

Université de Montréal

**Trauma, Hybridity, and Creolization in
Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Dew Breaker***

Par Chloé Gonthier

Études anglaises, Département de littératures et de langues du monde
Faculté des arts et des sciences

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Ce mémoire intitulé

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Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Dew Breaker***

Présenté par

Chloé Gonthier

A été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes

Robert Schwarzwald
Président-rapporteur

Caroline Brown
Directrice de recherche

Lianne Moyes
Membre du jury

Résumé

Breath, Eyes, Memory (1994) de l'auteurice Edwidge Danticat relate l'histoire de Sophie, une jeune femme Haïtienne qui quitte Croix-Des-Rosets pour New York où elle rejoint sa mère biologique, Martine. Le récit et le passage à l'âge adulte de Sophie sont une exploration de l'acculturation, de la violence politique, et des abus sexuels intergénérationnels auxquels le personnage fait face. *The Dew Breaker* (2004), un roman divisé en plusieurs nouvelles, raconte les récits de différents personnages dont les vies s'entrecroisent sous les dictatures de François et Jean-Claude Duvalier. Ce texte explore la multiplicité des perspectives étant les résultats directs d'une politique de terreur et de ses effets sur le long-terme sur les différents personnages. Au centre se trouve deux personnages : Ka Bienaimé, une jeune Haïtiano-Américaine qui idéalise la figure paternelle qu'elle perçoit comme une victime du régime dictatorial de Duvalier, et son père, un immigrant Haïtien qui cache son passé de 'dew breaker', un Tonton Macoute, qui travaille comme agent d'exécution violent de la dictature. Ces deux romans décrivent les dommages psychologiques, interpersonnels et culturels causés par la violence d'un régime autoritaire. Dans ce mémoire, mon intention est d'analyser comment Danticat utilise les personnages de Sophie et Ka pour enquêter sur des questions relatives au trauma et aux trahisons émotionnelles. Mon étude soutient que dans ces textes, l'auteurice crée un espace où les notions d'hybridité et de créolisation se mélangent et donnent naissance à de nouvelles formes de discours. Plus particulièrement, j'offre que la langue Créole aide le lecteur à "come to a better understanding of the cultural, physical, and the historical realities of Haiti" (Sarhou 20).¹ En reconnaissant leurs traumatismes passés comme faisant partis intégrants de leurs êtres, les personnages de Danticat gagnent en autorité et choisissent de confronter leur passé. Ce mémoire sera divisé en trois chapitres. Dans un premier temps, j'explore comment

¹ « [à avoir une meilleure compréhension des réalités culturelles, physiques et historiques d'Haïti] » (Sarhou 20).

l'hybridité et le langage Créole créent un espace pour articuler de nouvelles formes d'identité. Dans un second temps, j'examine comment l'auteur utilise *Breath, Eyes, Memory* pour redéfinir la mémoire et les traditions. Dans un troisième chapitre, j'analyse comment *The Dew Breaker* entremêle les notions de violence, les souvenirs et le pardon pour interroger le potentiel d'une guérison émotionnelle.

Mots-clés : Violence, Post-colonial, Créole, Identité, Trauma

Abstract

Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) tells the story of Sophie Caco, a young Haitian girl who moves from Croix-Des-Rosets, Haiti, to New York City to reunite with Martine, her birth mother. Her coming-of-age-narrative becomes an exploration of cultural displacement, political violence, and intergenerational sexual abuse. *The Dew Breaker* (2004), a novel as short stories, recounts the tales of different characters whose lives intersect under the Haitian regimes of both François and Jean-Claude Duvalier. The text explores a multiplicity of perspectives representing the long-term effects of political terror on a host of characters. At their center are Ka Bienaimé, a young Haitian-American woman, who has idealized her father, whom she has perceived as a victim of the Duvalier regime, and her father, a Haitian immigrant hiding his past as a dew breaker, a *Tonton Macoute*, working as a violent enforcer of the dictatorship. Both novels depict the psychological, interpersonal, and cultural damage caused by the violence of an authoritarian regime. In my thesis, I investigate how Danticat uses the characters of Sophie and Ka to interrogate questions related to trauma and emotional betrayal. My study argues that in these texts the author creates a space where notions of hybridity and creolization mingle and give birth to new forms of discourse. More particularly, I provide an account of how the Creole language helps the reader to "come to a better understanding of the cultural, physical, and the historical realities of Haiti" (Sarhou 20). In acknowledging the traumatic experiences of their past as part of themselves, Danticat's characters exercise agency by choosing to address the past. I will thus divide my thesis in three chapters. In Chapter One, I explore hybridity and creolized language as a space to articulate new forms of identity. In my second chapter, I examine how the author uses *Breath, Eyes, Memory* to reformulate memory and reclaim tradition. In Chapter Three, I analyze how *The Dew Breaker* interweaves explorations of violence, remembrance, and forgiveness to interrogate the potential for emotional healing.

Keywords: Violence, Postcolonial, Creole, Identity, Trauma

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Chapter 1 – Introduction:

The Difficulty to Frame Identity

“I was born and raised in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and have never been to my parents’ birthplace. Still, I answer ‘Haiti’ because it is one more thing I’ve always longed to have in common with my parents.”

Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*

“The fetish or stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it.”

Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism”

To claim belonging to one community becomes increasingly difficult in an ever-growing society influenced by globalization. The political tensions have led many communities to flee and seek asylum in "First World" nations such as the United States. However, this massive migration, despite being mobilized by the search for a better lifestyle, reveals itself to be flawed as it creates social displacement as well as inequalities based on racial differences. In an ideal world, each community would grow to accept and appreciate the presence of one another. In reality, people tend to be socially and racially divided, especially when there exists cultural biases.

Immigrants hope to find a balance between their previous identity and cultural belonging. Nevertheless, they face the difficulty of trying to be integrated into a culture different from the one they were raised in and the hardship of not blending in. When the violence of their families’ past is voluntarily silenced and untold, second-generation immigrants perceive themselves as possessing a dual-citizenship but fully identify as neither one nor the other. Belonging to one community, in this instance, is nearly impossible, and the notion of citizenship as the "political, psychological, emotional and social significance attached to the state of citizenship" (Scribner 8) does not capture the essence of how second-generation

immigrants identify themselves. Moreover, the media tends to diffuse a unitary vision of culture where stereotypes are displayed on a large scale. In "What is Globalization in Post-Colonialism?", Ameh Dennis Akoh asserts that "like people, culture can be dislocated. Thus in the present arrangement to dislocate cultures, national cultures will give way to unipolar world culture within the framework of a defining center of power that will foreground one culture over the other ... While colonialism was a frontal, more militant system of conquest and overthrow, globalization is a subtle, more nihilistic conquest and overthrow of all peripheral cultures in favor of the metropolitan culture" (165). The term "dislocation" serves as a reference to its primary definition as the "disruption of the established order," according to *Merriam Webster*. When referring to people and dislocation, Akoh shows that as civilizations mingle and give way to discussions around new definitions, an increasing unitary culture emerges from one central power. Whereas colonialism imposed a single culture frontally, globalization relies on diffuse processes, such as consumerism and popular culture. Globalization implements the idea of a unitary vision of cultures, one that can only be represented by the ruling states, and one that belittles peripheral civilizations and languages as well.

It is not easy to find new ways to represent those peripheral cultures, and yet, literature seems to be ideal to explore different forms of speech. Post-colonial literature, in particular, and authors such as Edwidge Danticat not only introduce a new approach to stories but also succeed in introducing a new way of writing by blending *Krèyol*, with English and French.

Being a second-generation immigrant to the United States herself, Danticat portrays through her writing the difficulty of expressing identity in a world where there seems to be only one way to define oneself. Her fictions recollect the struggle of articulating identity when the lack of information about the past compromises new definitions of selves in the present.

Danticat is part of a younger generation of female writers² that deconstruct previous colonial discourse; she creates a space where differences and conversations outside of a central power are addressed. She shows what has often been silenced and absent from the literature, particularly regarding language, culture, and the building of a new community. By portraying the voices omitted in literature, she shows that they are not represented enough, if at all.

As Kali Lauren Oldacre states, borrowing from Françoise Lionnet's idea of a *narrative métissage*, Danticat's storytelling acts as "a way of putting varied, often fragmented, pieces together to create a clear voice of identity and representation of Self" (Oldacre 7). Thus, Danticat's writing is "a representative voice for a greater community" (Oldacre 3). She represents the cultural hybridity of her characters through their written speech. Indeed, speaking *Krèyol* is a way for them to connect to the motherland, or their origins.

The "hyphen" of the characters' hybridity as Haitian-American shelters them both inside and outside of the home, in Haiti or in the United States. When they connect with their Haitian selves, it is when they appear the most empowered. They acknowledge that they can have both Haitian and American roots despite facing alienation from others who try to define them according to their own perspectives. Sharrón Eve Sarthou asserts: "Danticat imagines a hybridized identity that is privileged and protected by its hyphenated identity, one which makes it possible for the subject to speak freely and safely both inside and outside Haiti. The Haitian-hyphen-American, Danticat suggests, is capable of recovering silenced cultural, family, and community narratives, but only through intimate contact with their Haitian selves" (Sarthou 101). It appears that being able to voice their dual identity allows them to retrace their forgotten and traumatic past in order to move forward in life.

² Some of the younger female writers of Danticat's generation include Roxane Gay, Katia D. Ulysse, Ibi Zoboi, Danielle Legros Georges, ...

Language is the metaphorical wire that connects the missing pieces that the characters are longing for in their search for identity. One of the primary challenges that Danticat's characters face is a linguistic one. The characters either speak *Krèyol* as their mother tongue or as a way to connect to Haiti. However, the very language that provides comfort may, in fact, set them apart from other Americans and reveal their own cultural differences. Nevertheless, when they make peace with their hyphenated, hybrid selves, language appears to be a liberating oral practice that helps them acknowledge their dual citizenship.

The act of writing in English is also a way for Danticat to play with a hybrid form of linguistic poetry. Danticat stated in an interview: "I came to English when I was not adept enough at French to write creatively in French and did not know how to write in Creole because it had not been taught to me in school, so my writing in English was as much an act of personal translation as it was an act of creative collaboration with the new place I was in" (Lyons and Danticat 188). For Danticat, writing in English and incorporating Creole in her narratives is a linguistic way of expressing herself through her first language, as well as with the new language that she learned in school in the United States. Through writing, not only does the author try to come to terms with her old self as a Haitian, but she also gets used to her new identity as both Haitian and American.

Although Danticat's stories are fictional, her approach to writing incorporates many of her own lived experiences through her experimentation with language. As Oldacre states, "it is the very act of storytelling that creates a sense of who we are as human beings, and that writers have the unique capability of recording these stories for those other than themselves" (Oldacre 4). By representing both languages in one narrative, Danticat becomes the advocate for the representation of a problem that her community and others face at large, and with which they can identify fully. In incorporating the *Krèyol* language within her narratives, the author's characters find comfort in their hybrid selves.

Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and *The Dew Breaker* (2004) represent the complexity of articulating identity and the journey that the characters have to embark upon to reach consensus and a redefinition of themselves as hyphenated Haitian-Americans. Both novels represent the hardship of surviving violence, here, caused by the particular brutality of the Duvalier regimes. The abuses of the dictatorship led thousands of Haitians to flee from their country and seek refuge in the United States, where they were then discriminated against as a result of their skin color, class status, ethnicity, or accent.

Breath, Eyes, Memory is the coming of age story of Sophie Caco, who, as a twelve-year-old girl moved from Haiti to New York City. Throughout her short life, Sophie lives in a state of constant dislocation. During her childhood in Haiti, she experiences the intense love and affirmation offered by her maternal aunt, Atie, and her grandmother, Ifé. When she finally reunites with Martine, her biological mother, in New York, she feels alienated by her high expectations inside of the home and anti-Haitian prejudice within the larger culture.

By trying to protect her daughter, Martine ends up pressuring her into being something she is not. For instance, she forces her daughter to use the English language as much as she can instead of *Krèyol*. By recreating a space where she can tell her story, Sophie ultimately finds comfort in acknowledging that she can be both Haitian and American. Thus, the very act of speaking, and through this accepting the violence both of her conception and her traumatic experiences with her mother, helps Sophie shape her identity. In my first chapter, I will examine the interrelationship between Martine's abuse of Sophie through *testing*, as well as Sophie's resultant trauma and potential for healing through language.

Edwidge Danticat's novel *The Dew Breaker* is a novel constructed through the puzzle of intersecting stories. Danticat's book explores the figure of the dew breaker, a *Tonton Macoute* who spreads terror among the various characters during their time in Haiti. However, the novel also begins and ends with the repentance of the dew breaker in the United States. His

family and daughter struggle to find consensus in the definition of their new identities as Haitian-American. Interestingly, the first lines of Danticat's novel reveal that the dew breaker's daughter Ka, cannot identify fully with one culture, whether it be through her parents or her cultural upbringing as an American in Brooklyn. Ka, like Sophie Caco in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, experiences the challenges related to accepting the complexity of her cultural hybridity. Although born and raised in the United States, she feels very Haitian as a result of her close relationship with her immigrant parents. Her fascination with her father is in part a result of the fact that she knows so little about him. Instead, she imagines him to be a poetic figure whose past remains mysterious, idealizing him by putting him at the center of her art and sculptures. However, she is only met with the frustration of not knowing her father's secrets. He later reveals that he was the perpetrator of violence as a former *Tonton Macoute*.

Another reason for Ka's difficulty in articulating identity is the fact that her surroundings do not allow her to do so. In the United States, where she was born, she is differentiated on account of her name and skin color and forced to think of herself as solely Haitian. However, she senses that this way of perceiving herself is not entirely representative of how she feels. The source of Ka's difficulty in the expression of her identity comes from her attachment to her parents' origins and cultural belonging to Haiti even though she has no direct connection to Haiti, nor did she ever visit the country itself. Ka's attachment to her parents' identity is closely related to Lacan's concept of the mirror stage. In other words, the child identifies with the image that his surroundings are projecting on him. The idealized perception of her parents leads Ka to find a temporary sense of identification. However, this elides the Americanness that she knows is also a part of how she identifies.

Different accounts of postcolonial studies have shown that redefining and rethinking oneself and one's identity are strategies used when it comes to implementing the stories of populations who lived under colonial regimes. In this thesis, my intention is not to find or prove

that hybridity is the solution to redefining identity. I want to approach the notion of hybridity as the narrative space that allows for a particular expression of freedom where narratives omitted from an imperialist culture are debated and included within a broader historical account. Bhabha explains: "what is denied is any knowledge of cultural otherness as a differential sign, implicated in specific historical and discursive conditions, requiring construction in different practices or reading" (151). Therefore, what Bhabha defines as "cultural otherness" should be included within and not rejected by history. He adds that cultural otherness should be viewed through a positive lens as a "symbol" rather than a "sign." Indeed, hybridity should be perceived as an addition to history, and not as a subversion of Western traditions. It bridges the gap between the lack of information about the past for a population who lived under colonial rule and history. Bhabha claims that "the critique of western idealism or logocentrism requires that there is a constitutive discourse of lack imbricated in a philosophy of presence, which makes the differential or deconstructionist reading possible, 'between the lines'" (Bhabha 151). To deconstruct Western representation, it seems essential to take a look at what is absent. In other words, narratives that were omitted from the past, such as the ones of Ka or Sophie Caco, should be reconsidered and included in historical accounts; the stories of hybrid individuals who share both Western and non-Western values must appear in history with Western traditions.

Ultimately, Danticat's novels explore the reconnection between past, trauma, and the self. Through her narratives, she unpacks the dichotomies brought on by dominant discourses in Western literature to reveal the voices left on the margins of history. Both Ka and Sophie Caco, through their self-exploration and acknowledgment of hybridity, heal and appear empowered. Danticat's characters find comfort in what Françoise Lionnet calls *métissage* as the new articulation of "visions of ourselves, modern concepts that allow us to think *otherwise*, to bypass the ancient symmetries and dichotomies that have governed the ground and the very

condition of possibility of thought, of 'clarity,' in all of Western philosophy" (Lionnet 6). Lionnet explains that there is a possibility for Danticat's characters to think outside the box. Indeed, there appears to be more than one way to define oneself. Western philosophy or its interpretation is not the only way to do so.

In an ever-growing globalized society, it becomes increasingly difficult to frame the concept of identity. However, Sophie and Ka's exploration of language, trauma, and their respective pasts allows them to navigate the hybrid space of *métissage* and find agency in their new hybrid identity.

Chapter 2 - Resisting Violence in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

“The overall effect of this paradigm is to deprive women of self-presence, of being ... they are inevitably seen as evolving in nonhistorical time. They virtually have no history.”

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes:
Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”

“The past, he reflected, had not merely been altered, it had been actually destroyed. For how could you establish even the most obvious fact when there existed no record outside your own memory?” (121)

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was never meant to be a novel. At the age of eighteen, Danticat was asked to write about her first day in America. She recollects that everything seemed to be “bigger” (Lyons and Danticat, 185) in the United States compared to Haiti, where she grew up. Danticat swiftly moved from memoir to novel, but it seems as though some aspects of Sophie Caco's life can be linked to Danticat - particularly her expatriation from Haiti to the United States. What was once an essay about Danticat's immigration to the United States became a novel as she wrote *Breath, Eyes, Memory* at the age of twenty-five in 1994. The book tells the story of Sophie Caco during three stages of her life – from being a child in Haiti to growing up in New York and coming back to the motherland as a mother. Both in Haiti and the United States, Sophie Caco is confronted with violence, trauma, and abuse. Her body is the medium through which pain converges.

Interestingly, the author distinguishes two forms of trauma, both physical and mental. Throughout her life, Sophie is tormented by the fact that she is the result of her mother's rape from a *Tonton Macoute*. As a consequence, Sophie faces trauma and is burdened by the inability to express herself fully, as her maternal figures often try to silence her.

Breath, Eyes, Memory is also the exploration of historical silence as it portrays a universal account of the “peripheral voices” (Bhabha 148) marginalized by Western culture. Sophie even points out that it is to be expected that “people can disappear into thin air. All traces lost except in the vivid eyes of one’s memory” (Danticat 173). In a country where there exist political instabilities, the civil registration system fails to keep an accurate record of who is alive and who is dead. According to Anne Bertin and Cindy Drogue, the civil state is not expansive enough to cover the entirety of Haiti’s population and cannot register everyone’s birth or death. Haitians find themselves lacking status and existence within records of the French *État Civil*.

For Sophie, the road to accepting herself within this hybrid identification is not an easy one. She acknowledges her hybrid self by being vocal about the subjects that her family in Haiti are trying to silence. For example, Sophie Caco is not afraid to address the act of *testing* as violence towards women’s bodies. Not only is her body the medium to express the abuse and trauma, but her voice is also the one telling about the story of multiple women, the Cacos as well as Haitian women in general. She also affirms her desire for hybridity through speaking *Krèyol* in the United States. Thus, she resists the erasure of her traditions and past. Playing with Bhabha’s idea of the inclusion of hybrid voices within new historical accounts, Sophie Caco affirms and gains agency by asserting her hybrid voice as a new way to find a sense of self. More than a novel about silence, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* also expresses a form of trauma that is never exteriorized. The novel portrays the difficulty of finding one’s voice when some narratives are left out on the margins and limited to stereotypical representations in Western culture.

In quoting Beverly Bell, Sarthou points out that “impoverished Haitian women are virtually absent as recorders of history and as actors in that history. The routine muffling of their voices has expunged the lives of millions of Haitian citizens” (2–3). Danticat often tells

interviewers that she is troubled by the absence of Haitian women's stories and feels compelled to 'tell her people's stories'" (100). Indeed, Haitian women are even more absent from these records, as their existence is silenced from the moment they are born. Danticat points out in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*: "If it's a girl, the midwife will cut the child's cord and go home. The mother will be left in the darkness to hold her daughter. There will be no lamps, no candles, no more light" (145). Danticat uses the darkness metaphor to show how women are at the mercy of societal values and traditions. From the moment they are born, female infants are in no way celebrated. Contrary to the birth of boys, their existence is occluded through the absence of light, which translates into a secondary position within the Haitian system. The constant threat and the habits of a colonial system prevent them from expressing agency.

The allusion to darkness brings together multiple problematic events occurring in the Caco family throughout *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. For Sophie, this is related to the horrifying moment of *testing*. For Tante Atie, her pain is connected to her being forced to witness the man for whom she still has feelings going to bed with his wife, the woman he chose to marry over her due to the latter's superior class status. For Sophie's mother, darkness is when her nightmares surface again. The night is when the Caco women are at their most vulnerable, and where no witness can testify about what is being done to them.

Sophie's future is predetermined by her mother, up until the point where the young woman makes the decision to walk away from her well-mapped future by manually breaking her hymen. Martine perceives Sophie's act as a betrayal and the two end up not talking to one another. The act of *testing* leaves Sophie with post-traumatic stress disorder and a poor body image. Besides, Sophie is not comfortable with having intercourse with her husband and *doubles* to escape. The act of *doubling* permits her to create a sanctuary where she is able to dissociate the present moment from her thoughts. When she goes back to Haiti, she addresses head-on the problems that the practice caused her and the women of the community at large.

She breaks the cycle of silence that grandmother Ifè and her daughters have tried to keep going as legacy. Sophie confronts this problem by calling *testing* a “humiliation” (Danticat 122) that left her with a traumatic perspective on her body. Indeed, she affirms: “I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband. Sometimes I feel like I should be off somewhere by myself. That is why I am here” (Danticat 122). Haiti is the place that helps her escape physically from her husband with whom she feels pressured to have intercourse because “they say it is what is most important to a man” (Danticat 121). By expressing ambivalence about her body, but also by portraying Haiti as a sanctuary where she does not have to be with her husband, Sophie contends that women generally do not give consent to either *testing* or intercourse. Often, they transition from being subject to parental authority to that of their husbands.

