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## Lyrical Rapturing in Danticat's Work: Transcending Haitian Cultural Silence through Narrative

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY  
Miami, Florida

LYRICAL RAPTURING IN DANTICAT'S WORK: TRANSCENDING HAITIAN  
CULTURAL SILENCE THROUGH NARRATIVE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

By

Johanna Martine Piard

2022

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Johanna Martine Piard, and entitled Lyrical Rapturing in Danticat's Work: Transcending Haitian Cultural Silence through Narrative, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Anne Castro

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Date of Defense: June 14, 2022

The thesis of Johanna Martine Piard is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

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Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
And Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2022

## DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Alphonse and Raymonde Piard, who first introduced me to Edwidge Danticat and have always encouraged me, even in my darkest moments, to be proud of being Haitian. I also want to dedicate this thesis to my sister, Isabelle Piard, who continues to be my cheerleader no matter what I do, and to my partner, Kieron Williams, whose love, patience, brilliance, and impeccable editing skills have contributed to the completion of this work.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS  
LYRICAL RAPTURING IN DANTICAT'S WORK: TRANSCENDING HAITIAN  
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by

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Florida International University, 2022

Miami, Florida

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Edwidge Danticat's work has been praised for the visceral, deeply personal ways she writes violence, suffering, death, and loss, leading scholars to theorize that dehumanization is a central motif in the Haitian and Haitian diasporic experience. This causes Haiti to be generally considered, as Jerry Philogene describes, "a socially dead space". Danticat ventures into this "socially dead space" in her recent memoirs, reflecting on the traumatic experiences of her two paternal figures, her father and Uncle Joseph, her complex feelings around her mother's death, and the value of Haitian art in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake. Danticat creates a language, I have coined as lyrical rapturing, that interrupts her narrative with prose that expresses her own residual pain from her personal traumas, triggering new processes of healing. This thesis will show how my theory of lyrical rapturing occurs in Danticat's "Brother, I'm Dying, The Art of Death," and "Create Dangerously: the immigrant artist at work". By reflecting past works such as "Breathe, Eyes, Memory", Danticat creatively theorizes the internalized process that helps her to continue to create despite the weight of such grief.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the opening pages of Edwidge Danticat's *The Art of Death*, she articulates the project of creating language by finding texts that reframe her relationship to death after her mother's passing. Danticat states: "I want to both better understand death and offload my fear of it, and I believe reading and writing can help"<sup>1</sup>. In this single moment, Danticat sets herself on a quest: she must confront her deepest fear of inevitable death and reconfigure a new narrative. Danticat's oeuvre is full of introspective projects like this, where she tackles the silent anxieties and vulnerabilities that are often precipitated and informed by her Haitian experience, on the island and in the States. According to Jerry Philogene, "Haiti has been constructed, in part through a visual discourse, as a socially dead space, entangled in the dialectic of a postmodern enslavement"<sup>2</sup>. Danticat's work places itself in this "socially dead space", expressing the interiority of the Haitian resilient spirit and imagination. These moments of expression in her work are what I have coined *lyrical rapture*, which can be identified by specific moments in the text that interrupt the narrative thread with deep political, cultural, metaphysical, spiritual, or unconscious thoughts that are superimposed upon the narrative, often without warning. This form in her literary style serves a purpose in her work.

Danticat revisits these sites of silence, in her work, to disrupt the cycles of shame while also extricating revelations that create pathways towards healing. Danticat

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<sup>1</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 7

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Philogene, "Dead Citizen' and the Abject Nation: Social Death, Haiti, and the Strategic Power of the Image," (Santa Barbara: Haitian Studies Association, 2015)



creatively theorizes the internalized processes that construct the resilience of Haitian people throughout her narratology. In her work, Danticat writes viscerally distinct narratives where her characters confront their traumas precipitated by Haitian cultural structures rooted in colonialism, sexism, colorism, respectability, poverty, systemic violence, and political instability. Her literary style is characterized by its cyclical form, merging present experiences with memory to bring forth a deeply personal thought that culminates into a lyric. Danticat's writing style engages with the fluidity of memoir, history, and essay, by showing the ineluctable implications anti-Haitianism has on the personal mind of the Haitian/Haitian diasporic person. Her words empower young Haitian writers like myself to take up these causes by embracing aspects of our Haitian culture deemed taboo, inferior, and/or evil. Danticat creates a language that is full of lyricism, emotional depth and complexity, that allows a depth of feeling that excavates pain, unveils silences and allows for transcendence of those traumas. I will show how the concept of lyrical rapturing is used in three of Danticat's nonfiction pieces. In *Brother, I'm Dying*, Danticat writes about Uncle Joseph's experiences navigating the civil unrest and political violence in Post-Aristide Haiti, and her father's entrapment in Brooklyn due to his immigration status and limited job opportunities that constantly left him financially disadvantaged. She shows their resilience by lyrically rapturing their mutual love, both for their families and each other. In *The Art of Death*, Danticat lyrically raptures to transcend her insurmountable grief over her mother's death by centering the intimate and spiritual bond between her and her mother that persisted despite distance and even death. This moment is triggered when she reflects on how she crafted Martine's suicide in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat is confronted with signifiers

of Vodou found in different Haitian art pieces. She lyrically raptures the cultural pride she feels in spite of the repudiation of this luxuriant tradition, creating the pathway towards healing, resilience, and cultural pride. These moments within Danticat's intimate, raw prose are lessons of life, community, family, and culture while also being modes of healing. Within her narratives, Danticat's lyrical raptures articulate the resilience central to the Haitian identity, imagination, and experience. These words are often expressed in the form of a lyric.

Grant Farred writes that a lyric event is, "language of disrupting the now so that it can function as a 'creative mode of language'"<sup>3</sup>. Farred asserts that Culler's theory of the lyric as an instantaneous moment that forms the present, informs Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*<sup>4</sup>. Farred claims that *Citizen* creates a felt experience for the reader where they bear witness to the internal traumas forced upon the modern black being by "microaggressions". Much like Rankine, Danticat posits her readers squarely in her protagonists' point of view, where they are confronted with the vile underbelly of postcolonial society that her Haitian characters must navigate. Danticat quotes Gray Sexton as she reflects on her late mother's suicide note, writing: "finally I am able to answer her...I cast my feelings into 'Language'—the shared medium in which Mother and I reveled—to find freedom"<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, Danticat creates a language, through her narratives and essays, that perfectly reflects the specific and poignant terrors familiar to

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<sup>3</sup> Grant Farred, "Citizen, A Lyric Event" (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017) 110

<sup>4</sup> Grant Farred, "Citizen, A Lyric Event" (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017) 94

<sup>5</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 97

the Haitian and Haitian diaspora experience, making them open, cathartic, and universal. Danticat purposely returns to her narratives, reframing them differently which contributes to her catharsis. She brings catharsis by centering the resilient spiritual love and connections that inform Haitian culture.

An example of lyrical rapture is found in *The Art of Death*, where the narrative thread of her grief regarding her mother's death is suddenly disrupted by a dream where she speaks to the metaphysical manifestation of her mother. Her lyrical raptures often occur when there is much needed reprieve from indescribable situations where her characters have no control and are forced to seek agency in order to cope. However, it is difficult to look at Danticat's literary work as separate from her own experiences, especially when looking at her memoirs. Barbara Christian writes, "our theorizing is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create – since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?"<sup>6</sup> Therefore, for Haitian women writers, narrative forms become conduits of articulating the gendered and racialized realities of Haitian women and its nuances brought about by a submerged culture of ethnic, class, and spiritual conflict. Where do we see a moment of catharsis within such dehumanization? For some of us, we see it in expressions of the spirit as observed in church rituals such as speaking in tongues, or receiving the holy ghost. For Haitians, they may find it in *poto mitan*, when they become a horse ridden by a spirit in a Vodou ceremony, or in secular spaces such as dance. For Danticat, she expresses her own

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 52

spirit in her writings. In *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*, Chancy says, “in the shadow, things go on that seem to have no meaning”<sup>7</sup>. It is within this shadow, and silence, where we see “the transmutation of the personal into the creative, into modes of self-empowerment that in and of themselves create a theory of self-definition”<sup>8</sup>. My definition of lyrical rapturing is closely aligned with Chaucy’s view of Haitian Women’s novels, but with some significant differences that can be seen in its tenets.

