

Empathetic Engagement in
Danticat's Brother, I'm Dying
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Abstract: In 2004 while fleeing upheaval in Haiti, 81 year-old Joseph Dantica died while being detained by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In seeking temporary asylum, Dantica became subject to regulations that can be assumed to have precipitated his death. This article discusses Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*, a memoir in which Danticat negotiates how best to establish her uncle's grievability as a subject. Using Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* as theoretical touchpoints, this article explores Danticat's manipulation of narrative form as an interrogation of the efficacy of emotional appeals. In viewing Danticat's narrative choices as her way to manage sites for empathetic engagement, this article questions the complexities and limits of affective citizenship.

Keywords: Danticat; *Brother, I'm Dying*; migration; grievable subject; empathetic engagement; affective citizenship; narrative perspective

In a siren, the individual muscles of a life collapsing,
as waves, stuttering on some harm,
your fingers may flutter in the viscera of an utter stranger
I wake up to it, open as doorways,
Breathless as a coming hour, and undone (Brand 63)

Having already achieved immense success with her fiction, Edwidge Danticat has recently turned more and more towards autobiographical non-fiction. In particular, *After the Dance: A Walk through Carnival in*

Jacmel, Haiti (2002), *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), and *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (2010) are all focussed on expressing Danticat's own experiences and that of her family. Although she suggests that she is "going to ease back into fiction slowly again" (Shea 192)—and she has begun to do so with, for instance, her recent children's book *Eight Days* (2010) and her recent novel *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013)—her shift towards the autobiographical has allowed Danticat a venue for further exploring the ethics involved in remembering and representing past traumatic events, a theme common throughout her body of work. In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat asserts, "Grappling with memory is, I believe, one of many complicated Haitian obsessions" (63). In Danticat's work, this "grappling with memory" has been witnessed in the narrative of a daughter's need to come to terms with her mother's abuse in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, in the re-telling of the 1937 massacre of Haitians in *The Farming of Bones*, and in the compilation of accounts of a former Tonton Macoute in *The Dew Breaker*. In Danticat's negotiation of the processes and limits of memory, to "grapple with" becomes an especially apt description, bearing as it does references to both physical and mental sparring. As much as "grappling" is "[t]o grip as in wrestling; to seize with hands and arms" ("Grapple," Def. 8b) and "[t]o encounter hand to hand; to battle or struggle with" ("Grapple," Def. 8c), it is also "[t]o try to overcome (a difficulty, etc.); to try to accomplish, . . . ; to try to deal with (a question, etc.); to try to solve (a problem, etc.)" ("Grapple," Def. 8e). As such, "grappling with memory" can be both to struggle against someone—the forces by which memory has been quashed—and to struggle against oneself.

In Danticat's recent turn towards the autobiographical, particularly in *Brother, I'm Dying*, this need to "grapple" becomes more personal, her struggle with memory and the ethics of commemoration more dire. *Brother, I'm Dying* tells a story of the collision of three life-altering events: her father's terminal illness, the upcoming birth of her first child, and her uncle's unexpected, tragic, and by most accounts wrongful death while in the custody of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Caught in 2004 at a moment post-9/11 when the United States perceived its borders to be threateningly porous, Danticat's uncle found

his simple request for temporary asylum precipitating his death. In assuming this three-part focus, *Brother, I'm Dying* requires Danticat to take on multiple positions as life writer. As both autobiographer and biographer, Danticat constructs a narrative where she is at times an interior consciousness sharing her own feelings, at times a somewhat omniscient narrator inside her father's or uncle's mindscape, and at times an overtly distanced reporter compiling the verbal and/or written accounts of others. The shift in particular away from a detailed, narrativized diegetic world to a listing of quoted facts has become a defining feature of this text, noted in almost all scholarship on it. As others have observed, a narrative in which Danticat felt comfortable entering into the minds of her subjects—either sharing what they have said about their thoughts and feelings or even anticipating what they *must have* been feeling—becomes a narrative of miniscule facts and quoted documents when she describes her uncle's detention and eventual death.

For the most part, the shift in narrative perspective and style has previously been explained as an example of a narrative's formal features echoing its content. The change in narrative can, for instance, be said to showcase the harshness of the bureaucracy that Joseph Dantica encountered when he sought temporary asylum (Danticat, *Brother* 215) in the United States.¹ Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw briefly describes this shift of style as “reproducing the clinical manner in which the authorities dealt with the case of Joseph Dantica” (76). Kezia Page similarly suggests that the shift towards offering “a staccato of information” (47) represents “the emotional exhaustion of the experience” (50). Nicole Waller expands on these ideas by assessing this shift in narrative as a sign of lost discourse space, one that argues against theories that depict borderland spaces as sites of “enunciation” (359).

In contributing to this critical discussion of the significance of the text's shift in narrative perspective and style, my reading will explore Danticat's narrative choices as an interrogation of the efficacy of emotional appeals. As I will argue, Edwidge Danticat's memoir, particularly the parts about her uncle's detention and death, is geared towards disrupting discursive “frames” (see Butler, *Frames*) that render immigrants and asylum seekers vulnerable to scapegoating.² In building upon

Wendy Knepper's linking of *Brother, I'm Dying* with Judith Butler's discussions of precarity, I argue that Danticat's manipulation of narrative form is a means of foregrounding this precarity and thereby of crafting a space in which precarity can be critiqued. As the following reading will develop, Danticat's narrative choices, by in part serving to manage sites for empathetic engagement, enable her not only to argue effectively for her uncle's grievability but also to explore whether the story of one person, a precarious other, can disrupt the ideological frames that cast some as having lives worth grieving and others as having ungrievable non-lives. The power of life writing or testimony should be in its ability to humanize a larger issue through the story of one individual. This humanization is what can motivate social change. But in a post-9/11 context, Danticat's text must, while giving voice to precarious others, question—in fact doubt—whether the story of an individual can still have the affective power that tends to be ascribed to the genre of life writing. Consequently, as will be shown, Danticat's text, in its manipulation of narrative form, largely functions to observe and interrogate the complexities and limits of affective citizenship.

