

In Dedenbach-Salazar Saenz S (ed.) *Translating Wor(l)ds: Christianity Across Cultural Borders*. Collectanea Instituti Anthropos, 51. Baden-Baden: Academia Verlag, pp. 283-304. Full text is available at:
<https://doi.org/10.5771/9783896657954-283>

“*Ou libéré?*” Vodou and Haiti: Speaking the language of Resistance, Remembrance and Freedom in the writing of Edwidge Danticat.

Fiona Darroch, University of Stirling, Scotland

Fiona Darroch is Book Reviews Editor for *Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). She is a member of teaching staff in Religion at the University of Stirling, Scotland. Her research focuses on postcolonial literature (predominantly Caribbean literature) and representations of ‘religion’, particularly the politics of the term ‘religion’.

Her publications include:

Memory and Myth: Postcolonial Religion in Contemporary Guyanese Fiction and Poetry. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009.

Re-imagining the Sacred in Caribbean Literature. In: Walton, Heather (ed), *Literature and Theology: New Interdisciplinary Spaces* edited. London: Ashgate. 2011.

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ABSTRACT

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This paper analyses how vodou is embedded in the history of Haiti; it is central to the language, literatures, and narratives of the 1791-1802 Saint Domingue revolution. Referring to the writer Edwidge Danticat and scholar of religion, Brent Plate, it engages with the ways in which a new language of religiosity, which prioritises the senses, can be creatively transcribed. This language of religiosity is in contrast to a European and Christian use of the term 'religion' which has a tendency to segregate the political and the religious, the spiritual and the material, the body and the mind. The language of religiosity used here is instead guided by a female historiography of Haiti and the goddess Erzulie.

Keywords: Vodou, Haiti, Erzulie, Danticat, *loa*, material religion.

Introduction

Vodou is embedded in the fabric of Haiti; it forms the language, the literature and the narratives of the revolution. It confronts European Enlightenment categorisations and models of knowing through its refusal to contain itself within limited constructions and definitions. Haiti's history of resistance and renewal is as equally contained in the many *loa* (gods/spirits) as it is in the colonial historical data, which often takes priority over the spiritual or metaphysical stories of a place. As with many places, a history of Haiti can also be mapped through a reading of contemporary fiction, for example author Edwidge Danticat offers her readers one way of knowing and seeing Haiti. Vodou is embedded in the narrative and the *loa* inform symbolism, metaphor and dialogue. Rather than seeing contradiction and tension as weakness, in terms of the way in which memories of Christianity and colonial encounters are manifested in vodou, we can celebrate the human spirit in all its both wonderful and painful paradox. The female *loa*, Erzulie, recurs, in her different manifestations, throughout Danticat's novels, and particularly in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). Edwidge Danticat is a Haitian-born writer; she

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has lived in the United States since she was twelve and writes in English. Her collection of essays, *Create Dangerously* (2010), provides a vivid account of her life as (what she describes as) an “immigrant artist”. Through a reading of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and the short story “A Wall of Fire Rising”, and in dialogue with Brent Plate’s and Heather Walton’s proposals of ‘material religion’, which prioritise the senses and our interaction with objects, I present a new language of religiosity, which prioritises the female body as the painful carrier of history, but also as a site of transcendence, renewal and rebirth. In this paper, I will identify the limitations of the classification ‘religion’ and open up new possibilities for the term in the contemporary world.

A history of Haiti and locating the term ‘religion’

This is what history tells us and what is remembered: initially colonised by Columbus, Saint Domingue saw the first arrival of slaves from Africa (predominantly Guinea). The Dominican priest, Las Casas, in an attempt to save the rapidly diminishing indigenous population, suggested to the King, Charles V, to import “the more robust Negroes from a populous Africa”. 15,000 slaves were transported from Africa to Saint Domingue in 1517, ordered by Charles V “and thus priest and King launched on the world the American slave-trade and slavery.” (James [1938] 2001: 3.) In 1659 the French had taken ownership of Saint Domingue and it was rapidly established as France’s most profitable, and brutal, colony. As was common across plantations, slaves were intermixed so as to dilute any linguistic and familial ties, and to destroy any relationship with the motherland. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gerbert describe how vodou was formed by the slaves in response to this violent attempt by French Catholic culture to destroy a connection with their motherland, ‘Nan Guinée’, and with their gods. (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gerbert 2003: 101.) It is estimated that in 1791 three-fourths of the population in the capital of Saint Domingue (Cap Français) were slaves. Figures recorded at that time state that across the

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island there were 40,000 whites, 28,000 free-coloureds and 452,000 slaves. (Dayan 1995: 146.) Not only did the slave population massively outweigh the colonial population, but they were also organised.

Trinidadian-born journalist and historian, C.L.R James ([1938] 2001: 69-71) describes the slaves of Saint Domingue as a “thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement” with vodou as the “medium of conspiracy” which ignited the slave revolution of 1791 and gave the slaves the momentum, language and courage to stand against a heavily armed and violent colonial force. Here, James engages with an alternative descriptive language of religiosity (compared to other scholarly writing of the time) that is committed to an understanding of our bodies’ relationship with the material world, and is therefore intimately connected to brutalities experienced by the bodies of slaves. For James, this language revolves around the men of the Saint Domingue revolution (on both sides). On August 22nd, 1791, the recorded (male) leaders of the revolution, Boukman and Makandal, carried out a ceremony, which would ignite the revolution:

Carrying torches to light their way, the leaders of the revolt met in an open space in the thick forests of the Morne Rouge, a mountain overlooking Le Cap. There Boukman gave the last instructions and, after Voodoo incantations and the sucking of the blood of a stuck pig, he stimulated his followers by a prayer spoken in Creole, which, like so much spoken on such occasions, has remained. ‘The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites which has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all.’ (James [1938] 2001: 70-71.)