## I. THE TENETS OF LYRICAL RAPTURING

Lyrical rapturing consists of four tenets. First, the rapturous moment or moments must be preceded by an amalgamation of historical, cultural (whether the character/narrator’s relationship to their culture is rich, barren, or somewhere in between), and personal traumas. Danticat’s narratives establish a pattern, imbued with her pain of loss that has continued into the present of her prose. Within the narrative, the reader is able to see the patterns (silence<sup>9</sup>) that are spurred by the destructive traces of trauma: the character endures their lamentable reality until an event triggers them to assume autonomy. The cultural silences stem from personal experiences shared amongst Haitians and the diaspora such as displacement, abandonment, disempowerment, racial/ethnic discrimination, violence, and subsequent death. Though cultures throughout

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<sup>7</sup> Chancy, *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*, 3

<sup>8</sup> Chancy, *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*, 11

<sup>9</sup> This term means a culturally repressed fear.

the Afro-diaspora share colonial history, infrastructures, and experiences, there are specific historical and social contexts that inform the Haitian worldview.

We can see these contexts throughout Danticat's work. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie breaks her own hymen in order to halt her mother's sexually abusive "tests". It is only when she recognizes the abuse that she embarks on a journey of recovery and to forgive her mother. In *The Farming of Bones*, Amabelle settles into a life of servitude in the Dominican Republic where she is subjected to ethnic discrimination and harsh working conditions as violence against Haitian workers rise. She is forced to leave everything behind when Trujillo's massacre breaks out, escaping back over the border to a life of freedom in her parents' homeland. Like Danticat, Haitians on the island and in the diaspora are impacted by issues such as deportation, scarcity of health and social resources, food insecurity, barriers of education, police brutality, sexual violence, anti-blackness, and poverty. It is this heaviness that creates an unyielding need to transcend the trauma the body can no longer hold which facilitates an interruption that is the lyrical rapture.

Second, this interruption creates a felt experience of the character's transcendence triggered through a significant moment within their community. The lyrical rapture disrupts the narrative with an epiphanous idea or realization of the narrator/character that stems from their repressed feelings. Danticat's visceral and immersive lyricism allows the narrator or character, along with the audience, to participate in the release the rapture provides. Therefore, it is expressed in the form of a lyric. According to Audre Lorde, poetry is an illumination from which we form ideas, as she writes, "that distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as

feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding”<sup>10</sup>. In Danticat’s work, the process that brings about the moment of lyrical rapture is caused by the protagonist/narrator being forcibly cut off from their family/community. This moment requires for the subject to confront the trauma that severed those roots, allowing them to culturally reconnect. Danticat effectively shatters the silence of the character’s shame or fear by centering a moment of consciousness that demands for a new path. Finally, her characters free themselves by choosing to acknowledge their traumas, confront the fears the traumas conditioned. Therefore, the character/narrator gains a new perspective that incentivizes their process towards healing.

In this final tenet, the moment of rapture ends with an ascended internal context via which the character/narrator now continues or ends the story. This is a process of resilience where they gain a “profound belief in the power and continuity of the spirit”<sup>11</sup>. As Donna Aza Weir-Soley states, “although Haitians are universally deemed powerless by virtue of abject poverty, political instability and corruption, they are far from spiritually impotent”<sup>12</sup>. For instance, in *The Farming of the Bones*, Amabelle, who begins the novel by sequestering her Haitian identity in the anti-Haitian terrain of the Dominican Republic, starts to make connections with her Haitian refugee community after barely escaping the massacre through the Dajabón River.

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<sup>10</sup> Audre Lorde, “Poetry is not a luxury”, (Austin: University of Texas) 37

<sup>11</sup> Cherie Meacham, “Traumatic Realism in the Fiction of Edwidge Danticat” (Santa Barbara: Center for Black Studies, 2005) 137

<sup>12</sup> Donna Weir-Soley, “Voudoun Symbolism in *The Farming of the Bones*” (Normal: Publications unit of NC State’s English Department, 2005), 168

Danticat's work, on its own, does not undo these traumas. However, in writing these histories and stories from a personal, introspective viewpoint, she frees herself from their power over her. While her work has been credited for providing important context to non-Haitian readers not available through media stories, it also presents a potential avenue for self-liberation to her Haitian diaspora characters and readers. She is able to connect to her Haitian and Haitian diasporic readers by centering Haitian culture and worldview.

## II. UNDERSTANDING THE HAITIAN WORLDVIEW THROUGH DANTICAT

Haitian Vodou is intrinsic to Haiti's worldview and social structure. Historically, Vodou was used as a tool to unite different slaves under the same cause during the Haitian Revolution. According to Michael Laguerre, "voodoo [sic] not only united the people with those who had been left behind in Africa and with those who had been killed in the war of liberation, it also brought them solace in their illnesses and nourished their faith in life"<sup>13</sup>. Since then, Vodou has continued to be a foundational faith structure within the Haitian purview that deeply influences social and family structures within Haitian and its diasporic culture. The Vodou philosophy of putting "death at a distance" while also remaining connected to those lost deeply influences the traditions and practices<sup>14</sup>. For instance, personhood, in the Haitian folk context, "is located at the nexus

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Laguerre, "THE PLACE OF VOODOO IN THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF HAITI" (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis Group, 1973), 46

<sup>14</sup> Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 243

of relationships among the living, the ancestors, and the diving spirits”<sup>15</sup>. As Erica Caple James writes;

The foregoing presents an image of an embodied subject whose social relationships and environment are also constitutive aspects of subjectivity, of the self, and of personhood—ruptures in the linkages among in individual, community, ancestors, and lwa (spirit) can cause emotional disorders, illness, and other material and spiritual problems, not only for the individual, but also for the extended family, both living and dead<sup>16</sup>.

Within the Haitian cultural view, death is thought to be at once capricious and ubiquitous, confirmed by natural disasters and political terror that surrounds Haiti on all sides. James provides a helpful understanding to the unique fear of death that shapes Haitian culture, philosophies, and worldview. Death, unless proper traditions are put into practiced, creates a rupture in the connection between the departed spirit and its family left behind. Therefore, there is a subliminal terror of suffering and death within the Haitian diasporic experience. At first glance, this brings forth sentiments of fatalism, that death and misery are all that makeup Haitian life. Surviving in the most seemingly insurmountable circumstances is one of the most poignant themes of Haitian Vodou and its overall culture. Adam McGee reflects on a hymn devoted to the spirit Ayizan (a wise market woman), “she is not dying ‘malere’, a term meaning both ‘poor’ and ‘wretched’.

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<sup>15</sup> Erica Caple James, “Culture, Trauma, and the Social life of PTSD in Haiti” (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) 368

<sup>16</sup> Erica Caple James, “Culture, Trauma, and the Social life of PTSD in Haiti” (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) 370



In other words, while conditions are not great, she is surviving”<sup>17</sup>. This Vodou philosophy of keeping death at a distance through resilience and survival informs Danticat’s prose. Oftentimes, her characters explore the memories shared with loved ones in order to block out the terror of their current realities, which are often dangerous and end fatally. In *Brother, I’m Dying*, Danticat writes, “I had seen lots of dead bodies, not in their beds at home but at viewings and funerals at my uncle’s church”<sup>18</sup>. Danticat shares that she was exposed to the concept of death at a very young age due to two factors: (1) regularly attending viewings and funerals, (2) the children's stories told to her by her grandmother. One story she was told was a Rapunzel-like folktale, a young girl is locked inside a constricting place by her mother when she works in the field. A deadly serpent lies waiting nearby, as it watches her mother sing a simple song to signal her daughter to let her in every evening after work. Over time, the serpent attempts to mimic the mother’s voice—to no avail—until one day it decides to kill her mother to force the girl outside. “Still the girl never left her little house,” Danticat writes, “preferring instead to die fresh and pure alone inside rather than risk facing the snake outside”<sup>19</sup>. While it can be argued that this is an allegory for virginity for young girls, Danticat shares this nursery story in order to exemplify how the cultural terror of death is instilled in Haitian children. Death is framed by a snake, which also serves as a symbol for Danbala<sup>20</sup>, the primeval creator

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<sup>17</sup> Adam McGee, “Constructing Africa: Authenticity and Gine in Haitian Vodou” (Santa Barbara: University of California, Santa Barbara, 2008) 30

<sup>18</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 72

<sup>19</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 70

of stars, planets, hills, and valleys in the Haitian Vodou tradition. Danbala is where material life begins and ends. In this story, he symbolizes the natural ruthlessness and violence of the natural world. This world, where this snake exists, must be avoided and shut out. As reflected in *Brother, I'm Dying*, Danticat's family lived with the constant likelihood of a sudden, violent death. It impacted the way they navigated certain spaces within their societies, the choices they made, and the lessons they passed on to their children about mortality. Throughout her work, Danticat reflects on how she used to view death, musing that "someone's tortured and melodramatic death is supposed to be—a warning for us to put our house in order so that we might do better or be better, when our turn comes"<sup>21</sup>. In Haiti, there is a cultural terror of death that not only stems from instability, disease, and natural disasters, but from social violence that have origins within Duvalier's brutal regnant.