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In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler argues:

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (xiv-xv)

To the U.S. immigration system, Joseph Dantica's life was not one that counted, his death not one to grieve. Edwidge Danticat seeks to correct this view, using the genre of memoir to construct her uncle, an asylum-seeker, as a viable subject with a worthwhile life and voice. To do so, Danticat must carefully navigate the frames of her discourse space and thereby construct her text's rhetorical effect so that she can generate empathetic engagement with Dantica's situation, not motivate mere pity nor perpetuate disdain for asylum seekers. In depicting her uncle's

experience, she is putting her text in conversation with recent critical discourse that not only privileges empathy as a means of raising social consciousness but also conceives of grief and mourning as potential motivators of social change.

In *Precarious Life*, for instance, Judith Butler explores how grief can function to build community instead of serving as “a cry for war” (xii). Suggesting that grief foregrounds the importance of our relationships with others, Butler argues that it can by extension make us aware of “our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another” (*Precarious* 30). As Maureen Moynagh further develops, the experience of grief offers “new perspective on and new understandings of lost objects” (Eng and Kazanjian qtd. in Moynagh 58), a new understanding that allows mere “complaint” to transform into actionable “plaint,” a seeking of social change (60). By extension, grief can become a “mechanism that helps us (re) construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in *their* name—and in *our* names” (Munoz qtd. in Dhar 35; emphasis added). The intimate connection forged through grief between the “they” who are mourned and the “us” who do the mourning (and subsequently, the “us” who are made aware of their own precarity) can, in this view, become a key impetus for social change.

Grief is thus put in the service of forming a sense of affective citizenship whereby “emotional geographies, and the socio-cultural dimensions of emotions . . . , each . . . carries implications for theorizing community and citizenship” (Brydon 1003). I use the term “citizenship” here with some trepidation. “Citizenship” does imply a certain sense of national belonging, a belonging in and also to nation, a belonging that is often denied to immigrants even after they become naturalized citizens. Nevertheless, my view of “affective citizenship” seeks to take “citizenship” outside of its roots in nation and view it instead as a marker of one’s humanity. In other words, the “citizenship” of “affective citizenship” suggests instead a belonging in and responsibility towards the broader community of humankind. To be human, emotionally engaged, and aware of one’s responsibilities to one’s fellow humans is to be able to be a “citizen” in this use of the term. In fact, because emotions “actively engage the subject in a relationship with the external world,” (Fajans

qtd. in Brydon 1000), emotions can be the means through which community across differences can be forged. Emotions “tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not are [*sic*] own” (Butler, *Precarious* 25); they thereby can be deployed to develop a more ethical approach to alterity.

Dantica’s *Brother, I’m Dying* itself largely becomes a case study for this exploration of the efficacy of emotion and empathy. There are, after all, complexities to and limits of deploying emotions as a means of ethical engagement with difference. For instance, the empathy that Butler envisions as attainable through an acceptance of our common precarity must still be charged with the responsibility of respecting difference. As Dominick LaCapra argues, the experience of empathy must be accompanied by an experience of unsettlement, of discomfort in trying to occupy another’s experience. He writes that one must be able to “put . . . oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (78). Alison Landsberg similarly suggests that a “practice of empathy” must involve “finding ways to inhabit other people’s memories *as* other people’s memories and thereby respect . . . and recogniz[e] difference” (24; emphasis in original). One threat of coming “undone” in the wake of another’s pain, the situation that the epigraph of this paper describes, is that such emotional investment in the experience of another may not respect the ultimate unknowability of another’s trauma.

While not respecting the unknowability of someone else’s experience can be ethically problematic, so too can feeling emotion for someone while maintaining one’s privileged separation. Empathy’s kin, compassion, which is tied to pity, has been explored by Lauren Berlant as involving “good intentions [that] can sometimes be said to be aggressive” (6). Although compassion can intimate an awareness of another’s pain, it does not always emerge to dismantle the power relations involved in distinctions between “us” and “them.” As Berlant observes, “compassion is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is *over there*” (4; emphasis in original).³ If all *Brother, I’m Dying* provokes is compassion for a situation like that of Joseph Dantica, then it cannot fully accomplish its goal of advocacy for systemic change. As Jo Collins explores in her

discussion of Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, the trauma of others can be problematically appropriated, put to use "for a celebratory rhetoric of audience empathy" (14) which allows an audience "to recuperate our liberal guilt for Haiti' (207) from a safe distance" (Martin Munro qtd. in Collins 14).⁴

All told, if provoking an empathy that does not observe one's proper separation from an event or individual is just as problematic as provoking a compassion that allows for one to preserve a privileged distance, then a text such as Danticat's must concern itself with carefully managing its affect. Danticat must not be perceived as disrespecting the unknowability of her uncle's experience, nor can she allow the audience to feel an unselfconscious intimacy with him. Nevertheless, while preserving a respectful distance from Dantica's reality, Danticat must all the while ensure that her audience connects with him, his otherness minimized. Of course, this ability to establish connection across difference relies entirely on whether or not a text is met with an audience who can be affected by its emotional appeal. Because only certain lives are grievable, as suggested by Butler, only certain narratives can employ pathos and still hope to be persuasive. Politicians may be able to "regularly use emotion to try to gain the interest and support of the electorate" (Johnson 495), but can Edwidge Danticat, an immigrant telling the story of an asylum seeker, count on pathos as a successful appeal? The online commentary in response to a *60 Minutes* broadcast about Joseph Dantica's death and the treatment of other asylum seekers would certainly suggest not. In telling the story of her uncle on *60 Minutes*, Danticat's grief is overt; her own feelings that are muted in the memoir itself are made apparent by the tears that disrupt her description of Dantica's death: "he died so alone . . . and after being treated like an animal." Neither the overtness of her grief nor the described trauma faced by other detainees featured in the story seem to serve as persuasive to many viewers. With the online commentary about this broadcast dominated by opinions such as "GUESS WHAT WHINER BABY ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS. . . . If you don't like the treatment you get in our country, THEN GO HOME!!!" (LEGALamericangirl), it becomes apparent that soliciting an emotional connection to those in-

humanely treated by the immigration detention system remains a hard sell to many.⁵

