



# ***KRIK? KRAK!* AND *BROTHER, I'M DYING* BY EDWIDGE DANTICAT: THE TRANSNATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF HAITIAN REFUGEES**

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## **Introduction**

It may seem that an author writing about diaspora is supposed to stress unity and present narratives promoting a coherent image of a small community. However, when it comes to analysing and representing the identity or identities of immigrants and refugees, bringing hybridity, diversity and transnationalism to the foreground appears to be a crucial element of recent theory and fiction. Nevertheless, the works discussed in the present article seem to escape both traditional and modern assumptions and, in the process of narrative emplotment, they emphasise the problem of constructing coherent stories of identity out of incoherent experiences.

A collection of short stories by Edwidge Danticat published in 1995 and entitled *Krik? Krak!* offers unconventional reflection on femininity and diasporic identity constructed in narratives of journeys and immigrants' life. Additionally, an autobiographical family memoir entitled *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2007, presents a personal insight into both male and female immigrant experience. It also depicts a struggle for survival in politically unstable Haiti as well as within the inhumane system of the United States asylum regulations. Finally, in both works, Danticat attempts to recreate the processes by which transnational identities are developed.

Edwidge Danticat, born in 1969, is herself an immigrant. In 1981 she emigrated from Haiti to reunite with her parents in New York City. After coming to the United

States, she experienced discrimination and struggled to receive education.<sup>1</sup> Her first novel, published in 1994, entitled *Breath, Eyes, Memory* generated considerable interest and made her a recognisable writer. She has recently published another collection of stories describing diasporic life entitled *Everything Inside* (August 2019).

### Historical Context

Short stories collected in *Krik? Krak!* and certain parts of *Brother, I'm Dying* have to be considered in particular historical contexts. Edwidge Danticat writes about immigrants who travelled to the United States during the rule of “[t]he Duvalier, [...] [a] dynastic regime which lasted from 1957 to 1986.”<sup>2</sup> The first Haitian refugees that came to America in the late 1950s were “mostly politicians and professionals, who later brought their families.”<sup>3</sup> Immigrants from this “wave” settled mainly in New York City and Miami. Another wave of refugees, called “the boat people,” came after 1971. In fact, boat migration continued until the early 1990s.<sup>4</sup> American reports describing the situation of Haitian citizens under the Duvalier regime denounced “unspeakable tortures and humiliations” and “infamous night prowling secret police” called the *Tonton Macoute*.<sup>5</sup>

The political unrest and riots, constituting the background of the culmination of *Brother, I'm Dying*, can be viewed as a consequence of a series of rapid political changes and foreign interventions in Haiti. In 2000, a former Catholic priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was elected president of Haiti for the second time in his career. In 2004, over a year before the end of his second five-year term, “[a]n armed rebellion led by a gang [...] quickly seized half the nation” and forced Aristide to leave Haiti. A United Nations military intervention led by the United States and Canada was organised in order to pacify rebels on the streets of Port-au-Prince and “stabilize” Haiti. These violent events left the country in chaos and resulted in the death of over 100 people.<sup>6</sup>

### Transnationalism and Narrative Identity

The concept of transnationalism seems to be essential for understanding the complexity of the cultural changes and diasporic identities of Haitian immigrants. According to Steven Vertovec, transnationalism is “a condition in which, [...] notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now

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<sup>1</sup> Lulu Garcia-Navarro, “Author Edwidge Danticat On The Immigrant Experience,” *National Public Radio*, January 14, 2018. [www.npr.org/2018/01/14/577969701/author-edwidge-danticat-on-the-immigrant-experience?t=1553689399210](http://www.npr.org/2018/01/14/577969701/author-edwidge-danticat-on-the-immigrant-experience?t=1553689399210).

<sup>2</sup> Michel S. Laguerre, “Haitians in the United States,” in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas. Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World*, ed. Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, Ian Skoggard (New York: Springer, 2005), 830.

<sup>3</sup> Laguerre, “Haitians in the United States,” 830.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Millery Polyné, *From Douglass to Duvalier: U.S. African Americans, Haiti, and Pan Americanism, 1870–1964* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 181.

