

## Between Worlds: Imagining *Diaspora* in Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* and Chancy's *The Spirit of Haiti*

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When you are in Haiti they call you *Diaspora*. This word, which connotes both connection and disconnection, accurately describes your condition as a Haitian American[, d]isconnected from the physical landscape of the homeland. . . . You get so you can jump between worlds with the same ease that you slide on your nightgown every evening. (Hyppolite 7-11)

Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004) and Myriam Chancy's *The Spirit of Haiti* (2003) both confront and are formally shaped to reflect the condition of "*diaspora*." The Haitian transnational community, which spans Caribbean islands (such as Cuba and the Bahamas), the United States, Canada, and France, is designated by the term "*diaspora*." Haitians within this community retain strong links to Haiti not only emotionally but often through familial and financial obligations (Pégram 127).<sup>1</sup> "*Diaspora*," however, whilst identifying dispersal, also indicates alienation as it functions as a disparaging label to designate outsiders (Danticat, *Butterfly* xiv). Both writers are "*diaspora*" in this double sense. But how has this inflected the re-evaluations of notions of belonging and identity in their texts?

Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat lived in Haiti for twelve years before moving to the United States to join her parents in New York. This migration informs Danticat's fictional and non-fictional writing, in which she explores how Haitians living outside the country's geographical boundaries "redefine . . . what it means to be Haitian" (Mirabal 29).<sup>2</sup> Danticat writes in English rather than Haiti's administrative language of French (an official language since 1915) or the national language of Kreyòl. For Danticat the English language becomes a "tool,"

and writing in English constitutes both “an act of personal translation” and “an act of creative collaboration with the new place” (Lyons 188).<sup>3</sup> According to Marie Laforest, Danticat’s decision to write in English is a strategic choice that reinscribes her migration in language. Although Kreyòl is spoken by the majority of the population, while five percent of the population are fluent in French (Lang 129), the latter has been the predominant literary language.<sup>4</sup> Danticat’s Haitian schooling taught her literacy rather than fluency in French (Laforest 226), and with migration, English became the logical choice for Danticat’s literary writing (Laforest 226).

While for Danticat English is a nurturing “step-mother tongue” (Laforest 226), academic and novelist Chancy associates the English language with alienation from French and from Kreyòl. Chancy, whose novels each position a number of characters at varied historical junctures and different geographical locations in the Haitian *dyaspora*, and whose academic writings explore the exile of Afro-Caribbean and Haitian women,<sup>5</sup> frames migration from Haiti overwhelmingly in terms of loss. Chancy was born in Haiti but raised in Canada (initially in Québec), and although French was her primary language at home, her schooling in Manitoba, from the age of nine, was in English (*Meridians* 85). Rather than presenting this education in English as a creative possibility, Chancy portrays it as exiling her from her “cultural roots” (*Searching* xiii-xvi).<sup>6</sup>

What might these different attitudes to acquired languages suggest about the ways in which *dyasporic* subjectivities can be imagined by (and for) Haitian migrants? What deeper political and cultural currents underlie these authors’ differing ideas?

*Dyaspora* is the canvas upon which these writers’ works take shape; they position themselves differently in relation to their homelands and in how they imagine the dispersed communities. Indeed, differing identifications might be expected in view of the distinctive distributions and integration patterns of Haitian migrants in Canada and America. The majority of Canadian Haitians have settled in French-speaking Québec. Allies in the preservation of the French language in that region, due to the proximity of French to Kreyòl (Mooney 110),

Haitians are prominent within Québec's cultural scene (Pégram 47–8, 134). Scooter Pégram has speculated that Canada's "salad bowl" multiculturalism (a notion based on mixing rather than assimilation), contrasts with the pressure on immigrants in the United States to join the cultural mainstream (21). Pégram compares the integration of Canada's Haitians, illustrated by their visibility in Québec's music, journalism, and entertainment, to Haitians in the United States, whose cultural contribution has been less visible (44). The U.S. Haitian population is concentrated in New York, Boston, and Miami, and while media reports of Haitians arriving in Canada were focused (initially) on successful integration, perceptions of Haitian migration to the U.S. were coloured by the influx of refugees arriving in Miami by boat during the 1970s (Mooney 115) and the stigmatization of Haitians as a health threat (tuberculosis in the 1970s and AIDS in the 1980s). Stepick, Grenier, Castro, and Dunn suggest that Haitians in the U.S. have faced marginalization due to their skin colour, because they speak Kreyòl, and because they are immigrants (170). While Haitians have been conflated with African Americans, some African Americans discriminate against Haitians (Stepick, Grenier, Castro, and Dunn 117; Pégram 44). These factors suggest a more insecure positioning of Haitians in the U.S. compared to Canada. These national differences might be seen as inflecting the forms of the authors' texts. Danticat's text, less focused on community, is fragmented, with the various stories moving centrifugally from the provisional centre signified by the text's enigmatic protagonist "the Dew Breaker." Conversely, the impetus of Chancy's narrative strands is centripetal, and the text is resolved in bringing the two *dyasporic* protagonists together to make a life in Montréal. These national differences do not, however, entirely account for the authors' diasporic affiliations. If Danticat appears to react against negative responses to Haitian Americans by regularly referring to herself as "Haitian," she nevertheless also self-identifies as Afro-Haitian-American ("Haiti" 2–3). Danticat's shifting identifications reveal her sense of the contingent connections and disconnections of diasporic identity, while Chancy emphasizes her sense of exile as "African descendent" and "emigrant" in Canada (*Searching* xii).

