

The Stories of Haitian Daughters:  
Disabled Bodies and Reconstructing Memory in  
Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

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This study investigates the representations of Haitian American women's corporeal experiences and attempts to gain autonomy over their controlled bodies in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1998). The most significant theme in this novel is the ways in which violence on third world women—including the threat of assaults by state-sponsored paramilitary force, *Tonton Macoutes* and the oppressive cultural practices traditionally done to daughters by their mothers affect Haitian women's bodies and identities. It reveals how women themselves help maintain this repressive patriarchal system in the third world, as well as highlights the mental and physical illnesses caused by these corporeal experiences. The work deals with eating disorders, insomnia, and the suicidal thoughts that often accompany traumatic bodily experience, such as sexual assault, unwanted pregnancy and breast cancer operation. The female protagonist, Sophie Caco, suffers from self-hatred since she was born after her mother, Martine Caco, was raped by a stranger—who seems to have been a Macoute—in Haiti when she was a teenager. Although the mother and daughter are notably intimate and affectionate, the closeness between them is referred to as that of legendary Voodoo twins *Marassas*, it is also troubled because mothers have to play a controlling role in retaining the extremely sexist cultural values of Haitian society. Sophie has ambivalent feelings toward her loving but controlling mother, with whom she reunites long after her mother's immigration to the United States. Toward the end of

the novel, Sophie is able to understand Haitian history and culture through a reconsideration of the tradition and meaning of oral storytelling among women for their own survival; thus, she is finally able to claim her Haitian identity by understanding the cultural background and accepting those stories as a communal memory. This study accounts for the use of body in relation to the Caco women's covert movement toward self-preservation and reconstruction of identity under oppression, negotiating with extremely challenging conditions in both Haiti and the U.S.

It is only in recent history that Haitians have immigrated to United States, who are called as "New Americans." Lisa Konczal and Alex Stepick explain the characteristics and history of Haitian immigration and their constructions of identity in the United States (445-57). According to the 2004 figures from the World Bank, Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, its annual gross national income is \$380 per capita, infant mortality rate is 79 out of 1,000, and the average life expectancy being 52 years. Haitian immigrants in the U.S. have many of the characteristics of other new immigrants who immigrated after immigration reform in 1965, such as being non-white, from politically and economically challenged countries, and the younger generation having to live in more than two cultures. However, Konczal and Stepick mention, Haitian Americans experience difficulty in terms of reception and being described as "triple minorities" for their blackness, language, and lower social status as stigmatized by the image of them as boat people and having HIV (445). Regardless of recent social and political accomplishments Haitian Americans have made, "Haitians continue to struggle against the negative stereotypes that too many Americans maintain" (Konczal and Stepick 456). It can be assumed that these challenged conditions significantly affect the construction of body and identity for Haitian

Americans in the United States.

To examine the representation of the female body in the novel, Nita Mary Mckinley offers feminist critique that have historically positioned the body as a site of control in women's lives in "Feminist Perspectives and Objectified Body Consciousness" (55-62). Contemporary feminist theory argues that women's body dissatisfaction comes from a systematic social phenomenon, in which the deviance of the female body creates the context for women's body experience (56). This context encourages the construction of women as objects to be watched and evaluated according to cultural standards (56). Thus, Mckinley suggests that the prevailing cultural standards problematically placed on women's bodies not only take away time, energy, and economic resources as well as allow biases for race/ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, and ability (60). Mckinley identifies "the source of women's negative body experience lies in social context rather than an individual pathology (61). The figure of Martine signifies the abject body and disturbance theorized from feminist perspectives on breast cancer. By being threatened, Martine embodies complexity of multiple illnesses and disability as she constantly faces physical and emotional challenges; both the protagonist Sophie and her mother Martine suffer from serious negative body experiences.

In a study on Caribbean female writers, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert identifies the conditions in which Caribbean women are under and states the danger of viewing the female body merely as a metaphor. She also emphasizes focusing on the materiality of the body as "vulnerable flesh and blood":

The flesh-and-blood quality of women...must be remembered when reading how Caribbean women writers—and indeed most Third World women writers—"read" and "write" the

female body. Their depictions of the “body-as-metaphor” must be seen in the context of political systems where women’s bodies have been subject to abuse, rape, torture, and dismemberment precisely because this very treatment, through its interpretation as symbolic construct, has been an effective method of political control. Their reading of the body thus emerges from an ever-present threat to their own vulnerable flesh and blood, and the resulting symbolism is too close to the material body to allow for the comfort of seeing this danger merely as metaphor. (8)

