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(Re)Imagining Haiti through the Eyes of a Seven-Year-Old Girl

By Iliana Rosales Figueroa¹

Abstract

Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat's new novel *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013) explores themes of love, loss, and death. The first character that is presented to us is Claire of the Sea Light, a seven-year-old girl, whose mother died giving birth to her and who is missing. It is at the intersection of this little girl's loss that all the other characters and topics unfold. Madame Gaëlle, an upper class woman who has a fabric shop in Ville Rose, decides to adopt Claire in order to give her a better life. In this essay I demonstrate that Edwidge Danticat articulates the nation as fundamentally constructed by the feminine positioning the daughter relationship with her biological mother and her adoptive mother as the most important bonds that the seven-year-old girl has throughout the novel. Women assume the role of guardians of the whole town, while at the same time, question and challenge Haiti's economic and social infrastructure. Furthermore, the author engages in a special literary creativity through the symbols of the sea, the frogs, and the ghosts to give a voice to displaced, marginalized, exploited and oppressed Haitian people as well as its nature. The purpose of the paper is to show a new way in rethinking feminist methodologies for researching the nation-state. Although the novel is set before the earthquake of January 2010, it is difficult to resist the temptation to see in the little girl's loss the nation-state's desire for repair. The imaginary reconstruction of the nation is located in modern Haitian literature as scholar Michael Dash mentions in *Haiti and the Americas* (2013). The theoretical framework of my paper is mostly based on works of feminism, identity and gender relations by Nira Yuval-Davis, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, and bell hooks.

Keywords: Caribbean, diaspora, migration, Haiti, feminism, gender, identity, Black women, imaginary.

For many Haitian-born artists from the Diaspora, the process of reimagining Haiti in their work has represented an important space of negotiation.² Themes of ancient folk tales, social and political discourses, and migration proliferate as writers attempt to recapture all that has been lost in order to negotiate their hyphenated Haitian identity in the countries to which they have emigrated. Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat is the author of numerous books, which speak to the history and sociopolitical realities present in Haiti's daily affairs, often focusing on national identity, mother-daughter relationships, and diasporic politics. She has received many

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² The term Diaspora refers to the recent larger diasporic Haitian community: "it encompasses many generations, many decades now of migrations and different varying levels of assimilation and return to the community" (Mirabal 29).

awards including the Fiction Award from The Caribbean Writer, 1994; the National Book Award nomination for *Krik? Krak!*, 1995; Best Young American Novelist for *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by GRANTA, 1996; the American Book Award for *The Farming of the Bones*, 1999; the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Brother, I'm Dying*, 2008; the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature for *Create Dangerously*, 2011; and most recently the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction for *Claire of the Sea Light*, 2014. Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. At the age of 12, she moved to Brooklyn, New York, to join her parents who had previously moved there when she was just a toddler. In her new surrounding, she felt uncomfortable and turned to writing fiction in order to strike a balance between her former life in Haiti and her present in a new cultural and geographical space.

Danticat's latest novel, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013) includes many of the same prominent themes we can find in her other works such as love, loss, and death; however, it also sheds a light on an innovative way to describe Haiti by 'imagining' a new nation. *Claire of the Sea Light* examines the interconnected lives of characters in the small town of Ville Rose and its surroundings. At the core of this structure is the life of Claire of the Sea Light, a seven-year-old girl whose mother died giving birth to her and who has run away due to her father's decision to give her away, against her will, to a rich woman in order to have a better future. It is at the intersection of this little girl's loss that all the other characters and topics unfold. This article explores the way in which author Edwidge Danticat envisions Haiti and critiques its economy and politics through the title character in order to reveal a new way to rethink feminist methodologies for recognizing the nation-state. Although the novel is set before the devastating 7.0-magnitude earthquake of January 2010, it is difficult to resist the temptation to see in the father's dreams of prosperity for his daughter the nation-state's desire for repair. After all, the story of the main character stands at a critical junction where the narratives of despair among the lives of her family and neighbors are revealed. The restoration of Claire's story, however, reappears at the end of the novel symbolizing healing, repair, and hope to all the members of the community. Her return introduces the idea of transformation in a positive light.

