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Human Tragedy and Human Survival:

Edwidge Danticat's Response for Haiti

Speaking for past, present, and future female storytellers

A Thesis Presented

by

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With inspiration from her friend Jean-Dominique, Edwidge Danticat finds herself responding to Haiti's need for hope. It is through her writings that Danticat gives hope to Haitians as well as the Haitian culture. Through this thesis, I wish to draw connections between Danticat's writings and contemporary Haiti as well as glimpses into her own personal life through the use of her autobiography. It is because of Danticat that contemporary Haiti is put into the minds of today's readers. Danticat uses stories of human tragedy and human survival to appeal to modern day readers while still remaining respectful to the unique Haitian culture. Through the use of her stories, Danticat preserves Haiti's history and opens the door for progress. It is through this paper that I wish to present these arguments and show Danticat's passion and obsession with Haiti, it's people, and their stories.

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Introduction

It is through the writings of Edwidge Danticat that contemporary readers become part of a country that has been tormented by violence, political corruption, and several Diasporas while still retaining its unique culture. Thousands of Haitians found themselves abandoning everything they knew and becoming refugees because of the internal conflicts found in their homeland. As is noted in her introduction to *The Butterfly's Way*, Danticat was inspired in her writing on Haiti by her friend, Jean Dominique, who said, "Edwidge, my country needs hope" (xii). Perhaps through her writings, Danticat is attempting to find refuge in her beautiful homeland of Haiti instead of becoming a refugee herself.

By putting pen to paper and creating stories of violence, haunting notions of nightmares, loss of communication, and by possibly losing herself, is Danticat running away from her Haitian culture or is she searching for something else? She calls upon several genres of writings – short stories, fiction, and autobiography – to portray an underlying theme of the destruction of the country of Haiti while also describing at the same time the constant rebirth of the Haitian culture. Experiences described in her autobiography are present throughout her fictional writings; seen by subtle changes of gender and names. Danticat incorporates her personal experiences into fictional writings to give life to the characters. This is also the way in which she looks for answers to questions about her life and Haitian culture.

Perhaps Danticat is trying to give a type of martyrdom to Haiti and its people. No matter the predicament of the main character, Danticat is able to incorporate feelings of hope at the end of her story. Yet look at her work from another point of view, is she instead issuing a warning to other countries in regards to the limitless power of destruction? Is Danticat urging Haitian descendents to stay away from their native country? Is she showing her patriotism to Haiti, its culture, and its people in creating epitaphs of the thousands killed, murdered, violated, and homeless?

One could argue that Danticat is creating a historical setting that praises the Haitian people for their power to carry on their culture through the destruction of their native country and their exile to different countries. One could also say that she is cursing Haitians for their ability to survive their experiences. Are Haitians damned to always being refugees? We can find the answer to this question by looking at Danticat's diverse portfolio of writings. Through this paper, I hope to explore several concurrent themes used by Danticat in an attempt to open the Pandora's box of Haitian culture. Histories of Haiti have been lost and chronicles overshadowed by stories of loss and political corruption. Danticat opens Haiti's history and paints faces and lives for the contemporary world to see. She unfolds the newspaper that sports headlines damning Haiti to be a nation of "AIDS-carrying boat people". Danticat personalizes stories of Haitians in giving each character in her works a name and a specific journey. From her point of

view, Danticat is able to give humanity back to the Haitians; even if she must first dehumanize them in the same way they were dehumanized in their homeland in reality by their own people.

So, to understand Danticat, we must force the contemporary world to open its eyes and see stories of a country that have remained hidden. We must explore its unseen experiences and profile its stories of courage that have been placed in the background. It is because of Edwidge Danticat that Haiti found its hope in the world and why a Haitian can always find sanctuary in his or her *patrie*.

Chapter 1 Les Cauchemars

Haiti's nights made you think that you could have nightmares with your eyes wide open, so that you'd want to close your eyes just to situate yourself in your own darkness – too afraid to blend in and get lost in a darkness that wasn't your own...a nightmare that wasn't your own.¹

One of Edwidge Danticat's most important images is the image of nightmare. In her works she uses the image of nightmare metaphorically to understand the experience of the Haitian people as a people forced into privileging dreams and nightmares to understand their experiences. She explores the concept of haunting and creates a new dimension of violence in her writings – a dimension where the act of violence is always present. One of her most important questions is “are the abused ever really free?” Perhaps it is only in confronting the ghosts of the abusers that the abuses are truly erased. Danticat considers thoughts of suicide and death being the only answer to these never-failing demons. Is this the only hope for Haitian refugees: to be free of their bodies and leave the past behind as their souls leave the Earth? In deadly silence perhaps Danticat sees no ghosts. It is possible that through the use of her pen, Danticat is trying to find the answer to a relief from the ghosts of all Haitian pasts. Do these ghosts follow us (Haitians) into the afterlife or simply bid us farewell as our souls leave the Earth?

What is Danticat's obsession with the notion of nightmares? Is it the complete hypocrisy of trying to achieve a peaceful sleep after particularly powerful events met by some of her characters? There are several personas Danticat uses to explore the concept of never truly finding rest and never finding peace within oneself. Danticat attempts to find the balance between sleep and being awake, and death and living. In several instances, characters in her writings

find themselves in the in-between between sleep and wakefulness, becoming the living dead. Never finding peace in sleep and plagued by constant nightmares, these characters create another dimension to their being. “Anytime one tries to take fragments of one’s personal mythology and make them understandable to the whole world, one reaches back to the past. It must be dreamed again.”² Fighting memories of violence and loss, it seems that her Haitians want to remember the pain but also be able to move on from it; to be able to find themselves amongst the nightmares and ghosts. Yet her characters are always losing their grip of reality. These characters never find peace within themselves with several succumbing to the ghosts that come with the setting sun. Along with the loss of light, they experience a loss of hope and are constantly reliving their experiences with eyes closed--a powerful image of loss of hope, indeed.

Based on the traditional Haitian religion of *Vodou*, the presence of the dead and respect for the dead is very important. Perhaps it is through religious practices that the past can be revisited during the night and the dead can be resurrected. “Haitians always have relationships with the dead.”³ Although the act of revisiting can be viewed as a happy occasion, Danticat chooses to take a negative spin on this and focuses instead on nightmares and the concept of being haunted. Danticat writes of brutal beatings, rapes, and murders occurring in the countryside of her homeland of Haiti. It is during the night, when the world rests from a busy day, that the past comes back and continuously beats, rapes, and

murders the victims of violence. This is perhaps clearest in Danticat's writing of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and needs to be analyzed in detail. The main character is Sophie, whose mother was raped by a faceless man, became pregnant, and later gave birth to Sophie. It is ironic that the mother never saw her rapist's face and only came to know him through her daughter's face. Each night, screaming and thrashing, she is revisited by her rapist as she relives her rape:

Whenever my mother was home, I would stay up all night just waiting for her to have a nightmare. Shortly after she fell asleep, I would hear her screaming for someone to leave her alone. I would run over and shake her as she thrashed about. Her reaction was always the same. When she saw my face, she looked even more frightened. "*Jesus Marie Joseph.*" She would cover her eyes with her hands. "Sophie, you've saved my life."⁴

In a way, Sophie's mother died on the night of her daughter's conception; her youth, innocence, and inner peace were stripped away by a faceless man. While having the reoccurring nightmare, she believes her life to be saved each night as she is awakened by her daughter. This leads one to imagine what would happen if one night there were no one to save her life. Would she succumb to her nightmares, becoming a part of them or would she have enough strength to wake herself? Perhaps she needs another person to save her, and if she were alone as the night of the rape, she would lose herself amongst the ghosts. In both a spiritual and mental way, her mother is attached to Sophie. If not for Sophie, she would truly die each night even though it is because of her daughter that the nightmares started.