These writers' approaches to "home" and "homeland" reflect their differing personal understandings of *dyaspora*. Danticat claims Haiti as a "homeland,"<sup>7</sup> yet acknowledges that, as a *migrant*, "Home is not a place anymore but an idea" (*Meridians* 72), a "floating homeland" (*Butterfly* xiv), and her position is "between worlds" (*Meridians* 82). Chancy, meanwhile, describes herself as an *exile*, which, for her, means that she is not alienated from Haiti:

[I]n Canada . . . I was very much identified as Haitian, and always when I went back to the island, especially as a child, I never had this sense of myself as somebody outside. Certainly exiled, or in a condition of exile, but not as someone who has assumed a new identity that was not Haitian. (*Meridians* 77)

Chancy imagines herself "between worlds" in a different way from Danticat. Danticat, as "migrant," sees herself as "inside and outside" of both American and Haitian cultures (*Meridians* 82)—a status which Carine Mardorossian characterizes as "relational" (140). Chancy, meanwhile, by categorizing herself as an exile, perceives herself as distant from, but an insider within, Haiti. Danticat's "relationality" emphasizes the undecidability of "homeland" that emerges through migration, whilst also accommodating her preference for Haiti as "home," as this claim is never absolute and conclusive. Chancy's identification as exile marks "home"—Haiti—as authentic and inviolable, at the centre of her conception of *dyaspora*. This home is primarily absent yet resonant, something unrecoverable that she strives to return to: "home was always the place to escape to, not the place where I resided from day to day" (*Searching* xiv). Although elements of this longing for a lost homeland occur in Danticat's writing,<sup>8</sup> they are offset by newly emergent identities in the between-space of cultures that Danticat calls "café-au-lait," where the two distinct "ingredients" or cultures, once mixed together, form something completely new ("Haiti" 5). Thus while Chancy's imagining of Haiti evinces a striving for wholeness, Danticat's framing of Haiti is ambivalent and shifting, accentuating plurality over unity.

These writers' different configurations of Haiti as "home" are reflected in their fictional depictions of *dyaspora* and the ways in which they en-

visage (or do not envisage) futures for Haiti beyond political terror and economic disenfranchisement. Both writers' novels point to the defining role that American imperialism has played in the disempowerment of Haiti's people but can be contrasted in the kinds of *diasporic* communities they portray and in the possibilities for transcending the traumatic legacies of Haiti's history they imagine. Although both texts realize disjunctive histories, Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, I will contend, develops a more provisional realization of *diaspora* than Chancy's *The Spirit of Haiti*. Both writers challenge identities rooted in monolithic geopolitical entities and nationalities, formulating new configurations of historiography: their inscriptions of *diaspora* suggest "tidalectics." "Tidalectics," originally conceived of by the poet Kamau Brathwaite (28–36), reformulates conventional national narratives of history by focusing on the dynamic between land and sea and transoceanic histories. Elizabeth DeLoughrey has argued that "tidalectic" histories contest Western ideas of linearity and progress based in fixed geopolitical locales. "Tidalectics" challenge Western models of thought (such as dialectics and synthesis), emphasizing instead time as ebb and flow, and the shift of exclusive historical focus on "land" to the relationship of land and sea which enables a consideration of the complex trajectories of migration and settlement. In this article I read Chancy and Danticat's novels tidalectically to map their specific configurations of *diaspora*. The "tidalectic" conception of history and space privileges flux and motion over rootedness, and repetition over causality and teleology, a model which is particularly open to theorizing migration and diaspora, providing a politically relevant alternative to identity claims based on nationality and geopolitical demarcations.

