

Restless Spirits: Syncretic Religion in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

by

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A dusty footpath led us to a tree-line cemetery at the top of the hill. Tante Atie walked between the wooden crosses, collecting the bamboo skeletons of fallen kites. She stepped around the plots where empty jars, conch shells, and marbles served as grave markers. "Walk straight," said Tante Atie, "you are in the presence of family." (149).

Abstract

There is very little critical work about the role of religion in Edwidge Danticat's novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, despite religious language being pervasive throughout the entire text. With a particular focus on the operation of syncretic religious traditions in both Haiti and the United States, this paper explores how spiritual faith can provide healing from physical and emotional trauma, particularly for the female characters who reclaim religion practices as modes of agency and transformation.

The characters of Edwidge Danticat's 1994 novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* are haunted by otherworldly restless spirits. Ghosts, generations of ancestors, and recently deceased family and friends pervade the world of the novel; it is a world in which divine intervention, communication with the dead, and the reverence of nature all point to the operation of a syncretic religious tradition. These spiritual beliefs are African in origin and Haitian in practice. But these beliefs are also mitigated by the constant presence of the New World; a distinctly American spiritual sensibility that interrupts and disrupts traditional religious beliefs and practices in the novel.

Few of the characters in the novel find emotional peace or physical healing outside of death, as they navigate their brutal personal histories, full of both political and sexual violence. Danticat has made it clear that we are to understand the pervasive sexual violence in the novel on multiple levels: as it examines the underreported and too commonly accepted physical violence perpetuated against Haitian women, as well as the violence perpetuated against the island of Haiti, by both interior and exterior forces.

And while the personal is political in this novel, we cannot lose sight that this is a story written about women and their specific forms of suffering. Danticat has us consider the stories of Haitian women, in particular, because she says that their stories are too often invisible. In her essay, “We are Ugly, But We Are Here,” she writes:

Watching the news reports, it is often hard to tell whether there are real living and breathing women in conflict-stricken places like Haiti. The evening news broadcasts only allow us a brief glimpse of presidential coups, rejected boat people, and sabotaged elections. The women’s stories never manage to make the front page. However, they do exist. (2).

The women and their stories in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* not only exist, but these women sustain a particular relationship to the supernatural world. By closely reading these religious moments, we can explore how participation in a syncretic religious tradition provides hope, comfort, and release for Danticat’s female characters. Through Danticat’s use of storytelling and poetry in her novel, we can see the way in which language serves as scripture or sacred text for the Caco women. And it is their language, in story and song, written and oral, which reveal the tremendous role that the supernatural plays in their lives. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a novel about restless spirits, attempting to negotiate African, Caribbean, and American spiritual beliefs and languages, as well dealing with the triple stigma of being Black, female, and outsider.

I – Breath

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. (Genesis 2:7)

She told me about a group of people in Guinea who carry the sky on their heads. They are the people of Creation. Strong, tall, and mighty people who can bear anything. Their Maker, she said, gives them the sky to carry because they are strong. These people do not know who they are, but if you see a lot of trouble in your life, it is because you were chosen to carry part of the sky on your head. (25).

Guinea, located off the west coast of Africa and the product of French colonial rule, is a land of origins for many descendants of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In retelling a distinctly African creation story, Tante Atie reminds her beloved niece Sophie that Black people were present when the very breath of life was being breathed into humanity.

As Sophie struggles to understand the pain that three generations of Caco women have had to endure, this Guinea creation myth serves as a reminder of the collective responsibility for the chosen to bear the weight of others, with their Creator-given strength. The task of the strong to bear the weight of the world is a story prevalent in many cultures, most notably in Greek mythology's hero of Atlas. Yet, Tante Atie's sharing of this story about Guinea people particularly resonates for Black women, as she further alludes to the image of women bearing their loads in baskets upon their heads. Certainly aware of the biblical account of the creation and population of the world through the influence of the Catholic Church, Tante Atie has no trouble reconciling the biblical account with a far more ancient, African-centered cosmology.