The reconstruction of Haiti after the earthquake will take time to come into effect. Six years after the disaster, the country is still struggling to be rebuilt. Progress has been made, but more needs to be done both to assist the displaced and to set in place "more sustainable initiatives" such as "building schools" and "improving the employment situation."³ When living in distress, the need to open an individual's imaginary into a promising change can reorganize the belief that identity must be fixed. Identity is something we perform and construct. It has become necessary for artists to find new ways to talk about Haiti's future restoration. Their work delineates a shape composed of diverse layers, a shape that has the richness of both pain and hope for the country's future. In *Haiti and the Americas* (2013) Michael Dash understands the imaginary reconstruction of the nation as something located in contemporary Haitian literature. Modern Haitian literature,

³ According to Brian Concannon, executive director of the Institute for Justice and Democracy, much of the money rallied after the earthquake was spent in the emergency response: "there was a lot of very good medical treatment," "the rubble was cleared," and there were some food programs" (*PRI's The World*). The construction of more sustainable initiatives however, did not work. Concannon stresses that the big problem of all is the fact that Haitians were not consulted for the setting up of these programs; they were just imposed on them (*PRI's The World*). One might ask why Haitians were not consulted to work together in implementing ideas in order to rebuild their own country. Clearly, a lack of trust exists toward Haitians mostly due to the fact that in the years before the quake public health, public education, and public works were already weakened. I believe what is of critical relevance in the transformation of Haiti is the participation of its inhabitants in the project. Without their input, Haiti cannot be transformed.

he writes, “can provide a site for experimentation with the question of identity” (226). Such a literature becomes an operation for the purpose of discovering or proving something. If we apply this model to Danticat’s work, one might ask what does she want to discover or prove? Her novel relates directly with the topic of identity. Something that is key to identity is repetition and when concepts are used consistently in a literary text they exert power. Danticat’s novel explores the issue of Haitian identity by placing an emphasis on the ways by which this identity is brought to life through the feminine discourse of Claire of the Sea Light. Thus, the analysis of the female character and her surroundings are relevant in order to understand the imaginary construction of Haitian identity and the nation-state. In this essay I demonstrate that Edwidge Danticat articulates the nation as fundamentally constructed by the feminine positioning the daughter relationship with her biological mother and, specifically, her adoptive mother as the most important bonds that the seven-year-old girl has throughout the novel. Here the women assume the role of protectors and defenders of the whole town, while at the same time, questioning Haiti’s economic and social infrastructure. Within the analysis of the female characters, I also present how the symbols of the sea, frogs, and ghosts reveal a new way to envision the future of Haiti, one from a perspective that looks “toward Caribbeanness.” This study shows how Danticat’s novel makes an argument that Haitians need to reflect upon their past and latch on to their land’s roots in order to rebuild their future. Haiti’s position within the Caribbean is an attribute that needs to be understood as strength. After all, although the Caribbean is linguistically different, all nations share a history of colonization, their socioeconomic contexts contain similar traits, and they all have suffered from political oppression. *Claire of the Sea Light* represents the connections/relations in the Caribbean.

