Living with ‘Doubled’ ‘Rememories’: Tracing Black Matrilineal Trauma from White Supremacist and Black Patriarchal Origins

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Abstract

Edwidge Danticat explores the limits and fortitude of the black female body in relation to invasive trauma in ‘Breath, Eyes, Memory’. This dissertation will argue that such trauma is initiated by violent patriarchal forces that function to enslave, silence and commodify the female form. The dominion of these forces is felt most in the fact that, once female characters are raped, beaten and debased, there is no accountability for the male perpetrators who remain physically absent but present in their lasting impression on the female bodies. Trauma within the novels, therefore, is depicted as a predominantly feminine state that festers and persists on the mother body before manifesting on the daughter body. The mother-daughter relationship that Danticat portrays enters a cycle of familial suffering centred on three main concerns: how trauma binds to the black female body; how such an experience reverberates back onto mother and daughter bodies and ultimately, how bodily healing can only be sought after via female, but most significantly, matrilineal interdependence.

Keywords: matrilineal, trauma, rape, testing, patriarchy, reclamation

The work of Edwidge Danticat cannot escape the trap of trauma once inscribed on the black female body. The main issue questioned then is how Danticat employs her female characters in Breath, Eyes, Memory to voice their subjection and resist the persistence of hegemonic constructions (rape) that exist to consume their bodies. To distinguish between female subjection and resistance, I refer to Carole Boyce Davies’ theory of “marking” and “naming”: “[m]arking is the product of abuse and is linked to societal inscriptions on the body of the “other.” Naming (or re-marking) has to do with redefinition’ (Boyce-Davies 1994, 138). Her literature denotes black female bodily abuse as inherent to oppressive social structures that “other” these females to justify violence against them. Davies also shares a vision of ‘redefinition’ which becomes synonymous with Danticat’s creation of reclamation spaces, inviting the potential for transformation despite gendered and sexual oppression. Primarily, Danticat’s character, Martine, is figured as a rape victim who bears her family’s initial scars in a seemingly unbreakable cycle of painful, resurfaced memories. As Zora Neale Hurston writes, ‘[d]e nigger woman is de mule uh de world’ (Hurston 1986, 29) and Danticat revives this sentiment by continuing to deconstruct the ubiquitous black female trauma struggle. A point of progression for this trauma narrative, and the one that I will follow in this dissertation, is the idea that physical and psychological trauma festers on the bodies of Martine and her daughter, Sophie. Motherhood is “marked” by a male attacker and cannot be contained to a single body in a society commanded by a misogynistic dictatorship. As a

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result, female reactions to trauma are exhibited viscerally and inherited maternally when men reject accountability.

By addressing the sensitivity of rape, Danticat communicates the taint of painful memories on the present. This ultimately focuses on the trauma of the event rather than the event itself. Danticat’s novel title is testament to how ‘a memory never really leaves you unless you have gone through it and confronted it’ (Rothstein 1987). This hints at the dominance of memories as characters embark on fragmented mother-daughter relationships terrorised by the ghost of abuse. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is gripped by the continuation of savage but sanctioned patriarchy which denies agency to the female form when motherhood is forced through Martine’s rape. From here, she must battle the paradox of raising her daughter in a world where she is destined to fall victim to regurgitated sexist attitudes.

### Rape and Reverberation: The Transferral of Haitian Female Body Violation

The female bodies in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* are wrecked by recurring sexual trauma wounds. The tortured mother-daughter dynamic between Sophie and Martine Caco evokes a persistent anguish originating from Martine’s rape and Sophie’s conception. Danticat represents a world of patriarchal brutality through Sophie’s subjection to the archaic Haitian practice of virginity testing. This involves the ‘humiliation’ (Danticat 1994, 123) of a mother ‘put[ting] her finger in [her daughter’s] very private parts [to] see if it would go inside’ (60). Danticat writes with a political awareness of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier’s dictatorship upheld by their military force, the “Tonton Macoutes”. With them, the Duvaliers aimed to ‘destroy [the] gender identity’ of women they ‘barely recognized as equal citizens’ through ‘forms of political violence, in particular, rape’ (Charles 1995, 135, 137). This context illustrates how Martine is also stripped of her sexual identity. From adolescence, she is imprisoned within a state endorsed hyper-masculinity so her fears for Sophie’s sexuality are predominantly shaped by this. In this chapter, I will explore Martine’s rape and impregnation as a product of patriarchal entitlement that imprisons her within a trauma space of nightmares. As Sophie’s sexual maturity runs alongside this, Martine’s trauma-induced fear is projected onto her to prevent a repeat of her history. Though Sophie’s virginity is upheld until marriage, she still suffers from body issues because Martine tests her. The key argument here is that trauma, initially at least, cannot be contained within Martine’s unhealed body and so affects Sophie via another form of rape. Only when both women understand that their suffering is shared can they seek to heal.

