Violence and Embodied Subjectivities: Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994)

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Situating herself within a literary tradition of force and counter-force, violence and resistance, Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat invokes Albert Camus to carve out her space of creation and writerly commitment inflected by the very violence of the place she comes from:

Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I’ve always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them. Coming from where I come from, with the history I have—having spent the first twelve years of my life under both dictatorships of Papa Doc and his son, Jean-Claude—this is what I’ve always seen as the unifying principle among all writers. This is what, among other things, might join Albert Camus and Sophocles to Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Osip Mandelstam, and Ralph Waldo Emerson to Ralph Waldo Ellison. (*Create Dangerously* 10)

Danticat’s collection of autobiographically inspired essays, *Create Dangerously* (2010) is an invaluable tool for the reader to get a grip on the intricacies of her identity politics as a U.S. based diasporic writer. As evidenced by the key phrase, also the title of her volume of essays, her work is inflected by the violence of the land, a dangerous place from which she also derives her inspiration. Indeed, the first essay heading this volume addresses the public execution of two young activists of Jeune Haiti at the order of Haitian dictator Francois Papa Doc Duvalier and identifies this emblematic event as her “creation myth” (5) ever since haunting and obsessing her. Though watching this highly orchestrated and spectacularized ordeal of postcolonial tyranny
only later on a documentary footage, Danticat suggests that the violent scene is a point of reference for her to frame the history of her family as well as grounding her artistic creed. Her 29-year old, recently married parents still lived in Haiti at the time of the execution. When Edwidge turned two, her father left for the United States to escape political pressure and poverty to be followed by the mother a few years afterward. In their parents’ absence, Danticat and her brother were entrusted to uncle Joseph, a Baptist minister, and aunt Denis’s care, but when Edwidge became twelve, they reunited with the family by then already enlarged with two American-born siblings in New York City. While still in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Danticat witnessed her uncle’s courage to resist the regime’s political pressure in his own way by allowing secretly staged plays behind his church. The Haitian practice of clandestine reading, stage playing, let alone writing, of potentially subversive pieces of literature (9) looms large in Create Dangerously as scenes of high risk invoking the memory of the execution of the Young Haitians, Marcel Numa and Louis Dronin (the latter a good writer himself). Yet this very danger is also pointed up as the condition for a distinct Caribbean creativity—writing and reading literature in particular—as well as a “unifying principle among all writers” (10?). To wit, following the disastrous 2009 Haitian earthquake, Danticat has recently claimed that since then she has been writing with this devastation in mind (Murphy, Interview).

Creating dangerously thus intimates not only her way of commitment to writing but also the concepts of danger in the shadow of violence as the ontological status of the immigrant artist who is inescapably drawn to themes of deprivation, disempowerment, and oppression, the very consequences of that violence. Hence is her declared obligation of political awareness and responsibility towards her readers (18) defined by the site of multiple traumas with a long history of political violence, organized crime, and natural disasters. Her debut novel, Breath, Eyes, Memory hinges on the theme of violence dispersed and decentered, generating a variety of symptoms (its diagnosis tallying with posttraumatic stress disorder) that affect the life of three generations of Haitian women in the Caco family. Danticat was particularly interested in representing a matriarchal family in a traditionally patriarchal postcolonial culture, as well as in their way of coping with trauma, pain, and memory (Lyons186). The first-person-focalizer protagonist is young Sophie Caco, who is violence embodied. She is a child of rape, a massive trauma her mother, Martine, is unable to work through, remaining caught up in it until brutally
terminating her own life with a knife. The memory of sixteen-year-old Martine’s tragic abuse—on returning from school, she is ravished in the cane fields by a masqued tonton macoute, a member of Papa Doc’s paramilitary troops—haunts the family across generations. The narrative evolves through young Sophie’s reluctant departure from Haiti to be with her mother in New York City (somewhat reminiscent of the author’s reuniting with her family in the U.S.A.), her tantalizing years with the mother and with her own womanhood, and her attempt gradually to cope with the Cacos’ multiple, transgenerational traumas that prefigures promises of healing and reconciliation. The novel’s cross-cultural themes along with issues of dislocation, relocation, migration, postnational consciousness, global citizenship, (subaltern) cosmopolitanism, and the re-invention of trans-Caribbean identities within and outside of the Caribbean region situate it in the tradition of Caribbean “heritage recovery” (Munro 6). The diasporic nature of Breath, on the other hand, speaks to the shifting nature of blackness, this novel expanding the scope of Americanness beyond the borders of the United States, linking it with all the Americas (Munro 6).

