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Landscape, Memory and Survival in the Fiction of Edwidge Danticat

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Landscape, Memory and Survival in the Fiction of Edwidge Danticat.¹

But islands can only exist
If we have loved in them.

Derek Walcott, *Islands*

In “Islands,” Derek Walcott urges West Indian artists to revise images of the Caribbean archipelago that European diarists and travelers consigned to us throughout history in startlingly repetitive tones. He writes: “Merely to name them is the prose / Of diarists, to make you a name / For readers who like travellers praise / Their beds and beaches as the same” (52). Iconic representations of tropical islands as a microcosm of earthly Paradise, pristine landscapes open to domination and conquest have dominated Western narratives since the late fifteenth century. Reformulated in the contemporary neo-colonial tourist industry, in which Columbus’ search for precious gold is replaced by first-world consumption of sunshine and beaches, such familiar narratives consistently erase the complex and entangled histories of European colonialism, genocide and ecocide that have characterized the Caribbean since first contact with Europe. In “The Sea is History” Walcott reminds us that the Caribbean Sea contains the most powerful monuments; mosaics of bones “soldered by coral to bone” (364) refer to the innumerable victims of the Middle Passage that the ocean swallowed, an image he also evokes in “Islands” through the metaphor of the “salt-haunted rooms” (52). The Caribbean artist who undertakes the daunting task of “writing islands” inevitably faces two major problems: finding the words to tell of the unspeakable horrors of the past that in some cases continue in the innumerable human rights violations of the present; and restoring balance to the relationship with a landscape that colonialist historiography alternately represents as alien and hostile.² Haitian-born writer Edwidge Danticat embraces the task of “writing islands” in her narratives about multiple experiences of violence, poverty, death and sabotaged elections, but Danticat also writes about Haiti, the island of her birth, for the Haitians who love it and who have loved in it. Addressing both Haitians at home and in the Diaspora, Danticat grounds her narratives on Haitian soil thus w/righting her island history against colonial and neocolonial discourse on islands.

Border Narratives, Border Selves

I first submitted a proposal for this essay to a panel presented at the 2006 MLA convention in Philadelphia, a panel featuring islands and ocean representation in the new Francophone writing. As the deadline for submissions approached, I inquired whether a proposal exploring precisely the discourse of islands and ocean in the fiction of Edwidge Danticat might

be taken into consideration, perfectly aware that I was stepping beyond the ideological parameters set up by the panel organizers. Despite the enthusiasm and warm reception by one of the scholars with whom I had corresponded up to that point, my proposal was ultimately turned down by the Division on Francophone Literatures and Cultures on the account that Danticat cannot be considered a Francophone Caribbean writer. After all, as I was nicely reminded, “she writes in English.” While there is unquestionably some truth in such a response, I find it nonetheless highly problematic that a writer such as Danticat, whose work has always revolved around her beloved Haiti and whose cultural and linguistic identity has always been located at the border of various diasporic *sites*,³ would be excluded from a literary academic circle on a strictly linguistic basis.⁴ Despite increasing efforts among Caribbean scholars to dismantle national and territorial conceptualizations of the Caribbean—a primary reason for the 32nd annual conference of the Caribbean Studies Association subsequently held in Brazil—discourses that valorize national identities and fragmentation versus “intermingled histories” and “reintegration” (*Caribbean Discourse* 154) still dominate the debates on the Caribbean region at the beginning of the new millennium. My analysis of Danticat’s fiction, in what follows, has to be situated against such separatist and exclusionist debates.

The former island of Hispaniola has a long and painful history of racial and economic divisions that in most cases continues to shape current socio-political events. Language as identifier was sanctioned in the 1937 massacre at the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. When asked to pronounce the Spanish word for parsley, *perejil* (*pèsi* in Kreyòl), Haitian cane cutters who could not trill the “r” were singled out for murderous abuse by Trujillo’s regime; this sign of their alterity apparently granted the dictator the authority to carry out ethnic cleansing at the border. The (mis)pronunciation of a single word became a linguistic death sentence for the 20,000 Haitians during *el corte*, the Spanish term by which the massacre is usually known.⁵ Danticat’s 1998 novel, *The Farming of Bones*, is a creative response to the madness of racial and linguistic categorization that have accounted for some of the most unspeakable horrors in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Along with “Children of the Sea,” the first story included in her 1991 collection *Krik? Krak!*, these narratives telling the stories of lovers separated by borders (whether these be represented by land or sea) exemplify the condition of diasporic Haitians living in an increasingly twenty first century transnational America and expanding the space of the original homeland beyond the borders of the nation state. In this essay, I argue that the sea space in Danticat’s fiction cannot be isolated and/or considered apart from the Haitian landscape, a landscape painfully marked by colonial historiography, and yet a landscape that continues to haunt and fascinate its people. Exploring the Haitian Diaspora in the United States, Danticat’s narratives often move back and forth between physical, cultural and linguistic borders with the sea—the Caribbean Sea that separates Haiti from the United States—often functioning as a microcosm of the multiple Caribbean Diasporas. Drawing upon the critical vocabulary of Caribbean theorists such as Edouard Glissant and Kamau Brathwaite, both of whom have conceptualized the dialectic between land and sea, I argue that Danticat’s process of writing her island participates in a revisionist process of

remapping European discourse on Caribbean island (hetero)topology and w/righting, as Glissant puts it, “the histories of those people once reputed to be without history” (*Caribbean Discourse* 64).

