas so that the character can move on. The distinction between commemoration and healing is important in Danticat's work, and in the work that will be done in this thesis, because it is a difference linked to two different traumatic moments in Haitian history and the affects of these moments. These moments are the Parsley Massacre of 1937 and the Duvalier Regime in the mid-20th century. My work divides four pieces of Danticat's fiction according to these traumatic moments in history and investigates the differences between commemoration and healing in her literature and in the Haitian Diaspora. In analyzing four of Danticat's works with respect to two historical traumas, I

hope to convey the difference between commemoration and healing. This difference may be seen as rooted in the location of the individual, either in Haiti or abroad. By placing this analysis in conversation with other scholarship surrounding Danticat, the accuracy of this distinction may be revealed.

In the field of scholarship surrounding Danticat there is a lack of analysis putting her various works in conversation with one another. With almost every novel or short story she has written being accompanied by some critical piece of scholarship this work need to be done. My analysis works to fill this void and place not only critics of Danticat in conversation, but also Danticat herself. By taking this approach I may gain a sense of the “purpose” her literature is serving and how it stands in relation to the Haitian community. By working with critics such as Jana Evans Braziel, Donette Francis, Amy Novak, Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw, and Martin Munro, amongst others, I have developed a well-rounded understanding of where the scholarship surrounding Danticat stands and where I am within it. Braziel’s investigation of the Duvalier regime and its impact on Haitian immigration has strengthened my understanding of Danticat’s treatment of this dictatorship. Francis’s piece “Silences Too Horrific to Disturb” shaped much of my understanding of the trauma in works such as *The Farming of Bones* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Amy Novak’s scholarship on women’s relationships and the place of home in *The Farming of Bones* was significant in my analysis of that work. Walcott-Hackshaw and Munro’s work in compiling helpful anthologies on Haitian and Caribbean literature was invaluable and their independent scholarship proved very useful in shaping and guiding this more holistic view of Danticat’s fiction. Many other scholars are present throughout the work and my aim was to place these arguments in dialogue and to position myself within that dialogue. I ultimately aim to

advance the understanding of Danticat's fiction both as an act of commemoration in itself and as the common theme throughout her works.

An additional source that I am engaging with is the history of Haiti itself. It is important to understand the historical moments in making the distinction between commemoration and healing. Danticat's work in recording the historical traumas of Haiti functions to record the voices of those who survived the traumas that permeate her literature. These traumas have gone largely unrecognized by the state and yet still exist in the Haitian collective memory. It exists through the traumatic memories of those who experienced it. Danticat records those experiences, immortalizing that history forever in her fiction. An understanding of the important moments in Haitian history is therefore important contextual information for this work, as Danticat does not always provide political or historical context to the traumas that her characters are dealing with. The first historical moment that is important to understand is the Parsley Massacre, which occurred in October of 1937 on the Dominican Republic-Haiti border. Called the Parsley Massacre because of the Dominican soldiers harassment and condemnation of Haitians because of their pronunciation of the Spanish word for parsley—"perejil." If they were unable to roll the "r" than they were perceived as Haitian and killed. Tens of thousands of Haitians were killed in this violent manner, in many cases with machetes and knives. The ramifications for both countries was the return of Haitians into Haiti and a rise in the tensions between the two countries for the rest of the 20th century. The massacre also provided a physical manifestation of the racialized national boundary that has divided the two Hispaniola countries. The violence committed in this massacre is horrific and results in the trauma that Danticat attempts to capture in *The Farming of Bones* and "1937," although echoes of it are felt throughout her texts.

A second historical moment that is beneficial to understand in light of Danticat's work is the Duvalier regime in Haiti. François Duvalier's dictatorship began in 1957 and lasted until his death in 1971. Although officially titled "President" Duvalier ruled Haiti through the use of a violent rural militia, the Tonton Macoutes. After his death in 1971 his son succeeded him until he was overthrown in 1986. Under this father-son regime Haitians lived in fear. The Tonton Macoutes haunted the countryside and the violence experienced there are represented in *The Dew Breaker* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. This historical moment has added importance because Danticat's closest living memory of Haiti is of the Duvalier regime and its brutality. Echoes of this trauma in her own life are found throughout her work. The relation of Danticat's life to her own work, and to the Duvalier regime, comes from her own experience of migration from Haiti at age 12. Her parents had migrated when she was young and an aunt and uncle raised her and her brother. Danticat was born in the final years of the Duvalier regime. These connections to her historical material within her own life situate her as a member of the Diaspora, writing about the issues facing people like her and her homeland.

A final important context to understand in grounding my work is the position of the Haitian Diaspora, or the "tenth department." Defined as an extension of Haiti's nine governmental departments, the tenth department is the Haitian Diaspora, living in the United States but still active in Haitian politics and society. Danticat configures herself as a member of this department. The diasporic literature that she produces from this position is writing participates in the project of recasting the traumas into the larger historical framework. The experiences of the Haitian people are then seen as engrained in the framework of trauma experienced by the African diaspora. This linkage of past and present trauma in the Haitian diaspora is important in Danticat's fiction because it is suffering that drives much of the

migration in her text. By placing trauma and immigration as so integrally linked, commemoration and healing become central themes of her fiction, themes that are linked with a return to Haiti.

The work of recording traumatic memory and commemorating it is central in the four works addressed here. Each of Danticat's four major works of fiction --*Krik? Krak!*, *The Dew Breaker*, *The Farming of Bones* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*--address elements of this theme in important ways. Part one consists of chapters one and two and deals with trauma and commemoration as the result of the Parsley Massacre. Part two contains chapters three and chapter four and investigates healing in relation to commemoration, especially regarding the Duvalier regime and immigration. The first chapter deals with the short story collection *Krik? Krak!* and the short story "1937." Within this work Danticat gives the reader an environment in which institutional commemoration is insufficient or nonexistent, but personal commemoration among women is thriving. The important point here is that the commemoration featured within the story is generational. Additionally the work collapses personal and institutional memory through the women's acts of commemoration. By recognizing the ways in which the states involved (Haiti and the Dominican Republic) have failed to acknowledge the traumas facing the Haitian people, Danticat then allows her characters form their own personal acknowledgments. These acknowledgments come through pilgrimages to institutional and state sites, thus functioning to collapse the notions of personal and institutional commemoration.

Chapter Two looks at *The Farming of Bones* and the ways in which past and present collide within the novel, ultimately making the survivor's body the final site of this collision and a site for commemoration. Throughout the novel the 1937 Parsley Massacre is narrated by Amabelle. What is notable is that the alignment of past and present within the novel occurs not

only through formal devices but also within Amabelle's life. Her body is the final site of this collapse. The pain she bears as a result of the massacre is a living commemoration to those who did not survive. The story she passes on at the end of the novel is the oral commemoration. Danticat's novel is additionally a form of commemoration through the writing of these traumas.

Chapter Three opens part two and examines *The Dew Breaker*, a novel that explores various cycles of traumas that individuals are immersed in as the result of the Duvalier dictatorship. These cycles of trauma reveal the various forms of healing and commemoration that individuals undertake. This works to unsettle the assumption that commemoration takes a unified form in Haitians, either at home or abroad. The novel follows several individuals after their immigration to the United States. A series of interconnected short stories work to show the diversity of Haitian experiences, the diversity of Haitian responses to the Duvalier regime, and the multiple ways in which diasporic Haitians contend with cycle of trauma. In this way it is subverting the notion of a monolithic Haitian experience of trauma. This chapter is in tension with the first chapter's notions of commemoration, and draws out some of the different notions of what commemoration is and how it can function within Danticat's texts.

Chapter Four investigates *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, a novel that looks at the traumas experienced by women. These traumas are the result of both institutional and personal experiences, they are generational and individual, and are ultimately transcendent of the immigration experience. These traumas are experienced by the women within the Caco family but may be seen as representative of the larger Haitian experience, or, as Braziel would argue, the African diasporic experience. Rape or sexual violence is experienced by two generations of women in this family and thus becomes the traumatic inheritance that is shared. The traumas are passed down from generation to generation and can only be healed in a return to the source of

pain, the cane field. The final question of “are you free?” provides the hope at the end that the cycle of trauma has been broken. The hope is that the women’s return to Haiti will ultimately provided healing.

All four of these works treat commemoration differently, but commemoration is central throughout. The important distinction that I am hoping to establish is between commemoration and healing. This distinction is linked to the nature of the traumas experienced, with Part One addressing the trauma of the Parsley Massacre and Part Two addressing the Duvalier Regime. The distinction is also related to the location of the characters in the texts with Part One addressing characters still residing in Haiti. Part Two is focused on works with characters located in the Diaspora. Part One offers examples of commemoration in Haiti as the result of the trauma of the massacre. Part Two, however, while reflecting on notions of commemoration, actually posits that the act of return is more important to the psychology of trauma victims because it offers the chance for healing. This distinction then reveals the issues facing the Diaspora and the possible function of Danticat’s work—that is to bring justice to the victims of Haitian traumas both at home and abroad through the act of writing the untold histories of Haitian women.

Part One

Chapter One

Forms of Commemoration in “1937”

The short story “1937” in Edwidge Danticat’s collection *Krik? Krak!* works to champion personal commemoration and to challenge official state history. The story follows Josephine, a young woman living in Haiti, as she struggles with her mother’s imprisonment in Port-au-Prince and her family’s tragic past. The trauma in Josephine’s life comes from two primary sources. The first is older, and less obvious in the story, and that is the legacy of slavery. The second, more tangible trauma is the trauma of the Massacre of 1937 at the Haiti-Dominican Republic border. Josephine is born during the massacre, on the night her grandmother was killed. There is an intergenerational nature to the traumas experienced within the story. They are coming from social and political sources such as slavery, the Dominican Republic and Haiti. However, the ways in which the trauma is commemorated is personal. Thus, the countries within the story (Haiti, the United States and the Dominican Republic) function to illuminate the importance of personal commemoration and the inadequacy of state or “official” memory. Danticat also works to collapse these political and social forces by comparing them. Moments of institutional and state violence in Haiti are related to moments of state violence in the Dominican Republic. By linking the dictators in Haiti and the Dominican Republic Danticat is making the claim that the crimes committed by the Haitian government against its own people are similar to the crimes committed by the Dominican Republic, during the Massacre.

