

# Remembering the Wretched: Narratives of Return as a Practice of Freedom

by

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## Abstract

Taking as its departure point ‘Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders’, the final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, this essay explores the legacy of Fanon’s insights on the psychological consequences of the anti-colonial struggle through an examination of the work of two post-colonial writers, Toni Morrison and Edwidge Danticat. As narratives of return, Morrison’s *Beloved* and Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* illustrate the necessity of returning to sites of trauma in order to resolve the assault inflicted by enslavement, colonization, and the anti-colonial struggle. The essay argues that these works not only affirm Fanon’s commitment to understanding the multiplicities of liberation, but also challenge his dismissal of the importance of “native” spirituality in the path towards freedom.

## Introduction: Fanon’s Final Adieu

In *The Wretched of the Earth*<sup>1</sup>, Fanon theorizes a rupture between colonization and decolonization that must be marked by violence in order to be authentic. He reasons that where once hostility of the colonized was directed toward his compatriots or else confined to the practices of dance and possession in which “symbolic killing, fantastic rides and imaginary mass murders [were] brought out and the most acute aggressivity and the most impelling violence [were] canalized, transformed and conjured away,” the confrontation with the colonizer serves as the conduit for the expression of rage. Where the violent impulse was once appeased by myths, it is now directed towards the very real act of liberation (Fanon 57). With this cleavage, not only is the social order completely inverted as “the last shall be the first” (Fanon 2), but the decolonized terrain is a *tabula rasa*.

Fanon, the revolutionary, imagines that this violence unifies the colonized and is a cleansing force for the individual, freeing him from his despair and inaction, making him fearless and restoring his self-respect. Violence is met with self-imposed silence as “when the native is tortured, when his wife is killed or raped, he complains to no one” (Fanon 92). The “native” simply continues to fight, maintaining focus on the justice that will ultimately justify his violence. There is no room for the exposure of grief, only for reciprocating such violations.

However, this liberatory violence is not without psychic and psychological consequence as Fanon, the psychiatrist, explores in *The Wretched's* final chapter, ‘Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders’. Through case studies of both victims and perpetrators of violence committed during the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria, Fanon reveals his belief that political violence cannot be bracketed, that it bleeds into the realm of the intimate.<sup>2</sup> It is significant that Fanon wrote *The Wretched* in the middle months of 1961, shortly before dying of leukemia, and thus its final chapter, from which this paper owes its foundation, is his final adieu. Given that torture and other forms of violence continue to be widespread practices in conflicts local, regional, and global, Fanon’s insights on its consequences are clearly applicable to the terrain of the 21st Century. However, the current work focuses not on “the wretched of the earth again”,<sup>3</sup> but on Fanon’s wisdom in directing our attention toward the psychological and social fragmentation that results from violent confrontations with modern power. It is a more ethereal but no less potent arena of liberatory struggle, one that is engaged in through the use of multiple strategies, including the act of writing.

Using Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, this paper explores the ways in which the psychic trauma inflicted by regimes of modern power, trauma that Fanon insists upon exposing, is represented in and resolved through the journeys of the novels’ protagonists. It observes that whereas Fanon envisions the decolonized subject as one who rejects the symbolic, these post-colonial writers center the spiritual in the path toward reconciliation with the legacies of colonial and anti-colonial violence. As we will see, the characters in Danticat’s and Morrison’s novels engage in acts of violence in order to secure their freedom, acts that resonate with aspects of Fanon’s vision of anti-colonial struggle. However, these authors’ works suggest that in order to repair what enslavement, colonialism, and post-colonialism have broken, there must be a reconnection with the practices, the myths, and the embodied spirituality that Fanon appears to dismiss as diversions from the real business of liberation. Thus, these writers expose Fanon’s analysis to be shortsighted or incomplete.

However, their work also points to what might be one of the most profound elements of Fanon’s legacy. In illuminating and legitimizing the layered process through which colonized peoples defend and recover their humanity, Fanon’s work provides an indispensable bridge between the personal and political. In the last chapter of *The Wretched*, Fanon explores the deep psychic injuries that not only colonialism but also the anti-colonial struggle inflict.

