

## MEMORY, DIASPORA AND THE FEMALE BODY IN LITTLE HAITI: EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S "READING LESSONS"<sup>1</sup>

**KEYWORDS:** diaspora; memory; trauma; Haitian American literature; Edwidge Danticat

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** diáspora; memoria; trauma; literatura haitiana-americana; Edwidge Danticat

### **ABSTRACT**

This article approaches Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat's short story "Reading Lessons" by focusing on acts of memory as a response to traumatic experience that are made manifest on the diasporic space and the black woman's body. By means of the anomaly trope, articulated through ambivalence and dissociation, as well as an emphasis on indirection, reflexive self-questioning and an avoidance of closure, the text complicates the full access to traumatic experience in the diaspora, thus showing a resistance to appropriation and calling for an opening of the trauma paradigm that pays a close attention to context. It is by articulating an ambivalent relation to home and memory, by calling readers to recognize their own positioning, and by arguing for the need to acknowledge the vulnerability of others, that memory is offered as a possibility for change.

### **RESUMEN**

Este artículo se aproxima al relato de la haitiana-americana Edwidge Danticat "Reading Lessons" centrándose en diversos actos de memoria en respuesta a experiencias traumáticas que se ponen de manifiesto en el espacio diaspórico y el cuerpo de la mujer de color. Por medio del tropo de la anomalía, articulado a través de la ambivalencia y la disociación, además del énfasis en la indirección, el auto-cuestionamiento reflexivo y la resistencia a los cierres, el texto complica el acceso completo a la experiencia traumática en la diáspora, mostrando un rechazo de la apropiación y demandando una apertura del paradigma del trauma que atienda especialmente al contexto. La memoria se ofrece como posibilidad para el cambio a través de la articulación de una relación ambivalente con el hogar y la memoria, de una llamada a los lectores para que reconozcan su posicionamiento y argumentando la necesidad de reconocer la vulnerabilidad de los otros.

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## “GRAPPLING WITH MEMORY”<sup>2</sup>

“The first time Danielle remembers ever being aware of her breasts was when she was thirteen and her mother told her to rub crushed butterflies on them to make them grow.”<sup>3</sup> In the very first sentence of Edwidge Danticat’s “Reading Lessons,” we are already introduced to the complex acts of remembrance on which she builds this remarkable short story. When Danielle, who works as a first-grade teacher at a small experimental school in Miami Little Haiti, finds a tumor in her breast, the memories of her mother’s teachings back in Haiti burst into her life. The butterfly ritual comes back to her with a series of detailed instructions: she should pick the pale female butterflies and pluck them alive from flower petals with her own hands. Very importantly, she was to avoid the darker males, species with black spots, and moths, or else she would not only get a rash but “she wouldn’t see another centimetre of growth for the rest of her life.” Because, as she interprets now, she followed her mother’s advice then, her breasts have actually grown, to such an extent that years after the mother has been murdered and Danielle and her father have left Haiti to settle in the United States, “she discovered in the shower one morning a chestnut-size lump in one of them, the right one, which seemed to have bloomed overnight, as if her mammary glands had been soaked in a butterfly bath while she slept.”<sup>4</sup>

The ritual that Danielle performs is directly associated to violence, death and mourning: because, as a girl, Danielle was used to hunting less delicate animals such as lizards, she would sometimes press too hard on the butterflies and kill them. She would then pile them in a jar, “a kaleidoscopic, see-through mausoleum, too horrifying to keep in her mother’s cosmetic cabinet yet too beautiful to discard.” She eventually ends up throwing these dead butterflies to the two iguanas she keeps in a cage in her parents’ garden on the day her mother is shot and killed by a classmate of Danielle as she was coming home from her textile shop. This is the ritual of commemoration of her dead mother that started in Haiti, and which Danielle will

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *REN* for their useful comments on this essay.

<sup>3</sup> All references to Danticat’s short story can be found in *The New Yorker* January 10, 2005 <[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/01/10/050110fi\\_fiction](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/01/10/050110fi_fiction)>.

<sup>4</sup> Danticat has often recognized that she is obsessed with butterflies; in her interview with Marlene Racine-Toussaint, for example, she connects the monarch butterfly, famous for its long migration and the still researched into manner in which its offspring knows the way back to where their ancestors came from, to the imprints left by stories and memories on the diasporic writer. Butterflies appear as a multilayered symbol in many of Danticat’s works: Rocío Davis notes that it is one of the unifying elements in the short story cycle *Krik? Krak!*, where they are a symbol of both continuing life and transformation, of beauty in spite of violence or death (71-72). Butterflies are also one of the most powerful symbols in *The Faming of Bones*, where they can be seen as “an ethereal token of hope,” “an indicator of the potentiality of transformation to be undertaken by a human soul in the wake of a traumatic experience” (Harbawi 44). Their meanings vary, the most recurrent being the duality death/resurrection, but also including resistance, indeterminacy or strength in spite of apparent fragility (44-45), all of which resonate in “Reading Lessons” too.

now have to bring to a full circle. On the other hand, the butterfly ritual—with its perverted supposed effect, the lump in her breast—also functions as a memory transmission device, reactivating her mother's teachings from years before. In this sense, it becomes an ambivalent symbol of connection and disconnection, of home and unhome, for as it brings back the mother(land) memory, it also entails a life risk in its very presence—over the course of the short story she will not figure out whether the lump is benign or cancerous—which simultaneously points at the painful dislocation of Danielle in the Little Haiti context, so alien to her mother, to her home country, and to her whole childhood.