What is central to the story however is the difference between personal intergenerational commemoration and institutional commemoration, because ultimately Danticat is providing a memory of the trauma to challenge the institutionalized, official state history through the personal stories of her characters. She is writing her mother country’s history and a history of survival and of survivors rather than the “official” state memory of executors.

The Parsley Massacre, as discussed in the introduction, is an important context for this story. An additional important context for the novel is the dictatorship of François Duvalier, who was dictator of Haiti from 1957 to 1971. This is an important context as the Duvalier regime was in power when Danticat lived in Haiti and formed much of her consciousness about Haiti as a nation. The place of the dictatorship in this story comes in the form of the prison. This institution may be seen as a microcosm for the regime itself. Additionally, it is the regime in power during the story, when Josephine's mother is in prison and Josephine is reaching her critical consciousness about Haiti. The violence that Defile, Josephine's mother, experiences in the prison may be seen as a direct result of Duvalier regime and its tactics. Through the comparisons of this prison violence and the violence of the massacre the larger comparison between Duvalier and Trujillo may be drawn out.

Commemoration

The privileging of personal memory over institutional memory is found in the story in several places. The 1937 massacre displays the importance of personal commemoration, as it is a massacre that has gone widely unacknowledged on an international scale and has failed to receive proper recognition by the two countries intertwined by it. Commemoration can take many forms. One is the preservation of the oral history and memories of the survivors. Another form is the performance of commemorative acts that shows the importance of personal remembrance in spite of national denial. These are acts of commemoration that run counter to the state recognition of the trauma and the "official" memories that grow out of this lack of recognition.

The form of commemoration that involves the preservation of the survivors' voices is the oral history that historians Lauren Derby and Richard Turits undertake in the collection of oral

testimony from survivors, to “provide a glimpse into the memories of those who witnessed and survived the genocide and a fragmentary window into a world that came to an abrupt halt on October 2, 1937” (139). In some ways this work may also be seen as performed by Danticat herself through this short story. Regardless of the fact that the accounts are fictionalized, the memorial that she is constructing is a form of commemoration that draws on the *idea* of preserving voices and the passing of stories from one generation to the next. Derby and Turits do the same work, although theirs is much more ethnographic as opposed to creative and qualitative. By collecting hours of oral narratives, their effort was to comprehend the genocide, its historical context and the role of violence in the national imaginations of both countries (137). This ethnographic approach is one that provides the raw material from which later writers, like Danticat, could draw. For Danticat, Derby and Turits the work of recognizing the role of violence in these countries is central. In Derby and Turits’ work the preservation of voices or a particular voice that can tell the narrative of such traumas is key, while for Danticat it is in the act of reconstructing the story according to the historical ways of knowing and through engagement with sources such as oral histories. The different approaches do not make the end goal different. While Danticat is fictionalizing aspects, comparing her work to the work of Derby and Turits makes clear the historical grounding she has in constructing her “fiction” narrative.

This effort to re-narrate historical trauma is present in another work by Danticat that treats the Parsley Massacre –*The Farming of Bones*. In one scene in this novel Danticat interrogates ethnographic attempts to preserve the voices of the massacre when she talks about the long lines of people waiting all day to speak just for a moment to the government scribe. This waiting and formation of the institutional memory is something that Danticat is simultaneously valuing and criticizing. It should be valued because these memories are important to be

preserved. However, the importance of these memories is thrown into question by the fact that they are being told to government scribes to be the property of the government. Their importance is also made questionable by the fact that nothing is done with their memories. No monument is built or museum erected. This distinguishes the work of Derby, Turits and Danticat from the collecting of oral histories by government scribes, because the work of the former attempts to have the voices of the victims heard. It is attempting to redress the fact that the inefficient government work has kept these victims silent for so long. However, Danticat's work takes the critique one step further and ultimately finds that there is no justice found through the telling of stories. However, the goal may not be justice, but instead, recognition, and commemoration, of the violent acts committed against the Haitian people.

Another form of commemoration comes from Josephine's mother. Her acts of commemoration are the result of personal loss, as well as of her own experience during the massacre. It is not only that she lost someone in the massacre but also she herself was a victim. Josephine later echoes the acts of commemoration that Manman performs as she mourns her mother in prison, thereby connecting Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Josephine states, "We went to the river many times as I was growing up. Every year my mother would invite a few more women who had also lost their mothers there" (40). This adds the important element of group commemoration. The gathering of women at the river highlights the importance of memory and loss to these women as well as focusing the power of commemorative acts in the hands of women. Rocio G. Davis notes this concentration of power in the article "Oral Narrative as Short Story Cycle: Forging Community in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*" stating, "Danticat's narrative presents the voices and visions of women, usually mothers and daughters, whose personal tragedies impel them to form community in the midst of oppression and exile"

(68). Another aspect of the commemoration is ritual of the commemoration. These rituals work to formalize the personal and group commemoration, causing it to run counter or in place of institutional commemoration. By annually gathering at the physical border between the two countries the women themselves symbolize where the state commemoration should occur. The river comes central in this construction of commemoration as it serves as the location and the physical manifestation of borders. The women's ritual also creates a "genealogical continuity" because, according to Braziel, "As Haitian *vodouissants*, the women are dressed in white, and through the vodou ceremonies they find reunion with their lost mothers and seek solace in their ancestral spirits" (Braziel 85). The river is a poignant place where institutional and personal memory also collides: "We went to the river every year on the first of November. The women would dress in all white" (Danticat, 41). In this way, by going on the same day every year and maintaining a consistent dress, the women are enacting a code or formal set of principles on which their commemoration is based. As Josephine states, the women went about "making up codes and disciplines by which we could always know who the daughters of the river were" (44). The daughters of the river thereby have succeeded in establishing their form of personal commemoration, independent of institutional recognition.

A final form of commemoration comes from Josephine's trips to the Haitian prison. The first march that Josephine makes occurs on the night of her mother's arrest: "I followed her cries to the prison" (39). Many other pilgrimages occur after that, as indicated at the beginning of the story by her reticence to make another long march to Port-au-Prince, as she says, "My bones aching from the thought of another trip to the prison in Port-au-Prince. But of course I had to go" (33). This trip is connected with the trips of herself and her mother after the massacre, as she says, "The roads to the city were covered with sharp pebbles only half buried in the thick dust. I

chose to go barefoot, as my mother had always done on her visits to the Massacre River” (33). She is mourning her mother before she has died in the same way her mother mourned her grandmother after her death at the river. This mourning of her mother anticipates her death by linking her to a practice of mourning the dead. It also links the women in a genealogical practice of commemoration. This shared commemoration also links Haiti and the Dominican Republic because both are committing acts of violence against women. Both the Duvalier regime in Haiti and the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic were totalitarian regimes that terrorized civilians and made those not directly involved stand by helplessly. Both victimized their citizenry and demanded either passive acceptance or active participation in the violence occurring in their countries. In “1937” the two regimes are portrayed differently and their violence represented on largely different scales. The government of Dominican Republic conducted a massacre against the Haitian people. The government of Haiti simply imprisoned and beat some of the survivors. But, by taking this example of prison violence as a microcosm of what was happening in Haiti under Duvalier, the similarity is established and both regimes may be held responsible for the large-scale loss of Haitian life. Despite the differences between the violence under both regimes, women are finding similar ways of dealing with the violence, synthesizing it, and moving on.

Haiti

The first institution—the prison—is discussed in the novel on a very literal level through Josephine’s visits to her mother. The Haitian government, then, not only failed to protect its citizens in the massacre propagated by the Dominican Republic in 1937, but it also failed in recognizing the trauma after the massacre and to properly commemorate its effects. The prison itself is indicted as an evil institution through Danticat’s descriptions of the way it treats the

female prisoners, robbing the women of their femininity. It does this by shaving their heads: “I was there watching when they shaved her head for the first time. At first I thought they were doing it so that the open gashes on her scalp could heal. Later, when I saw all the other women in the yard, I realized that they wanted to make them look like crows, like men” (39). By making the women look like men the prison is attempting to rob them of their power as women, the power associated with their status as witches. The women are imbued with power both through the narrative of the story and through the myths present in Haitian history. In the story the association between women and witches is one that is so associated with notions of power that it is punished by imprisonment. Women are also given power through the matrilineal line and through their ability to reproduce; the institution of the prison is attempting to disassociate the prisoners from these sources of power and forces them to look like and therefore conceive themselves as male. This punishment may be seen as a direct reaction to the crime the women were brought in for (witchcraft):

All of these women were here for the same reason. They were said to have been seen at night rising from the ground like birds on fire. A loved one, a friend, or a neighbor had accused them of causing the death of a child. A few other people agreeing with these stories was all that was needed to have them arrested. And sometimes even killed. (38)

The imprisonment of these women because of the accusations that they know how to fly and can cause the deaths of children are both accusations that attribute great power to the women.

The prison itself is the result of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Haiti from 1915-1925. This occupation left its mark on Haiti in the form of new military techniques, now buildings, and the prison system. The prison in Haiti exhibits many of the qualities of the prison as described by Michel Foucault. The punishment and fear the women experience isn't a result of the literal Panopticon but instead the result of the constant surveillance they experience within

the American designed prison. This power is then subject to punishment and, as Foucault discusses, punishment within the prison system is designed to fit the crime: “The Panopticon was also a laboratory...to try out different punishments on prisoners, according to their crimes and character, and to seek the most effective ones” (203). The American prison is designed as a Panopticon. The women are therefore punished and degraded, and always the institution works to prevent the women from exhibiting signs of power. By robbing them of their femininity and placing them under constant surveillance the women are robbed of their power and suffer under the Panopticon. The connections established in the microcosm of the prison link the United States and Haiti. The prison itself is located in Haiti, but is the result of U.S. intervention. In this way the violence perpetrated there is partly the responsibility of the United States. This positions the United States as a source of trauma in the lives of Haitians, and specifically in the lives of Josephine and Defile who live in the prison shadow everyday.