This essay engages Morrison's and Danticat's works as post-colonial writing that affirms Fanon's insight around the importance of addressing the psychic injury he was so committed to documenting at the same time that it resuscitates the practices Fanon discards as impediments to liberation.

### **The Writing(s) of *The Wretched* as a Practice of Freedom**

The case studies in 'Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders' expose the hidden legacy of modern power and describe what must be faced after the revolution triumphs and the settlers are cast out. It is the past that is prologue. This chapter sheds light upon the ways in which violence, even in the name of self-determination, dismembers the subject. This violence, as it paves the route to a self-fashioning unfettered by direct colonial intervention, leaves the subject to reconstruct a self shackled by irons forged in the liberation effort itself. Fanon begins,

But the war goes on; and we will have to bind up for years to come the many, sometimes ineffaceable, wounds that the colonialist onslaught has inflicted on our people. That imperialism which today is fighting against a true liberation of mankind leaves in its wake here and there tinctures of decay which we must search out and mercilessly expel from our land and our spirits. (249)

Appropriately, Fanon ends this 'Handbook for the Black Revolution that is Changing the Shape of the World' with a glimpse into what must be exorcised from the recently decolonized body. When there are no settlers, no colonial regimes to dislodge, the revolutionary and her post-colonial progeny must feel their way to a freedom that relieves them of the burdens that trauma and its memory impose.

Post-colonial literature and, indeed, Fanon's account of his experiences with colonial mental disorders, are a testament to the fact that decolonization does not create a *tabula rasa*. Memory itself does not allow for the generation of a blank slate. In particular, traumatic memory, its movements and manifestations, does not allow the 'liberated' subject to escape her colonized or enslaved self through the "complete and absolute substitution of one species of man by another." Decolonization and emancipation must not be equated with freedom. Violence and trauma create fractures through which the memory of them flows and the post-colonial subject must discover a way to cross these rivers of memory rather than wait at their banks, paralyzed by the fear of their flood. To do this, she must hold the contradiction that lies in the fact that, as violence in the struggle against oppression may restore self-respect, its moments of execution induce a shame that is calcified by the silencing of that experience.

Unarticulated and disremembered, the traumatic event, in its insistence upon being fully known, stalks she who must recover the symbolic practices Fanon speaks of as having been discarded by the anti-colonial consciousness and that, in the post-colonial moment, cleanse rather than disarm.

The spiritual beliefs and practices that Fanon dismisses as “fancies” and an “unreality” that have blinded “the native” for centuries persist in occupying an instrumental role in the route to release from trauma, complexifying notions of individual and collective freedom. In a political context in which many more were invested in the Marxist paradigm of liberation and Black revolution was visibly, tangibly changing the face of the earth, Fanon’s vision of freedom as a political sovereignty that was neither a model of European nationhood nor a revitalization of pre-colonial configurations excluded the symbolic. More than forty years later, in the face of a political and social reality that is significantly different yet in conversation with the past, notions of liberation have shifted but the possibility of freedom has not vanished. For the post-colonial subject who continues to struggle for political autonomy through economic viability, freedom has also come to be located in those practices that fuse the fractures created by the violence of colonization and decolonization.

Foucault, whose destabilization of politics and conception of relationships of power challenge metanarratives that promise freedom to be the reward for the sacrifices of violent political struggle, theorizes such practices. Though he admits to a certain caution about the theme of liberation, he nevertheless believes that it does exist and that decolonization exemplifies this act. In a 1984 interview, he stated,

When a colonial people tries to free itself of its colonizer, that is truly an act of liberation, in the strict sense of the word. But as we know, that in this extremely precise example, this act of liberation is not sufficient to establish the practices of liberty that later on will be necessary for this people, this society and these individuals to decide upon receivable and acceptable forms of their existence or political society. That is why I insist on the practices of freedom rather than on the processes which indeed have their place, but which by themselves, do not seem to me to be able to decide all the practical forms of liberty. (3)

His suggestion that there are practices of liberty is useful in understanding the process by which the post-colonial subject might construct a self in which the fragments of that self, a self fractured by rivers of traumatic memory, might be reunited. In engaging in such practices, the subject moves outside of the repetition of trauma and reaches resolution.

