

UNDOING THE HISTORY OF THE ENGENDERED  
NATION IN THREE NARRATIVES  
OF CARIBBEAN FEMINISM:  
*IN THE NAME OF SALOMÉ* BY JULIA ALVAREZ,  
*THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER*  
BY JAMAICA KINCAID,  
*KRIK? KRAK!* BY EDWIDGE DANTICAT  
  
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**Introduction**

"Nation and nationalism" are most debated topics in contemporary Caribbean theory. Understandably questions of national coming-into-being, cultural emancipation and the emergence of national consciousness were of paramount importance for all West Indian literatures in the nationalist period from the 1950s to 1970s. Since at that time authorship was considered to be mostly a masculine enterprise, it is not surprising that the majority of national narratives fundamental to the national formation were authored by male writers. All of them consistently overlooked issues of gender and insisted on seeing freedom in terms of patriarchal rhetoric that equated colonialism with emasculation and liberty with free expression of patriarchal desires. In the 1980s and 1990s, when the first narratives of Caribbean feminism entered West Indian discourse, the ethos of nationalism came under serious scrutiny from debutant female writers. Their texts, I will argue, criticize the gendered configuration of nationalism and demystify nationalist discourses by showing that they masked gender complexities and inequalities in West Indian societies.

I am borrowing my critical perspective from the nation-and-gender studies that emerged in the 1990s and particularly from Elleke Boehmer, whose groundbreaking study *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, illustrates distinctive tropes of nationalist male

the 'science of domesticity'" (Alexander 1994:77). Primitive, decayed and unclean, the deviant woman is seen as a source of disease, corruption and degeneracy. Her body is a medium through which the failures and dysfunctions of the postcolonial nation are exposed. As Boehmer concludes, configuring national affiliation through such carefully designed archetypes of men and women is an extensive apparatus of control, as the allocation of gendered roles entails a codification of gendered power. Both the deviant woman—a lesbian or a whore—and her inversed image the nationalist mother are disempowered by deeply embedded gender-specific structures.

In the following part of this essay I will attempt a comparative reading of three texts: *In the Name of Salomé* by Julia Alvarez, *The Autobiography of My Mother* by Jamaica Kincaid and *Krick? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat. My strategic juxtaposition of these novels serves to recast colonial and patriarchal symbolic legacies in three distinct yet similar versions of postcolonial nationalisms. Kincaid's and Danticat's texts present two different and to a certain extent divergent and oppositional strategies to combat normative female gendering. Whereas the protagonist of *The Autobiography of my Mother* rejects motherhood to sabotage the national family at its roots, the women of Danticat's short story collection *Krick? Krak!* invest in motherhood to create an alternative matrilineal history of their nation. Alvarez's novel, on the other hand, marks a number of differences in relation to the other two texts, as it argues for the continuing relevance of the nation for women. Alvarez's female protagonists, who seek self-fulfillment within national structures, may be seen as harbingers of a new order and a hope of regeneration of the postcolonial nation, even though they are confined by nationalist dogmas.

All three novels are disturbing family dramas that question the patriarchal nation and the prescriptive national identities of men and women. The novels focus on the relationship between the daughter and her family, community and nation. In other words, they work out the daughterly position in relation to the wider national society, often symbolized by the father-led family, a microcosm of a patriarchal society. The ambivalent relationship between the daughter and her mother, who is often absent, and her autocratic father, frequently becomes in these novels a metaphor of what it means to be a daughter of a Caribbean nation.

Furthermore I will argue that the writing of these feminist authors marks a significant shift in the approach to the post-independence national eschatology created by their male predecessors, who entertained a quasi-religious belief in the actual existence of the nation and the people. Those male writers saw the development of their nations in allegorical terms, as

an extension of their own process of growing up: the progress of history culminated in the national coming-into-being, just as their growth culminated in reaching maturity. As I will demonstrate, the women writers whose work is analyzed in this essay opt out of the much celebrated national *bildungsroman* for the sake of a new more advanced vision of the nation. Their writing endorses Homi Bhabha's belief that nation is narration i.e. that narration constitutes the nation. By rewriting their role in the national script, these women subvert traditional paradigms of nationhood away from the totalizing and monolithic definitions of manhood and nationhood. They validate Benedict Anderson's theory of the constructedness of the nation, trying to forge, despite their diasporic status, an affiliation with an imagined community of women. They also make creative use of Michel Foucault's theory of nation as a discursive formation. In the words of Belinda Edmondson, if "'nation' is a discursive formation more so than mere allegory or imagined construct, then the writing of the Caribbean [women] is paramount in the production of the nation" (1999:2). Therefore by entering the national discourse, these women subvert the nationalist and patriarchal rhetoric and upgrade the position of women.

### **Julia Alvarez's *In the Name of Salome***

Julia Alvarez is a middle class Latina woman whose family fled the Trujillo regime when she was barely ten years old. While most of her books are autobiographical, her 2000 novel *In the Name of Salomé* is a fictional biography of a famous patriotic Dominican muse Salomé Ureña Henríquez (1850-1897) and of her daughter Salomé Camila (1894-1973), who spent most of her life in exile in the USA and Cuba. Both are presented as great revolutionary women, whose lives were severely circumscribed by nationalist and patriarchal strictures. While Salomé bears the burden of the idealized national muse, her daughter Camila grapples with the negative stereotype of the deviant woman, trying to come to terms with her lesbian identity. In the words of Cherie Meacham, Camila "labors to resolve her passion for women with her desire to serve her island's culture. Both issues play out in her quest to know her mother [. . .] who died when Camila was three years old" (Alvarez 2000:147).