I-land Histories

Marine tropism has often been used among Caribbean writers and critics advocating for a discourse of unity and fluidity within the plethora of voices and multiple histories emerging from the archipelago. From Kamau Brathwaite’s much-quoted epithet “the unity is submarine” (64) to Édouard Glissant’s cross-cultural poetics of reintegration and Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s image of the Caribbean as a meta-archipelago, an aquatic rhizome without a “boundary nor a center” (4), the Caribbean has been *routed* as a fluid land(sea)scape that defies national and territorial boundaries, functioning therefore as a perfect symbol for the contemporary New World order.⁶ Yet, as various critics have forcefully pointed out, such aquatic images and rhizomorphic structures, uncritically celebrated, are somehow problematic when viewed from a historical perspective. Caribbean marine tropism ultimately tends to dehistoricize the island space, a space marked by violence, trauma, and everyday massacres, a legacy of colonialism that continues through the twenty first century with the dis/eased island(s) now functioning as a metaphor for a neocolonial socio-economic condition.

Elizabeth DeLoughrey, among others, has voiced a severe critique of marine tropism used to glorify fluidity and unmarked territories in Caribbean discourses of identity (“Tidalectics” 26-27).⁷ By breaking down the artificial ideological boundaries of Caribbean nation-states, she maintains that the most “pressing political objectives toward I-lander sovereignty” are easily and superficially collapsed within the ebb and flow metaphors of the sea (34).⁸ If on the one hand, the discourse of *detritorialization*, as advanced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, might work to account for the complex identity politics in the Caribbean, I agree that the same kind of discourse applied indiscriminately to all colonized peoples runs the risk of becoming a mere form of aquatic nomadologic model, one in which the political and socio-economic realities of the individual islands are consistently obliterated.

In *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat reclaims the tortured history of Hispaniola by giving voice to the voiceless and faceless victims of the 1937 massacre. The sugar cane landscape of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, itself a powerful monument of the history of transplantation that uprooted millions of people from the African continent and reduced them into chattel slavery, continues in the twentieth century to function as a site of violence and forced uprooting, as the Haitian inhabitants are exploited in the sugar trade business by the neighboring Dominican Republic. In an interview with Renée Shea, Danticat discusses a personal connection to the massacre as a story with “uncomfortable spaces” (16). She explains that one of her aunt’s older brothers who had gone to work across the border did not come back for years: “We got a sense

that people didn't come back from the cane work because they couldn't. All the money they made was owed to the company they worked for before they even made it. He had to escape to get away because he was in so much debt ... When he finally returned, he came back sick and with nothing" ("The Hunger to Tell" 15). The uncomfortable spaces in the story, for Danticat, originate in the fact that the Duvalier regime had traded Haitian laborers to work in the sugar plantations across the border. The Macoutes would "recruit" with force cane cutters to send to the Dominican Republic. "The sad part of this story is examining our own role in it, as Haitians, how our own government was complicit in turning our own people over, basically selling them into slavery all over again" (16), Danticat says.⁹

The novel opens with Sebastien Onius, Amabelle's lover and representative of all the cane cutters who disappear across the border, his body heavily scarred by years of work in the sugar cane plantations, yet still "lavishly handsome" in the young protagonist's eyes. In the naming gesture of the opening sentence, Danticat attempts to restore the anonymity of the victims consigned to the realm of eternal silence due to lack of historical records. By the end of the narratives, when Sebastien's death remains unconfirmed, Danticat brings the story full circle by repeating, "His name is Sebastien Onius. Sometimes this is all I know ... Men with names never truly die. It is only the nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air" (281-82). If official History denies Haitian people the fundamental rights to existence, Danticat turns to alternative forms of history in order to give voice to Haitian memory.

Elaborating on Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*,¹⁰ Lucía M. Suárez, in her study of Dominican and Haitian diaspora memory, reads *The Farming of Bones* not only as a site of memory but also "a memorial to the dead and the dispossessed of Hispaniola" (28). Perhaps, she writes, "the novel asks us to mourn the deaths of those we never knew, who may have never been documented, and whose families may have never known the truth of their loved ones' deaths" (28). If fiction and stories are indisputably powerful agents of memory, I would like to suggest that the landscape, containing the stories of individuals and community alike, also functions as a powerful repository of a collective memory, as suggested by Walcott and Glissant among others, at the same time as it sets in motion a healing process and the energy to forge a future of hope and survival.¹¹

In *The Farming of Bones*, it is the river itself—both the Massacre River as well as other related bodies of water that occupy a symbolic function in the narrative—that provides such a regenerative force. Early in the narrative, Danticat describes the Haitian cane cutters bathing in the stream behind the neighboring sugar mills "before heading out to the fields" (59). She describes the stream being always "crowded, overflowing with men and women" (59). On the morning that the Haitian workers mourn Kongo's son, Joël, they immerse themselves in the stream in a sort of cathartic gesture: "Void of ceremony, this was a silent farewell to Joël, a quiet wake at dawn" (63). The narrator reports that Kongo bathes himself in the middle of the stream, "scrubbing his body with a handful of wet parsley" (62). The same parsley that will later function as a Caribbean *shibboleth*,¹² condemning thousands of Haitian cane cutters to death, is

here associated with a regenerative ritual, the cleansing of the body from hard labor before paying homage to the dead. Danticat writes:

We used pèsi, perejil, parsley, the damp summer morningness of it, the mingled sprigs, bristly and coarse, gentle and docile all at once, tasteless and bitter when chewed, a sweetened wind inside the mouth, the leaves a different taste than the stalk, all this we savored for our food, our teas, our baths, to cleanse our inside as well as our outsides of old aches and griefs, to shed a passing year's dust as a new one dawned, to wash a new infant's hair for the first time and—along with boiled orange leaves—a corpse's remains one final time. (62)

Foreshadowing the climactic scene in which upon arriving in the border town of Dajabón, Amabelle and Yves are force-fed handfuls of parsley until they choke and are almost beaten to death by the Dominicans, this episode testifies to the idea suggested by Glissant and Brathwaite among others, that most of Caribbean cultural memory is embedded in the environment. By the end of the narrative, as she reflects on the Generalissimo's reasons for wanting to cleanse the Dominican Republic of Haitians, Amabelle echoes the words of the above-quoted passage: "We used our parsley for food, our teas, our baths, to cleanse our insides as well as our outsides. Perhaps the Generalissimo in some larger order was trying to do the same for his country. ... To the devil with your world, your grass, your wind, your water, your air, your words. You ask for perejil, I give you more" (203). Eradicated like weeds, Haitians in the Dominican Republic remind us of a similar fate befallen upon the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, the Caribs and Arawaks along with other groups, defeated and then nearly exterminated by direct violence, disease, and despair. Such a tragic blow would be inflicted, within the span of five hundred years since Columbus's arrival, upon millions of other indigenous peoples in the Americas, to constitute what David E. Stannard has termed "the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world" (x). Discussing colonialism and environmental devastation as interlocking systems of domination, Jana Evan Braziel argues that genocide and ecocide are strongly intertwined in the Caribbean archipelago (117), the transplantation of flora and fauna populations from all over the world paralleling the eradication and near extermination of the indigenous peoples. Such entangled histories make untenable any kind of "arboreal continuity" and "absolute rootedness," but offer instead alternative discursive tools to theorize "a new relationship between people and place" (Braziel 117). If we juxtapose Braziel's observations to Glissant's poetics of relation, then we can better conceptualize the Caribbean landscape as "a character in the process of creating history" (*Caribbean Discourse* 105), rather than a decorative element upon which the first world projects nostalgic feelings of a pre-contact Eden.

Sugar and sugar cane mills play a less ambivalent but equally significant role in *The Farming of Bones* as parsley. Demarcating a border between Amabelle and Sebastien, the house of Señora Valencia and the shacks of the Haitian cane cutters, the sugar mills embody both the backbreaking agricultural labor that enslaves Haitians to the Dominican Republic, as well as the violence and slaughter of bodies that resulted in the horrendous human rights violations during

the 1937 massacre. The sugar industry binding Haiti and the Dominican Republic is symbolically mapped in the scarred bodies of the Haitian cane cutters. More important, as noted by April Shemak, Danticat challenges the “genderings of class and labor” by also describing women’s dis-membered bodies as a result of cane labor (“Re-Membering Hispaniola” 95). In the stream behind the sugar mills, Amabelle observes some women bathing:

Among the oldest women, one was missing an ear. Two had lost fingers. One had her right cheekbone cracked in half, the result of a run-away machete in the fields. The oldest cane-cutting women were now too sick, too weak, or too crippled to either cook or clean in a big house, work the harvest in the cane fields, or return to their old homes in Haiti. So they started off every morning bathing in the stream, and then spent the rest of the day digging for wild roots or waiting on the kindness of their good neighbors. (61)

Unlike parsley that is forced upon the reader in the graphic episode describing Amabelle’s and Yves’s beating, sugar is made visible to us in the novel primarily through sensory impressions. On the run toward the border, aware that Sebastien might have actually disappeared, Amabelle remembers the nights when she used to visit him in his room, hoping that she could help him get rid of the “heavy smell of cane that was always with him, in his room, in his clothes, in the breeze, even in his hair,” a smell that would turn into sound at the breaking of the new day, when “begrudged [by] the sound of the cane being cut because it reminded him of the breaking of dry chicken bones” (174). Later in the narrative, Amabelle describes how Yves comes to terms with memories of the massacre:

The slaughter had affected him in certain special ways: He detested the smell of sugarcane (except the way it disappeared in rum) and loathed the taste of parsley; he could not swim in rivers; the sound of Spanish being spoken—even by Haitians—made his eyes widen, his breath quicken, his face cloud with terror, his lips unable to part one from the other and speak. (273)

Considering the historical role that sugar cane production played in the Caribbean, we might read Danticat’s evocation of these Haitian and Dominican *lieux de mémoires* as an attempt to remember the history of the Middle Passage deposited in “underwater signposts,” as Glissant put it, “between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands” (*Poetics of Relation* 6). In one of the numerous dream sequences interspersed within the linear narrative of the main story, Amabelle dreams of “the sugar woman” wearing a “shining silver muzzle” and “a collar with a clasped lock dangling from it” (132). When she asks the woman why she is wearing the iron muzzle, Amabelle is surprised to hear in the sound of her own voice, “the voice of the orphaned child at the stream, the child who from now on would talk only to strange faces” (132). Collapsing this dream into the incomprehensible waking nightmare of the slaughter of her fellow Haitians, Danticat weaves the twentieth-century history of Hispaniola with the ancestral history of the Middle Passage. The sugar woman explains that the muzzle was “given to [her] a long time ago