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In James' account, we encounter a challenge to a colonial rhetoric of 'religion' or religiosity; rather than presenting a European Enlightenment model of Christianity that would like to neatly separate church and state affairs, James exposes the intimate link between colonial violence and the history of Christianity ("the god of the white man inspires him with crime", *ibid.* 71) and confronts the European model of 'religion'. James also makes space for a new language of religiosity to emerge which prioritises the material aspects of religion – the forests and mountains, the incantations, the blood, the weeping; the physicality of these religious (although exclusively male) bodies. But it is also vital to note that this language was predominantly chosen and written for the consumption of a white European audience, albeit an audience ready to challenge dominant narratives, as we will shortly see in relation to one of Danticat's short stories. What follows in dominant accounts is the notorious thirteen-year battle for independence, so notorious that so-called historical and fictional accounts, along with communal memory, blend to produce a deeply-rooted and shared national history, and identity.

More contemporary writers, such as Joan Dayan in her role as historian, and Edwidge Danticat in her role as author of fiction, are confronting the male dominated aspect of this history by writing women back into the records, both through fiction and history.¹ Joan Dayan writes that women were often "written out of the records of the revolution." (Dayan 1994: 17.)

¹ Dayan has detailed fascinating aspects of the history of the colonial struggles in Haiti which focus on the relationships between white French women (and the struggles they faced at the hands of barbaric white colonial men) and black female slaves and the horrors they encountered at the hands of their white mistresses. As will be discussed later in the article, these relationships are manifest in the characters of the *loa*, particularly the complex goddess Erzulie (or Ezili, as Dayan also refers to). (Dayan 1994. Dayan 1995: 54-66.)

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Interestingly, what is often “written out” of the above and similar dominant accounts is that it was a female priestess, or *mambo* (whose name has not entered the national rhetoric of independence) who assisted Boukman in the ceremony and encouraged him to drink the blood of the pig to give them “future invincibility in battle.” (ibid. 17).

James does, however, provide us with a sense that at the heart of this history is a notion of ‘religion’ that refuses to impose crude separations of space but rather intimately connects the political, social, spiritual, geographical and temporal, so that one cannot be understood independently of the other. Danticat relates this detail to contemporary Haiti:

The real marvelous [sic], which we have come to know as magic realism, lives and thrives in past and present Haiti, just as Haiti’s revolution does. The real marvelous is in the extraordinary and the mundane, the beautiful and the repulsive, the spoken and the unspoken...it is in the elaborate *vèvès*, or cornmeal drawings sketched in the soil at Vodou ceremonies to draw attention from the gods. It is in the thunderous response from gods such as Ogoun, the god of war, which speak in the hearts of men and women who, in spite of their slim odds, accept nothing less than total freedom.

Whenever possible, Haitians cite their historical and spiritual connection to this heroic heritage by invoking the names of one or all of the founders of the country: Touissant L’Ouverture, Henri Christophe, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. (Danticat 2010: 103).

Danticat refers to Alejo Carpentier’s novel *The Kingdom of this World* (1957) to tell her history of Haiti and to share this “heroic heritage.” (ibid. 103). What is often called magical realism is central to the retelling of Haiti’s history. To serve the gods in Haiti is to combine the “extraordinary and the mundane, the beautiful and the repulsive...”. (Ibid. 103.) Paravisini-Gebert (2004) describes how it was the intimate connection between history and magic within Haiti that

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inspired Carpentier to write *The Kingdom of this World*. For Carpentier, the tangible link that exists in Haiti between history and magic, inspired by faith, “represented the very opposite of the separation from the life of the spirit that had been the outcome of the West’s privileging of reason.” (Paravisini-Gebert 2004: 115.)

European Christian models of ‘religion’ have segregated the public, thinking, and rational mind from the private acts of belief (in God) in an attempt to keep our enlightened and civilised self separate from our spiritual behaviours. In her intriguing article, which examines the comparative ritualised language used by colonial historians to describe both the discovery of electricity (an icon of the scientific enlightenment) and vodou ceremonies (the supposed “antithesis of enlightened modernity”), Kate Ramsey (2013: 31-41) exposes an implicit irony of Western modernity and notions of progress: when describing spirit possession, the lawyer and historian, Moreau’s choice of language closely mirrors descriptions of electrical performances of his time (Ramsey 2013: 34). Moreau and other scholars of the time, through their writing, were in support of the so-called anti-superstition campaigns that criminalised vodou – a criminalisation which persists today in both public perception and popular representations of vodou. She exposes how erroneous their justifications for this scapegoating were by analysing their descriptive language for both scientific development of the west, and the supposed backward ritual practices going on in the colonies. Ramsey accurately captures how the limited and *bounded* concept of religion is challenged by vodou in the way it combines supposedly contradictory elements of its culture and past, such as aspects of Catholicism and healing practices. (Ramsey 2013: 31.) The European Enlightenment concept of ‘religion’ (built around Christianity and European models of civility and progress) is an inappropriate category to use to describe vodou and most other practices in/of the (postcolonial) world. We should identify the limitations

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of this classification and open up a new way of understanding 'religion' in the contemporary world.