Haitians have been historically and culturally impacted by the violent years of the regime and the civil unrest that broke out after Aristide was ousted. While Duvalier's presence seems tangential in this memoir, his regime and the long-term effects to Haiti's political system touched the lives of Danticat and her family in life altering, devastating ways. His dictatorship created a culture of terror to Haitian civilians. Haitians have always found ways to survive through compliance and silence, with the few who openly revolted being exiled, tortured, killed, and disposed of in the shadows. Lucia M. Suárez notes that one of the most violent times in Haiti was during the Duvalier reign (Papa Doc

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<sup>20</sup> This is the traditional Haitian Vodou spelling of Danbala (can also be spelled Damballah, Damballa, Dambala, Dambalah but these reflect different traditions of other Vodoun systems such as in Louisiana Voodoo, Obeah, Santería, and various other Afro-diasporic sects).

<sup>21</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 29

and Baby Doc, 1957-1986)<sup>22</sup>. One of the most striking characteristics of Danticat's writing are the vivid images of prosaic violence and death. Danticat foregrounds the systemic violence and instability in Haitian history and culture. Much like other Haitian diaspora writers, Danticat is looking for a way to move past this history, to sever the ties of the residual effects of Duvalier's dictatorship that encumber Haitians within cycles of abuse and historic traumas. She invites the reader into her characters' interiority, where we witness as they process unimaginable horror, pain, and grief. The reader is made to feel the full weight of the character's emotions and thoughts. Much like in her other works, Danticat chooses to excavate these memories, rapturing by connecting family and community to transcend atrocity. She foregrounds her narratives with historical and sociological context to show the necessity for a transcendent motif that appears as lyrical rapturing. To conclude the metaphor, Danticat is stepping out to meet the serpent, seeking true transformation by confronting the cultural shames endemic to the Haitian diasporic worldview.

We can see a great example of lyrical rapturing in her memoir *Brother, I'm Dying*. Danticat writes about her two fathers, her father Mira and her uncle Joseph. She writes of her experiences with them and their lives in a single story, declaring that "their lives and mine intersected in startling ways, forcing me to look forward and back at the same time"<sup>23</sup>. Danticat references the historical contexts of the Duvalier regime and the military coup in the late 1990s, so as to establish the deadly situations that lead both men to

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<sup>22</sup> Lucía M. Suarez, "Breath, Eyes, Memory: Rape, Memory, and Denunciation" (Santa Barbara: Center for Black Studies Research, 2003) 112.

<sup>23</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 26

migrate to the United States. Despite their separations and subsequent experiences of dehumanization in both Haiti and the United States, she utilizes lyrical rapturing to show the resilience of and perennial love between Mira and Uncle Joseph that allowed them to transcend their traumas and give back to their families and community.

### III. UNCLE JOSEPH'S AND MIRA'S DEHUMANIZATION IN HAITI AND THE UNITED STATES IN *BROTHER, I'M DYING*

In the early sixties, Danticat's father Mira was driven out due to the looming threat of Duvalier's Tonton Macoutes. By this time, Duvalier was near the end of his term but was refusing to step down or allow new elections and, according to Danticat, there was "a growing dissatisfaction with his increasingly repressive methods of imprisoning and publicly executing his enemies"<sup>24</sup>. Aside from this, Duvalier also had the Tonton Macoutes to help him maintain power. It was then that Mira worked as a shoe salesman for a Syrian immigrant, and Danticat recounts how the Macoutes would come into the store, asking for the best shoes and walking out without paying. After losing a lot of business, Mira's boss enforced a new policy of giving them the cheapest shoes, which would have put his life in danger if he was ever caught. This particular instance of dehumanization shows how dangerous and demeaning the circumstances of Mira's life were, which mattered so little in the social structure of the Duvalier regime that he could have been killed over a cheap pair of shoes. This is what caused him to leave for the U.S., eventually bringing Danticat and the rest of the family along.

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<sup>24</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 51

Uncle Joseph, on the other hand, lived in post-Duvalier Haiti, where death was ubiquitously violent. When Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted by a military coup on September 30, 1991, there were protests by civilian supporters in Bel-Air, Uncle Joseph's neighborhood, which led to mass killings and house burnings by the army. The United Nations peacekeepers (on request from Haiti's representation of President Boniface Alexandre<sup>25</sup>) intervened in Haiti to reduce political violence and reinforce conditions for a democratic process which, as the post-MINUSTAH report states, "Haiti has not enjoyed in nearly its entire modern history"<sup>26</sup>. This official narrative by the UN is contradicted by Danticat's recounts of Uncle Joseph going out in Bel-Air to count the bloody corpses that were left around the neighborhood, jotting down their names, ages, the condition of their bodies, and the times at which they were picked up. The atrocity of such a genocide is made visceral as Uncle Joseph memorializes them through his diary entry. Danticat writes, "I knew, he hoped to gather all his notes together, sit down and write a book"<sup>27</sup>. The act of writing means that they are no longer lost in innumerable casualties, but documented as archived identities. The image of bodies in the street confirms the reality of how Haitian life is devalued. As Chancy writes, "when a population is considered so insignificant that its existence goes undocumented, storytelling becomes, necessarily, a source of retrieval; a story must be imagined, a fiction created, that will stand the stress of devaluation"<sup>28</sup>. As a pastor, Uncle Joseph had a platform to speak and influence; Danticat

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<sup>25</sup> The American Journal of International Law, "Replacement of U.S.-led Force in Haiti with UN Peacekeeping Mission." (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 587

<sup>26</sup> International Crisis Group, III. MINUSTAH: Achievements and Setbacks

<sup>27</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 176

recalls her father saying, “his preaching style was very straightforward. He talked a lot about love. God’s love, the love we should have for one another—sometimes I’d close my eyes and think, would I want to hear him if he wasn’t my brother and I’d have to say yes”<sup>29</sup>. This shows that Joseph was a skilled speaker and the respect that Mira had for him and his passion for leading the community. As a school owner, he also had the means to educate and distribute resources. Despite Uncle Joseph’s localized power in the Bel-Air community with his church, he kept his political beliefs to himself for the sake of his survival. After Aristide was ousted, the civil violence of the regional gangs caused the United Nations peacekeepers to step in. This would often cause loss of civilian life as they attacked the *chimères* (gang members)<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, this normalized threat of violence shapes the reality for Uncle Joseph, framing his life as expendable despite his inherent value to his community and the dignities he afforded them. The cycle of dehumanization can be seen in Uncle Joseph’s fate.

After a shootout between peacekeepers and the gang members, Uncle Joseph was questioned on their whereabouts and chose not to respond. Believing that he reported them to authorities for money, the gang and their leader (named Dread) threaten to kill him. These were the same men, Danticat writes, that “were young men, boys—he knew their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, uncles, and aunts. Some of them had attended his church, his school, had eaten in his lunch program”<sup>31</sup>. Not only was Uncle Joseph’s

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<sup>28</sup> Chancy, *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*, 15

<sup>29</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 35

<sup>30</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 173

<sup>31</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 182

church being invaded by UN peacekeepers, forcing him into a precarious position, he was also being verbally and physically threatened by the community he had spent his life supporting. He is rendered powerless to protect his community when UN peacekeepers overrun his church and made it stateless as he must escape from his own students who threaten to kill him. Upon seeking asylum in Miami, Uncle Joseph endured further dehumanization as he was detained and medically neglected which ultimately led him to his death. Danticat recounts her father's words upon receiving the news of Uncle Joseph's death, "he shouldn't be here...if our country were ever given a chance and allowed to be a country like any other, none of us would live or die here"<sup>32</sup>. Mira's words are significant because they show that both Mira's living conditions in America and Uncle Joseph's in Haiti, are treacherous and, in certain circumstances, lethal.

