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Carrying Trauma: Identity through Time and Space

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With a series of what, at first sight, seem to be unconnected short stories, Edwige Danticat's Krik? Krak! tells the story of Haitian women and their struggle against a failed state and the diaspora in the United States. In the epigraph of the book, a quote explains to the reader the meaning of the book's title. As readers, we learn that this is a ritualistic exercise that grandmothers use to begin telling stories to the children, for them to know where they come from. With this strong orality emphasis in mind, and the fact that Danticat's women have a similar ritual in common, the purpose of this paper is to propose a reading of Krik? Krak! in which identity is forged by trauma, goes beyond time and space, and is highly linked to orality.

In the story "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" we learn about the catastrophic effect of the Dajabón river on the women of Krik? Krak!. When running from Trujillo's[1] order to execute the Haitians, an unnumbered group of women had to cross the river and return to Haiti so that they could save their lives. However, it was not a smooth journey, many of them died crossing the river and the river itself became a symbol of life-death and trauma. We can find evidence of this when the main character states "we were all daughters of that river, which had taken our mothers from us…the river was the place where it had all begun" (Danticat 41). This means that due to trauma not only did women lose their mothers, but also they began a new life marked by the fact that now they declare themselves daughters of that river.

It is also important to highlight, that since the Dajabón is the official border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Danticat's women are establishing a *locus* of identification

[1] Rafael Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 until 1961.

linked to a place that is *in between*. They are the daughters of trauma and diaspora, but also of a non-place. As Marc Augé states "The link between individuals and their surroundings in the space of non-place is established through the mediation of words, or even texts" (94). Therefore, the speech act of naming themselves *daughters* of that river is one of the necessary characteristics of a non-place. The appropriation act is a gesture towards the definition of their identity. But it is not a steady and finished identity. The life and death of the other *daughters* will be continuously adding another layer of meaning to the discursivity of this non-place.

In the final short story, we learn that due to the river trauma the women started a closed group, Gracina reveals that "her mother [referring to her own grandmother] belonged to a secret women's society in Ville Rose" (Danticat 165). There are two aspects regarding this secret society: one, they are all *daughters of the river*; and two, they all share a secret code that enables them to identify one another. The code is a game in which they ask each other questions and, in the answers, they must repeat at least one of the words that have been used in the question. Like *Krik? Krak!*, the game also serves as a tool to transmit the stories about the other *daughters* and to remember where they come from.

Not only has this ritual been passed through time (by the time Gracina picks it up she is already the 3rd generation), but also through space. In "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" the code is used in Ville Rose (a fictional town in Haiti) to identify another member of the secret society; meanwhile, in "Caroline's Wedding" (a story that develops in New York) Gracina finishes her story by using this ritual to talk to her mother in the kitchen. This passage illustrates how the oral tradition originated in trauma is transmitted regardless of changes in both time and space. Even two characters that were not born not raised in Haiti and have a hybrid identity (Gracina was born in Haiti but becomes a citizen of the U.S. and her sister was born in the U.S. and does not understand Creole) inherit the ritual and are, therefore *daughters of the river* as well.

Danticat highlights the importance of orality once again in the epilogue of the novel. As if the dead relatives were talking beyond the grave, the narrator says: "And over the years when you have needed us, you have always cried "Krik?" and we have answered "Krak!" and it has shown us that you have not forgotten us" (Danticat 224). That means that both *Krik? Krak!* and the question game accomplish the same function: they are a reminder of the pieces that make up their roots. Both traditions are the living tale of the dead, they represent their memories, their suffering and their group identity.

Because of its ritualistic character, of the questions game, there is a multi-layered effect in place when performing the storytelling. As Davis says, "the telling of stories heals past experiences of loss and separation; it also forges bonds between women by preserving tradition female identity as it converts stories of oppression into parables of self-affirmation and individual empowerment" (68). This healing factor and empowerment can be easily linked to how Freud thought traumatized patients should be treated. For him, "la tarea planteada es más bien esta otra: dominar el estímulo, ligar psíquicamente los volúmenes de estímulo que penetraron violentamente a fin de conducirlos, después, a su tramitación." (Freud 29). In other words, it is possible to argue that the rituals presented in Danticat's novel are a way to deal with trauma by giving voice to the dead (both historical and fictional), and allowing the characters and the reader to engage into some kind of group therapy through the act of talking and reading. These speech acts enable the "processing" that Freud proposes since they are a conscious act of reviving the traumatic experiences.

Since the two analog rituals (*Krik? Krak!* and the questions game) are acts of language, they are (in theory) bound to a determined place and time. Although "Language produces temporality through tense, and time is inscribed in, limited and bound by horizons of language." (Gillman 334), when the narrator states "[...] name each braid after those nine hundred and ninety-nine women who were boiling in your blood […] the names would come rolling off your tongue. And this was your testament to the way that these women lived and died and lived again" (Danticat 224), not only are the deaths of these women within the blood of the person; but, as they live and die, and live again every time their stories are told, it also means that by reading them, as active participants in the storytelling we are also calling them back to life, and thus, expanding the *horizon of language*. Danticat's women will live and die forever as long as someone reads the book and, since we have learnt both rituals, when someone asks us Krik? We will be able to answer Krak!

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