The United States

The second state political force examined here is the United States, which is experienced in the novel through echoes of the former occupation. These echoes also shape Josephine’s relationship to Haiti because it forces her to see the “invader” in the institution that is killing her mother. She therefore sees Haiti as a place that has given itself to an enemy, the United States) and through the institutions this enemy put in place, the prison. The main site where the link between Haiti and the United States is established is in the prison: “The yellow prison building was like a fort, as large and strong as in the days when it was used by the American marines who had built it” (35). By locating the prison in these terms—“large” “strong” and “used by the American marines who had built it”—Danticat is locating the institution she is crediting with killing her mother as an outgrowth of American occupation. She goes on to further condemn the

occupation and the “invader” institution of the United States by saying, “The Americans taught us how to build prisons. By the end of the 1915 occupation, the police in the city really knew how to hold human beings trapped in cages, even women like Manman who was accused of having wings of flame” (35). She is clearly noting that the Haitian government and prison system was dramatically different before American occupation. The result of the occupation is a more rigorous prison system and harsher punishments. But it also allowed for crimes that were previously un-punishable or un-prosecutable to now be the charge of the government. One such crime or accusation of a crime is witchcraft. By saying that her mother was “accused of having wings of flame” she is clearly throwing the entire justice system into question—a justice system that Haiti inherited as a direct result of American occupation. Therefore, by questioning these prisons, which can on one level be seen as a symbol of the corrupt Haitian institution, Danticat is questioning American involvement in Haiti. It is a dual indictment of both Haiti and the United States: one allowed itself to be invaded and its citizens to be wounded in the process and the other was the invader and therefore worthy of a harsh indictment.

The Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic in “1937” is central. The Dominican Republic is the source of much of the trauma in the novel through the Massacre of 1937. The river that separates Haiti and the Dominican Republic is the site of much of the personal commemoration in the novel, thereby linking the Dominican Republic to healing. In addition to these central narrative functions the country also functions as a framing device and an institutional memory that these women are forced to experience in their personal lives. Danticat is writing against the Dominican Republic and its “official” history; by writing the stories of survival Danticat is rewriting Haiti’s history to include the voices of those oppressed and unacknowledged by the nation-state. The women

within the story struggle against the institutional history and memory of the massacre at the Haitian border. This struggle is embodied by the women's inability to name the Dominican Republic:

The Massacre River, the river separating Haiti from the Spanish-speaking country that she has never allowed me to name because I had been born on the night that El Generalissimo, Dios Trujillo, the honorable chief of state, has ordered the massacre of all Haitians living there (33).

This unwillingness does not however extend to the name of the executer of the massacre, Trujillo, who is referred to by several names throughout the story. This distinction between the man and the country raises the country to an almost mythical status. Another feature that Josephine names throughout the story is the Massacre River. The naming of this site is significant because she and her mother do not name the Dominican Republic. The naming of the river is also significant because the river itself is the actual site of the trauma inflicted on their family and the place where Josephine's mother watched her mother be killed. As Josephine says, "The river was the place where it had all begun" (41). The river's significance in the story does not stop simply at the act of naming it. Danticat also works to have her characters describe the river, including the ways it affects them and their anticipations of it. In this way the river becomes an active character and agent within the story:

When I was five years old, we went on a pilgrimage to the Massacre River, which I had expected to be still crimson with blood, but which was as clear as any water I had ever seen...When we dipped our hands, I thought that the dead would reach out and haul us in, but only our own faces stared back at us, one indistinguishable from the other. (40)

Josephine's anticipation of the blood reflects the presence of the massacre in her everyday existence. She has lived the massacre in the present through the commemorative acts with her mother and therefore anticipates the massacre to exist in the present as a physical manifestation as well. The naming of the river and Trujillo but not the Dominican Republic more fully

positions the nation as the political force against which Danticat is working, even if her characters cannot name it.

The Madonna

A final aspect of Danticat's treatment of personal and institutional memory is her incorporation of the statue of the Virgin Mary or the Madonna. This figure works in the story to collapse personal and institutional memory and to establish the importance of a genealogy of women both in Josephine's family and across Haiti. It also incorporates the original source of trauma both on an institutional and a personal level: the experience of slavery. It incorporates the trauma through matrilineal ties and the passing of the Madonna figure across generations.

The Madonna comes to the family from a history of trauma. This history begins its collision of institutional and personal memory: "I held out the small statue that had been owned by my family ever since it was given to my great-great-great grandmother Defile by a French man who had kept her as a slave" (34). In this passage the links between the women in the family are established as well as one of the original moments of trauma in Haitian history. The family's preservation of both the institutional memory and the personal memory in the form of the Madonna is important. What is equally important is that this preservation takes place through matrilineal ties. As Josephine states, "'You hear my mother who speaks through me. She is the shadow that follows my shadow'" (45). Matrilineal ties are emphasized throughout the novel both metaphorically, as above, and literally, as in the case of the passing of the Madonna. As Manman's health deteriorates in prison metaphor and reality collide and the Madonna comes to represent the mother physically to Josephine as she seeks comfort in the figure for the loss of her mother: "In the prison yard, I held the Madonna tightly against my chest, so close that I could smell my mother's scent on the statue" (49). The physical sense of the mother's presence on the

Madonna has collapsed the personal experiences of the women into oneness with the figurine itself. Manman is synonymous with the Madonna to Josephine, especially in the days before her death. This move emphasizes not only the importance of personal memory but also the importance of generational ties between women and the passing on of memory and stories, here embodied by the Madonna.

A final element of the importance of the genealogy represented by the Madonna is the importance of the passing on the story. In many ways Josephine struggles to put her memory and her mother's memory into words. The past pains and history are silenced in her. Her form of commemoration is not verbal but physical. It involves visiting her mother, just as for her mother it involved visiting the river: "I said nothing. Ever since the morning of her arrest, I had not been able to say anything to her... Sometimes I wanted to speak, yet I was not able to open my mouth or raise my tongue. I wondered if she saw my struggle in my eyes" (36). However, Josephine's acts of commemorating her mother also have a verbal, vocal or narrative element and it is this element that Josephine fears will be lost: "I was afraid that one day, like me, she would not be able to say anything at all" (37). This seems ironic given that Josephine does not speak. By playing the mother's orality against Josephine's silence the importance of preserving Josephine's mother's voice is driven home. It is important both to Josephine and to the preservation of the genealogical memory that the mother's voice is not lost. It represents both the institutional and the personal memories that this family has experienced, in a way akin to the Madonna.

In this way the Madonna and the mother's voice may be linked. Both allow for the commemoration and preservation of genealogical memory. One way of preserving the voices of those who experienced the institutions discussed above is through oral histories: "Moving the narration of the massacre and the pre-1937 frontier world from this mythical realm to a more

historical one requires listening carefully to the voices of those who lived in the frontier and who witnessed this unspeakable and seemingly mad state violence” (Derby & Turits 137). It is the act of “listening carefully to the voices” that constitutes a form of commemoration here. This also preserves the genealogical memory because those who experienced this “state violence” now have an outlet for passing their stories on. Here genealogical links extend even further than a single matrilineal line—it is the genealogy of a country.

Conclusion

The challenge that Danticat presents to institutional commemoration simultaneously promotes personal intergenerational forms of commemoration. The trauma of the 1937 Haitian massacre permeates through the nation from the institution of the state itself down to a young girl who was born on the night her mother escaped. The trauma demands recognition and whether it comes in the form of oral histories or genealogical acts of remembrance, personal commemoration will take place when institutional commemoration fails. Josephine does this for her mother at the prison. Defile performs her commemorative act at the border of the Dominican Republic. The collective memory represented by the women who make their pilgrimages and later by the women in prison show the remembrance symbolically held by Haiti. This collapses the personal and institutional memory, because it is individuals who hold the memories of institutions. It is individuals who commemorate the trauma.

Chapter Two

The Collision of Past and Present in *The Farming of Bones*

The trauma surrounding the 1937 Parsley Massacre in the Dominican Republic is the subject of Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*. One of the key facets to this trauma is collective memory and how it contributes to healing, mourning, commemoration and, ultimately, to history. An additional aspect of the novel, as Amy Novak points out, is its treatment of "the paradoxical process of remembering and forgetting in the narration of individual and cultural trauma" (93). What is important in the novel is that not all remembrance is positive and not all mourning is negative. The very act of individuals participating in this remembrance of a painful past and mourning for those they have lost contributes to their eventual healing. Thus, throughout the work individuals struggle against their memories and their emotions only to ultimately give in to the reality that one cannot avoid the past, or the collective memory that was formed in all that experienced the trauma. The novel ultimately brings the past into the present through memory and the act of mourning.

The techniques that Danticat uses in this novel work to reveal the collision of past and present within this novel and the importance of memory and mourning are in the lives of those who have experienced trauma. Novak states that the novel is "an act of memory" that is "attempting to translate the silences of trauma through the shifting, fragmentary voice of memory" (95). This act of memory that is also utilizing the voice of memory produces unique narrative structures. One function of this is the two narrative lines, as delineated by the shifting typefaces. Another act of memory in the novel is the referential nature of the epigraph. The chapter breaks also strategically participate in the construction of the "fragmentary voice of memory" and are linked to the two narrative lines of Amabelle in the present and Amabelle in

the past. Finally, the character choices are also links to a past that lives in Amabelle's present through her memories and the memory-narrative line.

