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# The Assertion of Identity: Storytelling and Testimony in the Works of Edwidge Danticat

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The Assertion of Identity:  
Storytelling and Testimony in the works of Edwidge Danticat

by

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A Proposal to the Honors Council  
For Honors in English

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## **ABSTRACT**

Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat evokes the Haitian tradition of storytelling in many of her novels and short story collections. A tradition formulated by vodou religion and the amalgamation of African cultures, storytelling acts to entertain, educate and enlighten the people of Haiti. Additionally, her novels are often written in the context of traumatic events in Haitian history. While Danticat's works have been studied with focus on their depiction of storytelling and of trauma, little has been done on the restorative power that storytelling provides. In this thesis, I seek to examine the potential for Danticat's characters and works to create narratives that build community, present testimony, and aid traumatized individuals in recovery.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1999, the World Bank completed a survey of 60,000 people living on less than a dollar a day. When asked what they desired the most, those who responded did not consider food, water, shelter, clothing, or medicine as their top priority. Of all the necessities in the world, the overwhelming response was that the socially and economically disempowered want “a voice:” they want to feel that their grievances and stories are heard. Though they live without their basic needs being consistently met, they wish most that their lives were understood by others, to validate their own existence through the confirmation of a shared community. The desperation for recognition reflects a sad truth about global humanity: the impoverished and oppressed at the lowest level of society often feel dehumanized and removed from the rest of the world.

This desire for human validation is a recurring theme in the work of Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat. In works such as *The Dew Breaker*, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and *The Farming of Bones*, she addresses Haitian life and culture during the dictatorial regimes of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The protagonists in her stories often have been victims of torture or abuse at the hands of the military regime and they must deal with the struggle to overcome this loss of power. The government in Haiti has been unstable since becoming decolonized after the revolution of 1791-1804, and the fight for power between groups within Haiti often results in an oppressive government.

Among the many repercussions of the mass-decolonization of the 20th century,

newly decolonized countries found themselves challenged by the prospect of abandoning and moving beyond colonial identity and creating a new national identity. The imposed colonial rule systematically devalued and destroyed precolonial African culture and often established tyrannical power through a form of social governance based on racism. The postcolonial governments that followed, then, often patterned themselves after the radical hierarchy, paternalism and repression that they had experienced when they were colonized. Attempts to form governance led to struggles for power, group identity and the overarching challenge of accommodating different social groups out of mutual respect rather than colonial obligation. The search for a national identity was difficult in a postcolonial society that in some aspects resembled colonial rule. Postcolonial literary theory uses modern and contemporary literature to examine power relationships relating to colonialism and nationalism.

In the following thesis, I seek to examine the way in which Danticat, a writer from a country once under colonial rule, portrays characters in search of voice. In doing so, I will look at the evolution of Haiti from its formation as a slave colony called Saint Domingue to the modern distinct dictatorships and the ways in which Haiti's political circumstances affected the ability of its people to represent themselves. Specifically, the Haitian tradition of vodou and storytelling that evolved from the practices of Haiti's oppressed slaves acts as a means of both preserving history and constraining personal freedoms of self-expression. It is here where I will find the heart of my research and analysis: in the struggle for human dignity through the validation of existence in



storytelling. Like the respondents to the World Bank survey, the characters in Danticat's novels are determined to have their voices heard. They seek to create a coherent story of their lives that they can understand and use to portray themselves to others. In doing so, they hope to create supportive community, provide testimony, improve their condition, and most of all, validate their existence.

## **The Assertion of Identity:**

### **Storytelling and Testimony in the works of Edwidge Danticat**

“I come from a place,” Sophie says, “where breath, eyes, and memory are one...you carry your past like the hair on your head.” Edwidge Danticat's narrator and protagonist in the novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* speaks of her homeland, Haiti, as “a place where women live near trees that, blowing in the wind, sound like music. These women tell stories to their children both to frighten and delight them.” Sophie spent the formative years of her childhood in Haiti before moving to the United States but remained connected to the country through familial contact and particularly through the stories and cultural practices of her people (Danticat, *Breath. Eyes. Memory* 234).

An intricate expression of the human condition, stories provide a narrative structure for understanding detailed attributes of characters and humans in the context of a larger story or moral meaning. Stories are used to teach, to entertain, and to understand the world. Moral and didactic folktales carry lessons in anecdotes about people and animals interacting with each other and the world. In the same way that humans use stories to teach others, stories are essential to assess one's personal identity. One rarely sees oneself as a biological being, as a human with chromosomes and skin and bones. Instead, one creates a narrative in which to place oneself in a larger narrative context: as a human who is born, who lives in a certain manner, achieves certain things and, most importantly, has a story. In forming a self-narrative, one understands oneself as a moral

character in a larger story and creates an environment and contextual plot in which to live.

Descendants of slaves forcefully brought to the colony of Saint Domingue, the people of Haiti have been historically denied the opportunity to take control of their identity and view themselves in a self-created narrative both formally and legally as well as imaginatively and socially. Taken from their home in Africa and brought to Haiti as slaves, the Africans were told that they were property, not humans with worthwhile stories, identities, cultures, or purposes. Discouraged from controlling their own personal identity, the slaves fashioned stories, tales to be a part of a religion and oral tradition that formed a culture. These stories became the narrative framework through which the Haitians grew to understand their own lives.

Haiti is largely composed of descendants of former West African slaves, brought to the island of Hispaniola in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during French colonization. Uprooted from their West African homeland and enslaved, the Haitians faced years of subsequent oppression and subjugation. Though remarkably unifying to obtain independence through the modern world's only successful slave revolt, the Haitians still struggled to create a national identity based solely on their common previous status as slaves. Following deportation from Africa, many of the Haitian slaves adopted the practice of vodou, a syncretic religion based on African and Caribbean oral tradition and, through vodou, they began creating a uniquely Haitian culture (Dubois 92).

In his essay "Vodou and History," Laurent Dubois argues that in the dehumanizing

atmosphere of the “around-the-clock harvesting and processing schedule” found on sugarcane plantations in 18<sup>th</sup> century Haiti, the “practice of African religion...was one way of fighting against the dehumanization of this system, of creating relationships and possibilities the system sought to shut down” (Dubois 92). Because the slaves were from a multitude of nations and ethnic groups, they began to form a religion that brought together different ideas and practices to form a new religion. The new religious practices adapted the evolving creoles that the slaves used to communicate with each other and the rituals, Dubois argues, are “[imbued] with revolutionary significance.” Much like the slave-code embedded in pseudo-Christian songs sung by slaves in colonial America, much of the vodou practice—and revolutionary undertones—remained “hidden from the eyes of planters.” The slaves, robbed of their freedom and taken from their homeland, create the religious practices to provide a narrative of their lives that they feel they have created. One such vodou tradition “is a symbol for this gathering of the nations in the pursuit of freedom,” a symbol “powerfully represented in the structure of the religion itself” (Dubois 92-94).

Such oral tradition became a part of Haitian culture, as it had been a part of diverse African cultures. Though politically subservient to the French and, in a different sense, the economic occupation of the United States, the Haitians established a tradition of storytelling as a way of preserving their story intangibly, in a manner that is self-created rather than imposed. Nancy Gerber has focused on women's experience in Haiti, arguing that stories act as a means of “performing both cultural and maternal functions,

recreating ties to Africa, the lost motherland, and strengthening the bond between mother and daughters” (Gerber 189). Through their oral tradition, founded on passing stories through memory and cultural repetition, the Haitians preserve stories without having to write them down. Initially, the absence of written evidence was necessary to keep the stories hidden from slave-owners. As time progressed, the act of retelling stories and passing them on worked both to ensure the tales' continued existence as well as to repeatedly reinforce the message behind the stories.

“Storytelling,” Danticat remarked in a 2011 lecture on creativity, “is a vital tool in all cultures, used to keep history and legacy alive. It provides comfort and healing during times of illness and loss and allows us to understand our own and others' history and plight” (“Create Dangerously,” Danticat). In her historical novels, *The Farming of Bones*, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat evokes the storytelling tradition that is distinctive to Haitian culture. The telling of stories and witnessing of events are integral to the lives of characters who seek recognition, understanding, and community. Danticat noted that humans “tell stories to become whole” (“Create Dangerously,” Danticat). The characters in her novels are Haitians who are, in this way, incomplete, and need to fully establish and understand their own life stories. After they provide self-understanding, these stories need to be heard, understood, and acted upon. The act of storytelling in Danticat's works reveals the power of language to both control and empower Haitians. Just as slave-owners forced perceptions of identity onto the slaves, so too do slaves and the stories of their descendents have the ability to constrain individuals

and defy the control of others. (“Create Dangerously,” Danticat)

In Danticat's novels, characters are constrained by a multitude of stories: the folktales that emerged through vodou and Haitian tradition, narratives imposed by the economic occupation of the United States, and also privately-created personal stories constructed as a means of shielding oneself from the truth. In order to come to cathartic realizations of personal identity, to represent themselves as members of beneficial community, Danticat's characters need to escape from the narratives that bind them. Through the re-appropriation of struggles, they claim their stories and affirm their freedom.

### **Conscripted Identity and the Escape from Stories that Bind**

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat's first novel published in 1994, stories are an integral part of young Sophie Caco's upbringing. As a child, she is raised by her aunt and grandmother, and stories are as much a source of education, legacy-passing, and comfort as they are of entertainment. Whenever Sophie has trouble sleeping, her Aunt tells her stories to hide her from the darkness that similarly plagues Sebastien, from *The Farming of Bones*, published in 1998. The “images she had made out of the night” contained “magic” that comforted her. While her aunt Tante Atie tells many of her stories to make Sophie laugh, she seems to recall other stories in order to involve Sophie in family tradition. Whenever she was sad, Atie would summon the tale of her father's (Sophie's

grandfather's) death. The story acts both to warn Sophie of the dangers of the sugar cane field, and gives her a glimpse of her grandfather. "Nothing," Sophie notes, "will bring my Grandfather back." Nothing will bring him back, except for the story, which seems to invoke his presence each time that Tante Atie feels sadness. Atie is trapped in a contradictory cycle of simultaneously realizing and admitting the permanence of his absence while invoking his presence through a story. Atie knows that she is constrained by the story of her father's death. The lifestyle that caused her father's death is the same lifestyle that caused her to be sad, alone, and to recite the story. Atie was forced into the lifestyle of the cane workers and thus became a part of a narrative that her father already took part in, a narrative that was already written for her. Like the generations of Haitians burdened by the cane field, she is left uneducated and fatherless by a life of hard labor, but as the surrogate mother of Sophie, she uses the story as a lesson to prevent Sophie from avoiding the same fate.. "As long as you do not have to work in the fields," she declares, "it does not matter that I will never learn to read that ragged old Bible under my pillow" (Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* 4-5).

The labor-intensive lifestyle of sugarcane farming is a central part of the Haitian economy and Haitian families like Sophie's have been working in the fields for generations. Like Atie and Martine, most Haitians are forced into the profession out of necessity and familiarity rather than free choice. A difficult and dangerous profession, sugarcane farming carries a connotation of enslavement or conscription that began with the relocation of African slaves to Hispaniola to farm and was furthered by the Haitians'

struggles following a intensified focus on sugarcane farming during U.S. economic occupation.