In “Unsilencing Défilés Daughters: Overcoming Silence in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory, and Krik? Krak!*,” Sarthou explains that Sophie’s hyphenated Haitian-American values are what help her denounce *testing*. Sarthou asserts:

If these Haitian and Haitian-American women are to be liberated, it will be through speaking openly about this testing, as Sophie does, for it is through open speech that women can collectively reject oppressive and destructive precepts by refusing to pass them on to the next generation ... Sophie can do this because, as a Haitian and an American, she is free to act and move and speak. Because she has the grace of distance, Sophie can choose to talk openly and choose whether to burden her own child by continuing this hateful tradition. (108)

Having lived according to different customs, Sophie’s hybrid Haitian-American identity allows her to have insight into both American and Haitian traditions. This duality, according to Sarthou, is what permits her to address the diminishing and humiliating act of *testing*. Sophie dares to oppose the practices that are in place mainly to control women’s bodies. *Testing* is,

therefore, not a practice to help women protect one another and strengthen the sense of community. Instead, it is relied on to impose upon women's bodies a patriarchal authority embodied in the institution of marriage. Sophie denounces the power dynamic of this political system by stating: "they train you to find a husband..., 'They poke at your panties in the middle of the night, to see if you are still whole. They listen when you pee, to find out if you're peeing too loud ... Then still you have nothing'" (Danticat 135). Danticat's novel addresses how women are often perceived through their sexuality and not through their selves. The novel also demonstrates how *testing* serves primarily as a way to police and control their bodies, perpetuating the legacy inherited from centuries of violence under slavery, colonial rule, and the Duvaliers's political regimes. Indeed, as Sophie's grandmother argues, "secrets remain secret only if we keep our silence" (Danticat 121).

Women's bodies are tied to the nation-state, and inscribing terror on them could be perceived as a way to subdue the population and instigate fear. The power dynamic between men and women and the way violence befalls women's bodies illuminates how women in Haiti are prevented from asserting agency. They are only perceived through their sexual representation—as procreative or sources of pleasure. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty states, borrowing from Fran Hosken's idea: "a woman's sexuality is controlled, as is her reproductive potential" (339). Therefore, Mohanty portrays how by controlling female's sexuality and objectifying their bodies for the sole purpose of procreation, women remain subjected to the state; they cannot express themselves as whole entities. This also ties in with the idea that women's bodies are placed "within a given structure," (Mohanty 341) thus contributing to the absence of women's voices within a system and its historical narratives.

Women coming from economically underdeveloped countries are even more absent from these historical accounts because of the corrupt political systems in which they live. Sophie's hybridity allows for the possibility of looking at the big picture of Haitian traditions.

It enables her to denounce the injustices inflicted upon women's bodies. Not only does she deduce that the other women in her community never wanted to undergo *testing*, but she calls it a "humiliation" (Danticat 122), an act of abuse that only acknowledges women solely on account of their sexuality. She asserts agency by criticizing the violence of the practice, and by deciding never to carry on the legacy with her daughter. However, Sarthou explains: "as the stories of the Caco family illustrate, if the trauma is to be mediated for these Haitians, it will be through free and open speech. This is not possible in the Haiti Danticat describes, a place where, as Ifé tells Sophie, 'People have died saying the wrong things'" (110). Sophie's physical displacement from one country to the other—particularly to a nation where she does not risk being killed for having different opinions—allows her to create a space of "free speech," permitting her to ultimately reject such violent and unjust traditions.

Before resisting through denunciation, Sophie would also use a different form of opposition, *doubling*. She explains: "I had learned to *double* while being tested. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known. The lukewarm noon breeze through our bougainvillea. Tante Atie's gentle voice blowing over a field of daffodils" (Danticat 155). Sophie dissociates her thoughts from what is physically happening to her. The first time she *doubles* is when her mother came in her bedroom to test her virginity at puberty. Since women's bodies are subjected to a failing political system controlled by men, purity, and preserving women's virginity are at the core of social values. *Doubling*, dissociating thoughts from actions, is, therefore, a way for Sophie to regain control and assert agency against an act that violates her both physically and mentally. The first test comes at a time where Sophie is just beginning to develop feelings for Joseph, who would later become her husband. Even though Sophie's mother escaped from the country associated with her trauma, which could be considered a form of resistance itself, she ends up creating and transferring her pain onto her daughter by perpetuating the traditions that she escaped in the first place. Steve Beauclair

indicates that, according to Danticat, “*doubling* cuts two ways. Doubling explains not only how victims separate and compartmentalize within themselves very horrific suffering, but also how perpetrators can live with themselves despite the heinous acts committed against others” (154). Indeed, differentiating the unconscious from the conscious represents how *doubling* is a way to cope with trauma and “violations of the body” (Beauclair 169)³.

In fact, Sophie’s *doubling* is basically a form of psychological dissociation. In “‘Silences Too Horrific to Disturb’: Writing Sexual Histories in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*,” Donette A. Francis shows how Sophie’s *doubling* comes by definition from her mother, who doubled herself while being raped in the cane field. Francis explains: “Martine’s practice of doubling during her rape (is) a survival strategy of disconnection. Rather than construing ‘doubling’ as creative and adaptive, I agree with Herman that ‘though dissociation offers a means of mental escape at the moment when no other escape is possible, it may be that this respite from terror is purchased at far too high a price’” (83). Therefore, *testing* is such a traumatic event in Sophie’s life that she cannot fully comprehend what is happening, nor can she put into words how she feels. Dissociating herself from her present trauma and remembering happy memories is a way to return to childhood when she was free to think for herself and did not have to undergo such psychologically damaging physical examinations.

It is also worth noting that when Sophie doubles, she thinks about Tante Atie blowing over the daffodils. The daffodils, she explains, “were really European flowers, French buds and stems, meant for colder climates. A long time ago, a French woman had brought them to Croix-Des-Rosets and planted them there. A strain of daffodils had grown that could withstand the heat, but they were the color of pumpkins and golden summer squash, as though they had acquired a bronze tinge from the skin of the natives who adopted them” (Danticat 20). The

³ Danticat also explains following Sophie’s first doubling, that Haitian presidents used the coping mechanism to distinguish the horror of their violent acts from their private lives. *Doubling* seems to be a coping mechanism that distances unethical and inhumane effects from moral thoughts.

flower is representative of a movement and acclimatization to a new environment, becoming a French and *Krèyol* hybrid.

Sophie is often associated with the flower that could be linked to her movement from Haiti to the United States. I would argue that it is also representative of the passage from childhood to adulthood. The flower is closely linked to Sophie's childhood and her close, filial bond with Tante Atie. When she doubles during the *testing*, Sophie escapes through her thoughts. She imagines the safe space that her aunt and the daffodils in Haiti embody. However, the fact that she then blows over the field of flowers suggests that she means not only to destroy the connection between motherland and adoptive land, but also between childhood and adulthood. As Jana Evans Braziel suggests in "Daffodils, Rhizomes, Migrations," Sophie loses part of how she defined herself. In other words, Sophie moves from being entirely Haitian to Haitian-American while simultaneously transitioning from childhood into adulthood.

Through dissociating thoughts from actions, Sophie recreates and rewrites her story. The act in itself not only allows her to resist what is being done to her physically, but it also permits her to shine a new light on how she perceives herself. Sophie attempts to do the same by drawing on happy memories that made her feel secure, comfortable, and empowered. With the daffodils, Danticat displays how her characters resist the very notion of violence by means of tradition and legacy, she also pays attention, though subtly, to Sophie's créolité.

The hybridity and the *métissage* of the daffodil, reminiscent of Sophie's own hybrid self, does not conform to the idea of the "marqueur culturel d'une globalisation heureuse [cultural marker of a happy globalization]" (Vergès 221). In *Le Ventre des Femmes*, Françoise Vergès points out that in many scholarly articles and theses in social sciences, the word *métissage* is used in a way that differs from its primary meaning:

L'histoire du peuplement est racontée comme la rencontre d'une série de communautés qui se succèdent chronologiquement pour aboutir au métissage ...

Cette adoption s'est faite au prix de l'effacement de l'histoire du métissage et de son utilisation stratégique ... le métissage a été, historiquement, la conséquence du viol des femmes noires esclaves ou libres par des Blancs, puis du droit de cuissage des planteurs et des bourgeois. Le métissage apparaissait alors comme une stratégie antiraciste qui contestait la fiction d'une race blanche pure (Vergès 222)⁴

Vergès explains that it is essential to remember that the term *métissage* is a political term that condemns the differentiation between the enslaved population and the ones in power. Therefore, Sophie's dream of the daffodils appears bittersweet. It is not only a happy memory; it also serves as a strategy to show that *testing* is a consequence of women's submissiveness to a colonial system. The daffodils' change of color alludes to Vergès's idea of the fictive "pure white race," as the daffodils represent *métissage* too. The flower was brought over by the settlers and then subsequently adapted to its new environment. Therefore, the allusion to the flower helps Sophie assert agency and rewrite history; she resists the new definitions of *métissage* brought by globalization by reminding us that *métissage* is in essence a discriminatory term.

The daffodils also bridge the gap between Danticat's text and Bhabha's idea of hybridity. In "The Location of Culture," Homi K. Bhabha explains that hybridity in postcolonial texts stands as the anti-text against previous authoritative forms of speech present in Western literature. He explains:

The conceptual boundaries of the west were busily reinscribed in a clamor of counter-texts – transgressive, semiotic, ... deconstructionist – none of which

⁴ [The history of settlement is told as an encounter of multiple communities that succeed each other chronologically and result in *métissage* ... This adoption is made at the cost of the erasure of the history of *métissage* and its strategic utilization ... Historically, *métissage* has been the consequence of the rape of enslaved or free black women by white males, followed by the 'droit du seigneur' of the farmers and bourgeois. *Métissage* then appears as an anti-racist strategy that contests the fiction of a pure white race] (Vergès 222)

pushed those boundaries to their colonial periphery; to that limit where the west must face a peculiarly displaced and decentred image of itself “in double duty bound,” at once a civilizing mission and a violent subjugating force. It is there, in the colonial margin, that the culture of the west reveals its “différance,” its limit-text, as its practice of authority displays an ambivalence that is one of the most significant discursive and psychical strategies of discriminatory power – whether racist or sexist, peripheral or metropolitan. (148)

Bhabha's analysis of otherness suggests that there should be a dismantlement of the so-called objectiveness within history. He criticizes history as it shows colonial power and omits the discourses that lay outside the scope of one representation of power. Bhabha emphasizes the importance of including the narratives of hybrid voices within history. He pinpoints its logocentric as well as ethnocentric qualities. In other words, discourses around particular sets of identities and languages seem far too absolute and undisputed. In “The Other Question,” Bhabha challenges these two notions by wanting to make hybrid voices part of a new reading of history, one that does not only focus on difference, but that incorporates omitted narratives in collective memory.

