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## **Braiding Memories and Cooking Resistance: Subversive matrilineal storytelling in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!***

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to explore the resistant as well as the sustaining potential of the act of storytelling, in the specific context of Haitian female community through the study of Edwidge Danticat's collection of short stories *Krik? Krak!* The history of Haiti has been a history of prolonged gender oppression. It has also been a history of silence. The paper aims to understand how through the act of story-telling, and other typically female activities of the domestic space, such as cooking and braiding hair, one can not only form long-lasting communal bonds and pass on shared legacy, which can also transform into a tool of survival and opposition. The stories of Danticat can be read as both independent and intertwined tales of resilience in the face of precarity and the aim of this paper would be to understand how matrilineal legacy of storytelling, which cut across time and space give voice to the silenced stories and provide a divergent shade to normative historiography.

### **Keywords**

storytelling, matrilineage, identity, gender, oppression

“Ma says all Haitians know each other”.

– Danticat 169

All Haitians know each other through stories. All Haitians know each other through stories told by ‘ma’ and ‘grandmas’, stories that are passed through generations till it becomes a part of a collective racial memory and gendered identity. Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik Krak* celebrates in writing, the matrilineal legacy of oral storytelling in a montage of stories about Haitian women from different time periods and places. The novel interestingly begins with the following opening credit,

Krik? Krak! Somewhere by the seacoast I feel a breath  
of warm sea air and hear the laughter of children.  
An old granny smokes her pipe,  
surrounded by the village children . . .  
"We tell the stories so that the young ones  
will know what came before them.  
They ask Krik? we say Krak!  
Our stories are kept in our hearts. (1)

This underlines the immense significance of the story-telling tradition in the Haitian culture as a means of communal bonding and sharing of heritage. The title of the short story collection ‘Krik Krak’ is an allusion to the call and response tradition of storytelling common in the Haitian society where the children call out ‘Krik?’, and the elders, the storytellers, who are mainly women respond by saying ‘Krak’, after which the story actually starts.

The stories can be read as independent tales but the collectively it reads as one seamless, uninterrupted saga of survival and resilience, braided tales of repression and resistance of Haitian women that cuts across time and place. Danticat uses the ‘braiding’ metaphor to reflect on the act of writing about her ancestors,

When you write, it's like braiding your hair. Taking a hand-ful of coarse unruly strands and attempting to bring them into unity . . . Some of the braids are long, others are short. Some are thick, others are thin. Some are heavy. Others are light. Like the diverse women in your family. Those whose fables and metaphors, whose similes, and soliloquies, whose diction and je ne sais quoi daily slip into your survival soup, by way of their fingers. (220)

The act of braiding that is collecting together of individual and disparate strands of hair into “unity” is compared by the narrator of the last story in the collection, “Epilogue”, to the task of writing about her ancestors. The nine stories in the collection, each consisting of numerous of experiences of women through centuries, resemble different strands of hair that are brought together to manifest a unified, shared history of loss, resistance, hope and oppression. Apart from braiding, the above quote also mentions ‘survival soup’, a special kind of soup made of meat carcass and vegetables, which forms an integral part of one of the stories, “Caroline’s Wedding”. Writing stories about her ancestors is compared to making a soup which has for its ingredients, ‘fables and metaphors, similes, and soliloquies’ and is called the survival soup. The soup is the marker of the unsevered connection of the exilic Haitian community in the story, with their country. The makings of soup along with the act of braiding are works which belong exclusively to the female domain of domesticity in Haitian culture. Danticat deliberately makes use of these domestic metaphors because her stories are tales of women which do not find mention in the official annals of history. The history of Haiti has witnessed a long silencing of women’s experiences and contribution in nation-making. It is also a history of sustained and systematic government-sponsored coercion on the bodies of women, as a political weapon. Danticat’s stories offer a deviant version of history, a version which is relegated in the confines of the kitchen, in the whispers and sobs shared by women, in the stories passed down by a mother to her daughter, in the games that sisters play. It also celebrates the strong bonds in the female community, nurtured through soup-making, hair-braiding and story-telling. The Haitian history has been a history of repression. Through individual stories, Danticat displays the oppressive environment that has remained a constant in Haiti for two centuries. Beginning from their independence struggle against the brutal French colonial powers, with, indicated by the inclusion of a Haitian independence revolutionary Boukman in one of the stories, to the atrocities of the Duvalier regime, to the coercive American occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934. The Massacre River, named after countless dead bodies were dumped in the river water as the aftermath of the genocide of 1937 by Dominican Republican leader Rafael Trujillo also features in one of the stories in the collective. In such a draconian political environment the very act of survival and telling the tale of survival is revolutionary. Bell Hooks discusses a revolutionary potential of ethnic women’s narrative speech within her text *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. She states,