<sup>6</sup> Lydia Polgreen and Tim Weiner, “Haiti’s President Forced Out; Marines Sent to Keep Order,” *The New York Times*, February 29, 2004, [www.nytimes.com/2004/02/29/international/americas/haitis-president-forced-out-marines-sent-to-keep.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/29/international/americas/haitis-president-forced-out-marines-sent-to-keep.html).

take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning [...] arena of activity.”<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the transnational “exemplary communit[y]” is the diaspora, which experiences specific cultural, historical, and identity dynamics.<sup>8</sup>

Although there are numerous different approaches to transnationalism, only a handful of them are applicable to the matter discussed in this article. The first one focuses on individual consciousness and the subjectivity of personal experience. This level of transnationality is particularly marked by “a refusal of fixity,”<sup>9</sup> as identities within diasporas constantly change from one generation to another or even within a single generation. Different “[m]odes of cultural reproduction” constitute the next level. Those modes of cultural reproduction were studied through analysis of the traditional products of diasporic cultures. However, contemporary scholars focus more often on “hybrid cultural phenomena [...] found among transnational youth whose primary socialization has taken place within the cross-currents of differing cultural fields.”<sup>10</sup> Vertovec indicates that in the era of transnationality, people tend to assemble their hybrid identities from “self-consciously selected [and] syncretized” elements, which are often “elaborated from more than one heritage.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, the phenomenon of cultural hybridity is closely linked to various channels of cultural reproduction, such as world literature, the Internet, and even television. In spite of this vast perspective of cultural cross-connectedness, there also exist local “everyday networks”<sup>12</sup> contributing to “little” transnationalisms, those of “family and household.”<sup>13</sup> Even though they constitute an important element of diasporic identities, scholars point out that the lack of cultural fixity may pose challenges in the production of coherent local structures.<sup>14</sup>

Another crucial element of interpretation presented in this paper is to approach the narratives of Edwidge Danticat and her characters as a discourse of identity. The concept of “the self as a storyteller” can be understood in two complementary ways. The first concerns understanding the concept as the relationship between creating narratives of important events in one’s life and constructing a personal identity.<sup>15</sup> By providing “temporal organization” and forming specific narratives “through emplotment,”<sup>16</sup> this mechanism helps to process heterogeneous experience in a meaningful way “to grasp the self as a whole.”<sup>17</sup> In the second, a person narrating their world is always a social subject and is somehow bound to narrate their identity with a particular “orientation to the context at hand,” be it historical, social or simply

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<sup>7</sup> Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London–New York: Routledge, 2009), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Anna De Fina, *Identity in Narrative: A Study of Immigrant Discourse* (Amsterdam–Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003), 16.

<sup>16</sup> The word “emplotment,” widely used by Hayden White in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), is a specific term used by Anna De Fina (both as a noun and as a verb) in *Identity in Narrative*. The definition of the term provided by the scholar: “a procedure configuring temporal elements into a whole by grasping them together and directing them towards a conclusion or sequence of disconnected events into a unified story with a point or theme,” 17.

<sup>17</sup> De Fina, *Identity in Narrative*, 17.

interpersonal.<sup>18</sup> Constructing or acquiring identity takes place within “the negotiation of personal and social roles,” images, and expectations.<sup>19</sup> This requires analysing certain “storytelling strategies,” discursive techniques, and linguistic aspects of considered narratives within the wider contexts of philosophy, psychology, and politics.<sup>20</sup> With regard to diasporic identities, researchers observe that individuals tend to create meaning through “constitut[ing] images of themselves and others, [and making] interpretations of the migration process” to determine their individual place in a bigger cultural framework of a diaspora.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, narrating one’s identity may be also viewed as “the expression and negotiation of membership into communities.”<sup>22</sup> An analysis of a discourse or a text with respect to belongingness usually focuses on exploring reflections of moral values, beliefs, and social categories. It can also take the form of interpreting strong similarities and differences between kinds of behaviour and sets of “implicit or explicit norms.”<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, scholars often emphasise the importance or even centrality of narrating certain episodes involving strong expressions of “attitudes towards social categories such as race” and ethnicity in the process of building communal memories and myths.<sup>24</sup>