Danticat gives voice to narratives like the one of Sophie and the daffodil, which, having adapted to their new environments, contribute to the rewriting of history, or at least offer a narrative that can be added to broader historical accounts; she produces narratives that are left out of Western representations. In “Imagining Post-colonialism as a Revolutionary Reality,” Nadia Ragbar describes how Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* plays with Bhabha's idea of positing “historicism (post-colonial as an era that breaks from colonialism) and a 'post' invoked by Bhabha, which strives to move beyond the atrocities committed in history” (122). She suggests that post-colonialism would operate alongside colonialism “as a parallel movement of resistance” (122). In this instance, post-coloniality in history would be the entity against the

historical colonial representation that would allow for a new rewriting of history. However, critics, like Anthony Easthope, argue that the term “post-colonial” was created primarily by the West and cannot resist Western authority in history. He illustrates how Bhabha’s idea of hybridity “exists only to vanish into difference, like those subatomic particles which are present only for the millionth of a second in which they are photographed and have no other existence” (344). Bhabha’s philosophy of presence, that is to say, the presence of hybrid voices in history, appears inconsistent with Easthope’s, as it fails to “relativize identity ... (Bhabha) is stuck with a notion of absolute identity which he is opposed to; he is therefore driven back on to a binary opposition: either full identity or no identity at all, only difference” (Easthope 344-5). In other words, Easthope argues that lack of explanation around the notion of presence belittles Bhabha’s definition of hybridity as it fails to erase the binary between colonial power and difference. Therefore, Easthope, in his essay “Bhabha, Hybridity, and Identity,” emphasizes Bhabha’s ambiguous position on the concept of hybridity. Anthony Easthope concurs that, Bhabha, in trying to defend hybrid voice in the “interstices” (Bhabha 2)— in other words, neither binary nor operating under the assumption of a single form of identification— is choosing one. Easthope explains that Bhabha’s notion of a “dominant meaning in a dominant culture” (Easthope 343) falls short of a definition of hybridity. I would argue that postcolonialism and hybridity allow for a space of resistance that contributes to shining a new light on history. It creates a space where hybrid voices can express themselves and resist silence and misrepresentations within history. However, to understand how colonial power established its authority and “difference” (Easthope 344), it is essential to pay attention to the different processes of marginalization. For example, Ragbar suggests: “it is the willingness to account for subversive appropriations of language, theory, and cultural forms, which enables the recognition that wherever there is any degree of potential for agency postcolonialism does not erase the reality of ongoing persecution but rather shines a light on its very existence” (123).

Hence, a redefinition of hybridity and resistance emerges when stereotyping is addressed. It denounces the imbalance between what globalization intends to do by imposing one culture upon others and exposes the multiplicity of cultures and voices as well as how these voices can be equally represented alongside Western representation.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the perpetuation of a colonial system is denounced because of the terror and fear inflicted on bodies and what it creates as a legacy. This idea ties in with the use of memory as well. Danticat's characters live under the Duvaliers regimes that spread terror among the population, particularly with their use of the *Tonton Macoutes*. It seems even more apparent with regard to women, who are continuously reminded of their sexual vulnerability by the *Tonton Macoutes*. Danticat even points out that what she remembers most from her time in Haiti during the Duvaliers regimes is a "lot of silence" (Shleppe 44). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the narrator describes the *Macoutes*:

In the fairy tales, the *Tonton Macoute* was a bogeyman, a scarecrow with human flesh. He wore denim overalls and carried a cutlass and a knapsack made of straw. In his knapsack, he always had scraps of naughty children, whom he dismembered to eat as snacks. *If you don't respect your elders, then the Tonton Macoute will take you away.* Outside the fairy tales, they roamed the streets in broad daylight, parading their Uzi machine guns. *Who invented the Macoutes? The devil didn't do it and God didn't do it ... the Macoutes, they did not hide.* When they entered a house, they asked to be fed, demanded the woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom. Then all you heard was screams until it was her daughter's turn. (137)

What was once a fairy tale to scare young children and keep them from making mistakes, serves as a way to sow terror among the Haitian population. The fairy tale as a part of the unconscious mind and the world of dreams is brought to reality; now it does not only concern children, but

also, and first and foremost, Haitian women. Danticat also points out the violence of their presence by recalling that they would roam out “on the streets in broad daylight” (137), therefore destroying any possible mental escape through imagination and dreams. Here, you cannot escape through the unconscious mind; instead, the *Tonton Macoute* is there as a reminder that the Haitian state has absolute control over its citizens. Submission to the militia is total and opposition could lead to losing one’s life. It is hard to know whether Danticat tried to insert her narrative consciousness in through the use of italics; however, the author informs the reader about the atrocities of the *Macoutes*. The word “elders” could have easily been replaced by “settlers,” in this idea of colonial presence in Haiti. By imposing their colonial views in Haiti, the settlers deprived the Haitian population of their cultural heritage. It is through imagination that Haitians passed down their knowledge and customs to future generations. Nevertheless, by politically preventing the community to create imaginatively and by making them fear their own beliefs, the colonial regime slowly implemented its system. In order to resist this colonial subjection, Ragbar suggests that there is a “refusal to be imaginatively colonized, and the accompanying drive to fight tooth and nail against the dangerous manifestations of colonial internalization. And obviously, the colonial project and subsequent dictatorships deemed it necessary to strip its victims of an autonomous identity and imagination” (Ragbar 113). Indeed, by depriving Haitian women of control over their bodies, it seems as though the *Tonton Macoutes* are there to remind them that they do not get to exist, nor think and act autonomously. The presence of the *Tonton Macoute* could be considered as the continuation of a colonial system. The Duvaliers, whose initial intent was supposedly to re-establish the culture and rights of the Haitians, ended up reproducing a form of domination, thus establishing an unjust and violent system. The figure of the *Tonton Macoute* deprives the population of their right to dissent and thereby improve their living conditions. However, it also prevents the community and Haitian women from gaining any measure of agency and

expressing autonomous identity. The struggle for the Caco women of Danticat's novel to resist is threefold: remembering, forgetting, or finding a way to cope with trauma.

Furthermore, when Danticat questions the existence of the *Macoutes*, it seems as though she addresses Catholicism by claiming that they were invented neither by God nor the Devil. They are the result of the Haitian imagination, and yet the emblem confronts the religion introduced by settlers. She rejects the very idea that the *Macoute* is a product of Catholicism. Instead, they seem to be a representation of the perpetuation of violence and trauma. In "The Trauma of Black Haitian Womanhood in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*," Marianna Eerinen calls attention to the paradox of female sexuality in Danticat's novel where Vaudou traditions collide with Catholicism. She claims: "the contradiction between the values of Vaudou and Catholicism contains the force of trauma, because the ideals are impossible to fulfill, and it creates the paradox of female sexuality. In the novel, Haiti is a patriarchy, where women have a very precisely determined place in the society. The trauma is created because (...) women themselves (have no) influence on their own sexuality" (36). The women of Danticat's novel are forced into submission by a violent Haitian authority embodied in the *Tonton Macoute*. They cannot escape their grasp. In that sense, the character of Erzulie, the bold and sexually liberated character in Haitian tradition, clashes with the Catholic values brought by the colonial system. Haitian women in Danticat's novel cannot be free to express sexual desire because Catholicism prevents them from doing so. However, they cannot behave like Erzulie because her freedom of expression only exists in the world of representation and challenges the prevailing religion in Haiti, Catholicism.

Throughout *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie Caco resists violence by dint of *doubling* or by denouncing and voicing the injustices of a violent system, but she also does so through the use of language. It is in the very act of speaking that Sophie Caco finds agency and a way to affirm her hybridity. Danticat's use of the English language throughout the novel does not

resemble French, nor can it be likened to *Krèyol*. English, it seems, is a way to escape and puts distance between Haiti and Sophie in the United States. It is also a way for her to avoid the stereotyping that she faces in school as a young girl, as she describes her hatred for the school that she attends in New York. Indeed, she claims:

I never said this to my mother, but I hated the Maranatha Bilingual Institution. It was as if I had never left Haiti. All the lessons were in French, except for English composition and literature classes. Outside the school, we were “the Frenchies,” cringing our mock-Catholic-school uniforms as the students from the public school across the street called us “boat people” and “stinking Haitians.” When my mother was home, she made me read out loud from the English composition textbooks. The first English words I read sounded like rocks falling in a stream. Then very slowly, things began to take on some meaning. (Danticat 64)

Sophie describes how, by attending the Catholic school in New York, she feels like she is not fully integrated within her new country’s culture. Instead of moving away from a colonial system that seeks to impose its domination by use of French and religion, primarily through power structures such as schools and administrations, Sophie still is a part of this system, only this time, she is in New York. Sophie’s mother helps her improve her language skills through composition books. As she points out, “there is great responsibility that comes with knowledge” (Danticat 64). In this instance, Sophie’s knowledge of English, just as Danticat’s, helps them to recollect the oral stories of their existence and past in Haiti. They participate in the writing of the oral traditions that shape their Haitian identity, history, and past.

With knowledge, Sophie Caco is armed with a double-edged sword to resist by use of English and *Krèyol*. The use of the French language points to the continuation of a hierarchy between the state and the population. By imposing French as the official language, it is clear that the French colonial system would seek to retain power over the community, mainly

through the difference between social classes. Undermining any other languages that might push back against the dominant state-imposed language only further consolidates the State's power over the colonized. In the "Location of Culture," Bhabha argues that "in the context of a colonial society, those strategies of normalization ... play on the difference between an 'official' normative language of colonial administration and instruction and an unmarked, marginalized form – pidgin, Creole, vernacular" (152). Bhabha explains how *Krèyol* is a resistance tool to colonial power for the Haitian population, as it is the language that the colonial state does not speak nor have power over. *Krèyol* appears thus as a threat to the French language that is at the centre of governmental and educational structures. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, English is not part of the official languages used by the French colonial power in Haiti. Therefore, speaking both *Krèyol* and English interchangeably is a way for Sophie Caco to subvert colonial speech. Sophie is able to claim, not only a sense of identity but also, and above all, a sense of agency.

The code-mixing of the two languages is also a way for Danticat to assert creativity, and it is the link between Sophie's Haitian and American identities. Somehow, language is the metaphorical wire - the hyphen - that allows Sophie to consider herself fully Haitian-American. *Krèyol*, it seems, is a way for Danticat to provide a glimpse into Haitian traditions and culture, especially when she uses *Krèyol* expressions and proverbs. By interweaving *Krèyol* with English, Danticat gives her characters something to hold onto. In other words, sharing the same mother tongue helps Sophie gain the trust of other members of the Haitian diaspora. On the other hand, speaking English fortifies Sophie's new American values. Hence, when Danticat uses a proverb in *Krèyol* and translates it into English, she makes the connection between the two languages and cultures possible. However, Danticat insists on the fact that Sophie's progressive knowledge of English is not without obstacles. At first, Sophie prefers speaking in *Krèyol* when she first comes to the United States, but she is soon met with her mother's intent

to speak only English both inside and outside the home. Sophie struggles to keep her Haitian roots and mother tongue, both of which are important to her, when she learns English at school. Eventually, she succeeds in creating a hybrid language when she uses both languages interchangeably. Sarthou claims that Danticat not only “use(s) language to illustrate the progress of an immigrant’s journey toward hybridity, she sometimes exposes individuals’ insecurity through the ways they exhibit their attitudes toward their own language capabilities” (114). Sophie’s journey to master the English language is not an easy one, as she struggles to formulate words and sentences. However, the resemblance that certain English words bear to French, as well as the use of *Krèyol* during “heated political discussion” (Danticat 64) - whenever she hears her mother speaking to Marc - help her develop and improve both her speaking and listening comprehension skills. In this sense, it is the struggle that Sophie faces that allows her to “take some things from one culture and combine them with another to create a common language” (Danticat and Lyons 188). English creates a neutral space where Danticat can retell the stories without using French - as the language imposed by a dominant power- or *Krèyol*.