In the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, hundreds of thousands of Africans were brought to Saint Domingue (modern Haiti) to provide labor on sugarcane fields, a product already proven to be successful on other New World islands. The ignorance of the European investors and plantation owners inspired them to clear forests, which resulted in massive erosion and damaged soil. The slaves were made to do dangerous labor and ended up destroying the land they would later inherit. The Africans spent decades working in disastrous conditions in the cane fields: one-third of the African slaves brought into Haiti died in their first few years of work. In *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James describes a situation where the slaves were “worked like animals” and “housed like animals.” In order to “cow them into necessary docility and acceptance,” the slaves were regularly abused and whipped and fed only a small fraction of what they were required to feed them. Eventually, the slaves banded together, formed a common religion and sought to eliminate slavery and their forced identity as pieces of property, animals in the field. The masters routinely beat their slaves in order to eliminate thoughts of revolution, to instill into their minds that they were inferior to their masters. However, the slaves resisted and “were seeking their salvation in the most obvious way, the destruction of what they knew was the cause of their sufferings.” After a successful revolution, the newly obtained land was systematically divided and privatized amongst the former slaves and the Haitian slave revolt came to epitomize the idea of reclaiming one's identity from an oppressive



regime (James 1-20, 67-68).

General Toussaint Louverture was a former slave and leader of the Haitian independence movement and revolution. He was a Catholic staunchly opposed to the vodou tradition that served to bring the slaves together under a common religion. Louverture found that in addition to their religion, the slaves could unite through their common narrative of being unfairly oppressed and adamant for freedom. In 1850, Haitian advocate Reverend James Theodore Holly wrote that the Haitian revolution was one of the “noblest, grandest and most justifiable outbursts” in history. Holly posits Louverture and the slaves as “a race of almost dehumanized men” determined to seize control of their lives, who “arose from their slumber of ages and redressed their own unparalleled wrongs.” The Haitian revolution is historically described to be the only successful slave revolt in the modern era and, as Holly puts it, “a revolt of the uneducated and menial class of slaves” as compared to the American revolution of “people already comparatively free, independent and highly educated.” The Haitian slaves had been dehumanized and oppressed, yet were determined to earn their freedom and under Louverture's lead, defeated the French and created an autonomous nation of their own ruling. (Holly 6-7)

Nearly a hundred years later, the Haitians found themselves similarly forced into sugarcane farming for the benefit of someone else, thus reviving the narrative of forced labor, even though they were politically free. After over a hundred years of relatively exclusive self-rule, they were faced with another, albeit different, occupation. The United

States occupied Haiti in 1915 under the guise of the Monroe Doctrine and for humanitarian aid for the struggling country. Shortly after occupying Haiti, the US controlled the economy of the entire island of Hispaniola, and manipulated both countries' economic gain. The high US demand for sugarcane production necessitated that the DR's economy shift from cattle-raising to a sugar growing economy dependent on the US. The increase of sugar-cane farms brought more and more Haitians over the border, eager for any kind of work. In fact, the number of Haitians working in the DR *doubled* during the US occupation. Several factors led to economic disparity between the Haitians and Dominicans. US efforts to invest in Haiti in the same way that it did the DR proved unsuccessful. The US attempted to implement “corvee,” a system of forced labor that seemed too much like slavery to the consciousness of the Haitians. Though unwilling to implement US plans in their country, which proved to be futile because of a lack of resources, the Haitians were willing to work in the Dominican Republic for the sugarcane plantations dependent on the US. US racism against the dark skinned Haitians (more so than toward the mulatto Dominicans) perpetuated negative ideas with which Dominicans agreed. The new economic imbalance and Haitian workers' subservience to Dominican plantation owners created a volatile environment for the two parties who have a history of historical uneasiness. This led to a generation of Haitians who were born and raised entirely in the Dominican Republic, but ignored by Dominicans as veritable slaves. In this way, the Haitians reignited their narrative as workers subjugated by the practice of farming and by an oppressive regime (Matibag 2-15).

In *The Farming of Bones*, Amabelle describes Sebastien and Yves as trapped within their work lives, they measured their lives through the farming schedule: the cane season and the dead season. In 2004's *The Dew Breaker*, the eponymous Dew Breaker is likewise constrained by a story. Early in the novel, the Dew Breaker approaches his adult daughter with a story that he has kept silent for a long time. He tells her that, contrary to what she had been told, he was “the hunter, he was not the prey” (Danticat, *The Dew Breaker* 21). He had told her some stories, though false, but up to this time his daughter Ka had learned more from what was *absent*. She saw that he and her mother have “no close friends, never have anyone over to the house...never speak of relatives and have never taught me anything else about the country” (21). The Dew Breaker's actual story—that he had been a notorious torturer in the oppressive Tonton Macoutes—was a truth that would have dire consequences for his family if revealed. It is his story that prevents him from connecting to his past, speaking to relatives or living a guilt free life as the man he used to be. By not being able to admit that he is the same man as the one who committed the atrocities in Haiti, he cannot actively work to rectify the wrongs that he did to others and to himself. Instead, he must bury and repress this past self. He speaks with a “deep raspy voice, muted with exhaustion,” skinny and quiet, he has changed the image of his former life to form a new sheltered identity (6). The Dew Breaker tells Ka he is like an Egyptian statue found at the Brooklyn museum, with “pieces missing from them” (19). Danticat notes that humans need to tell stories to be whole, and it is the stories that he cannot tell that leaves him missing pieces. Unable to tell his own story, he

reappropriates the Egyptian book *The Book of the Dead* to be his own tale. However, it is not his truth, his story. Ka realizes that the Egyptian tale to affirm good deeds in a life was her father's attempt to reconcile all of his bad deeds.

The Dew Breaker and his wife Anne are given shelter by a story different from the one that prevents him from being a part of the Haitian community in New York. When they were first married, there had been “more silence than words between them.” The narrator describes their marriage as “a conspiratorial friendship.” Both the Dew Breaker and Anne had terrible pasts to hide from. The Dew Breaker has his torturous ways; Anne has the murdered brother who may have been killed by her husband. The silence is part of their “benevolent collaboration”: both were afraid of the truths that would come from speech, and silence provided them with the stable ignorance that was undoubtedly better than a violent truth. When Ka is born, they spoke about Anne’s brother, “but only briefly.” He agreed with the story told in the news, she chose to believe him, though it is said that “neither [believed] the other nor themselves” (Danticat, *DB* 240-241). Anne agrees to the story they have constructed because the truth is too painful to accept. She wishes both to hide from the fact that her husband murdered her brother, and to believe what she thought had brought him to her, that “she'd been there to save him, to usher him back home and heal him” (Danticat, *DB* 240-241). They create a story to give them refuge in New York City, but it is the same story that tortures the Dew Breaker with guilt. One sees that the Dew Breaker creates the story to provide safety and security for his family in the United States, not to redefine himself as a victim. Indeed, when Ka

attempts to represent her father as a victim through her artwork, the Dew Breaker refuses to validate the representation. He destroys the statue, symbolically declaring that he will no longer allow the false story of his imprisonment to impede him.

Martine Caco, the mother of protagonist Sophie in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, assumes custody of her daughter when Sophie is still a young girl and continues the tradition of storytelling begun by Sophie's aunt and grandmother in Haiti. The Dew Breaker and Tante Atie differ from Martine in their determination to ensure that their children do not become controlled by their stories. Martine shows how storytelling can be used as more than an entertainment or a lesson: it can also be a device of control. In "Marassa with a Difference," Mireille Rosello examines the way in which the novel "structures the mother's storytelling practice as an activity that the daughter cannot distinguish from an act of sexual violence" (Rosello 119). When Martine first decides to test Sophie's virginity, she tells Sophie a tale to distract her. The story, as Rosello notes, does little to distract Sophie. Instead, it becomes connected with the testing and trauma that Sophie's mother inflicts. When placed in context, the folktale is disturbing. Martine speaks of Marassas, two inseparable lovers from the vodou tradition, "the same person, replicated in two," and concludes that "you and I could be" like them (Danticat *Breath, Eyes, Memory* 84-85). Rosello argues that by saying that they "could be" like Marassas, Martine emphasizes that in order to be one of these inseparable lovers, Sophie needs to maintain her virginity. Danticat depicts Martine's behavior and the testing as a result of the rape in which Sophie was conceived. To Martine, the story of the rape is "an infinite

series of mirrors,” repeated every night through the nightmares that return her to the moment of her rape. She loses “the ability to make a distinction between past and present” and cannot “distinguish between herself and her daughter.” In consistently living the act of her rape, Martine loses the power to witness or author her tale. Rosello argues that what she is left with is “the impossibility to construct her post-rape self as a life-affirming narrative.” When she recounts the story of her rape to her daughter, she ceases using the pronoun “I” after her rape, signifying her lost sense of identity following the rape. (Rosello 119-129)

Whereas Martine no longer uses the pronoun “I” because she lost her identity, the Dew Breaker employs a similar tactic in his attempt to reclaim his own. When he is finally prepared to tell the truth to Ka, he asks her to “let your father talk to you.” The father figure is the new man the Dew Breaker attempted to be, the family man, the quiet barber in New York City. By saying “your father,” the Dew Breaker attempts to defend himself through his new role and to free himself from the “I” that represents himself as both torturer and barber. However, in saying “I have objections,” he begins to take responsibility, appropriating himself as both the family-man barber in New York City and a former torturer in hiding in New York City. He is prepared to become this new “I,” the amalgamation of the two selves. It is in this recognition and admission that he attributes the actions of the Haitian Dew Breaker to the father he now is. He even uses language and places his present self in the past. “Your father *was* the hunter,” he notes, even though he wasn't her father at the time. “I'm still your father,” he says and acknowledges his past

transgressions while he asserts “I would never do these things now.” He, unlike Martine, breaks free of the story that constrains him and separates himself from the false story of an innocent man.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, however, Sophie ensures that she does not become controlled by the rape experience that her mother is inadvertently attempting to pass on to her. In being tested, Sophie is being held down and violated in a similar fashion to her mother. Rosello argues that the end of Martine's testing period “involved no . . . success because it corresponded with the rape” (Rosello 127). Because of this, the two events are fused together. Though Martine similarly detested the testing, the act of rape destroyed her self identity, making her feel that “she is not even worth testing” (Rosello 127). She is thus unable to connect the pain she is inflicting onto Sophie to her own dislike of the testing. Rosello argues that the control that Martine expresses through the testing is represented in imagery of bodily immobility. Early in the book, the mother's act of controlling Sophie is foreshadowed in a description of a photograph of Sophie's mother pulling her into the frame, trapping her body and her will. This similar image of a shrunken body is found when Sophie describes a love letter sent to Tante Atie, where she wishes to shrink her body and jump in the letter. In the latter example, her body is said to be shrunk, but this self-objectification is self-willed, unlike rape, and is meant to express her love for her Aunt. Sophie thus realizes that she is able to escape the recurring testing and control of her mother through separating the act violence from her post-trauma life. Martine is unable to separate the violence from life as Sophie is living evidence of her

ordeal. This ability to separate is where Sophie's situation differs from that of her mother's. Because Sophie does not have to consistently live the nightmare, she realizes that to use violence is to escape the “traumatic reiteration of nightmarish abuse,” but only as a “coherent and life-affirming narrative.” Rosello notes that Sophie deflowers herself and thus enables herself to fail the test. In saying “finally I failed the test,” Sophie asserts control of the narrative of her trauma. She uses the self-affirming pronoun “I” and the word “finally” to represent the satisfaction in overcoming difficulty. Through language, Sophie displays control over the story of the traumatic testing, and unlike her mother, she is able to escape the cycle of traumatic nightmare. (Rosello 119-121)