... so [she'd] not eat the sugarcane" (132). Amabelle asks, "Why are you here?" and the sugar woman replies: "I'm the sugar woman. You, my eternity" (133), a reminder of the importance and role of memory in re-remembering the Caribbean experience. Again and again, Danticat takes us through the storied landscape of *The Farming of Bones* and offers a pointed response to the Euro-American tourist gaze that packages the islands in endless imagery of paradisaical gardens and sun, sea, and sand colors; "iconic islands" that are consistently erased and (re)colonized by the discourse of modernity (Sheller 1).

In his essay, Nora maintains that *lieux de mémoire* replace the absence of real environments of memory or *milieux de mémoire*, "settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience" (1). He uses the example of the disappearance of peasant culture, that "quintessential repository of collective memory" (1), in which stories are transmitted in the same place where they are experienced, to account for the dissolution of memory in our era of travel, migration and global culture. He proposes new venues of memory such as archives, monuments, literature and various documents or "traces," as he calls them, of distance and mediation, by means of which "we leave the realm of true memory and enter that of history" (2). Framed as they are by French nationalism and the topology of French symbolism, Nora's views on memory and history, nonetheless, cannot explain the complexity of memory per se, especially when memory is marked by trauma, and when the will to remember is hindered by a desire to forget. "How can one remember violence and still heal from it?," Suárez asks in her critical investigation of Hispaniola's diasporic memory (27). In the case of the argument I advance in this essay, how can one conceptualize the absence of "real environments" of memory in the Caribbean? To Suárez's question, I add that Nora's marked distinction between *memory* and *history* is not so clear-cut when we consider the ruptured history of the Caribbean powerfully mapped in the landscape. If, in the French critic's view, "[h]istory ... is a reconstruction ... of what is no longer ... a representation of the past," as opposed to memory which is "always a phenomenon of the present" (*Realms* 3), how does one account for the ever present memory of the Caribbean landscape? As theorized by Glissant, due to the plantation system in the Caribbean, the relationship with the landscape cannot be disentangled from the history of slavery: "*Our landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history*" (*Caribbean Discourse* 11; emphasis mine).

In the preface to *Massacre River*, the novel written by Haitian poet René Philoctète, Danticat states: "Between Haiti and the Dominican Republic flows a river filled with ghosts. This river is called, aptly enough, the Massacre River and is one of several natural frontiers, dividing what is geographically one island into two independent nations" (7). In *The Farming of Bones*, the river can be seen as the repository of collective memories, the *milieu* of the stories transmitted in the same place where they are experienced. For Amabelle, these stories begin with her own parents drowning in this landmark river, leaving her an orphan on the Dominican side of the border. Soon, however, her orphan fate will merge with thousands of Haitians displaced from their native land; people who are orphaned at the border. When, at the end of the narrative,

Amabelle returns to visit Señora Valencia, the latter comments: “When we were children, you were always drawn to water, Amabelle, streams, lakes, rivers, waterfalls, in all their power; do you remember?” (302). In her affirmative reply, Amabelle confirms the strong connection she has with the river, the same river that, at the end of the novel, will become her new border identity.

As she swims across the river past the corpses of other refugees, still hoping to find Sebastien among them, Amabelle accidentally contributes to the death of her traveling companion, Odette, another refugee who along with her husband, Wilner, is trying to reach the other shore. When Wilner is shot by Dominican guards, Amabelle, in an attempt to prevent Odette from screaming, places her hand over her mouth and “pressed down hard for her own good, for our own good” (202). The victims of torture have become so desensitized to death that the loss of human life results in a sort of Darwinian natural selection. Amabelle compares the death of Odette and her active role in it to a natural act of killing for survival: “It is the way you try to stun a half-dead bird still waving its wings, a headless chicken courageously racing down a dirt road” (201).

The river as a point of encounter between life and death is also a primary motif in Danticat’s story “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” in *Krik? Krak!* Here the protagonist’s mother escapes the Generalissimo’s soldiers, leaving her own mother behind to be horribly mutilated and then thrown into the river by the Dominican soldiers. Danticat writes:

We were all daughters of that river, which had taken our mothers from us. Our mothers were the ashes and we were the light. Our mothers were the embers and we were the sparks. Our mothers were the flames and we were the blaze. We came from the bottom of that river where the blood never stops flowing, where my mother’s dive toward life—her swim among all those bodies slaughtered in flight—gave her those wings of flames. The river was the place where it all had begun. (41)

Like the protagonist of the story, who was born the night that her mother’s mother was taken by the river, Amabelle will be able to survive thanks to the sacrifice of Odette. Like Odette, the mother of the anonymous character of “Nineteen Thirty-Seven,” and thousands of other Haitians buried at the bottom of *Rivye Masak*, Amabelle bears witness to the atrocities committed in the name of racial intolerance and political power by military regimes.¹³