From the discourse surrounding this *60 Minutes* broadcast it would appear that Butler's desire for individuals to appreciate the precarity of others through an awareness of their own is an ideal that may not be easily realized. The online commentary regarding this broadcast demonstrates a clear awareness of precarity in American culture, a precarity particularly surrounding the issue of affordable medical care. Stepdancer58, for instance, writes: "There are plenty of needs and it would be ideal if we could meet every one, but your story ignored the fact that so many hard working Americans can't even afford health insurance for themselves or their families." Proudcitize1 offers: "There are millions of families in this country who have no medical insurance and no access to the basics of medical care. You want their hard earned tax money to pay for medical care for someone who came into this country illegally?" From these comments, which express sentiments prevalent in much of the online commentary, one can see that an awareness of one's own precarity does not necessarily motivate an empathetic connection to another person. Instead, one's knowledge of another's precarity competes with one's own experience of vulnerability, thus compromising one's willingness to forge an unconditional empathetic bond.

So what can the impact of the story of an individual be if it cannot guarantee the creation of an empathetic connection across difference? The assumption has long been that the testimony of an individual can humanize a socio-political issue, that the testimony of an individual provides the story to which others may relate and thereby be moved to appreciate the issue, if not in fact be motivated to work towards change. John Beverley, in his groundbreaking work on testimonio, writes that "a literature of personal witness and involvement [is] designed to make the cause of these movements known to the outside world, to attract recruits" (32). Yet, is there now growing doubt that the story of an individual can serve as this impetus for change? Sustainable4, for example, critiques the *60 Minutes* broadcast for getting caught up in the stories of individuals while ignoring the even bigger picture, a bigger picture involving the costs of "immigrant inmates":

Rather, though, than stress this costly impact on the U.S. system, CBS . . . provides a story about an illegal immigrant, Francisco Castaneda, who had penile cancer, not getting prompt (very expensive) treatment. That illustrates the kind of general reporting often used in covering the complexity of immigration issues. Rather than look at the macrocosmic impacts of rapidly-growing millions, the 60 minutes' reporter looks at microcosmic examples involving individual immigrants impacted by policy.

Sustainable's statements may come out of an ideological stance concerned with the effect of immigration on American citizens, hence a position from which he/she may not want to empathize with detainees like Dantica. Nevertheless, even Butler's recent *Frames of War* expresses a lost faith in the power of an individual to have affective impact. Given the growing doubt that an individual's story can motivate change, how can Danticat's humanization of her uncle through life writing have an impact? Butler's *Precarious Life* may have suggested the inability to "muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you'" (*Precarious* 49), but *Frames of War* backs off from this ideal of accomplishing social change through a connection between individuals.⁶ The opening of *Frames of War* signals this shift of attention away from the individual towards the conditions the individual faces: "if one apprehends a life as precarious one will resolve to protect that life *or secure the conditions* for its persistence and flourishing" (*Frames* 2; emphasis added). There is an interesting duality expressed by the "or," a duality that imagines a public who may not be affected by thinking about the singular "life" at stake but who may be affected by considering the broader "conditions" that may affect that life. Although Butler holds onto the idea that lives are lived in relation to others, she seemingly moves away from emotional attachment as the source for connection across difference. She writes that there may be "a *dependency* on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all" (*Frames* 14; emphasis in original), but "[t]hese are not necessarily relations of love or even of care, but constitute obligations towards others" (*Frames* 14). Obligation may still be an emotion, but it reflects more a forced than desired attachment.

In her figuring of obligation as the means through which systems that “minimize precariousness” (*Frames* 21) can be achieved, Butler turns away from the importance of the singularity of an individual that she had earlier foregrounded in *Precarious Life*. In *Precarious Life*, emotions—particularly grief—could be a means of connecting an “I” to a “you” (*Precarious* 49). But in *Frames of War*, Butler shifts to asserting that “[p]recariousness has to be grasped not simply as a feature of *this* or *that* life, but as a generalized condition” (*Frames* 22; emphasis in original). She continues by stating that ensuring the grievability of another “does not require that we come to know the singularity of every person who is at risk or who has, indeed, already been risked. Rather, it means that policy needs to understand precariousness as a shared condition” (*Frames* 28). There is a movement here that suggests a lost faith in the possibility of felt, albeit imagined, personalized relationships between individuals. Instead of *Precarious Life*’s assumption that we individually can be committed to each other, all Butler requires of her public in *Frames of War* is a commitment to humane conditions. As she asserts, “[o]ur obligations are precisely to the conditions that make life possible, not to ‘life itself’” (*Frames* 23).⁷

The contradictions and ambivalences suggested by the shift between *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* illustrate the difficulty of the terrain that Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying* must traverse. Danticat’s memoir must navigate questions regarding the efficacy of emotional appeals, and by extension, questions regarding the efficacy of an individual’s story to produce empathetic engagement. Consistent with a suspicion of the impact of appeals to pathos, Danticat’s movement away from narrativizing events towards quoting written reports can in part be seen as a means of heightening the persuasiveness of her appeal. She may conceive of her audience as a favourable one; in an interview, she states, “I envision as my audience anyone who’s ever read me before and everyone who is interested in these issues of justice and immigration and human rights and parity in immigration policy” (Shea 189). Regardless, her choice to avoid narrativizing the events of her uncle’s detention and death also suggests an awareness that reporting the facts, which can be looked up and confirmed, is perhaps more persuasive in such

a circumstance. Consider, for instance, the controversy that Rigoberta Menchú encountered when it was revealed that she fictionalized some of the events of her family's persecution during the Guatemalan Civil War. In particular, Menchú was found to have placed herself at the sites of historical events for which she was not present. Though portraying herself at sites where family members were tortured and killed was to ensure that there was at least a pseudo-witness to the events (Menchú 111), as Menchú's experience of being cast a liar shows, the fictionalization of real events may have little place in advocacy. By offering only documented facts rather than an imagining of what her uncle's experiences must have entailed, Danticat is able to avoid compromising her own ethos amongst those who seek to deny fictionalization a place in testimony. The combination of memory, hearsay, and imagination may be commonly accepted as autobiography's means of constructing a representation of reality, but when a story serves a larger purpose of human rights advocacy, the stakes regarding its credibility grow much higher, its truthfulness coming under intense scrutiny.