According to Nira Yuval-Davis, it is “women who reproduce nations biologically, culturally and symbolically” and they are “usually ‘hidden’ in the various theorizations of nationalist phenomena” (2). Women symbolize nations by raising and teaching children in everyday life their mother tongue, customs, and rituals that make them feel related to the collective identity. The role of women in the domestic and collective spheres is ignored by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies and thus excluded in the public political sphere. One explanation as to why women remain excluded in this domain, according to Rebecca Grant, is because they do not portray “the aggressive nature of men” and “the capacity for reason in men” (2). She explains, “women are not part of this process and are therefore excluded from the social and remain close to ‘nature’” (2). Not only does this portrayal create a narrative of women being passive; it simultaneously creates a narrative of women as backwards and uncivilized. Once this narrative is constructed it becomes a way for men to assert themselves as modern subjects in public political spheres. Danticat changes the way women have regularly been used by the mainstream patriarchy. She positions women not only in the private sphere with the imaginary reconstruction of Haiti, but also in the public political discourse by incorporating the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited and oppressed Haitian people through the narrative of the youngest and most fragile among them, Claire, a poor fisherman’s daughter. In this way, the author enters into the most unstable national dimension, that of Haiti’s economic and social conflicts and offers a solution to the reconstruction of the nation. The novel opens on the morning of Claire’s seventh birthday when a cutter and the fisherman onboard disappear amongst furious waves. Claire’s birthday comes to represent the death not only for what happened to Caleb, the fisherman, but also for the death of her biological mother; “Nozias had told her [Claire] what had happened on her first day on earth, that giving birth to her, her mother had died. So her birthday was also a day of death, and the freak wave and the dead fisherman proved that it had never ceased to be” (4). Danticat uses the symbol of death to represent women’s battleground in the public political sphere. Moreover, she uses it to

exemplify the hearts and minds of the underprivileged that have been silenced for years and wish for a revival, in other words, for a critical voice that will enable them to speak up. It must be noted however, that Haitians often identify death with regenerative rather than destructive powers.⁴ In this way, amidst the macabre of what Claire's birthday could represent is the symbol of life and hope of the oppressed. This symbolism is stressed in a climactic final scene when the waves of the sea carry the body of Caleb alive and the inhabitants of Ville Rose welcome him. From the beginning to almost the end of the novel, the reader is held in suspense, awaiting to see if Caleb is dead or alive. Throughout the text the reader sympathizes with the little girl and wishes for Caleb to be alive so she can finally be free of the symbolism of death. The narration thus plays on the idea of self-assertion for Claire and women in general. Danticat stands up to the desire of women to be treated as equal citizens. She legitimizes their role by allowing them to speak in the public political sphere.

Furthermore, Danticat addresses the relation of state and gender through the incorporation of another female character, Madame Gaëlle, an upper class woman who has a fabric shop in Ville Rose and who wants to adopt Claire in order to be her mother, a decision she made after having lost her own child in a motorcycle accident. Nozias, Claire's father, wants his daughter to have a better life than him, and for this reason decides to give her away to Gaëlle, a common practice among poor Haitian families. Unfortunately, in most cases, these children, known as *restavèk*, a Kweyol term whose literal meaning is "staying with," are used as unpaid servants to the wealthy. Apart from suffering physical and emotional abuse, these kids are denied a place in the family and an education. Their deep-seated feelings of betrayal, abandonment, and humiliation result in a sense of separation from self and from other people, which leads to the inability to love. *Claire of the Sea Light* acknowledges the importance of breaking this social destructive cycle. Henceforth, the novel suggests that Claire will not become Gaëlle's slave. "The fabric vendor [Gaëlle] groaned a warning, like an impossible word, a word she had no idea how to say. Why would you want your child to be my servant, a *restavèk*? I know she would never be that with you, Nozias said" (8). When Claire learns that her father will give her away, she escapes, and Gaëlle, among others, helps to look for her and even waits in Nozias' shack for her return. A crucial point of the excerpt is understanding the value of trust and most importantly of love. In *Talking Back* (1989), bell hooks declares that it is noteworthy "to concentrate on the politization of love . . . in a critical discussion where love can be understood as a powerful force that challenges and resists domination" (26). Embedded in the celebration of life is the empowerment of people through love regardless of sex, race, and class. Only when we love the other, the barriers of division are broken. Madame Gaëlle sees in Claire the daughter she lost in a motorcycle accident. Her commitment to adopt the little girl to love her as her own and the help she always offered to her family intensify and strengthen Danticat's desire to repair Haiti beginning with its youngest inhabitants. Because of its creative and liberating nature, Gaëlle's act of love leads us to interpret the narration as a healing process of the nation by giving a voice to the children of the poor.⁵ This voice embodies, as well, those kids who live without a father figure like the little Pamaxime Voltaire. His father Maxime Ardin, Jr., a

⁴ This view, which derives from the African concepts of life, believes that the dead body is disintegrated in nature and reborn in the community (Desmangles 71). In fact, in Vodou, the lord of the death, Gede, is often identified as the "Giver of Life" and the "Rising Sun" (115).