Critics have praised Edwidge Danticat's achievement of giving a voice to the protagonists of the Haitian diaspora through the fictional recovery of their memories, and her uncovering of previously silenced, unknown, or manipulated chapters in Haitian history. Her literary work has been generally analysed as trauma fiction, a paradigm that becomes particularly appropriate to approach an experience of invasion, dictatorship, repression and natural disasters like that suffered by people from Haiti, as well as Danticat's own personal history of exile, family fragmentation and dislocation. Such an approach focuses on the way Danticat's narratives function as a surrogate mourning process as the author, mixing trauma with resilience, adopts the role of witness of the traumas suffered by her people, while simultaneously aiming at repairing the wounds she is exposing and providing some idea of wholeness in spite of overwhelming rupture and pain. Accordingly, critics generally mention rites of memorialisation as a means to reconnect with motherland and heritage, and references to healing, hope, resistance to invisibility or oblivion abound together with the attention to traumatic experience. The transgenerational transmission of trauma derived from sexual violence on Haitian women has been analysed in the novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) by various critics, who see a final healing of the protagonist Sophie when she confronts her mother about the virginity tests she performed on her and goes through a cathartic experience in the scene of her mother's rape, after which she is liberated from the cycle of sexual violence (Ibarrola "Broken," Smith, Sweeney). The short story cycle *Krik? Krak!* (1996) articulates several examples of the traumatic experience of Hatians and the different vignettes are connected through symbolism, Haitian traditions and especially the conception of storytelling, which has been outlined as the way to emphasize community in spite of fragmentation (Davis, Ibarrola "Broken"). The novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998) has been generally recognized as bringing to the surface the massacre of Haitian migrant workers living in the Dominican Republic in 1937, in such a way that writing becomes an act of remembrance directed at restoration and regeneration, with an emphasis on the images of hope, redemption and rebirth in the final scene of the protagonist Amabelle's reunion with the river, a cathartic act of coming to terms with the past (Caruso, Harbawi, Ibarrola "Broken," Vega-González). The short story cycle *The Dew Breaker* (2004) has been seen as a

“casebook” in trauma theory (Ibarrola “Broken” and “Language”) for the depth in which it unveils the psychological and social dysfunctions of the people traumatized by the Tonton Macoute that gives the title to the text, which include paranoia, nightmares, ghostly presences, or schizophrenia as a direct result of the terrible violence of the Duvalier dictatorship. Although regeneration for victimizers is not so easily achieved (Ibarrola, “Broken” 24), critics still emphasize the process of healing through storytelling (Smith), enabling narratives of resistance, creation and redemption (Mehta), burdens becoming gifts (Walcott-Hackshaw), or the way the author still leaves some room for hope and recovery (Ibarrola “Language”). In the memoir *Brother, I’m Dying* (2008), about Danticat’s father and uncle’s lives and deaths, the critical attention has focused on the traumatic content of her uncle’s attack and persecution in Haiti, the total disregard of Haitian or US authorities and his detention and tragic death in Krome.<sup>5</sup> In spite of this, an author still sees Danticat herself emerging as the empowered protagonist of the narrative (Caruso), implying that some sort of healing is possible. Although it is of course too soon to have articles published on Danticat’s most recent work, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), which goes back to the short story cycle genre and which is full of lost mothers, lost children, accidental deaths, murder and exile, we can expect its future criticism to go in the same direction.

In spite of this prevalence of the discussion of Danticat’s works as trauma fiction—which makes sense insofar as they deal with the content of traumatic expression through structural and thematic fragmentation, therefore fitting in the general description of the trauma paradigm—Jo Collins has very appropriately interrogated, from a postcolonial point of view, “a specific strand of trauma theory, developed through the work of Vickroy and Whitehead, that sees the text as a ‘witness’ to trauma” (7), where the reader is ethically called to engage with the text, becoming the interpreter of testimony. In this model, Collins sustains, audience response is privileged at the expense of the political realities depicted in the text, and this entails the risk of appropriation of the trauma of others, of falling into what Spivak calls “epistemic violence.” As Collins proves with an analysis of *The Dew Breaker*, “for Danticat, it is important that art can approach trauma without appropriating it as a ‘whole’ and misrepresenting it” (11), which is why the text is full of fragmentation, dissociation, disconnection, negation, and reflexive self-questioning. As a consequence of Danticat’s “textual politics of distancing and indirection” (11), traumatic events “are rendered incompletely and without the possibility of closure” (10), we cannot reconstruct the characters’ experiences, which prevents empathy, access to trauma is complicated and, in this way, trauma experience is made unavailable for possession and assimilation into discourses of therapeutic recuperation. This is relevant because there is a tendency, as I have noted

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<sup>5</sup> Waller offers an interesting view of Krome detention center as terra incognita, connecting it to US detention policies and Guantanamo Bay.

above and as Collins also finds in reviews and criticism of Danticat's work, to find "some disavowed salvation" (13) in the narrative that would allow readers—especially Americans, who are involved in Haitian traumas—to deal with guilt from a safe distance, which would preclude real political engagement, for "[r]eading such novels through western paradigms of trauma may seem like an ethical act of recuperating memory, but may ultimately be a way of appeasing guilt about the West's imbrication in such trauma without impelling real intervention" (14).