As noted by De Fina, constructing identity through narrative appears to be also an act of “positioning” because it involves “both the storyteller and the audience.”<sup>25</sup> An autobiography or a memoir can mediate one’s reality but also challenge it by the sheer fact of being published or read and discussed. A coherent, autobiographical story may be seen by certain scholars as a finished monologue which cannot be further rewritten or retold; however, it is also a space for interaction with the reader, within which the storyteller attempts to establish a common ground and negotiate understanding.<sup>26</sup>

In the context of the Caribbean diasporic identities, Stuart Hall stresses the significance of perceiving the experience of identity formation as disrupted, fragmented and always in process. He suggests that the identity at stake, so to speak, is not “an essence” since it frequently lacks or cannot reach the final point of closure or a completed meaning.<sup>27</sup> He also argues that the communal identity of a diaspora is marked by “heterogeneity and diversity.” Hence, it remains alive due to differences, changes, and, again, hybridity.<sup>28</sup> Altogether, it seems that emplotting hybrid immigrant experience in order to give it coherence becomes the most important task of displaced storytellers and diasporic writers.

### **All Women but Not the Same**

In *Krik? Krak!*, Edwidge Danticat captures Haitian women in extreme situations, which enables her to represent differences among them and makes the reader aware of the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 165, 220–221.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 233–239.

<sup>28</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 244.

diversity of their identities and roles they perform. The short story opening the collection is an epistolary account from Haiti and from a refugee boat. A pair of lovers, writing letters they cannot send, describe the terrifying reality of a totalitarian state and their attempt to reach the American shore on a boat full of refugees. In “Children of the Sea,” Danticat presents the stories of two women: one left in Haiti and the other trying to flee while being pregnant. The first one has to live in a country terrorised by the barbarous *Tontons Macoutes*.<sup>29</sup> She is not well-educated; she tries to write in English but she uses Haitian French as well. In spite of this, her simple language conveys a gruesome message:

they have this thing now that they do. if they come into a house and there is a son and mother there, they hold a gun to their heads, they make the son sleep with his mother, if it is a daughter and father, they do the same thing, some nights papa sleeps at his brother's [house], [...] just in case they come, that way papa will never be forced to lie down in bed with me.<sup>30</sup>

The young lover is forced to grow up in a violent way. Moreover, she identifies as a rebellious woman, confident about her feelings and political views. She is not afraid of writing down her personal account of the atrocities committed by the Macoutes and she clearly suggests that she wants to finish her education.<sup>31</sup> The sheer act of writing her story is a kind of therapeutic process in which emplotment serves as a way to reconcile herself with the thought that her boyfriend might die on an overcrowded refugee boat and with the fact that her own social and domestic role is going to change due to her family's escape to the provinces.

The other girl's name is Célianne. Before leaving the country, she was violently raped by a group of Haitian soldiers and became pregnant as a result. She gives birth at sea, on a boat carrying refugees. The baby dies soon after, but the fifteen-year-old mother does not want to believe it. Eventually, the narrator, who also happens to be the boyfriend of the first girl, notes that she threw the child's body overboard “[a]nd quickly after that she jumped in too.”<sup>32</sup> Unlike the first girl, the young refugee does not have time to mature — she is unable to identify as a mother or as an immigrant. Her body and mind are literally trapped in a state of in-betweenness. In her death, she is reunited with other refugees and their African ancestors who perished during their journeys to the colonial territories.

A similarly tragic story is recounted by Danticat in *Brother, I'm Dying*: the author's cousin, Marie Micheline, marries a man, who decides to help her and her illegitimate child. In spite of this seemingly virtuous act, he seems to be one of the callous Macoutes and forbids his new wife to visit her family because they despise the Duvalier regime. She is secretly taken to a remote part of Haiti where, isolated from her family, she is heavily beaten and sexually abused by her husband. Her ordeal ends when she is rescued by her adoptive father, Danticat's uncle, Joseph. As she is rescued by her father, Marie Micheline is born again, starting her life anew.<sup>33</sup> In the course of the story, she gives birth to a daughter and three sons, becomes the head nurse in a local clinic and then the manager of her own small medical centre. She is a single mother, a determined and courageous woman. Although Danticat does not state it openly, in her

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<sup>29</sup> Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* (New York: Soho Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>30</sup> Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–11.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 81–86.

portrayal of Marie Micheline, she paints her as a Haitian feminist, paving the way for other ambitious women in Haiti. Unfortunately, she dies as an innocent bystander during a street shooting, which is a part of the military coup following the ousting of President Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier.<sup>34</sup> Her character is represented as dynamic, progressive, and almost transgressive, and her narrative identity is never stable and ends abruptly.