S. Brent Plate (2014) writes that it is "ultimately misguided" to explain 'religion' in the way that the above Enlightenment model does, that is as a "set of beliefs" which are contained in the thought process of the brain.² He continues:

Religion, being a prime human activity throughout history, is rooted in the body and in its sensual relations with the world. It has always been and always will be. We make sense out of the senses. This is the first true thing we can say about religion, because it is also the first true thing we can say about being human. We are sentient beings, and religion is sensuous. (Plate 2014:7.)

In his engaging text, *The History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to its Senses*, Plate provides his readers with a framework with which to not only embrace the supposedly paradoxical, extraordinary and the mundane but to see them as intimately linked. This framework therefore provides opportunity to break through the *boundedness* of the concept religion: it is through an interaction with the mundane objects which surround us, which we touch, treasure or discard, that we can find a more appropriate understanding of 'religion', and therefore start to build a theoretical language that will enable us to engage with vodou, and the history of Haiti, more creatively:

Ultimately it is physical objects like stones, incense, drums, crosses, and bread, and our technological encounters with them, that give rise to our religious language and make sacred utterances meaningful. We see, hear, smell, taste and touch well before we speak. (Plate 2014: 21.)

² See also Mary Keller 2002: 6.

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Research into the significance of the relationship between humans and objects (named materiality or material religion) is gaining momentum in the arts; for example, Heather Walton's article "The Consolation of Everyday Things" (2016) provides a vivid engagement with a range of theorists, from Karl Marx to Daniel Miller and Tim Ingold. She details the complexities of western theory which has led to the "habitual denigration of the significance of material objects within our common cultural imaginary" (2016: 139) in order to find theoretical ground from which to harvest a recognition of the meaningfulness of the objects we touch and cherish on a daily basis: "Indeed these micro-material cosmologies sustain identity and help generate the resilience necessary to pattern life creatively and interact meaningfully with others" (2016: 144). Both Plate and Walton prioritise the arts, and particularly literature, as the place that most poignantly teaches us a history of religion. (Plate 2014:18, Walton 2016: 148-9.) As will become clear through a reading of Danticat's work, fictional accounts such as "A Wall of Fire Rising" (1995) and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) provide a unique and vivid reflection of not only Haiti's history but also of materiality as they so provocatively connect the extraordinary with the mundane.

Flight and Transcendence in "A Wall of Fire Rising".

Danticat's creative practice is a commitment to capturing stories of the revolution, stories that are undoubtedly rooted in the individual lives of Haitians. The volume *Create Dangerously* (2010) is witness to the fine line she treads between ethnography and fiction. A notion of 'truth' or historical accuracy is not what is important here – her works enable the (sensual) relationship with the place and its people to be captured, and the foundations of a historical memory to be laid; objects are a central part of this building process. In her short story "A Wall of Fire Rising" (1995: 43-67), Edwidge Danticat places the revolution and vodou at the centre of contemporary Haiti's national identity and pride, whilst simultaneously emphasising the personal

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tragedy of so many individuals and families trying to find their liberation amidst the cruelty and poverty of everyday life. In the story, little Guy's namesake, his father, is desperately struggling to lift his family out of poverty. After six months of unemployment, he finally gets a few hours work at the sugar mill scrubbing the latrines. Degraded, he comes home to tell his wife that he has at last found some paid work, but is interrupted by his son who is desperate to tell him the exciting news that he will be playing the part of the slave at the centre of the 1791 revolution for Independence, Boukman, in the school play. He recites his lines to his parents, lines that are purposefully reminiscent of James's historical account of the revolution ([1938] 2001: 70-71):

'A wall of fire is rising and in the ashes, I see the bones of my people. Not only the people whose dark hollow faces I see daily in the fields, but all those souls who have gone ahead to haunt my dreams. At night I relive once more the last caresses from the hand of a loving father, a valiant love, a beloved friend.' It was obvious that this was a speech written by a European man, who gave to the slave revolutionary Boukman the kind of European phrasing that might have sent the real Boukman turning in his grave. However, the speech made Lili and Guy stand on the tips of their toes from great pride... they felt as though for a moment they had been given the rare pleasure of hearing the voice of one of their forefathers of Haitian independence in the forced baritone of their only child. (Danticat 1995: 48. Italics in the original.)

Danticat acknowledges the complexities of a postcolonial education and history: whilst it provides opportunity to celebrate the struggle for independence, the details are re-written in a European tongue so as to be palatable to that audience. These words are particularly reminiscent of C.L.R. James' description of the night of the 22nd August 1791: "From Le Cap, the whole horizon was a wall of fire. From this wall continually rose thick black volumes of smoke, through which came tongues of flame leaping to the very sky". (James [1938] 2001: 71.) Danticat purposefully provides her readers

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with aspects of the more standard historical accounts of Haiti and the revolution, whilst acknowledging the limitations of these accounts, and the individual lives which can be affected. Whilst little Guy's parents are full of pride to hear the voice of the revolution coming from the mouth of their son, they are simultaneously aware of how this voice has been edited and adjusted to suit its audience, not the people it represents, and how little impact these words will have on the reality of their daily suffering. The words coming from the mouth of their son are another part of the performance of historical memory. Danticat uses the school play in the story as a metaphor for the different performances of historical memory we all participate in, rightly or wrongly. By writing James's account of the revolution into her story, Danticat reminds us of the ways in which history is collected, translated, and written-over to suit the needs of the current audience, and the individual stories that this process inevitably erases. In his engaging reading of the short story, Winston Chen (2011) acknowledges that the multiple layers of colonial history have lost the "magical quality of Boukman - his *voice*". (2011: 46.) Danticat is acutely aware of this erasure, but through Little Guy's grief this abstract performance of the past is given volume in the present, as he is faced with the immediate horror of this father's death. The tragedy of the past is still intimately connected to the horrors of the present.