### I. "Caught in time": History and Migration in Chancy's *The Spirit of Haiti*

Few Americans are aware their country once occupied ours, and for such a long time. . . . The 1915–1934 U.S. occupation . . . is one more hurdle the country has had to overcome in a long and painful cycle of destruction and reconstruction[.] (Danticat, "90 years")

Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* and Chancy's *The Spirit of Haiti* are both fundamentally concerned with the cycles of violence that have dominated Haitian history.<sup>9</sup> For Michel-Rolph Trouillot (analysing the regimes of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier), a major cause of violence in Haiti is the disjuncture between the nation and the state, or civil and political life, the germ of which emerged after independence and was consolidated in the 1860s. The division between those in power and the "ordinary people" has been exacerbated by foreign intervention, such as the U.S. occupation between 1915 and 1934 and U.S. involvement in economic "restructuring" in the 1970s. Trouillot contends that as "peripheral capitalist state," Haiti continues to be subject to inherited colonial power structures, a legacy enacted in the ongoing disconnection between state and nation (*Haiti* 23). Notwithstanding potential difficulties of definitively separating the politically empowered elite and the "ordinary Haitian," Trouillot's analysis of Haitian history is useful because he conceives of Haitian history not simply in "national" and isolated terms but considers the inextricability of colonial and neo-colonial influences on Haiti's cycles of violence. What also emerges here is the inescapable shaping of "the present" by the past, the persistent and *elliptical* return of colonial legacies in Haitian power structures and neo-colonial intercessions in Haiti's politics and economics. "Ellipsis," according to Derrida, designates a repetition that does not return to the same and thus problematizes a notion of "origin" (295). This elliptical view of time is implicit in the tidalectic notion of history, and it is through this conception that we can examine how Danticat and Chancy represent history in their narratives.

According to Danticat, the U.S. military occupation of Haiti in the early twentieth century "had a very potent legacy that we're still living with today," specifically in the U.S. implementation of a military structure that lasted until the early 1990s.<sup>10</sup> This inheritance is addressed by both texts. In Chancy's novel, this legacy is implicit in its temporal setting: events unfold between September 1991 and February 1992 (the period prior to and following Aristide's deposition, a coup many have seen as financially sponsored by the C.I.A.).<sup>11</sup> The narrative proceeds fairly chronologically (with some interruptions), moving between sec-

tions chiefly narrated by three main characters to a denouement where the key characters come together. Chancy also links the specific time-frame to key events in Haiti's past: an account of Henri Christophe's life is developed in the prologue, and she disrupts narrative sequentiality by including within the day-to-day observations of one of her characters a manuscript account of Défilée (Défilée is the woman who gathered Jean-Jacques Dessalines' severed body parts in the aftermath of his murder). The three consciousnesses through which the narrative is predominantly focalized are Haitian-born, Canadian Carmen, who, with the onset of pregnancy, feels the need to reconnect with her Haitian roots; Alexis, an artist whose political activities cause him to flee Haiti in 1991; and Philippe, whom Carmen describes as "a ghost of what-could-have-been" (*Spirit* 251). Unlike the other two characters whose paths cross in inverse journeys during the novel (Alexis travels from Haiti to Tennessee to Montréal while Carmen travels from Montréal to Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince, to Le Cap, where Alexis lived), Philippe's poverty confines him to Haiti. Philippe's ailing body, marked with a Haiti-shaped scar, represents the country's degradation by destitution and foreign infringement: whilst attempting to make money to support himself and his grandmother, Philippe has contracted AIDS through sexual contact with tourists (*Spirit* 202).<sup>12</sup>

Chancy's novel, in using Philippe for overt political critique, reflects a strong tradition in Haitian writing (in Marxist novels such as Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* (1944) and Jacques Stephen Alexis' *Compère Général Soleil* (1955)) in which the peasantry and destitute (rather than the powerful elite) are configured as "nation" but are destroyed by inequality and injustice. Philippe communes with the anguished spirits of those who died building Christophe's "Citadelle," indicating how the past not only shapes but is also relived in the present. This theme is also developed slightly differently through Chancy's representation of Carmen's unborn baby as a ghost who visits Carmen (and Alexis' dreams), a child who is a reincarnation of the daughter of Défilée. In a disruption of linearity, Carmen's daughter (daughter of the Vodou goddess *Ochún*) is both a ghost from the future and the past. The narrative shows the oppressive nature of Haitian history and violence

through Philippe, who is paralysed by the weight of Haiti's past pressing on his life. Carmen, on the other hand, balances looking backwards (to her Haitian heritage) and forwards (through her pregnancy), and her linking of both signifies possibilities for understanding and hope.