Sophie is destined to a mother line of trauma because she signifies a ‘living memory of the past’ (56), a physical presence made responsible for her mother’s bodily dispossession in the absence of her rapist father. In adulthood, Sophie attempts to understand the origins of her mother’s trauma:

> [m]y father might have been a Macoute…He kept pounding her…made her keep her face in the dirt, threatening to shoot her if she looked up. (139)

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1 Further references to this text are put in parentheses in the text.
The attack is sensationalised by the ‘pounding’ and ‘threatening’ as the Macoute releases and imprints himself onto her body. The subsequent statement ‘the Macoutes, they did not hide’ (139) conveys the injustice that Martine belongs to a sadistic male gaze that revels in harming women. Their shamelessness confirms that, in this society, the central narrative endorses male superiority and female commodification and gives rise to testing though virginity is actively disregarded by these men. The rape stains Martine with the memory of her attacker and her pregnancy writes him into a disconcerting absence and presence on and in her body. A twelve-year-old Sophie is introduced to her mother’s pain through the story of her conception: ‘I never saw his face. He had it covered...I think it is true what they say. A child out of wedlock always looks like its father’ (61). Both female bodies are claimed as the Macoute hints, but denies confirmation, to whether Sophie looks like him. His absence shares trauma between the women and Sophie carries her first “mark” based on what ‘they say’. As maternity is easier to determine than paternity, rape is reinforced as an extreme form of patriarchy that festers on and reserves shame solely for Martine’s body. The Macoute sadistically asserts himself over her by fulfilling cultural superstitions through the image of a ‘soiled’ (156) woman despite his responsibility.

Carole Sweeney theorizes the persistence of violent masculinity through her examination of rape. She writes

[i]n the act of rape, women exist as holes or spaces that become meaningful only when filled by the phallus, not always in the form of a penis; whether the probing and silencing thrust of the conquering phallus or that of the slave owner, the colonizer, or the Tonton Macoute, it has been the ill-fortune of Haitian women to have their voices stopped by the violation of their genitals. (Sweeney 2007, 59)

By characterising Martine synecdochally as a ‘hole’, her trauma is crudely focused on an area that is later mirrored by Sophie’s genital mutilation and can only be destroyed by the masculine phallus. She is now, like many other women, a product of her abuse, exemplified by the way the Macoute views her: as genitalia. As the rape claimed her virginity, the ‘hole’ would have lay dormant, free from the taint of forced sexuality. Afterwards, however, she is left with the painful awareness of this ‘hole’ as her sexuality that has been eternally traumatised. This reduction of her body down to voiceless genitalia speaks to the male capacity to fragment the female form, keeping it contained within an enduring state of suffering. The Macoutes prey freely and destructively while Martine is left to deal with self-loathing and the desire to traverse a horror created by them. Her desperation manifests physically through self-harm. The act of ‘bit[ing] off pieces of her own flesh when she had nightmares’ (139) emphasises another instance where Martine is denied agency over her mind and body by an aggressive patriarchal force. Even without being physically present, the Macoute stakes a claim, ensuring that her ‘nightmares’ inhabit both conscious and subconscious spheres and that any further aftershock reverberates back onto Martine’s victim body. In the time that follows, Martine is ‘terrified’ (139) and continues to perceive her body as an irreconcilable wreck. To confront this image, Martine attempts ‘to kill herself’ (139) several times during Sophie’s infancy. These self-destructive tendencies become one of the only outlets, albeit controversial, through which she tries to find relief from the perpetual
burden of living as a rape survivor. She cannot kill the perpetrator so she strikes at the forced memory of him though this problematically incorporates Sophie.