### **Cyclical Structure and Constraining Stories**

The constraining stories in *The Dew Breaker* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, though passed down from generation to generation, are not presented in a linear fashion. Rather, these stories are inhibiting in that they create a recurring cycle that is difficult to escape. *BEM's* Tante Atie retells the story of her father's death in the cane field whenever she feels sad, Martine is trapped by the infinite mirrors that cause her to live through her rape every day, and the Dew Breaker and his wife repeatedly hide behind the lies of their false identity. The characters are constantly forced to confront their trauma because the issue is cyclically and continuously returning to the subject's lives. Characters only achieve freedom from the narratives that bind when they escape the confines of the cycle



created by recurring storytelling and traumatic experience. This reveals important characteristics about the stories in the Haitian tradition. At the end of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie realizes that the recurring mother-daughter motif in the Haitian stories she was told as a child was not something personal to their family or living situation as a young girl living with her aunt. Instead, she asserts that it is “something essentially Haitian. Somehow, early on, our song makers and tale weavers had decided that we were all daughters of this land.” (Danticat, *BEM* 230)

The idea that the mother-daughter motif in stories is ingrained in Haitian culture creates a cycle of tradition and customs with no clear cut origin. Though Martine hates the testing, she continues to do it because that is what her mother did to her. The story telling tradition is depicted as feminine in several facets. According to Nancy Gerber, story-telling is a “maternal gesture that provides comfort, security, and emotional sustenance” (Gerber 194). In a broader sense, the Haitians use the tradition to form a connection with Africa, their motherland. The idea of mother-daughter tradition is inevitably intertwined with the biological connection between mother and daughter. Sophie's paternity is an unanswerable question, but the fact that she came from her mother and her mother came from her grandmother is indisputable. Story-telling reflects the same practice of undeniable lineage. The mothers, like Grandma Ife and Martine, are in charge of telling stories to ensure that the stories and lessons are passed along, down the biological chain. Martine was once a child, taught by her mother and next becomes the mother, teaching her child. Such a pattern becomes troubling when it becomes

connected with undesirable cultural practices such as the virginity testing. Grandma Ife justifies the testing process by telling Sophie that if she gives “a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me” (Danticat, *BEM* 156). She is threatened by the possibility of bringing shame upon her family and upon herself. Shame would become part of the family's story and identity, passed down through generations. Maternally protective of her family's reputation, Ife seeks to remain in control of her family's narrative and ensure it is a shameless one.

Experiencing similar nightmares as her mother, Sophie seems to continue in the same cycle as her predecessors. However, as Gerber argues, Sophie confronts her mother's rape in a more direct fashion than either Martine or Tante Atie, her first mother figure. Neither Martine nor Atie is able to comprehend, control, and re-appropriate the horrific story of Martine's rape into something that can empower them. Tante Atie first describes Sophie's conception through the parable of a girl made from rose petals and chunks of the sky. Later, Martine adds some details, depicting her rape scene with the omission of the pivotal “I” pronoun. Gerber argues that not only does Sophie control her own narrative by escaping the testing process, she also confronts the rape narrative inherited from Martine. The rape becomes most clear when Sophie completes the retelling, describing in vivid detail the rapist (black bandana, eggplant colored hair), the rape (being dragged into the field, the pounding and threatening), and the aftermath (the nightmares and threats). This story acts as Sophie's means of claiming the rape as her heritage and “separating as her mother's Marassa” (Gerber 196). In appropriating the

rapist as the source of her mother's suffering rather than herself, Sophie frees herself from the rape. She becomes determined not to let the trauma of her mother's rape and her testing affect how she raises Brigitte.

Sophie frees herself through taking control of the rape narrative that had constrained her mother, and this is also seen in her physical confrontation with the cane field. Sophie ultimately fixes the cycle of female consent to patriarchal abuse and colonial history and oppression at the end of the novel. Upon returning to Haiti for her mother's funeral, she runs to the field: the site of her mother's rape and her own inherited nightmares. She strikes the cane stalks, fighting the scene of the rape that had claimed her mother's innocence. She removes her shoes—she is not there to work-- and “pounds” the stalks, inflicting violence the same way her mother was “pounded.” In doing so, she, like Amabelle, connects the cane field to the source of her family's suffering. The lifestyle of sugarcane farming had plagued her family for generations: it killed her grandfather and enslaved her mother and aunt. Largely, the agrarian lifestyle of sugarcane farming is a result of the European colonial domination of the region and subsequently the United States occupation and economic transformation that resulted in the class stratification that created dictatorial rule and oppressive regimes. In striking the cane fields, Sophie seeks to re-appropriate two rapes: the rape of her mother, and the metaphorical rape of her people. The oppressed Haitians are not like young Martine, to be thrown around and oppressed by the Europeans, Dominicans, Americans, or anyone. They are Sophie, multicultural, independent, and strong willed. She fights back, defeating the man in her

family's nightmares and in a way, the subservient role that many Haitians faced in the agrarian workforce. She received an education her family could not and established a new life in America, and learns to face her nightmare in the real world. Her grandmother sees the cathartic process and yells to her, asking if she is free. The trauma of Martine's rape and the lasting narrative the trauma wove confined their family for years, but having re-appropriated the violence and guilt of the rape away from her family, Sophie becomes free. While Martine thought the only way to escape the trauma of her rape was to enact violence upon herself and her womb, Sophie showed an understanding of the rape and used violence against the cane-field. In a sense, she has taken control over the trauma inflicted upon her by her mother. This is not to say she is immediately freed from the trauma. Sophie still must go to counseling and work to repair herself, but the burdening constraint of the story is gone. In this way, she is free from the confines of the cycle created by the narrative of her trauma .

### **Trauma and the Struggle for Personal Identity**

While many of the characters in Danticat's works face a narrative imposed upon them that they must escape before appropriating and propagating their own crafted personal identity, others struggle with simply recognizing and piecing together their personal narrative and view of their lives. These are the characters who have experienced trauma, their lives and mental condition ruptured. In *The Farming of Bones*, *The Dew*

*Breaker, and Breath, Eyes, Memory*, characters need to overcome fragmented memories and senses of time as well as emotional instability in order to organize their lives and separate their sense of self from the traumatic experience that ruptured it so they may take control of their story. One method for the characters to understand the trauma is using dreams as a means to understand and approach what is otherwise initially difficult to comprehend.

“We have voices sealed inside our heads,” Amabelle declares in *The Farming of Bones*, “voices that with each passing day, grow even louder than the clamor of the world outside.” The voices in her mind are those of the upwards of 40,000 Haitians living in the Dominican Republic who were massacred in 1937. The Massacre of 1937 depicted in the novel is also known as the Parsley Massacre. Generalissimo Trujillo of the Dominican Republic supported negative stereotypes and nonfactual stories of Haitian barbarianism and inferiority to create antagonism between Dominicans and the Haitians. Among the techniques used to emphasize Dominican superiority was a shibboleth Trujillo purportedly invented to distinguish between the native Spanish speaking Dominicans and the supposedly intellectually inferior Haitian workers. By asking a stranger how to pronounce “perejil,” the word for parsley, Dominicans could identify if that person was a native or not through the Haitian's inability to speak the rolled r followed by the silent j. The Dominicans used language in this way to separate the Haitians from the Dominicans and highlight their differences. When Amabelle and her companions are surrounded in the town square and revealed to be Haitians, parsley is shoved in their mouths: as if they

have to die by their voices, by the very thing that revealed their inferiority (Danticat, *Tfo* 304).

Amabelle, unlike her lover, friends, and thousands of others, survives the massacre but lives with the memories, the stories of slaughter, and the voices of the dead in her mind. All she wants to do is “find a place to lay it down now and again...even in the rare silence of the night.” The voices in Amabelle's head that break through the silence of the night are the dreams that seem to interrupt the narrative of *The Farming of Bones*. The silence of the night is sleep, “a close second to death,” in the mind of Sebastien,” and is conquered by the presence of the voice that tells his story, the voice within Amabelle's head. (*FB*, Danticat 5, 266)

According to Martin Munro, “it is only...in the unstructured narratives of dreams that the imagination can transform trauma into testimony” (Munro 93). As Danticat's works depict victims of oppressive Haitian regimes, many characters suffer from acts of trauma and their consciousness becomes fractured as a result. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Martine, for example, suffers the traumatic experience of rape and “loses the ability to make a distinction between past and present” (Rosello 121). However, the world of dreams offers possibility for non-linear narratives. Unlike the real world, in a dream one can change time, place and character without questioning the continuity of the dream. To Munro, this is the ideal place to confront trauma: in a world where unstructured narratives can be sensibly assessed. Through her representation of dreams in her novels, Danticat provides a staging ground in which characters confront horrific events from their

lives and, in many occasions they are able to discover means of retribution in the real world.

When Amabelle is young, she is sick with a terrible fever that manipulates her perceptions and causes her to become delirious. In her delusional state, she creates an imaginary doll to keep her company and it reassures her that she will become well. She trusts the doll, as she notes that she eventually becomes well again, “as the doll said I would be.” It is then that her mother reveals to her that the doll never existed, that the fever “made [you] an imbecile (Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* 58).” This is a foreshadowing of the power of dreams in the novel. Amabelle is unable to confront the sickness until she can dream about it and approach the problem in her imagination.

In later recurring dreams, Amabelle is confronted by a figure known as “the sugar woman.” The sugar woman is a character wearing a muzzle locked around her neck to prevent her from eating the sugarcane. Amabelle demands to know if the sugar woman has a face beneath the mask, whether her identity is that of her subjugation or if she exists behind what confines her. Shockingly, the voice that comes from the sugar woman is “the voice of the orphaned child at the stream” (Danticat, *TFoB* 132). Amabelle. In “Writing Disaster,” Munro uses this dream to exemplify what he believes to be Amabelle's sense of “split subjectivity, of detachment from her previous self” Much as Martine uses a different pronoun to describe herself before her rape in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Amabelle, as Munro argues, is so traumatized by her parent's death that, in her dreams, she reveals a lack of ability to show her real face to the world, that she must “exist in a suspended,

childlike or orphaned state” (Munro 93). The sugar woman tells Amabelle “I am the sugarwoman. You, my eternity” (Danticat, *TFoB* 132). Of this, Munro argues that the sugar woman is positing Amabelle's trauma to be one of a forever recurring case of suffering just like her own: a woman whose life and voice have been taken by the compulsion to labor at sugarcane farming.