The novel is made of two narrative threads. The story of Salomé is narrated chronologically by Salomé herself—it starts when Salomé is six years old and her country reaches independence and it finishes when Salomé dies. The story of Camila is traced in inverse order in the third person—it starts at a crucial point in Camila's life, when she retires from

the prestigious Vassar College and is about to join Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba. The two narrative *reçits* converge when the mother and the daughter are separated by Salomé's death. This separation is the most painful event in the life of Camila, who becomes obsessed with keeping her mother's memory. She devotes her entire life to getting to know her mother through her poems, family papers and stories that are fragmented, incongruent and often censored by her father and her older brothers. In the "Epilogue," in which the aging Camila returns home to the Dominican Republic to die, she comes into her own narrative voice, which, together with her acceptance of her full name "Salomé Camila," a name which she so far has refused to use, can be seen as a sign that the quest for the truth about her mother and her own stable identity are complete.

Salomé's first person autobiography can be seen as a foundational nationalist text, the autobiography of the nation. It is also a *bildungsroman* based on the analogy between the progress of the individual and the entire nation, as Salomé's poetic talent flourishes at the time of her nation's emancipation. However, contrary to the male *bildungsroman*, Salomé's story does not optimistically end with her country's liberation from Spain. On the contrary, it sets off at the time of the liberation and depicts fractures and uncertainties involved in the construction of a new nation. Just as Salomé's delicate health starts to wear out under the strain of too many betrayals and responsibilities, so the newly born country gradually starts to disintegrate, ravaged by civil wars and exploited by notorious dictators. Thus Salomé's life can be seen as a symbol of the difficulties faced by a nation in the process of becoming. Her story is disruptive of the conventional male narratives of the nation's unity and well being. It represents a debased condition of freedom, in which men are engaged in a meaningless competition for power in the name of mutually antagonistic nationalist forces. "Lost in the muddle of politics," (Alvarez 2000:134) ready to sacrifice their lives and their families to achieve their ambitions, men are shown as miscreants responsible for internal divisions that virtually tear the newly-born country apart.

Salomé's painful story of national division is written from the point of view of a self-consciously patriotic woman, who wholeheartedly identifies with the emergent nation. It is replete with evidences of political despotism, cultural repression of blackness and sexist discrimination. Salomé's life-story makes abundantly clear the exclusionary nature of Dominican national identity, which is based on the ideology of *Dominicanismo* or *blancismo* i.e. on the xenophobia directed against neighboring Haiti and its alleged socio-cultural flaws. Salomé is "a plain mulatto woman" (Alvarez

2000:205), but her nation pretends not to see "Africa in [Salomé's] skin and hair" (Alvarez 2000:94). After her death, this desire to erase her African lineage becomes even more evident, as her husband commissions a portrait of Salomé with "the telling features"—her dark oval face, the full-lipped mouth, broad nose and discernible kink in her hair—removed. This posthumous portrait enhances Salomé's idealized image, it is "a beautifying and whitening of the great Salomé" (Alvarez 2000:201-205).

Salomé's life-story also proves that in the postcolonial Caribbean nation the emancipation of women took second place to national struggles. Though Salomé is an object of her nation's adoration, her narrative gives many examples of her and other women's political repression and social exclusion. Even though women participate in the national life in a very limited way, they can easily become political victims. The Dominican Republic is a country "where national heroines tie their skirts down as they are about to be executed" (Alvarez 2000:139), as the example of the seamstress who sewed the national Dominican flag poignantly illustrates. It is a country where women are considered intrinsically inferior to men and therefore fit only for conjugal life. The novel presents only failed marriages—Salomé's mother and Salomé herself end up heartbroken after their marriages with charismatic men end up in ruins, both due to the infidelity of their husbands. As all wayward husbands are at the same time statesmen or fighters for freedom, men's promiscuity, the ideology of *machismo*, are linked to the authoritarian nationalist system of government. While men indulge in their passion for war, politics and for women, having numerous extramarital affairs and fathering many illegitimate children, women are subjected to rigid codes of propriety and trained to see their future exclusively within the confines of marriage.

When the young Salomé secretly starts to pursue the poetic vocation she so strongly feels, she inadvertently transcends the boundaries of her gender, claiming a privilege so far reserved only for men. With her patriotic poems, she consciously embarks on the feminist quest for self-emancipation and self-fulfillment. By breaking the silence surrounding Dominican women, Salomé articulates her own agency.

Salomé's verbal self-assertion pulls down some of the confinements of her life, yet it does not entirely set her free. As a national muse, whose poetry is appropriated by various nationalist leaders, Salomé faces other kinds of handicap. She never becomes an actor on the political scene—her role, even in her husband's eyes, is limited to being a mascot, a figurehead, a put-on-the-pedestal provider of patriotic verses. When "weary of the moral throne everybody wanted [her] to sit on" (Alvarez 2000:144), Salomé ventures beyond patriotic themes to write about love

and female desire, she gets angry responses from her countrymen, shocked to discover that "[she] has a real body" (Alvarez 2000:144). For Salomé writing these passionate poems for her would-be-husband, is also an act of self-revelation and feminist awakening: "I had released the woman inside me and let her free on paper," says Salome, suddenly aware "[there] was another revolution to be thought if our *patria* was truly free" (Alvarez 2000:145).