In other stories from the collection, Edwidge Danticat explores immigrant identity. The life of women struggling to survive in the New York Haitian diaspora is the central theme of “Caroline’s Wedding.” It tells the story of a wedding of the youngest daughter of a Haitian-American widow. This narrative can be interpreted through the lens of three levels of cultural reproduction. The first level is represented by the character of the mother. Her personality is a mixture of fear and disillusionment with the American reality. She enjoys telling the same family stories over and over again although her two daughters already know them by heart. She is also religious and traditional. Additionally, she believes in Haitian superstitions: when her husband died, she wanted her daughters to wear red underwear to deter their father’s soul from them when they slept. Even more importantly, her attitude and behaviour make more pronounced cultural distinctions between Haitians and other nations. While she learns to accept her daughter’s Bahamian husband and their civil wedding, she reproduces certain notions of national and ethnic differences between the Haitians, Bahamians and Americans.

The second level of cultural identification is exemplified by the narrator of the story, the older daughter named Grace. To some degree, her identity can be described as one of compromise. On the one hand, she goes to church and always makes an effort to understand her mother’s feelings and beliefs. On the other hand, she and her sister never put on the red underpants her mother asked them to wear and they do not hold prejudiced views towards the Bahamians or Americans. Grace abandons her mother’s Haitian traditions, but she is not able to gain real freedom until she receives her American passport. If the diaspora is “a central focus” of transnationalism<sup>35</sup>, anxiety resulting from being placed between two frameworks of identity, Haitian and American, is a transnational feeling characteristic of the second generation of immigrants, something which Danticat manages to capture in her stories.

Finally, there is a third group in the story that comprises the subsequent generations of the Haitian-Americans. The eponymous character, Caroline, was born and raised in America. She does not have her own mental image of Haiti — she knows it only from her parents’ stories. Furthermore, she represents a truly “hybrid” identity characterised by the reconciliation of differences stemming from feelings of national belongingness. However, this process is not a peaceful one, as it incorporates an open rebellion against the fossilised Haitian traditions and beliefs. As the younger daughter, Caroline takes transnational interconnectedness for granted and enjoys the internal freedom her older sister is not entirely able to experience and exercise.

A similar portrayal of Haitian-born immigrant women is present in Danticat’s “New York Day Women.” The “day women” are babysitters “taking other people’s children on an afternoon outing.”<sup>36</sup> In this short story, another mother character is depicted as emotionally attached to the thought of Haiti as home. However, in this case, the mother is ashamed of her work and is anxious about her origins and the social

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<sup>34</sup> Danticat, *Brother*, 133–137.

<sup>35</sup> Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, 133.

position of her family in the United States. She rarely leaves her house alone and hides the truth about her occupation even from her family. As in the short story discussed earlier, the narrator of “New York Day Women” is also a daughter, one who works in an advertising office. As the story progresses, she realises that she knows nothing about her mother’s job, habits, predilections, and, in consequence, is completely unaware of a considerable part of her mother’s identity. The women’s transnational ties are highlighted as the mother struggles to blend into the pace of life on the American street while the daughter subordinates her life to corporate expectations. Both of them live and work in New York, but their experiences are very different since the daughter seems to be completely immersed in her professional life and the mother is concentrated on her family. Nevertheless, the readers can clearly see that the younger woman’s perspective changes when she learns about the hidden side of her mother’s life.

In the epilogue to *Krik? Krak!* entitled “Women Like Us,” Danticat directly highlights the diversity that can be found among female Haitian immigrants and comments on the traditional roles they perform. She also makes explicit and provocative remarks about her own position as a female writer in a Haitian-American family: “No, women like you don’t write. They carve onion sculptures and potato statues. They sit in dark corners and braid their hair in new shapes and twists in order to control the stiffness, the unruliness, the rebelliousness.”<sup>37</sup> Her closing monologue resonates with the notion of artistic and professional freedom discussed in the context of female, black, and immigrant dilemmas and struggles, which are associated mainly with the third wave of feminisms.<sup>38</sup> Throughout *Krik? Krak!*, Danticat gives voice to Haitian women who share the same cultural identity and thus may be unfairly perceived through the lens of the homogenous entity that is the Haitian diaspora. Nevertheless, by emphasising the subtle differences between women and the gradual evolution of the Haitian-American identity, Danticat offers particular and distinct female narratives.