While keeping in mind the novel’s postcolonial-diasporic aspects, my focus in the forthcoming discussion will be on the representation of embodied subjectivities bound up in the order of desire, signification and power in which these female bodies experience themselves. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to subjectivity and his claim about the interwoven spatiality of body, subjectivity and the world—“Bodily spatiality is the deployment of one’s bodily being, the way in which the body comes into being as a body” (149)—as well as informed by corporeal feminism and disability studies, I seek to tease out how the embodied subjectivities of women characters, those of Sophie and Martine in particular, are represented as lacking and deficient in an overtly dramatized way. I am interested in exploring how the novel’s bruised and abused female lives are fleshed out and normalized into social bodies by the postcolonial male aggression that paradoxically “enables” embodied female subjectivities to exist only as “disabled” bodies, on disabled terms. My reading of Breath also attempts to address the ways how healing is configured in the narrative by transmuting violence through empathy, mutual recognition, and generosity.

At first sight, Breath, Eyes, Memory is a 35-chapter, retrospective narrative inflected by the Euro-American tradition of female Bildungsroman that more or less linearly follows the
chronology of the narrator’s life from early girlhood to womanhood. The text’s distinct focalization carves out a narrative space in the low mimetic, Menandic mode—to follow Northrop Frye’s terminology—also called comic since the novel revolves around the script of a young protagonist falling out of grace, then combating vicissitudes, and finally realigning with a newly found community. Notwithstanding its comic status, the novel is far from being a comedy; indeed, it abounds in tragic scenes of violence, laceration, and above all, abused, disfigured and painful bodies whose presence is conspicuous in the narrative.

Examples of the above abound in the text. Martine’s raped body never heals, instead, it becomes cancerous, then mutilated by double mastectomy; furthermore, she experiences her newly pregnant body as heinous, inhabited by a monster-fetus as if she were carrying her own rapist inside. Grandmé Ifé’s old body is represented as disfigured, also having a “pineapple-sized hump” (113). Her Haitian tales flesh out stories of adventure and survival, yet they are populated with vulnerable and imperfect female bodies that show their deficiency from the start, as in the short narrative about baby girls whose birth—contrary to baby boys—is not celebrated by lighting lanterns in the night. Other tales that Sophie remembers being raised with also target lacking and dysfunctional women’s bodies, as the one about a young bride who does not bleed, then bleeds far too much and dies. Yet in Breath, it is not only Haitian female but also disempowered Haitian male bodies that would bleed (such as Dessaline’s) or become disfigured with pain or are simply tortured to death: the Caco grandfather is killed by heat stroke and overwork on the canefield; the poor coal vendor is beaten to death by tonton macoutes; the government politician’s body is mangled by a car bomb. American school kids find the generic Haitian immigrant body disgusting, exuding “HBO” (Haitian Body Odour) as well as threatening since it is supposed to be a cesspool of viral diseases, most notably AIDS. Young Sophie develops a defective body (later demanding even medical help) due to her violent, self-inflicting way of defloration with a vegetable pestle in revolt against the mother’s virginity tests. As a young woman she struggles with a bulimic and wounded body that she finds dysfunctional, indeed, a site of lack and pain (“I hate my body” [123]) rather than plenitude and pleasure. Sophie’s American sexual phobia group includes an Ethiopian college student with mutilated genitals (her clitoris was cut and her labia sewn up when a girl at home), and a middle-aged Chicana, sore at body and heart in consequence of her own grandfather raping her for ten years. With such a high concentration on ravaged,
disfigured and painful bodies, Danticat’s novel seems to point up the inescapably interwoven nature of bodies, selves, and their world, indeed, it spells out how violence is triggered by regimes of sexist-racist ableism that derive their power from the methodical disabling and dispossessing of bodies. Put another way, as Donette A. Francis phrases it, “Danticat gives voice to a larger muted history that intimately connects gender, sexuality, and violence to the projects of nation-building and imperialism” (88).