In the story, Guy Senior is obsessed by the sugar mill owner's hot air balloon, which lies behind a fence in the grounds of the mill. He becomes fixated on how to fly the balloon: "I watched the owner for a long time, and I think I can fly that balloon. The first time I saw him do it, it looked like a miracle, but the more I saw it, the more ordinary it became". (Danticat 1995: 56-57.) The balloon symbolises his possibility of escape, his freedom from the poverty and neo-slavery he is trapped in, whilst also acting as a motif for economic migration. He confides in his wife: "Sometimes, I just want to take that big balloon and ride it up in the air. I'd like to sail off somewhere and keep floating until I got to a really nice place with a nice plot of land where I could

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be something new. I'd build my own house, keep my own garden. Just *be* something new." (Ibid. 61.) In the tragic conclusion to the story, Guy manages to fly the hot air balloon only to climb over the sides and fall to his death in a final act of escape from the grim circumstances of his life, with his wife and son watching hopelessly from the ground. (Ibid. 65.) Little Guy stands beside his father's body and begins to recite his lines from the play. His voice changes to a "man's grieving roar" and in the intimate exchange of *loa* and human, Little Guy becomes a vessel for the gods and shoulders the grief of his nation. His cry exposes the human sacrifices still being made in the name of freedom: "*now I call on our gods... I call on everyone and anyone so that we shall all let out one piercing cry that we may either live freely or we should die.*" (Ibid.66.) Little Guy's childhood ends, and he calls upon the words of his ancestors to vocalise his own heart-breaking loss. Haiti's history can all too easily be reduced to a metaphor of resistance and survival which fails to hear the individual stories of tragedy. Danticat weaves a narrative of individual loss within Haiti's legendary history to provoke both remembrance of the individuals who lost their lives in the revolution, but also to ensure that the entrenched poverty and neo-slavery in which many modern Haitians still live is not overlooked, romanticised or reduced to metaphor.

The hot-air balloon is the object that details the significance and meaning of Guy's spiritual longings: the movement of people and economic migration. This tactile, yet often untouchable and vivid flying object (simultaneously a symbol of modernity and supposed 'progress') is the site onto which Guy's spiritual desires are transcribed. Material theory, or 'thing theory' (the term Walton uses 2016: 142) allows us, as readers, to extend and explore the significance of the object more fully. Danticat's use of this intrusive, beautiful object, as the 'thing' that holds the story together, a story about spiritual flight, Haiti's history of slavery and revolution and modern day poverty, is no accident. The use of the hot air balloon provides an opportunity to bring conversations of material religion and postcolonial fiction together, yet

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it also demonstrates that it is through our relationship with objects that we bridge the material and non-material (physical and metaphysical) world; by focussing on Guy's relationship with this unwieldy and obscure object, Danticat distorts divisive binary thinking which is prevalent in western culture.

Danticat sets the story in the male historical narrative (through its vocalisation of Boukman and James) and male lineage, but the ever-present, if peripheral, voice is that of the mother and the burden she will continue to carry after Guy has 'escaped'. The theme of flight recurs throughout Danticat's work; it is a powerful trope for physical liberation, and escape, whilst also symbolising the possibility of spiritual, or metaphysical, transcendence. In his article, Chen maps legends of flight that recur throughout New World folklore, of Africans escaping slavery and returning to Africa, and of how this legend is repeatedly transcribed in oral traditions and twentieth century literature. (Chen 2011: 41.) Chen details how the story "A Wall of Fire Rising" evokes a Haitian legend of flight that holds central importance to communal remembrance of the revolution. I would like to add that Danticat uses the hot air balloon to confront over-simplistic and romanticised readings of the folkloric flights of the enslaved by detailing the brutal reality of Guy's choice to fly; his violent death is witnessed by his son and wife whose poverty, as a result of his death, is further entrenched – there is no easy transference from worldly to non-worldly. Danticat ensures that, as readers of this story, we are equally infuriated by a system that causes Guy to feel that his only liberation is in death. These stories, and Guy's choice to fly, symbolise the limitations of the human world alone to provide freedom. Yet these legends of flight are also witness to the continued possibility for creativity and healing in the face of the most brutal adversity, a theme that is particularly drawn out in the character of Martine in the novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.