One of the most prevalent practices of freedom for the post-colonial subject is the disinterment of memory as a means by which to expose the hidden histories of violence. As the denial of these histories is the silent partner of violation itself, post-colonial writers engage in practices of freedom in the act of writing. In constructing texts that seek to peel away and examine the layering of colonial/post-colonial experience, the memories of people whose lives have been distorted or erased by the victors of history are released, their violations articulated, and their inner lives recollected and reclaimed. Toni Morrison explains,

For me- a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman- the exercise is very different [from earlier black writers who recorded their experience in a way that made it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it]. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate. The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic (191). In this process, the body of collective recollections that the writer and/as marginalized person has access to is critical to unearthing the truths of those inner lives. To remember collectively is to take a step deeper into the ownership of one’s self. It is the refusal to have one’s stories told by those who were not there or do not care to ask for a different truth. It is a way of taking back an intimate part of oneself. Thus, the practice of memory itself is also a practice of freedom.

This literary archaeology is mirrored in the journeys of the characters in post-colonial literature whose excavations of and encounters with the memory of their collective experience ‘conjures away’ and thus redresses the real and relentless violence in which post-coloniality has been constituted. One of the ways in which post-colonial literature addresses the critical role that memory plays amongst those who have undergone traumatic dislocations and who long for remedy and reparation is through the returns to sites of violation. These returns, which involve movement across time, space and place, rely on memory to chart a course across itself and are qualitatively different from those that are characterized by the blind repetition of re-traumatization. Rather, they are a route to release.

“Trauma,” Cathy Caruth tells us, “seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise unavailable” (4). As both injury and its telling, trauma itself is a return of the voice to the site of a violation that was beyond language in its doing but nevertheless demands to speak. However, it is in the speaking, in the revealing of trauma in a way that is *guided* by she who has experienced it, that the wound might be healed. It is through returning to sites of violation that writers in the act of writing and through the exploration of the experiences of those written about, become the voice of the wound in the process of reparation.

For post-colonial writers and thinkers, this process of disclosure, of revealing and revelation, necessarily includes multiple trans-dimensional passages. Movement of a material, psychic and spiritual nature interrupts the violence of colonialism/post-colonialism and the terror of its unfolding and is critical for its subjects- perpetrators, victims and witnesses- to be relieved. For the writer who often journeys through archives, memory and imagination as well as across miles of land or sea in order to unearth the strangeness of truth, returns and thus movement are integral. Indeed, her text is itself a return to a site of trauma in that it has been in words, in the language of the colonizer, as well as in deeds that the colonial/post-colonial subject has been distorted and dehumanized. Furthermore, nested within the text is the palimpsest of returns embarked upon by characters, the destiny of whose longings illustrate as they instruct post-colonial subjectivity.

As narratives of return, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* traverse the rivers of traumatic memory and illustrate that freedom is not a destination, but a process engaged in through the act and art of telling. As texts that deal with the experience of Black women in the Americas, both narratives are inextricably linked to the legacy of slavery. Legally sanctioned, socially acceptable and economically indispensable, the centuries of exploitation of Black women's labor, sexuality and reproduction and the deeply entrenched ideology of white supremacy that accompanied it leave not "tinctures of decay" as Fanon suggests of imperialism, but vast cesspools that mine the landscape of home. Indeed, for Black women enslaved in the Americas, home- literally, the plantation or dwelling of the slave owner and, metaphorically, the body was the site of violations intimate and unfathomable. Thus, it is to this sense of 'home' that these texts must return, venturing back through travel and embodiment in order to redress the violated body and articulate sorrows denied.

### **Confronting Modern Power: Travel and the Return of the Sacred**

"The trouble with the EngEnglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means." (Rushdie 353)

Mr. 'Whisky' Sisodia, Salman Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*

Whether as a result of exile, migrations elected and involuntary, a successful colonial education (successful because the student identifies with the land, language, and lifestyle of the colonizer more than that of her own), or psychic fragmentation that is induced by trauma and denies one the fullness of one's experiences, the history of the post-colonial subject, ironically like that of the English, in many ways happens elsewhere. With shards of personal and collective history deposited across time, space and place, the journey of the post-colonial subject often involves a physical return in order for her to recollect herself and to be remembered.