The Farming of Bones follows a young woman, Amabelle, through her experience of the Haitian massacre and her escape from the Dominican Republic. It also takes the reader into Amabelle's memory as she struggles with her past despite, or perhaps because of, the obvious difficulties of her present reality. Many of these memories include the loss of Amabelle's parents, during Amabelle's childhood prior to the massacre, who drowned in the river that separates the Dominican Republic and Haiti. This loss haunts Amabelle throughout the work. In the present tense of the novel, other characters include Amabelle's lover Sebastien, who was supposed to accompany her on her escape into Haiti but is lost. Amabelle spends the rest of the novel searching for him. She travels instead with Sebastien's friend Yves. Along the way they meet other Haitians trying to escape, including a Haitian woman named Odette. Amabelle makes it to the Haitian side of the River and starts a new life there. She does return to the Dominican Republic once to see her former employer Señora Valencia. This pilgrimage of sorts gives Amabelle the chance to tell her story one more time and to pass it on to the Señora's new Haitian maid. The passing of her story is important because it indicates that the memories contained in one woman's mind are not stopped there but spread, woman to woman, across generations. The sharing of these stories is how women remember and heal from their trauma.

Formal Strategies

The first of Danticat's formal strategies for communicating the importance of remembrance and its relation to trauma is her differing typeface for the main character's dreams and memories. The typeface for the sections where Amabelle is in the present day, experiencing the trauma as it is occurring to her in plain typeface. As Novak points out these sections "weave

together as a point/counterpoint” (95) allowing for the past, or her memories to coexist with the present narrations. The typeface for the sections where Amabelle is escaping into her dreams and memories is bold. These differing typefaces are also associated with differences in tone and voice. In the sections where the typeface is plain and Amabelle is in the present day she is much more straightforward, dialogue is present and the realities weigh much more heavily. Novak emphasizes this as “Amabelle’s first-person, linear testimony” stating that it “emphasizes the significance of testimony and witnessing” (95). In the bold sections Amabelle is reminiscing and is therefore more circular in her thoughts, there is much less dialogue, and the trauma of the current reality seems to be a distant reality. Novak describes these sections as “more difficult to understand...possess an a temporal quality, as if they have been cut loose from the ties that bind them to a linear narrative. They are composed of dreams and memories of Amabelle’s missing lover and dead parents” (109). The “point/counterpoint” or interplay of these sections works to disrupt the narrative of the massacre and “produce a traumatized text” (Novak 109). The constant experience of trauma, both in the past and in the present, because of this textual interplay creates this sense of trauma in the text itself.

The first place where we find an example of the differing typeface and the associated narrative storylines is in the first chapter, in which Amabelle is relating a memory of Sebastien Onius, her lover. By beginning the novel this way the reader is instantly plunged into a world where past and present coexist but are segregated. The novel cannot seem to exist without colliding the two because it opens with a memory. For the rest of the journey through the novel the reader must figure out which world Amabelle is truly living in and which she would prefer. Her constant reminiscing about her parents reinforces this. She alludes to her desire to join them and to the day at the river as being a moment of rebirth into a new life. The reader is faced with

the question of whether or not this life is better than the life her parents are living in their watery graves. It is the question that plagues Amabelle, especially in her return to Haiti when she crosses the same river that claimed her parents.

The switching of the typeface is largely kept to discrete chapters with some notable exceptions. For example, a breakdown in this rigid dichotomy between past and present (the font, the discrete chapters) is found in “Chapter 30,” a chapter laden with traumatic imagery and recollection. The trauma in this chapter is the result of the graphic details Danticat provides of the massacre being perpetrated. It is particularly traumatic because the details are provided in the present tense and in the first person and they put the reader in Amabelle’s shoes, feeling her pain. However, the chapter also contains Amabelle’s memory of her mother. Thus, in this chapter the past and present co-exist side by side within the confines of the chapter. The lines written in plain typeface, which represent Amabelle’s present, convey the horror of her current situation: “I heard the moan of a man trying not to scream, saw Odette’s dying face, and drifted back to sleep.” There is then a chapter break followed by a passage in bold typeface, the typeface that represents Amabelle’s memories and dreams: “In my sleep, I see my mother rising, like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her.” The typeface differs between the two passages but the barrier is broken. Both exist within the same chapter and the same few moments of Amabelle’s life. The trauma present in the narrative at this moment may be seen as responsible for this break and for the collision of past and present in the life of Amabelle.

A second formal strategy may be found in the epigraph. The epigraph states:

Jephthah called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites capture the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead asked him, “Are you and Ephraimite?” It he replied, “No,” they said, “All right, say ‘Shibboleth.’” If he said, “Sibboleth,” because he could not pronounce the word

correctly, they seized and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-thousand were killed at a time” (Judges 12:4-6).

The incorporation of this passage from the Bible extends the reality of massacre and trauma across time. The memory of that massacre lives on today through the writing found within the Bible. This justifies Danticat’s project by reflecting the massacre she is about to detail because of the remarkable similarities between the massacres of the Ephramites by the Gileadites to that of the Haitians by the Dominicans in the Parsley Massacre. By making this her epigraph Danticat is simultaneously noting the presence of massacres throughout time while also bringing this past present into her novel and her character’s present. In another way the incorporation of this epigraph could signal a critique of organized religion’s failure to protect individuals from massacre. By including a biblical passage about a previous massacre it seems as if massacre is relentless or that religion is insufficient. A third effect that the incorporation of this epigraph has is to create an imagined solidarity amongst oppressed people and the victims of massacre and genocide across history. This works to make the story one that not only chronicles an event in Haitian history but also champions commemoration, memory and healing in the face of trauma across time and space.

The second epigraph strengthens the notion of colliding past and present within the novel: it takes the ancient trauma depicted in the biblical epigraph and incorporates similar themes but on the level of our main character’s individual story. The second epigraph states, “In confidence to you, Metrés Dlo, Mother of the Rivers.” The theme of rivers connects the two epigraphs as well as the presence of trauma, because the subtext of the second epigraph is a reference to Amabelle’s mother who drowned in “the fatefully named Massacre River that divides the two nations” (Turits 591). Metrés Dlo is a goddess and is the female spirit of the river (Novak 108). Voudoun is the syncretic religion of Haiti practiced pervasively throughout

the country. It co-opted Catholic idols during slavery so that African slaves could hide their indigenous religious practices from slave owners. After the War of Independence voodoo came to be recognized as the religion of the Haitian people. By linking her mother to Metrés Dlo, Amabelle is drawing on this history of slavery and rebellion: "...I see my mother rising, like the mother spirit of the rivers..." Here, past and present collide in a way that highlights Amabelle's personal trauma in losing her mother and links her past trauma to the future trauma of the massacre at Massacre River. It also serves to highlight the ways in which Haitian spirituality in the form of the goddess Metrés Dlo is more comforting to those experiencing trauma than institutionalized religion. The first epigraph is linked to the institutionalized religion of the island and the second to its spiritual practices. When Amabelle imagines her mother it is as Metrés Dlo, the Haitian Goddess, rather than as the Virgin Mary. The failure of institutionalized religious to support and protect the victims of massacre is therefore emphasized in both epigraphs.

The epigraph may also be read as Amabelle's dedication of her testimony to the reader. When read this way, the epigraph/dedication changes the end of the novel in significant ways. As Novak states, "Amabelle's immersion in the river at the end of the novel, suggests that when she enters the river, she takes up the narrative that becomes her tale (the tale the reader is reading)...narrates it to the river" (109). This reading changes the tone of the second epigraph from past-orientation to future-orientation and to a goal of passing one's story on. Because Amabelle has no one else to tell her story, she dedicates her narrative to Metrés Dlo. The narrative is continuous: "If the novel is read as a narrative act begun by Amabelle at the end of the linear narrative when she enters the river, then the story does not lead to closure of the past. Rather the narrative act is ongoing: arriving at the end the reader arrives back at the beginning" (Novak 110). Novak's reading of this ending indicates that the work of cultural remembrance

that the novel is undertaking is never ending and that the task of commemorating trauma is ongoing. This cultural remembrance is present in much of Danticat's work, giving strength to Novak's interpretation.

The third technique that Danticat uses is the chapter breaks. This technique is a strategic means by which the past is interjected into the present. Danticat's incorporation of the past is not in an organized, repeating style. The past inserts itself into the narrative of the present in seemingly random but ultimately significant times. Through observing the chapter breaks it becomes easy to track both the narrative progression in the present and the past while also recognizing that the past increasingly inserts itself in times of personal stress or trauma for Amabelle. One example of this can be found after the death of Rafi, the son of Señora Valencia, who dies in infancy. A significant line ends the chapter in the present, saying, "At least she could place her hands on it, her son's final bed. My parents had no coffins (93)." After this the past abruptly inserts itself as Amabelle reflects on a memory with Sebastien. We don't know how long ago the night she is thinking about took place, but the chapter is brief, the recollection only one paragraph. It ends with Amabelle reflecting on her own sadness and personal loss by saying, "...there will not be a drop of liquid left in me with which to cry." Thus, the past and present are brought together in a moment of sadness, and Amabelle utilizes the past as a means of assessing on the present trauma and of, perhaps, healing. It is also important to note that these insertions occur less and less as the novel continues and the trauma of the present seems to overwhelm the past. This is indicated by the decreased frequency of the past in the novel. The present reality that the characters are facing seems to be overwhelming, and not allowing for the past to assert itself as a presence in their lives. The past then becomes a living memory, orally transmitted by

the characters in the times of stress during the massacre. However, it is no longer segregated to discreet chapters with differentiated fonts.

Character's as Formal Strategies

A fourth tool to incorporate the past with the present is found in Danticat's character choices. The first character in whom it is important to recognize this function is Sebastien. He is the first character that may clearly be seen as working, at least in some function, as a vehicle for Amabelle's memory. An important part of his character is the act of naming that occurs at the start of the novel, "His name is Sebastien Onius" (1). This act of naming serves to highlight both his and Amabelle's humanity in the face of the approaching massacre. W. Todd Martin reiterates this, stating, "Sebastien is an integral part of Amabelle's life and loss, and Danticat humanizes both of them, turning both into subjects rather than objects" (68). His subjectivity turns him into a character through which the past can come alive. He is a young man who came from the same town as Amabelle in Haiti and now works as a cane farmer in the Dominican Republic. In his relationship with Amabelle, they work together to overcome past trauma's (he lost his father in the hurricane) and this work is found in Amabelle's memories of him. He also serves as a vehicle because he allows Amabelle to talk of the Haiti she left. He knows the Haiti that Amabelle calls home, and together they allow the reader to know it. Martin addresses this: "Her love of Sebastien need not be a weakness, relegated to an either/or dichotomy which subjugates one to the other. And Sebastien need not be associated with the limited role of the oppressor" (73). The gender dynamic is then subverted and their roles are designed to support one another in the trauma they experienced and are experiencing. The idealization of Sebastien further relegates him to a position linked to the past, a past Amabelle longs for as happier and more secure.