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**“Ou libéré?” Sexual Exploitation and Possibilities of Freedom:
Following the flight of Erzulie in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.**

Themes of flight are at the foreground of Danticat’s novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Published in 1994, it is the heart-breaking story of the Caco family; Sophie Caco is brought up by her Aunt Atie in Haiti, after her mother is forced to emigrate to the United States. When she is around twelve years old, Sophie’s mother Martine sends for her daughter. When she arrives in the United States, Sophie discovers the shocking truth that her mother was raped as a child walking home from school and this is how Sophie was conceived. Martine’s only option for survival in a regime that used brutalities against women and girls to assert power and fear, and to maintain patriarchal controls within society, is to leave the country, alone and utterly traumatised.³ Martine is unable to recover from the trauma, and is revisited every night by the rapist in the form of night terrors, which Sophie repeatedly wakes her from: “... I would stay up all night just waiting for her to have a nightmare. Shortly after she fell asleep, I would hear her screaming for someone to leave her alone ... She would cover her eyes with her hands. ‘Sophie, you’ve saved my life’”. (Danticat 1994: 81.) As a consequence, Martine’s trauma becomes Sophie’s trauma:

Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother’s anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something I had ‘caught’ from living with her. Her nightmares had somehow become my own, so much so that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we hadn’t both spent the night dreaming about the same thing. A man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless girl (ibid. 193).

³ Donette A. Francis’s article “‘Silences Too Horrific to Disturb’: Writing Sexual Histories in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*” looks in detail at the sexual trauma of Sophie and Martine and examines how in Haiti women’s bodies become sites of “national trauma” (2004: 77).

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Unable to either understand or deal with the layers of her trauma, Martine becomes the fierce protector of Sophie's virginity. When Sophie begins to show signs of becoming a sexual being, through her interest in their musician neighbour (Joseph, who later becomes her husband), Martine starts 'testing' her daughter; she puts her finger in Sophie's vagina to ensure her hymen is still intact: "She pulled a sheet over my body and walked out of the room with her face buried in her hands. I closed my legs and tried to see Tante Atie's face. I could understand why she had screamed while her mother tested her. *There are secrets you cannot keep*". (Ibid. 85, italics in the original.) Because of the complexity of her own trauma, Martine is unable to break the generations of abuse and instead perpetuates the perverse and patriarchal system of purity and honour, so-called 'testing'. In the process Martine ensures that her own trauma becomes that of her daughters': "... the faces that loom over you and recreate the same unspeakable acts that they themselves lived through. There is always a place where nightmares are passed down through generations like an heirloom". (Ibid. 234.) In the end, the depth of Martine's trauma is realised when she becomes pregnant again. Unable to continue reliving the horror, she stabs herself in the stomach seventeen times in a final act to obliterate her maternal body, whilst simultaneously attempting to gain some control over it. The hope of healing in this world is lost for Martine; our only hope for her is that she finally finds peace in her return to 'Guinea': "She is going to Guinea,' [Sophie] said, "or she is going to be a star. She is going to be a butterfly or a lark in a tree. She's going to be free". (Ibid. 228.) And what of Sophie's freedom? Is she able to heal?

Throughout the novel, Sophie is accompanied by the goddess Erzulie, from the bold colours and butterflies she sees, to the mother she imagines. Danticat weaves Erzulie into the fabric of the story, as she appears on almost

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every page.⁴ She is with Sophie every step of the way and integral to her survival. But who is Erzulie?

Erzulie, the goddess, spirit or loa of love in vodoun, tells a story of women's lives that has not been told. A goddess was born on the soil of Haiti who has no precedent in Yorubaland or Dahomey. In her varying incarnations, her many faces, she bears the extremes of colonial history. Whether the pale and elegant Erzulie-Fréda or the cold hearted, savage Erzulie-gé-rouge, she dramatizes a specific historiography of women's experience in Haiti and throughout the Caribbean. (Dayan 1994: 6.)

Erzulie is a multifaceted goddess with different personas that replicate the bitter realities for black women in Haiti, particularly during the 1800s and the fall of Saint Domingue. The rituals associated with Erzulie often represent the relationships between female slaves and the colonial French mistresses, shown in Erzulie-Freda's pale skin, and the way she wears blue and is adorned with jewellery and make-up. In her many manifestations, she can be: "Ezili [sic] Freda, the pale, elegant lady of luxury and love, identified with the Virgin Mary...; Ezili Dantò, the black, passionate woman identified with the Mater Salvatoris, her heart also pierced, with a dagger; and Ezili-je-wouj [also written as Erzulie ge-rouge who we encounter in the novel], Ezili Mapian, and Ezili-nwa-kè (black heart) of the militant Petwo family of gods." (Dayan 1995: 59). In Danticat's novel, Erzulie is therefore Martine and Sophie. She

⁴ So, is Danticat's manifestation of Erzulie in her novel a conscious act? In an interview, Danticat says: "Vodou is a part of my belief system as a Haitian. Erzulie, the goddess of love, has always intrigued me. She is the loa of Sophie's family, their chosen protector, which is why she almost always stands by them as a character in their story... I identify with Erzulie in her many manifestations as young, old, loving, angry, beautiful woman and crow." (Palmer Adisa, 2009: 350).

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embodies all the lives of the women who have been violated, tortured and raped at the hands of male systems of power in the form of slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. But as Dayan warns, representations of Erzulie often replicate male fantasies of women: “the splitting of women into objects to be desired and feared”. (Dayan 1995: 59). I would argue that Danticat’s representation of Erzulie, and the weaving of her into the fabric of the story, enables the prioritization of the devastating, individual stories of abused women, whilst simultaneously providing a ‘historiography of women’s experience’ in Haiti. Erzulie is a carrier of women’s history in Haiti in all its complexity and paradox: in its horror and laughter; its anger and kindness; its beauty and ugliness; the materialistic and charitable. Vodou, and Erzulie in particular, reminds us that religion is best understood as a breathing force that is responsive to trauma inflicted on the human body, and its ability to redirect and re-imagine that trauma.