Later in the memoir, Danticat juxtaposes Uncle Joseph's experience of brutality with her father's. She recounts Mira's experience of being a taxi driver in the chapter "Gypsy Cab". She recalls how her father masked the dangers he faced in his job as a Brooklyn cab driver by reframing them as adventure stories. She muses, "a gypsy has no medallions or affiliations. It belongs entirely to the driver, who roams the streets all day looking for fares"<sup>33</sup>. Her father's stories of his adventures left Danticat with the impression that he was in control of his own destiny. Danticat writes, "my father's cab is named for wanderers, drifters, nomads. It's called a gypsy cab—he recounted what my brothers and I called his street adventures"<sup>34</sup>. We see the contrary as Danticat presents

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<sup>32</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 251

<sup>33</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 120

examples of acts of violence Mira endured. Danticat details one instance where Mira was mugged: his assailants held him at gunpoint, forced him to drive them to Brooklyn Navy Yard, then hit him in the face with a crowbar after they realized he did not have much money on him. By documenting his assaults, Danticat shows how her father was perpetually victimized in a job he was trapped in due to his race, ethnicity, and class status. While he came to America for a better life, Mira has sustained trauma from the sort of violence he never experienced in Haiti, and we can see that he has internalized this dehumanization. Mira never responded to these acts of violence. He states: “I need their money more than they need my service”<sup>35</sup>. This is further elaborated on when Danticat recounts when she asked her father if he ever wished he had another job. She writes, “I saw his hands shaking, his lips quivering. He bit down on the lower one, hard, to make the trembling stop. He probably thought I was judging him, telling him that what he was doing was not honorable, prestigious, intelligent enough”<sup>36</sup>. Danticat highlights Mira’s physical reaction to show him suppressing grief when he assumes that his daughter is ashamed of him being a taxi driver. The gypsy cab shifts in meaning here. Instead of being a vehicle of adventure and possibility, it becomes a trap where her father’s fate relies on the money, goodwill, and whims of his passengers.

Mira’s ability to sustain his family and himself was contingent on an economic and social system that does not invest in protective infrastructures for low-skilled work,

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<sup>34</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 121

<sup>35</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 122

<sup>36</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 123



especially for Haitian immigrants. Danticat writes, “my father never went after them. His crowbar and gunshot encounters had taught him that something much worse than getting stiffed might be lying in wait”<sup>37</sup>. Mira is not recognized as a citizen, or a human being worthy of respect or protection. Therefore, he internalizes the shame of the dehumanization that comes with his job. Taking into account both Mira’s and Uncle Joseph’s experiences, we see how they have internalized the shame of being dehumanized due to their traumas from state/social violence, with both men dying in the United States, where they were “never really free”<sup>38</sup>.

Their stories show the patterns of trauma due to dehumanization and how their connection to their purpose (Uncle Joseph) or family (Mira) made them resilient. Uncle Joseph became a bastion in his community, building a church and school. Uncle Joseph’s institutions gave him a purpose that made him fight for his country’s and his own autonomy. On the other hand, Mira was able to secure employment and documentation so as to bring his family to the United States for more opportunities. When Danticat and her brothers came to join them permanently in the United States, Mira’s resilience enabled him to continue to work and provide for his family. It was Mira’s incredible persistence and work ethic that positioned Danticat to become the well-respected and successful writer she is today. Despite their varied yet similar experiences of dehumanization, both men are connected in death, as both die within months of the other. In her grief over losing her two fathers, Danticat lyrically raptures the love and respect both held for the

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<sup>37</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 122

<sup>38</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 250

other through the ways they supported each other in their hours of need. This intimate bond between the two brothers strengthened the familial and cultural background they needed to persevere.

#### IV. LYRICAL RAPTURING THE DIVINE BOND OF THE BROTHERS

Danticat reflects on the dynamic between the brothers, born twelve years apart, writing, “–in his time, my uncle liked to say, a twelve year old was already a man–neither one of them had any memory of ever playing together”<sup>39</sup>. This dynamic continued into their adulthood, as Uncle Joseph took care of Danticat and her brother Bob while Mira worked to bring his family over to New York. Danticat provides two examples of when the brothers expressed their love to each other. First, Danticat recounts their interaction the first time her father visited. Mira was emotional when he embraced his brother. She writes, “they remained attached for a while, intertwined, as if one might never release the other. Stepping away first, my father left an imprint of his wet face on the front of my uncle’s shirt”<sup>40</sup>. Although we do not see an emotionally charged moment like this for Uncle Joseph, Danticat shows how he protected her father’s place in her life even though she was separated from him for many years. This is exemplified when she recounts her weekly visit to the phone booth with her uncle and brother to talk to her parents. Uncle Joseph would write down what they would say and kept close watch to make sure they did not say anything that would make their parents feel guilty for not being present.

Danticat writes, “my parents would interrupt me now and then to make a comment or ask

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<sup>39</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 95

<sup>40</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying*, 90

a question and I'd have to stop and wait for my uncle to respond before speaking again—I could almost imagine the look on my father's face, a broad smile that showed how proud he too was of himself"<sup>41</sup>. Both Uncle Joseph and Mira were impacted by the stresses of their separation and difficulties that came with living in Haiti and the United States. Neither of them knew the full extent of their conditions or health status. After Uncle Joseph tragically dies in the immigration custody, Mira sees his brother for the final time in his coffin. According to Danticat, he tells his brother, "the last time we spoke, you said you were leaving me with a heavy heart. this time I'm the one leaving you with a heavy heart. We may not see each other again on this earth, but I will see you soon"<sup>42</sup>. Danticat writes as close to the truth of their experiences as possible, interweaving their lives of heartache, sacrifice, suffering, and hard work into a single moment of peace in union after death. In the final words of the memoir, Danticat expresses that she wishes she could be certain that they have found peace. She imagines them, "on a walk through the mountains of Beauséjour—peacefully making their way down the zigzag trail that joins the villages to the rest of the world below"<sup>43</sup>. Instead of dwelling on not knowing, Danticat maintains that the brothers are now in an ethereal place where they can easily find each other. She lyrically raptures, "I try to imagine them—whenever they lose track of one another, one or the other calls out in a voice that echoes throughout the hills, "Kote w ye frè m? Brother, where are you? And the other one quickly answers, "Mwen la. Right

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<sup>41</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 104

<sup>42</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 251

<sup>43</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 269

here, brother. I'm right here"<sup>44</sup>. Danticat materialized what both brothers wanted. They are at peace in death because they are no longer separated by their lives.

## V. REVISITING MARTINE'S SUICIDE IN THE ART OF DEATH

Danticat writes *the Art of Death: Writing the Final Story* to process the passing of her mother's death while also contemplating the complexities of their relationship due to their long separation in her childhood and throughout her adulthood. She is grounded in the very present moments that make up her mother's final year of living and subsequent death. Danticat overlays the narrative with vignettes, contemplating different memoirs and novels that attempt to capture the process of dying. She writes, "we also write of our most painful experiences hoping that bringing these horrors to light might serve some greater purpose—it often directs us somewhere, even if inevitably to death"<sup>45</sup>. Despite the strains that distance caused to their relationship, Danticat lyrically raptures the intimate and spiritual bond that she and her mother have that persists over distance and death. She does this by contrasting how she has written the mother-daughter relationship in *Breath, Eyes Memory*, before turning inward to her own relationship with her mother.

Danticat begins by stating that suicide in Toni Morrison's works is framed by the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade<sup>46</sup>. She writes that suicide was how enslaved people affirmed their humanity. She mentions Shadrack, in *Sula*, "openly acknowledges that life is indeed too much for him and the only thing he fully understands is the pull and

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<sup>44</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 269

<sup>45</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 82

<sup>46</sup> This is the same framework that is explored in Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*

tug of suicidal thoughts, thus, he institutes National Suicide Day”<sup>47</sup>. Contrary to the general idea of suicide being a selfish act, Shadrack makes suicide an open and communal discourse. His community is receptive to his message because of how they think of death, “life might be accidental, but ‘death was deliberate’”<sup>48</sup>. By introducing this approach of considering suicide, Danticat sets the stage for how she will be looking at her own work. She observes the bonds that can exist between parent and child despite complex social, political, and geopolitical frameworks and the traumas they produce.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie is sent to her mother, Martine, in New York after living with her aunt in Haiti for twelve years (an echo of Danticat’s own childhood). While under Martine’s care, Sophie endures her mother’s nightly “tests”, where she checks her daughter to make sure her hymen is intact. Once Sophie found a way out of her situation by marrying her older neighbor, she did not talk to her mother for years. She uses the time away to seek healing and make room for forgiveness. When they reconnect, Sophie learns that she is a product of rape. Martine was raped by a Tonton Macoute. Fearing for her life, she sought asylum in America. According to Lucía M. Suarez, “the injury of rape—exacerbated by general and government-sanctioned denial of the crime—extends far beyond the site of the initial violation, continuing to wound victims and survivors, even in the diaspora”<sup>49</sup>. We see this in the novel’s climax, when Sophie’s mother commits suicide upon falling pregnant with her second child. We are not shown