Another character that clearly brings the past into the present through memory is Señora Valencia. With Señora Valencia the memories that Amabelle reveals are of her original trauma, the loss of her parents. These are valuable to the reader because they explain how she came to the Dominican Republic and how her life in the present was formed. In one passage the importance of these memories is highlighted with Señora Valencia saying, “Amabelle, today reminds me of the day Papi and I found you at the river...Do you remember that day? (91).” Amabelle does. She remembers it while awake and dreams it while sleeping. It is the trauma she is dealing with throughout the novel. The fact that Señora Valencia asks the question shows her ignorance to Amabelle’s pain. Amabelle remembers the day and her constant interactions with the family that took her in will never let her forget it. The character of Señora Valencia allows this memory to thrive in the present.

Conclusion

Through the use of font, narrative line, chapter breaks, character devices and epigraphs, the past and the present are forced to coexist in *The Farming of Bones*. Amabelle experiences this collapsing in her psyche and in the crafting of her narrative, but perhaps the most poignant place where past and present collide is on her body: “The past is not simply written on her but, as the insistent use of the preposition “in” and the description of pain within bones and joints suggest, it has penetrated her” (Novak 106). Thus, the final location for the collapsing of past and present is in the body of the narrator. She lives with the reminder of the past trauma she has experienced everyday because it is written on her body. This is seen particularly at the end of the novel, when every day is a struggle to move. The narrative she crafts and the testimony she provides is nothing compared to her own bodily testament: “It is her body that bears the record

of the past, and the story it tells is not seamless but disfigured, flawed, even imperfect” (Novak 103). It is a body that exists in the present and narrates traumas of the past.

Thus, the final collapse of past and present occurs on Amabelle’s body itself. The text provides the framework for the past to insert itself into the present. The shifting typeface indicates to the reader when the past is being interjected. The chapter breaks also allows a jarring interface of past and present. The historical echoes provided by the epigraphs place the past in dialogue with the present from the start of the novel. Finally, in a leap off the page, past and present collide on Amabelle’s body. The traumas that she experienced in the past live in the present through her body. She is the living testament, just as Danticat’s work is the written testament. In her last move she passes the story on to the new house-girl at the Valencia house, just as Danticat has passed the story onto the reader. The pain is unending and therefore the telling of it must also never end.

Part Two

Chapter Three

Trauma in the Diaspora in *The Dew Breaker*

“A woman, weakened from a long ocean journey, spots land and leaps into the shallow tide” (Danticat, “No Refuge” 30). This image of Haitian immigration is prevalent in U.S. society—the “Haitian boat people.” It is a common stereotype of Haitian immigration that has become the single representation of all Haitian immigration. In her scholarly work Danticat has aimed at unsettling the notion of a monolithic Haitian experience. By exposing the vast array of immigration experiences to the public Danticat is working towards a broader understanding of Haitian immigration. This vast array of Haitian experiences includes the women weakened from a long journey and the woman getting off a plane in New York. One element of Danticat’s work is her novel *The Dew Breaker*, which works to disrupt the notion of a unified Haitian identity and to collectively reveal the diverse experiences of Haitian immigrants. Danticat is also working to critique notions of assimilation, which continues to be the ideal in US public discourse for immigrants and the standard to which immigrants are held. This collection reveals that assimilation is neither possible nor desirable for many of Danticat’s characters. It is made impossible because of the traumatic memories that many of the characters hold and carry with them through the immigration experience.

Through the connected short stories, the ways in which trauma and memory can disrupt the lives of Haitian immigrants living in the United States are exposed. Through each character a different traumatic experience is encountered and a different memory revealed. These memories often disrupt the lives of the characters in the United States, creating an environment in which Haiti is mythologized and a longing for return is present, albeit occasionally ambiguous, in the novel. In the stories one of the main sources of trauma is Papa Doc Duvalier’s brutal regime in Haiti and his state-executed torture. This regime and its practices drove many Haitians from their

homeland and into the United States where they faced the question of whether or not to assimilate into a U.S. culture or to hold onto their cultural practices and beliefs. The trauma of the dictatorship is located in several figures in the novel through both lived experience and through the memories inspired by the title character of the Dew Breaker, who was a prison-guard during the dictatorship. The Dew Breaker is now a barber in the United States coping with his own memories of the dictatorship and his participation in it. Thus the traumas that the individuals experienced in Haiti, largely as a result of the dictatorship, have forced them into certain cycles of trauma after immigrating. Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw identifies this traumatic cycle, stating, “The characters in the novel, still haunted and psychologically traumatized by the Dew Breaker’s acts, remain entrapped in a landscape of memory, unable to put an end to their mental torture” (79). This traumatic “entrapment” has created the environment for each of the stories where, be it personal or political, traumas are haunting members of the Diaspora. The additional aspect of the novel being composed of interconnected short stories shows the diversity of Haitian immigration experiences, the diversity of Haitian responses to the Duvalierist regime, and the multiple ways in which diasporic Haitians contend with the cycle of trauma. The result of this structure is a subversion of the monolithic idea of a single Haitian experience of trauma.

The Dew Breaker’s Family: “The Book of the Dead” and “The Dew Breaker”

In the story “The Book of the Dead” the reader is introduced to Ka, a young woman whose Haitian parents immigrated to the United States. She is an artist and the events of the story follow her and her father making a trip to sell a sculpture in Florida to a Haitian family, the Fonteneaus. Ka has never been to Haiti but instead experiences it through the memory of her parents. Family photographs foster some of Ka’s connection to Haiti, but this feels insufficient at times and she longs to go. Ka longs for a connection with Haiti just as she longs for a connection

with her parents: “I was born and raised in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and have never been to my parent’s birthplace. Still, I answer “Haiti” because it is one more thing I’ve always longed to have in common with my parents” (4). Ka has not come to “see” the United States as home, a result that Walcott-Hackshaw links with Danticat’s expression of immigration throughout her works: “Views of her adopted American homeland are seldom described in Danticat’s works...Landscapes in Danticat’s works are mostly Haitian, created in the minds of her characters” (74). Ka has “created” an ideal Haiti in her mind. Yet, despite Ka’s longing for her homeland, Haiti comes to be mythologized in the story as a place of brutality and institutional violence. The family’s experiences in Haiti have followed them to the United States in the form of memory. It is because of the mythological status that Haiti holds in her family that halts their experience of belonging in the United States.

The experience of desire for Haiti in the United States is common in the immigration experience and has produced the phenomenon called the “tenth department.” Danticat describes the tenth department in her introduction to the work *The Butterfly’s Way*, saying, “My country, I felt, was something that was then being called the tenth department. Haiti has nine geographic departments and the tenth was the floating homeland, the ideological one, which joined all Haitians living in the *dyaspora*” (Danticat xiv). The Diaspora in the United States long for Haiti and are joined by this longing. However, there is a distinction to be found in Danticat’s descriptions of Haiti as a place of desire. Walcott-Hackshaw describes this in terms of “return” or the desire to return, stating, “In Danticat’s works, Haiti is not positioned as a single location of return; there is often a clear distinction between a return to the capital and to the countryside. The capital, Port-au-Prince, is the site of violence where nightmares are created, whereas the Haitian countryside is edenic” (80). The split in what Haiti is explains why Haiti can at once be a site of

longing for the characters and simultaneously a site of trauma and horror, depending on the character's relationship to the state and the nature of their return.

In *The Dew Breaker*, Ka's father provides an example of the longing for Haiti, while simultaneously fearing the memories linked to the land, as well as the trauma experienced and perpetrated there. The Dew Breaker's longing for Haiti is revealed when Ka and her father visit the Fonteneaus. The Fonteneaus are buying a piece of Ka's art. During the visit the old men discuss returning to Haiti and Ka imagines her father's nightmares: "Maybe he dreams of dipping his hands in the sand on a beach in his own country and finding that what he comes up with is a fistful of blood" (30). This simultaneous desire and fear to return to Haiti freezes Ka's father and Ka by extension. The experience of lacking a homeland and yet being unable to adopt the United States leaves them mourning and unsettled.

Ka's father's fear of "a fistful of blood" comes from another revelation that is uncovered in the chapter. Ka's father was a member of Duvalier's regime. This fact is slowly revealed throughout the story. One device for revealing her father's involvement is an old photograph. In the photograph her father is in military garb and is hiding the long scar on his face. Ka links this discovery back to her earlier understanding about the lack of photographs of her father and the way in which, when photographed, he hides his scar. Melissa D. Birkhofer sees the scar as "evidence" of the Dew Breaker's traumatic past and of his guilt for crimes committed in Haiti. Ultimately the scar may be seen as an impetus for immigration: "The scar acts as "evidence" in much the same way as a photography; it reminds the onlooker of a past of which he does not want to be reminded...the scar is a physical/visual signifier of the past" (49). This evidence shows Ka's father for who he really is and links him to an institutional past that he migrated to escape. Haunted by the atrocities that he has committed he tries to hide them from his daughter.

The lies that he has constructed have positioned him as the victim as opposed to the oppressor. However, these lies are revealed and the true nature of his background is uncovered.

This revelation shatters Ka's previously conceived notions of her father that assumed him to be a victim of the terror and violence of the Haitian institutions. With this revelation Ka begins to perceive her entire life differently, along with the lives of her mother and father. She discusses her mother saying, "She'd kept to herself even more than he had, like someone who was nurturing a great pain that she could never speak about. Yet she had done her best to be a good mother to me...leaving only what she must have considered my intellectual development to my father" (22). The act of keeping to herself "even more than he had done" shows that the weight of the memories that both Ka's mother and father have stopped them from experiencing the "new life" that they hoped to have in the United States.

