

"*Ou libéré!*": Trauma and Memory in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

At the beginning of Part III of Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), the first-person narrator Sophie Caco returns to her grandmother's village in rural Haiti after eight years of immigration to the United States and comes upon a group of female vendors. Danticat describes a moment of camaraderie among the women through the perspective of Sophie:

When one merchant dropped her heavy basket, another called out of concern, "*Ou libéré?*" Are you free from your heavy load? The woman with the load would answer yes, if she had unloaded her freight without hurting herself. (96)

The question of whether one can unload physical and spiritual burden without hurting oneself is indeed central to this novel in which personal traumas, such as rape and female genital mutilation, and the pain of separation and immigration are intricately interwoven with national memory of violence and bloodshed. The setting of the scene—Sophie's homecoming—is also important in that it places her story within a diasporic discourse in which transnational and transcultural experience is highlighted. This key question that comes out of the language of market place further exemplifies how Danticat's lyrical writing in English vividly captures the texture of life in the Francophone Haiti and is indicative of the importance of folk culture in the novel.¹ Moreover, the representation of a group of underclass women

1 According to Dash, Danticat's choice of language is liberating: "Writing the novel in English, the language of the other, affords an eloquent taciturn defiance of a traditional Haitian literary rhetoric which can be identified with a kind of masculine audibility and copiousness. If French is the language of political authority and literary tradition, then English has become, for Danticat, the code of genuine feeling" (161). At the same time, Danticat is very happy having her book translated into French (as *Le*

struggling with life's heavy burden yet supported by mutual sympathy distinctly echoes the homage to female endurance in the dedication in which Danticat devotes her first novel to "the brave women of Haiti" who "have stumbled but will not fall." While rooted within Haitian folk culture and female sympathy, this celebratory narrative is nevertheless heavily accentuated with ambivalence, especially towards maternity in which the boundary between self-identity and the (m)other becomes problematic. To maintain her sanity, the protagonist Sophie is faced with the challenge of self-liberation through confronting the "horror" in her life, which in the novel is represented as the inevitable separation and eternal bonding with her mother Martine. To fully understand the complexity of the novel, it is imperative that the intricately related web of trauma and memory must be understood within a transcultural context and a cultural specificity befitting Haitian American imagination. This paper therefore aims to examine the ways in which Danticat utilizes the culturally specific issue of "testing" and voodoo legends of blood and the double to depict trauma and memory that are closely related to a problematic of boundary within the mother-daughter relationship.

To mirror Danticat's insistence on rootedness, a brief overview of Haiti is needed here to contextualize the novel socially and historically. The Haitians in the late eighteenth century were anti-colonists, "the black Jacobins" in C. L. R. James's terms, who inaugurated the first revolution in the "Third World." Although Haiti became the first black republic of Americas in 1804, it is now one of the poorest countries in the world due to political instability and foreign invasions. The period of American Occupation from 1915 to 1934 has also left its permanent mark on Haitian national memory and literary representations. The reign of terror and superstition by François "Doc" Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude from 1957 to 1986 further plunged the country into abject poverty. The arrival of Haitian "boat people" in Florida in 1971 shocked the consciousness of the world. As in many other poor areas in the Caribbean, Haitian workers move into Euro-American metropolises to look for better opportunities in life and to support their families back home. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, for instance, as a young child Sophie is made aware how "the New York money" allows her and her Tante Atie to have a house of their own. But the price of a better living standard is high since many Haitian immigrants leave their young children behind in Haiti and only send for the children when they can afford it. Such a pattern of separation and

reunion becomes characteristic of many Haitian immigrant families and the major structural principle of Danticat's novel.

Breath, Eyes, Memory is in fact emplotted as a series of separations and reunions: In Part I twelve-year-old Sophie Caco is summoned by her mother, a rape victim who works in the United States as a nursing aid. In Part II the life of the eighteen-year-old Sophie is turning into a nightmare when her mother starts to "test" her to safeguard her virginity. Sophie chooses to elope with her African American boy friend Joseph after inserting a pestle into her body to stop the testing. Sophie returns to Haiti with her baby daughter Brigitte to search for ways to re-member her traumatized body and spirit in Part III. Finally in Part IV Sophie again makes the passage back to her home village to bury the mother who commits suicide during her second pregnancy.