Munro's argument is predicated on Amabelle's irrevocable fragmentation as a result of the trauma. Certainly the death of Amabelle's parents resulted in a skewed perception of time and identity as depicted in dreams. Even as a grown woman, Amabelle must confront herself as a young girl through the sugar woman with the padlocked mouth. However, Amabelle's case is undeniably different from that of Martine in *BEM*. For Martine, her rape is not in the past. It, as Rosello argues, “belongs to the immediate present since it is re-enacted, re-presented every night, in [her] dreams.” Rosello notes that Martine feels as if she is being raped every night, and her reaction to the nightmares is often self-destructive. In “Trauma and Recovery,” Judith Herman suggests that those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder “relive in their bodies the moments of terror that they cannot describe in words” (Herman 239). She does not understand and cannot speak about her rape, so in her dreams she “tore off the sheets and bit off pieces of her own flesh” (Danticat, *BEM* 139). Martine's loss of temporal understanding results in a literal fragmentation of perception: she perpetually experiences trauma and, unable to distinguish violence from life, she kills herself to escape the pain. Amabelle's dream experience with the sugar woman differs from Martine's in that while Amabelle revisits



events and characters from her past, her perception is not fragmented in that she is literally forced to relive events of trauma. In fact her dreams take her to different points in her life following her parents' death, such as her experiences with Sebastien.

Rather than being haunted and controlled by her dreams, Amabelle battles the trauma that they force her to confront. The fact that the sugar woman is muzzled because of her interaction with the sugarcane represents multiple sources of trauma for Amabelle: her parents, and later Sebastien, were part of a Haitian movement to the Dominican Republic to find work in the sugar-cane fields, resulting in a life of subjugation and their untimely deaths. Munro argues that in for Amabelle “there is no clear empowering, literal move out of silence and into 'voice' or agency” (Munro 92). To Munro, whether Amabelle finds remedy in her dream-testimony or not is inconsequential as long as it stays within her mind. This further exemplifies her muteness: through the night, she feels as if she is telling her story, but in reality she is silent and alone in her sleep. It is in this point that I believe Munro misses Amabelle's transcendence from empowerment in the dream narration to empowerment in the main narration of the text. Though it is through the dream states that Amabelle faces her trauma, she successfully acts upon it in the living world.

As a young girl, Amabelle is warned by her father not to play with shadows, as they will give her nightmares. Sebastien, she describes, “guarded me from the shadows...At other times, he was one of them (FB 4).” This is eerily prophetic in that her interaction with Sebastien in life is precisely what she revisits in her dreams of him for

the rest of her life. However, as Myriam Chancy notes in “Violence, Nation & Memory,” “Amabelle joins him in this alter-space as she clings to their love and refuses to let it go, or take another (Chancy 139).” Thus all of the dream sections in *The Farming of Bones* serve to act as the “voice within Amabelle’s head” that grows louder and louder. Her dreams exist to provide testimony for Sebastien. “Men with names,” Amabelle remarks in a dream narration, “never truly die. It is only the nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air (FB 282).” With this recognition that the novel begins with her declaration that “His name is Sebastien Onius.” This phrase is repeated frequently and adamantly over the course of Amabelle’s dream narrations, accentuating the fact that the novel itself stands as her testimony and witnessing of Sebastien’s life. She says that his name *is*, not *was*, Sebastien Onius, thus positing *him* as eternity, as the victim of cane-field violence to be remembered forever, while initially it seemed the sugar woman indicated was Amabelle.

Amabelle makes the dream section her testimony to Sebastien, thus repossessing the idea that sleep is a place of silence, a close second to death. She fills the night with Sebastien’s name, his story, and through it, the story of the thousands of Haitians hurt in the same way as Sebastien. While Munro believes that the novel serves to “maintain and valorize the open-endedness and unknowability of [Sebastien’s] life and death” (Munro 91), by ensuring that his story and name is heard, Amabelle creates knowable permanence to his identity. Myriam Chancy notes that by re-appropriating the legacy of Sebastien’s life, Amabelle is able to come to terms with it in the real world. She revisits

Alegria and the Massacre river, foreign lands to the native Haitians but irrevocably the site of Sebastien's death. Through the connection of the cane fields to the massacre in which Sebastien and 30,000 others died, Chancy argues that "Danticat reveals that the relationship of the Haitians to the land is an antagonistic one." By being killed and buried in the Dominican Republic, the Haitian victims, and thus their story, become a part of the landscape. With this in mind, Amabelle returns to the site of her lover's and parents' deaths. She presents her testimony to Sra. Valencia, Sylvie, and the audience of the novel through her dream narration, and comes to accept the fact that she has validated Sebastien by making his story heard. All that is left is to free the sugar girl, the woman silenced by the padlocks of the sugar fields. In lying down in the river, the crossroads between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Amabelle resigns herself to become part of the landscape. However, unlike her parents or lover, she puts herself there by her own volition. Washed by the river, she becomes reborn. Having told Sebastien's story, she ensures that he exists beyond cycles of life and deaths, she returns herself to the landscape, forever infusing the land once defined by the subjugation of the Haitians with a self-empowered Haitian who has re-appropriated and defeated her trauma. Though Amabelle's death is a reclamation of the land, the suicide itself isn't a necessary part of the triumph. Instead, it shows her contentment to present Sebastien's story, and willingness to end her life now that her work is finished.

### **Night-talkers and Finding Angels**

*The Dew Breaker* prominently features the act of community building through speech by its depiction of “night-talkers.” When Dany travels to Haiti to see his aunt and confront their traumatic past, he describes his aunt as a night-talker, like himself. A night-talker is someone who “[wets] their beds...not with urine but with words” (Danticat, *DB* 98). The condition is first described as a curse, one being forced to repeat one's nightmares to oneself over and over, without being able to share their feeling with anyone else. The experience of night-talking contrasts with the nightmares that haunt Martine in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. In experiencing her nightmares, she does not speak, she “hollers, [tears] her sheets and [bites] off pieces of her own flesh” (Danticat, *BEM* 139). According to Rosello, her body “inflicts on itself the violence that it endured without being able to fight back;” she is “left in a state of perpetual aphasia while her body takes over” (Rosello 123). The violence draws a stark difference to Dany and the night-talkers of *The Dew Breaker*. Dany listens to his aunt speak, and thinks to himself that he often woke up with the “sensation that he had been talking, laughing, and...crying all night long” (Danticat, *DB* 99). Rosello describes Martine's destructive nightmares as “a dimension where the distinction between Martine's body and her self disappears, which reduces her to an ambiguous human state where present and past are fused, destructively. (Rosello 123)” Martine's suffering is not the condition of night-talking, where the palannits (Dany's term for night-talkers) take part in a tradition of testimony and community building

In *The Farming of Bones*, Amabelle notes that Sebastien talks in his sleep. Amabelle considers speaking to a sleeping person to be a magical experience: “it is a

miracle, like being loved” (Danticat, *TFoB* 47). There is something pure about speaking to a night-talker; they are not impeded by hesitation or social constraints. The telling thing that Sebastien says in his sleep is that he'd like to fly a kite. He doesn't recount horrors of his life, or tear at his own body. The simple request for a kite epitomizes the power of speech to repossess one's story. He wishes to be free to fly a kite in the limitless sky. This is the power of speech, community building, the dialogue created by night-talking in contrast to the destructive nightmares of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.

The second night he spends with his Aunt, Dany dreams of having the conversation that he traveled so far to have. He wakes himself to the sound of his own voice and it becomes clear that he was actually speaking the conversation as he dreams it. However, his Aunt is awake and tells him that she “should have let you continue telling me what you came here to say.” In his dream, he recounts how, living with the Dew Breaker, he could easily slip to his bed and night and kill him, but that he would hesitate because he could never be sure that it was the right man. When he wakes, he manages to ask his aunt one question about his parents, and she tells him that whoever killed them made the same mistake: not knowing if it was the right man. She offers him a suggestion as to the killer's motivation, but returns to sleep. Dany allows her to sleep, knowing that “they should have a chance to talk again,” though this chance never comes. When he wakes in the morning, she is dead.

He never gets a chance to speak with her again, but because of her death he is introduced to Claude, another night talker. Claude is “even luckier than he realized”

because he told his stories “to himself as well as to others, in the nighttime as well as in the hours past dawn” (Danticat, *DB* 120). The night before, Dany had a dream of confronting the Dew Breaker, but found that he couldn't understand the workings of a killer's mind. Though not haunted in the same way at Martine, his mind is similarly fragmented by the trauma and has difficulty with temporal differentiation. The dream takes him back to a more recent source of trauma, standing over the Dew Breaker's sleeping body, not knowing what to do. As in *The Farming of Bones*, the dreams provide a staging ground upon which the characters prepare to deal with the problems in real life. The day following his sweat-inducing dream, Dany comes face to face with Claude, a murderer. Claude shares his story with Dany and in doing so, gives insight into Dany's desire to understand the mind of a killer. He is surprised by what he finds. Claude is abrupt about his revelation and does not try to defend or rationalize his decision. He was a normal person who did “something really bad that makes me want to live my life like a fucking angel now.” He knows that he is lucky that he is not in jail, instead of “sitting here, *talking* with you” (Danticat, *DB* 119, emphasis added). The luckiest palannit of them all, Claude is able to share his stories with others and build community. His story, like the narrative of the novel as a whole, humanizes the essentialized other. Though the Dew Breaker's exploits are recounted in each story, the opening story that shows him old and remorseful and the final one which shows him young and impressionable. humanize the otherwise ruthless killer. This is the truth that Claude shares with Dany. Dany is haunted in his dreams by the fact that he doesn't know what to think of the Dew Breaker,

the man who killed so mercilessly. The truth is that the Dew Breaker did more than destroy Dany's entire life; he also destroyed his own. The two men are not so different after all, both are traumatized by the Dew Breaker's violence, even though one is the victim and the other the perpetrator.

The Dew Breaker lives with the same nightmares as his victims and Danticat's other traumatized characters. Rather than re-appropriate or repossess the source of his unending guilt, the Dew Breaker is silenced by his determination to cover up his true story. He lives with the nightmares and lies every day. When he was young, he goes to hear the president speak in the city and becomes entranced, determined to join the military police. Listening to the speech, and looking at the president's wife, he "found himself dreaming. He thought he saw...winged women circling the palace dome." He later recounts this story to a "one of the many women he'd eventually take to bed," telling her that he thought "they were angels." She replies tellingly, "You can't afford to be a spiritual man" (*DB*, Danticat 193). She tells him he cannot be spiritual because of the life he lives. If he were to consider the moral ramifications of his own actions, he'd be forced to face his own monstrosity, the trauma of his dreams that he needs to repossess. As a Dew Breaker, he was able to take home many women at night, but was never able to find the "angel" he dreams of, "a soul for each of us standing there in the sun" (*DB*, Danticat 193). He never truly faces his own violence until he meets what appears to be his first angel, his wife.

While it is true that his wife is indelibly connected to his escape from Haiti and

departure from his life of violence, she does not help him to repossess the trauma that haunts his memory and dream. While Anne believes that “She'd been there to save him, to usher him back home and heal him,” she enables him to hide his pain by keeping him silent. Neither of them wants to face the truth, so they help each other by pretending to believe the false stories they concoct. If the Dew Breaker is to face the nightmares of his past, he needs an angel like the one he dreams about, a soul for him.