Amabelle’s decision to stop at the border between the two nations further confirms the role of landscape as “obsessively present” (*Caribbean Discourse* 63) in the islands’ histories. As she walks to the bank of the river, Amabelle comments how in the blackness of the night, “the river ceases to exist, allowing you to imagine just for a moment that all of them ... died natural deaths, peaceful deaths, deaths filled with moments of reflection, with pauses and some regret, the kind of death where there is time to think of what we are leaving behind and what better

things may lie ahead” (308). By momentarily “erasing” the river from the landscape, Amabelle seems to be entering Nora’s realm of *history*, to be taking apart the “most clearly defined objects” and showing how they came to be. By reconstructing myths and interpretations of the past, Nora maintains, “we indicate that we no longer identify fully with its heritage” (4). As comforting as this possibility seems to Amabelle, she is perfectly aware that “the slaughter—the river” (309) will not disappear; its memory is permanently engraved in that body of water binding the shared island history of Hispaniola.¹⁴ In a last, ritualistic gesture, Amabelle immerses herself in the river; her act is an attempt to “re-member” the brutal history of the two countries:

I removed my dress, folding it piece by piece and laying it on a large boulder on the riverbank. Unclothed, I slipped into the current.

The water was warm for October, warm and shallow, so shallow that I could lie on my back in it with my shoulders only half submerged, the current floating over me in a less than gentle caress, the pebbles in the riverbed scouring my back.

I looked to my dreams for softness, for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed, where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow. (310)

By re-enacting a version of the cleansing ritual that before the massacre leads Haitian cane cutters to scrub their scarred bodies with handfuls of wet parsley, Amabelle makes a statement about the possibility of renewal and the resilience of life itself. In 1995, as part of her research for *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat visited the Massacre River. In the preface to Philoctète’s novel, she reflects on that trip describing how surprised she was to find out that a place drenched in such a gruesome history could still inspire countless unacknowledged stories of loss and survival, stories yet to be written. She writes: “I grieved then, as I do now, for all the Massacre River’s survivors, those who suffered the machetes that chopped the Haitian heads and the fingers that counted the dead. However, my hope was renewed by the spiritual children of the river, the washing woman, the man with the mule, the bathing boys, the soldiers ... who ... continue to challenge the meaning of community and humanity in all of us” (*Massacre River* 9). Among the countless stories that could still be written are those of contemporary Haitians who still cross the border to work in the Dominican plantations, the “peripheral migrants,”¹⁵ “who still toil in the cane fields” (*The Farming of Bones* 312), and to whom Danticat respectfully pays homage in the last page of the novel. Their stories, historically linked to previous stories of (forced) migration and border crossing, bear witness to a “reconfiguration of landscape in citizenship” (Brazier 124);¹⁶ a landscape that is once again re-routed, as Haitian immigrants cross the border separating Haiti (and the Caribbean) from the United States.

Across the Sea and Beyond *Exile*

Set during Haiti's repressive years following President Aristide's forced expulsion, "Children of the Sea" is a story told in epistolary form by two lovers who write letters to each other, letters that will never reach their intended addressees. The male narrator, a former university student who was part of a revolutionary group known as the youth federation, has managed to escape the island by boarding a boat headed for Miami. He writes to his lover back home in a journal, which will eventually be thrown into the sea as the boat starts to sink. His lover's letters, written from the homeland base, a locale by no means safer than the perilous borderless sea, record the massive violence perpetrated by the military following Aristide's expulsion. Whereas in *The Farming of Bones*, the river and its violent history marked the border zone landscape of the island of Hispaniola, in "Children of the Sea," it is the Caribbean Sea itself, now routing the modern voyage of Haitian refugees to the United States, that forcefully reinscribes the history of the middle passage.¹⁷

In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant reminds us of the aquatic origins of the dislocated people of the African Diaspora: "[T]he entire ocean, the entire sea, gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green" (6). The contemporary voyages of Haitian refugees echo the ancestral voyage across the Atlantic, as new forms of slavery set up by neocolonial global capitalism replace nineteenth century traffic in goods and human beings. The passengers on the boat "see themselves as Job or the Children of Israel" ("Children of the Sea" 7), clearly drawing a parallel with the Jewish Diaspora. The pregnant girl, Célianne, will give birth to a stillborn child and will eventually follow her daughter in the Atlantic watery grave, echoing the fate of those innumerable faceless victims of the Middle Passage. More significant, in Célianne's story, we find embodied the violence and trauma perpetrated both in the home landscape and at sea. Raped by a group of *tonton macoutes*—who one night burst into her mother's home, ordered her brother Lionel to "become intimate" with his own mother, and when they were done raping Célianne, accused Lionel of "moral crimes"—Célianne that same night would "cut her face with a razor so that no one would know who she was" (24). With the senseless violence perpetrated in contemporary Haiti inscribed on her body, Célianne gradually drifts toward the sea that claimed her daughter and all those "children of the sea" inhabiting Caribbean (trans)oceanic history.¹⁸ As the sinking boat advances toward Miami and a sense of hopelessness overcomes the narrator, references to the Middle Passage abound—"Perhaps I was chosen from the beginning of time to live there with Agwè [the Dahomey loa of fishing] at the bottom of the sea" (27-28)—and aquatic and territorial paths are evoked to re-map the symbolic land(sea)scape of the Caribbean region:

I must throw my book out now. It goes down to them, Célianne and her daughter
and all those children of the sea who might soon be claiming me.