At the center of Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* are the two returns to Haiti made by Sophie and Martine Caco. Through the contrast in the context and content of Sophie and Martine's returns, Danticat illustrates that the process of recovery entails not simply homecoming, but homecoming that consists of reconciliation through confrontation.

Martine, a Haitian woman living in the United States who was raped in a cane field at age 16 by a man who could have been a member of the *Ton Ton Macoutes*, the infamous security force of the Duvalier regime. From this assault, Martine bore a daughter, Sophie, whose face bears striking resemblance to that of her mother's assailant. Martine immigrated to the U.S. to begin a new life, later sending for Sophie while she was still a child, but is crippled by nightmares about her assault. Having avoided herself, her traumatic past and nightmarish present, Martine ultimately commits suicide, returning to the physical site of her original violation for the second time in a casket, adorned in the red she never wore while living in Haiti.

The victim of virginity testing at the hands of her mother, in "an act of freedom" (Danticat 130) Sophie takes it upon herself to rupture her hymen with a pestle. However, this did not bring about resolution as Sophie suffers from bulimia and, once married, cannot have a healthy sexual relationship with her husband. Sophie's first trip back to Haiti with her infant daughter was one in which she fled her life in Providence in search of an antidote for her self-loathing. She travels into her own past as well as that of the other women in her family in order to unravel the mysteries that bind her. She is looking for that which she does not remember, for the serpent in the garden of her own dreams as well as of those in her female line. She demands that her whole self be claimed, that her family and people not only know the wounds she has suffered, but also provide her with the salve. In traveling to Haiti, Sophie is also refusing to be counted among the missing and unaccounted for who flee their country of origin, propelling themselves into the abyss of North America. Her insistence upon exorcising the demons that haunt her, her family and the land itself direct people to acknowledge her suffering as they ask, "Is this what happens to our girls when they leave this place? They become such frightened creatures that they run like the wind, from nothing at all" (Danticat 157).

Sophie's return and refusal to mask her pain brings her grandmother to provide explanation for the *testing*, to carry some of Sophie's burden and to offer her solace through the statue of Erzulie.<sup>4</sup> The pressing of Erzulie into Sophie's hands and the uttering of words heavy with compassion, sorrow and regret ("My heart, it weeps like a river for the pain we have caused you", Danticat 157) are acts of reparation that are more than apology for the past but guidance and support for the future. The statue and spirit of Erzulie is the link between the past, present and future of the Caco women as it represents beliefs and practices ancient and alive. It is the symbolism dismissed by Fanon but clearly indispensable in the practice of freedom as it is the 'myths' and 'unrealities' that animate and intervene in the women's lives.

Returning to the stories and spirits of Haiti, Sophie is in a place whose language and rhythm resonate with a part of her identity that had been sealed over in the process of Americanization. She is able to reclaim the power that is the source of the symbolic and is essential to being released from the prison of post-colonial, intergenerational trauma.

The contrast between the character of Sophie and Martine's first returns and the different stages in the process of healing from intergenerational trauma that they indicate is also reflected in the way in which they experienced the termination of *testing*. While Sophie, in the act of taking the pestle to her bed and grinding away her hymen, controls the trauma inflicted upon her by her mother through this act of self-mutilation, Martine is dramatically and tragically powerless in bringing an end to the ritual. It is her rape, a violation that punctuates the violation more intimate and ritualized, that acts as a rite of passage from adolescence to womanhood, brutally reinscribing the notion inherited from the days of slavery that a Black woman's body is not her own. Her body is *tested* by her mother, raped by a stranger and impregnated with a child whose face is a testament to that violation and whose presence is the voice of her own wound. Her nightmares that come as a result of her refusal to return to the site of trauma keep her captive. While the first journey to Haiti brings about reconciliation with her daughter and an introduction to her granddaughter, it only submerges her deeper into the waters of traumatic memory. Upon leaving Haiti with Sophie, she becomes physically ill due to her "discomfort with being in Haiti." Seeming as though she narrowly escapes being overtaken and consumed by memory, she presumes that the possibility of safety cannot lie within the borders of that island. However, the site of her trauma has become her own body, which is not and has never really been her own. It is a body claimed by misogynist obsessions with purity, sexual assault, unwanted pregnancies, racialized self-hatred and one whose life ends in a tremendously brutal act of self-inflicted violence.