⁵ Other Haitian-American writers have raised awareness of the *restavec* issue in other ways, such as Jean-Robert Cadet, who after writing his autobiography entitled *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American* (1998) in which he describes his youth as a *restavec*, has founded a foundation in Cincinnati, Ohio with the purpose of bringing an end to child slavery in Haiti through the global awareness of the issue across the United States and around the world.

nineteen-year-old man, impregnated the maid of his father's house, and as a consequence, he was forced by the family to leave Haiti and live in Miami. After a decade, Max Junior comes to visit his father and meets his son for the first time. What Danticat requires us to reconsider is the whole basis of what it really means to be human. It involves the power to love as a conversion process. With Max Junior's return, he brings about a complete change in the relationship of his son with the world. We may translate this as a possibility for him to construct a better future for his son. According to bell hooks "as we work to be loving, to create a culture that celebrates life, that makes love possible, we move against dehumanization, against domination" (26). When people are objectified they are no longer fully human in social terms. In other words, they do not exist in society. With Claire and Pamaxime's storylines, Danticat asks Haitians to work to make up for the country's poor performance in loving one another, especially children who lack a mother or father figure and who, in some cases, end up as *restavèk*. Moving toward an understanding of this commitment it creates a narrative of a country being 'healed' and 'free.'

The adoptive mother-daughter relationship in the novel functions as a symbol of Haiti's future renewal. In an interview, Danticat reveals that she has written a lot about the mother-daughter relationship, but "from the perspective of being a daughter" (Mirabal 36). According to the author that practice has shifted because of her new role as a mother. "Being a mother has certainly deepened my interest in the future, in what I want to become and what kind of work I want to do, both in my writing and within a larger context" (36). *Claire of the Sea Light* is the first time that the author positions the maternal support—as seen in Gaëlle's decision to love Claire as her own child—as a positive effect on her work; unlike the plot of her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, for instance, which records primarily the mother-daughter relationship with tension and violence.⁶ With Gaëlle's character, the author focuses on the need for adequate mothering as a means to achieve a healthy social stability not only for Claire, but also for the nation. Understanding the idea of the maternal as not being solely a biological mother-daughter's affair, but a process of protecting the most vulnerable and fragile of all—the children—invites a reconstruction of a nation. As bell hooks points out in *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000), "It is important to critically examine females' feelings and to offer constructive strategies to develop a "healthy self-esteem and self-love" (31). What is of critical relevance in this quote is the fact that it illustrates Danticat's concern of mothering the nation in a positive way. First, Gaëlle's symbolism of protecting the Haitian children, through the adoption of Claire, shows a creative and constructive strategy to raise healthy individuals into productive citizens who contribute to the overall good of the country. Second, Gaëlle's action challenges patriarchal forces by pointing out that legal protection for children does not exist due to the corruption of men in power.

Within the relationship of mother-daughter we can also find a critique of Haiti's economic and social infrastructure through the creative and enigmatic symbols of the sea, the frogs, and the ghosts. In Caribbean literature, the sea has been the site of conflict because it represents the path by which people flee their countries for political and economic reasons and go to the United States. Haiti, for example, witnessed this exodus during the bloodthirsty dynastic Duvalier regime (1957-1986), where "the only safe place to hide was outside Haiti's borders" (Laguerre 26). Despite perilous crossings of the sea, Haitians risked their lives in the hope of being alive. The sea has also come to represent the psychological displacement suffered by those who emigrated and the grief of the family members who stay. The sea is the endless imaginary bridge that links Haitians with

⁶ This novel was published in 1995, "nine years after the end of the twenty-nine year Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti," an autocratic regime which imposed a lack of freedom of expression forcing many writers to go into exile "if they did not comply with rigid nationalist ideal or governmental rules and policies" (Clitandre 92).