The weight of her father's crimes have followed the family and are a burden in their new home as well as a barrier to returning to their old one: "my father breaks the silence in the car by saying, 'Now you see, Ka, why your mother and me, we have never returned home'" (27). The burden of memory has confronted the family both in their homeland and in the immigration experience and now it is being passed to their daughter. Ka thinks about her family's, and particularly her father's, immigration experience, as a natural outgrowth of the atrocities he committed in Haiti. She now understands why a foreign land would be more comfortable to him than the home he had a hand in destroying:

I had always thought that my father's only ordeal was that he'd left his country and moved to a place where everything from the climate to the language was so unlike his own, a place where he never quite seemed to fit in, never appeared to belong. The only thing I can grasp now...is why the unfamiliar might have been so comforting, rather than distressing, to my father. (34)

The “unfamiliar” is what the family was thrust into. It is what Ka was born into. It is what they still struggle in adapting to. The family is burdened by memories of the past and the struggle to exist with the trauma of these memories in the present. The main burden in the family’s life is Ka’s father’s fear of being recognized by a former victim. Immigration was his solution. However, he could not account for how his personal memories would stop him from feeling comfortable in his new home.

The final story of the novel is one that also addresses Ka’s family. It is also the title story: “The Dew Breaker.” This story reveals essential details about the crimes committed by Ka’s father. These details are relayed with total transparency. The Dew Breaker hopes to escape his traumatic past through immigration. The Dew Breaker’s hope for a new life began while he was living in Haiti, as the story states; “He had been constantly thinking about getting out of this life, moving to Florida, or even New York, making himself part of the new Haitian communities there, to keep an eye on the movements that were fueling the expatriate invasions at the borders” (189). The Dew Breaker’s attempts to “keep an eye on the movements” show that other character’s suspicions of him, particularly those of the Bridal Seamstress, whose story is analyzed below, may be valid. The Dew Breaker’s emphasis on loyalty and following orders is emphasized in the chapter when he thinks: “But he couldn’t leave until he followed his orders, proved his loyalty, and killed the preacher” (190). This murder is referenced throughout the chapter as a sign of the Dew Breaker’s brutality. It marks him throughout the novel as a brutal killer, capable of the worst forms of human violence.

What is significant about these chapters is that they bookend the novel. “The Book of the Dead” starts the novel with a daughter’s revelation that her father is a brutal killer and “The Dew Breaker” ends the novel with the revelation that the killer himself can never outrun his past. The

two chapters, when read together, reinforce the theme that memory is linked to the immigration experience and is not separate from it. One cannot simply immigrate away from one's past. It is part and parcel of the present and future. For the Dew Breaker this means the constant fear of being recognized for who he is, a killer, by his family and his neighbors. These stories also reveal a unique immigration experience. The stories follow the immigration of a participant in the dictatorship, not a victim of it. This places the family in a unique relationship with the United States, as they are migrating from a country with a U.S. backed dictatorship in which they participated to the U.S. itself. The experience of the Dew Breaker's victims is quite different and the traumas experienced entirely unique.

The Victims of The Dew Breaker: "The Water Child," "Night Talkers," and "The Bridal Seamstress"

The first story to fully address some of the struggles faced by immigrants in the United States is "The Water Child." This story tells of the struggles of Nadine, a woman who struggles in the United States because of her traumatic past of losing a child and being estranged from her family, home and country. The struggles that Nadine experiences are the result of her separation from her homeland and trauma she has experienced in the United States. This sets Nadine's story apart from the collection because her trauma is disconnected from the Haitian dictatorship and experiences with the Macoutes, the Haitian military force that Duvalier had police the countryside.

The first element of Nadine's trauma is her separation from her family. This trauma is chronicled in the story through her correspondence. She tries to connect with her family but cannot because the writing simply cannot convey what she needs: "Every time she read the letter, she tried to find something else between the lines, a note of sympathy, commiseration,

condolence. But it simply wasn't there. The more time went by, the more brittle and fragile the letter became" (54). The letter becomes "brittle and fragile" and Nadine is unable to get the "sympathy" she needs from it. The letter is a useful mechanism for conveying these sentiments of loss of homeland, for, as Brenna Munro states, "Letters are, after all, literally writing in motion, bearing the stamp of their origin, while also marked by their journeys. A poignant synecdoche for migratory life, letters evoke both the attempt to maintain relationships...and the struggle to attain many different 'papers' that might lead to citizenship" (124). Nadine's struggle and constant re-reading of the letter therefore reveals her struggle in the United States and her longing for a connection with home.

The second element of Nadine's trauma is her experience of abortion and loss. Nadine and her boyfriend Eric have an abortion, and Nadine then leaves Eric. However, Nadine is deeply wounded by these experiences. As a result she has built a shrine to her child and this shrine and the memory it provokes slow her assimilation in the United States. Nadine's shrine is described as a picture, roses, microcassettes and a glass of water. This glass of water speaks to the title of the chapter, "The Water Child," and comes from Nadine's reflection on a Japanese shrine to dead children: "She had once read about a shrine to unborn children in Japan, where water was poured over alters of stone to honor them, so she had filled her favorite drinking glass with water and a pebble and had added that to her own shrine" (57). The other elements of the shrine speak of her ongoing attachment to Eric, for example the roses and the microcassettes, which are described somewhat nostalgically, "next to the plain wooden frame there were a dozen now dried red roses that Eric had bought her as they'd left the clinic after the procedure...a total of now seven microcassettes with messages from Eric, messages she had never returned" (57). The fact that Nadine never returns Eric's calls shows that her trauma has caused an introverted

quality wherein she has stopped her own happiness because of her former sadness. Her memory is halting her experience of happiness and assimilation. It burdens her experience of the everyday and her life in the present. Her experience of the past has made her unrecognizable to herself: “She thought of this for only a moment, then of her parents, of Eric, of the pebble in the water glass in her bedroom at home, all of them belonging to the widened, unrecognizable woman staring back at her from the closed elevator doors” (68). Nadine’s memories have linked her to her past in an inextricable way. She is tied to her family, to her dead child, and to her lost lover and because of these ties she has lost herself. She cannot experience a life in the United States because she is continually rereading letters from home. This act of tying herself to the past makes her a prisoner of it. However, the alternative of tying herself to the U.S. is equally traumatic as it is where she lost her baby and her lover. Ultimately, she is left traumatized and unable to connect either to her homeland or to her place of immigration. Her traumas have left her frozen, unable to belong anywhere.

The story “Night Talkers” brings the reader back to Haiti. Dany, the protagonist, is living in the Dew Breakers basement. The Dew Breaker and his family are renting out the basement. Dany is living there to keep an eye on the man who murdered his parents. As the story starts Dany is traveling back to tell his aunt that he has found the man that killed his parents and committed that violence that caused her blindness. This story reveals a case of direct trauma caused by the Dew Breaker and some of the struggles that Dany is experiencing as the result of this trauma.

When Dany first arrives in Haiti he is almost immediately confronted with his past, the past that has followed him to the United States. The trauma of his past is the death of his parents and his reluctance to talk about it is described: “He hadn’t expected to be talking about these

things so soon. He had prepared himself for only one conversation about his parents' death, the one he would inevitably have with his aunt" (92). This reluctance is linked to his careful subversion of his painful past. He is also trying to heal in the present. He believes that he will start to heal if he can tell his aunt about finding the Dew Breaker in New York. The information most affects his aunt because she was herself a victim of the Dew Breaker. She was blinded in the fire he set to their house: "'I found him. I found him in New York, the man who killed Papa and Manman and took your sight'" (97), but it does not bring him the healing he needs. His aunt dies in her sleep. Ultimately he is not given the opportunity to synthesize the magnitude of the reality with which he is living in New York. He must face the reality that he has chosen to live with his parent's murderer and cannot afford to leave. He must also live with the imagined reality that the Dew Breaker is going to kill him any day. He goes almost every week to the Dew Breaker's barbershop for a shave. He is so controlled by his past that he cannot escape it and live his present. This is clear when he describes the ways in which he attempts to keep his parents' memory alive:

He had so little information and so few moments to draw on that every once in a while he would substitute moments from his own life in trying to re-create theirs. But lately what was taking up the most space in his mind was not the way his parents had lived but the way they had died. (99)

Dany is held by his past and it stops him from living his present. The way his parents died takes up "most space in his mind" and stunts his experiences of life in the United States. Additionally, he lives in fear of retribution at the hands of the Dew Breaker, a retribution that he fears because the man killed his parents and promised to kill him: "...he couldn't shake the feeling that after all these years the barber might finally make good on his promise to shoot him, just as he had his parents" (108). This fear is what makes Dany not only live with the man that he fears but also check up on him constantly under the guise of a simple visit to the barber.

In “The Bridal Seamstress” some of the lasting effects of the Dew Breaker are revealed. The story is about Beatrice Saint Forte, a Haitian bridal seamstress, who is being interviewed by Aline, a writer for a Haitian American magazine. The interview begins as a general human interest piece, but as the women walk around Beatrice’s neighborhood her terror at the presence of the Haitian prison guard on her block reveals a former trauma and experience in Haiti: “Beatrice had another coughing spell in front of the prison-guard’s house, and when it stopped, her face was somber, her eyes moist... Was he an old friend, Aline wondered, a new enemy, a past love” (128). Aline presses Beatrice to expand on the prison guard and Beatrice explains to her the Dew Breakers, saying, “... They’d break into your house. Mostly it was at night. But often they’d also come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they’d take you away. He was one of them, the guard” (131). She expands upon this talking about the institutional violence of the Macoutes more broadly and the way in which this man has physically followed her around the United States. She believes he is following her: “‘This man, wherever I rent or buy a house in this city, I find him, living on my street’” (132). The interviewer goes back to the prison guard’s house after the interview to discover that it is vacant. When she confronts Beatrice about this, Beatrice states, “‘Of course its empty,’ Beatrice said, raising her hands in the air as if to emphasize that it couldn’t have been any other way. ‘That’s where he hides out these days, in empty houses. Otherwise he’d be in jail, paying for his crimes’” (137). This scene provides a strikingly vivid example of the concrete ways in which memory and trauma can disrupt the present experience of individuals. Beatrice’s memory of the trauma she experienced has caused her to manifest the man as if he were a reality, following her in her attempts to escape in the U.S.