Salome's endeavors to reject her status of desexualized icon fail. Her "personal poems" are put away in the family trunk and never published—it is Camila, Salome's only daughter, who after decades of hesitation makes a corrective of the official, censored story of Salome's life and finally sends these poems to the national archives "to let the true story [of her mother] be told" (Alvarez 2000:44). It almost takes Camila a lifetime to discover the true sense of her mother's mission. When she decides to go to Cuba "to start over" (Alvarez 2000:32) she expresses a wish "to be a part of what her mother started" (2000:35). In Cuba she becomes an activist in Castro's anti-illiteracy campaign and realizes that it has brought Cuba "one step closer to the *patria* [they] all wanted" (Alvarez 2000:347). She is proud that through her tireless endeavors "[her] mother's *instituto* [has] grown to the size of the whole country" (Alvarez 2000:349). Camila does not put down Castro's revolution in spite of its obvious drawbacks of which she is aware, stating simply that "we have never been allowed to govern ourselves [so] [we] were bound to get it wrong the first few times around" (346). In her adoptive homeland Camila discovers what patriotism means for such women as her mother: "[it] is that continuing to struggle to create the country we dream of that makes a *patria* out of the land under our feet. That much I learned from my mother" (Alvarez 2000:350). This insight makes it possible for Camila to become "a part of national self-creation" (Alvarez 2000:121) and to "[pull] [herself] of the pit of depression and self-doubt" (Alvarez 2000:335).

Camila's recovery of her mother's message is an effect of a long process of disentangling herself from essentialist definitions of national and feminine identity. First and foremost Camila has to free the story of her mother from fixed nationalist and patriarchal appropriations. As a young person Camila is led to believe that her mother was an embodiment of the patriarchal ideal of womanhood—a bearer of traditional culture and conventional gender roles. This patriarchal objectification of Salomé is used by the Henriquez men in a very manipulative way. Camila is urged to see her mother as "a moral compass" (Alvarez 2000:250), an ideal she should aspire to. Whenever Camila swerves from the path outlined by her father and brothers "the memory of their noble mother and her suffering

country" (Alvarez 2000:210) is used to coerce Camila to comply with her family's plans and wishes. At that stage of her life, the young Camila sees her mother as a hegemonic force and a voyeuristic "oppressive ghost" (Alvarez 2000:207), constantly reminding her that "[duty] is the highest virtue" (Alvarez 2000:207). She becomes a paragon of feminine respectability and patriotic self-abnegation, but feels "an occupied territory" (Alvarez 2000:207) and a "nobody in the family" (Alvarez 2000:38), unable to "follow the voice of her heart" (Alvarez 2000:80).

Camila's low self-esteem is also a result of her failure to achieve the ideal of proper Dominican femininity and adhere to the romance fantasy of heterosexual love, motherhood and domesticity. When "an aging woman blinks back at [her]" from the mirror, "a girl wails in the wings of her heart for all the important things she was promised that have not yet happened: a great love, a settled home, a free country" (Alvarez 2000:79). To fulfill this desire Camila, who longs to be "one of the happy heroines of love stories" (Alvarez 2000:161), embarks on several doomed affairs with men only to find "the familiar where she did not expect it" (Alvarez 2000:250). She falls in love with Marion, an eccentric American, who remains Camila's life long-friend. However, their romantic liaison, quickly ends, as Camila cannot ultimately accept this passion "she always yearned for, but did not expect to feel for another woman" (Alvarez 2000:250). Camila, who can see herself only "through [her family's] eyes" (Alvarez 2000:243) i.e. through the prism of her family's values and the Dominican ideal of womanhood, perceives her desire for physical and emotional intimacy with another woman as an aberration and violation of her mother's ideals that would further separate her from her mother and the chance of living up to her legacy.

Though Camila achieves success in becoming a great revolutionary in the tradition of Hostos, Martí, Bolívar and Salomé, she does not entirely live up to their ideal of "the new woman." She resolves the conflict between her national identity of a revolutionary and her personal identity of a lesbian by sacrificing the latter. "[Enslaved] to her family's smallest demands and fighting for larger freedoms," Camila remains a victim of the coercive form of Caribbean nationalism, exercised by her "autocratic [brothers]" and such national leaders as Fidel Castro, who regulate the discourse about great national figures and in this way define the normative gender roles. She gives in to the requirements of her culture and selflessly serves others putting trust in her mother's assertion that "[the] best lives involve surrender" and "[whoever] gives himself to others lives among the doves" (Alvarez 2000:236). But the novel does not quite bear out this belief—"doves fly off," when Fidel Castro, who looks like Camila's father.

"tilts his head" (Alvarez 2000:46). Camila dies with a fractured personality and a conviction that in the established world of Dominican or Cuban patriarchy, she could become only an incarnation of symbolic but circumscribed motherhood, a "childless [mother] who [helps] to raise the young" (Alvarez 2000:351), or nobody, a deviant woman pushed to the margins of national life. Whether this conviction is true is open for debate.