Importantly, it is only in certain circumstances that Danticat demonstrates this unwillingness to focalize through her uncle's perspective; where she allows access to her uncle's consciousness and where she does not becomes meaningful in this text. A narrative in which Danticat felt comfortable entering the consciousness of her uncle, offering his thoughts and feelings and even hypothesizing about what he *must have* been feeling, becomes a narrative of minuscule facts, her uncle losing his interiority when his last days are depicted. In the parts of the narrative not concerned with Joseph Dantica's detention and death, Edwidge Danticat does not limit herself to merely transcribing her sources' accounts, nor does she assume that life writing must pursue objectivity and an unmitigated representation of the so-called "truth." Instead, up until Dantica's fateful entry into the United States, Danticat conveys an acceptance of the necessary elements of narrativization involved in life writing, and by extension, expresses a belief that her uncle's story (and her father's and her own) is worth sharing, that it will quite possibly affect others positively. In these parts of the narrative not concerned with her uncle's detention and hospitalization, Danticat does not drain

her narrative of drama and humanity by limiting her story to documentable fact. She instead positions her audience at the site of events by offering an imaginative reconstruction using participants, often Joseph Dantica, as focalizers for the action. In these instances, the overtness of Danticat's presence as narrator fades and she allows herself to imaginatively enter her characters' minds, omnisciently conveying the story from their point of view. For example, in describing the looting of Joseph Dantica's church, Danticat writes:

Walking the slippery incline that separated his house from another small courtyard, he kept his face down, his chin as close as he could to his chest without blocking his tracheotomy hole. He did not dare look back toward the church as a new wave of looters brushed past him, heading there. He might have been tempted to follow them, to try to stop them, reason with them. He thought about all the wounded who might be lying somewhere dying. He thought of their mothers, fathers, standing over them unable to do anything but watch. (187)

Unlike most of her other depictions of events, Danticat mentions no source for this particular description. She thereby suggests a willingness and ability here to imagine the story of her uncle. She fills in details like the slipperiness of the incline using her own familiarity with the environment. Other details are born out of logic and assumption: his need not to block his tracheotomy hole, his not daring to look back. By even offering suppositions about what her uncle "*might* have been tempted" to do and announcing what he "thought," Danticat imaginatively recreates his possible thought-processes, although the accuracy of such assumptions is impossible to confirm. Nevertheless, having earlier constructed herself as her uncle's interpreter—his voice when he did not have one after his bout with cancer—Danticat's ability and willingness here to channel his consciousness extends from and is rendered believable by her earlier established intimate connection with him.

However, in conveying Joseph Dantica's detention in the United States, Edwidge Danticat loses and/or chooses to cast aside this ability to be a conduit for Dantica's consciousness. In this part of the narra-

tive, an imagining or dramatization of what her uncle must have been thinking or feeling throughout his time in detention and up until his death is absent. The diegetic world that Danticat had created complete with fully rounded non-fictional characters whose stories Danticat, as narrator, assumed the right to narrate, becomes a narrative of expository language in which Danticat transmits the findings of the governmental investigation. Readers become acquainted with Dantica's final days in factual descriptions:

At 11:00 p.m., my uncle was given some chips and soda again. At 11:45 p.m., he signed a form saying his personal property was returned to him. The form lists as personal property only his one thousand and nine dollars and a silver-colored wrist-watch. At 1:30 a.m., I received my phone call. At 4:20 a.m., my uncle and Maxo were transported to the airport's satellite detention area[.] (221)

The emphasis on the fact of time replaces any details about the taste of the food, the experience of having one's property gone through and catalogued, the disorientation of the whole process. His consciousness is no longer one that Danticat enters and chooses to depict for the readers. Instead, Danticat merely quotes documents: the transcript of Dantica's interview with the Customs and Border Protection Officer; the Discretionary Authority Checklist for Alien Applicants with its "yes" and "no" answers; the medical record with notations of temperature, blood pressure, and pulse.

Danticat's choice not to narrativize her uncle's experience as a detainee—in fact, to employ, hence draw attention to, the discourse frames to which Dantica became subject—in part functions to optimize her ethos; she does not necessarily have the freedom to imagine her uncle's experience or focalize the action through his perspective because to do so could compromise the credibility of her narrative. Nevertheless, even if using an emotional appeal could be effective, as proponents for affective citizenship wish, in the case of representing traumatic events like those experienced by Dantica, the emotions of such traumas may remain largely inaccessible, hence inexpressible. As has been commonly

expressed, language fails in the face of trauma; trauma is “beyond language in some crucial way” (Gilmore 6). Danticat’s manipulation of narrative form towards that which can only curtly report documentable facts must then be seen in part as a function of her text’s attempt to represent that which is unrepresentable: physical and emotional trauma, most directly that of her uncle, but also her own.

Importantly, Danticat’s shift in style towards minimalistic expression can be seen as a continuation of her uncle’s own discourse form when confronted with traumatic events. His narrative of his escape from Haiti, written while on the flight to the United States, features the title “Epidemie du 24 octobre 2004” and offers one sentence, “Un groupe de chimères ont détruit L’Eglise Chrétienne de la Rédemption,” before devolving into a mere listing of material items lost: “the pews, two padded ballroom chairs used at wedding ceremonies, a drum set, some speakers and microphones” (214). Similarly, Joseph Dantica had earlier kept notebooks regarding the violence in his neighbourhood in which he recorded descriptions of the cadavers he would see on his daily walks: “Jonas, maybe 20 years old, missing right hand, 11:35 a.m.; Gladys, maybe 35 years old, naked, 3:09 p.m.” (139). These brief lists are inadequate expressions of the horrors he saw much as Danticat’s list of facts regarding her uncle’s death is inadequate. Nevertheless, this inadequacy of representation necessarily speaks to trauma’s inherent stiling, if not utter silencing, of emotional expression. Such documentable facts as the time and quantifiable circumstances of a death may be the elements that are actually recordable when to climb inside the reality of such trauma, to process it and choose to narrate it, would be overwhelming and even psychically harmful. As Anne Whitehead observes, trauma represents a “collapse of understanding” (5), “causing conventional epistemologies”—like self, memory, truth, and linear time—“to falter” (5). As such, Danticat’s movement away from representing her uncle’s consciousness towards merely listing facts may not simply represent a foregrounding of the dehumanizing frames used by the Department of Homeland Security. Neither may it represent a lost faith in appeals to pathos nor a desire to increase her ethos. It also indicates the incomprehensibility of emotion brought on by the experience of trauma.