their families abroad.⁷ The tension between life, death, and loss is at the heart of the sea. Interestingly, Danticat's work addresses these layers of affliction connoted by the sea through the lives of some characters, such as the disappearance of Caleb who goes missing at the beginning of the novel and does not reappear until the end. *Claire of the Sea Light* affords us a chance to also talk about the lack of jobs and the shortage of food. The sea is the site where fishermen risk their lives to make ends meet:

Lapèche, fishing, was no longer as profitable as it had once been . . . it was no longer like in the old days, when he and his friends would put a net in the water for an hour or so, then pull it out full of big, mature fish. Now they had to leave nets in for half a day or longer, and they would pull fish out of the sea that were so small that in the old days they would have been thrown back. (9)

Due to the lack of job security in Ville Rose, fishermen can no longer afford to fish only in season. As a result, the sea does not replenish itself and cannot offer jobs and food to the inhabitants. Haitians cannot depend on the government's capability to deliver jobs to them; they are forced to rely on nature like fishing. But even in the sea Haitians have a hard time making ends meet which further magnifies the poverty of the island. In *Haiti After the Earthquake* (2012), Paul Farmer offers an account of before the earthquake of January 2010, as well as a gloomy depiction of the aftermath. According to him, "even before the quake, Haiti, Latin America's first independent nation, was plagued by political, economical, and ecological fragilities" (23). Many historical adverse events—coups, invasions, military occupations, dictatorships, etc.—have contributed to worsen the internal problems of Haiti as a nation. The symbolism of the sea associated with death and loss serves as a point of departure for Danticat to show that the sea can reproduce itself through the character of Claire of the Sea Light. Her name carries the desire to sublimate death in a very special way. Claire's biological mother chose the name of "Sea Light" for her daughter one night when, being pregnant, she swam in the sea; "Surrounding her was a dazzling glow. It was as though her patch of the sea was being lit from below. From her perfectly round breasts down, she was in the middle of a school of tiny silver fish, which were ignoring her and feeding on gleaming specks of algae floating on the water's surface" (33).

In this passage, Danticat plays on the tensions between the two poles—the symbolic and contrast connotations about night and light—and asserts the fluidity and renewal of the sea by the abundance of the fish. In *The Repeating Island* (1996), Antonio Benítez-Rojo insists that "the Culture of the Caribbean . . . is not terrestrial but aquatic, a sinuous culture where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar" (11). This excerpt not only describes the versatile characteristics of the Caribbean Sea that resemble those portrayed about the sea's self-renewal in Danticat's novel; but also attributes the ability to change and how to counter obstacles to the Culture of the Caribbean. Water acquires a regenerative dimension and Claire personifies it. Given the fact that the islands of the Caribbean share histories of slavery, colonialism, and racial discrimination, etc.; through the sea the character of Claire comes to represent all the connections of this common background of the region as well as their fluidity. Other Haitian-born artists have portrayed the trope of the sea as a magical space of possibilities. For instance, the painter and sculptor, Edouard Duval-Carrié, had an exhibition two years ago

⁷ Danticat uses three Kweyol words, *lèt bò dlo*, that is "the other side of the water," to highlight the chaotic symbolism of both migration and death of the sea (*lèt bò dlo*, 268).

entitled “Imagined Landscapes” in the Pérez Art Museum in Miami.⁸ In his series of large-scale paintings and sculptures, he depicts the sea and tropical scenes by contrasting strong colors, black, and silver glitter. “Imagined Landscapes” presents the Caribbean at night, under a beautiful clear sky with floating figures that remind the viewer of the Haitian history, of its mystery, and of its symbolic connotations.