Foucault asserts that one must have a certain kind of liberty in order to engage in practices of freedom and perhaps the liberty that Sophie had as the one woman in the family who did not reach adulthood amongst the living ghosts and terror in Haiti allowed her to access such practices (3). In the narrative itself, Sophie's arrival in Haiti immediately follows the episode of self-mutilation that she describes as being "like breaking manacles, an act of freedom" (Danticat 130). While Martine's first return is an effort to fulfill her obligations as a mother and to her own mother, Sophie's return to Haiti is a retreat, a choice that she makes in her effort to fully know the truth of her trauma. Martine is conforming, she is submitting and, while there, she holds her breath, refusing to drink the air and ask the questions that would free her. In contrast, Sophie is able to search, insisting upon knowing why she was subjected to the *tests*, seeking out the source of her own and other women's violations.

The defense of honor, desire not to be disgraced, to show that women raised by a woman alone will not grow up to be trash is the explanation and the statue of Erzulie is the tool for the enactment of freedom. With these, she is able to make amends and returns to the U.S. calling Haiti 'home' for the first time.

However, it is in the second return that Sophie, after burying her mother and whose spirit Erzulie had surely transformed into a butterfly, confronts the cane fields, striking down the rapist who fathered her and who is represented by the phallus of the cane stalk. It is in this return that she might finally know the answer to the question asked of women who let down the heavy loads they carry long distances on their heads: “Ou libéré? Are you free, my daughter?” (Danticat 234).

Returns to sites of violation can themselves involve crossing boundaries erected by a consciousness steeped in the values and beliefs of the colonizing culture. Dismissed as primitive superstition and relegated to the quaintness of ‘folk’ beliefs, cosmologies in which the dead and other spiritual entities play an active role in the experiences of the living have been subjugated through the ‘civilizing’ as well as ‘liberating’ mission. Oppression in and of the flesh is foregrounded to the exclusion of other forces that might have a hand in the triumph or demise of the post-colonial subject. Fanon writes, “After centuries of unreality, after having wallowed in the most outlandish phantoms, at long last the native, gun in hand, stands face to face with the only forces which contend for his life- the forces of colonialism.” However, the Enlightenment model of reality in which belief in spiritual forces is relegated to the irrational and there are strict divisions between past, present and future is contradicted by the experience of traumatic memory and its resolution. Fanon, the revolutionary and psychiatrist, was clearly indoctrinated into this model but at the same time, his insights into the way in which the colonial/anti-colonial past is lived in the present invite inquiry into the necessity of adopting a more fluid conception of time in the process of liberation.

As Fanon indicates in ‘Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders’, to be haunted by the past is to live that violation in the present. To confront the violence that enslaves as it emancipates entails moving with the same unpredictability as memory itself, disregarding linear conceptions of time and place that deny the dead their influence upon the living. With this in mind, the trajectories of travel involved in returns to sites of violation in the search for reparation and release proliferate. It is this process that is explored in *Beloved* through the travel of Beloved, the child who Sethe, a woman who escaped enslavement on a Kentucky farm named Sweet Home, murdered when the overseer attempted to recapture her family. This overseer, Schoolteacher, was versed in scientific racism and oversaw her sexual assault; Sethe preferred death for her children rather than a life in which they would not only be worked like animals, but also believed to be only partially human. Complexifying understandings of reality, myth and the symbolic, *Beloved*’s returns are a refusal of the traumatic past to be confined by a tombstone, particularly one ‘bought’ with the sexual exploitation of a Black woman. Her returns are the slave past that is prologue to an emancipated present.