While Carmen's return to Haiti allows her to recover a missing heritage (partially through reconnecting with her family, but mainly through visions during Vodou ceremonies), the geographically immobile Philippe is trapped in reliving history. Meanwhile, through Alexis, whose political exile and name recalls novelist and expelled Haitian activist Jacques Stephen Alexis, Chancy aligns the marginalization and disempowerment of African Americans and Haitian migrants. In his journey through the Deep South to Canada Alexis encounters the ghosts of lynched African Americans and relives the experience of slaves fleeing to the North. Here Chancy's scheme is "tidalectic," as she seeks to map "diasporic historiography," which is not grounded in national narratives but in movements across and between them.

Chancy's depiction of the inverse trajectories of Alexis and Carmen between Haiti and the Americas, Alexis' alignment with the African American community, and Carmen's experience of prejudice against African American and Caribbean migrants in Canada through her father's family, all contribute to a model of *diaspora* in which history is configured geographically in what DeLoughrey calls a "transoceanic imaginary." Chancy's "transoceanic imaginary" inscribes a consciousness of the Middle Passage through the wisdom of Miss Alberta and a route of flight from slavery in Alexis' journey, but it also includes alternative trajectories in Carmen's return to her "home" and by referring to Vodou beliefs where spirits move across the water between Africa and America. Ultimately, Carmen's journey seems the most affirming. This coincides with Chancy's concern with "wholeness" in both her conception of "home" and her academic writing, where she emphasizes the need to reconnect with the "lost heritage of the Black woman . . . [so] that we can begin to see how the condition of exile can be transformative" (*Searching* 22, 27). Nevertheless, Chancy's narrative emphasizes the interconnected nature of these different trajectories, as by the end of the novel key characters have been brought together: Alexis meets



Carmen, and they share knowledge about Philippe; Alexis also meets Miss Alberta, a character who enables both Carmen and Alexis to bring together histories of Haitians and African Americans in the Deep South and Canada.

This tidalectic imagining of *diaspora* also emerges in the elliptical model of history that Chancy elucidates—the past continually returns, although never to coincide with the same moment. Brathwaite describes tidalectics as cyclical motion, and DeLoughrey translates this into a methodology that “foregrounds historical trajectories of migrancy and dispersal, and . . . processes of [migration,] settlement and sedimentation” (164). Here space and history are conjoined, and, in Chancy’s novel, history is something that flows forwards and backwards across space. Rather than positing what Trouillot conceives as a Western view of history, as “a linear and consecutive sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a distinct entity” (*Silencing* 7), Chancy’s novel depicts history as cyclical and occasionally concurrent.<sup>13</sup> Here (as in Carmen’s reliving Dessalines’ dismemberment and Christophe’s encounter with Vodou goddess *Olokún*) memory, vision, and history coalesce.

## II. *Sans Maman* and “Fatherless”: The Legacies of Haitian Violence

Carmen looks out onto a courtyard filled with men clad in greens, unlikely browns. *Sans maman* they are called[,] . . . [m] otherless brood. Too impossibly brutish to have been born of a woman’s womb. (Chancy, *Spirit* 275)

[We were] a generation of mostly fatherless boys, though some of our fathers were still living, even if somewhere else. . . . A great many of our fathers had also died in the dictatorship’s prisons, and others had abandoned us altogether to serve the regime. (Danticat, *Dew* 141)

One of the legacies of the American occupation of Haiti was increased militarization (Plant, *Sugar* 51); subsequent to the occupation, the military organisations and models established by the Americans have been

the means by which Haitians have been terrorized and oppressed. Danticat's and Chancy's texts engage with the way in which state violence impacts on the family, through the figures of *tonton macoutes* in the Duvaliers' regimes. The *tonton macoutes*, a personal militia force created by François Duvalier, consolidated his repressive regime through spying, beatings, executions, rapes, and "disappearances." These *tonton macoutes* as both family men and agents of the state epitomize the disjuncture that Trouillot pinpoints between the nation and the state, civil and political life. In Danticat's text the eponymous character is a *tonton macoute* and torturer in Duvalier's regime who flees to America in 1967. In Chancy's novel, Alexis meets his Uncle Kiko, who also worked for François Duvalier. Uncle Kiko is a minor character in the novel, yet the reader is given a clear account of his moral degeneracy, ostensibly engendered by the role he played in enacting Duvalier's state terror:

I tell you, it was horrible. I found myself killing people. Once I killed a pregnant woman with my hands wrapped around her throat and was told to tear the fetus from her belly. I tried to do it but I couldn't. I wish I had been able to because I was more afraid of what they could do to me if I didn't do it, than what I was capable of doing. (*Spirit* 198)

Uncle Kiko is an alcoholic who viciously beats his wife, Gladys. Despite fleeing Haiti for Canada with the help of his family, he carries the legacy of violence and terror with him, to re-enact in an intimate familial context. As discussed previously, Chancy's novel ends optimistically—with a union between Alexis and Carmen and the approaching birth of Carmen's daughter. This hopeful conclusion is made possible through the obliteration of Uncle Kiko, who is killed by a fire deliberately set by Gladys. This violent act coincides with and diametrically opposes the explosive violence in Haiti incited by the coup against Aristide. While the violence in Haiti is destructive and leads to the death of Vodou healer Léah, the violence in Montréal is cleansing, and represents "a part of the past [that] is beginning to die" so that a future can be lived (*Spirit* 288). However, it is notable that in Chancy's novel the possibility of a future is *dyasporic* rather than based in Haiti, as Philippe also dies.