Danticat also fuses English with *Krèyol* to recollect the orality of Haitian traditions. She purposely avoids using French in an attempt to distance herself from a language laden with colonial connotations and peppers the text with *Krèyol*. The *Krèyol* language is itself a hybrid form resulting from a mix between the enslaved populations’ dialects and the French language spoken by the colonizers in the Caribbeans. The language remained purely oral as the slaves had no access to education nor did they have a way to develop the language’s lexicography. Danticat indicates that for many years “there were not yet standard spellings and grammatical rules that everyone agreed on” (Lyons and Danticat 189). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat uses the *Krèyol* language primarily through proverbs and folktales. Her attempts to write in *Krèyol* are also followed by translations in English as if her approach to writing in *Krèyol* is

also tentative. These tales have an educational value as they pass on various morals specific to Haitian culture. They also transmit through imagery the stories and trauma that happened within the Haitian community. For example, Ifé says: “‘Tim, tim,’ she called. ‘Bwa chèch,’ they answered. ‘Tale master, tell us your tale.’ ‘The tale is not a tale unless I tell. Let the words bring wings to our feet’” (Danticat 122). When Sophie’s grandmother gathers the villagers around to remember a story, she uses the *Krèyol* language to engage the audience’s attention to the tale by use of “Bwa chèch”. Ifé goes on to tell the story of a young girl who has been tricked by a bird who wanted to sell her heart to a King and concludes by telling the audience that the little girl will never go back to the bird. The tale, it seems, draws a metaphorical parallel between the traumatic past and the present through a moral approach: “The girl ran and ran all the way to her family village, and never did she come back to the bird. If you see a handsome lark in a tree, you had better know that he is waiting for a very very pretty little girl who will never come back to him” (Danticat 124). Ifé uses the image of the bird to compare the little girl and Haitian women in general. From the beginning on to the end of the tale, Nadia Ragbar points out that the reader has been tricked into Danticat’s text as it is, in fact, a *Krèyol* text. Through the tales, Ifé tries to recall the trauma that women from the community have had to endure in the past. Sophie grew up listening to the tales of different women who had to undergo different sorts of ill-treatments, but also who learned to deal with and find a sense of hope through them. In a way, Grandmother Ifé and Tate Atie’s tales accompany Sophie throughout her childhood as cautionary tales to her role as a woman, particularly as a potential maternal figure in the community but also as sign of unity between Haitian women. Ragbar adds that Danticat’s use of English to reconstruct the tales “is a testament to the imagination’s ability to stand against ... colonization despite its treacherous physical, psychological, and emotional toll. Aside from imbuing her texts with orality, as a writer, Danticat changes the parameters of the novel as it is written in English through her hybrid use of language. Her writing is peppered

with Haitian Creole” (119). Danticat’s use of orality and imagination, particularly through *Krèyol* and folk tales, allows resistance against a colonial system that seeks to deprive Haitians of their traditions and language. By recollecting folk tales, Danticat points out that women are the storytellers and conveyors of Haitian tales. Sophie’s mother, however, breaks away from the role of *porteur d’histoire* first by leaving Haiti for the United States, and second, by taking her own life. Sophie Caco retraces the footsteps of her mother and ancestors with the help of Atie and Ifè. She names and denounces the inconsistencies of an unjust system towards women and becomes the spokesperson for new traditions, ones that do not perpetuate violence against women and their children, and the mediator for the future generation.

In addition to successfully translating orality in her text, Danticat, through her writing, reconsiders women’s voices and their place in Haitian society. The writing space becomes the entity that moves away from political statements to denounce what has been silenced, particularly for women. Danticat makes use of the *palé andaki*, a writing technique that has a double meaning. In other words, the *palé andaki* allows for an obvious meaning understood by all Haitians, and another hidden, understood only by a few (Jonassaint). Cordova adds that Danticat’s use of the technique is « une ruse d’allégorie ... Aux carrefours, l’allégorie cumule des souvenirs d’une époque sans mémoire certaine, réimpliquant l’individu dans la question du rapport entre le personnel et la culture. Sa polyvalence actualise des passés et, désengageant le politique de l’écriture tout en l’impliquant par les retours au passé, elle construit les non-dits du passé silencieux »⁵ (Cordova 497). Danticat uses the *palé andaki* technique to reveal the inconsistencies of ancient traditions. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the *palé andaki* helps Danticat link the past with the present. It signifies that despite Sophie’s struggles with how she feels and

⁵ “a ruse for allegory ... At crossroads, the allegory combines memories of an era without certain memory, involving the individual in the question between the personal and the culture. Its versatility actualizes the pasts and disengage itself from the politics of writing while implying it in the return of the past; it adds up to the unspoken of the silenced past” (Cordova 497)

what she has experienced during her adolescence and as an adult woman, the past as well as her ancestors' past must be remembered. Danticat's allusion to folk tales contributes to showing that Sophie's life is just one example of what Haitian women have experienced. Danticat's writing helps to make the connection between Sophie's ancestral past and present that, ultimately, allows her to find a way to alleviate her pain. Danticat succeeds in retaining the essence of the *Krèyol* language's orality in her text, and thus, restores collective memory.

Chapter 3 - *The Dew Breaker*: Violence, Forgiveness, and Empowerment Through Remembering

“These people don’t have far to go to find their devils. Their devils aren’t imagined; they’re real.”

Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*

“Silenced through history, institutional oppression, European languages and discourse, members of the Haitian diaspora, like Ms. Hinds, are deprived of a voice.”

Anne Robinette, *Bilingual and Bimodal Expression: The Creolization in Edwidge Danticat’s Oeuvre*

Almost ten years after the success of her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Edwidge Danticat provides yet another account of a fragmented Haitian society through *The Dew Breaker*. Written in 2004, the novel as short stories recounts the difficulty of seeing both through the eyes of a character who is responsible for trauma and violence and another who has to shoulder the burden of a brutal legacy. *The Dew Breaker* presents different stories that intersect with each other. These stories cover the same themes: violence, forgiveness, memories, but first and foremost, trauma. During an interview on *The Morning News*, Danticat mentions that her novel’s title comes directly from a *Krèyol* expression that she translated into English: *choukèt laroze*. She adds: “it really means somebody who breaks or shades the dew. That’s where that comes from. Creole is very forgiving of things like that” (Birnbaum 1). She reflects on the bittersweet aspect of a Creole expression that shows how nature and human actions are intrinsically interconnected. Danticat’s title, therefore, represents a direct fragmentation that echoes throughout the novel. The story centers on one family, consisting of Ka, her mother, father, and on the stories that happened in the past when the unnamed character known as the dew breaker was a *Tonton Macoute*. Danticat’s stories in *The Dew Breaker* are the results of a failing system. They explore which particular sets of traumas the various characters experience after their existence in Haiti and their recovery by moving away from

the Motherland and to the United States. In *The Dew Breaker*, the characters face discrimination based on their skin color, language, and the misinterpretation of their identity. Danticat's stories explore the duality between victims of the Duvaliers violent regime and perpetrators of political oppression. She analyzes how the different characters fail to grieve and heal from the trauma they experienced in the past. In this chapter, I intend to analyze how the different characters are haunted still by their existence in Haiti and how they try to find a sense of self in the United States. While some of those characters choose to forget about their past, they are confronted with reality when they get to meet other Haitians in their adopted land, and possibly, the ones who once tortured them. It appears that the ways in which the characters find solace is through remembering the past and accepting it as part of their existence. Another way for them to cope is through speech. Not only does the act of speaking relieve them from the burden of their grief, but it also allows them to address, if not forgive, the violence they were subjected to in Haiti. Language also shows the difficulty of articulating feelings into words. For some of them, language cannot grasp what they endured. Some of these characters decide to either voice their pain orally or keep their silence when they move to the United States.

Thus, sometimes language fails to recount the trauma of Danticat's characters. Speaking *Krèyol* is also what ties the Haitian diaspora together in the United States, and has the potential for catharsis. It is when they acknowledge and voice their trauma for the benefit of other members of the diaspora that Danticat's characters appear most empowered. However, speaking *Krèyol* is what often alienates Haitians from other Americans who wrongly assume, based on racist stereotypes, that Haitians are illiterate or uncooperative in learning to speak English. Speaking *Krèyol* is also a way to keep Haitian traditions, culture, and history alive among the diaspora, and resist the very attempt of the American system to impose English as sole language in the United States.

The *Krèyol* language allows for the recognition and visibility of the Haitian diaspora in the United States, often absent or marginalized in historical accounts and society. Thus, Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* accounts for both the psychological as well the narrative power to express one's traumatic experience through language or its failure to do so. She also points out that language is a fraught space that shows racial inequity among white and black Americans. Danticat asserts how language sometimes fails to transcribe an experience and its psychological impact into a speech act. She tells the journey that her characters undergo to find a sense of identity when they experience direct or indirect psychological trauma.

The "Book of The Dead," Danticat's first chapter starts off with the difficulty for Ka, a young Haitian-American to find a sense of identity. We learn that Ka's last name Bienaimé, automatically sets her apart in Brooklyn where she lives and where she spent all of her life. She is met with frustration when two police officers begin investigating her father's disappearance. When asked about her and her father's origins, she immediately feels resentment towards the police officer as he seems to address himself to "someone else" (Danticat 3). The police officer places a distance between Ka and himself, pronouncing her name in a way that makes her feel like an alien in the country of her birth. Ka's name conveys foreignness in the eyes of the "baby-faced, short, white Floridian" (Danticat 3), as he automatically assumes that she is, just like her father, from another country. The officer's intention appears twofold: indeed, not only does he attempt to silence Ka's voice by mispronouncing her name, but he does so from a position of privilege, making her feel unworthy of being in the United States. Danticat points out the self-inquiry that the young female character is trying to address as she progresses in life. She acknowledges that there are missing pieces in her story, which keep her from affirming herself.

One of the causes of Ka's social and individual displacement is related to her attachment to her Haitian parents. However, she has no direct affiliation to Haiti. Ka identifies

primarily with the idealized version of her parents, particularly with that of the father. Yet, she also acknowledges the complexity of her identity, as Haitian-American as opposed to solely Haitian. The novel begins with Ka's ignorance of and fascination with her father. She imagines him as a poetic figure whose past is shrouded in mystery, and even idealizes him by putting him at the center of her art and sculpture. Ka describes her father as a "quiet and distant man" (Danticat 13). Through her sculptures, it becomes evident that Ka perceives her father as a martyr, the victim of a violent regime when he was living in Haiti. Ka's ignorance of her father's past leads her to think of him as "a victim of the forces of history and power" (54). However, Armendariz, in "The Language of Wounds and Scars in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*," also argues that Danticat never made the boundary between victim and victimizer clear "since all of them seem to be burdened by a history in which they have been pawns of forces they could not really control" (54). Danticat explores how the different characters process trauma and how a single event shaped the way they decided to live their lives afterward.