With an apparent narrative lineality that depicts the first-person narrator's progress from her childhood, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* can easily be categorized as a typical developmental narrative. Yet such a linear development is constantly subverted by an insistence on repetition and a critical question of whether the female speaking voice is issued out of a unified subject. This kind of repetition and fragmentation has everything to do with the memory work in the novel. The novel in fact suggests two ways to read the meaning of memory. In a general context, memory is the key to personal and collective identity in modernity, as Michael S. Roth suggests (8). Whether one can achieve liberation in the novel is dependant upon the use and abuse of the past. As Roth points out in his discussion of Freud, "We are not the victims of our pasts, nor are we simply their (guilty) survivors. We do not only undergo trauma, we are capable of making meaning and direction out of our past.... An interpretation of the signs of the past still legible in the present helps us to achieve this" (193). Roth also contends in his discussion of narrative memory that "[a] trauma is a part of one's past that seems to demand inclusion in any narrative of development of the present but that makes any narrative seem painfully inadequate" (205). Reading within this Freudian psychoanalytic paradigm, Sophie's chance to achieve subjectivity depends on whether she can manage to achieve a "reconnection to the present via an acknowledgement of the past" (Roth 193). That is, Sophie needs to come to the awareness that she cannot afford a melancholic indulgence in the traumatic past at the expense of the present, and her hope in the present is to create an American family with Joseph and Brigitte through a reconciliation with her Haitian past. Otherwise, like her mother Martine, she is doomed to remain suspended in a liminal state of what Julia Kristeva terms abjection.

More importantly, memory in the novel carries with it a specific cultural significance. The title of the novel suggests a trinity between spirit, body, and memory that is rooted in Haitian culture; as Sophie confesses: "I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head" (234). Memory in the Haitian context is tangible and an integral part of the Haitian existence that corresponds to *voudou* practices in which the mysterious loas or deities manifest their presence by mounting the "horses" or priests and priestesses.² Memory for the Haitians, like the living gods of *voudou*, is alive and will return to interfere with human affairs and therefore demands recognition. This tenuous hold onto memory is partly a residue of African ancestral worship and a reaction to the experience of slavery in which all kinds of practices—the change of name and enforcement of Catholic baptism, to indicate a few—are mobilized to induce the transplanted and enslaved African population to forget about their home in Guinea. While there is no description of *voudou* possession in the novel, *voudou* loas such as the goddess of love Erzulie and the twin gods Marassas are alluded to as part of Haitian folk memory. From the title and the allusion to the folk religion, clearly Danticat is suggesting a Haitian context for understanding memory besides the western paradigm.

Although Sophie's memory is scarred with traumas, Danticat makes it clear that it is the forced immigration that starts the whole cycle of nightmares. The *konbit* potluck dinner in Part I and Atie's warm embrace seem to provide a glimpse of Sophie's sense of prelapsarian security before she is forced to acknowledge the existence of an absentee mother and the necessity of her to join the mother. Although the experience of Haitian diaspora is limited to part II within the quadripartite structure of the novel, apart in which we are offered a condensed narrative of six years of Sophie's development, the description of multiple transnational passages in the novel indicates that the narrative needs to be situated within a framework of immigration. Indeed the novel is typically analyzed as a moving piece of immigrant literature. Marie-José N'Zengo-Tayo, for instance, focuses on the representation of immigrant

children and observes that a significant issue in the novel is "the impact of migration on the mother-daughter relationship" (97) since this migratory experience "increases the gap between parents and children in terms of culture clash" (99). Reading the novel within the context of relations between Haiti and the United States in his brief analysis, Michael Dash places the characters in a conflict of shifting values between the parochial and the cosmopolitan as they "are caught between the nightmare of patriarchal, authoritarian Haiti and the liberating anonymity offered by the American city" (160). While I think N'Zengo-Tayo's thesis is valid but tends to be too generalized, I also disagree with Dash for the dichotomous treatment of the two cultures. In fact, Danticat definitely places Haiti higher up on the cultural hierarchy, if there exists one in the novel. Instead of pitting Sophie's American experience against the Haitian one, therefore, I propose to read them together as different representations of Sophie as a subject-in-progress. Here Kristeva's theory of abjection provides a useful lens with which we can examine the state of liminality of Haitian immigrants in New York and the problematic of boundary as embodied by Martine's and Sophie's symptoms of sexual phobia.