It was in this world of woman speech, loud talk, angry words, women with tongues quick and sharp, tender sweet tongues, touching our world with their

words, that I made speech my birthright and the right to voice, to authorize, a privilege I would not be denied. It was in that world and because of it that I came to dream of writing, to write. (6)

Hannah Arendt's observation on storytelling and its subversive implications also echo bell hooks, if not specifically in a gendered context. According to Hannah Arendt, storytelling is an effective tool in reconciling one to traumatic histories which can otherwise not be assimilated. Storytelling is particularly useful in the case of terrible and disturbing events that are difficult to comprehend or to imagine, particularly for those who have not lived through them. Storytelling can therefore be a useful tool for coping with the tragedy and the trauma of history. In the words of Isak Dinesen, as quoted by Hannah Arendt, "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them" (Swift 3).

But as much as it might be understood as a tool for coping with history, Arendt thought that storytelling offers an important tool for resisting the evils of the modern world. Arendt thought of the activity of telling stories as an exercise in political understanding. "Storytelling proved to be particularly enabling in her attempt to understand events that take place at the limits of what can be understood" (3). Storytelling, as cultural anthropologists have long recognised, is also traditionally the way in which cultures order their understanding of themselves; by being put into the form of a narrative, a series of events can be understood, and so it can be communicated to a wider audience and remembered by the community. If stories help us to understand, if they make events intelligible, they also presuppose an idea of community inherent in the act of telling, which involves at once the teller of the story, the hero of the action, and the listener or reader who stands back, judges it and responds to it. To summarise, storytelling according to Arendt has multi-dimensional functions coping with and understanding traumatic histories, resisting oppression and community-forging. As Arendt wrote in an essay on the Danish writer Isak Dinesen (1885–1963), "storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it", while "it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are" (3). It brings about comprehension of an individual or traumatic past, which otherwise would be too horrifying to be put into words of daily parlance. It is in storytelling that a meeting point is reached between a cathartic public performance and personal life, between the individual and the collective, between one mother and daughter in the present to all the mothers and daughters in the course of Haitian history. Storytelling helps transform the gendered community of Haiti into a spiritual collective that transcends over their long coercive history.

Gender oppression and brutality in the form of rape, sexual harassment has been a steady part of Haitian national history, from the Independence movement in the 1800s, to the hyper-machismo of the US Army in the 1930s to the despotic Duvalier government. It has been a systematic tool of the Duvalier government to contain women's social and political mobility, by brutalizing their bodies and rendering them mute and subservient. By carrying out a state-sponsored regime of terror on bodies of women, the political will of Haitian women to seek their rights and resist the patriarchal regime is battered, and the potential threat of collective women's movement is prevented. The first story in Danticat's collection "Children of the Sea", gives a poignant testament to the regime of routine rape carried out by state-sponsored militia of Papa-Doc Duvalier as an instrument of maintaining political power. Throughout the short story montage, we read stories that reveal to us aspects of Haitian socio-cultural history which are glossed over official documents. The act of story-telling both in a written and oral format, as the act of hair-braiding or cooking together, results in creating a cohesive unit of mothers and daughters with bonds that are sustained despite harrowing circumstances. This collective matrilineal legacy is revolutionary in its germ as it resists the forces of obfuscation unleashed by despotic governments and patriarchal society. Danticat employs a special narrative technique to give a sense of these all-encompassing maternal connections that is nurtured despite separation or death. Each story can be read as an independent story, but gradually as one story unfolds after the other, one finds repetitions of rituals, similar life stories, allusion to the character of one story by a character of another, inter-generational familial relations emerging between characters from different stories and time periods. As Amanda Putnam says in *Braiding Memories*, "By maintaining these important familial legacies, each story becomes one piece of a larger puzzle substantiating widespread personal and communal resistance to oppression and restoring complex maternal and national histories within Haiti" (53). The collection of stories seem like a chorus of common memory and intertwined lives that give a more inclusive and reflexive account of ethnographic history. There are nine stories, "Children of the Sea", "Nineteen Thirty-Seven", "A Wall of Fire Rising", "Night Women", "Between the Pool and the Gardenias", "The Missing Peace", "Seeing Things Simply", "New York Day Women", "Caroline's Wedding". There is a common thread running through all the stories - the location, Ville Rose. Almost all the stories are connected to Ville Rose in some capacity or another. This common heritage further points to the interlinkage between the characters of the stories. In Children of the Sea, the female narrator flees from their military-occupied city to Ville in order to escape the torture of the state sponsored militia. Josephine and her mother, in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven"

