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The (Nation) State of the Family: Remembering the Links Between Collective Rape and the Cult of Virginity in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

In the twenty years since its publication, Edwidge Danticat's first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, has attained a unique status in its revealing depiction of state-sanctioned sexual violence against women in Haiti.

Donette A. Francis credits Danticat's novel as one of the first among a new generation of Caribbean women's narratives which foreground the systematized violence experienced by women and girls in the region, thus breaking a longstanding silence on these issues (Francis, "Uncovered" 73).

A coming-of-age novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* tells the story of Sophie Caco who is born in Haiti and raised by her aunt until the age of twelve, when she migrates to New York to live with her mother. Central to the novel are the multiple sexual traumas experienced by three generations of women in Sophie's family, including her mother's brutal rape by a *Tonton Macoute* (a member of the notorious civilian militia during the Duvalier

dictatorships lasting from 1957-1986)¹ and the passed-down practice of mothers regularly “testing” their daughters’ virginity by using a finger to check the intactness of the hymen. As I argue in this paper, these, along with other allusions to experiences of sexual trauma in the novel, allow Danticat to revise a dominant historical narrative, in both national and international scripts, of Haitian women’s experiences within the family and the nation. Drawing attention to the long histories of the rape of Haitian women as a tool for social and political control, Danticat compels readers to question the normative codes of gender and sexuality that are policed within the family and to recognize how this very policing serves to protect the patriarchal interests of the nation. In doing so, she unmasks the ways in which citizenship is a gendered and heterosexualized construct that thwarts Haitian women’s sexual autonomy.

The primary rape depicted in the novel occurs in the 1960s during Papa Doc’s rule. We learn from the various tellings of the story that as a young girl, around the age of sixteen, Sophie’s mother Martine was attacked by a masked man on the road home from school, dragged into a nearby cane field and was raped, beaten, and left there on the ground

¹ François Duvalier, known commonly as “Papa Doc,” ruled Haiti from 1957 to 1971, when he named his son, Jean Claude Duvalier, his successor in the presidency. Jean Claude, called “Baby Doc,” ruled until 1986, when he fled into exile.

(Danticat, *Breath* 61, 139). She becomes pregnant as a result of the rape and begins to have nightmares, effectively reliving the rape every night for the rest of her life. After Sophie, the child of that rape, is born, Martine moves to the United States in an effort to get away from the constant memory of her attack which helps to a certain extent, although the nightmares continue. When Sophie is twelve, she moves to New York to be with her mother. It seems that being near her daughter, who is another reminder of the rape, intensifies Martine's anxiety and trauma, a trauma that eventually leads to her suicide.

Martine's rape is the driving force of the narrative, as many critics have examined, most commonly through the lens of psychoanalysis and trauma theory.² Additionally, a series of essays have been published on Danticat's politicization of the history of rape by *Tonton Macoutes* under the Duvalier regimes, discussing the novel's depiction of women's position as citizens within the nation.³ In her book *The Tears of Hispaniola*, Lucía Suárez argues that the novel is an act of remembering the real history of sexual violence during the Duvalier dictatorships that has otherwise been

² For example, see Jennifer C. Rossi's "Let the words bring wings to our feet," Newtona Johnson's "Challenging Internal Colonialism," Semia Harbawi's "Against All Odds," and J. Brooks Bouson's *Embodied Shame*.

³ The pluralized French form of Tonton Macoute would be "Tontons Macoutes," while the Creole form would be "Tonton Makout yo." Danticat maintains the use of "Tonton Macoutes," most likely and Anglicized version of the plural form. As such, I follow her usage.

silenced (Suárez 68-69). Politically motivated rapes, explains Carolle Charles in her historical analysis of rape during the Duvalier decades, became a prominent tactic under Papa Doc's rule in an effort to silence women who were outspoken opponents of his regime. The now well-known rape of anti-Duvalier activist and feminist journalist Yvonne Hakime Rimpel occurred in 1958, a year after she lent her support to Duvalier's opponent, Louis Déjoie, in the presidential election (Charles 140; Rey 84). She was attacked by *Tonton Macoutes* and taken from her home, raped repeatedly in an unknown place, and was found naked on a street near her home the next morning (Kang 45-46). Although Rimpel's case has recently gained attention, many women who have had similar experiences remain silent and silenced. Suárez suggests, then, that Danticat's storytelling offers a "memorial space of acknowledgement" for the real victims of rape whose experiences have until now been denied (Suárez 70). In her book *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship*, Francis further interrogates rape under the Duvalier regime, arguing that Martine's state-sanctioned rape reveals the ways in which citizenship is gendered and sexualized. The specific nature of sexual violence against women as a tool of political repression made clear the ways in which women occupied a