Danticat’s work also has readers to focus on the threat to “[t]he flesh-and-blood quality” (8) of the female body. In reading and examining writing that deals with violence to the female body, as this work does, the materiality of the body should be carefully observed. Newtona Johnson points out the Haitian conditions in which the female body is exploited for political control:

In Haiti, as it is in other politically repressive and patriarchal regimes, rape is simultaneously part of a culture of state-sponsored violence and an expression of male dominance. The *Macoutes*, Sophie tells us, committed their crimes with audacity...clearly, women’s bodies are used as instruments to produce state intimidation and coercion. The purpose of the rapes is not only to exercise masculine power over women but also to emasculate subjugated males in the society. (153)

Thus, the female body becomes a site of cultural and political control under intersecting oppressions, as demonstrated in the work through the experiences of the protagonist, Sophie, and her mother, Martine Caco.

Martine leaves her daughter and immigrates to the United

States when her daughter was infant. As a teenager, Martine is dragged into a cane field and raped by a stranger who might have been one of the members of the paramilitary force, Macoute. She gives birth to Sophie after the assault. After this act of sexual violence, Martine starts to have suicidal thoughts and suffers from nightmares about the rapist. After immigrating to the United States, she develops breast cancer and undergoes mastectomy. She then becomes pregnant with her boyfriend, Marc. She becomes mentally unstable due to the burden of unwanted pregnancy and begins to suffer from insomnia caused by even more nightmares; Martine has frequent panic attacks followed by suicidal thoughts, and she eventually kills herself by stabbing her own stomach seventeen times.

Martine represents the disabled body being inflicted by both physical and mental illness. Martine's body is severely damaged and disabled due to the rape and breast cancer surgery. After Martine's mastectomy, her grandmother touches her prosthetic bra, asking if it hurts. Martine tells her that it does not, "because they are not really part of me" (163). She carries with herself imitation of her breast wearing prosthetic bra, which she recognizes that it does not belong to her body. This seems to cause her sense of disconnection to her body, in addition to the trauma of the rape and the breast cancer. Martine's body brings to mind the Kristevan notions of abjection and the grotesque, which have been historically associated with the maternal body. Sophie fears Martine's body, in which both life and death are imagined, as in Julia Kristeva's terms, the maternal body as a type of grotesque in which both sublimity and terror reside.<sup>1</sup> Breast cancer is also associated with America, as according to research conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2003, breast cancer is the most common

disease affecting women in the United States. With nearly 200,000 cases of breast cancer being diagnosed each year, breast cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths in American women after lung cancer. Thus, Martine's experience in the novel reflects this realistic issue among women who live in America. As contemporary Western lifestyle, significantly diet, is said to be a major cause of breast cancer, it can be interpreted that American life has inflicted Martine's body. Martine seems to be depressed and emotional, having suicidal thoughts.

Martine has a negative image of her body as well as herself as a mother: "I am a fat woman trying to pass for thin. A dark woman trying to pass for light. And I have no breasts. I don't know when this cancer will come back. I am not an ideal mother" (189). She wishes to change her body image, which is evident in her habit of whitening her skin by constantly applying whitening cream. This treatment of her skin can be understood in the context of an internalized inferiority complex because of her black skin, as in the notable discussion of Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask*.

The breast cancer also has great impact on women's perception of their own bodies. Marian C. Condon, in *Women's Health: Body, Mind, Spirit: An Integrated Approach to Wellness and Illness*, explains the effects that breast cancer can have on a woman's body and self-image. Condon discusses that a diagnosis of cancer challenges a woman in the physical, emotional, and spiritual domains. They face the possibility of death, and such life-threatening treatment and mutilating surgery, as a mastectomy, can largely disturb a woman's body image and sense of femininity. Additionally, going through chemotherapy, women often suffer from unpleasant side effects such as nausea, hair loss, fatigue, and a reduced resistance to infection. Thus, "women's emotional reactions to the detection,