Ka's attachment to her parents' identity is closely related to Lacan's concept of the mirror stage. Indeed, Lacan describes the mirror stage as "the formation of the I as we experience it in psychoanalysis ... The child, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already recognize as such his own image in a mirror" (Lacan 1). The child does not realize that the image in the mirror is a reflection of himself. He identifies primarily with his surroundings, most likely to be his parents. In that sense, Lacan explains that the child is directly reproducing his environment. The mirror stage is an "identification. Namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*" (Lacan 2). In other words, the child identifies with the image that his surroundings are projecting onto him.

The idealized perception of her parents, for example, leads Ka to finding a temporary sense of identity. She even unconsciously reproduces her father's actions as if she were an extension of him, and thus shares the same traumatic past. Danticat describes how "with each step forward, he rubs the scar on the side of his face, and out of a strange reflex (Ka) scratch(es) her face in the same spot" (Danticat 32). Ka's quest for identity starts with questioning her father's past. The paternal figure becomes an object of study through her sculptures. Ka's work as a sculptor suggests that she tries to engrave what she understands as the past onto immutable matter, wood. Her observations help her retrace her ancestors' history as well as pointing out that she, too, shares this collective past. Ka's statue is a way for her to understand the metaphorical missing pieces of her father's past. However, she is confronted by her father's will to bury the past. When Ka was younger, her father would often take her to the Brooklyn Museum where they would observe the Egyptian statues. Ka believed that it was during these moments shared with her father that she understood that she could try to understand him by reproducing the object of his fascination. The dew breaker ultimately ends the cycle of trauma by burying the statue, even admitting that he "was the hunter, ... not the prey" (Danticat 21).

"The Book of the Dead" shows the grieving process of the dew breaker who tries to find a way to cope with the horror of his former life in Haiti. Although the first chapter describes the possibility for the former *Macoute* to be considered a martyr as he "would never do these things now" (Danticat 24), he seeks to dismiss the past and the violence of his actions without considering that their acknowledgment might help him grieve. Even though the system forced him to commit these atrocious crimes, it appears he cannot be absolved as a *Macoute*, especially when he attempts to erase the memories of his victims who were killed in Haiti. The dew breaker admires the Egyptians for their ability to grieve the dead. However, this seems contradictory as it contrasts with his intent to forget the past. Danticat points out that "the mummification process ... went on for weeks but resulted in corpses that survived thousands

of years” (Danticat 13). Hence, the dew breaker does not relate to the Egyptian mummified bodies that left permanent markers in history. However, we learn that he is haunted by the thought of his former victims, especially through nightmares.

Moving from the motherland to the United States, the dew breaker is not the only one that seeks a new beginning. Many Haitians who sought asylum in the United States found themselves in particular neighborhoods, notably East Flatbush, where the dew breaker’s family lives, and where many of his former victims also happen to be located. The dew breaker decides to toss the statue that Ka made of him in the water, and that depicts him as a victim of the violent system in Haiti. He explains to his daughter why he cannot accept that statue, as it does not reflect reality. While revealing the truth to Ka, the dew breaker never tells about the crimes he has committed, thus calling attention to the possible dismissal of his previous killings. Even though Danticat starts the first chapter with the portrayal of a humanized character who seeks redemption through the erasure of his past, the following chapters reveal that the former *Macoute* complied with the system, and even enjoyed taking part in elaborate torture. In the last chapter, “The Dew Breaker,” Danticat asserts that “he liked to work on people he didn’t know, people around whom he could create all sorts of evil tales” (187). This description challenges one of the man he has become in the United States. Here, Danticat explores the unethical balance between a system that forces inhabitants to fear one another and a character who complied so much that he almost takes satisfaction in killing other Haitians. Danticat also asserts how the dew breaker always tries to put distance between his unethical actions and the killings or the torture. He never takes full responsibility for his actions.

The dew breaker often differentiates his actions from his thoughts. He uses the *doubling* technique to cope with the horrors of the killings. While this psychological dissociation worked in Haiti, it does not in the United States where he has to find new ways to process trauma. However, the statue triggers what the dew breaker attempts to escape in the first place, guilt.

Despite trying to erase the past, the dew breaker cannot escape or deny that he is a killer and a torturer as well as a father and a recent pacifist. Some of his violent behavior, we learn, remains dormant but is still present. While trying to explain to his daughter what man he has become, he grabs his daughter's wrist that reveals "an uncharacteristic flash of anger" (Danticat 20). The statue triggers not only his guilt but also his former violent automatisms. The dew breaker finds ways to avoid feeling guilty. When he is about to kill the preacher, for example, he says: "In slaying the preacher, he could tell himself, he would actually be freeing an entire section of Bel-Air, men, women, and children who had been brainwashed with rites of incessant prayers and milky clothes" (Danticat 188). By killing the preacher, the dew breaker believes that he will put an end to the religion that was imposed by colonization, and that enslaved the community. He persuades himself that he is helping the population cease their false adherence to Catholicism by going back to their ancestral beliefs, most likely Vaudou. In turn, he reinforces the dictatorship of Duvalier referred as "the Sovereign One" (Danticat 188). Although Danticat hints that he is aware of the brutality of his actions, she also illustrates how the dew breaker relies on the propaganda of the regime to justify his actions. However, in the United States, the sight of the statue becomes the subject of his nightmares, reflected in the fact that he is "haunted by those phantoms and vacant spaces that they (the *Macoutes*) contributed to conjuring up" (Quist 151). The dew breaker cannot deny or find excuses for the killings as he now lives in a society that condemns violence. The fact that some of his victims live close by in East Flatbush prevents him from processing the trauma the same way he did before. Instead, it seems as though the dew breaker must make amends and address the violence of his past to move on with his life. He also needs to reconcile the past with the future and distance himself from the denial of his former crimes.

Sharing the trauma of his past experiences orally with Ka is the first step towards acceptance. However, it is also the transmission of his traumatic past to the next generation.

By telling Ka that he was a former *Macoute*, not only does he shatter the image that Ka built of him and, by default, of herself as well over the years, but he also burdens his daughter with a guilt shared intergenerationally. This confession forces Ka not only to shape her identity differently but also to signify that she too needs to undergo a process of healing and forgiving. In the United States, the dew breaker only finds partial relief when he reveals his true nature to Ka. When he comes back to the hotel room where Ka and he are staying before meeting the TV star Gabrielle Fonteneau, the act of releasing the statue seems to diminish some of the guilt he hid from his daughter as he appears “calm and rested” (Danticat 13). While both the act of sharing the trauma and destroying the statue alleviate the dew breaker’s heart, he passes his pain directly to his daughter, who in turn, feels betrayed by these revelations. Ka realizes that the way she sees her father and the narrative she builds around her parents over the years is false. She declares: “It was my first inkling that maybe my father was wrong in his own representation of his former life, that maybe his past offered more choice than being hunter or prey” (Danticat 24). Ka refutes the dew breaker’s confession as it does not appear sufficient to her. She suggests that the dew breaker did not consider all of the options that could have saved him and his family from the trauma and violence of the dictatorship in Haiti. She also offers that the dew breaker had a choice between complying with the system or removing himself and his family from it. She even affirms that despite not being her parents, she still is “a part of them” (Danticat 25). Ka now shares her parents’ traumatic experiences by legacy.

Just like Sophie Caco, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Ka is part of a new generation that grew up under different circumstances and away from the violence of the Duvaliers’ regimes. As time passes, however, she realizes that she cannot live in the ignorance of the past, while in turn, the dew breaker becomes aware that unless he comes to terms with his past actions there can be no healing from the trauma he caused. Ka realizes that she cannot rely on her parents anymore which results in unresolved emotions and leaves her disempowered. Danticat captures

how the disclosure of the truth leaves Ka speechless. She struggles to express how the traumatic experience makes her feel in words. Rather, Ka clings to the possibility of a miracle from her mother, Anne. However, she feels doubly betrayed when she learns that Anne contributed to hiding the truth. Indeed, she affirms: “Somehow she must know that she has betrayed me by not sharing my confusion and, on some level, my feeling that my life could have gone on fine without my knowing these types of things about my father” (Danticat 26). Shocked by the fact that she has no close family to share the burden of these revelations with, she hangs up the phone on her mother and chooses to isolate to process the information. It seems as though Ka would have preferred to live in the ignorance of her father’s actions, especially when she has no space to exteriorize the burden of his legacy. In quoting Judith L. Herman, Quist points out: “In addition to verbal narration, Herman explains that ‘the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others... Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation’” (151). Ka will only be able to recover and forget her parents if she tries to reach out to them and address the burden that they now all share. This, however, appears more complex as Ka did not live under the Duvaliers’ dictatorships nor does she agree with the choices of her mother and father. She lacks access to a community with which she could share this psychological shock as well. Besides, by not relying on her parents anymore, Ka battles with finding a sense of identity. By the end of the novel, it appears that she feels reproachful and angry with her father. It seems as though she rejects the idea of being “the mask against (her father’s) own face” (Danticat 34), as it provides yet another excuse to escape his violent past. Contrary to Anne, who has faith in the possibility of redemption, Ka does not forgive her father for his past actions, nor her mother who silently chose to comply with him.

The dew breaker’s wife and Ka’s mother, Anne, addresses her husband’s past differently. In “The Book of Miracles,” we learn that the character is a pious woman who

believes that religion, and most importantly, the forgiveness that exists in Catholicism, can change the dew breaker's attitude. Anne believes in his redemption solely with the acts that she witnesses and chooses to dismiss what happened during their life in Haiti. She notices Ka's father "worked in a prison where he hurt many people. Now look at him. Look how calm he is. Look how patient he is. Look how he just drove forty miles, to (Ka's) apartment in Westchester to pick (her) up for Christmas Eve Mass" (Danticat 72). It seems as though Anne convinces herself of her husband's good nature by acknowledging his new attitude as a miracle. The idea that the family goes to church on Christmas Eve Mass also hints that the dew breaker undertakes a personal and spiritual journey of redemption that suffices to convince Anne of the authenticity of his transformation.

