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ENGENDERING THE NATIONAL HISTORY OF HAITI IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S *KRI: 'K? KRA 'K'*

The concept of the nation and nationalism is the most significant development of Modernity. As Ernest Renan argues in his essay "What is a nation?", the concept of the nation is quite new in our history, and it was not known in antiquity (1990: 19). Today nationalism defines itself through geographical, ideological and political distinction, it is "a large scale solidarity, constituting by the feeling of the sacrifices that have been made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future [...]" (1990: 19). The ideas of nation and nationalism have been also adopted by different oppressed minority groups (e.g. Afro-Americans) and by many postcolonial countries that reproduce Western knowledge of the nation-state with its institutions (such as: representative democracy, competitive elections, market capitalism, etc.) and its strategies of nationalizing the identity.

The Caribbean countries are no exception to this rule, in the words of Boyce Davies, "nationalism was a 'trap' within which the growing independence movements in the Caribbean were interpellated" (1994: 12). In the nationalist period that overlapped with decolonization, Caribbean states struggled to forge national models of public power and define a sense of national and cultural identity. This struggle, as many critics observed, was an uphill battle because in the West Indies, with its multiple peoples and languages and its long history of dissemination of cultures, a homogeneous model of national identity was hard to sustain. Presently, in the post-indigenous era that began in the 1990s, the Caribbean is rather seen as transnational and diasporic place that challenges the definition of the nation and the ideology of nationalism, and, to paraphrase Michael Hanchard, diaspora is a revolt against the nation-state.

The aim of this paper is to explore how the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, who is a part of the Haitian diaspora in the United States, takes issue with the Haitian versions of Modernity and nationalism.

Danticat's collection of short stories entitled *Krik? Kra k!* shows from a feminist perspective how Haitian history of the 20th century was negatively affected by some misguided efforts of Haitian leaders to modernize the country. Edwidge Danticat is one of the most acclaimed female writers from the region, and her writing has been fiercely committed to the recovery of the voices of Haitian women who were particularly maligned by the ideology of progress and nationalism. Her novels and short stories illustrate Alison Donnell's comment 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 [...]" (2006: 139). I will further argue that "for Caribbean women as historical subjects the struggles of nationalism were always gendered" (Donnell 2006: 147). Nationalism, as Boyce Davies persuasively contends, is "a male formulation" and "a male activity with women distinctly left out or peripheralized in the various national constructs" (1994: 12). Using selected stories from this particular collection, I will demonstrate that Danticat engenders the recent history of Haiti by offering both a feminist and post-nationalist understanding of nation and culture. She exposes Haitian nationalism as exceptionally misogynist, as it not only deprived Haitian women of their status and erased them from Haitian historiography, but also actively persecuted them in the name of the Western ideal of progress.

Danticat 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 (1791–1804). From its very inception, the black republic of Haiti was seen as an aberration in the eyes of the white world; it was politically and economically isolated and impoverished. The predominantly peasant culture remained faithful to its cultural roots and resisted its own leaders' efforts to westernize the country. The aim of these efforts was to get recognition for Haiti as a legitimate country in order to attract foreign capital and bring the country out of its torpor. Modernizing the country by means of adopting Catholicism as the official religion was one of the strategies to "whiten" the country, and since that moment the state and the Catholic Church combined forces in the 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 right after the victorious slave rebellion, increased after Concordat in 1860 and under the US occupation of Haiti, and it is continued well into the later part of the 20th century. As Chancy puts it:

[*vodouissants*] were not only politically suppressed but militarily and brutally criminalized under the US Marines occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 and

later during the Anti-superstition Campaigns of 1940–1941; even Duvalier, who allowed vodou to flourish, but used it as a weapon to incite fear and control the Haitian masses, the religion was not granted full legitimacy (Chancy, *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* qtd. in Evans Brazier 2005: 74).

Many of Danticat's stories in this collection revolve around these events. In *Kri k? Kra k!* she creates a female lineage that goes back to a historic figure of the *vodouissant* Défilée-la-folle, Défilée Madwoman, whose 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. Though she was reputedly insane, she turned out to be a paragon of sanity, when after the assassination of Dessalines, she defied the angry crowd that ripped his body apart, gathered his remains and gave him a proper burial. Danticat uses the figure of Défilée-la-folle and her female descendants, who are representatives of Haitian creolized ethnicity, to talk about women's contribution to national struggles.

The stories about Défilée-la-folle's progeny are set in the midst of the 1946 Catholic Anti-Vodou campaign, during which Duvalier, Haiti's most oppressive dictator, came to power, and in the time of his regime. Duvalier tried to control the lower classes who were vodou followers by ordaining his own priests (*hougans*), organizing his own religious meetings and infiltrating other vodou societies presided over mostly by *manbos* i.e. vodou priestesses. As Chancy points out, he wanted to wipe out these predominantly female societies, which he treated as a rival power (1997: 208). Francis in her article "Silences Too Horrific to Disturb..." confirms Chancy's observation by claiming that

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' (2005: 78).

Danticat's tales show histories of several imaginary women descended from Défilée, who are suppressed by the national culture and the misogynist and repressive Haitian regime. 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 French man 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 from the hands of her own compatriots in the prison of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti.

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” (2001: 37–38). In the prison there are many other women like her. As Josephine, Defile’s daughter, notices

[all] these women were here for the same reason. They were said to have been seen at night rising from the ground like birds on fire. A loved one, a friend, or a neighbor had accused them of causing a death of a child. A few other people agreeing with these stories was all that was needed to have them arrested. And sometimes even killed (38).