Danticat's novel adopts a much more ambivalent approach to the eponymous *tonton macoute* and is less concerned with charting a hopeful future than with identifying a kaleidoscopic range of Haitian migrant experiences. This is reflected in the structure of the text, which emphasizes plurality and fragmentation rather than the impetus to wholeness and resolution that emerges in Chancy's novel. *The Dew Breaker* defies easy generic classification. Resting somewhere between a novel and a collection of short stories, the text's nine episodes variously alight at each decade between the 1960s and the 2000s. Through these episodes the reader is given snapshots of the Dew Breaker, but no complete picture coalesces. Instead, the reader is privy to his family's attempts to come to terms with his past and glimpses the legacy of his terror through the partial perspectives of his victims (Beatrice, a bridal seamstress, who was tortured because she would not date the Dew Breaker and Dany, whose parents were shot by the Dew Breaker). Unlike Uncle Kiko, the Dew Breaker is given a back story that roots his choice to become an agent of state terror within his own impoverishment and eviction by François Duvalier's representatives (*Dew* 191).<sup>14</sup> If this biographical context opens questions about the kinds of choices open to those disenfranchised and brutalized in Haiti,<sup>15</sup> then Danticat's depiction of the Dew Breaker's new life in the U.S. undercuts the possibility of unequivocally condemning him by suggesting that reprehensible actions do not wholly define identity. This contrasts with Chancy's depiction of Uncle Kiko, whose migration, rather than allowing possibilities for reform, prolongs his brutality. Uncle Kiko's "Canadian" identity seems continuous with his *macoute* brutality, and he shows no remorse for his actions. The Dew Breaker, on the other hand, asserts that his migration to the U.S. has enabled his transformation into a different person: reformed by the birth of his daughter, Ka, he could never be the killer he was (*Dew* 24). These representations of *tonton macoutes* coincide with the different visions Chancy and Danticat hold about the possibilities of migration. While Chancy's representation of identity emphasizes wholeness and continuity (implicit in the idea of *exile*), Danticat accentuates relationality and the notion of "café-au-lait," suggesting that migration can lead to identity-reformation ("Haiti" 5).

If Danticat and Chancy diverge in their imagining of the kinds of identities possible through migration, they both approach *dyaspora* through a “transoceanic imaginary.” Brinda Mehta suggests ways in which *The Dew Breaker’s* themes can be understood tidalectically:

The novel describes a re-enacted, postmodern middle passage characterized by forced evictions from the homeland; the sharing of transnational spaces such as boats, airplanes, and other forms of transportation by victims and victimizers alike; perilous crossings; and the unwelcome reception of Haitians in North America. The novel evokes the memory of the traumatic trans-Atlantic crossing and its “creeds carried over the ocean by forebears . . . in the hulls of Middle Passage *kanntès*, *nègriers*, slave ships.” (*Notions* 71)

I agree with Mehta that *The Dew Breaker* invites a tidalectic reading. However, while there are implicit forced evictions in the text, the narrative describes no journeys by boat: the perilous crossings are not narrated, and the transitions between countries are ideological and implied rather than physical. The concluding quotation originates in the thoughts of a character who has renounced Vodou beliefs rather than positing a connection to Africa. Taking all this into account, Danticat seems less concerned with actual geographical crossings and journeys than Chancy. Danticat’s “transoceanic imaginary” then, rather than mapping movement across space, seeks to engage with migrant sensibilities and the historical legacies of violence in Haiti.