diagnosis, and treatment of cancer commonly include anxiety, denial, anger and depression” (357-58). Roseanne Lucia Quinn researches women writers’ works on breast cancer and the accompanying sense of loss. She describes losing breasts feels like losing lives: “Women lose their breasts and their lives: dismembered, disfigured, diseased, ignored, dismissed, disregarded, humiliated, abandoned, betrayed” (3). She finds that the importance of women writers’ accounts of breast cancer is “their exposing of the particularity of their exploitation as women burdened with breast cancer in a sexist, racist, classist, ageist, homophobic society” (267-68). Zillah Eisenstein, an activist writer who has survived breast cancer, posits the disease as a political site from which she uncovers the silences used to construct women’s bodies. The body is persona as well as political in that it bears meanings that are beyond individual control. Breast cancer challenges women’s sense of being female, women of color, and the standards of beauty and healthiness that are inscribed on women’s bodies without choice (1). Thus, as these studies on the relationship between breast cancer and the perception of female body suggest, it is reasonable that Martine’s physical change greatly harms her mental state and personality. Martine signifies the abjection and physical disturbance theorized by feminist perspectives regarding breast cancer which causes the threat of constant physical and emotional challenges.

After their reunion, Sophie thinks that Martine looks different compare to a picture she kept in Haiti. Even though she uses face cream that makes her skin lighter, her physical appearance shows fatigue due to heavy labor and aging: “Her face was long and hollow. Her hair had a blunt cut and she had long spindly legs. She had dark circles under her eyes and, as she smiled, lines of wrinkles tightened her expression. Her fingers were scarred and sunburned.

It was as though she had never stopped working in the cane fields after all” (42). Martine calls herself a “ghost” (160) and she is read as a ghostly presence exhausted by life in America and suffering from haunting memories of the past.

Martine also refers to herself as a ghost when she is asked about the whiteness of her skin. Martine replies that she has turned whiter because of the weather in the U.S.: “‘Your skin looks lighter,’ said my grandmother. ‘Is it *produwi*? You use something?’ My mother looked embarrassed. ‘It is very cold in America,’ my mother said. ‘The cold turns us into ghosts’” (160). Though Martine excuses her whiteness as caused by the weather, she constantly applies cream and attempts to whiten her skin. This act can be read as cleansing one’s body and is similar to Sophie’s eating disorder in which she has the urge to cleanse her body by removing food from her body through vomiting. Sophie also notices the conditions and the changes of Martine’s skin color: “I felt so sorry for her. She looked very sad. Her face was cloudy with fatigue even though she kept reapplying the cream she had bought to lighten her skin” (58). After running away from her mother’s house, the first thing she notices upon returning is her mother’s skin color: “It had been almost two years since the last time we saw each other. My mother’s skin was unusually light, a pale mocha, three or four shades lighter than any of ours” (159). Sophie’s observation of her mother’s skin in comparison to herself and to others in the family indicates the significance Sophie places on the skin color. It reveals that Sophie also wish to whiten her skin, the idea which she has unconsciously inherited from her mother, based on stigmatization of black skin. Being physically disabled, Martine and Sophie are inflicted by physical and mental illnesses. Martine is ghostly existence who lives in the space between past and present and also Haiti and the U.S. Their disabled condi-

tions significantly thematize the body in the work.

Kathleen Brogan studies the proliferation of images of ghosts in contemporary ethnic American fiction. She suggests that they share a similar literary function “to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history” (2). It can be read that Martine symbolizes and embodies Haitian women who are silenced. Multiple times in the work, Martine is referred to as a ghost, suggesting that she is a female figure that has been underrepresented. As Brogan points out, “the individual’s or family’s haunting clearly reflects the crises of a larger social group” (2); Brogan also states that creation of it is “a pan-ethnic phenomenon, registering a widespread concern with questions of ethnic identity and cultural transmission” (4). She asserts that the ghost represents “what it means to live in between things—in between cultures, in between times, in between spaces—to live with various kinds of doubled consciousness” (3). Seeming like a ghost, Martine lives in between the space of life and death as well as Haiti and America.

The female body is physically disabled in other ways in the novel, as also seen in the description of Sophie’s grandmother, which seems to symbolize the abusive burden imposed on female body: “My grandmother had a curved spine and a pineapple-sized hump, which did not show through her clothes. Some years earlier, my mother had grown egg-sized mounds in both her breasts, then had them taken out of her” (113). Having a disability herself, Susan Wendell, refers to her illness and claims the significance of bodily experience on women’s lives:

My illness occurred in a social and cultural context, which profoundly affected my experience of it, but a major aspect of my experience was precisely that of being forced to acknowledge and learn to live with bodily, not cultural,

limitation. In its radial movement away from the view that every facet of women lives is determined by biology, feminist theory is in danger of idealizing ‘the body’ and erasing much of the reality of lived bodies. (325)