Jo Collins' observations are a useful and convenient starting point for my analysis of the articulation of memory and trauma in "Reading Lessons," a short story which has so far escaped critical attention and which, through reflexive self-questioning, indirection and ambivalence, incompleteness and an avoidance of closure, complicates the access to traumatic experience, thus showing a resistance to appropriation. On the other hand, for my use of the term "memory," I am indebted to Michael Rothberg's definition, which he in turn expands from Richard Terdiman's idea that memory is the past made present, and from Dominick LaCapra's understanding of memory as a form of working through: "The notion of a 'making present' has two important corollaries: first, that memory is a contemporary phenomenon, something that, while concerned with the past, happens in the present; and second, that memory is a form of work, working through, labor, or action" (Rothberg 3-4). This view of memory as the combination of a present-past dynamic, with a special attention to action and social change, is related to two of the problems with trauma theory that have been underlined by some critics recently; on the one hand, the "difficulty of trauma theory to recognize the experience of the non-Western other" (Craps 15), and on the other, the risk of trauma theory of preventing rather than allowing for real political transformation (124-26). This does not entail, as Craps contends, that trauma theory needs to be abandoned altogether, but that it should be expanded into "an inclusive and culturally sensitive trauma theory" (127), that is, that the traumas of non-Western or minority groups should be attended to for their own sake and approached from a culture- and context-specific perspective which is also compatible with a commitment to radical activism that may pave the way for transformation. Last but not least, bell hooks' warning that "[w]hen we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our actions, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination" (43), although not new, still needs to be recalled. This ought to remind us that an ethical approach to texts originated in a culture that is other to us is always necessary and will at least entail a recognition of the text's resistance to being easily fixed by the person who is interpreting it.

It is with all this in mind that my look at "Reading Lessons," which started from the butterfly story as a powerful symbol of main character Danielle's relationship to both mother and motherland, is focused on acts of memory and forgetting as a response to traumatic experience that are made manifest on the

diasporic space and the black woman's body. The narrative refers to these two levels, space and body, and their complex interaction, in order to deal with both the individual and the collective, with personal and political shame, and it does so by resorting to the anomaly trope on which the textual imagery is constructed. An anomaly is, generally speaking, an alteration of some kind, a peculiarity, an oddity, or even abnormality, and it can also refer to something or somebody deviating from a rule, not fitting in. By means of the anomaly trope, articulated through ambivalence and dissociation, Danticat interrogates simple presuppositions on anomaly and normalcy, trauma and health, and in this way she manages to approach the traumatic experience indirectly, through encircling rather than explicitly stating, and denying full access to traumatic experience in the diaspora.

### “THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WATER”

The first anomaly in this story is the articulation of place, a concept which refers “to a physical environment *inhabited or imagined* by a person who attaches and derives meanings from it” (Balaev, *Nature* 12, emphasis added). Spatiality “is crucial to the activity of remembering, and seems as important as temporality to both its conceptualization and its practice” (Whitehead 11), which explains its relevance in any account of trauma, for “[t]he primacy of place in the representations of trauma anchors the individual experience within a larger cultural context, and, in fact, organizes the memory and meaning of trauma” (Balaev, “Trends” 150). However, the word “anchor” may not be the most appropriate when referring to a space like the one inhabited by people of the Haitian diaspora, who see Haiti as a “floating banana boat, for which there is perhaps no longer a singular harbor” (Danticat, *AHA!* 44). As Lily Cho rightly argues, “[n]o one is born diasporic. Rather, one *becomes* diasporic through a complex process of memory and emergence” (21, original emphasis). Accordingly, the necessary connection to both Haiti and the newly founded communities of immigrants in America becomes for Haitian Americans a transnational space in the making, an example of diasporic subjectivity, whose conditions are, we should remember, “marked by sorrow and loss as well as by the pleasures of connection” (Cho 17).

The context where Danielle lives is the diasporic community of Little Haiti in Miami, Florida, a place of connection and support for Haitians in America, a transcultural community which is characterized by ambivalence, the presence of secrets and anomalies, and the tensions originating in conflicting cultural and social codes. Danielle—like Danticat herself, who emigrated to the US when she was 12—is a member of the 1.5 generation or the generation one and a half, Rubén G. Rumbaut's term for the immigrants of ages between 6 and 12, that is, pre-adolescent, primary-school-age children who learned or began to learn to read and

write in the mother tongue at schools abroad, but whose education is largely completed in the US (1167). It is typical of members of the 1.5 generation to fulfill the role of bridge between the US and the country of origin, and between the first and second generations of immigrants, especially in terms of language mediation as Danielle does, but also socially and culturally, for there are usually large differences in class and wealth between the people who are already established in the US and the newcomers, usually poor as well as uneducated. Danticat has often stated in interviews that she sees *dyasporas*, or members of the Haitian diaspora, as bridges,<sup>6</sup> but this is no romanticized view of the diasporic experience: “My country,” says Danticat, “is one of uncertainty. When I say ‘my country’ to some Haitians, they think of the United States. When I say ‘my country’ to some Americans, they think of Haiti” (*Butterfly* xiv).