We can particularly see the influence of an African cosmology in the choice of the name Ifé for the grandmother, the Caco family's matriarch. Named after an ancient Yoruba city in what is now southwestern Nigeria, according to Yoruba myth, Ifé is the site of the creation of the world, where the founding deities created humans from clay and the god Olorun breathed life into their bodies. Ifé is the site of origins; it is literally an African Genesis. Thus Grandmé Ifé, and the Black women who came before her, are the wombs of creation for the entire world.

The stories of both the Guinea and the Yoruba reveal the syncretic spiritual philosophy which govern the hearts and provide hope for the Caco women. While Sophie and her infant daughter are visiting Haiti, Sophie is reminded that her aunt's stories about Guinea also contain a promise. Guinea is to be the place where "all the women in my family hoped to eventually meet one another, at the very end of our journeys" (174). While this can be understood as "heaven" in a Christian context, Sophie's lessons from her aunt and grandmother situate heavenly paradise in an African text. Like the enslaved who longed to fly away "home," and thus back to Africa, the Caco women will only be at rest in their African home, a physical location they have never seen, but a spiritual destination for which they long. After her mother's suicide, Sophie remarks that Martine is "going to Guinea...she is going to be a star. She is going to be a butterfly or a lark in a tree. She's going to be free" (228).

The women in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* embrace this syncretic African faith and do not see it in conflict with their Catholic beliefs. These faith systems exist alongside each other, blending with one another to meet the particular needs of Haitian people. Tante Atie tells Sophie: "as long as you do not have to work in the fields, it does not matter that I will never learn that ragged old Bible under my pillow" (4). Tante Atie endures illiteracy and field labor, willingly holding up her piece of the sky like the Guinea, so that her niece does not have to bear the same burdens. And it will be up to Sophie to bear her particular piece of the sky, to lighten the load that her infant daughter will someday have to bear. And yet, Tante Atie longs to know and read the Bible for herself, seeking comfort in the words and scripture passages she hears at Sunday Mass, words that are supposed to contain the very breath of life.

II – Eyes

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. (Psalms 121:1)

Much of the novel is devoted to the attempts at recovery Sophie and her mother Martine make as they deal with the sexual violence that has been enacted upon their bodies; violence that has come from both hostile as well as “loving” sources. While only a teenager, Martine is raped and impregnated by Duvalier’s secret police. She never recovers from being unable to name or identify her masked assailant, Sophie’s biological father. Daily she lives the effects of this brutal rape in her dreams. Martine takes her own life after she finds out that she is once again pregnant, though this time it is by her loving partner and friend. All of the Caco women deal with the consequences of sexual trauma rendered by “loving” hands: each woman’s mother manually tests her daughter for signs of virginity. For Sophie, these tests begin when she leaves Haiti and joins her mother for a “better life” in the United States. And these purity tests continue until she willfully takes the pestle from her mother’s mortar and pestle set, uses it to penetrate herself, and thus “fails” her the virginity test. While she later marries and has a child, Sophie’s sexual relationship with her husband is fraught with psychological and physical pain. To whom do these women turn for help in their various times of trouble? What syncretic spiritual forces help explain their trauma and also offer some healing for their pain?

While living in Providence, Rhode Island, Sophie joins a sexual phobia group that speaks to the brutal nature of crimes committed disproportionately against women of color. One participant is an Ethiopian woman, who was circumcised as a child, and the other participant is a Latina who was raped by her grandfather for a period of ten years. Along with Sophie, the three women are helped in their recovery by a Black American female therapist, who is also a Santeria priestess. Their work at recovery does not take place in a traditional clinical setting because their therapy, first and foremost, is a spiritual process. Led by the Santeria priestess, these women wear long white dresses and burn candles and incense. They chant serenity prayers, pour libations, and add material objects to a makeshift altar. Their therapy is an act of worship, blending elements from African, Afro-Caribbean, and traditional Western faith traditions.