Beyond trauma compromising one's ability to effectively apprehend emotion, *Brother, I'm Dying* illustrates how immigration, more specifically questions of belonging, can actively cause the censoring of emotions. Describing her childhood self at the American Embassy in Haiti awaiting the approval of her visa, Danticat reports having been asked, "Do you miss your mother and father?" (105). She writes:

Sensing that it was the right thing to do, we [she and her brother] both nodded, as if bowing to the flag that our grandfather had once fought against, that our mother and father had now embraced for nearly ten years, that we were about to make our own. As my head bobbed up and down, I felt my old life quickly slipping away. I was surrendering myself, not just to a country and a flag, but to a family I'd never really been part of. (105–6)

As this example shows, the complexity of her situation—in part resulting from the fraught relationship between the U.S. and Haiti and in part resulting from her family's diasporic condition—upsets expected categories of emotion. If given the choice, she might express "hybrid emotions" (Eugenides 217), emotions that can house contradiction: "Germanic train-car constructions like, say, 'the happiness that attends disaster'" (Eugenides 217). Not only does "miss" not capture the children's emotions, but also the happiness the consulate promises them through the approval of their visas—"I'm going to make you very happy" (106)—insufficiently describes Danticat's actual feelings. For the child emigrant, emotions are not depicted here as something to feel but rather problems to solve. They are something to figure out and perform appropriately so as to not betray the true inaccuracy of such words and thereby risk disapproval and consequent rejection. In this scene, the consulate becomes the one who can regulate Danticat's emotions; he assumes the power both to dole out her happiness and to make her feel that "missing" her parents is the only emotional option. As a result, just as the stars of the American flag are pictured in this scene as "literally bursting from the corner square, their spiky edges merging into the wall" (105), the U.S. comes to represent a force that exceeds

its boundaries, infiltrating Danticat's emotional core in violent penetration. Danticat's choice to shift towards documentable fact in her representation of Dantica's detention and death may on one level serve to emphasize the inadequacy of language in the face of her uncle's trauma and of her own. But more importantly, it points towards Danticat's negotiation of what can and cannot be felt, thereby what can and cannot be expressed.

In other words, one's compromised agency over emotions speaks to an inability to voice one's own experience freely. Therefore, in part what is at stake in the midst of such emotional stiling and censorship is the place and power one's individual story assumes amidst socio-political systems that deny individuality. According to the discourse frames available to Joseph Dantica when he is detained and later hospitalized, his individualized circumstances do not matter. His death, as represented by Danticat, is precipitated by a system that never seeks to know Dantica beyond his place within the stereotyped groups of "Haitians" and of "asylum seekers." The system Dantica confronts never questions its comprehension of him and thereby neglects individual circumstances for the convenience of stereotype, leading Danticat to question, "[w]as my uncle going to jail because he was Haitian?" (*Brother* 222).

A close look at the fabric of post-9/11 U.S. society shines light on Danticat's musing about this racial motivation for her uncle's detention. Although not addressed by Danticat specifically, Joseph Dantica's detention and death came just three years after the exposure of concrete evidence regarding American discrimination against Haitian asylum seekers. On December 3, 2001, the U.S. Coast Guard rescued 167 Haitian migrants when their boat ran aground in South Florida (Wasem 7). At that point, the then-INS instituted a secret policy that no Haitian "should be paroled without the approval of INS Headquarters" (Bryant 31).⁸ The INS only admitted to this secret policy once it was exposed by a class-action lawsuit filed on March 15, 2002 (Little, "Statement" 11). By then, however, its effects were palpable: in November 2001, just prior to its implementation, the rate of parole for Haitian asylum seekers who had passed credible fear hearings was 96%; between December 14, 2001 and March 18, 2002, that rate dropped to 6% (Little, "Statement"

10). At the same time, rates of parole for non-Haitian asylum-seekers remained high at 91% (Conyers 27). The class-action lawsuit offered a marginal victory in drawing attention to the issue, even motivating an October 1, 2002 hearing on "The Detention and Treatment of Haitian Asylum Seekers" chaired by Senator Edward Kennedy. Nevertheless, as the lawsuit's dismissal without a hearing suggests, the United States in the wake of September 11th could be more unrestrained with its discriminatory policies, even those that flagrantly contravened commitments to international refugee protocols.⁹ Furthermore, despite the discussion generated by the October 1st hearing, another boat arrival of over 200 Haitian migrants on October 29, 2002 (Wasem 2) likely hurt the advocacy cause significantly.¹⁰ Despite the UN High Commission for Refugees declaring that nationality and ethnicity should not be grounds for detaining asylum-seekers (Feller, Türk, and Nicholson 256),¹¹ it is precisely within the context of overt discrimination that Dantica's detention must be weighed.