Furthermore, in *Brother, I’m Dying*, Danticat depicts women forced to make difficult decisions. She discusses her mother’s decision to leave her two children with their uncle in Haiti and go to the United States not only to reunite with her husband but also to find a better job and earn more money. Additionally, in the last chapters of the memoir, Danticat portrays her aunt, to whom she refers as “Tante Zi,” as a courageous person, not afraid to walk past rebels’ barricades or hide fugitives in her house. Due to such characters, Danticat introduces ambiguity into her narratives of female identities and stresses the importance of resisting the interpretation that views all Haitian women as an unchanging and homogenous group.

Danticat herself makes an important and difficult decision to mediate her transnational experience of Port-au-Prince, New York, and Miami by writing her family’s history in English rather than in Haitian Creole. By doing so, she manages to address and grasp the attention of the global audience. However, at the same time, she also risks being misunderstood or misinterpreted as she tries to encapsulate both her Haitian reality and the life of Haitian-American immigrants. More importantly, she describes the complexity of the Haitian-American identity to the audience whose members are unlikely to have any contact with Haitian culture. Hence, in her works, Danticat shows transnational uncertainty, characteristic of any member of Haitian diaspora that attempts to communicate their own perception of Haitian identities.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 192.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Evans, *The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 22, 87.

### All Men but Not All Equal

Danticat's family memoir presents two major male figures: her father, André Miracin Danticat, and her uncle, Joseph Dantica (the "t" in the author's family name was added by American immigration officers). Although they were ordinary men, for Danticat they are representatives of a special Haitian generation, the members of which experienced war and totalitarianism as well as immigration and diasporic life.

Danticat's father worked for most of his life as a tailor and a cab driver. He emigrated to New York City in the early 1970s — he entered the United States on a tourist visa without his wife and children, who joined him later; obviously, he "had no intention of coming back."<sup>39</sup> He emigrated for both political and economic reasons: he wanted to escape the totalitarian regime established by François "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his paramilitary Macoutes and, simultaneously, to improve his family's miserable financial situation. The book recounts his battle with cancer and his eventual death. As Danticat reconstructs her father's life, she realises that he might have been killed or severely injured by carjackers or gang members many times during his cab rides, and yet, he died in his house, wasted and defeated by the illness.<sup>40</sup> Although André Danticat's story of identity might be placed in a wider political context, his daughter chooses to narrate it within a sphere of locality, emphasising the "little transnationalism"<sup>41</sup> of their home and their transnational family relations.

The biography of Uncle Joseph is much more complex. The life of Uncle Joseph, a victim of unjust immigration and asylum policies, can be seen as a modern "transnational myth." Joseph Dantica was a devoted Baptist pastor; he established his own church in the district of Port-au-Prince called Bel Air.<sup>42</sup> Right after the ousting of President Aristide in 2004, a unit of Haitian police stormed Dantica's church and opened fire from its rooftop.<sup>43</sup> When the counter-terrorists left the district, the rebels accused the pastor of letting them kill innocent people from the top of his building. He had to leave his house and hide because the leaders of the gangs were determined to kill him.<sup>44</sup>

A few days after the shooting, he boarded a plane heading for the United States. At the Miami International Airport, Uncle Joseph presented his passport and tourist visa while he also immediately asked to be granted legal asylum.<sup>45</sup> Because of his formal request, he and his son were kept in the airport detention zone for asylum applicants for nearly a day and interviewed by customs officers, who claimed at some point that "[t]hey came [to the United States] with no papers and tried to get in —."<sup>46</sup> Although the old pastor had valid documents and could prove that he would unavoidably suffer considerable harm if he was deported back to Haiti,<sup>47</sup> he was sent to the Krome Detention Centre, notorious for treating immigrants like regular prisoners, where his health deteriorated rapidly. He died in Krome several days after arriving in the United States. His niece, Edwidge Danticat, narrates these events as central to her uncle's self. However, the image of Joseph Dantica's identity is a narrative reconstruction. The

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<sup>39</sup> Danticat, *Brother*, 54.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 120–123, 263.