Upon her return from Haiti, Sophie brings back a statue of Erzulie to share with her recovery group:

As a child, the mother I had imagined for myself was like Erzulie, the lavish Virgin Mother. She was the healer of all women and the desire of all men. She had gorgeous dresses in satin, silk, and lace, necklaces, pendants, earrings, bracelets, anklets, and lots and lots of French perfume. She never had to work for anything because the rainbow and the stars did her work for her. Even though she was far away, she was always with me. I could always count on her, like one counts on the sun coming out at dawn. (59).

This statue of Erzulie is given to Sophie by Grandmé Ifé as an apology for the physical pain that the family had caused her, and it joins the statues of the Virgin Mary and other female saints and icons collected by the women in the recovery group. Whereas Erzulie is often depicted as petty, selfish, and sensual-minded, Sophie imagines her also as healer, protector, and provider. As the Haitian goddess of love and power, part of the complex loa or pantheon of gods in Vaudou, Erzulie is associated with the Virgin Mary, but is also depicted as someone who is sexually promiscuous. Sophie chooses to concentrate on those elements of Erzulie that represent female strength, courage, healing, and provision. While all of the female icons the women in the recovery group collect are participants in male-dominated, patriarchal religious traditions, these women use female icons partly to redress the ways in which women have been misaligned in sacred spaces. Too often confined to the categories of “Madonna” or “whore,” these female icons are reclaimed by women in a recovery group who are searching for a healthy sense of sexuality amid social and religious restrictions that deny any female sexual desire.

This image of feminine sacred protector especially resonates with Sophie because she had experienced sexual violation from her mother, a woman who herself was devastated by the effects of virginity testing, but nonetheless continued that tradition with her own daughter. Sophie says:

I had learned to double while being tested. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known...there were many cases in our history where our ancestors had doubled. Following in the vaudou tradition, most of our presidents were actually one body split in two: part flesh and part shadow. That was the only way they could murder and rape so many people and still go home to play with their children and make love to their wives. (155-6).

This “doubling” allows Sophie a mental escape for the horrific acts that are being committed upon her body. As if in a spiritual trance, she is clearly able to see and hear what is happening to her, but is “away” from her body during those moments of violation. While this doubling is a type of coping mechanism, it cannot be read as only an act of resistance, since Sophie makes it clear that murderers and rapists can “double” as well. In her essay “Silences Too Horrific to Disturb”: Writing Sexual Histories in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*,” Donette A. Francis reminds us of the cost of “doubling,” by connecting it to the psychological state of dissociation, which may offer the victim temporary mental respite from terror, but at “far too high a price” (83). Sophie “doubles” as her innocent spirit is being violated along with her innocent flesh; those she depended on for protection are also the source of her trauma. So for the duration of her physical pain, she seeks spiritual release by attempting to literally disassociate spirit from body.

Even before she is given the Erzulie statue or before she joins the sexual recovery group, Sophie copes with her sexual violation with religious imagery as she “mouthed the words to the Virgin Mother’s Prayer” while being tested (84). Virginity testing is the product of religious systems, African and Western, which reduce a woman’s worth to her biological value as virgin, or wife, or mother. But in the syncretic operation of those faith beliefs, healing from these limited gender roles and subsequent sexual violation is possible, when the focus shifts to a female-centered god, capable of hearing and answering the prayers of women.

The story goes that there was once a woman who walked around with blood constantly spurting out of her unbroken skin. This went on for twelve long years. The woman went to many doctors and specialists, but no one could heal her...finally, the woman got tired and said she was going to see Erzulie to ask her what to do. After her consultation with Erzulie, it became apparent to the bleeding woman what she would have to do. If she wanted to stop bleeding, she would have to give up her right to be a human being... The woman was tired of bleeding, so she went home and divided up her goods among her friends and loved ones. Then she went back to Erzulie for her transformation...the woman was transformed and never bled again. (87-88).