The emblem of dispossession in the novel is Martine’s raped body which also intimates that rape is part and parcel of human dispossession, deprivation and disablement. Martine’s violated female body appears to be pivotal in the narrative: it embodies the structural violence that fleshes out the political body of Haitian dictatorships; it shapes the Caco family’s lived experiences, including Sophie Caco’s social body; and it triggers Sophie’s attempt to resist the normalization of this violence. Rape, as this novel intimates, is not a cursory incident involving a tonton macoute overpowered with sexual desire and a young girl out there to be ravaged, but a clue to the very operation of a cultural script.¹ As Sharon Marcus contends, “the violence of rape is enabled by narratives, complexes and institutions which derive their strength not from outright, immutable, unbeatable force but rather from their power to structure our lives as imposing cultural scripts” (emphasis mine; 388; 389). “The rape script,” as she explains, “takes its form from . . . a gendered grammar of violence, where grammar means the rules and structure which assign people to position within a script” (292). The grammar of violence called rape functions as a mirror that “reflects back to women images which conflate female victimization and female value” (393); to wit, “the grammar of violence dictates that feminine fear concentrate the self on the anticipation of pain, the inefficacy of action, and the conviction that the self will be destroyed” (394).

Not only normalizing rape as an always already existent force in control of giving shape to daily life, the Duvalier dictatorship also defines the boundaries of what counts as normative

¹ Benedetta Faedi’s *TheDouble Weakness of Girls: Discrimination of Sexual Violence in Haiti* (2008) addresses the high rate of sexual assaults in Haiti and explores practices of discrimination and sexual violence against girls with “double weakness” since they are women in children’s bodies. Claiming that high rates of sexual assault occur in “societies characterised by uncertainty of the male social role,” Faedi explains rape as a gendered problem, key to understanding the complex baggage of social ills: “In Haiti, poverty, poor governance, and armed violence further exacerbate strong patriarchal values, cultural patterns of a power-imbalance between men and women, a gender-specific sexual asymmetry, which ultimately foster the widespread and systematic rape of girls and women” (176).
female embodiment. Accordingly, the normalized model of Haitian femininity involves mentally and physically vulnerable, since “incomplete,” black women with a hole to be filled up and with a socially disabled body to be controlled. As Sophie remembers, “I learned very early in life that virgins always took small steps when they walked. They never did acrobatic splits, never rode horses or bicycles” (154). Young Martine of a poor family, cherishing dreams of becoming a doctor is thus liable to be normalized back to her place when, on her way back from school, she is attacked by a masked paramilitary who savagely beats and rapes her. Though the Caco women will perceive it as rape, they have no language to speak it: the gendered normalization of violence robs victims of their voice. Martine Caco’s rape, as Simone A. James Alexander suggests, “embodies this silence both in body and presence. As a result, she experiences both verbal and corporeal incapacitation. . . .” (376).