I go to them now as though it was always meant to be, as though the very day my mother birthed me, she had chosen me to live life eternal, among the children of the deep blue sea, those who have escaped the chains of slavery to form a world beneath the heavens and the *blood-drenched earth* where you live. (27; emphasis mine)

Although materially unmarked by monuments or gravestones, Glissant writes that the sea, “is History” in the sense suggested by Derek Walcott’s eponymous poem; “a grey vault” locks up the battles, martyrs and tribal memory of the millions of people traveling the (in)famous routes of the Middle Passage. In Glissant’s formulations, the sea is a powerful trope for reconfiguring the spatio-temporal complexity of the Caribbean region even as it is a powerful site of historical violence.

The “blood-wrenched earth” encompassing the female narrator’s world turns the landscape of Haiti into a place of unspeakable horrors. Confined to the space of her family’s house, she witnesses some of the atrocities committed by the soldiers against civilians and is repulsed by her father’s passivity and fear. “[W]e are just being good citizens, following the law of the land. [It] has happened before all over this country and tonight it will happen again and there is nothing we can do” (“Children of the Sea” 17), he says to his wife and daughter hiding in the back of the house as the soldiers brutally torture one of their female neighbors. As the family escapes to the seaside town of Ville Rose in the provinces, they witness additional scenes of unspeakable violence, unable to intervene or do anything to help the doomed victims. From the new house in Ville Rose, the female narrator writes that the stream down the hill is “too shallow for [her] to drown [herself]” (22), voicing suicidal thoughts that interestingly enough link her destiny to the character of Célianne on the boat, no matter how different their traumatic experiences are. If the borderless sea becomes a confining and imprisoning space for the refugees en route to Miami, the (up)rooted landscape of the yard behind the house in Ville Rose, symbolically represented by the banyan tree,¹⁹ seemingly suffocates the female narrator: “from the spot where i stand under the banyan, i see the mountains, and behind those are more mountains still. so many mountains that are bare like rocks. i feel like all those mountains are pushing me farther and farther away from you” (26). In her final entry, she records that upon hearing that “another boat sank off the coast of the bahamas” (28) the mountains closing on her bring black butterflies, which in Haitian folklore are harbingers of death.

Brathwaite has conceptualized the cyclic movement of water backwards and forwards as “tidalectics,” which suggests an ebb and flow process that is circular and repetitive (rather than linear and progressive) like the endless tides of the sea (Mackey 14). Similarly, for Glissant, tidalectics evokes the dynamic relationship between beach and ocean, thus reinscribing the landscape within the fluidity of the sea. In such tidalectic movements, it becomes critical to reclaim histories that dig deep into the collective memory and restore a past that in the Caribbean, according to Glissant, was “broken up by sterile barriers” (*Caribbean Discourse* 65). As contemporary Haitian waves of migrations across the sea rapidly increase and the collective

memory of the homeland becomes more and more fragmented between the *ex-isle* and the new homeland, the urge to remember and memorialize experiences and histories becomes more pressing.

While on the boat, the narrator of “Children of the Sea” writes that when they sing “*Beloved Haiti, there is no place like you. I had to leave you before I could understand you*” (9), the women start crying; in this way he is weaving an additional layer of ruptures in a rather familiar discourse of Caribbean memory. Suárez reads the metaphor of tears as “the socio-cultural, political mechanisms that *tear apart* individual lives, families, communities, and nations” (7; emphasis mine); in this sense, we might interpret Danticat’s reference to the Haitian popular song as the quintessential condition of exile described by Edward Said as, “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (173).

What will become of the endless number of refugees such as the protagonist of Danticat’s story, those who will never make it to the other shore but will remain instead at the bottom of the sea to form, along with other numerous anonymous faces of the Middle Passage, the “ocean floor” of Caribbean history?²⁰ According to an ancient Haitian belief, a transnational historical community is powerfully established in the fluid, borderless space of the sea. As the protagonist of “Caroline’s Wedding,” a story also included in *Krik? Krak!*, tells us: “There are people in Ville Rose ... who believe that there are special spots in the sea where lost Africans who jumped off the slave ships still rest, that those who have died at sea have been chosen to make that journey in order to be reunited with their long-lost relations” (167-8). The new “children of the sea,” however, such as the male protagonist of Danticat’s story, have inscribed the torn history of the Haitian landscape on their bodies so that when they sink a whole set of new memories will be deposited on the ocean floor.

In *Diasporic Citizenship*, Michel Laguerre argues that in the past few decades, the tragic results of American policy *vis-à-vis* Haitian refugees has turned “the sea corridor between Haiti and Florida” into a cemetery for thousands of Haitians escaping the repressive regime of the Duvalier dictatorship (85). He writes: “located between a country they are escaping from and a country that does not want to welcome them, the death of these Haitians at sea represents the maximal expression of their liminal citizenship status” (85). In this landscape of rough sea waves, frail sailboats, and ongoing political violence perpetrated upon the Haitian population, sites of memory are built to counteract sites of dispersal. It is the responsibility of the survivors, those who reach the Florida shores to make new lives in the United States, those who choose to travel back and forth (transnational subjects such as Danticat who, short of being global or world citizens, have been forced to re-root their lives in the border zone of the Haitian *dyaspora*), and those who ultimately have no choice (or make the choice) to remain in Haiti to make sure that the debris accumulated in a “landscape of loss” (Dayan 79) will not be erased by the passing of time.²¹

If official history in both Haiti and the Dominican Republic continues to obliterate individuals from national discourse, if contemporary episodes of human rights violation perpetrated both on the islands and across the boundaries of the nation state (think of the elaborate control mechanism used by the US government in processing Haitian refugees)²² continue to be ignored in Western discourse on the Caribbean, then fiction remains the only “textual memorial” (Suárez 57), through which writers such as Danticat suggest venues for political action and change. Writers such as Danticat, however, remain connected despite distance, ultimately transforming the condition of “exile” as an unhealable rift with one’s native homeland into what critic and poet Elaine Savory terms *ex/isle*, that is subjectivity “which is translocated and transformed by and into the desire to write”(171).