The women 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] prison guards thought that the wrinkles [on Defile’s haggard face] resulted from her taking off her skin at night and then putting it back on in a hurry before sunrise.” “This is why,” claims Josephine, “[her] Maman’s sentence was extended to life. And when she died, her remains were to be burnt in the prison yard to prevent her spirit from wandering into any young innocent bodies” (36). From her account, it becomes clear that 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. The guards 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 Josephine, “[the guards] wanted to make [the women] look like crows, like men” (39).

Defile’s granddaughter, Marie in the story “Between the Pool and Gardenias,” suffers a similar fate. The childless Marie has 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 and reap the fruit of her labor:

Monsieur and Madame sat on their trace and welcomed the coming afternoon by sipping the sweet of my soursop juice. They liked that I went all the way to the market every day before the dawn to get them a taste of the outside country, away from their protected bourgeois life (93).

At the same time, however, 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" (95).

Though they need her, they despise and hate her. 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 the 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" (96). Her deficiency as a woman is made painfully clear by her wayward husband, who "got ten different babies with ten different women" (96), as she grieved over all her miscarriages.

The alternative home she finds in Port-au-Prince does not even give an illusion of a protective space. While the life in the village circumscribes the protagonist's life with patriarchal notions of wifedom 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. It is a place of anonymity and sterility, where nobody cares about her: "In the city, even people who come from your own village don't know you or care about you" (95). 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" (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 cursing in the distance" (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]" (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-grandmother Défilée, who watch over her and comfort her in the face of loneliness and misery that engulf her. She is introduced to them in her dream by her own dead mother Josephine (the narrator of the story "Nineteen Thirty-Seven"). As the old women lean over her bed, she can "see faces that [...] knew [her] even before [she] ever came into this world" (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" (94) that prompts Marie to "adopt" a dead baby she finds in a Port-au-Prince sewer. The baby's name, Rose, which she finds embroidered on the collar brings to her mind Rose Ville, a place where people still hold on to a traditional, more ethical cosmology:

Back in Rose-Ville you cannot even throw out the bloody clumps that shoot out of your body after your child is born. It is a crime, they say, and your whole family considers you wicked if you did it. You have to save every piece of flesh and give it a name and bury it near the roots of a tree so that the world won't fall apart around you (92-93).

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" (92). In the names that she chants, *noms de famille et de guerre* (Evans Braziel 2005: 84), 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" (84). Finally, a more plausible explanation for Rose's appearance is provided. In reality, Rose has been discarded by some rich people: "she was something that was thrown out aside after she became useless to someone cruel" (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" (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 seeks compensation for the deprivations of her life. This is when she is

betrayed by a Dominican gardener, who condemns her as a *soucouyan* (i.e. *vodouissant*) 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 Defilee evoke fear because, as they cross the boundaries between rural and urban setting, 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 a 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). But in Haiti, whose dominant forms of cultural experience have been mired in the Western ideals of Modernity and 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 Brazier:

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 20th century Haiti – specifically the US Marine occupation of 1915–34, the Haitian Massacre of 1937 and the Anti-superstition campaigns of 1940–41 (2005: 85).

Danticat’s characters defend cultural sovereignty of Haiti and are posed in opposition to the ideals of nation state. Her narratives of confinement and political persecution expose the Eurocentrism of the political and cultural agenda of nationalism, the construction of 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 for Haitian nationalism that serves to problematize the vision of the modern mono-cultural nation. The nation, on

the basis of the evidence provided by these two stories, continues to be defined by the experience of colonialism – all the anomalies and perversities wrought on the slave society are a discernible legacy in modern Haiti. The city is associated with betrayal and dispossession, it is a place where mothers abandon their children. With her creative representation of the *Femmes d'Ayiti*, Danticat seeks to heal this rift, as she builds bridges between mothers and their children, between the historical subject Defilee and her “diasporic daughters” (Evans Braziel 2005: 85). In this way Danticat offers a feminist redress to the history of her motherland, brutalized by the masculinist and Eurocentric concept of the nation state.

As Francis argues, female narratives “were rendered invisible as the state exercised its power to obscure violence against women by dismissing their testimonies as nonsensical and inconsequential to the political life of Haiti” (2004: 79). Danticat challenges through her writing this trope of invisibility and silence of Haitian women. Writing is a way for women like Danticat to speak back to the normative, masculinist ideology of Haitian nation state (1995: 211): “in our world, writers are tortured and killed if they are men or called lying whores, then raped and killed if they are women. In our world, if you write you are a politician,” claims Danticat, who is very critical of the nationalistic ethos of the middle class. Her book can be viewed as a feminist corrective to the project of nation building because in her reckoning of the male-centered history of Haiti, Danticat 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 the history of Haitian women who have remained only a token presence in Haitian historiography. Thus, as Danticat narrates the gendered history of Haiti, she puts herself in the role of feminist historiographer and revisionist.

Even though Danticat rarely joins theoretical debates about diaspora, she does seem to endorse in her writing the ethos of *maroonage culturel* (René Despestre's term). In one of her interviews Danticat stated: “I'm maroonage” (Shea 1997: 49), and the fact that Danticat speaks of herself as a contemporary maroon situates her writing in the long history of black resistance and survival. By presenting herself as a modern maroon, she resists the masculine and nationalist domination, and male versions of female agency. Danticat clearly sees her role as a diasporic female writer as similar to that of a contemporary conjure woman, a legitimate traveler in the post-indigenous world, who through her art redefines such fixed hegemonic labels as nationality or gender.

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