Another of Danticat’s symbolic representations that illustrates the tension between life, death, and loss is provided by the image of the frogs. Danticat insists on the imaginary construction of Haiti’s renewal through the participation of female characters because they function, as previously discussed, as creators of a better future. Years before Gaëlle decides to adopt Claire, she was expecting her own child. At the time she was six months pregnant, she witnessed the death of hundreds of frogs due to drastic climate change and blistering temperatures. Every morning, she performed a burial ritual with the purpose to return the dead frogs to earth itself for rebirth:

Rubbing her belly, she [Gaëlle] crouched down to pick up the frogs, then dropped them in the chamber pot. As she walked toward the base of a particular almond tree, where every day in the last week she’d performed a wordless burial for a handful of frog skins she cradled the pot against her stomach. Most mornings when she’d reached the brook, she’d hoped to find at least one live frog, but carrying the dead frogs away made her feel useful, as though she were performing a crucial service that no one else would or could do . . . She dug into the dew-softened dirt with her fingers, making a hole large enough to bury the frogs under the almond tree . . . (43)

In Vodou, death rituals are performed to return the “two ‘compartments’ of a person’s spirit,” as Leslie Desmangles puts it, to Ginen and to the community itself for rebirth (68).⁹ Ginen is the land of the ancestors, often believed to reside “under the sea,” “under the bed of a local river,” or “in the bowels of the earth” (69). The parallel of the vodou death ritual with the excerpt is when Gaëlle chooses to constantly bury dead frogs under the almond tree for their rebirth. Her continuous observance suggests a desire for the continuation of a normal cycle where life replaces death through the earth. Moreover, frogs are not the only element of the environmental crisis that is dying, but also the topsoil in response to the dense rain, the swelling rivers, the lack of trees and the land erosion. With the everyday burial rituals, Gaëlle plays the role of a guardian concerned with nature/ecology who wants to protect the land of Ville Rose from deforestation. The generative symbolism of the land—just like the sea—marks its constant need for renewal and stresses the importance of creative ways to reverse Haiti’s destruction. As the reader can perceive in the passage, Gaëlle uses her own body to reinstate life—like the renewal feature of the earth—where death resides: “she cradled the pot [of dead frogs] against her stomach,” that is against her belly where a seed of her own life is blooming and growing. This action is also stressed by the fact that after a doctor’s visit, she learned that her baby would probably die due to a cyst growing in her chest and down her entire spine that was detected in a sonogram. Gaëlle opts to swallow a dead frog to let her body decide her baby’s destiny. “Her body tried to resist the koki in her throat, her gullet forcing it back upward, nearly making her vomit. She took another vigorous gulp and forced it down farther until she could almost feel it land . . . [h]ere they were, she thought . . . [t]wo types

⁸ The exhibition took place from March 13 to Aug. 31, 2014.

⁹ The two parts of the spirit, emphasizes Desmangles, coexist without polarity: “the two parts constitute an organic process, a dynamism which comprises divinity, authority, influence, morality, and wisdom” (68).

of animals were now inside of her . . . her daughter . . . and now this frog. Let them fight it out and see who will win” (59). Surprisingly, Gaëlle gives birth to a healthy baby with no sign of a cyst. Her action provides a courageous and clearly unconventional behavior for pregnant women who are expected by social norms to behave in certain ways. It also provides the base by which to establish the maternal as a vertical power relation to nature. In other words, by being part of nature—through the swallowing of a dead frog—Gaëlle’s body acquires the generative symbolism of the land and gives birth to a healthy baby.

The importance of renewal of the black female body imagined by Danticat is a common theme illustrated by female writers of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora. According to Ogundipe-Leslie, Afro-Caribbean diasporic feminism must “include issues around the woman’s body, her person, her immediate family, her society, her nation, her continent and their locations within the international economic order because those realities in the international economic order determine African [and Afro-Caribbean] politics and impact on the women” (228). This quote stresses the importance of talking about women dealing with more personal issues, such as her body, in order to restore their confidence in society. Gaëlle’s generative symbolism implies a performative and creative participation in the discourse of the nation. With Gaëlle’s action, Danticat provides a key element—that of a critical self-consciousness and reconciliation of the female body—to the dialogue relevant to women of African descent. As Myriam J.A. Chancy has written in her book *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in exile* (1997), it is in exile that Caribbean women become aware of “the limitations imposed upon the body” and “speak out against their marginalization in a culture which is not theirs and which is not likely to punish for speaking out . . .” (5). In fact, it is in exile that Caribbean women feel less threatened because they are likely not to be punished—unlike living in their own countries with patriarchal laws—for speaking their mind.