As Sophie's mother grows older, she finds no peace with the male sex and it is not until she meets Marc that she begins to feel like a woman again. Unfortunately, this happiness is interrupted when she becomes pregnant. Because of her previous experience of being pregnant, her nightmares of the rape occur more often and become more graphic. While carrying Sophie, she felt that the baby was a piece of the rapist that had been left behind; a parasite to take a part of her life, body, and sanity each day. Her immediate reaction to being pregnant a second time is to have an abortion and terminate the pregnancy because she believes that the baby will kill her from the inside out. She tells Sophie, "It bites at the inside of my stomach like a leech" (191). Ironically, pregnancy is viewed as a joyous celebration, yet Sophie's mother sees it as anything but, and even refuses to think of it as a baby, not wanting Sophie to refer to it as such. She tells her daughter, "Don't call it a baby" (192). Sophie's mother refuses identity to her baby and only accepts the association of the baby to Sophie and her rapist.

By refusing to see her child as human, Sophie's mother sees it as a thing and a constant reminder of her rape. She says, "I would want this child if the nightmares weren't so bad. I can't take them. One morning, I will wake up dead" (191). Even though her situation is different because she is not in Haiti, is with a man who she cares about, and is older, Sophie's mother cannot separate pregnancy from rape. She is so convinced that the nightmares are real that she says she will wake up one morning dead as she struggles to be free of her

nighttime rapist. If she does not give an identity to her baby, she cannot feel any remorse if she does die one night. Again, Sophie's mother is drawing lines, distance, and separation between life and death as a result of her nightmares.

Through the process of being pregnant, Sophie's mother recalls and relives her previous pregnancy experiences and her nightmares worsen. Losing maternal instincts, she succumbs to the power of her rapist. She cannot think clearly, make decisions, nor does she believe herself to have the power that is necessary to carry another child. She never confronts her nightmares or her rapist. By not confronting her rapist, she allows him to have power and control over her when she is at her most vulnerable – when sleeping. It is true that when one is sleeping, one is seemingly dead except for the movements associated with breathing. Perhaps Danticat explores the concept of nightmares as being seen through the eyes of someone seeming to be dead; someone who sees the nightmares as being real and who constantly feels and experiences the same event. It is only in the act of being awoken that this person realizes that he was sleeping and not awake as was previously believed. It takes someone else to awaken him and to bring him back to reality: to be awake from the dead or to be called back to life? This is a constant battle that the victim must face between life and death. It is ironic that in Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the person to call Sophie's mother back to life is the person who caused the nightmares to start.

Indeed, it does appear that in creating the Sophie's life, her mother's own life disappeared.

Danticat depicts a gruesome fate for Sophie's mother as she believes she is forced to decide the outcome of her second child while continuing to experience the nighttime rape. She is found dead, having stabbed herself and her baby seventeen times. Perhaps it is in death that Danticat wishes her character to find peace and solitude. It is in leaving this Earth that she can enter another world devoid of rapists and pain. It is through her nightmares that Sophie saves her mother's life by the act of awakening and then bringing her back to reality. Perhaps it is a cultural explanation, the result of being Haitian, that Sophie's mother loses herself when she closes her eyes. Memories of Haiti are clouded by the conception of her only daughter. It is through death that she breaks free from these nightmares and finds her reality.

What could have happened to Sophie's sibling stays in the imagination of the reader. It is depressing that the creation of life further reminded Sophie's mother about her own lost life. One event destroyed her peace and innocence in Haiti and followed her until she chose to take her own life. Will Sophie's father follow her mother into the after life? After reading her tale of rape and torment, one can only hope that Sophie's mother finally found peace with eyes closed.

But this is not the only story of nightmares and the dead in Danticat's work. Reoccurring nightmares and visions of the dead also appear throughout

Danticat's story, *The Farming of Bones*. Constantly visited by memories of her parents drowning, Amabelle finds death and regret when she closes her eyes. Much like the experience of nightmares in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat looks at the power of the awakened, in this novel Sebastian. Sebastian is Amabelle's lover and the man to whom she is promised. In changing the relationship from mother/daughter to woman/man, the stories of the rescue from the nightmares change forms.

With the change from mother and daughter to man and woman, the rescuer and the one who suffers changes, too. In this work, the man is the saver, being the rescuer of the "weaker sex". Shifting this relationship also alters the rest of the novel as Amabelle is constantly searching for her lover after losing him and in the end, never finds a suitable replacement. Amabelle finds herself dreaming of her parents, but also dreams of Sebastian coming back for her. She travels with Yves to find sanctuary in Haiti, shares a bed with him, but Danticat writes no mention of a romantic connection. Instead, Danticat uses Amabelle and Sebastian as characters in a type of Haitian "Romeo and Juliet", two lovers who never find the right time or place together. In a dream, Amabelle talks to Sebastian and says, "Breath, like glass is always in danger. I chose a living death because I am not brave. It takes patience, you used to say, to raise a setting sun. Two mountains can never meet, but perhaps you and I can meet again" (283).

Amabelle describes Sebastian as being her savior: “He comes most nights to put an end to my nightmare, the one I have all the time, of my parents drowning. While my body is struggling against sleep, fighting itself to awaken, he whispers for me to “lie still while I take you back.”⁵ Unlike Sophie’s mother in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Amabelle alludes to the fact, as seen in the aforementioned citation that she struggles to wake herself up from the nightmares. Not being entirely dependent on someone else to awaken her, Amabelle is struggling internally to wake herself.

As a young child, Amabelle saw her parents die. On their way back from a routine shopping trip, Amabelle and her parents plan to wade through the river that separates Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic). The river swallows her parents and they drown while Amabelle has to watch the sequence of events unfold from the riverbank, and others who are also watching hold her back. On the night of her parents’ death, one boy who sees the drowning occur and saves Amabelle from the same fate says, “Unless you want to die...you will never see those people again” (52). Perhaps what seems most ironic is that this instance is not the last time that Amabelle will see her parents. Instead, this is the event that will replay in her head each night, marking the start of continuously seeing her parents. The boy equates seeing her parents again with death. Does this allude to the fact that by seeing her parents in her nightmares, Amabelle is dead also? Is the river attempting to drown Amabelle in a current of nightmares?

Perhaps the answer lies in the article, “At the Crossroads: Disability and Trauma in *The Farming of Bones*” written by Heather Hewett where she describes Amabelle after her parents’ death, “...Amabelle lives like a ghost, trapped somewhere between past and present. She cannot escape her memories to live more fully in the present moment...”⁶

Does Amabelle ever find solace from her nightmares? Is it in the awakening from a nightmare that the voices in her head are silenced? After reading her story, one would think that she did not find her respite or her rest, because no matter where she traveled, the nightmare of her parents – and later Odette and Sebastian – always trailed behind her. “Wherever I go, I will always be standing over her [Odette’s] body. No farewell could be enough” (205). Is Amabelle clinging to memories because of the way her family and friend died? The river washed them away; water signifies baptism, innocence, and the washing away of sins. To drown; to have your body be engulfed by water, cleansing your body at death: is this not a sacred way to die? Amabelle saw the river as eating her parents and friends. Along with their bodies, their souls were also washed away. “It is perhaps the great discomfort of those trying to silence the world to discover that we have voices sealed inside our heads, voices that with each passing day, grow even louder than the clamor of the world outside” (266). Upon being silenced by water and death, they were born as ghosts in Amabelle’s mind.

By returning to the question of Amabelle finding peace, Danticat leaves the end of her story a bit ambiguous. She returns to the river where her parents died in hopes of finding an answer: "...I also thought that if I came to the river on the right day...the water might provide the answer: a clearer sense of the moment, a stronger memory. But nature has no memory. And soon, perhaps, neither will I" (309). The answer Amabelle searched for throughout all of her nightmares was a reason why her parents died but her life was spared. The river became a person in her life; someone from whom she was seeking answers to her questions. Danticat ends Amabelle's story as she becomes one with her dreams and calms her nightmares in the water. "I looked to my dreams for softness, for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed..." (310)

Does Amabelle succumb to her nightmares like Sophie's mother in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*? One would think no; Amabelle does not become another victim of the River. Hewett adds that, "The ongoing trauma of her parents' drowning manifests itself in recurring dreams about these events as well as Amabelle's attitude towards waters – rivers, waterfalls, and lakes – which can be understood not just as a symptomatic repetition of loss but also her own desire for a place of safety" (128). In bathing in the water, Amabelle searches for a deeper meaning and a reason for being. Amabelle also searches, following the thoughts of Hewett, for a "place of safety" in the water that claimed her parents' lives.