With Joseph as Sophie’s love interest, Martine’s distrust of men resurfaces as she views him as an unknown ‘vagabond’ (78) who threatens Sophie’s virginity. This perceived invasion occurs after Sophie has moved to New York, so Joseph’s romantic interest in her can be viewed as a breach of the safe, essentially male-free, space that Martine creates by retrieving Sophie from the country of her rape. As Sophie tries say that she trusts him, Martine silences her, saying, “[y]ou tell me you trust him...you are already lost” (78). Ironically, Martine fails to see that she is too ‘lost’ in her raw experience to remain impartial. With the prospect of male honourability obscured by rape, Martine’s trauma is projected onto Sophie’s virgin body by the threat of the testing. This lays the foundations for Sophie’s later disfigurement when she forcefully breaks her hymen to stop it. Martine repeats the chilling phrase “‘[t]here are secrets you can’t keep”’ (84, 85) during the testing. Here, she alludes to her pain-ridden belief that men exist solely to objectify women so assumes responsibility for Sophie’s sexual function (consensual or otherwise) in compensation, moulding her body into a self-despising form to match her own. Through this, she abuses arguably the most intrinsic states of being a woman, her motherhood, and draws on family honour to enforce Sophie’s chastity. The direct address of ‘you’ could be a comment on the female gender in general as their social inability to regulate male sexuality means that they must compensate by limiting their own. Defiant against Sophie’s blossoming maturity and sexual potential, Martine succumbs to a sense of duty to preserve her virginity and protect Sophie in a way that she was not. Danticat has always been eager to convey that virginity testing ‘is not necessarily representative and should not be read as a typical Haitian family practice’ (Bouson 2010, 71). With this context, Martine’s adoption of a minority practice embodies the dread that she feels about history repeating itself. Trauma takes a full circle here and, due to the actions of a single male, it is Sophie’s body who is punished by the testing and Martine’s paranoia. The simultaneous absence and presence of the male figure is significant here as it can be assumed that Sophie will never know her father. Nevertheless, he denies her bodily and sexual autonomy by leaving her with a mother who tests her because she cannot stave off a past that constantly feeds into the present.

Sophie represents an analogue of her mother line because she is tested in the same way as Martine and her Tante Atie before her. As women, they are framed by a proverbial narrative, ‘Haitian men, they insist that their women are virgins and have their ten fingers’ (151) and carry the injustice of pardoned male sexuality. As Sophie’s mother, it is Martine’s job to perpetuate the patriarchal system and ‘keep her pure’ (60) for the sake of cultural and familial honour. To mediate the impact, Martine tells stories to Sophie to remind her of their oscillating bond of love and pain:

As she tested me, to distract me, she told me, “The Marassas were two inseparable lovers. They were the same person, duplicated in two...the love between a mother and daughter is deeper than the sea. You would leave me for an old man who you didn’t know the year before. You and I we could be like Marassas. You are giving up a lifetime with me.” (84-5)
The affinity that Martine feels towards her daughter is intensified by a protective maternal instinct, conveyed through her desire to keep Sophie close as the ‘same person, duplicated in two’. Her desperation is distorted into something disturbing as it reiterates the idea that, through a matrilineal bond that is ‘deeper than the sea’, Martine’s bodily trauma becomes Sophie’s. By attempting to demonise Joseph as an ‘old man’ and relative stranger, it is Martine who plays the role of abuser by forcing her suspicions onto Sophie and taking away her agency. Despite being painfully familiar with non-consensual violation, she still ‘performs a (state-sanctioned) rape of sorts on her daughter as she re-appropriates and re-approximates torture’ because she cannot deter Joseph’s sexuality (Alexander 2011, 376). The ‘torture’ is re-appropriated because Martine is unable to confront her attacker but can confront Sophie’s sexuality. Sophie therefore becomes embroiled within unresolved trauma which functions as a perverse kind of family heirloom that simultaneously binds and divides the Caco women with the same pain.