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<sup>47</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 77

<sup>48</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 78

<sup>49</sup> Lucía M. Suarez, “Breath, Eyes, Memory: Rape, Memory, and Denunciation” (Santa Barbara: Center for Black Studies Research, 2003) 111.

the suicide but it is revealed when Sophia is told by her mother's boyfriend. When Sophie asks him where her mother is, he answers, "Non. She is rather in the morgue... she is gone"<sup>50</sup>. Even though he is the one who found her, there is a distance in how he delivers the news to Sophie. Danticat writes, "I admired the elegance in the way he said it... he would have to say it to my grandmother, who had lost her daughter, and to my Tante Atie, who had lost her only sister"<sup>51</sup>. The prose highlights how the loss will impact Sophie's grandmother and aunt but Danticat does not portray the impact of such a violent loss on Sophie. Instead, Danticat dramatizes the mother's suicide itself. The boyfriend shares with Sophie that he found her on the bathroom floor on a pile of sheets bloodied from her seventeen self-inflicted stab wounds. It can be argued that Sophie and her mother's boyfriend were in shock. This is countered by Danticat's musings as she writes, "I wish now that I had included more confrontation, so that it wouldn't seem as though Sophie had immediately accepted her mother's death"<sup>52</sup>. Sophie mother's traumatic rape and death is not felt in Sophie's prose the way Danticat's more mature, personal works are. Danticat does not show the emotional or mental weight of Sophie's awareness of being born from rape. Instead, she surveys how nightmares are passed down from generations of women as they "return to look at their own faces in stagnant bodies of water"<sup>53</sup>. Danticat's experience of loss, and the stories that shaped the lives of her family, has caused her to rethink the emotional impact Martine's suicide left on her loved ones.

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<sup>50</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 86

<sup>51</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 86

<sup>52</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 86

<sup>53</sup> Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, 234

Reflecting on her narrative choice to have such a dramatic death, Danticat lyrically raptures the emotional implications of losing a mother despite the traumatic geopolitical, generational constraints on Haitian mother-daughter relationships. The entirety of *The Art of Death* is a testament to this, as she writes to free herself from her grief over her mother's death.

The suicide is significant because it centers the bond between the Haitian mother and her child. Water, which is a powerful Haitian Vodou symbol for renewal or rebirth, takes on another meaning in this story. For Martine, the water serves as a distance from the place where her traumatic rape took place and, for a time, her daughter. She could not be a mother to Sophie, who was a constant reminder of her rape, and often she was “distant, far away” and beyond reach<sup>54</sup>. Once she returns to Haiti, she is unable to cleanse the traumas inflicted upon her body. Martine's suicide, though it may appear as a self-centered act, can also be read as an act of love. Martine could not bring another child into the world that she will abuse, like Sophia, due to her own trauma. She was too consumed by her trauma to be able to heal and had limited options for reprieve. There is another lyrical rapture in this memoir that happens when Danticat materializes her mother to reconnect with her after she passes. I will discuss this event below.

## VI. DANTICAT RECONNECTING WITH HER LATE MOTHER THROUGH LYRICAL RAPTURING

Danticat's stories on motherhood are informed by her own relationship with her mother. She writes, “my mother and I had spent more of our lives apart than together”<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 93

Her mother left a young Danticat in Haiti with Uncle Joseph and his wife to join her husband and gain legal documentation before sending for her children. In *Brother, I'm Dying*, Danticat remembers how her mother struggled to provide for her children. When she had no money at all, she would drop the children off at Uncle Joseph for a proper meal, tearfully promising that “one day this will stop”<sup>56</sup>.

Danticat reflects that there was a kind of fragility to their relationship, dealing with their grievances by internalizing them “until we stopped thinking about them”<sup>57</sup>. After leaving home for university, Danticat remained physically apart from her mother for many years until her cancer diagnosis. Despite the distance, there is a deep intrinsic love and bond between Danticat and her mother that comes through within the text. Strikingly, she reveals that “writing about my mother is the most active way I have grieved”<sup>58</sup>. The fear, grief, and sadness culminate into a single moment of rapture where Danticat divinely reconnects with her mother.

In the chapter “Circles and Circle of Sorrow”, Danticat inscribes the moments before her mother’s death, jumping to moments before and after in the thick of grief. Danticat watches as her mother is slipping away. As she drifts in and out of consciousness, Danticat tells her, “you’re a wonderful mother”<sup>59</sup>. There is urgency in her words as it is written in present tense. She struggles to articulate what her mother has

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<sup>55</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 141

<sup>56</sup> Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 55

<sup>57</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 165

<sup>58</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 155

<sup>59</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 141



meant to her by assuring her that she is a great mother and saying she loves her. After Danticat says, “you’re a wonderful mother”, her mother smiles. Danticat writes that hearing is one of the last senses to go<sup>60</sup>. This becomes significant in her mother’s final moment. Being aware of this fact, Danticat reassures her mother that she is not holding any grudges for her mother despite the physical and emotional distances between them. As Danticat writes, “before her diagnosis, we were living in different cities, over a thousand miles away from each other”<sup>61</sup>.

Her mother’s dying smile not only reveals what she heard, but appears to provide insight that she felt a sense of euphoric happiness before completely losing consciousness. Danticat includes an important detail that supports this. Writing that smiling in death is not unusual: “it releases the same kinds of neurochemicals—that flood our brains as we are falling in love”<sup>62</sup>. Danticat and her mother read the Bible together in those final months before her death. As she got progressively worse, Danticat would read Bible verses to her. She read her Revelations 14:13, which states, “Write this! Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” This means that those who have been faithful to their work, will enjoy rest from their labors. By expressing her feelings in her mother’s final moments, she gave her the “okay to let go”<sup>63</sup>. These moments, though deeply painful and traumatic, are also moments of reconnection after so many years apart.

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<sup>60</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 141

<sup>61</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 141

<sup>62</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 142

<sup>63</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 142

Contrary to Martine from *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, “—there was no death rattle” for Danticat’s mother Leila but rather peace as “she simply slipped away”<sup>64</sup>.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Martine died alone. Despite their reconciliation, it is unclear if Martine understood the depth of Sophie’s love for her mother which was evident in Sophie’s efforts to forgive her. Therefore, it can be argued that Martine died not knowing the depth of her daughter’s love. We see a completely different dynamic in this intimate moment between Danticat and her mother. Her mother’s smile came from knowing that her daughter loved and appreciated her despite their years of separation. Their mutual love for each other is intact, intense, and transcending. After her mother dies, Danticat is overtaken with grief and searches for her mother’s presence. She constantly writes through it and reads different literature about the process of grief, from C.S. Lewis’ *A Grief Observed* and the Book of Revelations in the Bible. Through her grief, we begin to see her searching for that feeling of connection. For instance, when she walked to the funeral home across the street from her mother’s home. This route reminds her of the countless walks she took with her mother growing up in their neighborhood. On these walks, they would see coffins carrying corpses as they were brought into the funeral home across the street. This would often facilitate conversations between them, with her mother often sharing a Haitian proverb about life: *Nou rantré tèt devan. Nou soti pye devan*<sup>65</sup>. This translates to “We enter headfirst. We leave feet first”. Regarding these coffins of her childhood, Danticat writes, “seeing one would be a sign that my mother

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<sup>64</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 142

<sup>65</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 169

was still on that walk with me”<sup>66</sup>. The realization of her mother being a corpse causes Danticat to fall into a depression that manifests in her body. She fell ill and was diagnosed with a H. Pylori infection a year after her mother’s passing. According to Danticat, the doctor suggested that it may have been dormant since her childhood and possibly activated due to the stress of her grief. She was told by a homeopath that her body was remembering how it felt to watch her mother die. Her descriptions of her symptoms (bloating, indigestion, gas) are similar to Erica Caple James’ description of the disembodied Haitian subject, that a break in the link between the individual and lwa (spirit) can cause material problems. It is not until she “spent half a day in bed crying” that her symptoms relented. Danticat is expressing the pain of her grief over her final separation with her mother. As she writes, “seeing my mother’s body being lifted off the hospital bed in my house, then lowered into one of those black body bags had been one of the most painful moments of my life”<sup>67</sup>. If her mother is just a body, then she is gone forever. While she is able to metaphorically reunite her father and Uncle Joseph in death, in this moment of deep loss she is incapable of conceiving a life without her mother in the flesh. This realization leads Danticat to seek her mother’s presence in a metaphysical world many Haitians are familiar with, in their dreams. Before she gets to this hospice room, Danticat writes, “I dream that I wake up shaking after realizing that I’d abandoned her in the hospice ward for a week and had completely forgotten about her”<sup>68</sup>. She is afraid that if her mother dies without her, their connection will be lost forever.