<sup>41</sup> Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, 18.

<sup>42</sup> Danticat, *Brother*, 32–34.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 175–177.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 177–180, 193–194.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 210–215.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.



events leading to his death, abrupt, chaotic, and fractured, are provided with a clear temporal organisation and his self is presented as politically positioned within a framework of ethnic and racial differences and animosities.

Danticat believes that he should have been released from the detention centre because his presence in the United States would not pose any threat — he never had a criminal record and had no intention of becoming part of an illegal Haitian population. Moreover, she admits that she “suspect[s] that [her] uncle was treated according to a biased immigration policy dating back from the early 1980s.”<sup>48</sup> She supports her argument by quoting her uncle’s Discretionary Authority Checklist for Alien Applicants. The officer who filled it in claimed that Joseph Dantica did not have health problems even though he was an eighty-one year old “survivor of throat cancer” and spoke through a voice box. Furthermore, the officer noted that the applicant had not come to the United States because of an emergency and that he did not have valid documents, which was not true.<sup>49</sup> Danticat wonders why her uncle was treated this way by American officials: “Was he going to jail because he was black? If he were white, Cuban, anything other than Haitian, would he have been going to Krome?”<sup>50</sup>

### Haitian Identities in Narratives

The expression “Krik? Krak!” is actually a customary Haitian expression used to indicate the beginning of a storytelling session.<sup>51</sup> As her stories revolve around the discourses of journeys and home, Edwidge Danticat creates characters who construct their immigrant identities through narratives. Danticat’s “tales” always situate losing and building identity within the framework of the migration process. For the Haitian refugees of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this process did not mean only fleeing to the United States. It is necessary to put their migration in a much wider context of the journeys made by the Africans brought to Haiti as slaves. In a “questions and answers” session, Edwidge Danticat referred to this part of Haitian history, explaining: “[w]e are here because someone on a slave ship refused to die.”<sup>52</sup> Her words suggest that the forced journeys of their ancestors add historical and psychological depths to the modern, transnational experience of Haitian immigrants.

Some of the forms of migrating in *Krik? Krak!* are examples of female experience. In the selected short stories, women go to the United States to give birth, to the Bahamas for a honeymoon, or reunite with their ancestors by dying at sea. Moreover, preserving communal memory of the Haitian home through storytelling appears to be a feminine practice. In Danticat’s stories, women are the ones who reproduce their memories to keep themselves safe, to maintain community bonds, and to remind themselves of the connection between the living and the dead. In addition, Grandmother Melina’s stories recalled in *Brother, I’m Dying* are a way of nurturing children and preparing them for the hardships of life by discussing important and

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 222.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 223–224.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> My transcription of a Q&A session with Edwidge Danticat entitled *Edwidge Danticat: This Side of the Water: Haiti and Life in the United States* recorded on February 8, 2018 at the John Seigenthaler First Amendment Center in Nashville. “YouTube: Edwidge Danticat: This Side of the Water: Haiti and Life in the United States,” uploaded February 26, 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr4e2a4mSCA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr4e2a4mSCA).

difficult topics such as death.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the idea of creating or keeping something “for posterity” recurs throughout *Krik? Krak!*<sup>54</sup> and *Brother, I’m Dying*.<sup>55</sup> This responsibility falls predominantly on women, who put it in practice through both traditional storytelling and modern forms of cultural reproduction, such as taking photos.