Through the character of Camila, Alvarez illustrates how difficult it is for Caribbean women to "imagine themselves into" their postcolonial nations, when the national affiliation is configured through the normative female gendering and a demagoguery of race. The postcolonial nation, as Alvarez demonstrates, can be a forbidding place for women, it is a place of patriarchal domination, heterosexual dysfunction, racial and homophobic repression. Yet, as Camila's life shows, there is no alternative to "the struggle to love [that] flawed thing" (Alvarez 2000:349) that is *la patria*. Camila who initially sees exile to the U.S. as a chance to escape from "the dark love and shame that binds us to the arbitrary place we happen to be born" (Alvarez 2000:349), gradually learns the truth of her brother's complaint about "the terrible moral disinheritance of exile" (Alvarez 2000:112)—Northern America is "a world without sufficient soul or spirit, as Martí put it" (Alvarez 2000:343). Therefore despite the en-gendering of the nation, Alvarez makes a point that national commitment is the only viable option for Caribbean women because only their own countries can help them to "[forge] identity and achieve social justice" (Boehmer 2005:4). Both Boehmer and Alvarez seem to think that it is possible for women to transform the nationalist agenda so that it includes female desires and goals and not only interests of the anti-colonial patriarchal state.

### **Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother***

Jamaica Kincaid, one of the most popular Caribbean women writers living in the U.S. is one of few dissident authors with Caribbean pedigree whose deepest views of life are not in accord with either nationalist or post-nationalist ideologies. Kincaid's 1996 controversial novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* grapples with such issues as the birth of national consciousness, the post-national valorization of creolization and the marginalization of women in both discourses. The novel, which contains the quintessence of Kincaid's dark vision of the colonial past and its influence on Caribbean people, focuses on the underside of Caribbean reality, on the colonial history of cruelty in which Caribbean people themselves have been drawn as accomplices. It takes place on the island of



Dominica in the pre-independence period and shows a nation that is deeply mired by the overriding logic of exploitation and deception.

The plot centers on the narrator Xuela Claudette Richardson, who recounts the story of her life from the vantage point of her old age. She is a woman of mixed ethnic origin who is "the abstraction of Caribbean people's history of wretchedness and denigration" (Paravisini-Gebert 2000:157), described in detail by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, a study generally considered to be a subtext to Kincaid's novel. Other characters have also historically assigned roles—they illustrate what Fanon identified as the different conditions of the colonizing and colonized people. Xuela's Carib mother, Claudette, who dies at childbirth, exemplifies the tragic fate of Caribbean Indians as representative of the human cost of colonization. Xuela's half-Scottish half-African father, Alfred, named by his Scottish father after Alfred the Great, represents the middle class Creole elite that help to rule the colony. The father, who starts his career as policeman and finishes as a magistrate, is an opportunist, who hates the black people in his power. He uses his position to amass a sizeable fortune and in doing this "he wears the mask of benign colonial power that covers his pleasure in robbing and humiliating others" (Kincaid 1996:40). Through this character Kincaid mounts a fierce attack on the degenerated mulatto elites, intoxicated by beliefs and values of white civilization and determined to keep the social hierarchies bequeathed by colonialism intact.

While the father allies himself with the myths of white civilization, Xuela gives preference to the forces that oppose the expansion and triumph of these myths. She chooses "savagery" and asserts: "whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most. I loved the smell of the thin dirt behind my ears, the smell of my unwashed mouth, the smell that came from between my legs, the smell in the pit of my arm, the smell of my unwashed feet. Whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not a moral failing I loved with the fervor of the devoted" (Kincaid 1996:32-33). She also passionately believes in Obeah, a religion which Xuela's father considers to be "the belief of the illegitimate, the poor, the low" (Kincaid 1996:18). For Xuela it is an alternative epistemological frame that undermines the colonizer's ontology. It is an emblem of her resistance, her refusal to be confined within the Western grids of knowledge.

Xuela's deepest wish is to bridge the fissures created by the upheavals of history through the recuperation of her matrilineal ancestral lines. She knows that her mother, brought up by French nuns was a "long-suffering, unquestioning, modest and wishing-to-die-soon person" (Kincaid 1996:199).

Just like other native people, she was one of the "the living fossils" (Kincaid 1996:197). Xuela imagines "her sadness, her weakness, her long-lost-ness, the crumbling of ancestral lines, her dejectedness, the false humility that was really defeat" (200). Still she believes that the death of her mother and the loss of matrilineality contributed to her acute sense of alienation. Through an imaginative recuperation of the past, Xuela wants to find a remedy for the obliteration of memory and rupture of history. She tries in vain to reinvent the past by conjuring up events from her mother's life or the simplicity of life before the European conquest. Xuela realizes that "to know all [about the past] is impossibility, but only such a thing would satisfy [her]. To reverse the past would bring [her] complete happiness" (Kincaid 1996:226). She would like to see her dead Carib mother, who often comes to visit Xuela in her sleep, but shows her daughter only the hem of her dress and her heels, as she descends a ladder. Xuela never sees her mother's face, which emphasizes the futility of her wish—it is impossible to transcend the pain of history or wipe out the crime of creolization. For Xuela, there is no escape from "the big, dark room [of] history" (Kincaid 1996:61).

Orphaned by her mother and estranged from her father, Xuela epitomizes her people's lack of belonging, the unfruitful alienated condition of pre-independence. She becomes the aberrant mother of the novel's title, who aborts every child she conceives. She has consciously chosen not to give birth to the next generation of men and women, who will carry around the stigma of defeat attributed to the colonized people. In the words of Lisabeth Paravisini-Gebert "she refuses to bear children through whom the chain of destruction and degradation can perpetuate itself" (2000:151). Like her father, who set himself on the course of becoming a master of his own life, so the childless Xuela, "becomes her own lifelong abortionist" (Segal 1996:24) and "an expert at being a ruler of [her] own life in this one limited regard" (Kincaid 1996:115). Xuela's rejection of maternity is the only way that she can manifest her lack of national affiliation: "Each month my body would swell slightly, mimicking the state of maternity, longing to conceive, mourning my heart's and mind's decision never to bring forth a child. *I refused to belong to a race, I refuse to accept a nation*" (Kincaid 1996:225; emphasis mine). Xuela repeatedly emphasizes her disavowal of black nationalism and pours scorn on the "natives" who "bogged down in issues of justice and injustice," and who "had become attached to claims of ancestral heritage, and the indignities by which they had come to these islands, as if they mattered, as if they really mattered" (Kincaid 1996:117).