In an analysis of storytelling within the novel, Francis writes that it acts as a ‘distraction…suggests to Sophie that the focus should be on the moral of the story, rather than the bodily violation’ (Francis 2004, 83). Harbawi alternatively discusses Danticat’s proficiency as a storyteller about women which parallels with Martine as a storyteller. She argues that

> takes by storm the hitherto impregnable citadel of a delegitimising official male narrative so as to resuscitate an occluded female consciousness from the silence where it has long been silted. (Harbawi 2008, 38)

Both critics seem to agree that, in this context, storytelling harbours feminist undertones that encourage female solidarity. The ‘moral’ of the *Marassas* story ‘distract[s]’ Sophie from the physicality of her abuse by drawing her out of a world where her mother abuses her and re-situating them as a united pair against the original male threat. Similarly, Harbawi claims that this fiction gives rise to the silenced female voice and body out of a monopolized male social narrative. Within both critical analyses, Harbawi’s especially, the female abuse that wrecks Sophie’s body is somewhat excluded. However, it is her existence that epitomises the unapologetic force of male sexuality. Even without being sexually active, her body is still punished by the pre-emptive strategy of the testing. Ironically, the silence that Harbawi envisages the women as being ‘resuscitate[d]’ from is forced back onto Sophie’s body through the testing. This later reverberates back on to her through an inability to be sexually intimate with her husband. Tragically, in Martine’s efforts to protect Sophie, she inflicts wounds of her own, paradoxically enacting the same trauma that she sought to prevent.

The devastating cycle of reverberation climaxes when Sophie, living under the double burden of hers and Martine’s abuse, finds her only escape from the self-‘hate’ (123) that the testing evokes by harming herself. Filtered down to another generation, trauma reattaches itself to the female body as a physical wound that imprisons Sophie within the violent memory of her desperate actions. In accordance with the matrilineal aspects of the trauma, she mirrors Martine’s tendency towards self-deformation:

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[m]y flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet…It was gone, the veil that always held my mother’s finger back.

My body was quivering when my mother walked into my room to test me. My legs were limp when she drew them aside. I ached so hard I could barely move. Finally I failed the test. (88)

Sophie’s genital mutilation is a reworking of the violence that was forced onto Martine during her rape. Her trauma reveals itself through what I would call the ghost of accumulated trauma as the damage brought on by the rapist is embodied by the phallic pestle while the ‘ripp[ing]’ of Sophie’s ‘veil’ is a direct affront to Martine’s intrusion on her body. Her pain is made palpable by her ‘quivering’ body and ‘limp’ legs but this is overshadowed by her greatest achievement of ‘fail[ing] the test’. This graphic scene reiterates the seeming inevitability of female bodily sacrifice. It is particularly interesting that Sophie chooses to defy the test and her mother through such destructive means rather than choosing the less painful alternative of having sex with Joseph. By personally breaking her hymen, Sophie suggests that, to free her body from one trauma, she must undergo the most extreme form of another. She soon learns, however, that her suffering does not end there and so, she becomes a victim of reverberated trauma when sex with her husband becomes another “mark” synonymous with testing and genital tearing.

The second of Sophie’s sexual wounds is initiated by Joseph’s ‘sexually bullying’ (Counihan 2012, 49). This is motivated by a preoccupation with his sexual desire which trivialises her anguish. Unable to experience testing, he is ignorant to how Sophie’s wounds replay into her present. When she talks of the loss of her virginity as a ‘duty’ (130) and the ‘very first painful time [that] gave [them] the child’ (130), she becomes an ‘instrument of production’ and is essentially denied choice as Martine was (Rousseau 2012, 452). Fixated on her sexual function rather than her emotions, Joseph flippantly tries to establish sex as a pleasurable act. When he assumes that the ghost of the testing can be repressed with an ‘aphrodisiac’ (196), Sophie retaliates and says,

“I don’t need an aphrodisiac. I need a little more understanding.”