distinctly sexed category of citizen whose bodies could be punished in particular ways, even while this distinction was denied by the state that “obscure[d] violations against women by dismissing their testimonies as nonsensical or inconsequential to the political life of Haitian society” (Francis, *Fictions* 81). For Francis, then, there is a double denial of “sexual citizenship” present in the Duvalier rape campaign: the sexualization of political repression for women as a group which sanctions rape as a political tool, and the denial, at the level of the state, of the occurrence of rape in the first place.

Suárez’s and Francis’ historical readings of Danticat’s novel are focused on politically motivated rapes under Duvalier, like Rimpel’s, which certainly remain the more recognized occurrences of sexual violence during the era. Yet, Martine is no such political dissident. She is a young peasant girl who is raped on her way home from school by a masked man. Most critics, and the character Sophie herself, read Martine’s rapist as a *Tonton Macoute*. But Sophie states, “My father *might* have been a Macoute” (Danticat, *Breath* 139. My emphasis). The ambiguity here suggests a larger context of state-sanctioned rape in Haiti, one in which *state-sanctioned* means not only rape that is executed by

agents of the state, but also rape that remains unaddressed, unpunished, and even unrecognized by the state. In this vein, Simone A. James Alexander argues more broadly that Danticat's novel, in its depiction of both rape and the familial obsession with virginity, reveals the ways in which women are marked as "second class citizens" within the nation (Alexander 373). Combining the arguments of Suárez, Francis, and Alexander, it is clear that Danticat's depiction of rape in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* gives voice to a silenced history of rape under the Duvalier regimes by agents of the state, while also giving voice to a wider history of unpunished rape in the region, ultimately revealing women's sexual vulnerability due to their marginality as sexed citizens of the nation.

Remembering the History of Collective Rape

From this perspective, and following Clare Counihan's recent article on the novel, I argue that the text serves as an act of remembering a much longer history of the sexual violation of Haitian women from the moment of colonization to the moment of publication, during which multiple campaigns of sexual violence occurred, constituting what Jennifer L Green calls instances of "collective rape" (97). Collective rape has been developed as a sociological concept in response to mass rape campaigns

around the world in the last 30 years, particularly within the context of the civil war in Rwanda in 1994 during which an estimated 250,000 people were raped, leading to the first ever declaration of wartime rape as a crime against humanity (Green 97-98). Since the Rwanda case, war criminals have been tried on charges of rape in Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone as well (Green 98), and a truth commission in Haiti was formed to investigate the crimes committed during Raoul Cédras' rule (1991-1994), paying particular attention to the regime's use of sexual violence (Suárez 68). Defined as "a pattern of sexual violence perpetrated on civilians by agents of a state, political group, and/or politicized ethnic group," collective rape provides a framework to analyze large-scale sexual violence during a specific historical moment (Green 101). Although used mainly in contemporary contexts, I argue that the concept of collective rape has particular salience in Haitian history (and Caribbean history more broadly) where sexual violence on the plantations served as a gendered and racialized tool of social control that established the masters' power.

Although Martine's rape and the Caco women's experiences of being tested and *testing* their daughters are certainly the main instances of

sexual trauma in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, there are other hints, snippets, memories, and historical references that point to many more occasions of the sexual violation of women through centuries. That Martine's rape occurs in a cane field, for example, evokes the gendered and sexualized violence inflicted on enslaved women, in particular, during plantation slavery. The rape of enslaved women by their masters was certainly a characteristic of the plantation system in Saint Domingue, among other slave societies, where, as David Geggus asserts, "female slaves were exceptionally vulnerable to rape, and sexual harassment by whites occasionally extended to the most vicious sadism" (Geggus 265). As scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, and Thomas A. Foster have pointed out in the context of American slavery, enslaved men, too, were likely sexually assaulted and exploited by their masters, suggesting that the institution of slavery and the violence it required were sexualized across gender lines (Hartman, *Scenes* 80-81; Abdur-Rahman 226; Foster 446). Martine's rape, although clearly representative of the specific sexual violence inflicted upon women during the Duvalier dictatorships, also symbolizes, through its cultural geography, the history of the sexual vulnerability of black women and men in Haiti during