One of the women who contributes to this cultural reproduction is the author herself. By writing a family memoir, Edwidge Danticat embarks on a quest to put the disjointed elements of her private migration history together and interpret them. Through the figures of her father and her uncle, Danticat seems to suggest that immigrant lives are marked by individual itineraries on the United States border. Furthermore, she shows that the identity of each Haitian-American is an ambiguous mix of two kinds of narration: one of fear and death and another of survival and subsequent happiness. In her account, it is possible to find such words and phrases as “disproportionately detained” and “deported”<sup>56</sup> as well as “I have enjoyed my life.”<sup>57</sup>

It can be stated that the most important story in *Brother, I’m Dying* is the narrative of Uncle Joseph’s arrival in the United States. Through employment, Danticat constructs an ordered and coherent account based on the disrupted and incoherent experience of pastor Dantica. Danticat, as his adoptive daughter and niece, narrates his journey and death in order to give him back his voice and reconstitute his identity. Figuratively speaking, she speaks for him since *he could not* express his suffering and anger. She takes political action, exposing an unjust migration system to the global audience while trying to give Uncle Joseph back his rights and subjectivity.

Additionally, not only does Danticat tell stories of individual people but she also constructs a narrative of her whole family, one which reflects similar stories of other Haitian-American families contributing to a distinctive community experience. Moreover, Danticat seems to use the medium of the novel to show the values cherished by her family. One of the most important points of her memoir is devoted to depicting the attitude of the American immigration officers towards Uncle Joseph’s ethnicity. Their malevolence is juxtaposed with the persistence and strength of Danticat’s family. In consequence, the United States immigration system is portrayed as based on indifference to human suffering and standing in opposition to the values of Uncle Joseph, Edwidge Danticat, and their family.

What is rather peculiar about *Brother, I’m Dying* is that Danticat finishes the book with two deaths. Interestingly, the motif of death is present not only in her other writings but also in the works of other Haitian expatriates. For instance, the poem “Death in Haiti” (translated by Haun Saussy) by Jean Métellus, a French neurologist of Haitian origin, paints a terrible picture of a dangerous place tormented by “Cyclones, Storms, and Tempests” where “the president knows neither his father / nor his daughter / nor his son” and “he cuts life short.”<sup>58</sup> On the whole, Métellus’s book of poems entitled *When the Pikipite Sings* (2019) appears to be yet another attempt to put together, rethink, and reproduce — through culture — a Haitian identity which has been violently fragmented and disrupted.

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<sup>53</sup> Danticat, *Brother*, 68–70.

<sup>54</sup> Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, 93, 103, 104, 181.

<sup>55</sup> Danticat, *Brother*, 256.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>58</sup> Jean Métellus, *When the Pikipite Sings*, trans. Haun Saussy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 66–67.

## Final Remarks

Haitian immigrants have to continually put together and interpret their turbulent migration itineraries in order to see themselves and their identity as a coherent whole. A major part of this mechanism is the fact that subsequent generations of immigrants have to “negotiate” their transnational identity in relation to stories about Haiti — that remain, at least to some extent, subjective — told by older generations. As noted by Stuart Hall, their identities are not an “accomplished fact”<sup>59</sup> but rather a process of cultural reproduction and negotiation because they are often hybrid or even fragmented and disjointed. However, Danticat’s narrative emplotment seems to represent the natural and almost never satisfied desire of migrants to understand and connect their experiences through temporal organisation, causal relationships, and a unifying theme.

In *Krik? Krak!*, Edwidge Danticat encapsulates the idea of diasporic transnationalism in her short stories. Within her narratives, she recounts the “processes of formation and maintenance”<sup>60</sup> of transnational identities. These narratives focus in particular on women and their experiences as well as their role of storytellers. In this context, *Krik? Krak!* seems to be common ground, where the feminist perspective, transnationalism, and the narrative meet.

Moreover, in *Brother, I’m Dying*, Danticat composes both her private immigrant “mythology” and a universal “tale” about people forced to migrate in a transnational yet violent world. The stories of her cousin, aunt, father, and uncle are only four out of a multitude of Haitian narratives she mentions in her memoir. The family bonds she presents and the feelings of brother- and sisterhood she shares add another crucial piece to an enormous mosaic of Haitian identity, one which can cross seas and borders. The picture of identity shown in those narratives is almost always built in a process full of pain, hope, and perseverance. However, the story of Danticat’s family demonstrates that the Haitian identity is not one of a victim, but rather of a sturdy wanderer, ready to tell his or her story even among a foreign nation.