We learn, however, that despite Anne's willingness to erase the past, she is triggered by several events that remind her of their former lives in Haiti. Although she believes in the redemption of her husband, Anne never acts to overcome her own trauma; she chooses to remain silent instead. When the Bienaimé family drives by a cemetery in the United States, Anne is reminded of the balance between life and death, but also of her brother who died in the hands of her now-husband. She states: "Did they wonder if the dead might enjoy hearing sounds of life going on at high speed around them? If this were so, then why should the living be spared the dead's own signs of existence: of shadows saying in the breeze, of the laughter and cries of lost children, of the whispers of lovers, muffled as though in dreams" (Danticat 72). Anne, we learn, is still haunted by the thought of death and of those she has lost. She criticizes the disbelief that leads to the ignoring and disrespectful treatment of the dead who, in African diasporic cosmologies, carry on with their daily lives. She asserts that there exists a contrast between those who believe in esoteric Haitian spiritual customs and pragmatic American religious traditions (Danticat 73), as Ka points out. Anne's approach to death and the afterlife is different from how Americans would perceive it. However, her link to

spirituality and religion also shows that she might still comply with the manipulative power of the Duvaliers. Anne's devotion to the existence of miracles and religion appears to be a product of the Duvaliers' system, which corrupted the religious leaders and forced them into educating the believers to like and fear the dictatorship. It seems as though she decides to keep her connection to religion as it is the only element that ties her both to the motherland and her brother. Most importantly, it is possibly the element that reminds her of the guilt that she lives with when she decides to marry the dew breaker. Like him, Anne is also haunted by phantoms of the past, particularly that of her brother, whose ghost weighs on her dreams by "walking the earth looking for his grave" (Danticat 71). Yet, Anne does not try to come up with a solution to let go of her traumatic past and remains silent despite wanting to express her pain. She witnessed the violence of the system she lived in Haiti, but Anne finds herself confronted with a "pendulum between forgiveness and regret" (Danticat 86), choosing instead to leave the numerous questions and testimonies of her past experiences hidden. She only finds relief when her body betrays her in epileptic seizures and recognizes them as "a kind of resurrection" (Danticat 86). Her body exteriorizes the pain she feels without resorting to language. She cannot control her body when it happens, but she can, however, control her speech and the secrets she hides. Perhaps, Anne's silence is also the reason why Ka feels betrayed by her mother who appears to be complicit with the dew breaker by not choosing to disclose the past.

"The Book of Miracles" reflects how language and speech are closely tied to Haitian customs. Although Anne distances her past in Haiti with her present in the United States, she is still attached to *Krèyol* and its metaphors. The use of proverbs and metaphors are key to representing Haitian customs and ways of thinking. Anne longs to pass on to her daughter the teaching that storytelling provides in *Krèyol*. Just like Grandma Ifé in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Anne hopes to embody the *passeur d'histoire* who through tales and stories conveys morals and the importance of creative imagery part of *Krèyol* culture. Nevertheless, Anne fails to

transmit those traditions to Ka, as her daughter grew with American values that do not make one see beyond direct reality. Indeed, Ka points out: “in Haiti or the Philippines, that’s where people see everything, even things they’re not supposed to see. So if I see a woman’s face in a rose, I’d think somebody drew it there, but if you see it, Manman, you think it’s a miracle” (Danticat 73). Ka explains that she sees the literal and immediate aspect of what she perceives instead of observing the possible extended reality that metaphor provides. Ka’s rationality as atheist clashes with the religious aspect of faith and believing in symbols. Ka is still fascinated by her mother’s tales and miracles; however, she makes sure to distinguish the tales from her reality in the United States. Anne, on the other hand, draws a parallel between Ka’s atheism and the English language. To her, Ka’s failure to see beyond reality results not only from her lack of faith but also from the fact that Ka does not speak a language that contains the same use of analogies. While driving to the church, Anne states that she and her husband “disapproved of their daughter’s language” (Danticat 70). Anne reproaches her daughter’s use of English contraction words such as “Ouch!” or “Whatever” (Danticat 69) as dismissive of her teachings. As a matter of fact: “the importance of metaphors in Haitian storytelling is reflected in the value ascribed to proverbs as an important aspect of teaching and reinforcing wisdom and values to children and community members” (Rahill, Jean-Gilles, Thomlison, Pinot-Lopez 138). The use of analogies in *Krèyol* provides valuable insights into Haitian culture and contributes to solidifying the customs and traditions of the diaspora. Ka shows that the way she defines herself to some Haitian values is different, as she incorporates her American views. Thus, Anne almost forgets that she cannot raise her daughter in the same way she was raised in Haiti solely through storytelling, as English, Ka’s first language, does not contain the possibility for metaphors in the same way that *Krèyol* does.

Ka's quest to find answers to her cultural belonging is challenging. At first, she is only met with a stereotypical depiction of Haitians. Besides, her mother keeps her silence about her

previous life in Haiti and avoids contact with her distant relatives. Ka indirectly identifies with a space that she imagines as Haiti. As she cannot get answers from her parents, Ka builds her sense of self from the stereotypes that she sees or hears. She wonders: “Is he going to explain why he and my mother have no close friends, why they’ve never had anyone over to the house, why they never speak of any relatives in Haiti or anywhere else, or have never returned there or, even after I learned Creole from them, have never taught me anything else about the country beyond what I could find out on my own, on the television, in newspapers, in books?” (Danticat 21). Ka only finds answers to her questions about cultural belonging when her father discloses the past. The only tie that Ka has to Haiti is the *Krèyol* language that helps her gain agency over the lack of information provided by her parents. It is also the only idiom that she cannot learn from the other sources of information that she used before.

Ka overcomes this lack by learning *Krèyol* and digging for more information about Haiti. More specifically, it seems as though she is a character facing homelessness. She faces stereotyping every day from other Americans. Other Americans perceive Ka as solely Haitian despite being born and raised in the United States. Longing for a sense of home, Ka investigates her roots, conceiving of Haiti as a space where she can claim an imaginative home. She states: “I was born and raised in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and have never been to my parents’ birthplace. Still, I answer ‘Haiti’ because it is one more thing I’ve always longed to have in common with my parents” (Danticat 4). Ka recognizes herself only through her parents. However, they face the difficulty of navigating two identities – one that they mimic, another that they try to erase. Thus, Ka cannot find a proper sense of belonging by relying on her parents. In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, Carole B. Davies writes about the desire for a home in the following terms: “Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it” (113). She finds temporary solace and power in defining herself as Haitian, as it provides a satisfying answer to the people she is addressing.

Nevertheless, by pretending to acknowledge Haiti as the place where she grew up, Ka does not appear empowered. For Ka, Haiti remains largely imagined. In “The Other Question,” Bhabha argues:

The Imaginary is the transformation that takes place in the subject at the formative mirror phase ... this position is itself problematic for the subject finds or recognizes itself through an image which is simultaneously alienating and hence potentially confrontational. This is the basis of the close relation between the two forms of identification complicit with the Imaginary – narcissism and aggressivity. It is precisely these two forms of “identification” that constitute the dominant strategy of colonial power exercised in relation to the stereotype which, as a form of multiple and contradictory belief, gives knowledge of difference and simultaneously disavows or masks it. Like the mirror-phase “the fullness” of the stereotype – its image as identity– is always threatened by “lack” (164).

Bhabha asserts that stereotyping is directly related to the Lacanian concept of the mirror phase. By normalizing a Western type of identification in popular culture, difference is exaggerated. Stereotyping differentiates two categories: one that normalizes a unitary definition of self and another that excludes the ones who do not fit into this definition. He also criticizes the unjust balance between “narcissism” by placing the dominant colonial power on a pedestal versus any other, and “aggressivity” towards anybody that falls out of this definition. By relying on the perspective of others, Ka, by default, recognizes that her identity is incomplete. She also acknowledges that her self-reflection in the metaphorical mirror does not tally with the one exposed in popular culture. Therefore, she cannot relate entirely to her parents’ birthplace, Haiti.

In “Water Child,” Nadine echoes Ka’s character in their relationship with isolation and the loss of identity. While the dew breaker discards the statue and the illusion that Ka had of

himself in a lake, water becomes a metaphor for Nadine's suffering. Water has the potential for a new beginning and a purification process. However, in *The Dew Breaker*, it is associated with violence and pain. Ka's statue in the water is the drowning of an imposture while also being a conceivable return to a dual identity. Without knowing it, the dew breaker allows her to access the truth while also isolating Ka. The end of the book puts forward Ka's irresolute decision towards her parents, and the reader does not know if she accepts her hybrid identity or if she, on the contrary, decides to reject it after the disclosure of her father's horrific past. For Nadine, water reflects the uncertainty of her move from Haiti to the United States, but also the pain of her current situation. It seems as though Nadine decides to leave her Haitian roots behind while crossing the ocean from Haiti to Brooklyn. When she is in the United States, Nadine struggles to find a sense of self and decides to distance herself from both her relatives and colleagues at work. Nadine's abortion suggests that she carries a secret that could modify the way her relatives see her, thus enhancing her solitude. It also changes the way she sees herself as she feels estranged from her body and distressed by her lost child. When thinking about calling her parents, she states: "She'd almost called many times in the last three months, but had lost her nerve, thinking her voice might betray all that she could not say" (Danticat 57). Nadine is afraid of her parents' reactions if they were to learn about her abortion. "Water Child" shows that her parents' societal values clash with her decision to abort. She honors the lost fetus by pouring water over the pebble that resides in her favorite drinking cup. Ka and Nadine see their trauma being submerged by water, both burying their previous identities and the pain that make them secluded, speechless, and lost in their quest to find out who they are.

Danticat criticizes a system that forces people to adopt a unitary identity to the point of having to modify physical characteristics to blend in, even more so when one character is part of a diaspora. One way for the characters to forget about the past and erase their previous identities in Haiti is for them to avoid speaking *Krèyol*. They also try to adopt an American

accent to blend in with other Americans in the United States. However, they find themselves split between two identities and recognize themselves in neither. Nadine, in “Water Child”, moves from Haiti to the United States when her parents decided to sell their house to provide a better future to their daughter. Nadine succeeds and works as a nurse in the Ear, Nose, and Throat ward in an American hospital. Despite her professional success, she struggles to blend in with her American colleagues, her suitor Eric, and her family back in Haiti. The pressure to provide for her parents and her life in the States leaves her in a state of limbo where she is unable to resort to language to liberate herself. Much like her patients who are physically unable to speak and share their trauma, Nadine finds herself mentally unable to put into words how she feels whether it be in English, French, or *Krèyol*. Danticat in “Water Child” explores how painful the immigration process can be for a character who does not know where she belongs anymore. The chapter reflects on these difficulties with the imbalance between the three languages. Nadine’s past haunts her so much so that she no longer speaks *Krèyol* with her relatives. When Nadine gets the voicemail that her old suitor Eric left her asking after her health, she remarks: “‘Alo, allo, hello,’ he stammered, creating his own odd pauses between Creole, French and English, like the electively mute, newly arrived immigrant children whose worried parents brought them to the ward for consultations, even though there was nothing wrong with their vocal cords” (Danticat 56). The succession of different languages suggests that Nadine is navigating three identities, but also that Eric, in turn, struggles to find a suitable language in which to address himself to her. However, the author, by mixing French, English, and *Krèyol* in the same narrative succeeds in adding layers to an intertext that “refuses to place English (or French) and its Western world-view at the colonial center of the world, reverses its dominant discourse, its desirability as the lingua franca constructed by the colonizers” (Hasebe-Ludt 463). The use of the three languages shows that the characters are part of a society in which language itself is a hybrid, nuanced by every nationality and identity that it comes in

contact with, and that reinvents itself. In terms of migration, it means that an individual incorporates his values in the language of his adopted land. The individual reinvents both his native language while also learning and speaking his adopted one that he adapts to his dual perspective. However, in *The Dew Breaker*, it appears that the characters struggle to keep the *Krèyol* language, their mother tongue, alive in Haiti. Not only is *Krèyol* mainly oral, but it is also threatened by institutions that use French as the official administrative language. In “Water Child,” however, the close relationship that exists between cultural belonging and languages render Nadine “unrecognizable” (Danticat 68). Nadine is unable to escape her state of isolation because she cannot find a sense of identity anymore. When she moves to the United States, her use of the English language alienates her from her *Krèyol* roots. Nadine prefers to stay silent as she struggles to navigate her Haitian self and new American values. The fact that she then gets close to her patients to help them overcome the trauma they physically experience helps Nadine to find new ways to approach her mental trauma. Hasebe-Ludt further explains that by using *Krèyol* in her text, Danticat can represent another language that is not associated with the coloniality of power. Language is the medium through which the characters achieve deliverance towards a hybrid self, and how individuals in Danticat’s novel succeed in reengaging the individual with culture. The chapter remains unfinished as Nadine does not come up with a solution to heal from her distress, but the fact that she contacts her parents offers the first step towards acceptance of her newly acquired hybrid identity as well as a comeback to her origins.