slavery. Indeed, after her mother's funeral, Sophie visits the site of Martine's rape in the cane field in an effort to free herself from the "ghosts" of the past (Danticat, *Breath* 211). In a rage, she cries and pulls at the cane until her grandmother finally asks her, "Ou libéré?," "are you free?" (233). Freedom in this scene is multilayered, representing a sense of freedom from her mother's, and her own, sexual trauma. Yet, the site of the cane field and the unanswered question of freedom make clear the historical setting of slavery and collective rape that informs the present trauma, suggesting that freedom, particularly from sexual violation, remains, from the era of slavery, unattainable for many Haitian women.

Beyond allusions to the history of rape and enslavement, Danticat offers other hints of instances of collective sexual violation experienced historically by Haitian women in the novel. As Francis notes, the family name Caco references the name of the peasant guerrillas who resisted the U.S. Marine presence in Haiti during the U.S. occupation from 1915 to 1934 (Francis, *Fictions* 79). In a lively conversation at a Haitian restaurant in the U.S., a young Sophie hears a man shout, "Never the Americans in Haiti again...Remember what they did in the twenties. They treated our people like animals" (Danticat, *Breath* 54). Indeed the

prevalence of rape of Haitian women by U.S. Marines during the American occupation of Haiti has been documented and is credited with having been a significant organizing factor in the early years of the Haitian's women's movement (Rey 83; Charles 146-147). Yet Francis argues that the invocation of the Caco name allows Danticat to expose the position of Haitian women in the midst of the resistance to the occupation as sexually vulnerable to men on *both* sides, revealing the history of rape of Haitian women by both the U.S. Marines and the Caco rebels themselves (Francis, *Fictions* 79-80). Alongside the Caco name, Danticat pieces together these multiple histories of sexual violation by hinting at generations of sexual trauma undergone by women in Sophie's family. We know that Martine has nightmares about her rape every night, but when Sophie returns to Haiti for the first time since she left as a child, she realizes that her grandmother, too, has nightmares. Sophie explains, "She mumbled in her sleep, like an old warrior in the midst of a battle. My mother used to make the same kinds of sounds. *Lagé mwin*. Leave me alone" (Danticat, *Breath* 109). The notion of a warrior in battle, here, suggests a longstanding fight against violation that Sophie's grandmother has fought. Moreover, we might gather that Grandmè Ifé, who would have

been a young woman during the U.S. occupation, too has experienced sexual violation, like her daughter, and has similarly relived the violation in her dreams. This emphasis on inherited historical trauma leads Sophie to state, “There is always a place where nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms” (Danticat, *Breath* 234).

The sexual violation of generations of women in Haiti is indeed historically documented, particularly during moments of political upheaval. As already mentioned, the rape of enslaved women by their white owners, overseers, and even visitors was a tenet of the plantation system. In response to this sexual and gender violence of the plantation system, a wave of what might be called “retaliatory rapes” occurred after the Haitian Revolution in 1804 when Dessalines’ soldiers raped French women (and black women who had voluntarily entered relationships with white men) as a means of vengeance for the countless violations experienced by black women under slavery (Rey 82; James 88). The rapes of Haitian women by both nationalist guerrillas and U.S. Marines were reported during the American occupation of Haiti, as Danticat references. Rape also became a tool of political repression under both Duvalier regimes, together ranging from 1957 to 1986, during which the *Tonton*

Macoutes--civilian militia members who acted as Duvalier's henchmen -- increasingly detained, tortured, raped, and executed women (as well as men) who were considered to be political dissidents (Charles 140). In the wake of the 1991 coup d'état that ousted democratically elected president Jean Bertrand Aristide leading up to the U.S.-run intervention in 1994 that removed the military junta led by Raoul Cédras, an estimated 1,680 rapes were committed in Haiti by military officials as a form of sexual terrorism (Rey 79). During multiple historical periods, then, ranging from the European conquest and the subsequent implementation of plantation slavery to the Cédras junta from 1991 to 1994 (at which time Danticat was writing the novel), collective rape has been a critical reality for women in Haiti.⁴

Yet, these many instances of collective rape remain generally absent from dominant narratives of Haitian history. International attention became particularly focused on violence against women in Haiti after Human Rights Watch and the National Coalition for Haitian Refugees published a report in 1994 on the drastic increase in the number of