In both Beatrice and Dany's stories notions of justice are questioned. Horrible injustices have been committed against these characters and yet neither have recourse to a formal claim for justice. The temporary solution is to immigrate away from the site of trauma, but the memories follow them into the United States. The lack of recognition for the injustices that have been committed haunts the characters. The need for justice for political trauma, particularly unrecognized trauma is just as important as the redemption and healing needed for personal trauma. Justice is seen as a healing force in this way, a force denied to these victims by the institution that perpetrated the crimes against them. In both Dany and Beatrice's lives the lack of justice is what prevents them from moving on and starting a new life. They are not granted justice or healing. Nadine may find healing because her trauma is personal. Thus, a difference is established between political and personal traumas. With the former formal recourse may be needed for the victims to move on and heal. With the latter personal redemption and healing may be enough to begin again. This makes justice central to the notions of political trauma within the stories.

Conclusion

The characters within *The Dew Breaker* struggle against memory, trauma, past, and present in their journey from Haiti to the United States. The challenges presented by leaving Haiti and coming to United States are unique in every case but are united by the common experience of having to face the choice of whether or not to assimilate. Danticat discusses the unique position of Diaspora in the introduction to *The Butterfly's Way*, a work that is a collection of writings by Diaspora writers. Danticat describes this position, stating, "'The *Dyaspora* are people with their feet planted in both worlds...There is no reason to be ashamed on being *Dyaspora*. There are more than a million of you. You are not alone'" (xv). This choice is one

faced by the entire Haitian Diaspora, “the tenth department,” and it is one that is not made easier by a traumatic past or ties to a homeland one can never return to. Whether victim or oppressor the challenges are there to be felt, experienced, and shared. With their feet planted in both worlds the “tenth department” can experience Haiti and the United States as equal parts home. This may be seen as productive as it provides new sites of healing for the traumatic wounds of the past. What is ultimately important for these characters is not moving on from these traumas but recognizing them, living with the trauma that one has experienced or the atrocity that one has participated in. This differs from the “norm” of assimilation and proves to be healthier for the Haitian diasporic community. One cannot simply ignore the traumas of the past in favor of a “new life.” This is living with feet in both worlds. It is not forgetting the past and it is embracing the future. This is the position of the tenth department in its many variations. It differs from commemoration in that it is experienced away from the homeland. It involves an act of return, and ultimately healing.

Chapter Four

Breath, Eyes, Memory: The Political Becomes Personal

As a novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* tracks the important themes of gender identity, trauma, and immigration. The novel investigates the role of immigration in a family's history and the various ways that genealogical and generational links are simultaneously disrupted and reinforced by trauma. The ways in which the themes are revealed are linked to the structure of the narrative itself, as Donette Francis observes: "Rather than constructing a linear narrative, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is fragmented, moving back and forth in time and between Haiti and the United States to suggest that neither a chronological telling of events nor one geographical space can explain the complexities of these women's lives" (78). The focus on the women in the novel adds another focus on the formation of a female diaspora. This allows for an examination of the sexual traumas that the women in this family have experienced both prior to and after the immigration experience. These traumas seem to be, as Francis states, written on the women's bodies: "In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Haitian American novelist Edwidge Danticat writes an intimate version of Haiti's political history by focusing on women's bodies—and the stories embedded there" (77). The traumas contained in these women's bodies are passed down, from generation to generation through the diaspora. The women may leave Haiti, but Haiti never leaves them. Thus, the political traumas experienced on these women's bodies become personal and familial, a shared heritage of Haitian women.

Breath, Eyes, Memory is a novel that follows the story of Sophie Caco, a young girl born in Haiti and raised by her aunt. The novel follows her immigration to the United States to reunite with a mother she hasn't seen in twelve years and who she only knows by a photograph. Once in the United States, Sophie discovers that her mother is unstable. Her mother reveals to Sophie that she was conceived during a rape when Martine wasn't much older than twelve. This early trauma

Martine's life has caused her to place a high value on protecting her own daughter's virginity. This results in "testing," or Martine's routine checks on Sophie's virginity. These tests traumatize Sophie who ultimately injures herself to make the tests stop. One she fails the test she is thrown out of the house and elopes with Joseph, an artist who lives in their building. However, her mother's tests have psychologically damaged her. As a result she cannot stand to have Joseph touch her. She has one daughter, after reluctantly consenting to Joseph's advances, who she takes with her to Haiti, without telling Joseph. Here she sees her aunt, whom she considers her true mother, and finds Martine. After the return trip to the United States, Martine kills herself once she learns that she is pregnant. The novel ends with grandmother, aunt, daughter and granddaughter at Martine's funeral in Haiti. In a final moment of traumatic healing Sophie attacks the cane, beating it until it breaks. This is a healing act because she is symbolically cutting down the forces that led to the enslavement and repression of her people and the environment that led to the rape of her mother.

Gender Identity

The gender role or identity in the novel is located in the discussion of what it is to be a mother, daughter, and granddaughter in a family. The Caco family is highly matrilineal, with men only being introduced as major characters once Sophie immigrates to the United States. The roles of Aunt Atie, Martine, Grandmother, Sophie and Sophie's daughter shape the narrative of the story and the passing of the family's history and memory. These roles are also shaped by the larger forces at work in Haitian culture, forces that are sometimes contradictory, as Martin Munro observes: "In addition to the inherited image of the Tante-Atie like enduring matriarch, the consciousness of Haitian women has been inscribed with the contradictory ideals of purity, motherly perfection, and sexual availability" (224). The inherited female consciousness troubles

the women of the Caco family and makes their relationship to sexuality problematic: “The shame and trauma of these kinds of sexual abuses, concealed in their bodies, haunt the women of the Caco family” (Francis 78). The haunting of the Caco women travels into the diaspora and the sexual traumas experienced by Sophie follow her to the United States. The Haitian ideals described by Munro have created the environment for the sexual abuses described by Francis. This collision occurs both within and outside of Haiti.

The troubled relationship with sexuality is pushed further by Martine’s rape by a Tonton Macoute while in Haiti. As a result of the rape she questions the purity of her own daughter and submits her to “testing.” This experience creates a sexual trauma in the daughter that grows out of the sexual trauma of the mother. Adlai Murdoch discusses this dual trauma, saying, “These double axes of female suffering symbolically represent the broad based trauma of the Haitian body politic, represented through the double disjuncture of both Sophie and Martine’s tentative inscriptions in their new migrant culture and Martine’s conflicted attitude to the one she left behind” (143). This linkage of the women’s experience of sexual trauma to the traumatic experiences of the Haitian people is reflected throughout the novel. The women’s relationship to their home country, especially after the experience of immigration, reflects this traumatic similarity. Both women distance themselves from Haiti. Sophie doesn’t really experience healing until she returns and comes to peace with both the nation and her mother. By attacking the cane this healing may be accomplished.

At the end of the novel, with the death of Martine, the importance of these matrilineal links are reinforced at the funeral as the women ask one another “are you free?” This question seems to be linked not only to their position as women but also to their position as Haitians. The women are acknowledging the shared experience of trauma and attempting to move past it. This

shared experience of trauma is something that Martin Munro links to the more general heritage of Haitian women: “The heritage of the Haitian women is not only a reserve of stoicism and comforting folk knowledge, but also a deep reservoir of sexually related trauma” (227). It is the “deep reservoir” of trauma that follows the women into the Diaspora. However, Sophie does heal some of this trauma through her movement from Haiti into the Diaspora: “Sophie’s liberation, here, is both subjective and cultural; what Tante Atie perceives, and elliptically articulates, is Sophie’s relocation beyond national boundaries of identity and belonging; that while she may not still live in Haiti, Haiti will always live within her” (Murdoch 145). It is the act of relocation that is credited with Sophie’s liberation, but it is her return to Haiti that allows her to recognize the pain from which she is escaping. That pain is linked to her family history of sexual violence and her nation’s heritage of violence against women.

Trauma

The trauma in this novel is linked to the generational ties between the women in the Caco family. The traumatic experience in Martine’s life is her experience of rape. She does not heal from this and instead perpetrates a similar trauma against her own daughter, in essence punishing her for her own wound that has not healed. Sophie’s trauma at the hands of her mother is something that she could likely carry out against her own daughter if she does not reconcile this traumatic past. Fortunately this moment of reconciliation is given in the cane field in Haiti. HOW, describe the scene. But the reconciliation is too late for Martine who is damaged from her own experiences and traumas. An important aspect of Sophie’s personal reconciliation is that it occurs in Haiti. This links her trauma to that experienced by her country, and her individual experience to the collective: “Personal history cannot be separated from collective suffering: the rape of the mother by one of Duvalier’s Tonton Macoutes symbolizes the violent, traumatizing

invasion of the private by the public and creates an apparently unbreakable bond between individual and collective destiny” (Munro 224). The collective destiny of the Haitian women of experiencing this violence is reflected in the conclusion of the novel where the women reflect on the generational narrative of violence perpetrated against their family, and, extrapolating this, against their nation. Munro calls this generational violence “inherited,” stating, “*Breath, Eyes, Memory* enacts just such an unbroken, apparently irresistible cycle of inherited trauma” (Munro 224). The women’s “ou libéré” interrogates this cycle. The women can free themselves of their own trauma but they will never be free of the perpetual cycle.