Not all of Danticat’s characters are given a chance to express their grief through language. The orality behind the *Krèyol* language enables the characters to access truth-telling, and thus, the deliverance that finding one’s identity provides. When they face voicelessness, just like some of the *Macoutes*’ victims, they disappear from collective memory. Once Anne became aware of the truth, she finds relief in talking to Ka over the phone. She states: “maybe

she would reach for a now useless cliché, one that she had been reciting to herself all these years, that atonement, reparation, was possible and available for everyone ... anything to keep them both talking” (Danticat 242). With Ka, and through speech, Anne finds solace. Ka’s mother has the chance to recover from her brother’s horrific death, in which he left “behind no corpse to bury, no trace of himself at all” (Danticat 242). Anne’s brother passed away along with memories of the past in Haiti. However, through Ka, Anne leaves a legacy.

Ms. Hinds, on the other hand, is deprived of the relief that speech and language provide. In *The Dew Breaker*, we learn that the young woman lost her voice as a result of larynx surgery. Silence, in this instance, is shown physically by the inability to speak, whereas in the rest of the novel, trauma is addressed metaphorically. Ms. Hinds is distressed by the fact that she cannot express herself anymore, nor confront the traumatic event that has rendered her mute. Through the perspective of Nadine’s character, we learn how:

(She) was tempted to warn Ms. Hinds that whatever form of relief she must be feeling now would only last for a while, the dread of being voiceless hitting her anew each day as though it had just happened, when she would awake from dreams in which she’d spoken to find that she had no voice, or when she would see something alarming and realize that she herself was slowly forgetting, without the help of old audio or videocassettes or answering machine greetings, what her own voice used to sound like. (Danticat 66)

Nadine warns Ms. Hinds about the temporary relief that writing provides. Her voicelessness, however, will prevent her from recovering from the trauma of the past. Eventually, she will forget the sound of her voice. As a woman, it becomes clear that Ms. Hinds will eventually disappear from collective memory, as Nadine will. Nadine compares her migration experience to the inability of Ms. Hinds to speak. She feels she has lost the ability to speak both by moving away from the motherland but also by having to deal with the pain of her recent abortion that

she chooses to hide from her family by fear of their reactions. Eventually, Nadine helps Ms. Hinds to find ways to overcome the trauma she experiences by losing her voice. Both traumatic experiences have rendered the two characters alienated from society. In “Silence and Speech,” Bellamy remarks: “silence thus reflects unresolved trauma, unsuccessful acculturation, ... while speech, however difficult, facilitates healing and begins the process of resolving trauma and achieving acculturation” (207). In *The Dew Breaker*, neither Nadine nor Ms. Hinds can achieve catharsis and heal from the trauma that they were or still are subjected to.

The Dew Breaker focuses on the possibility to reconcile past and present. Every character confronts the violence of a system they had no control over. Danticat’s novel argues for a different perspective on the outcomes of one’s trauma. For those who have to suffer from the consequences of a brutal ancestral legacy, like Ka, who acknowledges that she can form a sense of self only from facing the truth of history. Ka no longer identifies with an imaginative space embodied by Haiti but accepts her American identity and understands that the only way for her to affirm agency is to identify as Haitian-American. Home becomes a neutral space, an in-between, between Haiti and the United States. However, the presence of the dew breaker haunts Danticat’s characters throughout the novel. Some of the characters are given a chance to move forward with life by expressing their distress. Others, and particularly women, are either silenced or disappear from collective memory altogether. Language sometimes fails to help the characters reach catharsis, so they decide to remain quiet. Anne, Ka’s mother, only appears empowered when her body expresses her distress through epileptic seizures. For Ka and Nadine, the weight of their past leaves them in a state of uncertainty and alienates them from society. Some of them are able, however, to reach catharsis only when they liberate themselves on the spiritual level (Gonzalès 192), primarily by voicing their trauma. Language and the community offer that possibility. The dew breaker, for example, when he reveals the truth to Ka makes the first step towards a possible new beginning. Speaking *Krèyol* is what ties

the Haitian diaspora together and helps the community to heal both individually and collectively.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion

In 2020, Edwidge Danticat's novels find a significant echo in the depiction of the lives of Black Americans in the United States. Almost a hundred and fifty-five years after the end of the Civil War, Black communities, immigrants, and diasporas are still living in a society that advocates alternative forms of slavery, colonial subjection, and white privilege. Despite taking in Haitian refugees in the United States in the 1950's, growing hatred and fear has led the American government to incriminate black communities. This social and political rejection marginalized those communities who face alienation and oppression everyday. By portraying the violence and injustices towards Haitian-Americans living in the United States, Danticat's writings are part of the Black Lives Matter discourse against systemic racism. The author, for example, exposes how institutions condemn Black Americans to adopt English as sole language. She also reveals how divided communities are. She shows how literature is a tool to renegotiate art and unpacks the dichotomies between Western and non-Western values. In both *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat displays the repressed and intergenerational trauma that Haitian-Americans are going through, especially when they appear absent from history, and when their voices are silenced by the system.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Edwidge Danticat explores how violence is perpetrated through three generations with Grandma Ifé, Tante Atie, Martine, and Sophie. Sophie's body is representative of a generation of cultural change. Indeed, as Sophie departs from her native land, she gets to look back at the habits of an ancient colonial system and its reductive view of female sexuality from a new perspective. She denounces the codes women must abide by in Haitian society, despite their often disagreeing with these archaic values that leaves them all with post-traumatic disorders. For example, Sophie shows that the act of *testing* a woman's virginity is a violation and humiliation and chooses to end the tradition as her legacy to her daughter, Brigitte. Throughout the novel, Danticat demonstrates that gender differentiation is

the result of Haiti's past colonial status. Every man and woman has a specific role based on their gender. In Danticat's novels, men are often represented as the authoritative figures or the *Macoutes*, whereas women are depicted as mothers and subjected to a paternalistic system. However, Sophie finds ways to cope and resist. She *doubles* and compartmentalizes her suffering with the memories of her childhood. Nevertheless, this form of resistance is only temporary, as she cannot put into words the repressed pain she feels when *testing* occurs. She never exteriorizes it up until she decides to denounce it. Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, contributes to portraying the lives and customs of Haitians and Haitian-Americans and, most importantly, make their absent voices heard within history alongside Western and Euro-centric historical accounts. She makes them part of collective memory, by demonstrating how Haitians and Haitian-Americans resist stereotyping, particularly through language. The *Krèyol* language appears essential to understanding Haiti's culture and customs. *Krèyol* is transmitted via oral tradition from one generation to the next. When Sophie moves to the United States, she understands that, to find a sense of self, it is essential that she speaks *Krèyol* and English interchangeably. The orality of the language is also a symbol of Haitian women as *passeurs d'histoires*, who, through telling tales can heal and protect themselves collectively. On the other hand, it is also a way for them to remember their own history.

In *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat demonstrates that her characters become empowered as they remember the past. The novel traces the history of Ka, the daughter of a former *Macoute*, who seeks answers for her cultural belonging. At first, Ka identifies with her parents but is only met with absence, as her parents try to forget about their past in Haiti. Throughout the novel, Danticat insists on the importance of finding a sense of identity for Ka. Despite not having lived in Haiti, Ka desperately clings to the idea that she is from her parents' motherland. One of the reasons why she also tries to identify as fully Haitian is because she faces alienation everyday in the United States. Danticat depicts the lives of fragmented identities through Ka,

but also, the various characters in the novel. *The Dew Breaker* tells the stories of multiple characters who were the victims or perpetrators of violence in Haiti under the Duvaliers' political regimes. Danticat explores how, for example, the dew breaker colluded with the Haitian state in his torture of prisoners. She also explains that he must live with the consequences of his actions, the regrets and hauntings of his victims. Danticat denounces the stereotyping that Ka faces everyday in the United States. She first identifies with the stereotypical depiction of Haitians in the United States. She acknowledges, however, that she has a hyphenated identity as Haitian-American. *The Dew Breaker* also explores how language sometimes fails to capture feelings into words and how some characters are unable to reach catharsis through speech, as they are physically or mentally unable to do so. For Nadine's character, the pressure to succeed in the United States after her parents' sacrifices and her recent abortion leave her speechless. She is so blinded by pain that she is unable to find a sense of identity. Danticat also points out the importance of moving forward and remembering the past as a community. It is when the members of the Haitian diaspora come together that they appear more empowered. Through speaking *Krèyol*, they resist together against the hegemony of the American system that seeks to destabilize the community by emphasizing their difference; based on racist stereotypes. The characters, however, resist this attempt at language attrition by balancing the use of their mother tongue and their adopted language. Most importantly, through the transmission of tales and sharing their trauma collectively, the characters can heal and find their individuality.

In terms of gender, Danticat's novels denounce how Haitian women are often depicted as exoticized beings reduced to their reproductive potential and their silence. Nevertheless, they resist it and gain agency by renegotiating the way they choose to live their lives. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Dew Breaker* also make visible the *Krèyol* language, its culture, and customs. Through a decolonial process, they allow for a reconsideration of *Krèyol* as a

language rather than a pidgin or patois and reinvent the codes for its representation in history. Danticat mentions the psychological struggle of moving away from the motherland and being forced to adapt, notably through speaking one language. It is also problematic as it creates social disparity. Since most administrative services are in English, immigrants often find themselves deprived of access to services, such as welfare or health care, because they lack language skills. Yet, acquiring such language skills is also a matter of access to resources and interacting with other Americans.

In 2020, where there still exists violence against black communities, particularly police violence in the United States, stories like the ones of Danticat are a way to rewrite history and collective memory. Reading is a resistance tool and is essential to addressing social change and movements. For the Black Lives Matter discourse, Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and *The Dew Breaker* still stand in a good stead today, as an educational means to understand the complexity of the lives of those who face racial disparity everyday and have the potential to spark change.

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