⁴ More recent accounts of the rape of Haitian men and women by UN peacekeeping forces and the post-earthquake wave of rapes in tent camps have also gained international attention (Sheller 1). These instances of collective rape, although clearly important, occurred after the publication of the novel, which is why they are not mentioned in this historical timeline.

politically motivated rapes under the Cédras regime (Rey 73-74). As more and more attention was paid to the rape campaign, Haitian and international media framed the situation as one that was particularly dire given the rarity of rape in Haiti until this point (Rey 79). In 1994, for example, a reporter for the *Dallas Morning News* wrote that before 1993, Haitian women “lived nearly free from fear of sexual assault” (qtd in Rey 79). Written and published during the junta’s rule, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, contests this narrative by revealing the complex history of the rape of Haitian women, across generations, and its absence from national and international memory.

While the reporter’s statement certainly ignores the existence of historical documentation on generations of rape in Haiti, such as the instances of collective rape I have discussed above, it also points to a certain marginality of this documentation within a larger dominant historical narrative. Historians themselves have discussed the difficulties of piecing together Haitian women’s history, especially in the context of sexuality and violence, from the archival documents that remain. Bernard Moitt, for example, points to the dearth of archival evidence of enslaved women’s experiences of sexual violation in the French Caribbean,

especially compared with historical evidence on the topic in the British Caribbean colonies and in the U.S. South: “We have no personal testimonies such as that presented by Thomas Thistlewood, a young English overseer in Jamaica in the mid-eighteenth century, who sexually exploited a host of slave women and recorded his daily activities (partly in Latin) in a journal” (Moitt 99). While Moitt goes on to argue that accounts of children of mixed race, of the prostitution of enslaved women, and of slave drivers’ sexual assault of enslaved women serve as evidence that sexual violation of enslaved women was commonplace in Saint Domingue slave society, the general lack of documentation on the issue allows sexual violation to remain in the shadows of the history of the lived experiences of the enslaved, especially in Haiti (Moitt 99-100). Even in the historiography of slave societies where more accounts on the sexual experiences of enslaved women is available, there remains the challenge of filling in the blanks in the quest to reproduce the experiences of the lives of the enslaved. In her experimental historical account of the rape of an enslaved woman in New England, Wendy Anne Warren writes of historians’ predicaments, “We make our way among flawed sources, overreliant on written texts, hopelessly entangled in our own biases and

beliefs, doing the best we can with blurry evidence, sometimes forced to speculate despite our specialized knowledge” (Warren 1049).

Through fiction, Danticat can address these silences and the blurry evidence in the archives by filling in the blanks with fictional narrative. In her book *Framing Silence*, Myriam Chancy asserts, “the female characters brought to life in the works of women of the African diaspora function as representative figures of real women whose lives would, in the absence of these literary figurations, remain without shape or actualization in our imaginations and ideologies” (Chancy 109). In this sense, Danticat’s depiction of centuries of sexual violation of Haitian women serves to represent a history that remains otherwise untold in both popular media and dominant historiography. As Suárez asserts, “[t]he text does not allow the crime to be forgotten” (Suárez 74).

Although it asks us to remember these crimes to a certain extent in the novel, Danticat’s method of representing multiple instances of collective rape throughout Haitian history also demonstrates the purposeful forgetting and silencing of these crimes. Scenes of rape are depicted through what I have called “snippets” and “moments” in the text, suggesting not so much a clear memory but rather a shadowy

haunting of a past partially forgotten and written over. These specters of sexual violence serve to simultaneously remember the forgotten past of a longer history of trauma while also revealing the ways in which this history--and its forgetting--informs the present trauma the female characters experience.

Linking *Testing* and Collective Rape

Even beyond giving voice to an otherwise silenced history of sexual violence against women, however, Danticat's portrayal of centuries of collective rape serves to remember and reveal the ways in which gender and sexuality norms in Haiti have been and continue to be in the service of the interest of the ruling class, on multiple levels. Portrayed particularly alongside the other main instance of sexual trauma in the novel, virgin testing, allusions to the long history of rape force us as readers to reconsider the cultural justifications behind *testing* and the more general control of women's sexuality. Ultimately, as I will argue, the pairing of rape and *testing* as experiences of sexual trauma allows the novel to reveal the connections and paradoxes between the policing of women's sexuality within family and the state-sanctioned sexual violation of women as a tool for social and political control. *Testing*, in its multiple

and contradictory explanations, is simultaneously a practice that polices women's sexuality within a patriarchal system of marriage exchange, a nervous tic based in historical trauma that serves as a vigil against rape, and ultimately a practice in the home that upholds a national obsession with virginity. The novel makes clear, then, the irony of the existence of a virginity cult, upheld and enforced within the family, in a society with a long history of collective rape.