The trauma that Martine experiences in the novel is the result of the institutional experience of the Tonton Macoutes and her rape. Murdoch inscribes Martine as the representative for Haitian suffering in the novel by stating, “Martine, the novel’s chief symbol of suffering of the Haitian nation itself, one carried out at the hands of Martine’s national counterparts. This symbolic inscription of Haitian life as implying the ongoing and overwhelming risk of victimhood is later echoed” (Murdoch 141). The rape occurred when she was very young and is revealed to Sophie the night her mother begins the “testing,” “A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body. I was still a young girl then, just barely older than you” (61). This description also inscribes the experience as simultaneously personally traumatic and collectively traumatic, because it is described as occurring in the cane field. This location is symbolically a place of national pain because of slavery and later backbreaking labor. The fact that Martine’s rape occurs there inscribes it in a national history of violence. This historical violence grows out of the painful relationship between Haiti and various empires (first the French, briefly the Spanish, later the U.S.) that occurred, metaphorically in the cane fields. The troubled economic relationship that

the sugar-export economy wrought for Haiti has also led to its current status as a “failed state.” Cane is therefore useful as a signal of trauma, resonating back to the colonization of the island.

Sophie’s trauma, while echoing the colonial trauma, is linked more closely to the acts of migration and sexual violence. This trauma involves first her mother’s abandonment and later her mother’s sexual “testing.” These experiences transform Martine’s trauma from an individual trauma into a generational one. Sophie’s first trauma, of her mother’s abandonment, is represented by the Mother’s Day card: “At Mother’s Day, the protagonist Sophie makes a card for her aunt: when the latter decides that the card should go to its true owner, Sophie destroys the flower (a daffodil) that adorns it, amputating the card’s love message. In this reaction we can see a silent protest against what is understood as abandonment by the young child” (N’Zengo-Tayo 97). In the act of “silent protest” Sophie is making clear the pain she has experienced at the hands of her mother, or her mother’s absence. She has made the distinction of being her “mother’s daughter and Tante Atie’s child” (49).

The second trauma she experiences is at the hands of her mother once they are reunited in the United States. This trauma is the perpetuation of the sexual trauma that Martine experienced. This act is justified as a mother’s responsibility, as Martine states, “The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure” (61). The result of this trauma is Sophie’s strained sexual relationship with Joseph and her hesitant relationship with her own daughter. Sophie does not overcome this trauma until she is in the cane field after her mother’s funeral: “Although she shares many of her mother’s sexual phobias, Sophie does take a radical step in her attempt to break the female cycle of trauma” (Munro 227). By fighting the cane, and symbolically the

institution, that allowed the rape of her mother, Sophie is taking the “radical step” in breaking the cycle of trauma. Her grandmother’s final “ou libéré” drives home this act of traumatic healing.

A final aspect of both Martine and Sophie’s trauma is the experience of immigration. This experience is cast as both an act of escape and as the reinscribing of trauma in the Diaspora. Murdoch casts immigration as escape for Martine and Sophie, stating, “A major and overarching theme of the novel is a paramount and penetrating trauma and conviction of guilt at having “escaped” that characterizes the New York lives of both Sophie and Martine” (140). This escape positions the trauma nationally inscribed, related to the women’s citizenship. The act of uncovering the violence, as Sophie does in her support group in the United States, is encouraged by the novel: “In explicitly unromantic terms Danticat makes public the social history of sexual abuses committed against Haitian females relegated to “silences too horrific to disturb,” and encourages readers to link issues of sexuality to experiences of citizenship” (Francis 78). By linking the issues of sexuality that Sophie is struggling to deal with therapeutically to experiences of citizenship, the novel positions the immigration experience uniquely in relation to trauma, as a therapeutic outlet.

Immigration

Immigration is the way in which Sophie and Martine are reunited twice in the novel. The first time it is from Haiti to the United States and the second it is the United States to Haiti. The first act of immigration is much more permanent and involves a separation of Sophie from her Aunt, whom she considers to be her real mother. The second is temporal and involves reconciliation between Sophie and Martine and a healing of the wounds formed and reopened in the United States. The reasons for immigration in the novel are similar to reasons for immigration in society: “The attraction of the United States is constantly justified by the

“opportunities” it offers to people. Migrating is presented as a rite de passage” (N’Zengo-Tayo 97). In the novel Martine immigrates not only to escape her past, but also to offer her family financial opportunities and to care for her daughter, albeit from afar. Tante Atie recognizes this function of Martine’s immigration by saying, “If we can live here, if you have this door open to you, it is because of your mother” (21). This financial support is essential to the Caco family in Haiti, and it is what offers Sophie the opportunity to seek the further educational opportunities that she seeks in the United States. Her education is considered an additional “opportunity” or possibility” that “pulls” her into the United States, as Marie-José N’Zengo-Tayo states, “Possibility offered by the American society seems to be one of the most valuable to Haitian migrants and plays a major role as a “pull” factor in Haitian popular migration” (99). Once in the United States, however, the experiences and trials of migration force Sophie to long for home.

The trials of migration are many including struggles with parents, struggles with peers over language, and struggles with their new position in the Diaspora. The immigration experience in the novel separates Sophie from the mother figure she knows while reuniting her with the mother she has never known. This existing separation between Sophie and her mother is exacerbated by the experiences that Sophie has in the United States, for while Martine has been in the U.S. longer Sophie is much quicker at adapting to its culture. This is evident in the language that Martine uses at home, her relationship with a Haitian man, and her justification of testing. The gap between children and parents is common in the migration experience, as N’Zengo-Tayo states, “The experience of migration increases the gap between parents and children in terms of culture clash (Haitian culture versus American culture; tradition versus modernity)” (99). Another aspect of the migration experience is the process of learning a new language: “The experience of migration is also the experience of learning another language.

Mastering the language to become “unnoticeable” is an important objective for the young migrant” (N-Zengo-Tayo 98). This struggle to master the language is something that Sophie works towards in school, but is stunted by the private education system that seems to segregate the Haitian students. Sophie hates the school saying, “It was as if I had never left Haiti. All the lessons were in French...Outside of school, we were “the Frenchies”...the students from the public school across the street called us “boat people” and “stinking Haitians”” (66). Her hatred of this school is in part because of its rigid enforcement of a Haitian identity but also because it opens the students to the prejudices faced as part of the immigration experience. N’Zengo-Tayo notes Sophie’s understanding of the prejudice she faces in school, saying, “The narrator understands all prejudices Haitian children have to face in American schools, including racial prejudice and rejection based on popular stereotypes. Adjustment to American society means confrontation with rejection” (98). The “confrontation with rejection” that Sophie faces as a part of the bilingual school is something that engrains her in the Diaspora in a different way than her mother who did not seek an education and is in a relationship with a Haitian man.

The position that Sophie holds in the Diaspora is important given her age and her relationship to her family and to Haiti. These relationships are complicated by the trauma discussed above and by the nature of Diaspora in troubling notions of home and belonging. Sophie, in migrating to the United States, is challenging a definition of home because she is returning to her mother through the migration experience, but is leaving her motherland. Further troubling this is the trauma that she experiences while in the United States and its ultimate healing in Haiti. Murdoch captures this troubled notion of home in saying, “In the end, Sophie may be *in* New York, but is not *of* it; likewise, she is simultaneously *of* Haiti but not *in* it, and it is in the doubled positionality, representing a range of affective attachments, whose importance

supersedes physical location that determines who she is and where, ultimately, her allegiances lie” (145). This notion of superseding the physical location is further touched on by Munro who states, “Sophie’s movements back and forth from New York to Haiti become attempts to supplement the identity lacks that her exile brings: it is as if any sense of her “real self” can exist only somewhere in between these two necessary but alienating “homes,” possibly on the “floating homeland” of Haiti’s tenth department” (229). The creation of the Diaspora is where Sophie can find her “real self” and in this creation notions of home, motherland, and nation will be challenged. Haiti may serve to heal the wounds of Sophie’s past, but the wounds are generational and ultimately stem from Haiti itself. The Diaspora and the diasporic experience serve as the “real” in Sophie’s life and it is through her experiences in the United States that this “real self” is discovered.

Conclusion

The trauma experienced by the Caco women in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is trauma that passed from generation to generation. It is trauma that accompanies the migration experience. This passage of the sexual trauma of the Caco women is referenced in the end of the novel, and by extension the title, when Sophie states, “I come from a place where breath, eyes, memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head” (234). The Caco women are carrying their past with them. Home, the place where “breath, eyes, memory are one” is Haiti. The act of return provides the site of healing for Sophie and allows her to accept the sexual traumas of her past. Sophie’s daughter is the hope in the novel that the chain of sexual trauma and abuse can be broken. The return to the cane field at the end of the novel and the question “are you free?” gives the reader hope that Sophie is free of the cycle of trauma that has kept her family, and by extension Haitian women, in the pain over the years. If Sophie is free then her

daughter will be free. Ultimately, Danticat is painting a vision of the healing of Haiti through acts of return.

Conclusion

The memories and traumas in Edwidge Danticat's fiction echo across the diaspora and shape the immigration experience for Haitians living in the United States today. The memories are commemorated generationally and personally by her characters and therefore will not be forgotten. This commemoration takes the form of pilgrimages, vocalizations, and the character's bodies themselves. The traumas are inherited generationally and are carried by the survivors into the diaspora. In the Diaspora, through acts of return, healing may be achieved for the traumatic memories of the past. Both memory and trauma shape the lives and experiences of Danticat's characters because they have shaped Haiti. Her work is then to record the trauma, commemorate it, and to remember. She does it in service to the women that came before her who didn't have the privilege of writing their own histories. Danticat is writing these histories for them:

Those nine hundred and ninety-nine women who were boiling in your blood, and since you had written them down and memorized them, the names would come rolling off your tongue. And this was your testament to the way these women lived and died and lived again (Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* 224).

It is the nine hundred and ninety-nine women that make Danticat write, even though women like her aren't supposed to: "You have always had your ten fingers. They curse you each time you force the around the contours of a pen. No, women like you don't write" (Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* 221). By overcoming the challenges of writing a counter history, a history of the survivors Danticat has recorded the history of thousands of Haitians long silenced. In the act of writing the memories of an institutionally unrecognized trauma Danticat is rewriting Haitian history and incorporating into it the stories of these survivors. More than memory, and more than trauma, what Danticat is performing is an act of commemoration, and in some cases, healing.

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