In seeking temporary asylum, Joseph Dantica did not just encounter an attitude that cast Haitians as unwanted, even dangerous, migrants; he also confronted formal policies applicable to all detainees no matter their individual circumstances. First, despite his age and valid entrance documents,¹² in requesting asylum, Dantica was automatically subject to mandatory detention.¹³ Second, and likely specially contributing to Dantica's illness and death, U.S. authorities stripped Dantica of his long-term medications and replaced them with others. This was due to a policy that required the removal of all "[d]rugs and medications not prescribed or authorized by facility medical staff" (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 3). According to the Report of Investigation regarding Dantica's death, he had come to Krome with "two prescription medications: Hydrea (Hydroxyurea)/50 milligrams, and Valium, both of which Dantica said that he took as needed" (Department 8).¹⁴ Despite Dantica's long-term use of these medications, they were not reissued by Krome's Pharmacy "due to the uncertainty of the medical necessity for the medications" (Department 8).¹⁵ Consequently, after Dantica's mandatory medical screening, instead of these medications being re-prescribed, Dantica "was provided with five-milligram doses

of Enalapril to help lower his blood pressure and 250-milligram doses of Naproxen to ease the pain and reduce the swelling caused by his arthritis” (Department 8). Although there is no way to know whether Dantica’s life could have been spared had his medications not been confiscated, Danticat, for one, questions the role this policy played in her uncle’s death.¹⁶

Since Danticat criticizes the U.S. immigration system’s inability to consider the individual, she herself rightly refuses to rely on generalizations in her portrayal of the United States. As a cultural construct, the United States is neither all good nor all bad in *Brother, I’m Dying*. Just as her childhood view of the American flag brought up a myriad of feelings, as it represents both her historical enemy and her eventual home, Danticat allows her memoir to house ambivalences and contradictions regarding what the United States means to her and her family. In the memoir, the United States is both saviour and killer; it is a place that represents family reunion and the cause for family separation. The U.S. may have divided Joseph and Mira’s childhood family, their father often away fighting against the U.S. occupation of Haiti; it may also have brought about Joseph’s eventual death. However, Danticat also readily acknowledges the kindness of individual American people and the opportunities provided by the socio-political conditions of the United States. For example, Joseph was able to open his church and school in Haiti because of American missionaries who “gave him some money to help with the building, blackboards, and benches and pledged a monthly contribution for a free lunch program for the students” (34). Furthermore, when threatened by cancer, Joseph Dantica’s life is spared and his voice eventually regained thanks to American medical care and the sponsorship from the same American missionaries. Danticat, thankful for the privileges of American medical care, even notes the vast differences between her daughter’s “well-monitored” (255) birth in the United States and her own birth in Haiti where “no one would have noticed” (255) if something had gone wrong.

By constructing the United States as both a negative and a positive entity, Danticat emphasizes that generalizations are ineffective identifiers. Instead, ambivalence, and in fact contradiction, is part of her depic-

tion of the United States. As such, this dismissal of stereotype serves to critique a system that can categorize Joseph Dantica as "Alien" (*Brother* 214) and dismiss him, even cause him harm, because of it.

Although Danticat, in quoting such documents as the transcript of her uncle's INS interview, allows for her uncle's death to be rendered in the discourse frames of the Department of Homeland Security, it is important to emphasize that this crafting of narrative form represents a choice. While Danticat is constrained in her knowledge of her uncle's last moments, an assumption that infers Danticat had no choice but to resort to quoting documents would problematically dismiss her authorial control over her narrative construction. Instead, her choices regarding narrative form represent an ability to carefully manage sites for empathetic engagement. By switching to a narrative perspective that foregrounds all she does not know, all that cannot be known about her uncle's experience, Danticat can craft a model for negotiating alterity, an ethical model that respects difference. Danticat's switch in narrative form respects the unknowability of her uncle's experience, all the while lamenting that unknowability. By extension, she can emphasize that her uncle's death was caused by a system that assumed the hubris that it could and did know Joseph Dantica, a system that could, for instance, declare with no recorded self-consciousness, doubt, or regret that Dantica was "faking" (Danticat, *Brother* 233) his illness despite his vomit and altered state of consciousness proving the contrary.

In addition, as much as Danticat's choice to quote the records regarding her uncle's detention and death foregrounds the unknowability of his experiences, she significantly does not end her portrait by casting her uncle merely an unknowable other. Instead, she constructs a site for the possibility of empathetic engagement by providing a scene depicting her uncle's near death years earlier. Directly after the brief notes about Dantica's actual death—"There is no detailed account of 'the code' or the sixteen minutes between the time he was found unresponsive and the time he was pronounced dead, at 8:46 p.m" (239)—Danticat offers a narrative of her uncle's earlier near death from malaria, depicting the scene with imagistic detail: "When we walked into his small private room, he was curled in a fetal position, and though he was wrapped

in several blankets, was shivering. His face was ashen and gray and his eyes the color of corn” (240). Beyond the re-emergence of visual details, this narrative also suggests the re-emergence of Danticat’s willingness to speculate about her uncle’s unexpressed thoughts and feelings. She describes her uncle as “seem[ing] not to see us. Grunting, he closed his eyes as if to protect them from the ache coursing through the rest of his body. When he opened his eyes again, he glared at us as if wondering what we were doing there” (240). This description’s focus on the “as if” shows that Danticat is again willing to interpret her uncle’s emotions and hypothesize what his actions mean. As such, because of her manipulation of narrative order so that this flashback appears directly after the narration of her uncle’s death, Danticat has allowed her uncle to experience a pseudo-resurrection. This resurrection is literal—he, thanks to the order of these scenes, returns to life. But this resurrection is also a resurrection of his humanity; that Joseph Dantica again becomes a character with thoughts and feelings that can be acknowledged and appreciated by another establishes his grievability, hence restoring to him his humanity.

This scene, by extension, lets Danticat re-imagine the loneliness of her uncle’s actual death into an image of his family gathered around him, consequently enabling a vision of her uncle in more ideal circumstances. Beyond this scene’s suggestion of a cathartic replacement of the actual with the ideal, the inclusion of this scene has to be considered in terms of Danticat’s management of possible sites for an audience’s empathetic engagement. As Kathleen Woodward observes, “people are more likely to empathize with people who are like themselves” (66). Empathizing with Joseph Dantica, the detainee, may prove challenging for many, both because of the prevalence of stereotyped images of detainees and because becoming a refugee oneself may seem inconceivable. Seeing oneself as an ill man, confronting death surrounded by family, however, is a more easily imaginable circumstance. Since the circumstances of this scene represent a vulnerability that one can easily see as one’s own, this scene can more readily lead to an acknowledgment of a collective vulnerability, the kind of awareness of precarity that Judith Butler idealizes as an agent for community formation across individual differences.