Danticat’s country, in fact, is not a nation in the conventional sense of the word but a transnational space, what she calls “the tenth department. Haiti [...] had nine geographic departments and the tenth was the floating homeland, the ideological one, which joined all Haitians living outside of Haiti, in the *dyaspora*” (*Create* 49). The relevance of the *dyaspora* is such that the word has become part of popular language, and may be used to rebuke an opinion expressed about Haiti in Haiti—“What do you know? You’re living outside. You’re a *dyaspora*” (49)—or even for a stranger to catch your attention in the street, replacing “*Miss, Ms., Mademoiselle, or Madame*” (50). In any case, when used in Haiti, *dyaspora* often entails otherness, and therefore, dissociation and exclusion, and it reflects a common feeling of shame and guilt at having abandoned the country, even if that meant choosing life over death under the dictatorship (50). But the link to Haiti also proves undeniable and unbroken, nourishing its people abroad, for as Danticat also says, “We of the Haitian *dyaspora* maintain a very long umbilical cord with our homeland” (“AHA!” 42). *Dyasporas*, as is made manifest in Danticat’s fiction, articulate their view of Haiti as both home and unhome, a place of nostalgia and pain, the relation to which is characterized by the conflicting impulses to remember and to forget.

In her class, Danielle works surrounded by “hand-drawn maps of their Little Haiti neighborhood, real maps of what Danielle and the kids called Big Haiti, a globe that showed the whole world,” this series of official and unofficial maps and names bearing further witness to the incorporative and fluid nature of the diasporic reality. In accordance to the spatial and ideological ambivalences that characterize Little Haiti, the text is full of references to elements of tension and discord, to secrets and anomalies. The traumas they live by in this community are made patent in the list of questions that the students usually ask:

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, her interview with Marlene Racine-Toussaint.

What is a refugee? Why do my parents need money? What is a bouzen?<sup>7</sup> What is a vagabond? Every once in a while, she planned to tell the parents, she was delighted when a child made a more puerile inquiry: How does a kite fly? How does an airplane stay up in the air? Where are my tears hiding when I'm not crying?

The school has “a ninety-nine-per-cent Haitian student body—the one ‘foreign’ boy had, like the school’s principal, been born of Haitian parents in Burundi.” Danielle’s secret relationship with the school Principal is presented as another anomaly, sometimes deliberately confounded in the narrative with her recently discovered and also hidden tumor, for she could be referring to either one when she describes it as an unexplained and uncomfortable secret which “could be either harmless or devastating.” In many ways, Little Haiti is a community characterized by the coexistence of different languages and codes of behavior: on the one hand the official, US authority of school rules, where college titles should be publicly exhibited for a teacher’s validation, and where, perhaps somewhat hypocritically, no hint of violence is supposed to be allowed, as represented by Principal Boyfriend and her fanatic assistant Chantal Cozeau; on the other, the unofficial settling of the differences between Lorvane and Danielle, after which, Paul’s mother says, “We are finished now. . . . No more meetings. No police. Just teach my son.” As the title of the story implies, lessons are needed in order to be able to read all these codes, to account for these anomalies, and to decipher these secrets. In other words, the diaspora needs to be constantly rewritten and also re-read.

The most telling symbol of this transnational space is the tumor, and when Danielle calls it “a strange presence in a familiar place,” she preserves the ambivalence so that it could also be referring to the *dyaspora* experience and the Little Haiti community as an anomaly within the United States. The discovery of this anomaly in her breast activates a series of complex connections to mother and motherland:

What she remembered most vividly [...] was her mother’s odd advice, suggesting that in some way she could transform herself by rubbing the insects against her chest. It seemed harmless, now, that advice, even fantastical. But back then she had taken it seriously. Could her body have, too?

The centrality given to the body in modes of remembering in this short story confirms that “the body plays an important, if still contested, role in traumatic forms of remembering” (Whitehead 12), as it shows how “through certain forms of repetitive behaviour [...] the past comes to be relived or re-enacted in the present” (133). But as the previous quote from the short story also shows, Danielle refers to some kind of separation between herself and her body, as if they were not one and

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<sup>7</sup> “Bouzen” is the Creole word for prostitute.

the same. The differentiation between “back then” and “now,” defined here as that between the fantastical and the rational, perhaps even belief vs. reason, is attempted but, at least as far as her body is concerned, also unresolved.

Danielle’s interpretation of the lump in her breast as the perverted result of having followed the mother’s instructions is only one of two lessons taught by her mother that she remembers, the second being the fact that her mother used physical violence on her.<sup>8</sup> This memory is activated when Danielle, who was motivated to become a teacher in order to “detect and save” the type of boys like the one who killed her mother, recognizes “a familiar toothless smirk” across the face of one challenging student called Paul, and unwittingly slaps him, trying to erase that smirk “the way she did the words and numbers from the blackboard at the end of each school day.” According to her father, Danielle’s mother beat her because she was like a boy: “She wanted you to be better. [...] Better than dirt. [...] Better than your classmate who killed her. Better, probably, than the boy you slapped yesterday.”