This story has a remarkable Biblical parallel in the eight chapter of the Gospel of Luke. The Bible gives an account of a woman who had an “issue of blood,” or hemorrhaging for over 12 years, and who also had spent all of her worldly possessions seeking relief from doctors and healers. This woman is healed by touching the border of Christ’s robe and is informed by Christ that her “faith hath made thee whole” (Luke 48:43-50). While the parallels between the biblical story and this one told by Sophie’s mother are obvious, it is the ending which has the greatest implication for Sophie’s recovery. It is not a male God-in-flesh that heals the woman in the Haitian parable. Erzulie transforms the woman into a butterfly, into a creature that is free from the constraints of humanity; a world that chose to either ignore or fail to provide for a bleeding woman. The biblical account frees the woman to live among the very same people who had denied her personhood, since as a “bleeding” woman, she was considered unclean and was not allowed to either worship or eat with those considered “clean.” This is another example of how syncretic religion operates within the world of the novel: the Western Christian Bible provides the basis for this parable, but it is a Haitian/Vaudou cosmology which allows a feminine god to be the source of help for women, whose very bodies are far too often anonymously violated and discarded. When Sophie casts her eyes to the hills for help in recovering from sexual trauma, she sees a god that reflects her own Black, female body.

III – Memory

The memory of the just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot. (Proverbs 10:7)

After Martine gives birth to Sophie, she leaves her daughter behind in Haiti and runs to America to try and escape the memories of her past. She visits various churches in Harlem and Brooklyn, seeking the solace of faith, and is continually drawn to African-American Pentecostal churches, despite her background as a Catholic:

“I feel like I could have been Southern African American. When I just came to this country, I got it into my head that I needed some religion. I used to go to this old Southern church in Harlem where all they sang was Negro spirituals. Do you know what Negro spirituals are?” she said turning to Marc.... “They’re like prayers,” Joseph said, “hymns that slaves used to sing. Some were happy, some sad, but most had to do with freedom, going to another world. Sometimes that other world meant home, Africa. Other times, it meant heaven, like it says in the Bible. More often it meant freedom.” Joseph began to hum a spiritual. Oh Mary, don’t you weep! “That’s a Negro spiritual,” said my mother. “It sounds like a vaudou song,” said Marc. “He just described a vaudou song. Erzulie, don’t you weep,” he sang playfully. (215).

Over two hundred years removed from the physical operation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and her enslaved ancestors who composed these spirituals, Martine still finds comfort in the songs, hymns, and religious expressions of a people that first created a syncretic African religious tradition in the New World. In these songs and in the storefront churches of Brooklyn and Harlem, Martine’s memories go beyond her personal trauma and connect her to her ancestors. She finds a space in which the Christian religion and traditional African religions, as well as the various offspring faiths of these two religions, can survive and thrive. It stirs memories in her that she is not even conscious of; memories which tie her to a collective syncretic religious community.

When Grandmé Ifé looks into her great-granddaughter Brigitte’s face, she tells Sophie: “The tree has not split one mite. Isn’t it a miracle that we can visit with all our kin, simply by looking into this face” (105). Grandmé Ifé sees a physical manifestation of generations united through blood, separated by continents and oceans, yet retaining a common familial core. This is what Martine hears when spirituals are sung in those storefront churches: memories of something she did not experience personally, but connected to her by blood and by a sustaining spiritual faith that transcends Africa, Haiti, or America.

Sophie marries Joseph, an African-American from Louisiana, who also speaks a form of Creole, and is well familiar with both hybrid cultures and syncretic faith traditions. He woos Sophie with his reminder that although they are from two different countries, there is much that they share: "I am not American," he said. "I am African-American." "What is the difference?" "The African. It means that you and I, we are already part of each other." (72). As a musician, Joseph plays "slave songs" and "Negro spirituals" on his saxophone and piano; he travels to Jamaica, Cuba, Brazil several times, "trying to find links between the Negro spirituals and Latin and island music" (73). He is seeking musically what Sophie is seeking spiritually: a way to blend the various components of herself for the healing of her body and soul.