As noted earlier, the Dew Breaker is finally forced to confront his past when his daughter, Ka, creates the statue that dramatizes and accentuates the falsity of his lies. Before he confesses, he explains to her where she got her name. Annoyed, she remarks that she has heard it all before. It was inspired by his fascination with Egyptian spirituality. “You see,” he says, “ka is like soul...in Haiti, we call you good angel.” Prophetically, the Dew Breaker has named his daughter the good angel, the soul from his dreams. The woman in his past warns him not to be a spiritual man, but when he adopts Egyptian spiritually and gives himself a daughter with the name of a soul, he lays the groundwork for his eventual redemption. Ka, his good angel, forces her father to confront the trauma of his memory. While her mother encourages the silence, Ka inspires his confession and revelation. Only through this that can he repossess the identity he attempted to leave behind but which haunted him at night. Becoming a barber in New York City is the Dew Breaker's attempt to cover his old identity with a new one, but in forcing himself to speak about his true identity, the Dew Breaker is finally able to articulate his remorse. Like Claude, he is a lucky palannit, he can speak his troubles



during the day and re-appropriate them as steps towards redemption.

Inequality of social standing seems to create difficulty for characters attempting to create community with individuals of a different class. In *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat explores the differences between the military police and the oppressed individuals through the relationship between Anne and the Dew Breaker.

During the occupation, the United States also created the military structures of the DR that led to the rise of Generalissimo Trujillo and Haiti, which allowed for François Duvalier to have forceful support for his nationalist agenda. Duvalier's military background and fear of a challenge to his regime caused him to create the Tonton Macoutes, the violent police force responsible for innumerable atrocities against their own people such as the rape of Martine. This police force is the one that the Dew Breaker would later see as a young boy and become inspired to join.

The Tonton Macoutes, though appropriated with a mythical name of a magical creature, are a construct of Duvalier's regime. The fluid nature of the class division intimates the possibility of movement and relations between the Haitian citizens and Macoutes. The oppressed class, though violently marginalized, is not repressed beyond recognition and testimony could be beneficial.

When the Dew Breaker and Anne bump into each other when he is running from the torture center and she is running towards it, he reacted by saying “‘Tanpri,’ [Please], and heard the same word coming out of her mouth (Danticat, *DB* 231).” The Dew Breaker is from the Macoute, a group of men who could go to any store or home they

wanted and take what they wished without consequence. However, here he was, bumping into one of the innumerable lower class citizens, someone who might have been “someone he’d harmed or nearly killed,” and he is begging for assistance. He recognized that she too said please and remembered his mother saying that that connected them until death. By the large military torturer and the small “madwoman” in a “white satin nightgown” pleading for help at the same time, Danticat displays their common humanity. Now, the Dew Breaker finds himself wanting her to help him, the powerful arrogant man whose life is in the hand of the woman whose brother he just killed.

Though he came from a higher class, it is revealed that the higher class, like the subaltern class, is not as homogenous as one may imagine. The Dew Breaker, though a man of great power as a macoute, is a subordinate to many. Though his superior claims to be supportive of him with the situation regarding the Preacher’s death, he understands that she has no loyalty to him--- she would take credit for his actions if it benefited her, or blame him entirely if the government showed any disdain. He leaves the torture center “thinking he was going to be shot in the back (230)” but “crosses the threshold alive” and makes a decision not to return. The book describes him feeling his face, feeling the scar, coming to terms with his identity as a Dew Breaker. Without trustworthy support among his peers and having found common humanity in a stroke of fate, the Dew Breaker decides to take a chance with the lower class. Anne, lost and confused, seeking purpose or perhaps just the kind of community that would keep her from a haunting silence, decides to take a chance with the bloody stranger.

After leaving Haiti, the Dew Breaker erases his identity as a powerful Macoute and stoops down to the working class, immigrant Haitian Diaspora. He blends in seamlessly in a Haitian neighborhood of families who, as the novel shows, he directly affected in Haiti, but who are unable to recognize him. The ability for the former Haiti oppressors to fit in with the new Haitian immigrants in New York is the focus of the chapter “The Book of Miracles,” when Ka believes she sees a notorious killer joining the other Haitian immigrants in a Christmas Eve service. It turns out to be a mistake, but little does she know that her father is of the same oppressor class that she was shocked to see among the innocents in the church. A similar case of dual identity is found with the character Claude. In addition to being young, kind, and friendly, he is also a murderer who killed his father for no particular reason. Rather than condemning him for the murder, the book shows that he has nightmares just like Dany and his aunt, and shows his gratitude for being given a second chance.

### **Trauma and Testimony**

In “Trauma, Memory and History in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming Of Bones*,” Martin Munro examines Danticat's portrayal of trauma in *The Farming of Bones*. He notes that the form of Danticat's novels express fragmentation, which he argues is inherent to the writing of disaster. Because traumatic events rupture the way that one views one's life, it often has profound effects on one's memory and psychological status. Munro notes that “the natural desire to forget is constantly countered by the spontaneous,

troubling reemergence of memories through involuntary flashbacks and nightmares.” The reemergence referenced is aptly represented in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* through the nightmares that Martine experiences. These mental delusions are the result of a damaged sense of time brought on by trauma. Unable to distinguish past events from present, Martine's mind is fragmented and broken in the sense that Munro describes. She is unable to clearly assess her emotions or life situation because the traumatic event has disrupted her sense of time and her emotional and mental stability.

Munro sees fragmentation in the combination of narrative and dream reflections. Through “the unstructured narrative of dreams,” he argues, Danticat uses imagination to transform trauma into testimony, and Sebastien's fate is of great importance to Amabelle. “Amabelle's testimony,” he says, “is essentially an attempt to validate his existence, to maintain and valorize the open-endedness and unknowability of his life and death.” While Munro seems to be correct in saying that Amabelle “hopes to rescue his memory from the anonymity that the massacre imposes on its victims,” one can argue that *The Farming of Bones* does not seek to maintain and valorize open-endedness. The testimony that is the entirety of the narration is not fragmented, for upon close inspection one notices that it has a form and structure that emulates that of coherent testimony. (Munro 91)

The book begins with the refrain “His name is Sebastien Onius,” establishing the text as a testimony of Sebastien's experience and disappearance. Towards the end of the book, the narrator is adamant that the testimony be heard, repeating the line several times.

This comes from her belief that “Men with names never truly die. It is only the nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air” (Danticat, *TFoB* 280). Rather than presenting a tale to the priests or justices, she testifies this book is for Sebastien. Man Denise, Sebastien's mother, becomes overwhelmed with visitors coming inform her of her childrens' death. While Munro argues that, to the end, Amabelle is unsure of Sebastien's death and is looking for answers, I believe that she, like Man Denise, she has had enough people tell her that she saw Sebastien and Mimi die. She knows their fate and perhaps the details aren't entirely necessary. Certainly the book is her testimony and experience as well. In speaking for Sebastien, she also gives voice to a more general Haitian experience. I believe Danticat represents a universality in the experiences of those who met a similar fate as Sebastien through the passage where Amabelle wakes up in a tent with other recovering Haitians. She describes the therapy that strangers feel in the mutual understanding of the stories. While Sebastien's experience cannot be generalized to represent *all* Haitians, the tent scene intimates that it is indicative of the experiences of the other victims of the massacre. Their experiences are aligned in their similarity, finding commonality that transcends a notion of a generalization of their story.

In “The ethics and aesthetics of representing trauma: The Textual Politics of Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*,” Jo Collins argues that *The Dew Breaker* is framed in eleven non-consecutive short stories in order to represent the blurred fragmented nature of the mind of a traumatized individual. Collins sees the format of the novel in the

same way Munro describes *The Farming of Bones*, as blurry, distant, and fragmented. The non-linear nature of the stories shows the pieces of a destroyed collective mind. Unlike *The Farming of Bones*, *The Dew Breaker* has more than one narrator. Collin's argument that the structure is a reflection of a mental state would be more convincing if all the stories were told from the same memory or point of view. Even with Amabelle, the story maintains a chronological nature. The stories that comprise *The Dew Breaker* have ten or eleven different narrators and are organized around a common thread (the Dew Breaker himself) rather than told from one perspective. Rather showing mental deficiency, the novel's structure reveals another purposeful structure of a sound narration determined to tell the Dew Breaker's story. The first chapter reveals the truth of the the Dew Breaker's past, then each successive story shows the extent of his violent past.

A chronological order would display the Dew Breaker's transformation from innocent child to militant torturer to humble quiet barber and father. As a young boy, his family lost their land during the 1957 regime change. His father went mad, his mother ran away, and having no family or home to turn to, he enlisted in the military. He is described as being "mesmerized by the procession of humanity," during his first visit to the capital, though years later he would show no regard for humanity as he ruthlessly tortured his victims. He was a young boy, searching for purpose, amazed by the president's wonder and the taste of his first sip of alcohol. This picture of the young boy is drastic compared to the malevolent killer who tortured his victims physically and psychologically. Through the testimony of his victims, the reader is given a look into both the Dew Breaker's

crimes as well as the general crimes suffered by the oppressed in Haiti. After victimizing them, the cold-blooded torturer turns into the kind, quiet barber. The hands that violently held one blade to hurt citizens now quietly hold another blade to shave customers. The book shows the transformation in the opposite order. First it introduces the present day Dew Breaker and describes his quiet love and adoration for his family. This makes it nearly impossible to imagine that the same man was responsible for hurting all of the victims whose testimony speaks loudly through the novel. Finally, in the chapter where his violence is more intimately explained, the book reminds the audience of his humble beginnings. By finishing with the Dew Breaker's childhood and escape from his life as torturer, the final story humanizes him.

Similarly, *The Farming of Bones* has a coherent form that reflects a mindset overcoming temporal ruptures of a post-traumatic stress mindset beyond the backbone provided by the repetition of "His name is Sebastien Onius." The novel begins with the dream narrative depicting Sebastien as he "comes to put an end to my nightmare" and finishes with night ending, Amabelle "looking for the dawn." At the beginning of the non-dream narrative portion of the book, Amabelle says, "births and deaths were my parent's work" (Danticat, *TFoB* 5). Eerily, this image reappears at the end, Amabelle submerging herself in the river that killed her parents as she sees a man by the river with feet like "Two large birds fluttering damp wings." The river is pulling the birds down, preventing them from flying in the way that it dragged Amabelle's parents under water to their death. These connections clearly indicate a cyclical structure. While this could be

argued as the product of the fragmentation, the cycle reflects the motif of seasons and cycles that is present throughout the novel. Young Rafi epitomizes life to death, families of cane workers pass careers and experiences from father to son, and Sebastien and Yves are said to live by the work cycles based on the recurring seasons: the cane season and the dead season. Amabelle may drown in the river, becoming one with the inevitable cycles of life, but she has made Sebastien's name known which will persist beyond the cycles of life and death, the ebb and flow of the water in the river. Just as her testimony is enough to affect Sylvie, the young and educated servant to Sra. Valencia, when she returns to Alegria, so too will the story strike audiences in a noticeable way.