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<sup>66</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 170

<sup>67</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 170

The night before her mother's death, Danticat heard the homeless man who slept at the bus stop near their home, wailing. She called the police to check up on him. They came and left, leaving the man there. Danticat writes that his cries were as though "he had seen my mother's spirit come and go and was frightened by it. I too was seeing my mother give up the ghost"<sup>69</sup>. This is the first time she references her mother in a transcendental form. In Haitian cultural tradition, dreams are significant for being one of the ways the *lwa* (spirit) communicates with the living. Danticat has the dream "a year to the day" after her mother dies<sup>70</sup>. The painful absence of her mother triggers Danticat's nightmare of forgetting her mother in hospice care. She is afraid that if her mother dies without her, their connection will be lost forever. Danticat runs into a hospice room, where her mother is waiting. The woman begins to suddenly dance, and Danticat realizes that she is not her mother (similarly to The Sugar Woman in *The Farming of Bones*). She begins to leave the room, but her mother's purse appears. This seashell-shaped vintage purse is one of her mother's few belongings which she keeps on a nightstand near her bed. Danticat begins to speak to this woman, who is not her mother. She begins to feel her mother's presence metaphysically through her dreams. Danticat raptures in her dream when her spirit guide (*ti-bon-ange*) connects her mother's physical body (*gro-bon-ange*) to her. According to Julia Pfeifer, the soul is split into two entities. There is the *gros-bon-ange* (good big angel) which is the part of the spirit that keeps the physical body alive. It

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<sup>68</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 173

<sup>69</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 143

<sup>70</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 171

is a person's "own memory, intelligence, imagination and invention"<sup>71</sup>. The *ti-bon-ange* is the other part of the spirit that functions as a moral guide and can move away from the physical being during dreams and trances. Danticat indicates that she and the homeless man were witnessing her mother's *ti-bon-ange* taking shape as she slipped towards death. This idea culminates into the final moment of Danticat's dream of her mother. Danticat lyrically raptures the presence of her late mother in her dream by connecting her mother's spirit to a physical object on her nightstand, her mother's purse:

Manman, this is your purse. It is a purse inside a dream.

As if there's nothing left for it to carry in the real world.

But I am still carrying it. Like I'm still carrying you.

Manman, I miss you. Manman, I love you.

Manman, repoze. Please rest. Good-bye<sup>72</sup>.

This poetic stanza is a lyrical rapture due to how it functions in the narrative. It is a poetic prayer that interrupts the narrative form of the text, as Danticat expresses her longing for her mother's presence in her life. As we are brought into this very intimate moment, Danticat lyrically raptures by transcending her grief in a brief moment, attaching her mother's spirit to the vintage bag she left behind. Danticat's dream closely resembles the *retirer d'en bas de l'eau* (removed from the water below) vodou ceremony. This ceremony is performed to retrieve the spirit a year and one day after a family member's death, much like the time her dream takes place. Pfeifer writes that during the

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<sup>71</sup> Julia Pfeifer, "The Loa as Ghosts in Haitian Vodou" (Bern: Peter Lang Publisher, 2016), 139

<sup>72</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 173

ceremony, “the *gros-bon-ange* is called upon to appear and is eventually bound to an earthen vessel called *govi*”<sup>73</sup>. According to Alfred Métraux, the dead are always seen in the form of a “disembodied soul”<sup>74</sup>. Therefore, this woman, who Danticat does not recognize, is her mother’s *gros-bon-ange* awaiting to be bound. Her mother’s spirit dances, much like in the ceremony.

When the purse appears, Danticat recognizes it and is driven to tell her mother’s spirit about it. Much like the writing style used to describe Martine’s suicide (mentioned above) in her novel, Danticat is speaking with urgency, sticking to the essential. If her mother’s spirit does not try to connect with Danticat, her spirit will be corrupted and thus will not be able to return to her family or to return to rest. As Pfeifer writes, “to reclaim a *gros-bon-ange* is generally advised, as a soul not bound to its land and family can according to common folklore haunt its family and lead to disease by itself”<sup>75</sup>. The purse is her mother’s *gros-bon-ange*’s *govi*. The *govi* is a vessel that is part of the living world and can be “called upon whenever needed”<sup>76</sup>. Therefore, the purse is the *govi* to which her mother’s spirit is tied. This is exemplified when she writes, “there’s nothing left for it to carry in this world. I am still carrying it like I am carrying you”. Métraux writes that the *govi* is sealed and placed in a safe place (Danticat’s nightstand), “until the day when it is opened and exposed to the sacred flames of the *bulé-zin*”<sup>77</sup>. Just as she enclosed her

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<sup>73</sup> Julia Pfeifer, “The Loa as Ghosts in Haitian Vodou” (Bern: Peter Lang Publisher, 2016), 142

<sup>74</sup> Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 257

<sup>75</sup> Julia Pfeifer, “The Loa as Ghosts in Haitian Vodou” (Bern: Peter Lang Publisher, 2016), 142

<sup>76</sup> Julia Pfeifer, “The Loa as Ghosts in Haitian Vodou” (Bern: Peter Lang Publisher, 2016), 142

<sup>77</sup> Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 243

mother's spirit in the purse, her mother's life will be conserved within her narratives. The book ends with Danticat's lyrical promise to hold on to her mother's spirit (metaphorically held in the govi of the purse). We do not know if the day her mother's spirit is released would ever come to pass. There is no conclusion to her dream or her grief, and this may continue to circle back around in her future works. As Danticat writes, "I wonder what those stories will be for me now"<sup>78</sup>.

Reading Donna Aza Weir-Soley's "Voudoun Symbolism in The Farming of the Bones", created a framework for which to consider Danticat's work. I have found it helpful in understanding how the Haitian Vodou philosophy unconsciously permeates the Haitian artist. Although Danticat has not explicitly incorporated Vodou traditions in her past works, she begins to consider its implications in *Create Dangerously*. In the previous books, Danticat spiritually reconnects the relationships between herself, Uncle Joseph, her father, and her mother. In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat interrogates the legacy of her writing, and the purpose of her art in a brutalizing world.

## VII. THE IMPACT OF RACIAL BIAS ON IMMIGRANT ARTISTS IN CREATE DANGEROUSLY

*Create Dangerously: the immigrant artist at work* is a collection of published essays where Danticat reflects on the connection between art and death. She explores the assumed purpose of an artist as "one who keeps things alive"<sup>79</sup> within societal frameworks (in Haiti and the United States) that are structured with injustices, vulnerable

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<sup>78</sup> Danticat, *The Art of Death*, 144

<sup>79</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 20

to atrocities, incapable of dealing with disasters and breeding sites for dehumanizing-isms. In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat is confronted with the fatalist idea that death and suffering are consequences that come with Haitian life. Danticat lyrically raptures the spiritual connections of the Haitian Vodou tradition by critically appraising significant artists and paintings. By centering Haitian art in this way, she shows how Hyppolite, Basquiat, and the piece coined as “Guernica”, represents the capacity for healing and resilience of the Haitian people despite unfathomable destruction and dehumanization.

Danticat categorizes her form of writing as creating dangerously which “suggests that it is creating as a revolt against silence, creating when both the creation and the reception, the writing and the reading, are dangerous undertakings, disobedience to a directive”<sup>80</sup>. She is arguing that by telling our stories through art, we break the silences that traumas cause, creating a whole new worldview. Danticat creates these stories and memoirs to declare and forcibly mark our existence and relationship to modern colonial powers and their patrons within our own communities. With *Create Dangerously*, she calls every Haitian diasporic creative to assert themselves through their work because “we have no other choice”<sup>81</sup>. In this section, I will be showing how she raptures the cultural silences of Haitian Vodou in “Welcoming Ghosts”, and the 2010 Haitian earthquake in “Our Guernica”.