For Xuela her body is the only possible venue for resistance, so she makes a strategic use of it. She not only refuses to be defined by motherly functions but also brandishes her nativism, which finds primary expression in her uninhibited sexuality that taps into the stereotype of sexual wantonness of black females, the Jezebel paradigm. This stereotype, bequeathed by slavery, perpetuated by colonial plantocracies and enhanced by repressive Victorian sexual mores, often contrasted the alleged promiscuity of black women with the idealization of the body of a white lady. The stereotype is reinforced in the novel, as Xuela uses her sexuality to draw a line between herself and Moira, the English lady for whom Xuela works and whom she stealthily poisons in order to marry her husband-Philip. "[Moira] was a lady and I was a woman and this distinction was to her important; it allowed her to believe that I could not associate the ordinary, the everyday—a bowel movement, a cry of ecstasy—with her, and a smallest act of cruelty was elevated to a rite of civilization" (Kincaid 1996:158). That definition is at variance with the way Xuela perceives herself: "I was a woman and as that I had a brief definition: two breasts, a small opening between my legs, one womb, it never varies and they are always in the same place" (Kincaid 1996:159).

Xuela defiantly repudiates middle class notions of propriety and morality and embraces the racist stereotype of the deviant black woman. In the colonial discourse this oversexualized native woman was often abused by the white man, but Kincaid deftly subverts the dynamics of the typical colonial sexual encounter. In the case of Xuela, her sexual confrontation with the white man, Philip, does not entice her sexual subjugation. On the contrary, in her relationship with her white husband, it is Xuela who wields control. Philip is not the dominant subject who projects his sexual fantasies on the racial other, but a sexual slave enacting Xuela's wild fantasies. Xuela uses the power that she derives from her sexuality to wrap around Philip her own sense of alienation. She not only refuses to reciprocate his love for her but also locks him in complete isolation. The social ostracism that follows their marriage, which is a misalliance, is never compensated by the intimacy of conjugal life: "I blocked his entrance to the world in which he lived," says Xuela, "I blocked the entrance into all the worlds he had come to know" (Kincaid 1996:224). In this way Xuela acts out her revenge on the white race.

Kincaid allows Xuela to hold on to the Manichean economy of colonialist discourse and the racist stereotype of black female sexuality. Xuela, however, does not let herself be reduced to a subaltern position. Through her renunciation of maternity and her narcissistic and predatory sexuality, she defies the colonial power and the native bourgeoisie that

perpetuates colonial hierarchy and stratification. She consciously chooses to become everything that people like her father deem despicable. As a deviant woman she succeeds in exercising agency, and though it is the wrong sort of agency, based on self-destructiveness and moral deformity, for Xuela, it is preferable to no agency at all, to the state of zombification, which is Kincaid's metaphor for spiritual death, passive resignation and impotence.

The novel, in which all characters are constituted by the process of colonization and imperialism, demonstrates that the epistemic violence in the form of the Manichean logic of binary coding wreaked on the Caribbean people resulted in psychological damage and trauma that shall not be redressed by the sheer belief in the redemptive potential of Black Nationalism or creolization. *The Autobiography of My Mother* shows that both positions—national yearning for authenticity and cultural purity, and the more current trend to see mixing of races and cultures as a positive phenomenon—are utopian fallacies.

### Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*

Edwidge Danticat is a Haitian American writer whose whole literary career has been committed to the recovery of the voices of women, particularly those oppressed by the ideology of Haitian nationalism. Her 2001 collection of short stories entitled *Krik? Krak!* could serve as an illustration of Alison Donnell's assertion that "for Caribbean women as historical subjects the struggles of nationalism were always gendered" (2006:147).

Danticat's collection engages with the political, social and cultural history of Haiti—the first black republic in the world, a republic which came into being as a consequence of the only successful slave revolt. From its very inception, this black republic was seen as an aberration by the white world and was politically and economically isolated. Subsequent Haitian governments struggled to get recognition for Haiti in the eyes of the white world in order to attract foreign capital and bring the country out of its torpor. Modernizing the country by means of suppressing its indigenous culture and particularly the local *vodou* religion was the way in which Haitian leaders wanted to obtain legitimacy for Haiti. After Catholicism was adopted as an official religion of Haiti, the state combined forces with the Catholic Church in an effort to eradicate *vodou* "superstition." Since *vodou* was associated mostly with rural areas and with women, it was peasant women who were targeted in the so called Anti-superstition Campaigns. The persecution of *vodouissants*, that is

witches in the official nationalist discourse, began after the independence, increased after Concordat in 1860 and continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore Modernity and its most significant developments, the concept of the nation and nationalism, turned out to be inimical for Haitian women proving that “[regardless] of what role or status [women] had in their traditional society, inclusion into expanding Western sphere in their countries usually meant loss of status [. . .]” (Donnell 2006:139).