What she learns from the River remains her personal possession. Perhaps in directly confronting the past, the river, and her parents' death, she does find the answers that she has been searching for. Even though the river, and other torments in Haiti, claimed the lives of those she loved, she was the one chosen to carry on the stories of her homeland of Haiti. Amabelle finds acceptance of the past in the River. It is through this acceptance that she can start living in the present.

Danticat leaves the end of Amabelle's story ambiguous, and it is up to the reader to decide his own fate for the story's main character. Hewett adds that, "This is important; for while the moment contains hope, it is by no means a happy ending. It does not rewrite what has happened to the narrator, or the other survivors of the massacre. It is an indeterminate ending that purposefully brings us to the uncertain territory of the crossroads, a place that contains both danger and opportunity" (141). Hewett states in her opinion of Amabelle's ending that, like so many other Haitians who were part of the massacre, their pain may be temporarily suspended, but it never permanently goes away. While Amabelle finds solace in her moment in the river, what will happen when she steps out of the water? Pain can be temporary and can hurt, but it can heal over time, but one can argue that they never really vanish.

Instead of the pain vanishing, Hewett believes that after finding this temporary sanctuary in the water, Amabelle is a new person when she steps out of

the river. She sees this moment as one "...when Amabelle finally embraces all of the losses that have defined her identity and creates a new self out of loss...at this moment of heightened self-awareness, we can understand Amabelle as simultaneously wounded and whole, injured and healed, able-bodied and disabled" (142). Hewett sees Amabelle as the epitome of the Haitian survivor of the massacre of 1937. She sees her moving on and forming a new life after this moment of "heightened self-awareness", yet always being cognizant of where she has been. It is in the moment of the river that Amabelle finds herself alone with only the thoughts in her mind. No longer joined by other refugees, this is her moment of solitude where she can reflect on her past journeys.

Along with the haunted visions of the dead, Danticat finds herself continuously thinking about the circle of life and death. As Rocio G. Davis points out in her article "Oral Narrative as Short Story Cycle: Forging Community in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*", "The butterfly, one of the principal images in almost all the stories, becomes a symbol of both continuing life and transformation. The butterfly's life cycle, which involves a manner of death and rebirth, becomes a paradigm of the need to emphasize the existence of life and the search for beauty in situations of precarious survival."⁷ Perhaps in writing about butterflies in several of the stories found in *Krik? Krak!*, Danticat found inspiration for the title for the book that she edited about the Haitian diasporas entitling it, *The Butterfly's Way*. Through the symbol of the butterfly, the reader

can begin to appreciate Haiti's culture of constant death and rebirth through the stories that Danticat weaves together.

Over and again, one can find stories about one person being born on the same day as the death of another in Danticat's works. "In stories where the mother/daughter bond is broken by the mother's death, this loss is viewed as devastating and must be compensated for by the daughter's taking the place of the mother or finding mother substitutes" (74). Davis attributes the broken mother/daughter bond as a type of substitution of one for the other. In physical, mental, and spiritual ways, the daughter must compensate for the loss of her mother, which is apparent throughout Danticat's writings. Once this bond is broken, there is a power that is transferred to the daughter and it then becomes her duty to become both mother and daughter.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat showed that it is true that a girl becomes a woman when she loses her mother. The daughter then takes the mother's place. The physical connection between mother and daughter is lost when the mother dies, but the spiritual relationship grows. Danticat makes this point, when at the end of the story *The Missing Peace*, the main character asks no longer to be called Lamort, but Marie Magdalène – her mother's name. She truly takes the place of her mother and becomes the woman. "...Danticat locates subjectivity in the maternal and employs it as a axis between the past and the present" (75). Once a mother breaks from the mother/daughter

bond, Davis states that it is in the maternal that the daughter can find balance between past and present. No longer a girl or her mother's cause of death, Lamort finds her womanhood in the acceptance of her mother's death and the adoption of her mother's name.

It is true that a girl becomes a woman when she loses her mother. Danticat showed this to be true in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Farming of Bones*. It is when one loses her mother that she takes her place. The physical connection between mother and daughter is lost when the mother dies, but the spiritual relationship grows. Danticat makes this point, when at the end of the story *The Missing Peace*, the main character asks no longer to be called Lamort, but Marie Magdalène – her mother's name. She truly takes the place of her mother and becomes the woman. "...Danticat locates subjectivity in the maternal and employs it as a axis between the past and the present" (75). Once a mother breaks from the mother/daughter bond, Davis states that it is in the maternal that the daughter can find balance between past and present. No longer a girl or her mother's cause of death, Lamort finds her womanhood in the acceptance of her mother's death and the adoption of her mother's name.

Davis points out that with this relationship between mother and daughter, "The telling of stories heals past experiences of loss and separation; it also forges bonds between women by preserving tradition and female identity as it converts stories of oppression into parables of self-affirmation and individual

empowerment” (68). Never is this self-affirmation more apparent than when Lamort chooses to change her name and instead takes her mother’s name. Through the use of her mother’s name, she wishes to carry on the story of her mother. She adapts a new name, but also intends to change her story from that of oppression (since she was formerly named Death) into a story of empowerment in finding herself through her mother’s identity.

Along with Danticat struggling to find the answers to the circle of life and death, she creates a character that shares the same struggle. Hewett points out that in *The Farming of Bones*, “...Amabelle struggles to understand the meaning of accidents, coincidence, and death. Even before the massacre, events such as the accidental death of Sebastian’s friend Joël, followed by the sudden death of the Señora’s son, cause the narrator to ponder the existence of a greater order in the world” (137). Amabelle makes trips to Joël’s father Kongo in attempts to see how he is dealing with the death of his son. It is through the mask of Joël’s face that Amabelle looks for the answers of why he died and Sebastian and Yves’ lives were saved. It is one of life’s coincidences that starts Amabelle’s new relationship with Death. It is through this struggle that she attempts to find the balance of past and present.

It is also important to note that with the death of the Señora’s baby, it was the son who died while the daughter survived. When they were born, her son was strong while her daughter was thought to be dead soon after the birth. Again this

causes readers to ponder Danticat's subtle hints of feminism as the girl survived while her twin brother died unexpectedly. It is through the character of Amabelle that Danticat explores the meaning of death. What would have happened had it been Sebastian that had been hit by the Señor's car and not Joël? It is because of the death of one person that Amabelle's story and journey were formed.

Chapter I Endnotes

¹Alexandre, Sandy. *The Butterfly's Way...* ed. Edwidge Danticat. "Exiled". (Library of Congress, 2001), p. 183

² Saint, Assotto. *The Butterfly's Way...* ed. Edwidge Danticat. "Haiti: A Memory Journey" from *Spells of a Voodoo Doll*. (Michele Karlsberg, 1996). (Library of Congress, 2001), p. 37

³ Etienne, Phebus. *The Butterfly's Way...* ed. Edwidge Danticat. "Chainstitching". (Library of Congress, 2001), p. 123

⁴ Danticat, Edwidge. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p.81

⁵ Danticat, Edwidge. *The Farming of Bones*. (New York: Soho Press, Inc., 1998), p.1

⁶ Hewett, Heather. "At the Crossroads: Disability and Trauma in *The Farming of Bones*." (Connecticut, 2006), p. 132

⁷ Davis, Rocio G. "Oral Narrative as Short Story Cycle: Forging Community in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*". (Connecticut, 2001). P. 70

⁸ Danticat, Edwidge. *Krik? Krak!*. "The Missing Peace". (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p.116

Chapter 2

La Peau Féminine

*There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question:
'Ou libéré?' Are you free, my daughter? ¹*

Themes of dehumanization coexist with stories of rape, murder, and torture throughout Danticat's writings. Rocio G. Davis points out that in her stories, "...Danticat examines the lives of ordinary Haitians: highlighting the distance between people's dreams and the distressing reality of their lives."² It is because of this separation between hopeful dreams and distressing reality that Danticat's characters experience constant internal and external struggles. As a result of trying to balance past with present, many of Danticat's characters have layers of their beings stripped away. Dehumanized, these persons seek to understand why, metaphorically, layers of their skin were taken away.