Danticat’s text explores how her characters are “between worlds” as migrants, both inside and outside of cultures. Thus, when we see the wife from “Seven” arrive in the United States we witness how her identity is figuratively stripped away as she goes through customs. The customs officer disposes of most of the contents of her suitcase, and as she emerges into the foyer she is seemingly reborn: “suddenly she found herself before a door that slid open by itself, parting like a glass sea . . . she was standing there, blinking through the nearly blinding light shining down” (*Dew* 40). As she enters this new world her husband lifts her, and “when he put her back down[,] . . . she finally believed she was

really somewhere else, on another soil" (41). The unnamed wife does not instantly become "American," however. Her arrival in the new locale brings with it a difficult transition; we see her (hiding) in the basement flat, worried to venture into the outside world in case she gets lost. By the end of the episode the wife is making her first tentative steps into the "new" world outside. In "The Funeral Singer," Danticat also shows the "in-between" status of Rézia, Mariselle and Freda—these women are all fugitives from political terror in Haiti who meet in a class in New York. While the women are acquiring literacy in English, Freda teaches them another kind of communication—the song "Brother Timonie" which she sung at funerals in Haiti. The simultaneous exposure to these different "languages" shows how the women are poised between the future and memories of home, "the terrible days behind [them] and the uncertain ones ahead" (181). Song is particularly poignant as Freda is forced to flee Haiti after refusing to sing at the National Palace as a political protest against her father's murder by the regime. It is through "Brother Timonie" that we can see Danticat developing a version of tidalectics, using sea imagery to speak of the pain of continual cycles of violence in Haiti. Freda describes "Brother Timonie" thus: "a song whose cadence rises and falls, like the waves of the ocean. I sang it through my tears, and later people would tell me that my sobs reminded them of the incoming tide" (175). Freda first sung "Brother Timonie" at her father's funeral, before becoming a professional funeral singer: the song's tidal modulation symbolizes the elliptical return of violence in Haiti.

Like Chancy, Danticat imagines *diaspora* through an elliptical realization of history. In "The Book of Miracles," for example, we see that the Dew Breaker's wife, Anne, fears their daughter Ka will discover her father's identity. This anxiety has been precipitated by an encounter with a man that Ka believes is fugitive Emmanuel Constant, the leader of the FRAPH squads which terrorized Haitian civilians in the 1990s. Danticat thus explicitly links Duvalier's terror to that preceding and following the coup which ousted Aristide in 1991. Terror returns elliptically, in a different time, wearing another guise.<sup>16</sup> Through *The Dew Breaker's* non-sequential episodes (which also shift between different locales), history emerges as concurrent rather than chronological, as in Chancy's novel.

“Monkey Tails,” for example, includes a multi-layered historical allegory in which history emerges concurrently at personal, political, and national levels. In the background of Michel’s story to his unborn son is the *déchoukaj*: the overthrow of Jean-Claude Duvalier’s regime and the vengeance against the *tonton macoute*. In the foreground we see M. Christophe commanding his illegitimate son (Michel) to help stem the flow of water from his sabotaged pump. The overflowing water symbolizes “Lavalas” (“cleansing wave” or flood), the popular movement that toppled the Duvalier regime and latterly supported Aristide. Here again water imagery links to violence and suffering as Danticat symbolically aligns the free flowing water with the mass defiance of the surging crowd and the bloodshed of vengeance. The pump is owned by M. Christophe, whose name recalls the despotic eighteenth-century ruler of Haiti (an authoritarian pattern echoed by the Duvaliers), a self-declared king who governed the North as a semi-feudal state until a rebellion (and his suicide) in 1820. M. Christophe’s “cinnamon-colored” skin also testifies to the persistent power of the Haitian elite in shaping the lives of the “nation” (46). That M. Christophe denies his son is indicative of a larger nationwide trend of absent or inadequate fathers, a fatherlessness which operates as an indictment of François Duvalier (*Papa Doc*) and his failure to nurture his country. Here Danticat contrasts with Chancy, whose work tends to imagine *diasporic* identity in terms of separation from “the mother” (*Meridians* 71). This realization of parental figures coincides with the writers’ different attitudes to identity. As ambiguity and relationality are prevalent in Danticat’s writing, fathers in *The Dew Breaker* are indeterminate in identity, memory, and motivation. On the other hand, the predominance of absent yet identifiable Haitian mothers in Chancy’s writing illustrates how her representations of motherless daughters returning (or desiring to return) to Haiti<sup>17</sup> is a striving for wholeness, a reconnection with origins.

### III. Imagining *Diaspora*

The sea remembers everything and it remembers . . . even those who have gone away. (Danticat, “Haiti” 8)<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, Chancy's and Danticat's differing notions of identity and belonging translate into divergent conceptions of *diasporic* communities and their futures. These themes also emerge in the formal organization of the texts. For Chancy, rootedness is important. She recalls how one of her aunts describes her, as a (*diasporic*) writer, as "*la racine, the root*" (*Meridians* 77) — rooted in homeland. Carmen is also "*une racine,*" a root, because she is "carrying one of the daughters of *Ochún* in [her] belly" (*Spirit* 208). Here Chancy envisages the binding role of Vodou in Haitian identity. Vodou, "the oldest, least understood, and perhaps the most maligned of the Afro-Caribbean belief systems" (Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 4) emerged alongside these other religions with slavery's displacement of African peoples to the Caribbean. Vodou is diasporic—a mixture of African, Taino, and Catholic religious influences and syncretic Creole *lwa* (gods), brought together on plantations—and it played a key role in catalyzing Haitian resistance to slavery and to the American occupation of Haiti in the early twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> For Chancy, Carmen's journey to Haiti and involvement in Vodou (through Léah) serves to reveal rootedness. However, Carmen's Haitian identity can only be lived out in exile in Canada. As the situation degenerates in Haiti with the coup, Carmen flees the country (escaping by virtue of her Canadian passport). There is never any possibility of her permanent return to Haiti. Thus Chancy's representation of return slides into exile from Haiti. Yet for Chancy, the two bleed into each other in the novel through the "*diasporic* rooting" provided through Vodou visions and beliefs.