Most of the stories included in *Krik? Krak!* focus on the Haitian history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which began with the American occupation (1915-1934). This occupation, as Michael Dash claims, was Haiti’s “irruption into Modernity” (2008:35). Haitian intellectuals and politicians, such as Jean Price-Mars, reacted to this disruption by creating the myth of Haitian exceptionalism (*noirism* and *indigenism*) that cherished Haiti’s specificity and celebrated its uniqueness—the idea of Haiti as unfinished Modernity.

The neo-colonial American presence in Haiti also brought to power François Duvalier, Haiti’s most predatory dictator whose national despotism mirrored U.S. cultural models and archetypes. Duvalier imitated American nationalism that was based on a strong sense of identity, rooted in history and founded on the belief in the exceptionality of American socio-political institutions. He applied these assumptions to transform Jean Price-Mars’s *noirism* into the ideology of Black Nationalism and pretended to forge an alliance with the peasant culture. He wanted to validate *vodou* as a national religion but in fact he used his knowledge of history and *vodou* to control the lower classes who were *vodou* followers. He ordained his own priests (*hougans*), organized his own religious meetings and infiltrated other *vodou* societies presided over mostly by *vodou* priestesses. As Chancy points out, Duvalier tried to wipe out these predominantly female societies, which he treated as a rival power. (1997:208) In effect, as Francis observes:

The Duvalierist state (1957-1986), [. . .] ushered a shift in the reigning paternalistic construction of women as political innocents to women as “enemies of state.” Under his administration when women voiced opinions in support of women rights or the opposition party, they were defined as “subversive, unpatriotic, and unnatural.” (2004:78)

In *Krik? Krak!* Danticat exposes Haitian nationalism, before and after Duvalier, as exceptionally hostile towards women. It not only actively persecuted Haitian women and deprived them of their status but also erased them from the Haitian historiography. By creating a matrilineal tradition as an alternative to the patriarchal tradition that historically

dispossessed women, Danticat offers a corrective to the male-centered history of Haiti. In her reckoning of the history of Haiti, she sidesteps the whole gallery of national heroes such as Boukman Dutty, Jean Jacques Dessalines, Toussaint Louverture, Henri Christophe and others. Instead she recovers from obscurity Haitian women who have remained only a token presence in the collective memory of her country. In this way Danticat narrates her own gendered history of Haiti and puts herself in the role of feminist historiographer and revisionist, who clears a space for Haitian women in the national mythology.

In *Krik? Krak!* Danticat creates a female lineage that goes back to a historic figure, Défilée-la-folle–Défilée Madwoman, to talk about women's involvement in anti-colonial insurgency and their contribution to national struggles. Défilée-la-folle's real name was Dédée Bazile. Having lost all her sons to the cause of revolution, she followed the troops of one of the leaders of the Haitian revolution–Jean-Jacques Dessalines–the first black president of free Haiti. Danticat rehabilitates Défilée as a mother of Haiti and a female figure of resistance. Contrary to the fathers of the Haitian revolution most of whom looked to France for models in their project of nation building, Défilée, as a *vodouissant*, was a representative of Haitian creolized ethnicity.

Danticat's collection shows imaginary histories of women descended from Défilée. One of the most memorable incarnations of Défilée is her namesake in the story "Nineteen Thirty-Seven." There is an ancestral lineage between the two women that is more than one hundred and fifty years long. The contemporary Defile owns a Madonna statue passed down from the historic Défilée, who got it from "a Frenchman who had kept her as a slave" (Danticat 2001:34). The title of the story refers to the so-called Parsley Massacre–the ethnic cleansing organized that year by the Dominican regime of El Generalissimo, Dios Trujillo on Haitian cane cutters working in the Dominican Republic. It is deeply ironic and paradoxical that having survived the massacre, Defile is now incurring a slow death at the hands of her own compatriots in the prison of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. The irony is exacerbated by the fact that the prison in which she is incarcerated was built by the American marines during their occupation of Haiti. As Josephine, Defile's teenage daughter, who is the narrator of the story, observes "by the end of the 1915 occupation, the police in the city really knew how to hold human beings trapped in cages, even women like Manman, who was accused of having wings of flame" (Danticat 2001:35). In this way the violence leveled at women is connected with its political sources: the American occupation that showed the weakness of the Haitian state and taught it how to

effectively turn against its own citizens; and the 1937 massacre, when the Haitian government again failed to take any action to defend its citizens from whole-scale slaughter.

Defile is accused of being a "*lougrou*" or "*lougawou*" from the French word "*loup-garou*" meaning "werewolf." She is believed to be a mythical figure who "[flies] in the middle of the night, [slips] into slumber of innocent children, and [steals] their breath." (Danticat 2001:37-38). In the prison there are many other women like her. They slowly starve to death but their emaciated, ghostly figures evoke irrational fear in their male guards who watch them closely for any signs of their nocturnal transmutations. The guards, who represent the authority of the state, not only genuinely believe in the culpability of the women in their charge but also fear their reputed powers which they associate with their femininity. They physically abuse the women and shave their heads not only to mark them as violators of gender roles but also to de-feminize them "I realized," claims the narrator-Defile's daughter-"[the guards] wanted to make [the women] look like crows, like men" (Danticat 2001:39).