Kristeva's greatest contribution to the psychoanalytical theory is that she adds on to the Lacanian mirror stage and symbolic order by introducing the preoedipal stage that is dominated by the abject. In *The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva characterizes the abject as someone suspended in a liminal state that is neither subject nor object—"The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*" (1). For Kristeva, abjection is something that "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). In her expounding of Kristeva, Kelly Oliver suggests, "On the level of personal archaeology, abjection shows up as the struggle to separate from the maternal body.... The child tries to separate but feels that separation is impossible" (56). The issue of boundary between mother and child is therefore at the center of abjection. Furthermore, as John Lechte observes, for Kristeva phobia and loathing "are two fundamental forms of abjection resulting from an instability in the symbolic/paternal function and thus an imperfect separation from the mother" (161). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* there are many cases of phobia and self-loathing because of the problematic of boundary. The female body represents the abject and women act out their self-loathing by traumatizing their own bodies.

2 There is a lack of agreement upon the spelling of the Haitian folk religion. As Desmangles states, "The common term *voodoo*, a distortion of the Dahomean (or Beninois) word *vodu* (meaning 'god' or 'spirit'), has been used by many scholars (Daren, Laguerre). But unfortunately, in popular literature and films the term *voodoo* has been misconstrued as sorcery, witchcraft, and in some cases cannibalistic practices.... Other scholars have used the term *vodun* or *vodoun* (Leyburn, Mintz, Davis, Courlander) in order to dispel popular misconceptions about the religion" (xi). In this paper I follow Danticat's Francophone spelling of *voudou*.

In Part II we see the most direct description of the Haitian American community in New York and the prejudices against Haitian Americans. This period can be characterized by a state of what I call "Haitian abjection." Adopting Kristeva's concept of abjection, David Liwei Li uses the term "Asian abjection" to describe the dilemma of Asian Americans who are legally citizens but in fact cannot "enjoy the subject status of citizens in a registered and recognized participation of American democracy" (6). The abjection of Haitian Americans operates both internally and externally. Danticat addresses the issue of internal colonization in which black skin is devalued by people of African descent themselves. There is an apparent racial dimension to Martine's self-loathing since she seeks to whiten her skin with a special kind of lotion. At the external level, Danticat reveals how Haitian immigrants in New York appear to be such abjects within the American national discourse. In particular, she shows the ways that the language of disease and degeneration is turned into a racist apparatus to ab-ject Haitian Americans. Through Martine's motherly advice to Sophie, for instance, we learn about how the Haitian has been stereotyped in a biological discourse with terms like HBO, "Haitian Body Odor," and "the 'Four Hs,'" "Heroin addicts, Hemophiliacs, Homosexuals, and Haitians" who are regarded as immanent AIDS carriers (51). Thus the dominant society redirects its attack on the Haitian minority by labeling the group as something filthy and contagious that poses a threat to national health. Here we are reminded of what Susan Sontag states in her essay on AIDS, "Epidemics of particularly dreaded illness always provoke an outcry against leniency or tolerance—now identified as laxity, weakness, disorder, corruption: unhealthiness" (168). Despite the fact that the Haitian Americans in the novel have successfully crossed the national boundary, they appear to be trapped in a liminal state when it comes to racial identity.

One problem about Li's description of "Asian abjection" is that as a general model it overlooks the gender factor in the formation of ethnic subjectivity. Similarly, "Haitian abjection" is also a generic term that needs to be redefined in a gendered way. Since Danticat is more interested in unraveling the experience of immigrant women, she chooses to explore the issue of immigration within the dynamics of separation and reunion of mothers and daughters. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* she undertakes to investigate the impact of the absence of mothers and what comes after the reunion for Haitian women. As Danticat states in her interview with Renee H. Shea,

For me, the most fascinating thing is the absence and then the recovery from that absence. People who grew up without their mothers for one

reason or another and then find themselves reunited with them—this is a very strong theme in the lives of Haitian women my age who were separated from their mothers early on.... What interests me most is the separation and healing; recovering or not recovering: Becoming a woman and defining what means in terms of a mother who may have been there in fragments, who was first a wonderful memory that represents absence. (382)

As shown in the novel, being removed to the United States at the critical age of twelve seriously undermines Sophie's sense of identity both as a Haitian and a daughter. The novel starts with a description of how Sophie is forced to acknowledge that she is the daughter of a mother who has left her only child behind; importantly, it is Atie, the aunt who raises her, who dutifully opens Sophie's eyes to that fact when Sophie tries to present the aunt with a Mother's Day card decorated with a daffodil. Sophie's psychological reaction to Atie's enforcement of separation is embodied in her nightmare about being suffocated by the mother and her crashing of the daffodil. The implicit violence indicates that Sophie is experiencing a metaphorical "birth trauma" for leaving the surrogate mother and the motherland behind.