In his study, Laguerre discusses how “the Haitian nation through immigration has expanded itself beyond its geographical boundaries, establishing an overseas diaspora that serves as its extension” while reterritorializing the space of the nation in a transnational continuum (13). One of the common questions in Diaspora discourse involves the role and responsibility of the citizen within the new traveling, diasporic experience. Laguerre asks: “When an immigrant resettles in another country, does he or she hold a *dormant citizenship* status *vis-à-vis* the homeland? What kinds of claims can the homeland make on such a person, and what kinds of claims can the person make on the homeland?” (10).

As a member of this class of diasporic citizenship, Danticat, along with other fellow Haitians who have relocated to the United States, de-essentializes both the categories of *citizen* and *Haitian* as strictly confined to the border of the nation state and conducts her battles from within the international category of human rights in which, as Yasemin Soysal reminds us, “the individual transcends the citizen” (142). Even though Danticat’s “beloved Haiti” remains first and foremost her primary literary concern, her message, as my discussion has hopefully demonstrated, is not so much to forge a nationalist discourse of island identity but rather to uncover the violent and brutal past of her island of birth and give voice to those victims endlessly silenced by the forces of History. By creating transnational sites of memory beyond the sea and across the island, Danticat restores agency to a landscape that in the Caribbean has always been saturated with “intermingled histories” unfolding tidalectically. Unlike travelers or diarists whose prose confined them to merely “name” Caribbean islands, Danticat, like Walcott, digs deep into the islands’ submerged histories while forging “literary monuments to life, resistance, and survival” (Suárez 57).

Discussing the challenge she has embraced through her writing, Danticat states: “I look to the past—to Haiti—hoping that the extraordinary female story tellers I grew up with—the ones that have passed on—will choose to tell their story through my voice. For those of us who have a voice must speak to the present and the past” (qtd. in Casey 525-26). If, for Suárez, “*The Farming of Bones* is a monument that does not exist in any border town” (57), then “*Children of the Sea*,” I argue, is the monument erected in the “dark vault” of the sea (Walcott), resonating with History, both past and present. As monuments to life, resistance and survival, Danticat’s

works make a strong statement on the power of memory in affirming human rights and inspiring hope to the survivors of traumatic historical events across distance and time, at home in the island and in the Diaspora across the sea.

Notes

¹This essay grew out of a presentation I gave at the 32nd annual Conference of the Caribbean Studies Association, “Alternative Interpretations of the Circum-Caribbean: Interrogating Connections across History, Society, Culture, and Performance,” held in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, in May-June 2007. I would like to thank Rita Keresztesi and Margaret Shrimpton for comments and suggestions on the conference paper.

²The hostility of the landscape has in turn created images of cultural and intellectual sterility in Western discourse on the Caribbean. The rhetoric of absence expressed among others by James Anthony Froude in *The English in the Western Indies* (1887) resonates in V.S. Naipaul’s (in)famous statement “History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies” (*The Middle Passage* 29).

³About her linguistic identity, Danticat says: “when I was in Haiti I spoke Creole at home, and in school I studied and spoke in French. At that time no one, or very few people, wrote in Creole. There were not yet standard spellings and grammatical rules that everybody agreed on. ... So I wrote in a language I didn’t speak regularly and spoke a language I couldn’t write. When I came here [to the United States] and learned English, it was the first time I could write and speak the same language” (Lyons 189). Danticat’s case reflects the situation of many Haitian authors, individuals who, writing from a diaspora condition, belong to both their new countries and their native homelands. Furthermore, as noted by Lucia M. Suárez, “even if their works represent Haitian issues, their stories are globally African-Caribbean stories in the Americas, inclusively” (10).

⁴The works of Marie-Célie Agnant (Haiti), Daniel Maximin (Guadeloupe), Ananda Devi (Maurice), Axel Gauvin (Réunion), and Raharimanana (Madagascar) were discussed at the MLA panel. Currently living between Canada and France, all these writers, like Danticat, deal in different ways with issues of language, identity and migration, the quintessential predicament of diaspora literatures.

⁵The Haitian Kreyol equivalent is “kout kouto,” or the stabbing (Shemak 85).

⁶I have previously used this metaphor of the land(sea)scape to discuss the intricate geography of the Caribbean in an essay on Caryl Phillips’s *The Atlantic Sound*. See Pulitano.

⁷See also her critique of Gilroy’s masculinist approach in *The Black Atlantic*, in “Gendering the Oceanic Voyage,” 204-21.

⁸In her latest book, *Routes and Roots*, Deloughrey addresses the indigenous heritage of the Anglophone Caribbean that only recently has begun to reroot the islands’ creolized history. See the chapter “Landfall.”