The ending to the novel is significant in a way similar to that of *The Farming of Bones*. Like the FB, it ends as it begins. The narration travels through time and returns to the events of the first story, with Anne on the phone with Ka. When Ka hangs up the phone, she returns Anne to the silence and “fright that the most important relationships of her life were always on the verge of being severed or lost, that the people closest to her were always disappearing.” This emptiness is similar to when Amabelle screams until her mouth fills with blood as she watches her parents die, the silence and lack of voice is equated to the loss of community. There is “no way to escape this dread,” the fear that comes with the silence, the fear she hoped to avoid by keeping Ka speaking. The dread is in the shape of a circle like the cycles of this book and life. The dread is like the “spirits that left her,” the epilepsy that haunted her and she now knows to have a longer scientific name. With the name, the spirits had left her. I would argue that, in *The Dew Breaker* as



in *The Farming of Bones*, only the nameless die. Though the book ends with Anne alone at the end of the phone call, she recognizes that it is different from all the other phone calls she was accustomed to. Now, for the first time, Ka knows the truth about her father. Likewise, the narration has revealed his monstrosity and humanity. For the first time, his true story has been told. Just as the cycle of seizures ceased with the naming of diagnosis, so too will Anne be able to leave the cycle and dread that she will lose those closest to her. The destruction of the statue was the beginning of a cleansing. Now that Ka knows her father, his name, and his story, the father will continue to speak, breaking the cycle of fear.

### **Expressing Self-Identity in a Meaningful Manner**

It is essential for Danticat's characters in all three of these novels to create self-narratives that are entirely of their own devising. They must escape from confines of imposed traditions, ascribed identities, and traumatic repression in order to reclaim their stories and personal identity. However, as the structure of *The Farming of Bones* demonstrates, it is not enough to re-appropriate and possess a coherent life story and personal identity: the stories that bind and constrain characters within cycles are effective for the very reason that they are heard and understood. In order to liberate oneself and create a self-affirming narrative, the story being constructed or told needs to act to create community. If Ka had made the statue for no one but herself, the power with which she portrayed her father as a victim wouldn't have spoken the painful ironic truth into his

heart. Tante Atie needed Sophie to revisit the story of her father's death in order for it to act effectively to deter her from working in the fields and appreciate the opportunity that she has to become educated. In fact, Atie benefits from the the reminders she constantly gives her niece. Because of Sophie's inspiration, Atie eventually learns to read. Without Sophie, Atie would have been left to repeat the story to herself, forever being haunted by her father's absence.

Through speech and self-expression, humans establish relationships and form communities that improve and, in a sense, validate ones existence. Interpersonal relationships allow one to express one's identity and be recognized. Through speech and dialogue, Danticat explores a Haiti where citizens find comfort in experiencing common humanity with others, even across cultural or socioeconomic boundaries. The permeability of these boundaries implies the ability for the oppressed Haitians---those who need to take charge of and express their self-narratives—to act upon their own social standing in a meaningful manner. In circumstances such as Sophie's, storytelling leads to a self-understanding that enables Sophie to face her trauma and join a counseling group with other women like her. For the tortured in the Dew Breaker, they see that individual acts of brutality do not exist in a singularity and that individual feelings of disempowerment or dehumanization does not mean that one is alone. These common communities, like Louverture and the slaves of Saint Domingue, provide individuals with a force to create change in political, social, and military means in addition to the emotional and psychological benefits they provide.

## **Language and Interpersonal Connections**

Early in *The Farming of Bones*, references to twins emerge as a recurring motif for the countries of the Dominican Republic and Haiti that share the island of Hispaniola. Dr. Javier foreshadows tension between the country when he describes a twin that killed his brother in the womb, and the death of the young twin Rafael signals the beginning of chaos in Alegria between the Haitians and Dominicans. The DR and Haiti can be considered familial in that they share an island, resources, and a colonial background. In the *Farming of Bones*, however, this does not stop one country from oppressing and killing its twin.

In the introduction to his book, “Haitian-Dominican Counterpoint,” Eugenio Matibag remarks that to over-emphasize the antagonistic relationship between the Dominicans and Haitians, one plays into “a reductionist paradigm.” Indeed, while the Dominicans and Haitians are often at odds with each other, there have been historical instances where the two countries and peoples find themselves in similar and occasionally cooperative positions. Haiti and DR are both products of decolonized European settlements that suffer from the same problems of attempting to form social and economic identities with a lack of political structure and experience. The common desire for self-determination has been a historical source of commonality for the two countries. Haiti, for both their interests and that of their neighbors, assisted in fighting against Spain for Dominican independence and in the resistance of the DR government's short attempt to annex the country to the US. Historical examples of antagonism between the countries

are counter by examples of cooperation in recognition of similarities and mutual interest between the two countries. While the similarities in both historical situation, social structures, political motivation, and economic production would seem enough to align the nations in cooperation, the US occupation of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century drastically changed the destinies of the countries. (Matibag 2-15)

As noted earlier, the United States focused on sugar-cane production in the Dominican Republic and caused the number of Haitians working in the Dominican Republic to double in less than fifteen years. According to Matibag, the Haitians working in the Dominican Republic were veritable slaves, considered to be lower-class and barbaric. This way of thinking was perpetuated by the US soldiers occupying the DR who would spit on the Haitians, belittle their practice of vodou, and dehumanize their women in comparison the Dominican women. The furthering of these stereotypes, in conjunction with the rapidly growing number of Haitians and the fact that the Haitians were economically subservient to the Dominicans, created a sense of hostility between the Dominicans and the Haitians. Seizing power through military programs designed by the US, Trujillo pit the Dominicans against the Haitians with the justification that the Haitians were in some way harmful to the Dominican's way of life. While this is contradictory in the fact that the Dominicans needed the Haitian labor force, Trujillo believed that DR needed to control all of the island and ordered the Dominicans to kill all the Haitian workers living near the border.

In *The Farming of Bones* Kongo and Papi are seemingly representative of their

communities and their differences. Kongo has worked in the DR for nearly all of his life and spends his old age laboring the field with his children, who are just as poor as he. Papi is wealthy, powerful and employs many of Kongo's peers. However, following the death of his son, Papi comes to speak to Kongo. Yves and other workers think that Kongo is crazy to talk to the old general because Papi neither cares for or can understand Kongo's position. Kongo responds by saying "we are men." Kongo shares his grievances with Papi and Papi reveals truths about his past. "I told him what troubles me, he told me what troubled him. I feel perhaps I understood him a trace and he understood me." The Haitian and Dominican, coming from entirely different backgrounds and worlds, find commonality in their humanity and shared experience. Upon meeting the Dominican sisters who would join them en route to the river, Amabelle noted that "she couldn't tell if they were Dominicans or a mix of Haitian and Dominican, in some cases it it was hard to tell" (Danticat, *TFoB* 171). These interactions hint to the stark aspects of commonality between the Dominicans and Haitians.

Besides perhaps the obvious similarities of shared environment and resources, Haiti and DR are both decolonized European settlements that suffer from the same problems of attempting to form social and economic identities with a lack of political structure and experience. In a result, both countries have been damaged by the search for national identity and the ruthless rule of dictators. For decades, the Haitians and Dominicans shared similar agricultural and economic practices. This, in conjunction with the post-colonial struggle for political structure and national identity conceivably seemed

to be enough to encourage reconciliation between the countries. However, the US economic occupation of Hispaniola exacerbated the disparity between the agricultural and economic situations of the countries. While this added to antagonism between the countries, the interaction between Papi and Kongo emphasizes the possibility of reconciliation and cooperation (Matibag).

Kongo realizes that commonality with Papi does not mean that they were both granted the same position in life. “Things are never even,” he says, “if it was so, his life and my life would be the same” (Danticat, *TFoB* 144). Papi, however, indicates the common humanity between his community and Kongo's. Papi admits his guilt for killing people when he served in a war as a young man. He felt “like each one was walking kot a kot with him, crushing his happiness.” He blames these sins for the death of Kongo's son. Papi's guilt, like the familial shame that scared Grandma Ife, will weigh heavily on his soul forever. In a way, this guilt is analogous to the recognition of the hypocrisy of the Dominican oppression: the Dominicans, too, were colonized and the Haitians helped to fight for their freedom. Kongo and Papi epitomize the class and culture differences between Dominicans and Haitian-Dominican workers in such a way that their actions can be interpreted to represent that of their people. The Dominican plantation owners and upper-class citizens have economic and social superiority over the Haitians who moved to the country to do difficult labor. This, however, does not rid them of the acts of violence and subjugation that they have committed. Kongo recognizes that he and Papi are humans: he notes that they are men, drawing on their understandings of their

similarities in being familial leaders of shared gender with common, human, feelings and interests. Because of this recognition, they are able to understand each other. He sees that they share suffering, that though the Dominican Republic looks down upon the subservient Haitians, they were also a European colony and experienced similar hardships. By reaching out to Kongo and sharing in their sorrows, Papi uses shared language to show the ability for community across class borders and to offer an apology for the actions of his people.

Papi's kind gesture to Kongo and the Haitian workers provides a stark contrast to the Dominican violence that follows shortly thereafter. While Papi uses language to apologize to Kongo and find commonality, in a similar sense the Dominicans used language to oppress, subjugate and isolate the Haitian workers. Though communication and language enables the practice of using the word "perejil" to identify and massacre Haitians living in the DR, it speaks more to the intolerance and ignorance of the Dominicans than to the difference between the Dominicans and Haitians. Rather than being purely politically and economically minded or historically and culturally engrained, the oppression and massacre was based in prejudice. By complying with the Dominican orders to pronounce their word for parsley, the Haitians comply with preconceived notions of racial inferiority. Amabelle notes that had the General of the DR heard Odette say "pesi," the pronunciation of parsley in her native Haitian tongue, "it might have startled him." Rather than what "he would have expected," he would see "a provocation, a challenge, a dare." Odette's impassioned defense of her heritage, identity and language

would challenge Trujillo to question his assertion that she is inferior. She too has a word for parsley in a language he cannot perfectly pronounce. By uttering the word “pesi” before she dies, Odette dies with her dignity, reaffirming her humanity through the language and culture of her people, an essential component of her identity as a Haitian. Though killed by the Trujillo regime, they cannot control her identity. They cannot force upon her the identity of an inferior human who ruins the purity of the Dominican land. They cannot take away her self-awareness of being a person with a language, a culture, a community, from which she obtains her identity as a Haitian and a human of worth. She maintains a pride not unlike the pride which causes Trujillo to fear her people. That Papi reaches out to Kongo shows that he, unlike Trujillo, is willing to accept the Haitians as humans with the same feelings of sorrow, love, and familial affection. Their successful dialogue and communication shows the ability cooperation and commonality across classes in a way more endemic to their society than the false and artificially constructed prejudice that Trujillo encourages.

Language operates in a similar fashion in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Dew Breaker*. Both a method of communication and a cultural marker of self-identity, language acts as a means of bridging differences and creating community. Sophie becomes excited when she speaks with Joseph, her infatuation and neighbor. She worries that her Haitian background will ruin her chances with him, noting that she “wanted to sound completely American, especially for him.” However, he notices her accent and asks if she speaks Creole. Contrary to Sophie's fears, Joseph like this and responds in a Creole of his own.