“I do understand. You are usually reluctant to start, but after a while you give in. You seem to enjoy it.” (196)

Her desire for ‘understanding’ shows that her body is trapped within his superficial gaze and he excuses himself from having to view it as anything other than a sexual, reproductive vessel. In many ways, Joseph becomes to Sophie what Martine’s rapist is to her as ‘his desire for [her] is oppressive and predatory…His sexual initiative encroaches on Sophie’s physical autonomy’ (Counihan 2012, 49). When he legitimises his advances with the assurance that she eventually ‘give[s] in. [She] seem[s] to enjoy it’, he demonstrates that even supposedly sexually moral men who become husbands have the capacity to initiate and prolong trauma. Even within the ideal of married life, Sophie cannot escape trauma as she passes from one man (a rapist “father”) whose attack on Martine becomes the genesis of her testing and self-mutilation, to another (a sexually dominant husband) whose libidinousness re-opens her wounds. Sophie must therefore co-exist with her accumulated trauma by ‘learn[ing] to double while being tested’ (155). She is unable to defeat Martine’s demons and potentially overcome

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the testing so she accepts her abuse as part of the female condition tainted by hyper-masculinity. Her admission that ‘whenever Joseph and I were together, I doubled’ (156) enacts a return of Martine’s fears to Sophie’s mind and body. Just as Martine associates men with sexual violence, she is responsible for Sophie regarding all vaginal penetration as one and the same so Joseph reaffirms rather than alleviates her suffering. When sex revives the testing and pestle wound, Sophie transports herself to ‘somewhere else’ (200) through doubling. In this safe space, she can ‘console’ (200) Martine from her nightmares and realign them as ‘twins, in spirit, Marassas’ (200). Regardless of Martine’s infliction of trauma, Sophie recognises that ‘if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt too’ (203) and ultimately, Danticat introduces the prospect of healing because Sophie understands the confluence of maternal suffering. The lack of such allowances for Joseph frames hyper-masculinity as the female enemy. Rather than mother and daughter opposing each other, the matrilineal spiritual bond overpowers Joseph ‘pull[ing] [Sophie’s] body’ (200) to initiate sex. Although her wound is penetrated and Martine’s nightmares persevere, they banish the haunt of the unsullied male to relieve their shared agony, even if only temporarily.

Suicide and Survival: Reclaiming the Individual Black Female Body?

Female body reclamation occurs only when Danticat offers her females relief from regenerated suffering. Reclamation, like trauma, becomes an exclusively female concern when males refuse responsibility. This relies on mothers and daughters understanding and supporting one another to perform a kind of re-birthing that absolves them of past abuses of motherhood. In this chapter, I will examine the aftermath of black female trauma as a state from which victims can salvage a level of self-ownership that exhumes them from the matrilineal cycle of violation. However, partially obscuring their metamorphosis is the underlying injustice that their bodies will always carry scars of their past. Armed with, and perhaps burdened by this understanding, Sophie and Martine seek counsel as they strive for transformation. Their newfound capacity to heal enables them to purge themselves of their victim status through survival or, tragically, suicide. Regardless, both become legitimate forms of reclamation commanded by females.

Whether she chooses to ‘g[i]ve into her pain’ (234) and be defined by her scars or not, Sophie understands that her life is a product of abuse. As a result, bodily healing is not a wholly attainable prospect but develops partially as a communal duty aimed at defying the oppressor and elevating black females out of abuse. In her essay, Farah Jasmine Griffin gestures towards the remanence of trauma wounds. She writes:

> the body never can return to a pre-scarred state. It is not a matter of getting back to a “truer” self, but instead of claiming the body, scars and all – in a narrative of love and care. As such, healing does not deny the construction of bodies, but instead suggests that they can be constructed differently, for different ends. (Griffin 1996, 524)