Until she takes flesh as a fully dressed woman who walks out of the water, she is a transmigrant between the house on I24 and the timeless place. As the baby ghost, she returns to the house in which her mother murdered her, providing company for her younger sister and terrifying her older brothers. Her murder and the willingness of the 'free' community to succumb to envy and their need to project evil and grief onto the most vulnerable of targets drive the family into isolation. Her grandmother, Baby Suggs, holy, who bore eight children, "every one of them gone away [from her], four taken, four chased, and all [she] suspects worrying somebody's house into evil," (Morrison 12) has finally been broken by the trauma of the day the whitemen came into her yard to claim her fugitive family. An "unchurched preacher" with nothing but her heart to offer, she gave up her healing work, believing that she had lied to the people in telling them that the only grace they may have is the grace they can imagine. Thus, the baby ghost returns at precisely the moment when the comfort of community and Baby Suggs' healing work can no longer be accessed in the attempt to reconcile the trauma surrounding her death and the life from which that death spared her. Eventually, it is her presence that acts as a catalyst for Sethe to unravel a history she has worked hard not to remember.

Both the return of Paul D, one of the men enslaved on Sweet Home and the only one to survive their escape, and the arrival of Beloved draw Sethe to the shore of traumatic memory and bring her to peer into the reflections of her past. She curses her mind as it is greedy for images of the past that threaten to collapse her, but accepts more of the pieces that Paul D gives and finds herself willing to answer Beloved's call to tell their story. It is only when Paul D leaves that she recognizes who Beloved is and rejoices at all that she no longer has to remember because she believes that, with Beloved's forgiveness, her memories, rather than her struggle against knowing them, can be laid down.

In addition to illustrating that trauma will not be silenced, Beloved's returns allow Morrison to expose the superficiality of the divisions between the past, present and future, tracing the links that connect the descendants of enslaved Africans to the experiences of their ancestors in their removal from their homeland and endurance of the Middle Passage. The Middle Passage: the journey from one world to the next that forever altered everything. Morrison's story, devised from memory and imagination, testifies to the unbroken cord. She imagines that the bond between Sethe and Beloved existed before they were brought together as mother and child in North America. Beloved's longing for Sethe is more ancient as Morrison suggests that this is their spirits' fourth encounter. This spiritual context provides some explanation for the depth of Sethe's desperation in needing to nurture Beloved as well as the futility of any attempt to appease her. Beloved is simultaneously a rebuked spirit who has assumed flesh and a representation of traumatic memory that consumes, possesses and threatens to multiply in the absence of self-love and forgiveness. "Three times I lost her," Beloved reveals, "Once with the flowers because of the noisy clouds of smoke; once when she went into the sea instead of smiling at me; once under the bridge when I went in to join her and she came toward me but did not smile.

She whispered to me, chewed me, and swam away. Now I have found her in this house. She smiles at me and it is my own face smiling. I will not lose her again. She is mine” (Morrison 248). In Beloved’s halting, fractured monologue, she is unmasked. She has always had Sethe in view. From the time Sethe was captured by smoking guns in Africa to the peril of the Middle Passage when she jumped overboard in order to escape the fate planned for her by the men without skins to Sweet Home where Sethe gave her birth to Beloved only to later take Beloved’s life in order to spare her from being recaptured and treated like an animal but dirtied in a way that only a human being can experience, Beloved followed Sethe. Beloved’s travel is a testament to the irrepressibility of trauma and the bottomlessness of what it is we do not remember.

## **The Body and Remembering**

Integral to these explorations of rupture and remembrance is the body and its designation as both the object of subjugation and the vehicle through which the subject engages in practices of freedom. In the highly racialized colonial/enslaved landscape, the body is not only an instrument of production, but is itself inscribed with an inferior status. Its characteristics distorted and despised as the incarnation of animalistic humanity and its reproductive capacity co-opted for the perpetuation of institutionalized domination, the Black body, and particularly the Black female body, has undoubtedly been the site of tremendous violation. In her work on rape, memory and African-American women, Catherine Clinton notes that, “the law very specifically withheld from a slave woman the rights of personhood and concomitant protection of the state. Sexual abuse could break a slave woman’s will and spirit. She was denied her right of consent and, under the law, her own body” (207). As such, seizing ownership of one’s body is fundamental to practices of freedom. It requires a return of the body to itself in order for it to be released from the cycle of traumatic memory which often contains what we do not consciously recall but is nevertheless embedded in the memory of the flesh.