He tells her that they “have something in common. Mwin aussi [Me too]. I speak a form of Creole too.” His Louisianian family considered themselves to be Creole as well. This initiates the connection between Sophie and Joseph. (Danticat, *BEM* 70)

Later, Joseph asks Sophie what she would like to do after she finishes school. Sophie, still trapped by the stories and control of her matriarchal family, responds with her mother's wishes. She tells him that her mother thought it would be best to have a doctor in the family. He asks Sophie if her opinion differs and she replies with what he immediately recognizes to be a quote from her mother. Here, he specifically asks “What would Sophie like to do.” He speaks in the third person to emphasize the concept of Sophie as an individual separate from Martine, though her later Marassa story seeks to press the opposite idea. This idea strikes Sophie's consciousness and causes her to realize that “Sophie really wasn't sure.” She shifts to the pronoun “I,” beginning to see herself as an individual separate from her mother's wishes and admits that “I had never really dared to dream on my own.” Joseph presses on, telling Sophie that she can “flow wherever life takes you.” This philosophy is antithetical to the story tradition in which Sophie has been constrained. Her grandmother frequently tells a story of a little girl who is given the opportunity to fly, flow, away with a lark but escapes his treachery when she reveals that it is always the goal of the little girl to return to her home and family, where her heart is. Joseph presents Sophie with an alternative to living in the bounds of her family's constraining rules. She tells him that it is not “Haitian...that's very American,” as if the values are incompatible with the nationality that she so closely connects to her personal

identity. Again, he contests her family's enforced convictions, telling her that he is “African-American,” explaining to her that she does not need to be what her mother tells her or what Haitian society expects her to be (Danticat, *BEM* 72).

The Dew Breaker is a curious case of a Haitian-American: for obvious reasons, he never speaks of Haiti or his experience there. Instead he adopts his new American identity. When the Dew Breaker is finally revealing his true identity to his daughter, he admits that it is easier to tell the story in his native tongue. “I say the rest in Creole' he prefaces 'because my tongue too heavy in English to say things like this, especially older things” (Danticat, *DB* 17). Prior to this, the only way he spoke of his past was through quoting the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, a language neither English nor Creole. The *Book of the Dead*, as noted, was not the Dew Breaker's actual story or identity and only covered the truth. In choosing to speak Creole, he uses the language that he exclusively spoke in Haiti, when he was part of the Tonton Macoute police force. English is the language he adopted when he moved to the United States and created his new identity, which is why he prefers Creole when he speaks of “older things.” He still taught Ka to speak Creole, but excluded the part of his history and identity connected to his language. Now, he brings his Haitian identity to life and explains his past to his daughter, the product of his new identity and life in the US. The Dew Breaker's situation differs from that of Sophie and Joseph in that Joseph and Sophie speak in English and recognize their original Creole tongues as a means of commonality. In English, Joseph encourages Sophie to embrace her new American identity and the freedoms it provides. Indeed, as

Sophie progresses to the point where she forces herself to fail the test and leave her mother's home, she notes to Joseph that he “does wonders for [her] English,” and her new Haitian-American identity. One could argue that this encourages the creation of a new American identity that the Dew Breaker used to hide the truth of his Haitian identity. However, Sophie does not create the American identity to hide any Haitian cultural identity to which she was committed. While the Dew Breaker willingly lived the life of his Haitian identity, Sophie's Haitian identity was never truly hers. It takes her speaking in English with Joseph to realize she can dream for herself and create her own identity rather than creating a new identity to ignore the past.

### **Language of Visual Art**

In Danticat's fiction, when words are insufficient to express a character's emotions or create a life-affirming narrative, visual art emerges as a vessel through which expression can be made. The linear nature of story-telling provides an opportunity to create structure for victims of trauma with fragmented memory and perception. While story-telling progresses from the beginning to the end, visual art exists, in its entirety, instantly and eternally all at once. Usually, rather than create narrative, it emphasizes ideas. A narrative story controls the revelation of information on plot and character progression. In this way, the author can steer the audience's understanding in a way that creates a chronological story and characters that adapt and change. The instantaneous nature of visual art is immutable. The eyes dictate what is seen first in a painting, and

many times it can be seen and comprehended all at once. The subjects of a painting, unlike a narrative, do not grow or change. The eternal existence emphasizes the static ideas represented in the depiction. In *Farming of Bones* and *The Dew Breaker*, character's struggle with their ability to represent a person or story and instead choose to use visual art to validate their existence through the perpetuation of ideas associated with them.

Following the loss of her newborn son, Senora Valencia must find a way to deal with the trauma she experienced. The initial loss causes her to act hysterically, sitting in bed as she “wrapped her arms around her own shaking body.” She “opened and closed” her “empty hands,” trying to represent the loss that she does not understand. Without words, she is “determined to do something herself for her lost child.” Having failed in her motherly duty to nurture and protect young Rafi, she decides that she wishes to paint his coffin, “her son's final bed” (Danticat, *TFoB* 92).

Rafi's story and young death has become a permanent and unchangeable narrative. Painting the coffin is therapeutic to Senora Valencia. She decorates Rafi's “final bed” with an orchard garden and “a whirl of colors...like a sky full of twisted rainbows,” as a means of expressing her desire that he may rest in paradise. As if understanding that this is beyond her control, she paints four hummingbirds near the handles to carry him to heaven. Amabelle remarks that she is jealous of Sra Valencia's opportunity to have material, tangible opportunity for grieving her loved one, whereas her “parents had no coffins.”

Years later, when Amabelle revisits Allegría, she meets with Sra. Valencia, who

quickly tells her that she still paints, and points her to a “large portrait of the bone-white baby boy in the baptism dress.” In one sense, the painting of her baby boy allows her to protect her boy and enable him to exist with her forever. Tellingly, Valencia says she painted Rafi, and not a *depiction* of Rafi. To the victim of trauma dealing with intense emotional and physical loss, Valencia believes that in painting Rafi, he can live forever. However, the disturbing fact that Valencia depicts Rafi as “bone-white” and “in the baptism dress” memorializes the dead Rafi rather than the healthy one. After showing the portrait to Amabelle, Valencia is eager to convince Amabelle that she did not approve of the slaughter of the Haitians and did all that was in her power to save Haitian servants like Amabelle. The immediacy of her apology and the painting of dead Rafi intimates that her depiction is symbolic of the guilt she feels for her country's oppression of Haiti.

Valencia and Amabelle were raised together, nearly as sisters, even though Amabelle was forced into servant-hood when she reached the appropriate age. Valencia feels the familial connection to Amabelle just as the DR is connected to Haiti and Rosalinda is connected to Rafi. Valencia is married to Senor Pico, an army officer complicit in the slaughtering of the Haitians during the massacre. Valencia tells Amabelle that she hid as many Haitians as she could “because I couldn't hide you...everything I did, I did in your name.” The guilt, however, was strong enough that she represented it through painting: the dead Rafi representing both the son she couldn't save and the Haitians that her people oppressed.

The guilt that is eternally represented through the picture of the dead child differs

from the stories that Sophie and Amabelle are able to reclaim through creating a self-affirming narrative. The painting's instant and eternal existence emphasizes the idea of guilt perpetually, without providing an opportunity for re-appropriation in the same manner that linear story-telling does. Her new young servant asks Amabelle about the massacre, and Sra. Valencia remarks that they have never spoken about the incident, and that though it is something that brought her such guilt, she wouldn't even address it with the young woman so victimized by it. Valencia's art is an outlet for her emotions and grief, but does not allow for tangible action or rectification. In the same way, Valencia makes claims of feeling guilt or remorse, yet defends her decision not to do anything differently. "If I denounce this country," she says, "I denounce myself...not trusting [my husband] would have been like declaring that I was against him." Subjecting herself to her husband's wishes, she allows his opinion to overpower hers. Indeed, early in the novel he even controls her mode of self-expression, painting when he instructs her to create a giant portrait of the Generalissimo. (Danticat, *TFoB* 94)

Art plays a crucial role as well in the beginning of *The Dew Breaker*. Just as in *The Farming of Bones*, the role that art plays in relation to the protagonist's self-identity reveals art's inability to fully form a human narrative. The novel begins with Ka searching for her missing father and the sculpture she created in his image. The sculpture is her first attempt at depicting him, "back arched...downcast eyes...rough and not too detailed," the flaws in the wood like the scar on her father's face. The sculpture presents the Dew Breaker in the way Ka "imagined him in prison." Ka notes that she never tried

telling his story in words, but that as an artist she feels most comfortable with this medium. Like Valencia's painting, the sculpture does not create a story for her father, but rather shows him as exemplifying the ideals that Ka imagined her imprisoned father to have: he is broken, weak, and victimized. (Danticat, *The Dew Breaker* 6-8)

The Dew Breaker disappears with the statue and later shows her to the lake where he destroyed it. Though, in the past, he never told the truth to his daughter, he also never sought to promote the lie that he used to cover up his military history. In fact, he and Anne never spoke of Haiti at all. Ka's sculpture depicted the Dew Breaker as a maimed victim and because of the permanence of the submissive posture and anguish, it would have continued to do so forever if he would not have destroyed it. The constant reminder of his own deception is what inspires him to take control of his self-narrative rather than encouraging the false narrative that he created. He tells Ka that he does not deserve a statue, "not a whole one, at least." The incomplete statues represent both that he had been hiding a large part of his identity from his daughter, but also that he is not moral or worthy enough for a full body. This assertion is limited in the same way as Ka's and Valencia's art. Telling Ka that is he incomplete, like an incomplete statue, does not serve to re-appropriate his story or remedy the situation. Visual art, then, can be supplemental to the idea of a self narrative. In the circumstance that one knows the wholeness of a subject –its narrative and back-story–then visual art can supplement the narrative by emphasizing or perpetuating ideas and morals with which one wishes to be associated. Curiously, in the case of the Dew Breaker, the statue would take additional ironic

meaning if one is aware of the falsity of the representation. Here, the audience to the statue actively recognizes the error of the artist's depiction through their understanding of the subject that a narrative provides.

### **Testimony**

Through creating community, Danticat's characters find the common threads in their self-narratives and those of the people in whom they find comfort. Anne's brother, the preacher who is ultimately the Dew Breaker's final prisoner, is persecuted because of his "sermons to the beast," encouraging the Haitian class to question their position in society and the power of the ruling class. Using a radio show, he preached messages that demanded justice for his people. The Tonton Macoutes imprisoned him in order to silence his voice, the voice that represented the stories of his people. On his show, he regularly "denounced the powerful" and spoke out about the oppression of the violent militia. In an attempt to assassinate him, the Tonton Macoutes murdered his wife. He preached a sermon about her death, describing her death in gruesome detail. He didn't even consider it a sermon, believed that that night, it "was more like a testimony." The testimony of his wife's death provides his congregation with a graphic depiction of the violence of the Macoutes, enacted on a woman they all knew and respected. It is this last sermon that ultimately spells his death. The preacher knows this and "already decided to give his life...to be sacrificed for his country." (Danticat, *The Dew Breaker* 200-227)

The preacher is captured and, under orders, the Dew Breaker tortures him.



However, when the preacher shows resistance and fights back, the Dew Breaker shoots him repeatedly. As he watches him die, the Dew Breaker bets that the preacher has regrets. With his final thoughts, the preacher states that he doesn't regret speaking the truth about the repression of his people, and hopes that his death might inspire others to speak the same truth. Thinking to himself, he remarks that he regrets only that he cannot make a sermon out of his final experience. He finds conviction, though, in the belief that the battle he waged and the sermon he would have told “would be someone else's...from now on.” His self-narrative as a voice to fight for oppressed Haitians is something he shares with the others. That it is not solely his own is what makes it so powerful: by advocating for his own story, he has the opportunity to affect the lives of all who share his experience. This power is the great potential of self-expression, the ability to have one's story heard, understood, and acted upon.