Vanessa D. Dickerson’s critique works in dialogue with Griffin as she reflects upon the antithesis of the black female ‘pre-scarred state’. She notes that ‘[f]or all the wealth [the black female body] provides, the body is not saved. Neither precious nor privileged, it is
problematic’ (Dickerson 2001, 195). Continuously subscribed to a narrative of rape and defilement, the black female merely becomes commodified ‘flesh subject to the most destructive legacies of all – self-hatred’ (ibid, 211). After facing dehumanizing male practices, the Cacos must endure enforced self-loathing. Griffin’s celebration of ‘a narrative of love and care’ therefore shows the significance of black female communities in constructing a rehabilitated identity for other black women. The unattainability of a ‘pre-scarred state’ respects the severity and permanence of Sophie’s pestle wound and Martine’s rape, and does not challenge the dominion of the Macoutes. As Martine ‘never g[ives]…[the rapist] a face’ (209), Danticat cannot offer an idealised account of finding complete peace by punishing culprits. Realistically, trauma alters and binds to the women so there is nothing “truer” than the figures born out of darkness, namely Sophie ‘a little closer to being free’ (203) and Martine liberating herself through suicide. This shred of hope transforms Sophie into a figure undoubtedly ‘broken’ (203) but ultimately self-possessed. This sets a precedent for perpetuating a new cycle of self-worth that forges restorative matrilineal ties in place of inherited trauma.

Self-hatred follows Sophie through early adulthood, linking the testing and marital sex. When she tries to end the testing with the pestle, she becomes sexually incapacitated by the resonance between both phalluses. As the breaking of her hymen is necessary to stop the testing, it becomes her first reclamation act. Though pivotal for her, Joseph cannot ‘understand why [she] ha[s] done something so horrible’ (130) because, as a male, he is barred from the private, female world of testing. He therefore cannot recognise what Sophie has had to learn quickly as a woman: pain must compensate for pain and Sophie’s holds a deeper, generational meaning. By treating the breaking of her hymen as symbolic of ‘breaking manacles, an act of freedom’ (130), she counteracts her self-revulsion and attempts to use it as an escape from bodily restriction. The secret she keeps by denying Joseph an explanation preserves her ‘freedom’ as a self-claimed female issue though this is short-lived. Her belief that sex is ‘painful’ (123) and ‘evil’ (123) reminds the narrative of her problematic course to self-possession. Her experience originates from a cycle of male-led female suffering and her fears about sex stem from another female wound beyond her control. Growing up with a rape victim and abuser as a mother dissociates Sophie from perceptions of sex as healthy and pleasurable. Consequently, she faces the challenge of reimagining her body as a vessel that attracts more than abuse. This is consistently problematised because her genitals are either tested or coerced into sex which reinforces that her body is not her own. Danticat thus presents reclamation as a state that exists only when Sophie is able to remember then detach from trauma using her sexual phobia group.

Danticat situates women-led groups as healing communities of shared experiences. She achieves this by figuring male trauma sources as memories within a feminine discourse. Sophie’s group mantras, including “[w]e are beautiful women with strong bodies” (202) reinstate their self-worth. An element of comfort and reassurance is diffused by the collective ‘we’, reminding the women of the value of journeying through their ‘distress’ (202) together. Black feminism considers the image of the “Strong Black Woman” which glorifies black women resisting subjugation. A theoretical framework has since emerged known as The Strong Black Woman Collective proposing that ‘Black women construct strength through
communal communication practices by imbuing their assembled voices with might and fortitude’ (Davis 2015, 20). Davis outlines call and response as a method that encourages group members to take an active role in their reclamation whilst having an initial reference source (therapist) to establish a positive self-view. The final sentiment, ‘“[s]ince I have survived this, I can survive anything”’ (202) is the most striking as it represents the crux of the communal reclamation thesis. Evidently, the women are called together to focus on their own journey but the echoes around the room reinforce group support. Though Sophie hears her ‘voice rise above the others’ (202), it is essential to note that her recovery has been non-existent without the group. Thus, it can be said that ‘group communication informs a process of strength construction’ as Sophie turns group strength into her own. (ibid, 27)