Danielle’s life has therefore been determined by the traumatic experience of having lost her mother, and by the internalization of her mother’s own fears, which are passed on by means of the butterfly ritual and the beatings. Both are aimed at making Danielle’s breasts grow, as well as avoiding her inappropriate boyish behavior so that she becomes a proper woman, and while this may have been originally well-intentioned on the part of the mother, it is also a way of transmitting a feeling of anguish for not being feminine enough, or good enough. Her way of reproducing the circle of shame and suffering is directly linked to the Duvalier violent dictatorship (1957-1986), during which, as Danticat expresses,

all Haitians were meant to be [...] terrified children who could not be sure even whom to look in the eye or smile at or love. For love could easily turn into something ugly, something that could be expressed only through violence. [...] Coldness that hides a fear of attachment because who knows when we might have to leave, to go into hiding, into exile? Who knows when we might have to die? (*Create* 63)

Her mother’s fears are written on Danielle’s own body, which responds to them perhaps even more directly than she is ready to let her consciousness admit. Her breasts’ obedience to her mother’s orders, and her hand’s slapping her student Paul may be read as her body’s attempts at coming to terms with her inherited traumas. But they are, at the same time, the means for Danielle to establish a much needed connection with the lost mother and motherland in the diasporic context where she lives. In this way, “Reading Lessons” explores the transgenerational transmission of trauma between mother and daughter making it a representative instance of trauma

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<sup>8</sup> Danticat is here expanding on her already recognized expertise in representing the complexity of mother and daughter relationships, which she most famously encounters in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!*. More recently, she has centered on fathers and masculine figures in the memoir *Brother, I’m Dying* and the short story cycle *The Dew Breaker*.

that is also lived and transmitted transnationally, the personal becoming irreversibly intertwined with the political.<sup>9</sup>

As the story progresses, Danielle starts to think of the tumor “as a fragile egg that might crack” and decides that it is essential that it does not receive any touches, especially loving ones, for it might then be nourished and extend to other parts of her body. Due to this terrifying discovery, Danielle feels that her body is not her own anymore, to such an extent that she begins to speak of herself and her body as two separate things. As Sandra Bloom explains from the point of view of evolutionary psychology, humans’ primary defense to cope with the physiological overload produced by traumatic experience is a mechanism called “dissociation” (200), through which “we can deny important aspects of reality that are too disorganizing, too threatening to our own internal stability either individually or as a group” (202). Because due to dissociation—“a kind of ‘split-brain’ phenomenon in which there may be some kind of inhibition between the right and the left hemispheres as a result of experiences too overwhelming for the mind to handle” (205)—the traumatic experience does not register in the dominant hemisphere of the brain, which is where language and chronology are located, but it does register in the nondominant or nonverbal visual and emotional hemisphere, the trauma will haunt the individual as nightmares, flashbacks, and various physical symptoms until the integration of the two parts of the brain and the two ways of knowing is restored. Re-enactment behavior is thus understood as “a message, a signal, a ‘cry for help’ from another parallel consciousness” (207) which is trying to communicate with the linguistic side of the brain, and the only way for the person to heal will be to be able to communicate verbally, to reconnect the two parts of the brain, which according to Bloom can only be achieved socially, by means of artistic expression.

This interpretation of the human response to traumatic experience in terms of dissociation further illuminates our reading of Danticat’s short story, where the lump Danielle discovers becomes a symbol of a repressed traumatic memory, a cry for help of her body that is reacting to Danielle’s dissociative behavior in her attempt not to have to confront her pain. In order to fulfill this function, the lump is supported by the images articulated in two narratives that also work as signals that

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<sup>9</sup> The daughter’s search for connection with the lost mother is a motif that is present in Danticat’s fiction as a whole, including her most recent *Claire of the Sea Light*. In *Krik? Krak!*, we are offered various examples of the devastating loss of the mother, the search for connection even after death, or the difficulties of Haitian mothers to communicate with their more assimilated daughters in the US, as well as a clear emphasis on female bonding (see Rocío Davis for a complete analysis). But the most obvious connection of the mother-daughter relationship in “Reading Lessons” is to be made with *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, where the sexually abused mother passes on her shame to her daughter, forcing her to go through a virginity testing that becomes another sort of rape. Both texts are examples of sexual violence performed on the black woman’s body, engraved in the patriarchal system to such an extent that even the mothers continue it without question. “Reading Lessons” does not develop this issue in as much detail as in this novel, the violence level is lower, but the resolution is also left more open.