⁹As noted by Caren Kaplan, it is important, when considering theoretical positions that advocate discourses of mobility, to ask whether people “*choose* deterritorialization or whether deterritorialization has chosen [them]” (“Deterritorialization” 361). See also my discussion in the essay on *The Atlantic Sound*.

¹⁰For a moving eyewitness documentary of the life of Haitian cane cutters in the contemporary Dominican Republic, see Lemoine, also mentioned by Danticat in her conversation with Shea.

¹¹In the preface to the English-language edition of this monumental work on French national memory, Nora defines a *lieu de mémoire* as “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community (in this case the French community)” (xvii). I will return to Nora’s concept later on in my discussion.

¹²Within the context of Haiti, then, it should be pointed out the heritage of Guinea preserved in the symbolism of the land. According to Joan Dayan, “Most Haitians live ‘in the palpable presence of their gods,’ who depend on their human devotees for their embodiment on earth” (*Haiti, History, and the Gods* 80). Lack of space prevents me from investigating the direction suggested by Dayan’s study any further. And yet, the regenerative force of the Haitian landscape powerfully embodied in *vodou* beliefs is certainly an aspect of Haitian history worth of researching upon considering landscape and landscape representation in the Caribbean.

¹³In the epigraph to *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat quotes the passage from *Judges* in which Jephthah of Gilead used the word *shibboleth* as a test-word against the fleeing Ephraimites. Unable to pronounce the *sh*, the Ephraimites were seized and killed at the fords of the Jordan. As we read in *Judges*, “forty-thousand were killed at the time” (12: 4-6).

¹⁴The question surrounding the rationale for the massacre, whether or not it was prompted exclusively by Trujillo’s anti-Haitianism or by his carefully devised nationalist rhetoric that would allow him to control the border zone as well as the Dominican territory and people, is still highly debated among scholars and historians. See Suárez’s discussion, pp. 40-46.

¹⁵Within this context, it is highly significant that Danticat, by the end of the narrative, joins the words *slaughter* and *river* suggesting how in the history of Hispaniola the two terms should be viewed as synonymous. Moreover, the character of Sylvie, as marginal as it might appear, underlines the continuous presence of the past and the impossibility of forgetting for the survivors of the traumatic 1937 events. Through her stammering question, “why parsley?” (303), referring to the word chosen by Dominican soldiers to “test” Haitian cane cutters on the eve of the massacre, this woman whom Señora Valencia “had borrowed from the slaughter,” painfully voices the enduring terror of the massacre despite temporal distance and a visibly changed geography.

¹⁶I borrow this term from Samuel Martínez who describes the contemporary circulation of labor from rural Haiti to the sugar estates of the Dominican Republic as a circulation “between distant rural areas in the world’s economic periphery” (ix).

¹⁷Such a reconfiguration, Braziel suggests, implies that Caribbean citizens are “not citizens bound by and inextricable from a fixed territory,” neither are they “subjects bound to a *pays natal*.” On the contrary, through their diasporically reconfigured sense of land, they offer significant “ecocritical interventions” in the Judeo-Christian frame of domination and destruction of the landscape (“Caribbean Genesis” 124).

¹⁸According to DeLoughrey, the sea in this story is “tautological” for the ways in which it compresses diaspora histories (“Tidalectics” 22-24). See also her brief discussion in *Routes and Roots* (270-71).

¹⁹For a fictional account of such a (trans)oceanic history, see Fred D’Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts* (1998). The novel recounts the 1783 infamous episode of the slave ship *Zong*, whose crew threw 132 sick “livestock” in the Atlantic confident that they would gain more in insurance as “goods lost at sea” than at the auction block.

²⁰Like mango, rice, and other floral population introduced in the Caribbean from Asia, the banyan tree testifies to the bloody history of uprooting and transplantation that has permanently erased the (ab)original Caribbean environment to reinvent it, as Sheller argues, as “‘nature’ and ‘landscape’ for North Atlantic inhabitants’ pleasure and use” (*Consuming the Caribbean* 36). Both Olive Senior’s *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994) and Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Garden(book)*: (1999) offer a playful and yet penetrating autobiographical account of the creolization of “biotic transplants” in the Caribbean landscape. For an interesting discussion, see DeLoughrey, “Islands Ecologies.”

²¹The original title of “Children of the Sea” was “From the Ocean Floor.” In an interview with Renée Shea, Danticat said how she deliberately changed the title to reinforce the connection with the Middle Passage: “No one knows how many people were lost in the Middle Passage. There are no records or graves—and the ocean floor is where our fossils are. The journey from Haiti in the 1980s is like a new middle passage. Not to romanticize it, but the comforting thing about death is that somehow all these people will meet. I often think that if my ancestors are at the bottom of the sea, then I too am part of that, So we are all children of the sea” (Shea 1995: 12).

²²Danticat’s own uncle, Rev. Joseph Danticat, comes to mind here. When asked why he had not tried to move to NY like other relative members, the Baptist minister is reported to have said: “Exile is not for everyone. Someone has to stay behind to receive letters and greet family members when they come back” (*Brother, I Am Dying* 140). Little did he know that forces beyond his control would make impossible for him to honor such a belief. In 2004, upon arriving in the United States seeking for asylum, Joseph Danticat was arrested and detained by Homeland Security. He would die a few days later in custody.

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