Danticat explores the realm of gender roles as well as what it means to physically be a woman. The worst way she shows a woman injured and even destroyed is by continuously taking away parts of the whole that create a woman. Yet like an artist, her female characters can add physical strength while circumstances file away at their mental balance. Davis adds that Danticat's stories "...present versions of life in and away from Haiti that create a composite portrait of the Haitian and her world" (73). To show a true Haitian woman, Danticat must erase that which is true to all women and leaves, very simply, that which is the embodiment of Haiti. Through her writings, she strives to find the perfect physical example of Haiti: a woman with past experiences that she has learned from, battles she has fought to make her stronger, and above all – hope that she will continue on in life and always maintain her unique Haitian culture.

Throughout the development of the story of Sophie and her mother in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat chooses to leave out one crucial detail – the name of Sophie’s mother. The reader never finds out the name of the mother, perhaps drawing a parallel to the man who created Sophie by raping her mother. By leaving out the names of both of Sophie’s parents, the reader immediately feels a distance between Sophie and the two people who created her. There is a physical distance from her father, but also an emotional distance between her and her mother, as she remains partially faceless much like her rapist. From the omission of Sophie’s mother’s name to the rape scene where, “A man grabbed me [Sophie’s mother] from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body,” the physical and mental parts of being female are broken down (61). Through the development of Sophie in this novel, pieces are taken away from her as a human and also as a woman. Danticat attempts to show the struggle of one specific Haitian woman by weaving together several biographies to form the story of Sophie. One example of a specific story is the conception of Sophie by an innocent 16-year old girl and a *Macoute*. “...The *Macoutes*, they did not hide. When they entered a house, they asked to be fed, demanded the woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom. Then all you heard was screams until it was her daughter’s turn. If a mother refused, they would make her sleep with her son and brother or even her own father” (139).

Macoutes embody every aspect of corruption in Haiti. They were thought of as the bogeymen; being politically, sexually, and morally corrupt. This causes one to think of the reasons why Danticat would chose a *Macoute* to father Sophie as they were compared to devils that patrolled the earth. The ultimate example of the ability to have power over someone, these “soldiers” did as they pleased. Fathering Sophie, but never being a Father, this *Macoute* disappeared from the Earth the night of the rape but lived on forever in the nightmares of Sophie’s mother. Even as a baby inside of her mother’s stomach, Sophie had to fight in order to survive. Having been conceived as a result of rape, Sophie’s mother did not want to bear this child. Instead, she did all she could to get rid of her: “When I was pregnant with you, *Manman* made me drink all kinds of herbs, vervain, quinine, and verbena, baby poisons. I tried beating my stomach with wooden spoons. I tried to destroy you, but you wouldn’t go away.” (190)

From the time Sophie shows interest in her male counterpart Joseph, her mother starts to *test* her. Her mother takes away her young adulthood as she strips Sophie’s layers of sexual curiosity. Sophie has noticed a man and it is now time to make her aware of her own femininity and womanhood. She does not experience the fun of being a young girl in love and the follies of courtship. Instead, she is transformed into a home-science experiment where her mother must routinely make observations. “...She would test me every week to make sure that I was still *whole*” (86). Sophie’s mother tested for purity, virginity, and

wholeness. In a successful attempt to end the testing, Sophie takes a pestle from the kitchen and breaks the *veil*. Saying that it was an act of freedom, Sophie no longer felt a physical connection to her mother, and she ran to Joseph and married him after her attempt was completed.

After freeing herself from her mother mentally, Sophie runs away with Joseph; physically distancing herself from her mother. “The process of diasporic self-formation is presented here through the growing distance between mother and daughter who struggle to define new identities and decide what to keep and what to relinquish” (76). Here, Davis attributes the physical separation between mother and daughter to a struggle of forming new identities in the face of a changing relationship. This is clearly shown in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, because Sophie and her mother do not talk for a long period of time. It is because of this separation that each woman was able to create a new identity for herself and then could form a new relationship later on in life with each other. This distance also caused Sophie to relinquish the past in trying to understand Haitian culture and traditions passed down through generations of females. Later when she starts anew with her mother, she is able to openly communicate and starts to ask questions she held inside during their separation.

In order to be freed from her mother, Sophie had to break herself. She saw the tests as both physical and mental torture. She would attempt to put her mind elsewhere while her mother made her spread her legs. The splitting of her

mind and body is something that Sophie would later return to during sexual encounters with Joseph.

As Sophie grows older, she experiences several problems with her body. The first being the way in which she viewed herself. “I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband. Sometimes I feel like I should be off somewhere by myself” (123). The experience of being tested by her mother leaves a scar visible only to Sophie. She is never comfortable in her body, having to go to a support group for help, and having to separate mind from body while being intimate with her husband. Perhaps Sophie saw her mother’s testing as a form of rape. Her body was violated each week as her mother searched for virginity. In an effort for the tests to stop, she had to take her own physical virginity, which further stripped away her womanhood. As a result of her actions, Sophie never enjoyed being intimate with her husband and instead viewed it solely as her duty as a wife. To see intimacy as a job, Sophie could find no joy in her womanly features and was thus further dehumanized.

To further implicate the main character in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat chooses to write her as being bulimic. Not only does Sophie exhibit problems with being intimate with her husband, but she also shows a general embarrassment with her physical appearance. Perhaps these problems with body image stem from issues she has when relating to her mother. Sophie does not find comfort in food from her homeland. Danticat even writes about an incident

where, after being intimate with Joseph, Sophie binges on food and immediately after purges herself (200). Sophie is trying to take emotional pain and transcribe it into a physical pain. Purging herself of food, Sophie can visibly see her pain.

As a child, Sophie's aunt watched after her, later handing her over to her birth mother in New York. It is upon leaving her aunt in Haiti that Sophie's problems start to be apparent. Sophie's mother even admits to her wrongdoings when she says, "In spite of what I have done to you, you've really become an understanding woman" (182). Why do all of these problems start occurring after Sophie leaves Haiti? In the end, Sophie does find peace within herself and her daughter, while becoming a martyr of Haiti. She left her homeland when she was young and moved to New York. Outside of Haiti, her family no longer protected Sophie. Instead, her mother mentally abused her while her father spiritually abused her mother. It was her family outside of Haiti who hurt – and in a way – tortured Sophie; her homeland no longer offering protection.

Throughout all of her trials and torments, Sophie finds her way back to Haiti and it is there that she finds some closure. Davis attributes the return to Haiti by defining Sophie as one of the "women who struggle to establish and preserve the bonds of the Haitian community in the United States through powerful links with the mother country" (73). It is as if Haiti is Sophie's one true Mother and her own birth mother was just a substitute. Haiti protects; she consoles all those who

are hurt. In finding herself as a woman after having her layers taken away, Sophie finds her mother and her protector: Haiti.