Martine first *tests* Sophie at the age of eighteen when she comes home late one night after a date with Joseph, her black American boyfriend. She finds her mother waiting up for her. She narrates, “‘Where were you?’...[My mother] took my hand with surprised [*sic*] gentleness, and led me upstairs to my bedroom. There, she made me lie on my bed and she tested me” (Danticat, *Breath* 84). The *tests*, which become regular after this first night, are a source of trauma for Sophie who copes psychologically through the practice of doubling, “weaving elaborate tales to keep my mind off the finger” (Danticat, *Breath* 155). Sophie later realizes that all of the women in her family had been tested by their mothers and they, in turn, tested their daughters.

Testing is presented in the novel by the women who have both perpetrated and undergone the practice as a measure to ensure Haitian girls' chastity and marriage prospects. When, as a new mother, Sophie returns to Haiti, she asks her grandmother why women perform the *tests*. Grandmè Ifé responds, "From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity" (Danticat, *Breath* 156). In this sense, virginity or purity constitutes women's exchange value within a heteropatriarchal system that positions daughters as exchangeable property, and mothers as the ensurers of their value (Francis, *Fictions* 86). As such, their highly valued virginity must be policed within the family whose members stand to benefit from their marriage, which can be, as Rossi points out, especially economically beneficial to women in female-headed households such as Martine's (Rossi 206). Imbued with moral and economic values, virginity becomes linked with family honor, the responsibility for which is overwhelmingly placed on mothers. Mothers within this heteropatriarchal system, then, must be responsible for their daughters' virginity.

A common depiction of the relationship between the nation and the nuclear family, as Anne McClintock, among others, has shown, is within nationalist discourse that uses the symbol of the nuclear family to represent the nation as one that is unified, orderly, and patriarchal (McClintock 91). Fathers are configured as the leaders of the nation, as they are the leaders of the household, and mothers are configured as the nurturers and culture bearers of the nation, as they are within the home. Indeed, Mimi Sheller argues that post-independence national rhetoric in Haiti consistently configured women as symbolic representations of the nation as mothers, wives, and sisters, but never as citizens (Sheller 162). Women's roles within the nuclear family, then, are projected onto the larger national project of portraying the national family. If we read *testing* as a practice to maintain family honor, we must also see it as a nationalist practice to maintain the honor of the nation (Alexander 376). In this light, women as the symbolic mothers of the nation are asked to police the sexuality of their daughters in order to maintain the nation as one that is respectable. Tante Atie stresses the strictness of gender and sexuality norms within national culture, highlighting their imposition on her daily life: "[E]ach finger had a purpose...Mothering. Boiling. Loving.

Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing. Scrubbing...Her ten fingers had been named for her even before she was born” (Danticat, *Breath* 151). These are the roles women must play within the family in order to (re)produce a respectable heteropatriarchal nation.

Read alongside the specter of Martine’s rape and the many other references to historical rapes, however, *testing* is revealed as more than just a practice of a “virginity cult” (Danticat, *Breath* 154) within a heteropatriarchy. As Clare Counihan effectively argues in her recent essay “Desiring Diaspora,” the side-by-side portrayal of rape and *testing* in the novel reveals the constant threat of sexual violation as a contributing reason mothers seek to feel the untouched hymen of their daughters, to know that they have not been raped (Counihan 39-40). Once again, there are snippets in the text that hint at this truth. Tante Atie’s above statement about the predefined uses of each of the ten fingers of a woman makes a clear reference to the practice of *testing* during which a mother inserts a finger into her daughter’s vagina. The ten uses hold multiple meanings for the practice of *testing*. In the hegemonic explanation for *testing*--to guard young women’s chastity in order to ensure their marriage prospects--the roles of “mothering” and

“loving” can be read as a form of a tough love policing that will ensure the promise of their daughter’s future. The roles of “nursing” and “healing,” however, might suggest another layer of *testing* as an act of vigilance against the threat of sexual violence for which mothers must be prepared. In another example, after explaining *testing* as a practice to ensure marriage prospects, Grandmè Ifé says to Sophie, “You must know that everything a mother does, she does for her child’s own good” (Danticat, *Breath* 157). While this excerpt could certainly be read as another glorification of family honor, there is also present a sense of vigilance against danger, perhaps a danger of which Sophie is not completely aware.