Given the pervasive use of sexual violation as a tool of domination and the contradictions of colonized/enslaved motherhood, women’s bodies and sexuality must figure prominently in narratives of return. There is a tension within the violated female body in which the temporary relief achieved through disassociation is matched by the necessity of being present to one’s body in order for healing to occur. In her examination of the paradoxes of slavery in North America and the failure of freedom as figured in the project of liberalism, Saidiya Hartmann, observes that “the re-membering of the violated body takes the form of attending to the body as a site of pleasure, eros and sociality and articulating its violated condition...redress is itself an articulation of loss and a longing for remedy and reparation” (77). Yet, attending to that body means experiencing its memories and forgiving its terrorizing and traitorous vulnerability.

*Breath Eyes Memory* provides a poignant example of the struggle toward embodiment and ownership. Sophie's return to Haiti is about confronting her own body as a site of violation: her face is that of her mother's attacker, her body is what her mother, then she herself and then her husband penetrates, causing suffering. Though with her own act of penetration was one of volition not violation, it did not free her from being ashamed of her body and the presence of desire. Her bulimia is evidence that emotional pain resists submersion and is a way that the intergenerational wound speaks, that abuse continues to register on the body through self-inflicted injury. She continues to rely on disembodiment in the form of *doubling*, a term Danticat uses to invoke disassociation in the psychological sense where there is a separation between the body and consciousness during a traumatic event as well as spirit possession, as a means to escape the experience of sexual trauma. Through *doubling*, the body is disowned, the self dismembered and submerged.

The practice of both victims and perpetrators, *doubling* is linked to the tradition of possession and is a bridge to ancestral experience: "There were many cases in our history where our ancestors had *doubled*. Following in the *voudou* 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" (Danticat 156). Here Sophie is referring to Haiti's presidents, less than ten of whom completed their terms in office due to death, assassination and coup d'états, and the close association between political power and spiritual power in Haiti. *Doubling* is clearly critical to the psychic survival of all those embraced by violence and its mechanisms can also be harnessed and redirected in the interest of healing. The function of possession in the religious ritual is a confrontation with the truth provided by the deity or spirit. Similar to many instances of *doubling* or disassociation in response to severe trauma, an individual who has been 'ridden' by a deity has no recollection of what has transpired during the experience. She has been pushed to an alternate state of consciousness as her body is in possession of a force outside of her control. However, in these "fantastic rides" as Fanon refers to them, the body is vacated as a means of revelation and release rather than retreat.

In *Breath Eyes Memory*, it is not until Sophie flees the funeral to return to the cane fields, the site of her mother's violation and her own conception, and attacks the cane stalk "as though [she] were possessed" (Danticat 233), that Danticat provides a glimpse into the possibility that the mechanism employed in this tradition of *doubling* can facilitate the reintegration of selves splintered by trauma. Rather than 'leaving' herself in order to endure the use of her body to gratify either her mother's need to follow the Haitian tradition of *testing* or her husband's sexual desire, she abandons the fear and inhibition that had prevented her from confronting her phantom father. Her 'possession' in the cane fields brings her closer to discarding her own personal shame and, in doing so, challenging society's devaluation of what is female.

The same mechanism that, in the context of the traumatic event, is an escape from the body's violation, in the context of the journey to heal from that trauma, provides a means to overcome the fear that had prevented her and her mother from crossing the river of traumatic memory.

While Sophie is able to confront the past and alleviate some of her burden, this cathartic moment occurs at the end of the novel and thus we do not witness her coming to experience her body as a site of pleasure. For Sethe, on the other hand, the process of engaging with traumatic memory is facilitated by the presence of Paul D who becomes her lover and caretaker at the outset of the novel. Upon his arrival, he kisses and caresses the chokecherry tree scar that grows on her back and is itself the inscription of traumatic memory. When he holds her breasts that had been milked like a beast's so many years before, she is relieved that they, and the memory of that violation, are finally in someone else's hands.

Attention to the erotic and the celebration of a body denied its sensuality by the violence endured in slavery and in the attempt to escape it are critical to the process of healing. As Baby Suggs preaches,

Here in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them...and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (Morrison 105)

When Sethe is besieged by the past, it is the memory of Baby Suggs kneading her neck and bathing her gently in sections upon her arrival at 124 after her perilous journey that comforts her. It is her body, her woman's/mother's body, that is dissected by Schoolteacher, divided into "human parts" and "animal parts," and appraised based on the number of "breeding years" she has left. As such, her body is a terrain of struggle.