Martine’s suicide reflects how some sexual wounds are too critical to survive. She is undeniably affected by the rape and her own testing and must ‘live both every day’ (170) in adherence to a trauma narrative. Rather than draw the recovering Sophie or her unborn child into her darkness, she disrupts their history of matrilineal trauma by using suicide as an endpoint – the ultimate act that affects her body exclusively. In her singularity, she claims the decision to abort her baby as ‘supremely’ (189) hers which leads to her ‘stabb[ing] her stomach…seventeen times’ (224). She disregards people who could oppose her decision, namely the baby’s father, Marc, who ‘want[s] [the] child’ (224). Finally, she claims autonomy over her body and pregnancy, which she was deprived of in adolescence, thus her suffering ceases. At this point, the women undergo a spiritual role reversal with Sophie as a maternal figure who affirms peace for Martine and guides her to redemption. She boldly chooses the ‘most crimson’ (227) suit for Martine to be buried in that she admits is ‘too loud…for a burial’ (227) and will make her ‘look like a jezebel’ (227) but satisfies Sophie because she ‘chose it’ (227). Marc’s effort to assert his unwelcome male will by saying ‘“Saint Peter won’t allow your mother into Heaven in that”’ (228) is disregarded by Sophie who negotiates her mother’s ideal destiny: ‘“she is going to be a star. She’s going to be a butterfly or a lark…She’s going to be free”’ (228). Transformation is therefore key to exacting post-abuse self-possession because Sophie defies convention with her choice. In doing so, she proposes to free Martine from the battered constraints of her human form so that she can be reborn as a liberated creature of flight rising above her earth-bound torment. The continued maternal bond overwrites pain with strength when Sophie visits the cane field where Martine was raped. The cathartic ‘beating’ (233) and ‘pounding’ (233) of the cane stalk echoes Martine’s attack and allows Sophie to do her mother a final service by ‘say[ing] good-bye to [her] father’ (209) for them both. Their shared escape compensates for the words that Sophie cannot form when she wants to tell Martine’s spirit that she ‘was like [her]’ (234). However, in the absence of sufficient language, she enacts the bond that they struggled to forge in life with the knowledge that she has completed Martine’s freedom. By performing the ultimate act of forgiveness, she obtains the beginnings of freedom for herself to end the cycle with them in a pairing that defies death to salvage an eternal bond.

Conclusion

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This discussion has explored different forms of bodily trauma which, transcending the limits of the mother body, are transferred onto the daughter body. Black female adversity has been framed by Danticat and critics as ‘unspeakable’ (Ramos 2008, 48) and ‘unrepresentable’ for the women who suffer (Francis 2004, 77). Though understandable given the repulsion that their exploitation evokes, these perceptions threaten to hand the women over to a renewed realm of silence commanded by their attackers, potentially reigniting trauma. An aspect of my discussion has adhered to this because the initial impact of sexual abuse on the Caco bodies undeniably forces them into submission when direct retaliation is impossible.

However, the literature that I have explored also demonstrates that trauma memories can be confronted and partially disempowered, even if physical wounds remain. When Danticat depicts exploited bodies but allows space for repossession, her characters become subject to a “re-marking” whereby their bodies metamorphose into sites of reclamation, revival and for the most part, survival.

The female bodies have been primarily represented by a palpable trauma that claims two generations and individualises their suffering. For these figures at least, an alternative freedom has been proposed that contrasts with the faceless ‘brave women of Haiti’ in Danticat’s epitaph. The protagonists have been provided with a platform from which they speak of their shattered bodies and are finally heard. They come to embody the victimised state of black women and they offer a victim response to systemic patriarchy. By heading up an intimate insight into the African American female trauma experience with a generalised dedication to marginalised groups, the women function synecdochally within the tradition of African American Literature. This enables the narratives to draw on harrowing aspects of history using the fiction to overcome what Richard Wright perceives as the challenge of writing about African American injustice as an African American writer. He says that ‘the Negro life (whole and deep) must be represented. If this is done correctly then the social, political, and economic forms will inevitably be embraced’ (Eaton 2006, 676). This dissertation has engaged with rape and sexual abuse as representations of the African American female experience of the time which is then applied to inherited maternal trauma. As Wright views, the traumatisation of these women derives from endemic social and political horrors that endorsed sexual violation and state-sanctioned rape. My discussion has consistently claimed that male perpetrators are not held accountable for their crimes, and though I will not refute this, the novel clearly hinges on the devastation that they create. As a result, the reclaimed black female body remains to be a product of male-led trauma and its aftermath. Violent masculinity escapes punishment in a way that it does not escape vilification but still, what is inescapably tragic is that the women have been represented in relation to an exploitative gender conflict that is liable to re-emerge both interculturally and intra-culturally.

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