It is through the many *loa* that slavery is remembered, stored and revisited, but also where it is transcended. The brutality of the institution of slavery and colonialism, alongside Christianity, is manifest in the *loa*. What is vital here is that vodou is not just compared to Christianity or understood as a simple translation; it is vital that, in order to do justice to Erzulie and to the historiography built up of women’s experiences in Haiti, we do not resort to analogy (as Dayan warns, 1994: 6) and describe her as the Virgin Mary, for she “bears witness to a far more complicated lineage” (Dayan, 1994: 6). What seems more appropriate to remember is that our understanding of religion should be motivated by the sensual relationship between the body and world, as Plate recommends. (2014: 7.) But I would develop Plate’s (potentially) over-romanticised (and Christian) notion of a “sensual” relationship with the world so that it can enable us to understand vodou and the *loa* more appropriately; the *loa* replicate the violence and anger of the sensory experience of slavery, whilst also the deeply sensual desire to survive. If vodou is compared to exclusively Christian models of ‘religion’, as it has been

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in the past, at best it will be considered as 'less religious', and at worst, it will be rendered as a symbol for the inferiority and backwardness of New World practices, for it is intimately connected to the emotional and sensual journeys of the Haitian people from slavery to independence to neo-colonialism. Plate's model provides some opportunity to avoid this and to focus on the heart of the tradition. Erzulie is a sensual *loa*, her devotees enter into a sensory relationship with her, which relieves the complexities of the female embodiment of slavery and the colonial encounter.⁵

For the remainder of this article, I will map the journey Erzulie takes, as a character in the story, with Sophie and her family (her mother, Aunt and Grandmother) and how in the process Danticat develops the 'material' language of religiosity that emerges from this journey.

Sophie's early childhood, with her Tante Atie, is presented as the happiest and most settled time for both of them; the intimacy and kindness of this maternal relationship provides her with the strength of character to survive the rest of her childhood and adult life: "When I stood in front of her, she opened her arms just wide enough for my body to fit into them... she bent down and kissed my forehead, then pulled me down onto her lap". (Danticat

⁵ In her book, *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women's Writing* ([2009]2011), Donna Aza Weir-Soley demonstrates the "interrelatedness" of sexuality and spirituality in black women's writing (Weir-Soley, 2011: 5). The focus on a broad a range of writers, places and practices pulled together using umbrella terms such as the singular, 'black female subjectivity' or 'African-based spirituality' undermines the impact of her ideas, and belittles the multiple voices contained there; but nevertheless she appropriately challenges the predominantly Christian division of sexuality and spirituality, imposed on women, and how this needs to be challenged in order to engage with the work of writers such as Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Edwidge Danticat.

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1994: 3.) Danticat's use of colour and objects is significant throughout the novel; Tante Atie and Sophie are always surrounded by yellow 'things'. In the opening paragraph we see a "drying daffodil" stuck on a card made by Sophie for Atie, and Atie watching children "crushing dried yellow leaves". (Ibid. 21). Later, as Sophie is preparing to leave: "She reached over and touched the collar of my lemon-toned house dress. 'Everything you own is yellow', she said, 'wildflower yellow, like dandelions, sunflowers.' 'And daffodils,' I added." (Ibid. 21.) This calm colour symbolises the joy and gentleness of this relationship. It is the colour red that is associated with Sophie's relationship with her mother, symbolising both intense and burning love, but also danger and the arrival of their guardian, Erzulie-gé-rouge: "The tablecloth was shielded with a red plastic cover, the same blush red as the sofa in the living room." (Ibid. 44). In an interview, Danticat reflects on how her use of vivid colour is to provide contrast with the darkness of slavery; the dark, small spaces in which slaves lived were just for sleeping. There was no place for daylight there. According to the author, this is in stark contrast to the vivid colours of the Caribbean: "the skies, the trees, the flowers. When you go to a place like Haiti, you are struck by color: everything is in Technicolor... But I also remember as a child hearing how flowers had a certain meaning – yellow friendship, red love... When I'm in Haiti and look at the hibiscus and the *flamboyant*, these are so strong for me. That's how they make their way into the story". (Interview with Renee H. Shea 1996: 384.) As readers, we are provided with a sensory experience of Haiti, both of the natural environment but also, I would argue, with the spirit world. As Plate argues, it is through our sensory experiences with the natural world that we can begin to represent and/or engage with the spirit world. (Plate 2014: 21.) Danticat provides the reader with vivid and tactile images of plants, flowers and domestic objects (furniture and clothes). Similarly, we engage our senses in response to the narrator's descriptions so we can hear and feel the "crushing dried yellow leaves" and Tante Atie's touch of Sophie's yellow collar, contrasted with the

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uninviting plastic covers on Martine's red sofa. We open our senses, not only to the vivid descriptions of nature and human touch but also to the spirit world that settles in these places too.