Chancy's vision accommodates both displacement and rooting through Vodou, which affirms identity by providing routes to memory and history, allowing the characters access to Haiti, despite their geographical distance from it. In this way she is able to gesture towards a positive future that could work towards transcending the traumatic legacies of Haiti's history. This is reflected in the novel's resolution, which brings the key *diasporic* characters together (Carmen, Alexis, and Miss Alberta) and which also indicates possibilities for community construction. However, this resolution relies on chance (or perhaps the hidden shaping of destiny by Vodou *lwás*) and as such may seem somewhat contrived in terms

of plotting: Alexis arrives at Miss Alberta's house, where Carmen has been living, because he just happened to meet Miss Alberta's brother in Tennessee. If this impetus towards resolution seems somewhat forced (in terms of plotting and the overt political content of the novel), the centrality of mythological and magical realist elements in *The Spirit of Haiti* undercuts any evaluation based purely on formal realist criteria.

Unlike Chancy, Danticat sees neither herself nor her characters as definitely rooted in *one* place. Danticat seeks to unsettle notions of "origin" and sees that "home" can reside in multiple locales: "my home in the traditional sense is not just one concrete place but many, many places. . . . It is not one or two places . . . but a mix, the café-au-lait, which we make of it" ("Haiti" 8). Danticat's relational ideas of migrant identity are suggested in the way in which she structures the text. Dany is depicted in Haiti in "Night Talkers" and in New York in "Seven" and is one of a number of characters in Danticat's text who are seen from different viewpoints. Most obviously there is the Dew Breaker (seen from the perspectives of Dany, Beatrice, Anne, and Ka). The reader also sees Eric depicted through his wife's perceptions in "Seven" and through his ex-girlfriend's thoughts in "Water Child," and Michel appears in "Seven" and narrates "Monkey Tails." These shifting perspectives in the form of the novel reflect Danticat's own relational notions about migration, showing how identity is not fixed but is subject to continual redefinition by the self and by others.

While the dynamic of Chancy's novel tends towards unity, Danticat's text accentuates plurality and irresolution: the multiple outlooks on the Dew Breaker do not lead to a consistent depiction, nor do they posit definitive motivations that would allow for an understanding of his actions. Many of the narratives are incomplete and premised on absence: Dany is unable to elicit his aunt's testimony about his parents' murder because she dies; Beatrice gives only a partial account of her torture and mistakenly believes that the Dew Breaker continues to pursue her. In *The Dew Breaker's* form and content traumatic events are rendered incompletely and without the possibility of closure, which contrasts with Chancy's more optimistic resolution. In line with this, disconnection is a key theme in Danticat's text: we see this in Nadine's isolation from her



co-workers and parents in “The Water Child,” and in “Seven,” the couple reunited after seven years of separation continue to be estranged, an estrangement realized formally as the narrative moves from one character’s reflections to the other’s impressions, registering their mutual disconnection. Danticat’s writing gestures towards a more radical imagining of *diaspora* than Chancy’s. Realized through a larger pool of characters, and criss-crossing different decades, Danticat’s text does not employ a theme (such as Chancy’s Vodou) to formulate an internal coherence for the Haitian *diasporic* community: instead she depicts silence, isolation, and uncertainty. Is it her more nuanced approach to (collective and individual) identity that accounts for Danticat’s greater popularity? Aside from formal criticisms that might be levelled at Chancy’s work, her current invisibility in recent discussions of Haitian (migrant) literature is somewhat surprising. If Chancy’s resolutions appear idealistic, I contend that her work is nevertheless in need of discussion precisely because she investigates exile at a time when there is a critical tendency to suggest that with postmodern identity politics, stable subjectivities imagined as “exilic” have been superseded by more hybrid migrant identities.<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