are originally from Ville Rose, which is called "the city of painters and poets" (Danticat 34). Lamort/Marie Magdaléně and her grandmother from "The Missing Peace" live in Ville Rose and rent their house to boarders, usually "French and American journalists who wanted to take pictures of the churchyard where you could see the bodies" (106). In "New York Day Women" the narrator Suzette relates that six of her mother's seven sisters died in Ville Rose (151). Marie, from "Between the Pool and the Gardenias" leaves Ville Rose to escape the social ostracization after suffering multiple miscarriages (92-3). Princess, the young girl in "Seeing Things Simply" who is drawn by "a painter from Guadeloupe" also lives in Ville Rose (127). Gracina, in "Caroline's Wedding," mentions that her mother is a native of Ville Rose (167). The common geographical origin of these women highlights the intersecting maternal legacies.

Another way by which Danticat underlines the inherent bond between the characters is seen in the story, "Between the Pool and the Gardenias", where Marie, the woman who has fled from her husband after suffering several miscarriages, finds a dead baby in the streets and takes care of her as though she were alive. The dead baby, Rose provokes Marie to recall the names she would have given to the babies she lost, had they lived - Josephine, Jacqueline, Célianne, Hermine, Marie Magdelène, Eveline. It dawns on the reader that these names are the repetitions of the names of the several characters from the other stories in the short story collection. Josephine, Eveline and Jacqueline belong to the same story, "Nineteen thirty Seven", while Celianne is the teenage mother from "Children in the Sea" who gives birth to a baby girl on the boat. Marie Magdalene is the name of the girl from the "Missing Peace" and her mother while Hermine is the name of the mother from "Caroline's Wedding". Through the special narrative strategy of repeating the names of characters in a story which is positioned in the middle of the short story collective, Danticat alerts readers to the converging nature of the histories of seemingly-independent characters. Marie continues to explain to the dead baby Rose, the vast maternal lineage into which every Haitian woman is born, when she is recollecting the stories of her maternal ancestors,

Mama had to introduce me to them, because they had all died before I was born. There was my great grandmother Eveline who was killed by Dominican soldiers at the Massacre River. My grandmother Défilé who died with a bald head in a prison, because God had given her wings. My godmother Lili who killed herself in old age because her husband had jumped out of a flying balloon and her grown son left her to go to Miami. (94)

Thus Marie simply doesn't happen to think of the same names for her babies, as the other character names from the stories. It is revealed to us that she shares a more vital connection with the names she had thought for the babies growing in her womb. She wanted to name them after her ancestors, the same ancestors whose stories we have read so far, thinking them as autonomous units in the story montage.

Another recursive element in *Danticat* is the recurrence of the story of the Massacre River and how it had impacted the lives of the women in Haiti. In "Nineteen thirty Seven", the year of the genocide ordered by Generalissimo, Josephine visits her mother Eveline, who has been wrongfully detained in prison for being accused by her friend of killing a sick child. Eveline, had in fact tried to help the child. However she is imprisoned and her daughter relates, on her visit to her mother in prison, how the guards "made them throw tin cups of cold water at one another so that their bodies would not be able to muster up enough heat to grow those wings made of flames, fly away in the middle of the night, slip into the slumber of innocent children and steal their breath" (37-8). Midway through the story Josephine relates how her mother Eveline miraculously escaped from the Massacre River, while being with pregnant with her, while her grandmother Defile could not.