By looking at Danticat's autobiography, one can begin to understand her obsession with parental relationships. Danticat was raised by her aunt and uncle in Haiti, and always viewed her uncle as her father. This relationship is mirrored in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* with the connection that Sophie has with her aunt who raised her as a child in Haiti. Living with her Aunt Atie, Sophie viewed her as the real mother and only saw pictures of her birth mother and did not want to move to New York when she was sent for. It is important to notice while reading this book that "Atie" sounds like "Haiti" in English. That is to say, in French, the *h* in Haiti is silent and not pronounced. In the first chapter, it is nearing Mother's Day and Sophie wishes to give her aunt a mother's day card that she made. Atie objects and says that the card should be sent to her real mother. "I appreciated Tante Atie, but maybe I did not show it enough. Maybe she wanted to be a real mother, have a real daughter to wear matching clothes with, hold hands and learn to read with" (7). This relationship of Aunt acting as mother is reflected in Danticat's own autobiography. Forming a physical and mental barrier between herself and her birth mother, Danticat is using Sophie as a written example of herself. Blurring the line between mother and daughter, Sophie remains lost in the world of maternal bonding and always remembers her aunt as her true mother.

It is strange that, yet again, in *The Farming of Bones* Danticat chooses a woman as her main character. With so many central female characters one might wonder if Danticat a closet feminist? Danticat rejects this label. What is more likely is that she identifies more with females, since she is a woman, and also finds the “weaker sex” better able to symbolize her constant reiteration of the hopelessness of Haiti and its people. Her women characters find themselves in predicaments controlled by Haitian men as well. Amabelle’s story is another one of dehumanization. At a young age, Amabelle’s parents drowned in the river separating Haiti and the Dominican Republic. It is in returning home to Haiti that the river washes them away; it is true for these two Haitians that they cannot go home again. Amabelle is stranded in a new country with no family and is forced to form a relationship with the past.

To further alienate Amabelle from any possible happiness, Danticat writes that Amabelle’s lover, Sebastian, who in an attempt to escape Haitian persecution in the Dominican Republic and return to his homeland, is captured and never heard from again. For a second time, Danticat calls upon the action of returning home to Haiti as a means for people to die. In their journeys to return home, Amabelle’s parents and lover Sebastian are taken from her. Perhaps it is in the alienation of the main character that Danticat writes to find the epitome of a strong, Haitian woman. Davis states that, “...in stories about leaving Haiti and seeking a future elsewhere,” there is an emphasis on “the presentation of many of

the painful realities of the immigrant situation” (72). Davis attributes struggles in Danticat’s books with problems associated with immigration. Conversely, one can look at Amabelle’s journey between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and argue that she is struggling to find her identity and her home between these two countries. She is constantly tested by struggles of an immigrant, for example, her not being able to use the word “parsley” correctly. Constantly battling between Spanish and French heritage and homeland, the struggle takes away several people who are close to her.

By looking at the main character Amabelle in *The Farming of Bones*, one can view closely the relationship between mother and daughter. “Your mother was never as far from you as you supposed, you were like my shadow. Always fled when I came to you and only followed when I left you alone. You will be well again, ma belle, Amabelle. I know this to be true. And how can you have ever doubted my love? You, my eternity.”³ While thinking about the choice of Amabelle’s name by Danticat and looking at the above citation, we can begin to understand this relationship and Amabelle’s alienation. Amabelle, translated into English means “to my beautiful one” or “for my beautiful one”. Perhaps it was the ultimate sacrifice by Amabelle’s parents that earned her name. They gave their lives for the sake of Amabelle to carry on without them. In looking at the above quotation, which occurs during a dream, her mother calls Amabelle her “eternity”. To her mother and father, Amabelle is their beautiful one, the one who

continues on in life without them. Even though the physical bodies of her parents are gone, their souls remain with Amabelle because it was for their beautiful one that they died and chose to save her life.

In looking at relationship between mother and daughter, we can see hints of Danticat's possible feminist writing approach. In the novel's dedication, where Danticat writes in the character of Amabelle, she says, "In confidence to you, Metrès Dlo, Mother of the Rivers." By studying a little of the traditional Haitian *Voudou*, one can start to look at this dedication in a different light. Pointed out by Renée Larrier, "Mèt Dlo is a Vouduri figure from whom one seeks protection and it is to his female counterpart that Amabelle dedicated her narrative."⁴ In looking at the differences between male and female, one can ask why Danticat chooses to have the dedication from Amabelle be written to the female counterpart of the Master of the Water. Perhaps Amabelle is seeking sanctuary from the female counterpart in an attempt to form a connection with the water while thinking of it as female. By having knowledge of the French language, it is important to point out that the word for *water* in French is considered Feminine (its' article being *une/la*). Giving the water feminine characteristics is the way in which Amabelle can feel an emotional connection to the way in which her parents died.

To parallel Sophie's problems with her physical appearance in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat writes of the same problems facing Amabelle in *The Farming of Bones*. Sophie faces problems because of self-mutilation as well as

mental abuse by her mother. In *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat chooses to focus on the other end of abuse – purely physical. It is after her confrontation with the Dominican boys and their parsley that Amabelle states, “...I knew that my body could no longer be a tempting spectacle, nor would I ever be truly young or beautiful, if ever I had been. Now my flesh was simply a map of scars and bruises, a marred testament” (226-227). Amabelle viewed her body as solely a way for people to trace her journey and could see the physical abuse she had endured on her way to find her homeland.

In addition to the physical signs of her journey, Heather Hewett states that she is one of the, “...individuals whose marked, scarred bodies prevent them and those around them from forgetting what has happened.”⁵ Hewett points out that while Amabelle may be able to move on from her now disfigured body, there will always be others around her who will see the scars and will bring back the physical and emotional pain that she had endured through her journey. Hewett also discusses Amabelle’s internal struggle with her new body stating: “Her suffering includes physical as well as emotional pain, and the daily experience of living in a changed body is in many ways what makes her unable to forget the past. Thus her inner struggle to accept her permanently altered body constitutes an important part of her larger journey to accept loss and loneliness” (128). As her journey from the Dominican Republic to her homeland of Haiti unravels, Hewett states that Amabelle is also walking along the journey to “accept loss and

loneliness”. Both physical and mental layers are stripped away from Amabelle’s soul as she continues her journey and finds some comfort at the end (which will be discussed later).

Amabelle’s attitude towards her own physical appearance mirrored through her experiences until the end of her story. Never fully giving up on the hope that her lover Sebastian might be still alive, Amabelle could never accept another man in her life. She instead stays with Yves, partially because he is all that she has left. He has made the journey with her, being abused along the way. Danticat writes about Yves and Amabelle sharing the same bed, but never having a romantic connection. To Amabelle, Yves was simply another person who understood where she came from. In this way, Amabelle never finds love with a man. Holding onto memories of Sebastian, she is never willing to accept another. One could view her being alone as never finding her soul mate and never being whole, thus stripping yet another layer of her femininity away.

It is important to note that characteristics of dehumanization are not only essential parts of Danticat’s protagonists; they are just as essential to many of her other characters, too. This is apparent in *The Farming of Bones* when Amabelle meets Yves’ mother. Throughout the text, whenever Yves’ mother is speaking, Danticat writes about *the* mother and never *Yves’* mother. Only referring literally to their relationship is when Danticat writes about Yves being with his mother. “‘Who is this woman?’ the mother asked Yves” (226). This makes the reader

curious as to why Danticat chooses to have Yves' mother become slightly dehumanized because her relationship with her son is broken when she goes from *his* mother to *the* mother. It is in descriptions that Danticat uses the possessive pronoun *his*. When she is taking part in conversation with Amabelle, she turns into *the* mother. By switching this one word, Yves' mother becomes depersonalized and Danticat adds a distance between her and Amabelle because the mother/son relationship was cut.

It is crucial to point out the differences in possessive pronouns between the languages of French and English. In French, the possessive pronoun reflects the object that is being possessed. For example, his mother in English translates to *sa mère* in French. The *sa* is feminine because it reflects *mother*. There is a direct correlation between the object being possessed and pronoun used to possess it. One takes no notice of who possesses the pronoun in French and just concentrates on the possessed object. For example, there is no difference in French between *his* mother and *her* mother; the pronoun remains *sa mère*. In bringing this theory to English and Danticat's choice of using *the* mother and not *his* mother, Yves' mother develops a certain independence from him. She no longer depends on him and instead takes on a personality of being self-sufficient. It is also important to note that in taking on this distance between mother and son, *la mère* in French can also be equated with *mother* in general and also the universal mother. In another light, in French the *sa* is feminine, which correlates

to *mother* which is also feminine. In this way, to say his or her mother is doubly feminine. Perhaps Danticat is trying to establish that Yves' mother does not need to depend on a man in her life and in this way, she loses a part of her femininity and takes on a more masculine role in life.