If the experience of immigration recreates the birth trauma of separation for Sophie, what traumatizes her more is that upon arrival in the United States Sophie becomes aware that her mother Martine is unconsciously afraid of her because Sophie is the physical evidence of rape, "the living memory from the past" (56). As a rape victim, Martine sees the daughter as an embodiment of the rapist, whose face she has never seen and could never imagine. Just like being cast as "the 'Four Hs,'" Sophie's birth is posited as a result of tainted blood. Seeing the fear in the mother's eyes places Sophie in the realm of the unknown and unconscious. Martin's nightmares further plunge Sophie into guilt feelings that both undermine the mother-daughter bonding and alienate Sophie from her self. Compounded with her sense of alienation resulting from geographical and cultural transplantation, the mother's fear starts the whole process of Sophie's self-abjection.

What further increases Sophie's sense of abjection is when Martine starts "testing" her, a Haitian custom in which the mother inserts a finger into the daughter's private part to make sure about the latter's "purity." Through the description of testing, Danticat reveals that the apex of abjection of women in Haitian society is to turn maternity into an instrument of oppression against daughters. For generations, Haitian mothers have been testing their daughters out of maternal obligations without acknowledging that this practice abjects

the daughter's body and pushes the latter into self-loathing. Originated in the cult for the Virgin Mother in Catholicism, this custom of testing, which is obviously collusive to patriarchal authority, uncovers a trace of Haitian colonial history. Kelly Oliver spells out the embedded paternal control behind the cult for the Virgin while explicating Kristeva's concept of the abject mother: "The Virgin has no *jouissance*; and her body is marked with the Name of the Father. There is no mistake about paternity here in spite of the fact that in the Christian story Joseph becomes Mary's husband" (51). On a masochistic note, Haitian mothers faithfully carry out the duty entrusted to them by performing the function of safeguarding the purity of the paternal line.³ They are thus paradoxically agents of patriarchy without autonomous agency. By presenting how the daughters are psychologically and physically scarred, Danticat ventures into the heart of darkness of this maternal practice, which remains unquestioned and continues to be reproduced.

When Sophie takes Martine to task for testing her, Martine admits that she has no better excuse than it is a usual maternal practice:

"I did it," she said, "because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater excuse. I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the *testing* stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day." (170)

Martine's simultaneous mourning for/ rejoicing over the lost hymen shows how women are suffering from multiple oppressions. The testing cannot protect the daughter from rape. And just like the rape, the testing violates the daughter's somatic boundary when the mother goes "inside" the daughter's body to carry on the order of patriarchal control.

This violation of physical boundary leads to Sophie's sexual phobia and abhorrence against her own body. These sentiments finally climax in Sophie's self-mutilation, which is an act that embodies her self-abjection. In the novel, in a very corporeal sense the female body represents the abject and women act out their self-abjection by traumatizing their own bodies. Sophie's self-abjection brings about the formal separation from the mother. Kristeva's

3 Oliver further states, "The power of the mother in a matrilinear society, the power of the child's primary relation/identification with the mother, and the power of the mother as the authority over the child's body are all condensed into the symbol of the Virgin Mother. The mother's power is brought under paternal control. It is domesticated" (51).

theory of abjection posits that the mother must become the abject prior to the child's entrance into the symbolic order. And Danticat literally presents the reader with a mother's corpse near the end of the novel.

In developing the thematic of testing, Danticat relies on the imagery of blood. She depicts Sophie's self-mutilation in a matter-of-fact fashion:

My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet. I took the pestle and the bloody sheet and stuffed into a bag. It was gone, the veil that always held my mother's finger back every time she *tested* me. (88)

Immediately before this violent act of self-mutilation Danticat inserts into the narrative a folk legend about a woman who cannot stop bleeding until the goddess Erzulie changes her into a butterfly (87-88). This story of transformation teaches Sophie that she needs to change her own body in exchange for freedom. Here Sophie's self-abjection marks an attempt at demolishing her own corporeality to set up a boundary between the demanding mother and her withering selfhood. Thus Sophie frees herself from the nightly testing that dehumanizes her in her own eyes. The image of the bloody sheet recurs with another legend when Sophie and Grandmother Ifé are listening to how a village girl is being tested. As opposed to the previous story, this time the legend is about a virgin who does not bleed on her wedding night and her husband is obliged to cut her, which consequently leads to her death. Yet the honor of her husband is preserved when he parades at the head of the funeral procession with blood-soaked sheets (154-55). The story is permeated with a sacrificial sense: women's blood is spilt to maintain male honor and family pride. Together these three tales of blood exposes the unspeakable nature of violence in this maternal practice.