haunt Danielle, one being the butterfly story, the second, Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen," which she reads to her students. In the classic fairytale, a troll—in other versions, a sprite—makes a magic mirror that has the power to distort the appearance of all things reflected in it, hiding goodness and beauty and magnifying evil and ugliness. He uses it to teach the trolls in the school he keeps how the world really looks, but the mirror breaks and its splinters spread around the world, getting into people's eyes and allowing them to see evil only. When one of these splinters gets into little Kay's heart and eyes, he is transformed, and the Snow Queen takes him to her palace in the North Pole until his good friend Gerda, after overcoming a series of obstacles, saves him with her purity and innocence of heart. In "Reading Lessons," Danielle uses this story in her class, and it is precisely at the moment when she is reading about the troll mirror—"If someone had a freckle, you can be sure that it would spread over his nose and mouth"—that she sees Paul's mimicry of her facial expressions and lip movements and grimaces as an unbearable disturbance and slaps him. This intertext reinforces the anomaly symbolism, as it complements and complicates the butterfly resonances of beauty and metamorphoses introduced earlier. Danielle seems to have a troll splinter in her eye that makes her see the evil in Paul, even connecting him to her own mother's young murderer back in Haiti. At the same time, she feels threatened in the way the boy seems to be mocking her, his act perhaps a reminder of her own inherited fear of being ugly that made her follow her mother's advice on the butterfly rubbing in the first place.

When taken in isolation, both the butterfly and the Snow Queen narratives are anomalies in Danielle's context, a sign of alterity and dissociation: the butterfly ritual is far from the American emphasis on technology and rationalism, whereas the snow in Andersen's story could not be more alien to either Haiti or Southern Florida. Nevertheless, both are connected to the idea of ugliness and beauty and, taken together, they become symptoms of a hybrid, transcultural context, pointing at the need for new, transnational narratives and reading strategies. In the end, the only way for Danielle to escape destructive dissociation will be precisely by applying a new reading to a very old story: when confronted with the school committee that is judging Danielle's act of violence, Paul's mother Lorvane ignores the rest of figures of authority and settles the issue directly with Danielle by slapping her in turn, literally putting her in her place.<sup>10</sup> The result is that the splinter in Danielle's eye is melted, for, through sharp physical pain, she feels her body again, becoming reconnected to it and having no choice but to listen to its symptoms. The relevance

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<sup>10</sup> The search for retribution is a constant motif in US ethnic literature, which points at the fact that the mainstream or official system of justice can simply not meet the demands of social justice for everybody. Two recent examples that come to mind are Toni Morrison's *Home* or Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*. All of these cases require a close look at the specific context and tradition of each text/act, and are more or less direct ways of criticizing the duplicity of a system which can pronounce itself contrary to violence and simultaneously, persistently, continue it.

of her return to physical feeling is emphasized: “Now she understood the concept of turning the other cheek. It wasn’t so much directed at your neighbor; *it was allowing you to experience even further pain*. Acted out, it would indeed be an extraordinary sacrifice” (original emphasis). The final attempt at putting traumatic memories into narrative form is shown in the way Danielle rewrites not only the Snow Queen story—her return to perception motivated by a slap, as opposed to Gerda’s hot tears melting the splinter in Kay’s heart—but also the “turning the other cheek” Christian idea, using it to finally recognize the link to her body and pain, and to acknowledge the way these parts of herself were trying to speak to her. The slapping scene is all that “Reading Lessons” offers by way of epiphanic or cathartic ending, and it may be all it offers as opportunity of metamorphosis, but its ambivalence resists a comfortable interpretation: it is true that it offers connection—with Danielle’s mother’s slapping/lessons, and with a surrogate mother who slaps/teaches her in turn—but it does so, again, through violence.

Danielle’s return to full perception through her recognition of physical and emotional pain and renewed connections to her mother and a surrogate mother may be the beginning of integration and possibly healing for her. There is an obvious acknowledgement of the fact that running away from the images that haunt us makes them chase us, and that the silencing of symptoms will entail the perpetuation of the shame inscribed on the body and soul of a person, which in the case of Danielle grows as a tumor, literally. In line with trauma studies, this reading of the short story would also focus on an interpretation of narrative as fundamental in reconstituting the shattered self, its integrative motivation being the key to achieve the wholeness necessary for healing, in such a way that it may function as a surrogate mourning process that helps make sense of memories and come to terms with the past for the present and the future.

In spite of this optimistic view of the story resolution as a working through of traumatic symptoms, we should not ignore the fact that the slap on Danielle’s face allows her to experience “even further pain,” which also points at an unending circle of violence and suffering that does not allow for a feelgood reading. In fact, while the short story does confirm positive ideas about the need for community and the dynamic nature of remembering, it is simultaneously concerned with making us uncomfortable, to say the least, with the prevalence of physical punishment—Danielle’s mother beating her, Danielle slapping Paul, and Paul’s mother slapping Danielle—as a way to solve problems. Danielle may be trying to achieve retribution, to close a circle—a boy killed her mother and now she is trying to kill the violator in another boy—but her repetition of the violence actually perpetuates it, keeping the issue open, and we would not be surprised to hear Paul becomes a violent man himself in the future. This is just a sample of the presence of violence reflected in the text, which obviously has to do with the Haitian context but is here especially shown as exerted on the black woman’s body, from a murdered mother to

oppressive patriarchal values about female beauty and goodness. While some violence may sometimes be necessary for renewal and growth—as it is implied in the butterfly ritual and is common in many fairytales too—violence can also grow like a cancer inside the community. All in all, in the context of this story full of anomalies, we wonder whether violence can really be considered anomalous, and what that may imply for the definition of normalcy.