In regards to the above explanation of French versus English grammar and how it results in dehumanization because of gender loss, Danticat also shows a gender emphasis in her story, "The Bridal Seamstress" found in her collection of short stories in *The Dew Breaker*. Much like Yves' mother being referred to simply as *the* mother, Danticat underlines the importance of the word *mother* when referring to a female, whether she is technically a mother or not. In her short story, "The Bridal Seamstress", the dressmaker Beatrice tells Aline the news reporter that, "...I make them all call me Mother, it's more respectful that way..."⁶ Beatrice's decision to use the title of Mother instead of another acceptable title reflects on her own personal life. Never being married and never having children, she becomes affiliated with maternal characteristics even though she is lacking the experience of being a mother.

One might ask why the above example applies to this chapter on dehumanization. The answer to that question lies in Beatrice's desire to be called Mother and by looking at French grammar again. In the French language, there are two different ways to address a person when having a conversation. The informal *tu* is used for a younger person or a person of lower social class. The

formal *vous* is used for an older person who should be respected or a person of a higher social class. Beatrice wants to use the title Mother, which would be substituted for the formal *vous* when having a conversation.

Beatrice views herself as a Mother to the brides-to-be by creating their perfect wedding dress. "...I've sewn every stitch myself. Never had anyone helping me", Beatrice states while being interviewed by Aline (126). With every wedding dress she makes, Beatrice leaves a piece of herself in the fabric and says on the wedding day, "It's like everyone's looking at me" (127). By becoming Mother to both the bride and the dress, Beatrice is making lasting impressions and says that, "...it's become too hard. I'm tired" (126). After all the years making dresses for other women and leaving a layer of herself behind, Beatrice decided to retire from the work of a seamstress.

It is important to look at the life of Beatrice and the profession she chose. Like many other of Danticat's stories, the *Macoutes* entered Beatrice's life and left a lasting impression of violence. Always thinking that she is seeing the same man who, "...tied me to some type of rack in the prison and whipped the bottom of my feet until they bled. Then he made me walk home, barefoot. On tar roads. In the hot sun. At high noon," (132) Beatrice constantly lives in fear that her past life in Haiti is following her. By looking at her past, we can see that the part of her body that was abused the most was her feet. Looking at the celebration of marriage, the most breath-taking moment for the audience is when the bride is

walking down the aisle. Being a seamstress, Beatrice creates wedding dresses and says, “When they’re singing ‘Here comes the bride,’ they’re really singing ‘Here comes the dress.’ And the way I see it, I am that dress. It’s like everyone’s looking at me,” (127) Beatrice is surreptitiously walking down the aisle that she personally never had the opportunity to experience. The symbolism of walking down the aisle to find your new life is also important. Never having walked down the aisle to meet her husband and start a new life together, Beatrice is stuck in the past. Leaving a layer of her femininity behind because she was never a bride, Beatrice’s thoughts leave her in the past and she cannot move on. Always thinking that the man who abused her is following close behind, Beatrice sees hope only in another move to another city and hopes that this time, the past does not follow her.

Chapter 2 Endnotes

¹ Danticat, Edwidge. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p.234

² Davis, Rocio G. “Oral Narrative as Short Story Cycle: Forging Community in Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*”. (Connecticut, 2001). p.67

³ Danticat, Edwidge. *The Farming of Bones*. (New York: Soho Press, Inc., 1998), p.208

⁴ Larrier, Renée. “ ‘Girl by the Shore’: Gender and Testimony in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*. (2001), p. 54

⁵ Hewett, Heather. “At the Crossroads: Disability and Trauma in *The Farming of Bones*.” (Connecticut, 2006), p. 123

⁶ Danticat, Edwidge. *The Dew Breaker*. “The Bridal Seamstress”. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), p.126

Chapter 3

Les Corps sans Mots

“Feel like a basenji,” Ms. Hinds wrote, her face sinking closer to her chest.
“What’s a b-a-s-e-n-j-I?” Nadine asked, spelling out the word.
“A dog,” Ms. Hinds wrote. “Doesn’t bark”
“A dog that doesn’t bark?” Nadine asked. “What kind of dog is that?”
“Exists,” Ms. Hinds wrote...¹

In her writings, Edwidge Danticat shows a mild obsession with the loss of communication. Stemming from her personal experiences (her uncle was diagnosed with throat cancer, having had surgery that left him with a hole in his throat and an inability to speak), several of her writings recall the tragic loss of being able to communicate with the world through speech. Though each story is written about a different person, they all experience a loss of communication. This ties in with the history of Haiti and through dictatorships; citizens did not have the freedom of speech. Unable to share thoughts and emotions, Danticat writes of these people becoming empty bodies without words.

By looking at Danticat's autobiography *Brother, I'm Dying*, an avid Danticat reader can begin to understand her obsession with communication. As a young child, Danticat was raised by her aunt and uncle in Haiti while her parents lived in New York, saving enough money to send for their children. Most of her childhood memories being of her aunt and uncle, it is no wonder Danticat focuses on her uncle's laryngectomy and his loss of speech throughout her autobiography as well as her other fictional writings.

Danticat writes about simple tasks taking much more time because of her uncle's lack of communication, for he could not speak after his operation. He would bring either Edwidge or his grandson Nick to accompany him on his errands in case communication was needed.

Whenever he had to make a deposit at the bank or had school business at the Education Ministry, he would wait for either me or his grandson, Maxo's son, Nick, to come back from school and take one of us with him. That way if he wasn't able to make himself understood, either with his gestures or with his sometimes indecipherable handwriting, then one of us would *interpret* him.²

Looking at this citation, one can see that Danticat viewed herself as a type of translator for her uncle. Always with a child by his side, he had to resort to younger people to be there in his time of need. Being an interpreter for her uncle, Danticat felt a physical and spiritual connection to the process of communication as well as to her uncle. If he did not have someone to help with communication, he would resort to gestures and handwriting, which sometimes was not enough. Her uncle needed her and Danticat held the key to communication when she was with him. She viewed him as somewhat helpless when she was not around, and formed a caring if "paternalistic" relationship with him.

Danticat's uncle was a pastor, and before his surgery had used his voice on a daily basis in church. When his mother died, he wished to give a funeral homily, which was impossible because he did not have the ability to speak. His internal struggle with wanting to speak and yet not having the ability is most clear at his mother's funeral when Danticat writes, "He had traded his voice for a cure. But now he couldn't even properly say good-bye" (75). In this chapter of her autobiography entitled *Good-Bye*, Danticat places special importance on this one word. Perhaps echoing the Haitian culture and its relationship with the dead,

Danticat emphasizes how important this one word, said at a funeral service, can be. Not being able to communicate anything to his dead mother, Uncle Joseph mouths the word at the pulpit of his church. Perhaps believing that in death his voice will be regained, Joseph hopes that his mother can hear him. Not being able to say anything to his mother, Joseph must think inside of his head the words he wishes to say. Alone in his mind, Danticat and her other family members can only guess what he is thinking. It is strange that Danticat chooses this example of a funeral to show the struggle that Joseph endured while not being able to speak. Yet, it seems appropriate because saying good-bye to his mother and speaking her funeral homily would have brought him great joy because he would have held the last words to his mother.

In the collection of stories *Krik? Krak!*, the story, *Nineteen Thirty-Seven*, is written about Josephine's mother who is imprisoned because it was thought she was a witch. Josephine makes routine trips to the capital to visit her mother in prison, but can never talk once she is there. "I said nothing. Ever since the morning of her arrest, I had not been able to say anything to her. It was as though I became mute the moment I stepped into the prison yard. 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."³ With an internal struggle of not being able to communicate and her mother dying before her eyes, why couldn't Josephine find some words? Was it out of fear, loss, or confusion that she could not open her

mouth? What does one say to a person who is dying? Perhaps Josephine had so many words inside that she could not pick which ones should be said.