The grammar of rape in this socio-cultural script (which is also inculcated in the Caco women by grandmé Ifé’s tales as well as by the Caco mothers’ tradition of servicing their daughters with virginity tests) emplace Martine on a distinct social map with a specific body-style. When she responds to this force-field intersected by the power dynamics of gender, race, and class, her body-style or posture manifests the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.² The disabling environment of dictatorial Haiti imposes on her a cultural script that makes her evolve a body image comparable to disabledness. Her embodied subjectivity is thus constituted by an image of embodied anomaly: though trying her best to cope with the childhood trauma of rape far away from Haiti, her regular nightmares remain, her body deteriorates and develops cancer, and her new pregnancy triggers persecutory mania.³ In short, gradually succumbing to the interpellation of an ablist-racist-masculinist world (where subjectivity is normalized around healthy, lighter-skinned/mulatto and white, masculine bodies) experiencing her body as a site of disaster, she eventually enacts her imaginary body to become disability manifest, which David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder call “the master trope of human disqualification” (qtd. in Shildrick 17).

² “The posture that the body adopts in a situation is its way of responding to the environment” (Gallagher and Zahavi, 138).

³ Based on interviews with Haitians, a recent study, “The Mental Health and Psychosocial Effects of Organized Violence: A Qualitative Study in Northern Haiti” (2012) delves into symptoms described by informants and, as a result, claims that they “correspond to established criteria for major depression, dysthymia, and anxiety disorders including PTSD” (606).
Stuck in the binary of the ablist economy on the wrong side, Martine makes every effort to raise her daughter to avoid the throes of disability by enabling her to end up on the right side. She is at pains to convert Sophie into her healthy, caramel-colored Haitian doll (the living counterpart of the doll she has been sleeping with in her shabby American apartment), who is also her American daughter capable of meeting the corporeal standard interpellated by the ethos of compulsory white able-bodidness (Kumar Campbell 6). She wants Sophie to become a normative, white(ened) citizen (while she can only whiten herself with a skin cream and get her hard-earned money by looking after sick old people), complete with a straight, heterosexual life and professional career. One of the major causes of the multilayered conflict between mother and daughter derives from Martine’s ablist commitment to forcing Sophie to earn an easier living as well as to set the record straight for the Caco women. To compensate for mother Martine and Tante Atie’s frustrated, indeed, “disabled” Haitian life, Sophie is thus expected to attain the status of a healthy, well-educated and successful American woman: “If you make something of yourself in life we will all succeed. You can raise our heads” (44).

Sophie, however, as the plot unfolds, is far from being a dutiful ally or the daughter-half of the mythic Vodun Marassa, whose mother-half Martine claims to be. Instead of submission to the violence-ridden motherly design, Sophie reacts with growing indignation to Martine’s attempts to normalize her. In light of the complex mother-daughter relationship on which the narrative pivots, the whole novel can be interpreted as the daughter’s dubious, then unmitigated attempts to come to terms with her mother’s difference, indeed, with her own making, then revision, of a fantasy-mother modelled after the Vodun goddess, Erzulie.

_Breath, Eyes, Memory_ in this light is a retrospective narrative whose diegetical time is significantly marked by the daughter’s belatedness to relate to and make sense of the mother, as revealed by the narrator’s comment at the end of chapter 8: “It took me twelve years to piece together my mother’s entire story. By then, it was already too late” (61). Notwithstanding her adolescent resistances to the mother, Sophie’s task is exacerbated by the psychological baggage of “postmemory” that Marianne Hirsch—in a different, post-Holocaust context—identifies “as a

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4 While testing her daughter’s virginity in pursuit of the Haitian custom to establish herself as a good mother capable of turning out a good daughter, Martine tries to soothe Sophie’s pain during the procedure by repeating the story of the female Marassa always in search of her other half with whom she longs to unite, as mothers and daughters should.
structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” which is “a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (106). By definition belated and inherited (Hirsch 107), postmemory work, such as Sophie’s—which practically constitutes the whole novel—is structured by a particular trope identified as “the trope of maternal abandonment and the fantasy of maternal recognition” (Hirsch 108). Similar to Holocaust postmemorial work, Danticat’s fictionalizing of postmemorial work also “strives to reactivate and reembody more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Hirsch 111). Sophie’s postmemorial work to cope with her own loss of the mother as a baby, then, as a young girl, coupled with her way of handling the mother’s trauma of rape, is conspicuously structured and reembodied by her own “cultural memorial structure,” that is, the fantasy of the absent mother embodied in the mythic Vodun loa/lwa, Erzulie. Unnamed or named, Erzulie’s multiple figuration occurs ten different times in nine different chapters as if holding Sophie—embodied by the text—in her embrace.  