Regarding the body, issues of control are significant in the work as it is deeply intertwined with female bonding. Although Martine is a loving mother, she exercises control over her daughter’s body by performing virginity tests on her. Sophie is extremely traumatized by these virginity tests and eventually violates her hymen using a pestle in order to stop her mother from “testing” her. After her mother discovers that she lost her hymen, Sophie runs away with an African American boyfriend who is old enough to be her father. She marries him although she was sexually frigid due to the trauma of the virginity tests and her “self-rape.” She becomes pregnant the first time she has sexual intercourse with her husband and gives birth to a daughter, Brigitte. As a result of the virginity tests, even as an adult after birth of Brigitte, she suffers from an eating disorder, insomnia, and frigidity, followed by suicidal thoughts. Martine remarks that she does not know the true purpose of virginity tests which she herself had suffered as a girl. As Newtona Johnson states that mother-daughter relationships in this work are complex because the maternal role includes strict control of a daughter’s body:

Women’s contradictory roles as guardians and transmitters of their communities’ patriarchal heritage, on one hand, and as providers of a support system for other women, on the other hand, contribute to the complexity of women’s relationship with each other. The Cacos’ mother-daughter relationships are quite troubled [...]. (Johnson 156)

As Danticat admits, Haitian mother-daughter relationships are

particularly complicated because in Haitian society, a mother's imposed role is to be a practitioner of patriarchal culture. Martine is influential to Sophie even though they were physically distant when she was an infant. Although Sophie was away from her mother in Haiti, she felt as though her mother close to her: "Even though she was far away, she was always with me. I could always count on her, like one counts on the sun coming out at dawn" (59). Martine and Sophie share the experience of the past as if it were heredity: "After Joseph and I got married, all through the first year I had suicidal thoughts. Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother's anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something that I had 'caught' from living with her. Her nightmare had somehow become my own [...]" (193). Similar to inheritance, the anxiety that is associated with her mother's experience is brought in to Sophie's dream like a ghost.

Virginity tests are traditionally performed on daughters by their mothers; these tests significantly affect the female body in the novel. Martine does the testing to Sophie for the first time, carefully making sure of the strong ties of the mother-daughter relationship by referring to Haitian legendary twin figure Marassas. The relationship explored in the work is an intense collision of emotion between love and hate through Martine acting as a threat to Sophie by imposing oppressive traditional values upon her. Before Martine starts the virginity test, she threatens her while also asserting their bond, attempting to control Sophie's body and accusing her for having a suspicious relationship with a male neighbor Joseph: "The love between a mother and daughter is deeper than the sea. You would leave me for an old man who you didn't know the year before. You and I we could be like Marassas. You are giving up a lifetime with me. Do you understand?" (85).

Due to this virginity test, Sophie becomes unable to accept her body and become sexually frigid. Sophie's grandmother later describes that it was Martine's role as a mother and her responsibility to protect her daughter's "purity" (156). The virginity test causes Sophie to have a troubled relationship with her own body; Sophie claims that the virginity test, which she calls a "humiliation" (123) has great impact on the way she perceives her body: "I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband. Sometimes I feel like I should be off somewhere by myself. That is why I am here" (123). Sophie feels further exiled from her own body, as it was both physically and mentally disturbed by the test. Answering Sophie's question, her grandmother explains the reason for which a mother controls daughter's body: "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. If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me" (156). The reason stated by her grandmother accounts for the strict patriarchal control over female body that has been sustained by women and justifies the performance of a virginity test. In fact, Martine confesses a compulsive mentality in which she felt she needed to do the test: "'I did it,' she said, 'because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater excuse. 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 every day'" (170).

She reveals that she is only motivated to do so as customary ritual. This account indicates that test is culturally maintained for family honor without consideration of how deeply the test affects the female body and mind. Martine and Sophie's illnesses exemplify and embody the influence of the virginity test. Sophie mutilates

herself in order to make the testing stop. This is the only way for her to protect and gain control of her own body: "My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet. I took the pestle and the bloody sheet and stuffed them into a bag. It was gone, the veil that always held my mother's finger back every time she *tested* me" (88). The act is her attempt to reclaim her body. After painful loss of hymen by her own doing, she runs away from the house and becomes hospitalized. The injury takes four weeks to heal, which puzzles her boyfriend Joseph who think it seems like an excessive act of self-mutilation. She does not tell him that the act bears special meaning for her toward freedom: "Joseph could never understand why I had done something so horrible to myself. I could not explain to him that it was like breaking manacles, an act of freedom" (130). As a result of virginity test and self-mutilation of her hymen, she becomes unable to feel comfortable having sexual intercourse. As a result, she uses what she calls "doubling" (200) during sex, in which she tries to keep herself distant and disconnected from her body. She uses "doubling" (200) when she has to have sex with her husband. She is in a state of mental illness caused by Haitian patriarchal practice, causing Sophie's body to become disabled. Ironically, when "doubling" (200), Sophie can associate with her mother's experience and torture, though her mother was the one who made her experience same physical and mental pain of going through traumatic virginity test:

Finally, as an adult, I had a chance to console my mother again. I was lying in bed with my mother. I was holding her and fighting off that man, keeping those images out of her head. I was telling her that it was all right. That it was not a demon in her stomach, that it was a child, like I was once a child in her body...I kept thinking of my mother,

who now wanted to be my friend. Finally I had her approval. I was okay. I was safe. We were both safe. The past was gone. Even though she had forced it on me, of her sudden will, we were now even more than friends. We were twins, in spirit. *Marassas*. (200)

She reconciles with her mother through the physical experience of sharing pain when having sexual intercourse. Unfortunately, though, regardless of Sophie's psychological efforts, she could not save her mother from committing suicide due to the physical and emotional burden of an unwanted pregnancy.

The focus on Sophie's Haitian acculturation indicates that the female body is strictly controlled by family members and society in this novel. In the case of Martine and Sophie, the mother tells the daughter to learn English and become a doctor in the United States. The doctor, a professional occupation with a high social status, and at the same time, is in the position of controlling women's bodies—a position that Haitian women could not have had before. Martine plays contradictory role as Haitian mother who enacts patriarchal practices such as virginity test. While she hopes Sophie to acquire social position that possibly set her free from those traditional oppressions imposed on Haitian women in general. Martine has high hopes for Sophie and incorporates her own dreams into her daughter's, as many immigrants do: "‘You are going to work hard here,’ she said, ‘and no one is going to break your heart because you cannot read or write. You have a chance to become the kind of woman Atie and I have always wanted to be. If you make something of yourself in life, we will all succeed. You can raise our heads’" (44). Martine's attempts to hold control over Sophie regardless of her will. Martine strictly monitors Sophie's behavior and decides that Sophie can have a boyfriend only after she turns eighteen. Martine

embodies ambivalence, anxiety, and weakness as bound and troubled by being caught between both traditional and contemporary values, living in both countries.

Upon starting new life in America, looking into herself in a mirror, Sophie sees herself objectively. Her face seems new and strange to herself, which also indicates the distance to own face and body. This experience of examining one's face through a mirror can be considered as a scene of observation and reflection of self. It implies her expressing border-crossing of time and space—from Haiti to United States and from past to present. While she is hopeful about starting a new life in the United States, she is exhausted and feeling old at the same time:

I looked at my red eyes in the mirror while splashing cold water over my face. New eyes seemed to be looking back at me. A new face all together. Someone who had aged in one day, as though she had been through a time machine, rather than an airplane. Welcome to New York, this face seemed to be saying. Accept your new life. I greeted the challenge, like one greets a new day. As my mother's daughter and Tante Atie's child. (49)

Even though she notices that she does not take after any of women in the Caco family, Sophie proactively identifies herself with matrimonial lineage. However, in spite of Martine's effort to strictly control her, Sophie becomes lost in the United States, not knowing what she wants to become, which seems to be the result of that very control:

“What would Sophie like to do?” he [Joseph] asked. That was the problem. Sophie really wasn't sure. I had never really dare to dream on my own. “You're not sure, are you?” He even understood my silences. “It's okay not to

have your future on a map,” he said. “That way you can flow wherever life takes you.” “That is not Haitian,” I said. “That’s very American.” (72)

She regards the idea of choosing her life as impossible for her, dismissing the idea as American. Talking with African American boyfriend Joseph, she recognizes her “Haitianness.” She seems to be able to relativize her thoughts through communicating with him. Sophie experiences hardship adjusting to life in the United States, which is considered largely because of the ways in which Haitians are perceived in the country.<sup>2</sup> Sophie feels uncomfortable and depressive, knowing that Haitians are stereotyped as “boat people,” the body is stigmatized as having certain odor, and there are assumptions about them as having AIDS: “Many of the American kids even accused Haitians of having AIDS because they had heard on television that only the ‘Four Hs’ got AIDS—Heroin addicts, Hemophiliacs, Homosexuals, and Haitians” (51). This perception harms her positive acceptance of Haitian identity.