By gathering information about migration, history, and home, and by arranging it into narratives, Haitian immigrants can construct or “conjure up” their identities. What is interesting, in Danticat’s works, this usually happens within the private or local sphere. Her characters are “kitchen poets,”<sup>61</sup> neighbourhood pastors, or cab drivers: they tell stories over boiling bone soup, in the bedroom, in a car, or in a local church. Whether they are aware of this or not, by doing it, they create small elements of the identity of the Haitian diaspora in the United States.

Perhaps some readers might think that the white Polish man who wrote this article on black people of Haitian origin does not seem to be fit for commenting on their problems and identities. Drawing inspiration from the introduction to Stuart Hall’s essay entitled “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” I must admit that I “write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific.”<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, I believe that the works I analyse, although they often show locality and private life, speak volumes about universal problems relevant for studying identities of immigrants not only in America, but also in Europe, which has recently become a “New World” for Syrians, Afghans, and many nations from North Africa.

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<sup>59</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 234.

<sup>60</sup> Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, 193.

<sup>62</sup> Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 234.

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## **KRIK? KRAK! AND BROTHER, I'M DYING BY EDWIDGE DANTICAT: THE TRANSNATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF HAITIAN REFUGEES**

The article offers an interpretation of a collection of short stories entitled *Krik? Krak!* and an autobiographical family memoir entitled *Brother, I'm Dying* by the Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat. It concentrates on two interconnected issues: the transnationality of Haitian immigrants living in the United States and their hybrid identities interpreted in the context of the theory of identity in narrative. Selected works of Steven Vertovec, Anna De Fina, and Stuart Hall serve as the theoretical basis for the interpretation herein. The text sees the problems of migrating and living in a diaspora depicted by Danticat as phenomena important for developing transnational identities and producing narratives of identity-forming experiences. Moreover, the article presents an analysis of changing modes of cultural reproduction and dynamic identities of subsequent generations of Haitian immigrants. Additionally, the interpretation treats narratives of migration and diasporic life — often depicted by Danticat as belonging to the feminine sphere — as significant elements of the processes of putting together, rethinking, and reconstituting, through various modes of cultural reproduction, disjointed and disrupted Haitian identities. It also attempts to explore the techniques used by Danticat to build a coherent narrative of her family's immigrant experiences and mediate her perspective on immigrant reality.

KEY WORDS: Diaspora, transnationalism, Danticat, Haitian, identity

## **KRIK? KRAK! I BROTHER, I'M DYING EDWIDGE DANTICAT: TRANSNARODOWE DOŚWIADCZENIA HAITIAŃSKICH UCHODźCÓW**

Prezentowany artykuł proponuje interpretację zbioru opowiadań pt. *Krik? Krak!* oraz autobiograficznej powieści-memuaru pt. *Brother, I'm Dying* autorstwa haitańsko-amerykańskiej pisarki Edwidge Danticat. Tekst skupia się na dwóch połączonych problemach: transnarodowości haitańskich imigrantów żyjących w Stanach Zjednoczonych oraz ich hybrydowych tożsamościach interpretowanych w kontekście teorii tożsamości w narracji. Wybrane prace badaczy takich jak Steven Vertovec, Anna De Fina i Stuart Hall służą jako podłoże teoretyczne prezentowanej interpretacji. Postrzega ona problemy migracji i życia w diasporze opisywane przed Danticat jako zjawiska ważne dla rozwoju transnarodowych tożsamości i tworzenia narracji doświadczeń formujących tożsamość. Ponadto, prezentowany esej zawiera analizę zmieniających się metod kulturowej reprodukcji oraz dynamicznych tożsamości dalszych pokoleń haitańskich imigrantów. Dodatkowo, prezentowana interpretacja traktuje opowiadanie migracji i diasporycznego życia, które często jest przedstawiane przez Danticat jako należące do kobiecej sfery życia, jako znaczący element procesów ponownego łączenia, przemyślenia i rekonstruowania poprzez różne metody kulturowej reprodukcji rozczłonkowanych i zakłóconych haitańskich tożsamości. Obecna analiza stara się również zbadać techniki użyte przez Danticat w celu skomponowania spójnych opowiadań dotyczących imigranckich doświadczeń swojej rodziny oraz przekazania swojego punktu widzenia na imigrancką rzeczywistość.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Diaspora, transnarodowość, Danticat, haitański, tożsamość