By taking away the hymen that the mother is desperately trying to protect, Sophie at once liberates and punishes herself. Significantly, Sophie's instrument of "deflowering" is a pestle, a culinary utensil for crashing spices that signifies their cultural roots and a curious phallic substitute for that of her rapist father. By this self-inflicted mutilation, Sophie at once acknowledges her connection with the maternal and unconsciously punishes the body that reminds the mother of the rape. Later on, the mother repeats this kind of self-mutilation by committing suicide. The way that Martine stabs herself seventeen times shows the extent of her self-loathing. I would argue that both Sophie's and Martine's self-mutilations are unconscious attempts to replicate the original traumas, the testing and the rape. This obsessive desire of return

to the unspeakable past bespeaks a mimetic impulse. Both mother and daughter attempt to liberate themselves with phallic instruments. However, Danticat makes it clear that this mimicking will not bring true liberation for victims of masculine aggression and maternal complicity.

Sophie's self-mutilation fails to be truly liberating, which is evinced in her psychosomatic symptoms of fear of sex and eating disorder. Her bulimia is another symptom of her self-abjection. As Kristeva points out, "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (2). Danticat also makes Sophie's disease of eating disorder part of her maternal inheritance as Martine confesses that the scarcity of food in Haiti made her overeat and gain sixty pounds during her first year in the United States. Sophie also confesses to Martine, "I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband" (123). Sophie's sexual phobia can be regarded as a condensation of all her namable and unnamable fears. As Kristeva argues, "It will fall upon analysis to give back a memory, hence a language, to the unnamable and namable states of fear, while emphasizing the former, which make up what is most unapproachable in the unconscious. It will also fall upon it, within the same temporality and the same logic, to make the analysand see the *void* upon which rests the play within the signifier and primary process" (37). The brief appearance of Sophie's therapist, Rena, who is also an initiated Santeria priestess, becomes pivotal in Sophie's struggle with memory and trauma. The advices coming from Rena, to reclaim the mother line, to give a face to the rapist/father and to visit the spot where Martine was raped, combine professional psychoanalytical language and African folk wisdom. What is important is the creolized nature of this healing practice. Separately neither psychoanalysis nor folk wisdom can effectuate a cure.

Here we must pause and consider an important political issue about Danticat's emphasis on the thematic of testing in the novel. There are important questions that we need to address within the general framework of multicultural literature: Is it necessary to highlight the practice of testing in the Haitian culture? Is the testing an example of cultural specificity or is it inserted in the novel as a target for voyeuristic investigation by (primarily white) readers and critics? There are no easy answers to these loaded questions. I believe this horrific practice is used in the text to exemplify how Haitian women are suffering from multiple oppressions resultant from colonial and patriarchal authoritarianism.

In terms of gender politics, in the novel the testing is represented as a source of trauma that demands acknowledgement and comprehension. After

her self-mutilation and consequently rejected/expelled by the mother, Sophie tries to justify her self-defilement with a forced sense of *jouissance* by investing a hope of normality on Providence, a prototypical New England town—"I was bound to be happy in a place called Providence. A place that destiny was calling me to. Fate! A town named after the Creator, the Almighty" (89). The interpellative power of the supposedly utopian space rests on the biblical allusion in which the Name of the Father is invoked. For the posttraumatic Sophie, Joseph's house in Providence represents an imaginary postoeidipal stability that can rescue her out of the state of liminality. However, she has to carry out her project of liberation and regeneration back in the Haitian hilly village, which represents a Kristevan *chora*, the place in which Sophie's identity and the maternal practice are originated. This homecoming can be read as a sign of embracing maternal/native values. Nevertheless it is also a necessary journey for Sophie to confront the source of her sexual phobia and to query the grandmother and the mother who have passed on this tradition. Sophie's return to Haiti in part III, therefore, is not simply a journey of search for roots but an epistemological one.