Erzulie weaves herself into the material fabric of the story, in amongst mundane, everyday objects. Sophie's nightmares begin when she is told that she is to go and live with her mother, and it is at this time, during her first days in New York, that Erzulie starts to emerge:

All along the avenue were people who seemed displaced among the speeding cars and very tall buildings... We found Tante Atie's lemon perfume in a botanica shop. On the walls were earthen jars, tin can lamps, and small statues of the beautiful *mulâtresse*, the goddess and loa Erzulie. (Danticat 1994: 52.)

Erzulie makes her first overt appearance amongst the seemingly displaced people and objects of the diaspora, reassuring Sophie that she is not alone. But also, importantly, she appears amongst other consumer objects in an overtly capitalist environment: Erzulie's materiality is emphasised. But rather than responding to a more European and modernist understanding of religion, and seeing this as problematic, this detail captures both how capitalism in North America can arguably be understood as a form of religion, whilst also emphasising that religion can be understood in terms of our material relationship with objects. Later, Martine asks Sophie if she is the mother she imagined:

As a child, the mother I had imagined for myself was like Erzulie, the lavish Virgin Mother. She was the healer of all women and the desire of all men. She had gorgeous dresses in satin, silk, and lace, necklaces, pendants, earrings, bracelets, anklets, and lots and lots of French perfume. She never had to work for anything because the rainbow and the stars did her work for her. Even though she was far away, she was

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always with me. I could always count on her, like one counts on the sun coming out at dawn. (Ibid 59.)

Sophie's simple reply to her mother is: "For now I couldn't ask for better" (ibid 59). Erzulie is a multifaceted goddess and here Sophie is lamenting Erzulie-Freda, possibly the most complex manifestation of Erzulie for outsiders to engage with, for she is pale-skinned, beautiful, sexual and embellished with jewellery and fine clothes: the 'desire of all men' but simultaneously the Virgin Mary. Rather than seeing this mention as a direct comparison with Christianity, as Dayan previously warned against, we should, in one sense, understand the Virgin Mary's part in this story, and Haiti's history, as an engagement with patriarchal representations of women in a colonial context. Erzulie-Freda is the manifestation of the colonial French women, lavished with riches yet ultimately the property of white men. As discussed, her presence in the pantheon of gods is testimony to the complexity of their relationship with Haiti, and female slaves. In another sense, the Virgin Mary's part in the pantheon, as well as in the intersections of Christianity-Haiti-vodou-Europe and in Danticat's fiction, makes space for a deeply sensual relationship with Mary (particularly women's relationships with her). The complexity of Erzulie-Freda is witness to the complexity of colonial history and the need to remember this history even though that entails a confrontation with the seemingly paradoxical details of the lives of most women trying to survive within patriarchal, and white systems of power. For Sophie, Erzulie-Freda is both the 'desire of all men' and the ultimate mother, but also the goddess of the displaced, particularly displaced women and girls.

Erzulie offers transcendence for women who carry the history of displacement and migration on, and within, their often traumatised and sexually exploited bodies. After Sophie's mother starts 'testing' her, she remembers the story of a haemophiliac woman "who walked around with blood constantly spurting out of her unbroken skin". (Ibid. 87). Tired of doctors who could not help her, the woman consults Erzulie:

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After her consultation with Erzulie, it became apparent to the bleeding woman what she would have to do. If she wanted to stop bleeding, she would have to give up her right to be a human being. She could choose what to be, a plant, or animal, but she could no longer be a woman...

'Make me a butterfly,' she told Erzulie. 'Make me a butterfly.'

'A butterfly you shall be,' said Erzulie.

The woman was transformed and never bled again. (Ibid. 87-88.)

In a horrific attempt to end the testing and to gain some control over her own body and destiny, Sophie carries out a violent purging of her body:

My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping on the bed sheet... it was gone, the veil that always held my mother's finger back every time she *tested* me.

My body was quivering when my mother walked into my room to *test* me. My legs were limp when she drew them aside. I ached so hard I could hardly move. Finally I failed the test. (Ibid. 88).

Throughout the novel, Sophie develops a strategy of 'doubling'. Here, while she inflicts this trauma on her self she brings to mind her guardian Erzulie and the hope of being transformed into a butterfly in order to transcend her own painful and bleeding body. Her transformation does come but it is gradual; she has to break through her own chrysalis before she can finally be free.

Sophie marries her neighbour, a kind and loving man but not her saviour, and all too quickly becomes a mother herself; as the trauma deepens, she returns to Haiti with her baby daughter, Brigitte, in the hope that she will find clarity and healing with Tante Atie and her grandmother. At this point, Erzulie is closer still: she is in the repeated references to butterflies, "[a] pack of rainbow butterflies hovered around the porch" (ibid. 144); the red of her mother's umbrella when she comes to collect her (ibid. 158); she is in the intimate friendship between Tante Atie and Louise: "I will miss her like my own skin" (ibid.145); and she is in the statue Sophie's grandmother gives to her

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after being challenged about the female practice of *testing*. Erzulie can be seen to echo her dislike of this practice, as the “sky reddened with a sudden flash of lightning” (ibid. 156). Sophie’s grandmother gives her the statue of Erzulie, and, as if she has heard Erzulie’s rage she says:

‘My heart, it weeps like a river,’ she said, ‘for the pain we have caused you.’

I held the statue against my chest as I cried into the night. I thought I heard my grandmother crying too, but it was the rain slowing down to a mere drizzle, tapping on the roof. (Ibid. 157).

Erzulie weeps with Sophie and with all the other girls who are victims of sexual abuse and who carry the injustices and perversities of history on their bodies.