The pairing of these “death” scenes likewise establishes the ultimate mismatch between the frames of the Department of Homeland Security and those of the Dantica(t) family. Whereas the Department of Homeland Security’s frames deny the importance of being able to construct and share one’s own personal narrative, the Dantica(t) family, as constructed by Edwidge Danticat, holds up personal narrative as vital to forming an environment where individuals and communities can thrive.

The loss experienced by Joseph Dantica’s family proves to be at once the literal loss of Joseph Dantica—“the patriarch, the head, of our family[,] . . . a father of two and grandfather of fifteen, an uncle to nearly two dozen of us, a brother, a friend” (Danticat, “Written Testimony” 1)—and a loss of ownership over his story and, thus, their own family history. Through her choice to quote the official documents, Danticat suggests that the story of her uncle’s death no longer exclusively belongs to him or to his family. Instead, it belongs more to the authorities who have documented his detention and death and who have done so in a way that largely strips him of his humanity. To the authorities, Dantica’s individual story has no place in their frames for dealing with mass migration, but the impact of this lost right to one’s own story is emphasized particularly by Danticat’s focus elsewhere in the memoir on the importance of storytelling in self-formation. Throughout the rest of the text, the stories about and by one’s ancestors are shown to be a key form of inheritance for the latter generations, and thereby a key means through which individuals find their places within family and their broader communities. Danticat acknowledges, for instance, that Marie Micheline’s stories—like the one of toddler Edwidge and her father bonding over butter cookies—function to “assur[e] us that we were indeed loved by the parent who left” (54–55). By extension, stories about “the future, an undetermined time when my father would send for my mother, Bob and me” (55) enable Danticat to conceive of her family as a cohesive group despite their current fracture. Danticat’s eventual reunion with her parents is even figured in terms of her parents immediately starting to tell stories about their children: “muffled laughter coming from the next room, as well as the occasional sound of our names. They were already telling each other stories about us” (116). This coupling of family

reunion and the construction of family stories suggests that to possess the ability to tell a story about someone is to feel that that person can be one's own. Consequently, Danticat's choice to quote from documents rather than narrativize her uncle's detention and death symbolizes the irreparable harm done to her family's sense of cohesiveness. Governmental immigration policies interrupt their familial intimacy, taking away from them both Joseph Dantica and confidence in their own ability to know him and pass along his story.¹⁷ As Danticat's memoir emphasizes, even if an individual story—or certain types of individual stories like those of immigration detainees in the United States—cannot elicit the empathetic engagement that one might desire from a broad public, such stories of individuals are vital in the formation, cohesiveness, and stability of smaller social groups like families and communities.

Danticat's narrative shift towards quoting documentable fact may represent an authorial choice, but it is a choice that emphasizes how her position in and control over her narrative has been inherently affected by the American border politics encountered by her uncle. As Danticat shows, the voicelessness that Dantica experiences becomes her own, his precarity expanding to become hers, too. Throughout *Brother, I'm Dying*, Danticat must negotiate the inherent contradictions of her discourse space: personalized stories are needed as a means of humanizing socio-political situations, and yet such appeals to pathos may be ineffective; the depiction of emotion is needed also as a means of humanizing, yet governmental systems can either cause the censoring of emotional experience or create traumatic situations that compromise one's ability to access and/or express emotion; and finally, individuals must be knowable so that empathetic engagement can be achieved and yet their unknowability must be respected. These are the rocks and hard places that Danticat must navigate. Of course, one might argue that Danticat's text does not do enough to establish Dantica's experience in detention as grievable. Joseph Dantica, as detainee, still remains for the most part inaccessible. Nevertheless, although Danticat's memoir may not be able to fully dismantle the frames that cast some individuals and experiences as ungrievable, its manipulation of narrative form can serve as a critique of these frames. As her memoir demonstrates through its

narrative choices, to lose the ability to empathetically engage with another, to no longer become undone by the precarity of someone else, is to accept inhumanity in one's social systems and in oneself.

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Notes

- 1 The difference in spelling in Joseph Dantica's and Edwidge Danticat's surnames is a result of "an error on [Edwidge Danticat's] father's birth certificate" (Danticat, *Brother* 209).
- 2 "Frames," as conceived by Butler, "seek . . . to contain, convey, and determine what is seen" (*Frames* 10). In other words, much like Burke's "terministic screens," "frames" function to produce a perceived reality. Butler is most concerned with the way certain frames produce a reality in which only particular individuals and situations invite grief and only some lives are respected for their precariousness.
- 3 While Berlant roots compassion's questionable ethics to the "Freudian notion of *Schadenfreude*, the pleasure one takes in the pain of another" (5), Garber elaborates with the following:

The problem with compassion begins with its etymology and history. From the fourteenth century to the beginning of the seventeenth, the word (deriving from Latin *com*, together, and *pati*, to suffer) was used to describe both *suffering together with one another*, or "fellow feeling," and an emotion felt *on behalf of another who suffers*. In the second sense, compassion was felt not between equals but from a distance—in effect, from high to low: "shown towards a person in distress by one who is free from it, who is, in this respect, his superior." When the first sense fell out of use, which it did fairly quickly, the remaining sense hovered between charity and condescension. (20; emphasis in original)
- 4 Munro warns that "perhaps reading a book is the easiest way of aligning ourselves with the contemporary wretched of the earth. The book may be a kind of buffer between us and people and situations we could never identify with in reality" (207).
- 5 My description of the commentary being "dominated" by negative opinions of "illegals" is based on impression rather than on a strict classification and tallying of the 330 comments. Of course, one would perhaps expect that those viewers responding negatively to the story would be the ones most likely to take the time