Ironically, in order to assume ownership of her body, Sethe must wrest it away from not only the Garners who 'owned' her, Schoolteacher who hunted her down and other white people, but also from Beloved. Beloved, as the abandoned child whose thirst for mother-love is insatiable and as the representation of an ancient wound that refuses to heal, seeks to claim Sethe as well. Once she realizes that Beloved is the incarnation of the baby girl she murdered in order to protect, she ceases going to work, caring for herself and attending to her other surviving daughter.

Denying herself sustenance and forgiveness for violence committed in the name of freedom, Sethe deteriorates as she desperately attempts to appease Beloved: “The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that never used to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (Morrison 288). Sethe’s resignation remains even after Beloved’s retreat and it is not until Paul D returns that the hope of her claiming herself emerges. It is in his offer to bathe her violated and denied body as well as in her inability to refuse him and his care that the possibility of redress lays. Sethe cannot own her body until she recognizes that it has value beyond its ability to work, to reproduce and even to mother.

### ***Conclusion: Envisioning “Total Liberation”***

“...The colonized subject fights in order to put an end to domination...but he must also ensure that all untruths implanted in him by the oppressor are eliminated...total liberation involves every facet of the personality.” (Fanon 310)

Critical to Fanon’s legacy is the importance that he placed on the psychic injury inflicted not only by enslavement and colonization, but also by the struggle against these regimes of power. His elaboration on the internalization of racist oppression and insistence that it be uprooted in order to achieve “total liberation” elevates self-discovery and the recovery from trauma to a political act. In her study of trauma and recovery of victims of sexual and domestic violence, Judith Herman asserts that, “...equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told. Murder will out. Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (1). Fanon, in both his work as a psychiatrist and in his writing of ‘Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders’ does the work of remembering through truth-telling in the interest of social transformation. However, does he envision this transformation to be complete? Is his conceptualization of liberation an achievable end or an ongoing process?

Fanon’s final adieu, with its focus on the complexity of the human psyche would seem to indicate that he understood liberation to be contingent. The tension that results from the desire to forget and memory’s resistance to suffocation has implications for both individual and collective self-definition and, for the post-colonial subject, the task of recovery entails grappling with atrocities that have created- and continue to create- a social order characterized by disruption.

The dilemma, then, is how to engage healing and enact resolution with respect to the traumatic event in a context where the nature of the larger “event”: i.e.: slavery, colonialism, imperialism, is such that the restoration of the preexisting social order is not an option. The significance of the colonial/post-colonial rupture is that it defies closure and a stabilizing resolution. It demands that the subject construct a healed self on terrain that is fractured and mobile, one that is provisional and incomplete.

The journeys made in *Beloved* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* both end in questions. Responding to Paul D’s insistence that she love and value herself above even her children, that she is her own best thing, Sethe’s asks “Me? Me?” Similarly, Grandma Ifé calls to Sophie after she has done battle with the cane field: “Ou libéré? Are you free my, daughter?” These questions go unanswered in the texts, suggesting that the place beyond patriarchal oppression, self-denial and re-traumatization exists at the same time that it has yet to be constructed. Having crossed the rivers of traumatic memory, Sophie and Sethe are certainly among its architects and these questions that face them beckon other ‘post-colonials’ to build in spite of, indeed, out of the instability and fragmentation that is their inheritance.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as *The Wretched*.

<sup>2</sup> Those who misjudge Fanon's thought to be irrelevant based on his dated language of liberation need only review the relatively recent discourse on the legality of torture that emerged during this latest War: the War on Terror, to surmise the contemporary application of his ideas.

<sup>3</sup> Upon seeing a violently repressed youth demonstration in Algeria in 1988, Josie Fanon, Frantz's widow, is quoted as saying "Oh Frantz, the wretched of the earth again" (Fanon 2004: x).

<sup>4</sup> In Vodun, Erzulie, in one of her manifestations, is the female Iwa (diety) of love, sensuality, and beauty.

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