In “Welcoming Ghosts”, Danticat puts two Haitian painters side by side, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Hector Hyppolite. The conscious Vodou inspiration in Hyppolite’s

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<sup>80</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 11

<sup>81</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 20



work and unacknowledged use of vodou imagery in Basquiat's makes for an interesting study of Haitian identity and pride. On January 14, 2010, New York Times columnist David Brooks claimed, "Haiti, like most of the world's poorest nations, suffers from a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences. There is the influence of the voodoo [sic]<sup>82</sup> religion which spreads the message that life is capricious and planning futile"<sup>83</sup>. It is beyond Brooks' capability to understand Haitian vodou as an ancient, complex system of belief that has been able to preserve the important elements of African ethno-linguistic tradition<sup>84</sup>. As Hurston writes in *Tell My Horse*, "It is the old, old mysticism of the world in African terms. Voodoo [sic] is a religion of creation and life"<sup>85</sup>. Brooks is unable to comprehend because of the stigma of Haitian Vodou being "satanic", "non-Christian", "inhumane" and "uncivilized". Therefore, he is unable to see Haitians as capable agents. The stigma that causes this dehumanization is the consequence many Haitians endure whether they practice Vodou or not. Both artists, Hyppolite and Basquiat, are ensnared by this stigma. Danticat distances herself from this rhetoric, opting instead to explore ways in which Vodou informs both of their work and identities. As Danticat writes, "both Basquiat and Hyppolite were in a type of trance, divine horsemen,

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<sup>82</sup> Brooks' oversight is shown here by his confusion of Haitian vodou and Louisiana Voodoo, two current faiths that essentially differ because of different social, geographical, and historical realities.

<sup>83</sup> Benjamin Hebblethwaite, "The Scapegoating of Haitian Vodou Religion: David Brooks's (2010) Claim That "Voodoo" Is a "Progress-Resistant" Cultural Influence" (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2015), 4

<sup>84</sup> Benjamin Hebblethwaite, "The Scapegoating of Haitian Vodou Religion: David Brooks's (2010) Claim That "Voodoo" Is a "Progress-Resistant" Cultural Influence" (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2015), 6

<sup>85</sup> Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 113

possessed, as their hyper-productivity shows, by spirits they were seeking to either welcome or repel”<sup>86</sup>. She lyrically raptures the divineness of Hyppolite and Basquiat’s artwork due to the foundational Haitian diasporic influences inherent in each artist’s approach.

Danticat prefaces her essay with an old interview between Basquiat and art historian Marc Miller. Miller asks Basquiat if there is a connection between Basquiat’s Haitian background and his artistry. Miller asks, “no Haitian primitives on your wall?” Basquiat responds asking, “Haitian primitives? What do you mean? People? People nailed up on my walls.” Miller chuckles, saying, “I mean paintings.” To which Basquiat responds, “just, you know, typical prints you find in any home in America. Well, some homes in America. Nothing really special”<sup>87</sup>. Each word in this exchange is important to understand the process of discrimination and shame being enacted from a white American man to a Haitian diasporic person as Basquiat.

According to Oxford Languages, the word primitive has three definitions<sup>88</sup>. It can mean an early stage in the evolutionary or historical development of something. It can mean something having a quality or style that offers an extremely basic level of comfort, convenience, or efficiency. Lastly, it can be defined as a person belonging to a preliterate, nonindustrial society. Jean-Francois Staszak claims that primitive art is interpreted by the

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<sup>86</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 135

<sup>87</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 127

<sup>88</sup> Oxford languages,  
<https://www.google.com/search?q=primitive+definition&oq=primit&aqs=chrome.2.69i59j69i57j0i433i512l4j69i60l2.3195j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

west as “archetypes of otherness”, stating that “his otherness is inscribed in time (he belongs to the dawn of humanity), but also in space (he is erotic)”<sup>89</sup>. Due to this context, Miller’s seemingly harmless question clues readers to the popular assumption made about Haitian art. When Basquiat clarifies whether Miller meant “people nailed to the wall”, this clues us to his internalized assumption of violence and inhumanity tacked on to the Haitian identity. Basquiat’s assumption of Miller’s meaning is not unwarranted if we take a closer look at Miller’s language. As Basquiat walks him through his gallery, Miller continually references specific elements of his paintings while using words like “snatched”, “childlike”, “basic”, “simple”, “crude” and “imitating”. Therefore, when Miller asks Basquiat if he had any Haitian primitives, he is connecting Basquiat’s artistry and intellect with his “uncivilized” and “unsophisticated” Haitian identity.

Comparatively, Danticat introduces Hyppolite with a quote from Truman Capote, who wrote in a 1948 *Harper’s Bazaar* issue that while he “lavished praise on Hyppolite’s work”, he could not help but deem Hyppolite ugly and “monkey-thin”<sup>90</sup>. Although both artists differ in time, upbringing, geography, and style, they are united in the dehumanization they face of their art and cultural identities. Danticat claims Basquiat was “symbiotic and syncretic in the same way that Hector Hyppolite’s Vodou paintings were, mixing European Catholicism and African religious rites and adapting them to a world made new by the artist’s vision or, in both Hyppolite’s and Basquiat’s visions”<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> Jean-François Staszak, “Primitivism and the Other. History of Art and Cultural Geography” (New York: Springer Publishing, 2004) 354

<sup>90</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 129

<sup>91</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 133

## VIII. LYRICALLY RAPTURING THE ANCESTRAL CONNECTION BETWEEN HECTOR HYPPOLITE'S & JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT'S ART

Hyppolite was born to a family of Vodou priests in a poor slum in rural Saint-Marc. He became renowned for painting doors, bed frames, temples, boats, and tap-taps. "The canvas, for Hyppolite, was just one more space in which to serve the lwas," Danticat writes, "and when he served them properly, they rewarded him with ideas for paintings"<sup>92</sup>. He went on to become renowned for his fine Vodou paintings across the Western hemisphere, admired by luminaries such as Andre Breton and artists like Geoffrey Holder. Despite Hyppolite's notoriety in the arts, he maintained his dedication to his faith. While Haitian Vodou was synonymous with Hyppolite's art, it was Basquiat's discomfiture. Basquiat is unable to recognize or understand his ancestral influences that he unconsciously incorporates into his work. He is unable to tell Miller of the ways those "Haitian primitives" inform his work that resonate with so many across the world. Danticat does this work for him posthumously, connecting him to Hyppolite. This is part of her rapture where she allows their brilliance to transcend the racist assessment of white art critics.

In the introduction of *Spiritual Citizenship*, N. Fadeke Castor writes that the power of religions like vodou possess "the power of the sacred to inform new ways of belonging to community, the nation, and the transnational"<sup>93</sup>. She claims that diasporas are performative communities invested in creating, negotiating, and traversing "bridges"

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<sup>92</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 133

<sup>93</sup> Castor, *Spiritual Citizenship: Transnational Pathways from Black Power to Ifá in Trinidad*, 5

between space and place. Hyppolite embraced Vodou as an expression of his life and faith. Whether consciously or not, Basquiat's art brims with Haitian Vodou imagery, with symbols of Toussaint Louverture, his signature gold crown, and masks closely resembling those of the Haitian carnival. Danticat does not trivialize whether Basquiat's ignorance signified the shame of his Haitian identity. Instead she wonders, "perhaps all Basquiat could think of was the primitive in the mirror, the anonymous inventor, who was plucked from obscurity and turned into a god only to be continually called crude, naïve, savage"<sup>94</sup>. She presents Hyppolite as an artist who is freed from the perceptions of racial and ethnic inferiority rife in the artistic landscape due to his powerful faith. If Basquiat had lived, Danticat writes, "he would have learned to embrace these types of ghosts, among his many others"<sup>95</sup>. Danticat poses an interesting thought here. If given another chance at life, would Basquiat had ventured further into his ancestral heritage, found celebration and faith in his people and himself? Would he have been liberated from the reductive and demeaning gaze of white art critics?

Danticat interweaves Hyppolite's and Basquiat's narratives with explanations on Haitian Vodou symbols, spirits, and concepts. For example, Danticat explains that the *chwal*, or divine horsemen, is a mortal who becomes a vessel for the spirit to speak through. The spirits are not deities, but divine connections to Bondye (God). She wonders, if Basquiat and Hyppolite lived, where would the spirits have led them? Or did they fulfill their connected missions and had nothing left to create? Danticat is lyrically

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<sup>94</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 135

<sup>95</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 134

rapturing by asserting that their art transcends the “crude, naive, and savage” labels put on their works and personhood. She posits the white art critics and their descriptors of “primitive”, “ugly”, and “monkey thin”, as outside the divine culture of Basquiat’s and Hyppolite’s art. Their works come from a divine, ancient, spiritual consciousness to which they are connected as Haitian artists and men and that consciousness persists whether they are aware of it or not and shapes through the brilliance of the art both men produced.