### **“A DANGEROUS BALANCE BETWEEN SILENCE AND ART”**

When trying to reach a conclusion, not many final statements can be offered about the story ending, except that the point that the text is making is already there at the beginning, in its very title, for Danticat’s “Reading Lessons” may be seen as both the account of a character’s learning process and a lesson in critical reading. On the one hand, what we are in the presence of here is an account of traumatic memory as part of a character’s learning process that is made manifest as a transformed awareness, a reordering of reality and the idea of the self in relation to a diasporic space seen as process. Just as when Gerda and Kay go back home after their encounter with the Snow Queen, they perceive that they have grown, which provides Andersen’s text with a traditional folk tale ending, the final scene in the short story, although left more open, is also a turning point for Danielle, a painful but necessary lesson which forces her to reorganize her perception of reality and previous conceptions of her self. She does so by reconstructing her sense of community: by mourning her mother and connecting to another mother; by questioning her place in the patriarchal set of values inherited from Haiti and newly confronted in America, and by acknowledging the suffering and vulnerability of herself and the people around her. Little Haiti is a community in the making that needs to revise and redefine its own codes, values and allegiances, and in this way, it becomes a good example of the diaspora as process that includes both homemaking and conflict. As for the lesson in reading, offered simultaneously, the story unsettles simple assumptions about trauma development and resolution, challenging the critical lenses we might have been wearing when approaching the text.

The first of these challenges refers to the supposed unspeakability of trauma, an idea which has been generalized amongst trauma critics. In the way “Reading Lessons” approaches the diasporic experience through ambivalent language and explores stories both Haitian and western to make sense of this reality, we see that trauma is by no means unspeakable, although it does need a specific narrative form to address its complexity. As Jenny Edkins says about language and trauma, “[t]he use of the term ‘unspeakable’ in relation to trauma is not only an excuse to avoid the need to listen to what is being said [;] It also reflects the view of survivors that what they have been through cannot be communicated” (7). Because relations of power

are produced through, reflected, and perpetuated in language, challenging the unspeakability of trauma through literature becomes an act of resistance to the supposed silence of traumatized or suffering peoples, and it proves politically relevant insofar as we acknowledge that “there is an imperative to speak, and a determination to find ways of speaking that remain true to the trauma” (15). Nevertheless, since as Edkins also argues, it may be true that “[w]e cannot try to address the trauma directly without risking its gentrification” (15), the best choice is “‘to encircle again and again the site’ of the trauma, ‘to mark it in its very impossibility. Memory and forgetting are crucial [...] in keeping open a space for a genuine political challenge by encircling the trauma rather than attempting to gentrify it” (15).<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Laub and Podell also refer to the creation of a space when they state that “[t]he indirect pointing to past meanings is an essential element in the art of trauma, in which the aim is not to come to an ‘objectively real’ depiction of an event, but to create a protected space wherein the remembrance of the traumatic experience can begin, if only haltingly, to occur” (995). The way Danticat approaches the trauma indirectly, encircling it, refusing to offer closure in meanings, focusing on anomalies that, in their overwhelming presence, ultimately contribute to call the very idea of health and normalcy into question, keeps this space both open for political challenge and sufficiently protected for remembrance to start to occur.

Further revision of the trauma paradigm is provided by the text’s challenge to “the predominant model that suggests traumatic memory remains frozen and separated from ‘normal’ memories” (Balaev, “Trends” 163). Memory is an active and revisionary process and traumatic memory is rarely represented as an exact recalling of events in fiction; on the contrary, usually “memories of the traumatic experience are revised and actively rearranged according to the needs of the individual at a particular moment” (163). Danielle reinterprets the death of her mother after she has confronted what she sees as a potential murderer in one of her students, and she is revisiting the past event as somebody who wants to prevent the same from happening again in the future. Besides the traumatic event, she is also revisiting the memories of her mother and the teachings included in them, especially the slapping and the butterfly ritual. While these revisions respond to the particular needs of her present context, they also confirm that the past is far from being static, an already told or finished story, and that it is instead very much open and alive in the present.

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<sup>11</sup> Edkins herself is drawing from Žižek here; when Edkins speaks of “encircling” the trauma she is mostly referring to using “another notion of temporality” and avoiding a “the reinstallation of time as linear and the narrating of events as history” (15), and she is taking for granted that there is a clear opposition between linear and trauma time, which is questionable. I am using the idea of encircling in a broader sense.

Another assumption generalized in the trauma paradigm that is being questioned here is the conception of trauma as a shattering experience that fragments a coherent sense of self. Craps resorts to Stocks to call attention to the fact that trauma theory has often relied on the Western conception of the self as a psychologically healthy and unified subject, which has led to the conclusion that healing from trauma implies overcoming the fracturing of the self caused by an extremely disturbing event. Contrary to these assumptions, Craps contends, it is obvious that for many disempowered groups trauma is a constant presence, and that there is no pre-traumatized state of being that can be straightforwardly restored, no single linear narrative into which they can integrate their traumatic memories (32-33). When we think of a person who is mourning a murdered relative, or a diasporic individual who has lost direct contact with their motherland, we tend to imagine a coherent identity that has been broken, threatened by the dead person's loss, and a home to be nostalgic about, some place to dream to go back to. This is not necessarily the case when we deal with a place like Haiti, where violence can almost be considered endemic, so that Danielle's mother's murder is only a small chapter in a long history of suffering that is by no means closed today, that is, violence, trauma, are not exactly an anomaly, in the sense of something exceptional, in Haiti. This fact should remind us that a context-specific approach to these traumas is not only desirable, but essential, for it is the only way we can actually listen when Danticat articulates in her narratives what she has stated in interview, that "healing is harder" than trauma, and "it can take generations" (in Jaggi).