Again, Danticat writes of the relationship between mother and daughter. The daughter, never truly understanding what caused her mother to be imprisoned, chose no words to say. Her mother was put into prison because she was thought to be a witch who used magic to kill a child. Perhaps Danticat is trying to associate this accusation of magic with Josephine's mother, herself, being somehow magical. Finally finding words to speak, Josephine asks her mother, "Manman, did you fly?" (43) It is possible that Josephine is thinking that magical women in prison, with their powers, grew wings at night and flew away. However, it is more likely that Josephine is asking more of an abstract question. Did her mother fly? Not to steal the lives of children, but to separate mind from body while in prison. Did she fly to a spiritual place, somewhere with no pain as other of Danticat's characters have done? From all the words that Josephine could have spoken, why chose a question?

The answer lies in the fact that Josephine was in awe of her mother and was astonished by her courage in prison. Rocio G. Davis writes, "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."⁴ Josephine and her mother form community with other females of the town. It is through this special bond with the other females that

Josephine can come to terms with her mother's fate at the end of the story.

Josephine was born on the same day as her mother's mother was killed. Being a child of Haitian violence, Josephine only had her mother on whom to depend. Having one solid person in her life, but perhaps never fully understanding her – this is why she chose a question. In asking a question, her mother had to respond.

Perhaps as the Haitian storytelling tradition of one person asking, *Krik?*, and another responding, *Krak!*, Josephine needed a response from her mother. It is in the giving and receiving of a word that Josephine found peace, for she knew that her mother could fly, or do anything she wanted, because of her maternal powers. In her article, Davis points out that, "Though these stories reflect loss and a sense of a lack of affiliation, the overwhelming movement is toward reconciliation and pertinence, confirming the necessity and the possibility of seeking connection even after death" (76). It is in this possibility of "seeking connection even after death" that Josephine is offered hope at the end of the story even through the loss of her mother. She knows that after death, her mother will be free to fly and Josephine hopes that when her time comes, she will be able to fly alongside her mother.

It is not always the loss of communication that stings the most, but sometimes it is a subtler miscommunication or inadequate communication. Never is this clearer than in Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and the infamous Spanish translation for parsley. It is in the pronunciation of parsley, or *perejil* in Spanish,

that almost kills the main character Amabelle. The Dominicans used this word to separate themselves from the Haitians because a French speaker does not trill the *r* in the same way as a Spanish speaker. Who would know that the mispronunciation of one word would lead to the massacre of thousands of Haitians? How could one word hold so much power?

Amabelle best explains these feelings of miscommunicating when she says, “At that moment I did believe that had I wanted to, I could have said the word properly, calmly, slowly...even though the trill of the *r* and the precision of the *j* was sometimes too burdensome a joining for my tongue.”⁵ Even though Amabelle wished to pronounce the word correctly, she did not have the chance to try. The Dominican boys stuffed parsley in her mouth by the handfuls. They took the abstract word of parsley and turned it into a tangible object that they used as a weapon of torture.

Parsley is green; a color that often represents youth, naiveté, and newness. To Amabelle, the parsley might as well have been blood red. Becoming numb to the pain of kicks and punches, Amabelle physically felt the power of being loss of communication through one simple word. “We used parsley for our food, our teas, our baths, to cleanse our insides as well as our outsides” (203). The Dominicans saw the word *parsley* as a way to cleanse their country of Haitians. A river that claimed the lives of Amabelle’s parents separates the island of Hispaniola. Now the other side wanted to spit her out like the parsley she had

been forced to eat. Had she been able to say it correctly, would she have been saved by that one word?

After the altercation with the Dominican boys, Amabelle experiences a brief loss of communication because her lips are very swollen and she cannot talk. “My voice came out in one long grunt” (195). Although she is hurt physically and emotionally, Danticat chooses to emphasize this loss of communication. Amabelle tries to speak, but no one can understand her and the other characters tell her to rest. As Heather Hewett points out, “...While her wounds may not be visible... she cannot talk. And while she eventually regains her ability to speak, she is permanently changed...her jaw is misaligned.”⁶ Even after Amabelle regains the capacity to speak to the other characters on her journey, her jaw is misaligned and she carries a physical reminder of this loss.

The theme of communication is ever-present in the story, “Night Talkers” in the collection of *The Dew Breaker* written by Danticat. In this story, a young man named Dany returns home to Haiti to visit his aunt – his childhood caretaker – to inform her that he found the man who killed his mother and father when he was younger. Again drawing an analogy between Danticat’s autobiography and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the position of the aunt remains an important character through the lives of younger children.

While visiting his aunt, Dany recognizes that they share some common habits,

They were both palannits, night talkers, people who wet their beds, not with urine, but with words. He too spoke his dreams aloud in the night, to the point of sometimes jolting himself awake with the sound of his own voice. Usually he could remember only the very last words he spoke, but remained with a lingering sensation that he had been talking, laughing, and at times crying all night long.⁷

Danticat explores the concept of sleep once again in this tale, not with characteristic nightmares, but with the power to communicate while dreaming. Like the characters that could not experience peace because of nightmares, both Dany and his aunt speak during the night, never finding solace from words; communication never stops flowing. Dany often dreamt of what he wished to say to his aunt regarding finding the man who killed both his mother and father. Never finding the right time for this conversation, he instead spoke all he wanted in his dreams. One night Dany and his aunt started talking and Dany was asking questions about his parents, trying to figure out who would want them dead. His aunt responded that perhaps they had been mistaken for someone else, and asked Dany to leave her alone. Dany let his aunt rest, thinking that because now the communication had been opened between the two of them, it would be easier to start again at a different time. “She went back to sleep, whispering something he could not hear under her breath, then growing silent. When he woke up the next morning, she was dead” (109-110).

Dany traveled to Haiti in hopes of finding answers from his aunt about his parents and past life experiences. Instead, as soon as communication opened

between himself and his aunt, it stopped. Even dying, his aunt was whispering her secrets, forever holding onto the power to communicate within her dreams. As neighbors prepared for the funeral, Dany kept silent, not being able to speak and voice his internal thoughts. Davis attributes this inability to speak because of “Occasions in which communication between mother and child is obstructed result in confusion and unnecessary hurt” (76). While Dany’s aunt was not his biological mother, she was the maternal figure in his life after the death of his parents. Dany had arrived just in time to see his aunt before she died, and the neighbors saw this as an internal connection between Dany and his aunt: “They were speaking about him as though he couldn’t understand...He wanted to close his eyes until he could wake up from this unusual dream where everyone was able to speak except the two of them” (112).

The concepts of miscommunication and inadequate communication are central to this story of Dany and his aunt. Earlier in the story, Danticat writes about his aunt’s pleasure that she received while listening to Dany and another boy, Claude, speak in English.

His aunt was leaning forward with both hands holding up her face...She was listening to them speak, like someone trying to capture the indefinable essence of a great piece of music. Watching her face, the pleasure she was taking in the unfamiliar words made him want to talk even more, find something drawn-out to say, tell a story of some kind, even recite some poetry, if only he knew any. (101)

By incorporating pleasure into hearing others communicate, Danticat is implying Dany's aunt's fascination with any kind of communication, even if it is a language that she cannot understand. Being "night talkers", Dany and his aunt are never freed from communication. Even when the sun sets and the rest of the world is sleeping, words come out of their mouths as they speak to their dreams. It is ironic, then, that Dany cannot find the time to communicate with his Aunt about the man that he saw in New York. It is something that is very important to him because he needs to find answers that remain without response. He even has the nighttime, when their dreams may be able to talk to one another, to talk to his aunt.