Even while the connection between the threat of rape and *testing* as a practice of vigilance against rape is suggested in the novel, as Counihan asserts, it is also recoded by dominant gendered and heterosexualized scripts as a practice made necessary by the promiscuity of Haitian girls (Counihan 40). The women in the Caco family simultaneously remember and forget that *testing* is bound up with rape, making it possible for the multilayered readings of the women’s explanations of the practice. In the end, it is Martine who makes the most overt connection between the two

instances of sexual trauma: “I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both everyday” (Danticat, *Breath* 170).

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Danticat’s portrayal of *testing* is the reality that none of the women in the Caco family successfully “pass” the tests: as Martine makes clear in the excerpt above, her mother stopped *testing* her after she was raped; Sophie chooses to end the *tests* by using a pestle to tear her own hymen (Danticat, *Breath* 88); we are unsure how or why Tante Atie’s *tests* end, but it is clear that she had an affair with Monsieur Augustin in Croix-des-Rosets (Danticat, *Breath* 14-15) and that later in life she is in a queer relationship with Louise.⁵ *Testing*, then, in its dominant coding as a practice to ensure family honor and marriage prospects, is revealed as ineffective because it neither guarantees women’s virginity nor does it seem to factor into their marriageability. In its hidden premise as a practice of vigilance against rape, *testing* is also clearly ineffective. It cannot prevent rape and it

⁵ While Danticat portrays a queer relationship between Tante Atie and Louise, it remains undeveloped in the novel. My silence surrounding queer sexual histories in this paper reflects their relative absence from the novel in this study.

cannot offer any healing after a rape has occurred, aside from the promised end to the trauma of undergoing the *tests*.

Interestingly, what seems to be most effectively established in the practice of *testing* is, on the one hand, a preservation of the value of virginity within the home and the nation, and on the other, a reproduction of the sexual trauma to which it is a reaction. In both cases, Danticat reveals the irony of the practice of *testing* in a society that has experienced centuries of collective rape as a prominent tool for social control. The concept of collective rape, as explained in the previous section, denotes a historical moment when sexual violation is used as a tool of torture or war by a ruling group (national, ethnic, religious, etc.) against another (Green 101). As I have argued in the first section of this paper, many moments of collective rape have occurred in Haitian history in which a ruling group--be it the planters on the plantations, the revolutionary soldiers, the Duvalier militia, or the Cédras junta--has enacted mass sexual violences against women, and in some cases, men. What is particularly important here is an understanding of the ways in which these ruling groups in these particular moments benefitted from the sexual violence they enacted. During plantation slavery, the rape of

enslaved women served planters in multiple ways by both providing a mechanism to reproduce the labor force in a slave system in which the child of an enslaved woman became the slave of her master and by disrupting the familial home of the enslaved which served to reinforce the master's power on the level of race, class, and gender. As Angela Davis asserts, "Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men" (Davis 23-24). Moreover, sexual violence and exploitation of enslaved men and women, argues Abdur-Rahman, highlighted "the vulnerability of all enslaved black persons to nearly every conceivable violation [which] produced a collective 'raped' subjectivity" (Abdur-Rahman 226).

During the Haitian Revolution, too, rape became a tool used by the previously enslaved rebels who enacted a kind of "retaliatory rape" campaign as a form of vengeance for the sexualized violence imposed on the plantations, as C.L.R. James explains:

From their masters [the previously enslaved] had known rape, torture, degradation, and at the slightest provocation, death. They returned in kind. For two centuries the higher civilisation had shown them that power was used for wreaking your will on those whom you controlled. Now that they held power they did as they had been taught...They, whose women had undergone countless

violations, violated all the women who fell into their hands, often on the bodies of their still bleeding husbands, fathers, and brothers. (James 88)

Here, a collective campaign of violence of a particularly gendered and sexualized nature is used against white women in order to revenge more broadly the violences undergone by the enslaved during slavery. As such, this moment of collective rape serves the interests of the revolution.