- 1 During the 1990s, President Aristide sought to strengthen these *diasporic* connections by involving Haitian emigrants with economic and political developments in Haiti (Glick Schiller and Fouron 137–8).
- 2 See for example Danticat’s *Krik Krak*; *Brother I’m Dying*; *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; and *Behind the Mountains*, in which female adolescent protagonists migrate from Haiti to New York.
- 3 See also Danticat’s interview with Holmes on Bookbrowse.com.
- 4 Martin Munro argues that in Haiti Kreyòl literature has been slow to evolve. In part a legacy of the perceived threat of the U.S. to Haitian culture, for much of the twentieth century French remained the favoured literary language. The “elaborate linguistic self-investigation” and “careful reintegration of ‘authentic’ language” evident in other Caribbean and postcolonial interrogations of colonial languages emerges in Haitian writing only during the 1970s (210–1). See Lang for a discussion of literature written in Haitian Kreyòl.
- 5 See particularly Chancy’s academic writings, *Framing Silence* and *Searching for Safe Places*. Chancy’s novel reimagines official historical narratives by focusing on women such as Défilée and Christophe’s mother and by writing slavery into

- Canadian history with the figure of Marie-Josèphe Angélique, a female slave who set fire to part of Montréal (*Spirit* 36–7).
- 6 This sense of exile might well have been compounded by Chancy's distance from the large and well-established Haitian community in Québec, where 95% of all Haitian migrants live (Pégram 44).
- 7 See Danticat's interviews with Lyons (197) and Holmes.
- 8 See, for example, the dislocation of the protagonist of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as she arrives in New York (chapters 5–8).
- 9 After a slave uprising against French planters in 1791 and prolonged fighting against French attempts to reclaim the colony, St. Domingue was declared independent in 1804 and renamed Haiti (Dash 6). This independence came with a financial price: Haiti agreed to compensate France for its losses in 1825, a debt not settled until 1947. Haiti, then, became "postcolonial" only twenty years after America, and thus has a significantly different postcolonial history from other Caribbean islands. Guadeloupe and Martinique are still "*départements d'Outre-Mer*" (overseas "departments") of France, Jamaica became fully independent in 1962, Barbados in 1966, and Dominica in 1978.
- 10 See Barsamian, "Interview with Danticat" (n. pag).
- 11 For background see Kaussen (221–2) and Farmer (198, 219–21).
- 12 Another example of how American influence has degraded Haitian life indicated in the novel is the U.S.'s role in the eradication of the indigenous pig population in the 1980s after an outbreak of African swine fever (*Spirit* 29). By the time the eradication programme had begun, deaths from the disease had ceased, and the obliteration of this pig population decimated farm economies and ecosystems (Richman 49).
- 13 An example of this is Alexis' flight from those who beat him and Darren, which is simultaneously a flight from slavery (*Spirit* 168).
- 14 When François Duvalier comes to power, the Dew Breaker and his family are dispossessed of their land, his father goes mad, and his mother disappears, so to volunteer for the National Security services seems like a positive action. This scenario is ironic, as Duvalier promised to empower the poor and "redistribute wealth out of the hands of the light-skinned elite" (Scott 34).
- 15 Kaussen sees Danticat's depiction of the Dew Breaker as a rewriting and updating of the peasants of Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* (*The Masters of the Dew*)—instead of labourers, peasants become *tonton macoutes* (201).
- 16 Critics such as Farmer (108–110) and Chancy (*Searching* 147) have argued that François Duvalier's regime was in various ways (although not wholly) supported politically and economically by the U. S., while FRAPH were financed by the C.I.A. (*Uses* 321). In fact Constant lived in New York as a free man until 2006 under the protection of the C.I.A. (Kaussen 187; Mehta 199).
- 17 For example, Carmen in *The Spirit of Haiti*, Josèphe in *The Scorpion's Claw* and Catherine in *The Loneliness of Angels*.

- 18 In her discussion of Danticat and her conception of “tidalectics,” DeLoughrey does not mention America’s policing of the ocean to control the influx of Haitian refugees arriving by boat. Here national concerns shape the conception of “the sea” as territory.
- 19 Notably it is during the period of the American occupation that writers and anthropologists sensationalized Vodou as satanic, savage and cannibalistic, an image which has had remarkable cultural resonance. Later François Duvalier would attempt to harness Vodou for his own political purposes.
- 20 Mardorossian makes this a central argument in her study of recent Caribbean women writers, arguing that a new phase of postcolonial writing is emerging, exemplified by a concern with “the pragmatic shift from exile to migrant” (114). See also Israel’s *Outlandish*, which in part seeks to deconstruct this trajectory, whilst showing how it has been constructed. Israel argues that “‘exile’ is perhaps most closely associated with literary modernism, [and] tends to imply both a coherent subject or author and a more circumscribed, limited conception of place and home” (3).

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