In the syncretic religion of Vodun, Erzulie/Erzili/Ezili is not only one loa but a pantheon of female spirits embodying a wide range of forces, including erotic love and pleasure, maternal love and protection, creativity and fertility, wisdom and healing, beauty and plenitude. Ezili Fréda, for example, is a luxurious mulatta abounding in earthly pleasures of perfume, jewelry, fine clothes, sweets, flowers, and laughter, whereas Ezili Dantor is a Vodun Mater Dolorosa, a mother in sorrow, tears always in her eyes, the protector of women, children, and lesbians. “Erzulie thus goes beyond false dichotomies,” explains Joan Dayan, “as she prescribes and responds to multiple and apparently incoherent directives. . . . Everything written about Erzulie can be contradicted” (6). Engaged in postmemorial work, Sophie fleshes out her own fantasy-Erzulie of such contradictions:

5 I find Maria Rice Bellamy’s use of “postmemory child” related to Ka in Danticat’s short story cycle, _Dew Breaker_ (2004), revealing. Indeed, similar to Danticat’s Sophie in _Breath, Eyes, Memory_ Ka is also raised in a traumatized household away from Haiti, and like Sophie committed to patching up the story of her mother’s (and her own) life, Ka is also involved in a “life-long quest to understand and represent her father’s tortured past. . . .” (178).

6 For Erzulie, see the following chapters and pages: Ch. 7, p. 52; Ch. 8, p. 59; Ch. 12, p. 87; Ch. 16, p. 113; Ch. 23, p. 157; Ch. 31, p. 201; Ch. 33, p. 215; Ch. 34, p. 221; Ch. 35, p. 227, p. 234.
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. She had gorgeous dresses in satin, silk, and lace, necklaces, pendants, earrings, bracelets, anklets, and lots and lots of French perfume. She never had to work for anything because the rainbow and the stars did her work for her. Even though she was far away, she was always with me. I could always count on her, like one counts on the sun coming out at dawn. (59)

Erzulie Fréda combined with Erzulie Dantor is the mythic Mother in the child’s fantasy, who is a most powerful woman, no human woman, I must add, could ever measure up to: she is virgin mother and seductress, the object of heterosexual, even same-sex desire; she is mother-healer serving others and voluptuous woman seeking her own desire. Small wonder that in place of Erzulie, Martine at the New York airport disappoints the daughter in chapter 6. Their first encounter is captured in a language of disenchantment. Instead of loving, gentle, and solicitous, the mother is described as rude, almost offensive: “she came up to me and grabbed me and begin to spin me like a top, so she could look at me” (40). Far from even the handsome photograph her aunt had of her on her night table,

[h]er face was long and hollow. Her hair had a blunt cut and she had long spindly legs. She had dark circles under her eyes and, as she smiled, lines of wrinkles tightened her expression. Her fingers were scarred and sunburned. It was as though she had never stopped working in the cane fields after all. (42)

Unlike omnipotent Erzulie, “the healer of all women and the desire of all men” (59), her mother works in an old people’s home, washing and feeding the bedridden in the day, and looking after an old lady, sick with a stroke, in the night (57, 58). Instead of powerful and strong, she has such a weak constitution that she is unable to hold the child in her lap for long (46) and when in conversation, she talks “as though she were talking on one of our cassettes” (59),
expecting no exchange of thoughts or opinions. Though striving to heal her love life with an upstanding Haitian-American boyfriend—as the daughter gradually finds out—she seems to be submissive rather than assertive in this relationship:7 “[s]he was going to stay with him as long as he didn’t make any demands that she couldn’t fulfill” (60).