Defile's granddaughter-Marie from the story "Between the Pool and Gardenias"-suffers a similar fate. The childless Marie left the village of Rose-Ville where, her grandmother and mother used to live, in order to escape from an unhappy marriage. She works as a maid for a rich couple in Port-au-Prince. They enjoy the taste of the countryside that she puts into the food she cooks for them but at the same time they remain deeply distrustful of her and her countryside ways: "She is probably one of those *manbos*," they say when [Marie's] back is turned. "She's probably one of those stupid people who think that they have a spell to make themselves invisible and hurt other people. Why can't none of them get a spell to make themselves rich? It's that voodoo nonsense that's holding us Haitians back" (Danticat 2001:95). As members of the middle class, particularly active in the Anti-superstition Campaigns, they disdain *vodou* as the illegitimate religion of the poor, illiterate and backward peasants who can nevertheless be potentially harmful. They are bound to the idea of progress which makes the erasure of indigenous traditions imperative and frames the future in terms of material advancement.

The title of the story-"Between the Pool and Gardenias"-alludes to the limited space that Marie is allowed to occupy in this new, modernized model of the Haitian nation. She is a prisoner of stereotypes associated with *vodou* as well as of the traditional model of Haitian femininity where a woman's worth is measured by her ability to bear children. These presuppositions make Marie an outcast in all communities in which she tries to find a home for herself. Rose-Ville is "the place that [she] yanked

out of [her] head" because her infertility made her feel "like a piece of dirty paper people used to wipe their behinds" (Danticat 2001:96). Her deficiency as a woman is made painfully clear by her wayward husband who "got ten different babies with ten different women" (Danticat 2001:96), as she grieved over all her miscarriages.

The alternative home she finds in Port-au-Prince does not even give an illusion of being a protective space. While the life in the village circumscribes the protagonist's life with patriarchal notions of wifehood and motherhood, the city delimits her existence with nationalistic prescriptions and assumptions. Marie's migration from the country to the city does not help her to get outside of society's limiting structures or create a sense of possibility. On the contrary, it only deepens her sense of alienation and displacement. The city is an even more constricted and hostile place, marked by the absence of any meaningful human relationships. For most people it is a place of poverty and corruption that forces women to "throw out their babies because they can't afford to feed them" (Danticat 2001:92). At the same time it is a place of luxury and comfort for few others who, like Monsieur and Madame, own a lavish house with a swimming pool that overlooks the sea with "the holiday ships cruising in the distance" (Danticat 2001:96). Marie, who dreams about domestic happiness and fulfillment in her role as a wife and mother, can only "pretend that it was all [hers]" (Danticat 2001:96). Thus Monsieur and Madame's house becomes a symbol of middle class entitlement and lower class disempowerment.

The city is first and foremost the place of death, where one has to enter an imaginary world in order to survive. Severed from her family and relatives, Marie imagines a community of dead women, descended from her great-great-great grandmother Défilée, who watch over her and comfort her in the face of the loneliness and misery that engulf her. She is introduced to them in her dream by her own dead mother Josephine. As the old women lean over her bed, she can "see faces that [. . .] knew [her] even before [she] ever came into this world" (Danticat 2001:97). They are a family of women who worship Erzulie—the protector of women and children, embodied in the statue of Madonna in the story "Nineteen Thirty Seven."

It is a sense of despair at being "the last one of [them] left" (Danticat 2001:94) that prompts Marie to "adopt" a dead baby she finds in a Port-au-Prince sewer. As soon as Marie rejects the idea that the baby is a *wanga*—an evil spirit sent by her husband's lovers—she accepts another explanation for the sudden appearance of this lovely baby in her life. Rose becomes an embodiment of all the children she has lost. She thinks of all the names



that she wanted to give to her unborn children: "I called out all the names I wanted to give them: Eveline, Josephine, Jacqueline, Hermine, Marie Magdalene, Célianne." (Danticat 2001:92). In the names that she chants, "*noms de famille et de guerre*", as well as the faces she sees in her dreams the reader can recognize the characters from other stories from the collection drawn into "one ancestral fabric" (Evans Braziel 2005:84).

Finally a more plausible explanation for Rose's appearance is provided. In reality, Rose seems to have been discarded by some rich people—"she was something that was thrown out aside after she became useless to someone cruel" (Danticat 2001:93)—people whom Marie associates with her own employers because the baby smells "like the scented powders in Madame's cabinet, the mixed scent of gardenias and fish that Madame always had on her when she stepped out of her pool" (Danticat 2001:94). For a few days Marie's life oscillates between dream and reality, life and death until the decay of Rose's body forces her to face the facts and abandon the fantasy world in which she seeks compensation for the deprivations of her life. This is when she is betrayed by a Dominican gardener, reminiscent of the Dominican soldier who killed Marie's great-grandmother Eveline, who condemns her as a witch who eats children and calls the gendarmes. As they "wait for the law," the world of patriarchal and nationalistic dictates closes in on Marie.

Such women as Marie or her grandmother Defile evoke fear because as they cross the boundaries between rural and urban settings, they appear to deviate from the Western model of normative femininity—they are aligned with witchcraft, with transgressive female power. As Gauthier argues in his article "Why Witches?" witches always occupy a transgressive position in society: "If the figure of the witch appears wicked, it is because she poses a real danger to phallocratic society" (1981:203). In traditional African religions the position of a witch, or more precisely speaking a "conjure woman," used to be associated with positive power. The conjure women were often visionaries who possessed the gift of seeing with the so-called "third eye". As Boyce Davies concludes: a conjure woman "stands between the community and what it is unable to attain" (1994:75). However, in Haiti, whose dominant forms of cultural experience have been mired in the Western ideals of a homogenous nation state, the position of the visionary conjure woman has been reduced to that of a witch—an epitome of transgressive female power to be penalized. It is consistently associated with evil by the regressive national *realpolitik* that contains and represses women to impose uni-centricity on the Haitian cultural cauldron. The witch can be therefore seen as a rebel against the nationalistic order and patriarchal dominance. In the words of Evans Braziel:

Defilee, historically resistant to colonial oppression, becomes a revolutionary revenant in Danticat's diasporic literary narratives. In *Krick? Krack!* the figure of Defilee is martyred by cultural forms of violence that suppress both *femme d'Ayiti* and Haiti; by rewriting Defilee, who is tortured and imprisoned, Danticat resists those national and imperial forms of violence's that have destroyed alternative historical lines in Haiti. By doing so, Danticat offers feminist resistance to national, neocolonial and feminist violence's in 20<sup>th</sup> century Haiti—specifically the US Marine occupation of 1915-1934, the Haitian Massacre of 1937 and the Anti-superstition campaigns of 1940-41. (2005:85)

Danticat's characters defend the cultural sovereignty of Haiti and are posed in opposition to the ideals of the nation state. Her narratives of confinement and political persecution expose the Eurocentrism of the political and cultural agenda of nationalism, the construction of a nationalist teleology that insists on grounding the nation in one fixed point of origin and on forging one single worldview. The city of Port-au-Prince with its villas for the rich and the prison for the poor becomes a trope of Haitian nationalism that serves to problematize the vision of the modern mono-cultural nation.

## Conclusions

The ideas of nation and nationalism have been adopted by many postcolonial countries that reproduce Western knowledge of the nation-state with its institutions and its strategies of nationalizing identity. Caribbean countries are no exception to this rule—in the words of Boyce Davies (1994:12): “nationalism was a ‘trap’ within which the growing independence movements in the Caribbean were interpellated.” National affiliation was always configured through narrowly defined inscriptions of manhood and womanhood that served to conceal gender bias and dissymmetry in power. Nationalism, as Boyce Davies persuasively contends was “a male formulation” and “a male activity with women distinctly left out or peripheralized in the various national constructs” (1994:12).

The three expatriate women writers discussed in this essay, each a daughter of a different West Indian nation, engage in various ways with insurgent nationalisms in their countries. The plot of their novels unfolds in the Caribbean in the pre- or post-independence period at the time of the rise of militant embattled nationalism. Each novel explores the relationship between gender, sexuality and the emergent nation; each presents a different Caribbean nation and “dismembers” its recent history. The authors expose the seductive dream of a monolithic nation, bringing to the

foreground what Boehmer calls "the transformative instability of nation" (2005:17). The nation is often pictured as an authoritarian regime that replaces the colonial regime and reproduces its racial, social and gendered hierarchies and structures of power. More often than not, these states-in-the-process-of-becoming are characterized by material scarcity, social injustice, corruption and institutionalized violence, compounded by absurd displays of the megalomania of their male rulers. The novels show that various brands of Caribbean nationalism: *blancismo*, *noirism* or Black Nationalism, are crippled by similar drawbacks. All of them are elite-driven, exclusionary, racist, xenophobic and misogynist projects, based on ideologies carried over from the colonial state. In their stagnant patriarchal societies, women continue to be marginalized and oppressed.

Alvarez, Kincaid and Danticat re-vision the concept of the nation constantly drawing the reader's attention to its constructedness. They expose the desire for unsullied national origins, for ethnic roots and cultural purity, as an attempt to elide the truth about the imaginative status of the nation. Their books remind us that, to quote Boehmer again, "a nation operates as a fiction unifying people into a horizontally structured conglomerate into which they imagine themselves" (2005:7). When faced with the patriarchal apparatus of control in the form of fetishized tropes of motherlands and culture-bearing women or the cult of motherhood and domesticity, Caribbean women, black or Creole, find it difficult to "imagine themselves into" their nations. In the three national family dramas, analyzed in this essay, the odds are always against women, against their self-determination and self-fulfillment. None of the texts offers a vision of equal participation of women on the national stage. None of the female protagonists, torn by contrasting pulls of different markers of identification, is able to achieve a coherent sense of self. Their life-stories are an antithesis of the myth of national unity—childless and/or deviant (morally lax, lesbian or accused of witchcraft) they do not fit into the monolithic nation.

The three novels are also linked by the trope of the absent mother. Their motherless protagonists are engaged in the quest of getting to know their absent mother and disentangling the mother image from the national male iconography. The mother, conspicuously absent in these feminist texts, may be seen as a counterpoise to the symbolic language of male rhetoric that associates the mother with the grand history of the nation. Though often appropriated by patriarchal tradition, the national mother is often unknown and irrevocably lost in the turbulent colonial and postcolonial history, full of violence and ruptures. Where the matriarchal lines have "crumbled," the preservation of an authentic indigenous culture

is an impossible task, and the icon of the national mother, a repository of traditional values, loses its legitimacy.

Instead of "subscribing to [this] unitary icon," that, as Boehmer writes, could "threaten to defeat [women's] own particular mode of being," (2005:93), contemporary Caribbean female writers confront the patriarchal story of the nation with their own narratives that are less totalizing or unitary. They refuse to idealize the nation or the national mothers and point to the necessity for women to move beyond familiar markings of gender. For them writing is an effort to arrive at an understanding of the self in relation to mother and motherland, an understanding that is free of given symbolic roles for women. It is a subversive and political act which allows these women writers to achieve autonomy outside patriarchal networks and come to their own as national citizens. In the words of Elleke Boehmer:

[through] writing, through claiming a text—and a narrative territory—women sign into and at the same time subvert a nationalist narrative that excluded them as negativity as corporeal or unclean, or as impossibly idealized. (2005:94).

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