#### IX. REVISITING THE MOTIF OF FATALISM IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2010 HAITIAN EARTHQUAKE IN *CREATE DANGEROUSLY*

In “Our Guernica”, Danticat visits Haiti for the first time after the devastating 2010 Haitian earthquake. In all the death, despair, and hopelessness she feels, she is searching for a sign to believe that Haiti and its people will survive such an incomparable loss of life. She begins the essay by stating that Maxo, the son of Uncle Joseph referenced in *Brother, I’m Dying*, was killed when his family home collapsed on top of him. She recounts how her aunt and uncle did not celebrate his birthday due to how traumatic his birth was for his mother. His birthday became such a bad omen that once, sometime after Uncle Joseph’s death, Maxo jokes, “My parents never wanted me to have a birthday”<sup>96</sup>. The memory of Maxo, invoked upon his death, fosters a deep sense of loss within Danticat. As she travels through the streets riddled with debris, dead bodies, shanty camps, and survivors, Danticat grapples with the consuming guilt of leaving her family and country behind to experience such a catastrophe. This diasporic guilt is introduced

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<sup>96</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 155

when she is asked by media outlets to share her thoughts on the earthquake. “You were not there,” she writes, referring to her absence during this tragedy, “you did not live it. You have no right even to speak—for you, for them, for anyone”<sup>97</sup>. She struggles to find her role in helping ease the suffering of her family and people. This poses a complicated question: if the immigrant writer is rooted in *lòt bò dlo* (the other side of water), how valuable is their work to the country they left behind? Danticat’s writing captures the Haitian diasporic pain of the 2010 earthquake by breaking the silence of her grief, with hopes for healing.

To answer the question posed above about the role of Haitian immigrant artists, Danticat reads different literature from other Haitian diasporic writers to define her role in the crisis. She reads first-hand accounts from Dolores Dominique Neptune, Lyonel and Évelyne Trouillot to capture the devastation of the disaster and its aftermath. Danticat begins to idealize the Haiti she knew, conserving her memories in writing because “after the earthquake, the way we read and the way we write, both inside and outside of Haiti, will never be the same”<sup>98</sup>. She also reads Dany Laferrière’s *L’Énigme du Retour* (The Enigma of Return), in which a Haitian-Canadian narrator returns to Haiti after the death of his father. Danticat reflects on the work of the writers to understand whether their contributions have a material impact on the lives of Haitians. She mentions Laferrière who claims that his writing was not intended for catharsis, but rather to bear witness. According to Laferrière, the role of the immigrant artist is “to add one more voice to our

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<sup>97</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 159

<sup>98</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 162

chorus of bereavement and paralyzing loss”<sup>99</sup>. This becomes a prompt for Danticat as she chronicles what she saw on her visit. In her opening chapter “Create Dangerously”, Danticat writes that Haitian people “needed art that could convince them that they would not die the same way Numa, and Drouin did. They needed to be convinced that words could still be spoken, that stories could still be told and passed on”<sup>100</sup>.

Danticat recounts every detail of her visit from when she arrives at Toussaint Louverture airport to her departing flight. The reason for her visit is to embrace her surviving relations and pay her respects to those who have died<sup>101</sup>. She watches young American soldiers with machine guns walk around the airport, seemingly for the relief effort but, in reality, guarding the American border from “people with Haitian passports”<sup>102</sup>. She reminisces about her childhood as she drives past the school she attended, the cathedral she worshiped in weekly, and the home of her tutor. Each place that contributed to her upbringing has either caved in or completely collapsed, taking the lives of families and destroying the world she once knew. As Danticat writes, “with its gorgeous white domes either tipped over or caved in, the national palace is the biggest symbol of the Haitian government’s monumental loss of human and structural capital”<sup>103</sup>. When we see political unrest, poverty, and environmental disasters in Haiti, it is often through the American voyeuristic gaze. Danticat’s words decenter the detached and

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<sup>99</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 162

<sup>100</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 8

<sup>101</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 168

<sup>102</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 163

<sup>103</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 164



superficial American camera lens by grounding and trapping her readers in the material aftermath of the earthquake. She describes body parts being pulled out of the rubble and placed on the side of road, where they bake in the sun and meld together into mounds<sup>104</sup>. This language traps us right alongside Danticat, with little to no reprieve, as she processes the chaos. For example, Danticat describes her cousin, nicknamed NC (Naomi Campbell), who had gone hungry and was homeless, sleeping in the bushes with dead bodies close by. When Danticat bursts into tears, NC tells her, bluntly and pragmatically: “that’s life”<sup>105</sup>. Unable to abide by Naomi’s acceptance of constant suffering and loss being our reality, Danticat continues to look for any expression of life which she finds painted among the ruins.

#### X. LYRICALLY RAPTURING THE EXPRESSION OF HOPE IN HAITIAN ART

She finds a painting of “a stunningly beautiful chocolate angel with her face turned up toward an indigo sky as she floats over a pile of muddied corpses,” on a side of a medic tent<sup>106</sup>. With tears in his eyes, Jhon, her driver, comments, “like Picasso and Guernica after the Spanish Civil War. We will have our Guernica,” to which Danticat responds, “or thousands of them”<sup>107</sup>. Artists are not highly valued in Haiti partly because of their economic status and also because their art carries both personal and political messages that make Haitians uncomfortable. Danticat claims that creating dangerously, “is creating as a revolt against silence—writing and reading, are dangerous undertakings,

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<sup>104</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 165

<sup>105</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 157

<sup>106</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 169

<sup>107</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 170

disobedience to a directive”<sup>108</sup>. Danticat lyrically raptures the shame of being a Haitian artist by asserting that Haitian art expresses the love for life even in the worst of circumstances. *Pito nou lèd, nou la*. Better we are ugly, but we here<sup>109</sup>.

As Danticat writes, “our people, both inside and outside of Haiti, have changed. In ways that I am not yet fully capable of describing, we artists too have changed”<sup>110</sup>. Danticat could not have known what the landscape would look like for young survivors who would eventually make their way *lèt bò dlo*, or to know what artistry could be born there that would shape the story of Haiti and its diaspora. Just as she argues in her opening chapter “Create Dangerously”, stories need to be told and passed down so that they can be preserved<sup>111</sup>. Jhon was not saying that the painting they found was Haiti’s *Guernica*, but rather that it was going to be made. There will be thousands of artistic pieces that will encapsulate the modern anxieties, strife, triumphs, and beauty of Haitian survivors, their families, and the diaspora. When Danticat talked to her cousin NC in the tent, her fatalist outlook that suffering was a by-product of Haitian life interrupted Danticat’s survey of the aftermath. Danticat’s words conceive of the deeply personal loss and pain she feels. When she comes across *Guernica*, she lyrically raptures the incredible hope and spirit present in every aspect of Haitian life even in the face of so much loss. Danticat chronicles the inconceivable pain and loss of the Haitian earthquake while also

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<sup>108</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 11

<sup>109</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 147

<sup>110</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 162

<sup>111</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 8

enshrining the beautiful lives of those that she lost and the incredible power of her surviving family members.

## XI. CONCLUSION

The hegemonic narrative of Haitians by media and foreign policy has created a structural funnel for few artists, like Danticat, to be able to tell our stories and be seen. Some Haitians respond to this misrepresentation by sequestering these perceived negative aspects of our culture into silences and surviving through multiple modes of assimilation. Danticat engages with these misrepresentations by centering the sense of connectedness that can arise from collective trauma and the real human aspects of the Haitian experience. Through lyrical rapturing, she confronts these silences and one-sided representations, bringing forth new frameworks for Haitian survival, growth, triumph, mortality, and spirituality.

Danticat raptures the ancestral vodou connection between Basquiat and Hyppolite and the resiliency that informs the artistic movements and culture of Haiti. Danticat's raptures the necessity for art to live with the legacy of trauma. If we do not find a way through our trauma and tell our stories, we will die. Haiti is not only a racially black country, defined by strife, despite the pain, brutality, and death; Danticat shows us that creation and love are the nucleus of Haiti and foster its resilience. As Danticat concludes, "great black country, I too bid thee farewell, I think. At least for now"<sup>112</sup>. The lyrical rapture in Danticat's work is the interiority, the almost unconscious desire to heal, survive, and thrive that bolsters the Haitian spirit and imaginary despite trauma, upon

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<sup>112</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 173

trauma, upon trauma. It is Haiti's incredible beauty and resilience that brings us, in the diaspora, back.

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