- to offer online commentary, but it should be noted that the opinions expressed are not uniformly negative.
- 6 Interestingly, even *Precarious Life* accounted for a certain perceived self-interest in the public; Butler's envisioned public, after all, needed to see their own precarity in order to appreciate precarity in another.
 - 7 Of course, Butler's views regarding the individual are in part informed by the discourse frames upon which *Frames of War* concentrates. As she acknowledges, knowing the individual, the "*this or that* life," is not always possible, and in fact the pursuit of that knowledge could perpetuate the individual's experience of exploitation (*Frames* 22; emphasis in original). For example, when discussing the images of those victimized in Abu Ghraib, Butler acknowledges that international law protects "the privacy of persons who have been the victims of war crimes" (*Frames* 93). She then must conclude: "Do we lament the lack of names? Yes and no. They are, and are not, ours to know" (*Frames* 95).
 - 8 The justification for this change of policy involved claims ranging from the need to stop illegal immigration for the sake of national security to a desire to protect Haitians from embarking on similar dangerous voyages. As Assistant Attorney General Daniel J. Bryant explained the policy, the U.S. government thought the change represented a "reasonable step to take in order to protect lives and prevent against a potential mass migration to the United States" (31). With the harsh promise of indefinite detention, the assumption was that further sea entrances to the United States would be deterred and, subsequently, not only would the migrant be protected but also the Coast Guard would be able to fulfill its role in preventing terrorism rather than being distracted by immigration issues. However, the logic of this deterrence method and desire to protect lives (both Haitian and American) dissolves amidst the secrecy of the policy—how can one deter if the policy is not publically acknowledged? Furthermore, it must be noted that this policy was not just applied to those Haitians arriving by water, but also to those arriving by air (Little, "Statement" 10).
 - 9 On May 17, 2002, Judge Jean Lenard, a U.S. District judge, dismissed the case ruling that the courts were not the proper place to be seeking help. She asserted that "[c]ourts generally must defer to the laws established by Congress and administered by the executive branch of government" (qtd. in Wilson n. pag.). An appeal of this dismissal was filed to the 11th circuit court, which "issued a short opinion adopting the district court's opinion" (Little, "Responding" n. pag.). More specifically, the court ruled that "it was a political question insulated from judicial review" (Little, "Responding" n. pag.).
 - 10 The aftermath of the October 29th arrival of Haitian migrants represents another key blow to the rights of Haitian asylum seekers. On April 17, 2003, Attorney General John Ashcroft ruled that David Joseph—an 18 year old who arrived on the October 29th boat—did not have the right "to an individualized assessment of the need for his detention" despite the fact "[t]here was no allega-

tion that Joseph himself presented any risk to the public" (Human Rights First 23). The case of David Joseph is a particularly jarring example of the U.S.'s systemic prejudice against Haitian migrants. After Joseph was granted bond on November 6, 2002 by an immigration judge, the INS appealed the decision with the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA), which sided with Joseph's right for parole, dismissing the INS's appeal stating that "the broad national interests invoked by INS were not appropriate considerations for the IJ [Immigration Judge] or the BIA in making the bond determination" (Ashcroft 573). Subsequently, the case was sent to John Ashcroft by the Under Secretary for Border and Transportation Security for review, a process that stayed the ruling of the BIA, consequently keeping Joseph imprisoned. Citing the Attorney General's "broad discretion in bond proceedings" (Ashcroft 572) as granted by the Immigration and Nationality Act, Ashcroft definitively denied Joseph parole. Subsequently, by the time Joseph was at last deported on November 29, 2004—to an uncertain future in Haiti where his family home had been destroyed thanks to his father's political views and where his family had subsequently disappeared shortly after Joseph arrived in Florida (Charles n. pag.)—he was believed to have been the longest held noncriminal Haitian at the Krome detention centre (Charles n. pag.).

- 11 The Expert Roundtable of the UN's High Commission for Refugees made this assertion during its November 2001 meeting in Geneva, Switzerland (Feller, Türk, and Nicholson 256).
- 12 It is believed that Dantica's valid multi-entry tourist visa—which Danticat testified would not have expired until 2008 ("Written Testimony" 2)—was deemed invalid by the Customs Border Protection official as soon as Dantica requested asylum (Posner 1).
- 13 Codified by the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, all asylum seekers entering the United States are placed in detention until their "credible fear" hearings where Customs and Border Protection officials determine whether the applicant does possess a "credible fear" that he/she will face persecution in his/her home country. Title 8, Section 1235.3(b)(4)(ii) of the Code of Federal Regulations states: "Pending the credible fear determination by an asylum officer and any review of that determination by an immigration judge, the alien shall be detained" ("Inadmissible Aliens and Expedited Removal").
- 14 Family members also insist herbal medicines were confiscated, but such medicines are not listed in any records of Dantica's possessions. Nevertheless, one official, Russ Knocke, is quoted as stating that "Dantica had no 'legitimate' medication on him" (Bracken n. pag.); what was confiscated was "a voodoo-like potion" (Casimir n. pag.). This statement quickly led to outrage about its dismissive and prejudicial nature.
- 15 Dantica's need of Hydrea, in particular, was questioned since it is approved by the American FDA only for the treatment of cancer (Department 8).

- 16 Although there is little conclusive evidence one way or another, one might also wonder if Dantica's death was precipitated by the change to Naproxen in treatment of his arthritis. Although one would not expect Naproxen's side effects to affect someone so quickly, the FDA's Medication Guide does list gastrointestinal problems, "ulcers and bleeding in the stomach" (Roche Laboratories 27) as key risks. Furthermore, "even at low doses" (Merck n. pag.), Naproxen is said to be a special risk to the elderly, causing in particular "peptic ulcers" (Merck n. pag.) and other renal and central nervous system complications. Interestingly, pancreatitis—Dantica's official cause of death—is a very rare, though possible, complication of Naproxen use, with a less than 1% rate of occurrence (Merck n. pag.).
- 17 Shortly after she narrates Joseph Dantica's death, Danticat offers a story of his childhood in which she likewise acknowledges the U.S.'s role in compromising her knowledge of family history. During the U.S. Occupation of Haiti, the family was not to ask questions about the grandfather's whereabouts, and "[t]his is why they knew so little of Granpè Nozial's activities during the U.S. Occupation. This is why I know so little now" (246). This passage's connection of what "they" did not know with what Danticat herself does not know suggests that much as stories can pass a sense of one's relatives on into the future, a lack of knowledge is also something that is inherited and experienced as loss.

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