By having the freedom to speak up, Caribbean women can “politicize their discourse and be heard in more than one culture simultaneously . . .” (5). Danticat’s discourse of renewal of Gaëlle’s body through the swallowing of a dead frog challenges Haiti’s government and local institutions for not implementing better health care programs for women, especially during their pregnancy. The doctor tells her there is nothing he can do, so she takes matter into her own hands. Furthermore, it is as if Danticat is demonstrating to us that Haitians must be active participants in the country’s recovery and rebirth and less dependent on outside influences. Also, they must not accept what they have been told by these influences. The parallel of the vodou death ritual with Gaëlle’s burial ceremony suggest the need to latch on to Haiti’s roots. *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990) is one of the major collections of essays on Caribbean Women Writers. Its introduction, written by editing scholars Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, focuses on the political responsibility of women writers and critics in the third world to end the exploitation and oppression of women in and outside of the Caribbean region. Here, Fido evokes the need to develop a Caribbean female debate: “The point is still that male writers in the Caribbean have a tradition of debate, women need to develop one consciously now” (xi). It must be noted, however, that there is still little work as a whole about a Pan-Caribbean women’s literature published on the topic of renewal of female bodies in society.

The female-centered presence in *Claire of the Sea Light* is successful in weaving feminism with other ideological and political formulations that have guided Caribbean thought, such as resistance and struggle at the economic and social levels to assert people’s freedom. Danticat’s use of the two symbols of nature, the sea and the frogs, helps serve as a transition in the narrative to explore a deeper social conflict in Haitian society. Indeed, the novel addresses another obscure

economic and social disparity through the symbolic use of ghosts. Gaëlle's husband, Laurent Lavaud, is not able to be next to his wife while she was giving birth to baby Rose because he is a victim in a shooting and killed at Radio Zòrèy which he used to sponsor; "The shots had rung out as Laurent was leaving the station, and he was struck by three bullets to the heart and died on the spot . . . people immediately began to declare that his shooting was related to a new, urgent plague in Ville Rose, one that was even deadlier than the frogs: gangs" (62). Ghosts or *chimères* is a Kweyol term that refers to young black men from the ghetto who use violent means to intimidate political opponents. They represent problems such as "policing, drugs, gentrification; lack of jobs, resources, and education; incarceration and gang warfare" (Mennel 156). These gangs of youth frighten subjects who try to avoid involvement in criminal activity but whose lives, whether as a willing participant or being reluctantly drawn into, end in tragic ways. This chaotic and gloomy description of life in some neighborhoods can be seen in the third section of *Claire of the Sea Light* through the character of Bernard Dorien. He lives in Cité Pendu, a midlevel slum, an impoverished and dangerous extension of Ville Rose, known as "the region's first circle of hell" (63). Bernard realizes the situation of the ghosts and tries to have a radio program in order to offer them a voice: "We can't move forward as a neighborhood, as a town, or as a country . . . unless we know what makes these men cry. They cannot remain chimè, chimeras, phantoms, or ghosts to us forever. His commentary segment at Radio Zòrèy, if he were ever given one, would be called Chimé, or Ghosts" (68). The programmers never gave him such a platform. Later on, the head of the gang, Tiye, blamed Bernard as the mastermind of a crime—the murder of Laurent Lavaud—he did not commit.