Although just over eighteen, Sophie seems to understand instinctually that healing is tied to the recovery of memory, so she leaves Joseph and travels with their infant daughter back to Haiti. Even though she returns back to New York for a brief spell, she is pulled back to Haiti shortly thereafter for her mother's funeral and burial. The action of the novel ends with Sophie running from the cemetery and through the cane fields. The fields were once the source of African enslavement and are still the site of economic disenfranchisement for the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. But these fields are also the site of memory, a place where "you carry your past like the hair on your head" (234). And so in this moment, Sophie is not running away from the pain of her mother's death, but she is running to a source of healing. Grandmé Ifé catches up with Sophie and reminds her that "if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: 'Ou libéré?' Are you free my daughter?" (234).

Sophie is free to communicate with her mother, who though now dead, still lives. Sophie is free to grieve from the physical torment she suffered from her mother's loving hands, knowing that her mother was herself a victim of brutal sexual violence. Sophie is free to make the world less of a burden for her own daughter to carry by not perpetuating virginity tests on her daughter's innocent body. But mostly Sophie is free to recognize that the power of a hybrid faith that sustained her ancestors can sustain her. She comes from a place where "breath, eyes, and memory" are one; a place in which African religion, Christianity, and Vaudou create a syncretic faith for a Diasporic people.

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Notes

- 1) The custom of burying the dead with material objects from everyday life was, and is still, a common custom in many African nations. This retention is still seen in many Afro-Caribbean cultures and has been documented in early African-American slave culture. In the excavation of New York City's African Burial Ground, cowry shells, beads, pottery shards, pieces of jars, and other objects were found purposely buried with the dead. For a brief discussion of this, see Michael L. Blakey's "The New York African Burial Ground Project: An Examination of Enslaved Lives, A Construction of Ancestral Ties" in *Transforming Anthropology*, 7 (1), 1998.
- 2) By "outsider" status I mean to remind the reader that the Sophie and Martine are immigrants, so that in addition to their race and gender, they are dealing with the unique status of being Haitian immigrants to America during a time in which Haitians were demonized as part of the "4 H" group connected to the AIDS/HIV epidemic: Haitians, hemophiliacs, homosexuals, and heroin users.

3) Guinea shares with Haiti a French colonial past. In 1958, Guinea became the first French African colony to gain independence, following in the footsteps of Haiti which had, one hundred and fifty years earlier, abolished slavery and declared its independence from French colonial rule.

4) Santería is an Afro-Caribbean religion, with tenets derived primarily from traditional beliefs in the Yoruba religion. Brought to the New World by slaves, Santería is widely practiced throughout the African Diaspora, including the United States, the Caribbean, Cuba, and many regions of South America.

5) Vaudou is alternately spelled as “Voodoo” or “Vodou.” It is primarily a mixture of West African and Christian religious beliefs. Like Santería, it is also practiced by many people throughout the African Diaspora, although most often just associated with Haiti. Vaudou’s survival and longevity as a faith system is explicitly linked to its syncretic blending with Roman Catholicism.

6) Traditional Christian theology maintains a clear cut distinction between the “spirit” and the “flesh,” as the believer is urged to “die” to the flesh so that the spirit may fully live. To that extent, “doubling” can be read as the problematic Christian emphasis to deny even the abuses and violations of the body, since suffering brings you closer to a desirable spiritual state.

7) Danticat’s choice of New Orleans, Louisiana as Joseph’s birthplace is deliberate; Joseph is not only African-American, he is a Creole. Like Haitians, many Creoles in New Orleans speak a form of patois, with a significant Francophone influence. Creoles are ethnically a mix of French, Spanish, African, and Native American, similar to the ethnic variety of Haitian people. And New Orleans is the home of various syncretic religious traditions, including Vaudou and Santería, even in the midst of a strong Catholic influence.