The prevailing ambivalence with respect to traumatic resolution mirrors the representation of the immigrant writer's relationship to home and memory, a view of whose complexity is made obvious in Danticat's own words:

[g]rappling with memory [...] is one of many complicated Haitian obsessions. [...] There are many ways that our mind protects us from present and past horrors. One way is by allowing us to forget. Forgetting is a constant fear in any writer's life. For the immigrant writer, far from home, memory becomes an even deeper abyss. It is as if we had been forced to step under the notorious forgetting trees, the *sabliyes*, that our slave ancestors were told would remove their past from their heads and dull their desire to return home. We know we must pass under the tree, but we hold our breath and cross our fingers and toes and hope that the forgetting will not penetrate too deeply into our brains. (*Create* 63; 65)

Just as there is a part of the self that needs to die for the person to live on—like the caterpillar that sheds its skin before becoming a butterfly—there is also the risk of remembering, or forgetting, too much, of wings growing into cancer, of breasts growing too large, too dangerously. Memory is something to grapple with, and forgetting is both desirable and feared, and implicit in this ambivalence is the idea

that, while there may not really be a choice, having one's identity based on a traumatic past entails serious complications.

As we see, "Reading Lessons" may not be considered trauma fiction in the narrow description of the model, which presupposes experimental textual strategies to represent the acting out of trauma and which will conclude with a working through of traumatic symptoms. But looking at the anomalies and ambivalences in the text is one way to respond to the opening of the paradigm demanded by critics like Craps:

[r]ather than positioning a necessary relation between aesthetic form and political or ethical effectiveness, trauma theory should take account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and be open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance which these contexts invite or necessitate. (43)

The attention to context and to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance determined by it has been one of the motivations behind this essay, largely through the observation of the indirect literary articulation of trauma and memory, and a reconsideration of the norm/exception, normalcy/anomaly oppositions. It is precisely this resistance of the text to being fixed that prevents the reader from becoming a figure of authority that can apprehend and contain the whole story in a single interpretation. Rather, we are called to participate in a dialogue with the text—which makes sense in the conception of the art of trauma as both indirect and dialogic, as Laub and Podell define it (993)—listening to what the text has to say and avoiding attempts at fully appropriating it, trying not to fall, in other words, into epistemic violence.

The call to engage in a dialogue and acknowledge the text's openness and resistance to fitting in a paradigm is an interesting self-reflective commentary offered by the text on the act of critical reading. In parallel to this lesson, and not less importantly, Danielle's story of grieving also directs our attention towards the necessity to recognize the vulnerability of others. Judith Butler theorizes a conception of mourning as having to do with "agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance" (21). She emphasizes how grieving reveals something important about ourselves, for "[t]he very 'I' is called into question by its relation to the Other" (23), and when we are dispossessed of the other we finally discover that it is really the ties we have to others that "constitute who we are" (22). Danielle's story precisely illustrates this process of submitting to the transformation of grief, although we cannot figure out exactly in what direction that transformation will take her, as the final question asked by her boyfriend after Lorvane's slapping—"Are you ok?"—shows in its openness. She learns that if she continues to avoid confronting her pain, her body will respond with physical symptoms and the repetition of

unresolved behavior. She also changes in the way she used to be blind to other people's suffering, only to finally recognize the boy's and the mother's vulnerability in parallel to her mother's and her own.

"Reading Lessons," then, is another contribution to Danticat's concern with making readers aware of their own positioning and the subsequent recognition of the vulnerability of others:

though we [contemporary immigrant artists] may not be creating as dangerously as our forebears—though we are not risking torture, beatings, execution, though exile does not threaten us into perpetual silence—still, while we are at work bodies are littering the streets somewhere. People are buried under rubble somewhere. Mass graves are being dug somewhere. Survivors are lining in makeshift tent cities and refugee camps somewhere, shielding their heads from the rain, closing their eyes, covering their ears, to shut out the sounds of military "aid" helicopters. And still, many are reading, and writing, quietly, quietly. (*Create* 18)

As we see here, Danticat—a writer who sees herself as an accident of literacy (19) and who is constantly struggling to find the "dangerous balance between silence and art" (10)—admits her own sense of responsibility when she is writing, acknowledging the vulnerability of those in a less privileged position than hers. As for us readers, if we accept the text's resistance to fitting in our previous expectations, as we ponder on the possible outcome of the violence inflicted on the woman's body—will the metamorphosis result in a tumor or in a butterfly?—we may become a little more open to the complex dynamics of the diasporic experience and the relevance of memory as a tool for potential change.

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