As Danticat plays with the concept of communication and words, it is important to note that Dany feels like he never received the answers he was looking for. Maybe his aunt's blood did call him back to Haiti – a Danticat characteristic of always returning home to find solutions to problems. At the end of the story, Dany is talking about his friend Claude saying, "Claude was a palannit, a night talker, one of those who spoke their nightmares out loud to themselves. Except Claude was even luckier than he realized, for he was able to speak his nightmares to himself as well as to others, in the nighttime as well as in the hours past dawn, when the moon had completely vanished from the sky" (120). Dany envied Claude's ability to confront his nightmares not only during the nighttime, but being able to talk about them in the day time. This is

something that Dany never did, as he always communicated at nighttime.

Danticat adds a little hope to the end of this story, willing Dany to confront his nightmares of the inability to communicate with them during the day because of his experience with Claude. It is important to add, though, that the ending of the story again remains ambiguous, leading the reader to wonder whether or not Dany ever confronted the man who he believed killed his parents, or whether he was just another nightmare that Dany could not confront.

In one of Danticat's stories in *The Dew Breaker*, one of the main characters resembles the story written about her uncle in *Brother, I'm Dying*. In Danticat's real-life story, her uncle loses the ability to speak because he has to have his larynx suddenly removed. In the story "Water Child", the main character is a nurse named Nadine who works in the Ear, Nose, and Throat section in a hospital. Being a nurse in this unit, Nadine, "...saw many post-op patients wake up bewildered to discover that their total laryngectomies meant they would no longer be able to talk. No matter how the doctors, nurses, and counselors prepared them, it was still a shock" (55). In this particular period of Nadine's nursing career, she is forced to face Ms. Hinds, a "twenty-five-year-old nonsmoker" (59). By referencing this character as a nonsmoker, Danticat creates an element of innocence. Usually it is smokers who must have their larynx removed; a nonsmoker shouldn't have to resort to this operation. The same holds true for her uncle who, out of the blue, had to have the radical operation as well.

There are many similarities between this story of Ms. Hinds and Danticat's uncle that should be taken into consideration as to why this story was chosen to be a part of the collection in *The Dew Breaker*.

Danticat uses the character of Ms. Hinds to explore unanswered questions she had about her uncle. One must first point out the similarity of professions: Ms. Hinds is a teacher; Danticat's uncle a pastor. Both occupations require communication in order to be successful and both are respected in a community. Whether the audience is a classroom full of students or a church full of spiritual-seekers, both Ms. Hinds and Uncle Joseph teach lessons through speaking. Ms. Hinds makes reference to feeling like a *basenji*: a dog that doesn't bark. Nadine replies, "A dog that doesn't bark? What kind of dog is that?" (62) Ms. Hinds replies that it is a dog that exists. Through this comparison, Danticat uses Ms. Hinds as a stand-in for her uncle. Wondering what it must have been like for her uncle to wake up and realize that he could no longer be successful in his chosen occupation, Danticat writes about a dog with no bark; a person without words. Not only having the inability to create sound, all thoughts are stored internally. Sharing these thoughts and communicating become more cumbersome; freedom of speech through words is taken away.

Nadine and Danticat become curious about what it is like to have the inability to speak to others. Being lost inside of oneself, how would the words find their way out? Nadine comments about,

...Whatever form of relief she [Ms. Hinds] must be feeling now would only last for a while, the dread of being voiceless hitting her anew each day as though it had just happened, when she would awake from dreams in which she'd spoken to find that she had no voice, or when she would see something alarming and realize that she couldn't scream for help, or even when she would realize that she herself was slowly forgetting...what her own voice used to sound like (66).

Changing the gender of her uncle into a woman in this story, Danticat herself becomes part of the story. Not understanding why she had to lose her voice and what uncertainty the future holds, Danticat is the patient. All of the warnings and suppositions about not being able to communicate and become bodies emptied of words, Danticat is the caretaker.

At the end of the story, Nadine sees a reflection of herself in the elevator door as Ms. Hinds is discharged. "Facing a distorted reflection of herself" (68), this is the moment that Danticat blends the two worlds of patient and caretaker. Through this story of loss of communication, Danticat is preparing herself for the uncertain future. Never warning Ms. Hinds of the hardships to come, Nadine is leaving it up to the patient to face the struggles as they come. Danticat wrote this collection three years before publishing the story of her Uncle Joseph in *Brother, I'm Dying*. Using "Water Child" as a starting point, Danticat begins to explore a world without oral communication and later comes to term with the world of the patient in her autobiography.

Chapter 3 Endnotes

¹ Danticat, Edwidge. *The Dew Breaker*. “Water Child”. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), p.62

² Danticat, Edwidge. *Brother, I’m Dying*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 64

³ Danticat, Edwidge. *Krik? Krak!*. “Nineteen Thirty-Seven”. (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p.46

⁴ Davis, Rocio G. “Oral Narrative as Short Story Cycle: Forging Community in Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*”. (Connecticut, 2001). p.68

⁵ Danticat, Edwidge. *The Farming of Bones*. (New York: Soho Press, Inc., 1998), p.193

⁶ Hewett, Heather. “At the Crossroads: Disability and Trauma in *The Farming of Bones*.” (Connecticut, 2006), p. 130

⁷ Danticat, Edwidge. *The Dew Breaker*. “Night Talkers”. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), p.98-99

Conclusion

All critics discussing Edwidge Danticat have noted that her central subject in all her works is without a doubt, her native country of Haiti. In his article “Remembering Haiti”, Ethan Casey asks, “Could such a novel [*Breath, Eyes, Memory*] have been so poignant – could it even have been written? – had Haiti not been so newsworthy in recent months and years?” (525) Casey conveys a very valid point: are Danticat’s writings so powerful to contemporary readers simply because they are founded on a subject that has not been touched by other contemporary writers? Or, is it her sheer talent in weaving so many different stories and narratives that causes Danticat’s books to be a modern day success?

Does Danticat, “...write about appalling realities without succumbing to futility and impotence or acquiescence” as Casey asks? (524) My answer, based upon all of my research, is that I believe that Danticat opposes impotence and instead encourages all of her characters to seek hope in their pasts. While none of her characters are able to forget the past and completely move on, they use their memories of the experiences that they’ve had to learn from them. It may be argued that this is a trait of Haitians but the same is true elsewhere in the world, and the concept of “living and learning” is found in cultures other than just Haitians.

It is true that Danticat paints a picture of Haiti that is, at times, gruesome and seems to be hopeless. She chooses specific characters with specific histories

and experiences that widen the contemporary readers' knowledge about Haiti and the problems that Danticat's characters and Danticat herself has had to face. However, what stands out in all of these stories of difficulty and hopelessness is that there is not one character of Danticat's that cannot find hope in his or her homeland of Haiti. Although there are often physical and mental distance between her characters and their *patrie*, their homeland always remains a part of her characters and never disappears from them. Constant travel to and from Haiti causes the characters to view themselves in different lights. Whether it may be through new friendships or saying good-bye to family and friends, Haiti constantly emits a ray of light and hope to Haitians all over the world.

In a note distributed by her publisher (and noted by Casey), Danticat states that, "I look to the past – to Haiti – hoping that the extraordinary female story tellers I grew up with – the ones that have passed on – will choose to tell their story through my voice. For those of us who have a voice must speak to the present and the past. For we may very well be Haiti's last surviving breath, eyes, and memory." (526) While searching for solutions to nightmares and reminders of violence, Danticat also hopes to capture the timelessness of the Haitian countryside and the closeness of its families. Whether or not the stories she writes have generalized "happy endings", Danticat is preserving parts of Haiti through the different faces she paints in her writings.

Is Haiti completely devoid of hope for progress for the future? By looking deeper into Danticat's memories inspired by strong, female storytellers, one can see the stories of experiences being carried on through generations. Danticat hopes to preserve the past, yet not live in it. It is important to respect those that came before us, yet live our own lives. I think that Danticat's friend Jean Dominique would be proud of her, for through her stories and her characters' strengths and resolution, Danticat's readers can see hope for Haiti and her people.

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