After Bernard is tortured, Tiye decides to change his testimony, which puts him out of the prison. Outside of prison, Bernard is murdered, presumably in his sleep as his body is found in his bed with three bullets to the heart. This last detail is eerily similar to Laurent Lavaud's murder. Though little information is given about Bernard's death, we can assume that he is another victim of the ghosts. This reminds the reader of the legacy of the Duvalier's regime, the Tonton Macoutes, the nefarious network of informers, intimidators, and violent executors. In calling into question the situation of the ghosts, Danticat is revisiting, in her narrative, Haiti's past, and presents a critique of the current economic and social complexities of forgotten and silenced national subjects who commit crimes according to their whims. Unlike the natural elements of the sea and the frogs, the narrative about the ghosts does not show overtly a gesture of change. It is a political expression that challenges politics of domination. It is a critique of the successive political crises, coup d'états, uprisings, and revolts that have characterized the cyclical instability of the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere since its independence from the French regime in 1804. Nevertheless, with the character of Claire at the core of all the interconnected lives in the small town of Ville Rose, the use of the ghosts also makes reference to the unstable political situation of the islands in the Caribbean, which shows a constant need to resist enslavement, murder, and oppression throughout its history, and the need to eradicate it. For example, by continuing their everyday actions Bernard and his family refuse to be intimidated. The simple act of resistance demonstrates the desire to move forward despite the threats.

Finally, when viewed as a whole, with Claire's return, Edwidge Danticat's literary creation captures the essence of what has been lost and needs to be recovered in Haiti through the sparkling and innocent eyes of a seven-year-old girl. The author focuses on the lens of a little girl to weave the narration because children in any society represent the future. The first priority should be the nurturing and education of their lives. When Claire goes missing many people in the small town of Ville Rose and its surroundings start looking for her. There is a growing sense of anxiety in the

narration as to whether Claire will return or not. The author emphasizes the power of love toward children to heal and transform the nation. The novel suggests that Claire will not become Gaëlle's *restavèk*. With this the author breaks the harmful cycle of children becoming slaves. With love, children grow, like the seed on the ground, to become responsible members of the community. A society without love eventually breeds violence and gangs that poison the streets with drugs and crime. Once this occurs, change is almost impossible. Ghosts or *chimères* give evidence to what happens to those kids who are forgotten by society. This symbol acts like a double-edged sword, echoing the common history of violence in the Caribbean basin while at the same time calling to end it.

What Danticat's novel reveals is the reformulation of the nation as feminine by positioning her biological mother and her adoptive mother as the sources for nurturing and inspiration for the seven-year-old girl. Here, women complement each other in creative and healthy ways. Women's role goes beyond dealing with bearing and rearing children. They are in charge of protecting and defending Claire and give hope not only to her, but also to the whole nation. In fact, Danticat portrays Haiti as a space with regenerative and liberating rather than solely destructive powers. The reader is able to see the country's capacity to reproduce itself through the symbols of the sea and the frogs. This entails the notion of a female guardian interested in the conservation of natural resources, such as Madame Gaëlle, to preserve life. This assertion of feminist identity, along with the concept of ecology, functions to establish Haiti as feminine, while at the same time, allows repairing the psychic damage of patriarchal domination against the bodies of women. The use of female protagonists acts as a liberating force to traditional gender division in society. Women must play an active role in rebuilding Haiti and in moving the Caribbean forward as a region. Danticat's position of women in the private sphere does not exclude them from the public political discourse.

Like a painter, Danticat uses real models for her creations. Indeed, she rethinks the nation by articulating the complex and oppressive realities of Haitian society through narratives of the day-to-day experiences of Haitian individuals, such as, the harsh lives of fishermen, and the life of a little girl who loses her mother at birth. As the author herself points out, "I do not think of my characters as archetypes. I think of them as people, individuals like you and me" (Adisa 349). Danticat attempts to give hope to the oppressed Haitian people by freeing the narrative from the atavistic idea of social and class differences as a way of conceiving a new imagined Haitian nation. According to the author, "for a lot of poor families, the men are abroad or society has crushed them and they're absent for one reason or another" (348). The women have become "the middle pillars of society" (348). It is in this way, that Danticat shapes her novel by positioning the youngest woman of all, Claire of the Sea Light, at the core of it illustrating that it is women and their love that will transform Haiti and bring about a better future for the country.

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