The thematically second textual segment marked by Sophie’s two crucial relocations (from chapter 6 [Sophie leaves Tante Atie in Port-au-Prince for Martine in New York City] to chapter 12 [Sophie leaves her mother to live with Joseph in Providence, Rhode Island]) represents Sophie’s growing resentment with Martine whom she finds only a grotesquely dysfunctional and weak counterpart of the mother her childish fantasy—far from the actual mother in Brooklyn—brought to life in the figure of the powerful Vodun goddess, Erzulie. Their tantalizing relationship—which Masoumeh Mehni describes as “mutual abjection between Sophie and Martine” (81), also involving “an important element of Kristeva’s theory of identity formation” (57)—comes to a head with a most dramatic scene. She breaks her own hymen with the mother’s pestle (as if regendering the aggressor) in an ambiguously erotic context, this retelling of deflowerment also enmeshed in the story about the bleeding woman whose plight is healed by Erzulie (87-88). By abusing her own body to revolt against the patriarchal requirement of virginity (fulfilled by her mother’s relentless virginity tests), she re-enacts the mother’s rape with a difference, since Sophie performs the role of rapist, lover and victim in one person.

Though not as crucial as the decision that the young Indian female political activist Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri makes to commit suicide under unsanctioned conditions in Spivak’s

7 I agree with Simone A. James Alexander with regard to Danticat’s representation of female bodies as not only sites of pain, mutilation and terror but also the sites of resistance and revolt: “women frame a counter-discourse in the existing (patriarchal) structures of state violence, using their mutilated, abused bodies as weapons to resist and rebel against the nationalist agenda” (373-74). However, in my argument, which focuses on the mother-daughter relationship from Sophie’s perspective (after all, Breath, Eyes, Memory is Sophie’s retrospective narrative), I find the critic’s interpretation of Martine’s relationship with boyfriend Marc and her butchering herself with a rusty knife more optimistically slanted toward feminist agendas than actually supported by Danticat’s text: “Martine . . . disrupts the link between black women’s bodies and a knowable corporeality that Dickerson references by refusing state-imposed motherhood. Martine thereby refuses to reproduce the nation and its nationalist designation of her as an invisible, second-class citizen” (382). I believe the novel situates Martin’s character in more contradictory terms, constituted of the dynamics of empowerment and fatal disempowerment, resistance and submission, the latter triggering Sophie’s increasing anxieties as well as her developing female agency and reconciliation with the mother.
milestone study of postcolonial agency, Sophie’s decision to wound herself is likewise a self-afflicting kind of rewriting the social text “in an interventionist way” (130). Like Bhaduri reinscribing the social text of sati (widow immolation) by killing herself while still menstruating—she claimed herself the agency of a good woman but also disregarded the traditional ban on enacting suicide on her “unclean” body—Sophie seems to challenge the normalizing social text of sexual assault against women. Furthermore, Sophie also seeks to free her body from the tyranny of the (m)other. The daughter’s self-protective desire for mastery over her own body vis-a-vis her mother’s power over that body reads like a revolt against a monstrous mother who feels entitled to control her child, yet has no power to control her own raging mind and hysterical body. Sophie’s self-mutilation (not only painful then but necessitating medical help later) soon precipitates a fatal, though temporary, disruption in their relationship, her mother severing ties with the daughter for two years (88).

Martin’s trauma of rape has obviously trapped her, leaving her even more powerless and inarticulate (Sarthou 109): revengefully inflicting pain on the daughter clearly shows her a prisoner within the economy of violence. Her postmemory daughter is, however, capable of mobilizing the dual (Haitian and American) resources at her disposal as well as unlearning the traditional Haitian way of covering up traumas so that she can remember them differently, “with a sense of connection” (Eva Hoffman, “After Such Knowledge” qtd. in Hirsch 103). To retrace this process in Danticat’s book, I briefly address a few pivotal scenes in the thematically third textual segment (dovetailing with sections three and four) that, in my reading, elaborates on how this reordering of remembering evolves, assisted by Sophie’s effort to seek relief, reconciliation and freedom from the bondage of violence.