Danticat clearly indicates that the end of Part II demarcates a watershed in Sophie's life. What comes after is how to deal with the formal separation from the mother or the possibility of a second reunion. Yet the novel does not end with Sophie's return to the United States with Martine after the mother and daughter reconcile. Obviously, there is more to be resolved than the mother-daughter conflict. The novel also makes it clear that acknowledgement and comprehension is not sufficient to overcome the traumatic experience. The trapped green balloon in Sophie's healing ritual is an eloquent symbol of the impossibility of any miracle cure. Sophie still needs to take another step—to confront the past as represented by the spot of the mother's rape and the place of her origin—in order to be fully liberated. Martine's death catalyzes this final confrontation and her suicide, in this sense, becomes sacrificial. Her spilt blood enables the daughter to reconnect with the present.

The novel evinces an ambivalent reaction toward maternal discourse. On the one hand, mother-daughter bonding is described as fundamental to female existence. On the other hand, mothers are also victimizers who collude with the patriarchal violence, which again presents a nuanced picture of patriarchal practices. A paradoxical demand in the novel is the need to continue the semiotic order of female heritage and a need to stop the meaningless reproduction of suffering women. Ambivalence or paradox notwithstanding,

Danticat is faced with the challenge of a feminist demand to contain and curb the sense of resentment within the narrative since it is supposedly a celebration of Haitian womanhood. To resolve the conflict between the demand of narrative containment and the oscillating sentiments towards maternity, Danticat resorts to the appropriation of culturally specific allusions which are exemplified by the references to the *vaudou* loa Erzulie and cult of twins in Marassas.

In Danticat's portrayal of Grandmother Ifé we see a good example of the ambivalence towards the maternal: she is the African Caribbean ancestress figure who safeguards family heritage; at the same time, she is collusive in sexual oppression against women. It is therefore highly symbolic when she offers Sophie a statue of Erzulie, the *vaudou* "goddess of love who doubled over...as the Virgin Mother" (113) to solace the latter's painful memory of testing.⁴ Before she is reunited with Martine, Sophie entertains a projection of the mother as the goddess: "As a child, the mother I had imagined for myself was like Erzulie, the lavish Virgin Mother. She was the healer of all women and the desire of all men" (59). In her path-breaking study of Voudoun practices in Haiti, Maya Deren points out the significance of this female loa: "...Voudoun has given woman, in the figure of Erzulie, exclusive title to that which distinguishes humans from all other forms: their capacity to conceive beyond reality, to desire beyond adequacy, to create beyond need. In Erzulie, Voudoun salutes woman as the divinity of their dream, the Goddess of Love, the muse of beauty" (138). Deren nevertheless observes a paradox in this celebration of the great female principle: "It is upon this diminutive feminine figure that man has placed the burden of the most divine paradox.... Erzulie is the loa of the impossible perfection which must remain unattainable" (144). When the image of the Virgin Mother is no longer valid, Martine takes on with her suicide another characteristic of Erzulie. Sophie chooses to bury the mother in a bright red suit as a final gesture of rebellion against the virginity cult and an attempt at empowerment and liberation: "It was too loud a color for a burial. I knew it. She would look like a Jezebel, hot-blooded Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped *them*, and killed *them*. She was the only woman with that power" (227). The crimson red, which is both a color of love and passion in Haitian

cosmology and that of redemption in Christian theology, represents female sexuality and ancestral identity since the color is correlative to the family name Caco, a scarlet bird.⁵ Hence Sophie again identifies Martine with Erzulie, which symbolically reroots the mother's spirit, her *éspirit*, with the motherland. In this final act of "courageous daughtering,"⁶ Sophie acts out her piety towards the past and discovers her own liberation.

However, the reason for Martine's testing of Sophie goes deeper than the virginity cult. Martine tells the story of *Marassas*, the inseparable lovers, to Sophie during a testing: "The love between a mother and daughter is deeper than the sea. You would leave me for an old man who you didn't know the year before. You and I we could be like *Marassas*. You are giving up a lifetime with me. Do you understand?" (85). Danticat somehow changes the meaning of *Marassas*, which represents a worship of twins in Haitian culture, into one that stresses the oneness in two entities. It also represents her fear of separation and resentment against the daughter's "betrayal" of the mother-daughter symbiosis for the sake of the entrance into the symbolic order as represented by Joseph, whose name is reminiscent of the Christian myth of fatherhood. Ironically, Martine's fixation on the preoedipal symbiosis is always already determined by the symbolic order as she ritualistically practices testing on Sophie according to the patriarchal mandate. In Martine's desire of doubling with the daughter there is a strong sense of possessiveness. Besides nightmares and suicide, therefore, Martine's way of "narrating" her memory is possessiveness. Her insistence on the complete mother-daughter identification can also be regarded as a symptom of melancholia since Sophie is used as the substitute of a love object. Martine's fixation on eliminating the boundary between the mother and the daughter is depicted as a symptom of her madness. On the other hand, this insistence on mother-daughter