On that day so long ago, in the year nineteen hundred and thirty-seven, in the Massacre River, my mother did fly. Weighted down by [Josephine's] body inside hers, [Manman] leaped from Dominican soil into the water, and out again on the Haitian side of the river. She glowed red when she came out, blood clinging to her skin, which at that moment looked as though it were in flames. (49)

It is significant to note that the ability to fly and the wings of flame of which the guards are so scared of is, in fact, a symbolic marker of Eveline's resistance and survival. The fiery glow of her skin is the metaphorical glow of her triumph over the incarcerating forces of history. The site of coercion of the Massacre River thus becomes laden with a transformative potential. The Massacre River was intended to be the graveyard of the Haitian communal identity, a genocidal site which was supposed to snuff out people and their legacies. However, the oppressive event becomes a singular agent in bringing together all those women who had lost their mothers to the river

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. (41)

It is the Massacre River which brings Emilie Gallant, a Haitian exile in America to the site in search of her mother's history, who had drowned in the river. It is the river which brings together all the women "who had lost their mothers" (56) in it, on the special invitation of Josephine's mother as a communal ritual of collectively mourning the death as well as celebrating the sacrifices of their mothers. In this a communal fellow-feeling is developed between women who would otherwise be strangers. The women also share among themselves, secret speech patterns, a sort of a covert unit with exclusive speech codes, which would enable them to correctly identify a member. "Ma too had learned this game when she was a girl. Her mother belonged to a secret women's society in Ville Rose, where the women had to question each other before entering one another's houses" (165). It gives this all-female community, brought together by a single loss, a revolutionary aura, for they indeed are resisting the neutralizing forces of history by militantly passing down their maternal legacy and memories through oral narratives and rituals. According to Haitian culture, death doesn't necessarily mean a complete termination, but merely a replacement of one life from the racial, spiritual collective with another, "life is never lost, another one always comes up to replace the last"(48). Thus, when Eveline loses her mother to the Massacre River, she is consoled by the fact that her daughter comes immediately to fill up the lacuna left by her mother's death. The idea that the loss of a mother can be assuaged by the birth of a daughter highlights the metaphysical, almost mythic connection between women that transcends the limits of life and death. This sentiment is reiterated by Marie in "Between the Pool and the Gardenias", "For no matter how much distance death tried to put between us, my mother would often come visit me. Sometimes in the short sighs and whispers of somebody else's voice. Sometimes in somebody else's face. Other times in brief moments in my dreams" (94).

Another recursive element occurs in "Caroline's Wedding", where a Haitian diasporic community in America is shown to be mourning in church, the drowning of a boat carrying Haitians. It dawns on the reader, that the drowned boat in the first story "Children of the Sea" is being alluded to, when at the Mass, the priest describes the harrowing tale of Celianne,

We make a special call today for a young woman whose name we don't know ... A young woman who was pregnant when she took a boat from Haiti and then later gave birth to her child on that boat. A few hours after the child was born, its precious life went out, like a candle in a storm, and the mother with the infant in her arms dived into the sea. (167)



The repetition of one event of a story in another joins these two disparate stories into one to draw attention to the cohesive structure of Danticat's short story collage. As Gracina recalls when the priest, "recited a list of a hundred twenty-nine names, Haitian refugees who had drowned at sea that week. The list was endless and with each name my heart beat faster, for it seemed as though many of those listed might have been people that I had known at some point in my life" (167). Even though Gracina has never met the people on the doomed boat, it seems to her as if she has known them, because it is their stories that are familiar to her, stories that she had heard earlier in some shape or the other, stories that are her own in a way. However, the feeling of mutuality arising out of a common and shared experience of loss and pain also carries with it a restorative potential. The drowning of the fleeing Haitians arouses in the diasporic community a spiritual conclusion because of their belief in continuity beyond death. They believe those who die by drowning in the sea, actually unite with their slave ancestors who had drowned by the scores, while being transported from Africa. In "Caroline's Wedding", Gracina says, "[t]here are people in Ville Rose, the village where my mother is from in Haiti, 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 Haitians thus hold this conviction that they all belong to one metaphysical, over-arching spiritual collective, whereby they only live for a while before joining their deceased ancestors and the deceased always maintain a strong bond with the living. As the narrator reiterates in the last story,

The women in your family have never lost touch with one another. Death is a path we take to meet on the other side . . . With every step you take, there is an army of women watching over you. (222)

By reconstituting the lost stories of her ancestors, Danticat underlines the crucial marker of Haitian identity, their vital and indelible link to the past. The Haitian culture demands of its young generation to remember those who went before them, to felicitate the harrowing journey of their ancestors through ritual act of recollection, till the point the stories become part of their blood, to give 'testament' to how women of their country 'lived and died and lived again',

to name each braid after those nine hundred and ninety-nine women who were boiling in your blood, and since you had written them down and memorized them, the names would come rolling off your tongue. And this was your testament to the way that these women lived and died and lived again. (224)

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