Erzulie’s weeping continues as Sophie returns to the United States and to her husband. Sophie attends therapy sessions with other displaced women of the diaspora, who have been victims of sexual abuse. It is here that she comes “a little closer to being free. I didn’t feel guilty about burning my mother’s name anymore. I knew my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too.” (Ibid. 203.) She takes the statue of Erzulie with her, who watches over her, weeping: “the flame’s shadows swayed across Erzulie’s face in a way that made it seem as though she was crying”. (Ibid 221.) Erzulie is often depicted as weeping. We should remember Dayan’s warning that “those tears can not be generalised out of history as the tears of the Virgin Mary” (Dayan 1994: 12) but rather are specific to the traumas of women in Haiti, as here represented in the lives of Martine and Sophie. Through Erzulie’s tears we can understand Sophie’s suffering as “a link in a long chain” (ibid. 203) of women’s tragic stories. This paradoxical metaphor both pays tribute to the lives linked together in grief, dependant on each other for survival, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the bondage that chains maintain, and the freedom they prevent.

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After her mother's tragic death, Sophie prepares her body for her final return home and the funeral:

I picked out the most crimson of all my mother's clothes, a bright red, two piece suit that she was too afraid to wear to the Pentecostal services.

It was too loud a colour for a burial. I knew it. She would look like a Jezebel, hot-bloodied Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped *them*, and killed *them*. She was the only woman with that power. (Ibid. 227.)

Sophie channels Erzulie's power through her mother's dead body and into her own living body through the object of the red suit: for Martine, the transformation has finally arrived as she leaves her human body; for Sophie, through her mother's death, she finds her agency and is finally able to speak through her inconsolable grief, with Erzulie acting as her guide. Sophie runs from the graveside to the cane fields – the place where her mother was raped and her grandfather died:

I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding.

The cane cutters stared at me as though I was possessed... From where she was standing, my grandmother shouted like the women from the market place, '*Ou libéré?*' Are you free?

Tante Atie echoed her cry, her voice quivering with her sobs.

'*Ou libéré!*' (Ibid. 233.)

Not only is this the place where Martine was raped, it is also the place that contains the history of slavery. In order for Sophie to heal, along with "all the daughters of this island" (ibid. 230), she must return to this site and confront its physical brutality. Riding with Erzulie, and as part of the chain of mothers,

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daughters, sisters and aunts, and “women from the market place,” she is empowered to fight and can finally be free. ‘You are free!’ is her aunt’s revolutionary battle cry.

The novel is drawn to a close with a lament that captures the language of religiosity I have portrayed, a language and theory which challenges standard discourses of religion, but which is effortless for writers such as Edwidge Danticat. It is for this reason that a history of religion is most fruitful when led by an engagement with the arts and, in this case, creative writing:

I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head. Where women return to their children as butterflies or as tears in the eyes of the statues that their daughters pray to. My mother was as brave as stars at dawn. She too was from this place. My mother was like that woman who could never bleed and then could never stop bleeding, the one who gave in to her pain, to live as a butterfly. Yes, my mother was like me. (Ibid. 234.)

Danticat reminds us of the importance of material objects (“statues that their daughters pray to”), the intimacy with nature (“as brave as stars,” “to live as a butterfly”) and the function of the human body (“breath, eyes and memory are one... carry your past like the hair on your head,” “... never stop bleeding”) in representations of religiosity and spirituality. Sophie finds her freedom in the knowledge that the chain of women whose stories are intertwined are like a *wall of fire rising*: they are the feminists, activists and the revolutionaries; they are where hope and healing lies. And the ever-growing pantheon of vodou gods – is Martine now one of them? – is still at the heart of this revolution. We start to see Martine’s suicide as a sacrificial act – not only a way for her to secure her own freedom, but that of her daughter’s: “There is a place where women are buried in clothes the color of flames ... where the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed before her ... she will ask

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you this question: ‘*Ou libéré?* Are you free my daughter?’... ‘Now ... you will know the answer.’” (Ibid. 234.) Sophie’s grandmother turns Martine and Sophie’s story in to a feminist/womanist legend and religious lament of female survival and liberation.

Conclusion

Breath, Eyes, Memory is a stunning portrayal of intersectionality and womanism; gender, race, religion, spirituality, body and class are intimately entwined in the lives of the main characters so that one aspect cannot be considered or understood without the other. Contained so effortlessly within the pages of this novel is a language of religiosity that refuses simple binaries and neat boxes by utterly immersing us in a world where one categorisation necessarily bleeds into the other. Danicát builds a language of religiosity that is utterly sensual and intimately connected with our bleeding, loving, painful, maternal bodies and the objects we hold dear: Martine and Sophie’s legendary, yet equally individual, stories of survival and liberation can only be truly understood when we engage with the physical and sensual relationship between a *loa*, like Erzulie, and her devotee, in the form of bleeding and weeping female bodies. Danicát’s fiction demonstrates that the arts is the place that most vividly teaches us a history of religion by both exposing the limitations of standard classifications and opening up a new and vital linguistic threshold, that makes space for the broken and imperfect human body.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to my dear friend, Elizabeth Horn, for providing proof reading, wisdom and insight from the other side of the world, and to Francis Stewart, Corinne Fowler, and, in particular, Sabine Dedenbach-Salazar for valuable comments and editing which ensured the article’s completion.

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