Sophie is separated from her mother when she is a baby and is raised by her aunt, Tante Atie’s until at the age of twelve when she immigrates to the United States to live with her mother. Sophie was not informed of the fact that she was born as the outcome of rape until she reunites with her mother in America when she was twelve-year-old: “A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you into my body. I was still a young girl then, just barely older than you” (61). She also finds that the horrific memory of the rape causes Martine suffer from constant nightmares. Martine gradually becomes mentally inflicted from the nightmares of the traumatic experience, although she comforts her daughter who becomes nervous and anxious: “‘Don’t worry, it will pass,’ she said, avoiding my eyes. ‘I will be fine. I always am. The

nightmares, they come and go” (48). Sophie internalizes her body as a stigma when her mother admits that she takes after her father and that her mother sometimes cannot face her out of fear:

“I thought it was my face that brought them on,” I said. “Your face?” “Because I look like him. My father. A child out of wedlock always looks like its father.” She seemed shocked that I remembered. “When I first saw you in New York, I must admit, it frightened me the way you looked. But it is not something that I can help. It is not something that you can help. It is just part of our lives.” (169)

Tante Atie remarks that Sophie’s daughter, Brigitte, resembles Martine more than Sophie, which seems to further isolate Sophie physically from the Caco family: “I handed Brigitte to her [Tante Atie], as I raised myself from the ground. “Who would have imagined it?” She said, “The precious one has your manman’s black face. She looks more like Martine’s child than yours” (101).

In the work, Tante Atie, also plays significant role in educating Sophie and controlling her body. Tante Atie raised Sophie from when she was an infant until she was twelve years old. She is an unmarried and childless woman who plays an educational role by teaching Sophie lessons and telling stories. Although she may not be conscious of it, Tante Atie is another controlling agent who tells a variety of Haitian folktales to give Sophie lessons and indoctrinate the patriarchal norm in Sophie. Tante Atie also talks about the maternal duty of protecting a daughter’s virginity and the strict control on the daughter’s body done to serve cultural purpose. Sophie’s aunt reveals how her body was monitored and controlled when she was young:

“They train you to find a husband,” she said. “They poke at your panties in the middle of the night, to see if you are

still whole. They listen when you pee, to find out if you're peeing too loud. If you pee loud, it means you've got big spaces between your legs. They make you burn your fingers learning to cook. Then still you have nothing." (136-37)

Tante Atie tells Sophie that Haitian men expect women to be virgins and to have a body useful for domestic work. Tante Atie has a resigned attitude toward female roles, accounting for the purposes of each female finger:

According to Tante Atie, each finger had a purpose. It was the way she had been taught to prepare herself to become a woman. Mothering, Boiling, Loving, Baking, Nursing, Frying, Healing, Washing, Ironing, Scrubbing. It wasn't her fault, she said. Her ten fingers had been named for her even before she was born. Sometimes, she even wished she had six fingers on each hand, so she could have two left for herself. (151)

Tante Atie's body can also be read as disabled body in the context of patriarchal Haitian culture because of her infertility. Sophie understands from Tante Atie's stories that the female body is valued in Haitian culture only in terms of functionality.

Regarding representations of body and identity in the novel, food and eating practice symbolize and includes significant meanings when considering female body in the novel. The actions surrounding food indicate the way a woman can take control of her own body. Danticat also uses food as a cultural metaphor. In her essay *Kitchen Poet*, she states that a mother's role is metaphorically expressed as telling stories and silencing her daughters through nurturing: "Are there women who both cook and write? Kitchen poets, they call them. They slip phrases into their stew and wrap meaning around their pork before frying it. They make narrative dumplings

and stuff their daughters' mouths so they say no more" (*Krik? Krak!* 219-20).