5 Atie explains the family name to Sophie during their walk around the family cemetery: "Our family name, Caco, it is the name of a scarlet bird. A bird so crimson, it makes the reddest hibiscus or the brightest flame trees seem white. The Caco bird, when it dies, there is always a rush of blood that rises to its neck and the wings, they look so bright, you would think them on fire" (150). The symbolic meaning of the scarlet bird is important to the novel, thus the title of the French translation is based upon this bird imagery.

6 This is the term Thomas Ferraro uses in his analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Ferraro revises Adrienne Rich's concept of "courageous mothering" and argues that the daughter should have courage to speak against her heritage and clan and also the resourcefulness to identify the mother's silent dissent in the interstices of tradition and family history (159).

4 As a creolized religion, *vaudou* maintains a symbiotic relationship with Roman Catholicism. Desmangles sees the symbiosis in two ways: "first as symbiosis by ecology; and second as the system of identification by which Catholic saints are identified with Vodou laws [loas]" (136).

doubleness is culturally specific when Sophie finally realizes that starting from the folk tradition they are all "daughters of this land."

Another meaning of doubling refers to a state of two in one in which a unified identity becomes impossible. Danticat uses it in an ironic mode as a critique of the inhuman cruelty of politicians:

There were many cases in our history where our ancestors had *doubled*. Following in the *vaudou* tradition, most of our presidents were actually one body split into two: part flesh and part shadow. That was the only way they could murder and rape so many people and still go home to play with their children and make love to their wives. (156)

More important to our context is how Martine and Sophie both adopt this kind of doubling during sexual acts. It is obvious from the text that the purpose of their doubling originates in a fear of abandonment since both mother and daughter confess that they feel obligated to fake sexual pleasure in order to keep their men.

To avoid stereotyping, however, Danticat takes pains to illustrate that sexual phobia is not limited to Haitian women alone. In Sophie's sexual phobia group, there is an Ethiopian woman Buki, who is a victim of female genital mutilation, and a Chicana woman Davina, who has been raped by her own grandfather for ten years. What the three women have in common is that they all suffer from sexual violence inflicted by their own kinsmen who either represent or act out the mandate of patriarchal authoritarianism. The ritual of burning the names of their abusers signals a symbolic revenge against their victimizers. At issue here is not the assertion of a victim's moral superiority. Rather the object lesson is to stop the senseless circulation of victimization. As Sophie states, "It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire. It was up to me to make sure that my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares, and never had her name burnt in the flames" (203). Here Danticat allows Sophie to invest hope in her own daughter. Because of her mother's maturity, Bridgette Ifé, as the youngest generation of the Caco women, will be exempted from the cycle of hurt and trauma.

At the very end of the novel and after the mother's burial, Grandmother Ifé queries Sophie with the key question again in a rhetorical way: "There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: 'Ou libéré?' Are you free, my daughter?" (234). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* Danticat offers a vision of mother-daughter bonding that is based upon biological

connection and spiritual identification through the images of blood and double. While stressing the importance of female heritage, however, Danticat also sees the danger of entrapment within a biological discourse of bloodline and the necessary separation in order for the daughter to develop into full subjectivity. Through the interrogation of the mother-daughter boundary, Danticat passes on these messages with her novelistic discourse: The daughter must reconcile to the fact that the good mother and the bad mother are one and the same; and she must not reproduce the cycle of trauma so that the daughters in the future will not suffer. Thus when Martine chooses to be subsumed by a melancholic negation of self, Sophie learns to move beyond the liminal state of abjection. Sophie's multiple passages manifest an epistemological desire to understand the cause of her own trauma so that the horrific practice will not be repeated and reproduced. This brave confrontation with her own memory helps Danticat's daughter protagonist break out of the biologically determined cycle of victimization, reconnect with the present, and is finally able to reach a state of true liberation.

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