Under Duvalier and later under the Cédras junta, state-sanctioned rape served to disrupt families and cause national terror. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat writes of the Duvalier tactics:

But the Macoutes, they did not hide. When they entered a house, they asked to be fed, demanded the woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom. Then all you heard was screams until it was her daughter's turn. If a mother refused, they would make her sleep with her son and brother or even her own father. (Danticat, *Breath* 139)

In an article investigating rape culture in Haiti, Terry Rey argues that a similar tactic was used during Cédras' military junta from 1991 to 1994 and that "a discernible objective in the junta's rape strategy, beyond the humiliation and intimidation of women, was the disruption of the entire family structure and thereby the destruction of both civil society and popular support for democratic institutions and social change" (Rey 78). Seeking to intimidate and silence those involved in the Haitian Women's

movement, which became newly active during the democratization process in the 1980s, the military regime resorted to “sex-specific abuses,” including rape (Charles 135-36). Even beyond the punishment of women active in the defense of women’s rights, rape became a general political tool to target remaining supporters of Aristide (Rey 77). Danticat depicts this disruption of the family by the wave of rape and terror directly after the coup d’état overtly in her short story “Children of the Sea,” published in her collection *Krik? Krak!* (1996).⁶ The story portrays the plights of multiple families who face the terror of the *attachés* (civilian militia members) of the new military junta: a son is forced by soldiers who burst into the family’s home to rape his mother, a young woman is gang raped by soldiers and becomes pregnant, and a father refuses to sleep at home out of fear that soldiers will force him to sleep with his daughter (Danticat, “Children” 3-29). Danticat reveals the centrality of sexual violence (against men and women) to the regime’s tactics of political repression, and more broadly in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the ways in which collective rape has served the interests of the planters, the soldiers of the

⁶ “Children of the Sea” was previously published with the title “From the Ocean Floor” in *Short Fiction by Women* in October 1993.

revolution, the Duvalier state, and the Cédras junta in each respective historical moment.

In an essay examining sexual violence against women by the Argentine state during the Dirty War in the 1970s and 80s, Ximena Bunster argues that the combination of support for a gendered society in which women must remain chaste with the promotion of military tactics that specifically use sexual violence against women produces a situation in which the state-sanctioned rape “becomes most cruelly doubly disorienting” (Bunster 100). She asserts, moreover, that there is a “double brutalization involved in socializing women in particular modes and then using that very socialization as a method of torture” (Bunster 101). For Bunster, the combination of policing women’s sexuality within the family and the use of sexual violence as a form of torture is particularly traumatic to the female victims of state violence. Read in a different light, however, it could be argued that the social obsession with women’s chastity makes their sexual violation particularly forceful, not only for the survivors of rape themselves, but more broadly for the society as a whole. In a similar way, Danticat makes ironically clear the role that the practice of *testing* plays in preserving a cultural obsession

with virginity within the larger context of histories of collective rape that operate through the violation of this very cultural value. Terror and political control are specifically wrought through enacting sexual violence against women in a society that so values women's chastity.

Moreover, the paradox of the relationship between *testing* and the history of collective rape in Haiti is revealed by the fact, made clear by the women in the Caco family, that *testing*, itself, is manifested as another experience of sexual violence for Haitian women. For in responding to historical trauma, be it to ensure women's chastity for the prospects of marriage or to guard against the real threat of rape, *testing* inflicts its own trauma, enacted on daughters by their own mothers. Positioned alongside the specters of centuries of collective rape, then, *testing* in the novel is depicted as a practice with multilayered meanings, alternatively remembered and forgotten by the women who perform and undergo the *tests*. While it is coded as a practice to ensure the marriageability of daughters, it is revealed, in certain moments, to be a form of vigilance against the possibility of rape. Danticat's ironic depiction of the failures of *testing*--that it does not ensure marriage or prevent rape--highlights its primary function to reproduce a cultural obsession with virginity. That

this obsession with women's chastity is precisely the social value targeted by campaigns of collective rape which enact social terror, moreover, makes clear the paradoxical relationship between the practice of *testing* and the history of state-sanctioned sexual violation. Danticat's novel is groundbreaking, then, not only in the ways in which it remembers a forgotten women's history, but also in its compelling revelation of the relationship between the policing of sexuality within the family and the operations of social and political control enacted by the state. Both the family and the nation are indicted in the continued infliction of sexual violence on Haitian women who remain sexual non-citizens.

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