In “At the Intersection of Trauma and Testimonio” Marti Caminero-Santangelo explores the testimony of those affected by acts of trauma, particularly in Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*. Caminero-Santangelo focuses on the idea of “synecdochic modality”—one story standing for “a larger collective recounting of trauma (Caminero-Santangelo 8). She cites the example of Rigoberta Menchu’s famous autobiography that opens with the line describing her story as “not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people” (Menchu 1). The synecdochic function that testimony provides is connected to the “ability of the narrative account to give voice to the subaltern who are the victims of repression and trauma” (Caminero-Santangelo 8). In testimony, Claude is given his

ability to speak. The benefit of speech to Claude's life is made evident by the struggles to which he works to attain it. In moving to Haiti, he encounters language barriers, but when he interacts with Dany or those who can fully understand him, his ability as a lucky palannit who can share stories during the day comes to fruition. He recounts his tales of struggle to Dany, then reflects on his fortune at being able to do so, saying, "I'm the luckiest fucker on this goddamned planet...I'd be in a small cell with a thousand people right now, not sitting here *talking* with you" (Danticat, *DB* 119). The emphasis is mine. The testimony that Claude tells is significant in that it is not strictly his own. Like Menchu, his story explains the oppression faced by all those who were oppressed similarly. Thus, in speaking on behalf of the group, with a synecdochic example of the testimony, he gives them the ability to speak.

After she is injured at Massacre River, Amabelle wakes to find herself surrounded by other patients and voices in a medical care tent. What follows is a powerful scene of trauma, testimony, and storytelling. She lies in her bed and listens as groups of victims recount their tales: the victims are nameless, suggesting that their stories are more indicative of a general Haitian experience rather than unique to each individual. As soon as one man recounts his experience, another begins, one voice echoes and follows another, the collective group of voices expressing agreement. The testimony brought them together, having found others who lived through the same testimony. One of the injured men mentions the sight of vultures around dead bodies and "everyone chimed in" to share their experience with the birds. They all speak at once and posit themselves as

the living community, those who saw the vultures prey on their lost loved ones, those who must live with the pain of leaving their family behind. In Haitian tradition, one of the speakers invokes a famous quote about the power of community, the strength of a tree with many roots. “Who said this?” someone asked, “Wasn't it General Toussaint Louverture?”

Amabelle and the victims of the massacre invoke General Louverture because of the ideas connected to his name. An important thing, James notes, is that “his character was quite unwarped” (James 71). Louverture once remarked that he “was born a slave, but nature gave me the soul of a free man” (Parkinson 37). He maintained his intellect and physical condition throughout his time as a slave and emerged to lead a successful slave revolt. Thus, in the mind of Haitian and civil rights activists, he represents the assertion of self worth by a unified group of individuals in the face of great violence and oppression. The call and response pattern of the lamentations in the recovery tent eventually blends into a chorus of voices testifying about the vultures. The vultures represent the Dominicans who both rely on the Haitians to produce sugar-cane but also repress and violently prey on them. Louverture is thus invoked, drawing a parallel between the French slave owners and Dominican farm owners. In the way Louverture provided a sense of pride and self-worth to the slaves which inspired them to improve their own condition nearly one hundred and fifty years before, the injured Haitians find comfort in the idea that they have strength in their community. The stories they tell are not unique; each story is a testimony that represents the stories of them all.

The art of storytelling has the ability to reach out to people of different social and cultural groups. It is an intrinsically human activity that allows for community building to be possible. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie recounts how the stories she was told conjured images of interpersonal connection. Tante Atie would “rock [Sophie's] body on her lap” as she told stories of “fishermen and mermaids bravely falling in love.” Ostensibly, the mermaids and fishermen couldn't be any more polarized; the fragile beauty of the natural mermaids contrasts with the idea of a preying fishermen. The love that brings them together is similar to that of the Dew Breaker and Anne. Anne is fragile and weak, the Dew Breaker a fierce Tonton Macoute who, very specifically, preys on a person from Anne's social class: her brother. However, in creating a new story of interdependence, love, and desire for escape, they find their ability to coexist.

In seeking recognition through storytelling, it is important that the story is being told by a subject who maintains self-representation and whose voice is not appropriated by the listener. A self-narrative is obviously and inherently personal, and reflects an agent's understanding of the culmination of events to happen to them and their reaction. Because of this, their opinion must be told in their words, from their perspective. When a third-party attempts to tell the story of an individual with different life experiences, the speaker unconsciously changes the story by making it familiar to themselves, while the experiences are not their own, and the only person who knows the precise way of explaining it is the person who experienced.

In *The Farming of Bones*, both Amabelle and Yves are aware of the fact that their

traumatic experiences will often be aestheticized and misrepresented. When asked why he doesn't go to the justice of peace to tell his story, Yves notes that the stories collected and “retold as [the priests/government officials wish] written in words you don't understand, in a language that is theirs and not yours.” The stories are then used to attract audiences in radios and newspapers. The truth becomes distorted and facts are changed in order to fit a narrative that the audience is more excited to hear. According to Collins, the reading of testimony turns the audience into therapists rather than readers, causing them to take the position of witness to trauma that they are only reading about. This causes them to become whelmed in “celebratory rhetoric of audience empathy” and enables a “disengagement from social, historical and political realities,” the very factors that led to the individuals pain” (Collins 14). Yves knows that truth of his trauma would not come out in this light, and certainly he wouldn't stand to benefit from the reaction to a story that is not his. When his story is manipulated and changed from the newspapers, it ceases to be his own and the fabricated sensationalist story serves not to represent him but only to engage an audience. However, the characters of Danticat's novels are aware of these dangers. When Amabelle approaches one of the priests, she adamantly states “I have not come to tell you a tale.” She knows that she should not provide testimony to the priest, as it will not aid her trauma. Instead, she frames her testimony around the narrative of the book and and through her return to the DR to confront her past.

It is important that testimony is properly presented to the right audience. For Amabelle, she knows not to tell the stories to the priests with the ulterior motive of

attractive radio listeners or to the Haitian government officials, who have heard the lamentations of their citizens who suffered in the DR, but are neither guilty for the crimes or in an adequate position to assist in reparation. Amabelle needs to tell the story for her own benefit, which as addressed earlier, she succeeds in doing before rewriting the narrative of the river that marked the crossroads between Haiti and the DR, the source of the violence that traumatized her. On a more meta-textual level, Amabelle's narration of the novel serves as a testimony of its own.

Danticat once remarked in an interview that the 1937 massacre is “not taught in school as history.” In another interview she said that the massacre “really isn't a memory; it's an event that has a continuing relationship” with modern Haiti and its social positions. The problems have not disappeared: “we still have our people working in the cane fields in the Dominican Republic” and some people of Haitian heritage in the DR are “taken off buses because they looked Haitian and their families have been in the Dominican Republic for generations” (Danticat). The mundane domestic events taking place at river the massacre and the lack of knowledge of the massacre in general partly inspired Danticat to write the book and make it a testimonial. Like the voices in the camp for the injured, Sebastien's story is not alone. The format of the book allows the audience personal interaction with Amabelle's consciousness, dreams, and her inner voice. Danticat, through Amabelle, provides the testimony for Sebastien and the 30,000 people who were killed. Danticat's primary audiences are from her two homes: Haiti and the United States. The testimony reaches out to the Haitians, who need to remember the

violence inflicted upon them, and the US, whose economic intrusions undoubtedly catalyzed the antagonism between the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

It should be noted, however, that not all of Danticat's novels have metatextual testimonial purposes in the way that *The Farming of Bones* and *The Dew Breaker* do. Whereas *The Farming of Bones* examines testimony on a textual and meta-textual level, Danticat added an epilogue to a later edition of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in the form of a letter to her protagonist. She tells Sophie that her body “is now being asked to represent a larger space than your flesh. You are being asked...to represent every girl child, every woman from this land. I pray that the singularity of your experience be allowed to exist.” Danticat was concerned with the assumption her novel spoke as a testimony for all Haitian women, or is something that one can study to learn about Haitian women in general. She emphasizes that this is one family's experience, not that of an entire people. As noted before, the trauma and re-appropriation of narrative that Sophie experiences, however, is not exclusive to herself. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the testimony should be seen from Sophie and the experience of traumatized individuals, not from all Haitian women. To do so is to make a false generalization about the Haitian people and ignore the powerful victory that Sophie achieves for herself and her family over the traumatic experience that threatened to destroy them all.

## CONCLUSION

Danticat's addition of the epilogue of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* expresses her discomfort with having her characters generalized. In the epilogue, the letter to Sophie, Danticat remarks "I have always felt, writing about you, that I was in the presence of a family." Danticat has forged a relationship with Sophie as a human character in her book. When an audience asks Sophie to "represent a space larger than her flesh" she is generalized to be "every girl child." The desire to have Sophie represent a nation of women causes the audience to lose sight of Sophie as a person, the character to whom Danticat has become so attached. Tired of having her words misconstrued, Danticat clarifies that notion when she reminds Sophie that "not all Haitians are like your mother. Not all Haitian daughters are tested, as you have been" (Danticat, *BEM* 236). Her frustration comes from having her character's humanity ignored and having her text falsely perceived. In a 2003 interview, she notes that she is "writing fiction, telling stories...not anthropology or social research" (Lyons 187).

Her assertion is justified: because she is not writing an anthropological work, it seems unfair to assume that her singular experience can be generalized to represent an entire culture. However, simplifying her work as only stories for entertainment ignores the power of her work for what it is: testimony. Once, when asked if she was the voice of Haiti, she admitted "there are many, I'm just one." Danticat's inspiration for writing *The Farming of Bones* was her understanding that Haiti lacked a historical perspective on the



1937 massacre and harbored racial prejudices much like the one that fueled the slaughter. Her novel provides testimony for the voices of the Haitians who were killed. As the novel notes, “nature has no memory,” meaning that the Massacre River cannot teach future generations of the atrocities of the slaughter, it is through stories that the narrative is told and lessons learned. Here is where one must consider the epilogue of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and her letter to both Sophie and the audience that was too willingly to over-generalize Sophie to represent all Haitian women. Certainly it is fair for Danticat to be concerned when her audience draws drastic and unintended conclusions, especially when she did not intend anthropological consequences. One must see Sophie as a singularity in order to understand how the particulars of her experience: the overcoming of trauma and the creation of a self-affirming life narrative. The reclaiming of the stories that constricted her is what makes her representative of all humans, not just Haitian women.

Stories are the words that provide the memory that nature lacks. Whether Danticat intends to write stories of political or social meaning or not is irrelevant. In fact, it is particularly telling that Danticat seeks to create stories of elaborate prose, complex characters and compelling plots and the inherent storytelling still comes to light. In creating a Haiti as authentic to her people and the world as possible, Danticat reveals the importance of storytelling and self-understanding in the real world. Sharing narratives is an integral part of the human condition, whether it is a part of blatant oral tradition such Haitian storytelling or not. Humans create self-perception through the construction of a self-narrative: making themselves a character in a larger story. This lesson is what is

evident beyond any anthropological or social generalization one may make of Danticat's work. As a voice of Haiti, she proves that though “nature has no memory,” humans do. Beyond literary tradition and novels of entertainment, one must recognize the prevalence of stories in society and seek to create an environment where individuals are free to control their own self-narrative, to find peace in the authorship of their own identity, and to build community by sharing their experience with others.

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