While agreeing with James Alexander, Francis, Loichot, Mehni, and Sarthou who insightfully explore Sophie’s healing and emerging agency, I argue that Sophie’s way of transforming violence is not only a matter of reclaiming and taking control of her body to assert her female subjectivity and freedom. My contention is that losing control, indeed, temporarily

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8 In “Can the Subaltern Speak” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interprets young Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri’s puzzling suicide in 1926 as a distinct articulation of her agency whereby she “rewrote the social text of sati-suicide in an interventionist way” (307).
disowning her body to let it be absorbed by other bodies is just as crucial for Sophie to negotiate violence in the novel as her effort to establish control and self-definition. I even suggest that her attempts at self-recognition through interconnectedness approximates the operation that Roberto Strongman calls “a transcorporeal conceptualization of the self” which he identifies in Afro-Diasporic religions, including Vodun. Sophie’s American-based therapy guided by a woman psychiatrist cum Santeria Priestess as well as her trips to Haiti (first to stay with Grandmé Ifé and Tante Atie then to bury her mother) inescapably render her the task to remap the traces of her female disablement into a geography of interconnected subjectivities. As a result, conspicuously foregrounded as the narrator’s delayed and retrospective commentary toward the end of the novel, she is capable of grasping herself in an interwoven pattern of female bodies “tied to a certain world,” indeed, constituted of it (Merleau-Ponty, 148):

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. Where women return to their children as butterflies or as tears in the eyes of the statues that their daughters pray to. My mother was as brave as stars at dawn. She too was from this place. My mother was like that woman who could never bleed and then could never stop bleeding, the one who gave in to her pain, to live as a butterfly. Yes, my mother was like me. (234)

The crucial prefigurations of this transformative change anticipating healing and speaking it hinge on two scenes of generosity or gift-giving in the final chapter. The first occurs when grief-stricken Marc, Martine’s partner, requests Sophie, still in New York, to choose clothes for her mother to be buried in:

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9 Strongman explains that unlike in Western tradition represented by “the unitary soul of Descartes’ the immaterial aspect of the Afro-Diasporic self is multiple, external and removable” (14); furthermore, these various, even contradictory subjectivities “rest upon a concave corporeal surface reminiscent of a saddle or calabash” (14).

10 Elizabeth Grosz writes on Derrida’s notion of gift/generosity that he derives from Levinas: “The gift is both a part of and in some sense always beyond the economy of exchange, that economy that measures, regulates, calculates only through a kind of primary violence. The gift, and the modes of hospitality it entails, is an impossible (yet imperative) relation in which what is given cannot be what it is: the gift can only function in not being a gift. The moment an impulse to reciprocity or exchange is set up (one gift for another), the gift ceases to be a gift and becomes an object in a system of barter or exchange” (67).
I picked out the most crimson of all my mother’s clothes, a bright red, two-piece suit that she was too afraid to wear to the Pentecostal services.

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. It was too bright a red for burial. If we had an open coffin at the funeral home, people would talk. It was too loud a color for burial, but I chose it. (227)

When picking a crimson dress for her mother, Sophie not only reinscribes her as a proud Caco woman (the family’s name is identical with that of a Caribbean bird with loudly purple feathers) but also as a powerful Jezebel-Erzulie, formerly the mother of her childish fantasy. Symbolically empowering her mother with the capacity to repel, even rape her rapists-to-be, she no longer expects her mother, now dead, to be involved in any emotional transaction with her; on the contrary, she places her beyond the economy of violence and desire, expecting no return or repayment, only effecting “pure excess, without accumulation” (Grosz 67). Martine is thus transformed into a loa with multiple and contradictory identities with magic power in a closed coffin, with “no ostentation, no viewing, neither pomp nor circumstance” (227).

The other crucial act of generosity is enacted at the end of the funeral by the grandmother and the aunt when perceiving Sophie as she runs off to the neighboring cane field to attack the cane. Though breaching every possible rule of mourning and propriety, Grandmé Ifé and Tante Atie give their full consent to Sophie’s strikingly untraditional way of dealing with her loss:

There were only a few men working in the cane fields. I ran through the field, attacking the cane. I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding.

The cane cutters stared at me as though I was possessed. The funeral crowd was now standing between the stalks, watching me beat and pound the cane. My grandmother held back the priest as he tried to come for me.
From where she was standing, my grandmother shouted like the women from the market place. “Ou libéré?” Are you free?

Tante Atie echoed her cry, her voice quivering with her sobs.

“Ou libéré!” (233)

This apparently insane scene represents not only Sophie’s release ritual letting go of pent-up tensions and grief but also, as Francis insightfully states, her recognition of a “collective Caco body” constituted of “three generations of broken bodies … in dire need of restitution” (87). For this young Caco woman to challenge and revise the disabling social script, she needs violence redirected from herself to the site of collective traumas. But Sophie, I argue, also needs her performance to be communally accepted, indeed, she needs fellow-Haitians partake of her act. Consented by the grandmother and her aunt, the funeral crowd not only bears witness to this scene of transforming violence but also actively sanctions it with its approving presence. Put another way, on the grandmother’s prodding, exercising an act of generosity, the funeral crowd gives Sophie the gift of time and space outside of the economy of violence, expecting no return.

Blessed with this condition of hospitality, Danticat’s novel ends with promises of the main character’s liberation. The concluding scene represents the grandmother with the granddaughter, both standing in the cane field, the latter still unable to speak. The text foregrounds an emotionally highly charged scene that Sophie recollects, with the grandmother intimating an alternative future for the granddaughter, that which is beyond violence, trauma, and silence:

“Listen. Listen before it passes. Paròl gin pié zèl. The words can give wings to your feet. There is so much to say, but time has failed you,” she said. . . . 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?

My grandmother quickly pressed her fingers over my lips.

“Now,” she said, “you will know how to answer.” (234)
As the self, Sophie’s included, is never autonomous but “always exists in the complex web of its varied relations” (Gatens 38), Sophie’s imminent liberation is rendered by the text through her interconnectedness to Martine (and the collective Caco body) in an ever-expanding time and space where words of liberation won’t be contained within their constraining horizon.

Edwidge Danticat’s _Beath, Eyes, Memory_ is a memorable text that demonstrates a literary representation of violence as well as the characters’ effort to negotiate, indeed, transform violence into interconnectedness and personal/communal liberation. Danticat’s postmemory text foregrounds the violence of rape as part and parcel of human deprivation normalized by regimes of postcolonial dictatorships whose power derives from the methodical disabling and dispossessing of female bodies. _Breath, Eyes, Memory_ maps out the operation of traumas across generations only to suggest a counter to the economy of violence by generosity and re-remembering with a sense of connection. Though anchored in concrete, materially existing, historically constructed scenes of Haitian-American life, the text hinges on the notion of becoming instead of being, flows and shifts instead of completion, provisionality instead of permanence. This fascinating debut novel, in short, explores a liberating vision where “humans are neither pure cause nor pure effect but part of the world in its open-ended becoming” (Barad 821), the ground for always evolving possibilities of contesting, indeed, transforming violence.

**Works Cited**


Francis, Donette A. “‘Silences Too Horrific to Disturb’: Writing Sexual Histories in Edwidge Danticat’s Breath, Eyes, Memory.” Research in African Literatures 35.2 (Summer 2004): 75-90.