Sophie develops an eating disorder and insomnia after moving to the United States. The illness puzzles her mother, who is unfamiliar with the disease because most Haitian women suffer from a shortage of food. Thus, Martine finds Sophie strange and remarks, "[y]ou have become very American" (179). Her abnormal and uncontrollable eating habit indicates her aversion to the traditional maternal role that is associated with nurturing and feeding children a healthy diet. Sophie also suffers from being in a state of losing control of her own body. Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran point out that the eating disorder displayed in the novel represents a form of social illness, arguing that "ambivalence about orality and embodiment, women's narratives about food and cultural dislocation are literary refractions of 'culture chaos syndrome'" (18). Sophie's eating disorder can be read in the context of this syndrome: "I [Sophie] ate everything on my plate, forcing myself to resist the urge to purge my body" (198). Julia Kristeva finds aversion to food as abjection in connection to maternity: "[F]ood loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. [...] the abject confronts us [...] with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her" (qtd. in Xu 18). As to cultural practice regarding food, Doris Witt also explains the ways in which culture can affect ethnic women's eating habits: "[M]any eat to suppress emotions, particularly the post-traumatic stress of incest and sexual assault, as well as the ongoing frustrations of life in a white-supremacist, heterosexist, capitalist patriarchy" (168). Food is a significant motif in the writings of immigrants; as Valerie Loichot argues, "it establishes food as an unavoidable and complex form of language necessary to remember the past and to heal the self and

communities in the aftermath of diaspora, immigration, and exile” (92). The actions surrounding food are also important as they explain the mental state of characters in this novel as food offers immigrants nostalgic memories that both comfort and haunt them. It is in an unconscious attempt that Sophie intentionally fills her stomach with food to reject and disconnects her body from memory of Haiti: “I usually ate random concoctions: frozen dinners, samples from global cookbooks, food that was easy to put together and brought me no pain. No memories of a past that at times was cherished and at others despised” (151). After leaving her mother and getting married to Joseph, she suffers from an eating disorder and particularly refuses Haitian food in order to not to be reminded of her past.

Avoiding Haitian food and consuming frozen food is Sophie’s physical rejection and resistance of the mother’s nurturing role within patriarchal Haitian society: “Fried chicken, glazed potatoes, and broiled vegetables. Everything came frozen out of a box” (198). Similarly, Martine also rejects Haitian food that reminds her of her daughter and Martine shows anorexic eating habits: “‘After you left home,’ she said, ‘the only thing I ate was spaghetti. I would boil it and eat it quickly before I completely lost my appetite. Everything Haitian reminded me of you’” (183). Susan Bordo, referring to feminist writer Susie Orbach’s argument, suggests that anorexia is a feminist protest in which women engage in a hunger strike and the destruction of the female body. Whether or not one is conscious of it, through the act of refusing food and transforming body size, Bordo accuses the culture of suppressing female hunger, demanding women to constantly work on their bodies to serve standard beauty of dominant culture (Conboy, Medina, and Stanbury 98). Thus, both Sophie and Martine’s ill eating practice can be read as a female protest to the intersecting oppressions under which their bodies are

influenced.

As food is deeply associated with culture, ethnic foods other than Haitian food can convey the “foreignness” of the person who consumes it in the novel. While Sophie, who has completely lost her appetite, is lamenting her mother’s suicide in her bedroom, her mother’s boyfriend Marc eats Chinese food in the living room. His eating Chinese food seems to make Sophie feel further disassociated with him. He is distant to Sophie in that he is in the living room eating food when she is completely without appetite, remorsefully reminiscing about her mother, lying on the bed in “the fetal position” (226). Therefore, the Chinese food eaten by Marc in the living room symbolizes the distance between Sophie and him, characterized by foreignness.

Along with bodily matter of eating habits, Sophie displays a similar attitude toward sexual intercourse. Sophie has difficulty in having a sexual relationship. She dislocates herself from her body in order to have sex. Semia Harbawi notes Sophie’s compulsive urge to cleanse her body, which Sophie either consciously or unconsciously seems to associate with uncleanness:

Sexual intercourse is a loathsome act devoid of pleasure and fraught with pain. Sophie undergoes a psychotic cleavage where her femininity is anathema and her body a repugnant filthy husk. Her psychic dislocation translates itself into bulimic bouts accompanied by suicidal thoughts. These bouts are symptomatic of a neurotic state that unveils the pernicious working of her internal trauma. Consequently, after the vengeful and self-destructive eating frenzy, the compulsion to vomit becomes an act of expiation and a bodily purge. Sophie’s urge to cleanse her body is overwhelming. (Harbawi 42)

As Sophie stigmatizes her own body, just as Martine uses cream to whiten her skin, she seems to associate her body with filth and tries to keep her body clean both inside and outside: “Even though so much time had passed since I’d given birth, I still felt extremely fat. I peeled off Joseph’s shirt and scrubbed my flesh with the leaves in the water. The stems left tiny marks on my skin which reminded me of the giant goose bumps my mother’s testing used to leave on my flesh” (141). Her goose bumps remind her of the hateful virginity tests, which she remembers through a physical reaction. With regard to her face and body, Sophie discovers that she does not resemble any of Caco family members, which makes her disconnected from her own mother and daughter:

I moved closer to get a better look at the baby in Tante Atie’s arms. I had never seen an infant picture of myself, but somehow I knew that it was me. Who else could it have been? I looked for traces in the child, a feature that way my mother’s but still mine too. It was the first time in my life that I noticed that I looked like no one in my family. Not my mother. Not my Tante Atie. I did not look like them when I was a baby and I did not look like them now. (45)

After Martine’s suicide, she begins to suffer thinking about her mother’s suicide. She talks to and blames herself, feeling that her appearance led her mother to fear the rapist and to commit suicide, while she ambivalently thinks that Martine might have been soothed if Sophie had been with her: “It is your fault that she killed herself in the first place. Your face took her back again, you should have stayed with her. If you were here, she would not have gotten pregnant” (227).

Before she dies, Martine fears pregnancy and reveals the way she feels about it to Sophie. It is extremely difficult for her to feel

baby inside her body because she associates the experience with her first unwanted pregnancy: “The nightmares. I thought they would fade with age, but no, it’s like getting raped every night. I can’t keep this baby” (190). Martine also fears being alone and having to live her life in loneliness, which is what makes her seek a partner like Marc though she would need to have sexual relationship with him: “I pretend; it is like eating grapefruit. I was tired of being alone. If that’s what I had to do to have someone wake me up at night, I would do it. But never in my life did I think I could get pregnant” (191). Her sense of loss and isolation in America seems to have led her to find a partner and, subsequently, resulted in pregnancy. She feels extremely stressed and thinks that she will become insane by keeping the baby. Martine remarks that her body is severely stressed after being exposed to the chemical treatment for her breast cancer and then becoming pregnant. Although she goes to a hospital for an abortion, the staff tells her to rethink the operation, even though she is suffering from even more nightmares while pregnant: “‘I tried to get rid of it,’ she said, ‘Today. But they wanted me to think about it for twenty-four hours. When I thought of taking it out, it got more horrifying. That’s when I began seeing him. Over and over. That man who raped me’” (199). Receiving cancer treatment and having a second unwanted pregnancy, her body is apparently beyond her control. Regardless of Sophie’s efforts to soothe her mind, Martine kills herself out of fear of keeping the child. Sophie is filled with remorse and blames herself for not being able to stop Martine from committing suicide. When Sophie revisits Haiti for her mother’s burial, she confronts the past instead of her mother. Back in Haiti for her mother’s funeral, Sophie fights with the cane in the field where her mother was raped as a girl. This is the physical act of fighting with the past for her mother, with the cane symbolizing the traumatic

past that is hard to grapple with, which fights against her, snapping back to strike her shoulder and making her palm to bleed.

I ran through the field, attacking the cane. 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. (233)

Martine and Sophie are both characterized by incurable physical and mental illnesses and are unable to take control of their own bodies. As Arthur Frank describes the ways in which loss of control influence people and their bodies, as a site of control, the female body in the novel is lived along contingency which stresses the body:

People define themselves in terms of their body's varying capacity for control. So long as these capacities are predictable, control as an action problem does not require self-conscious monitoring. But disease itself is a loss of predictability, and it causes further losses: incontinence, shortness of breath or memory, tremors and seizures, and all the other "failures" of the sick body...others experience a crisis of control. Illness is about learning to live with lost control [...]. Contingency is the body's condition of being subject to forces that cannot be controlled. (318)

Having illness is to live with the body that cannot be controlled and, thus, requires conscious monitoring. Frank describes the relationship between body and identity, focusing on illness and that people consider the body as a site of control which is predictable when the body is in a healthy condition. The sickened body, as Martine's and Sophie's, however, is out of control, being under the state of unpredictability. It can be said that Martine chooses to kill herself to control her body as her last resort.

In relation to physical representations, the novel is characterized by a ubiquitous reddish coloration. The physical image of blood is present in such things as creatures, animals, clothes, food and folktales. The red color and the image of blood carry positive images of the power of life as well as negative images of death.<sup>3</sup> The color of red includes image of fire, light, love, and the heart. It also has meanings of resurrection, courage, and active creativeness. In opposition to these positive images, it is also associated with images of sin, revenge, and anger, along with blood. The image of blood shares similar images connected to such things as the sun, passion, life, and fertility. In contrast, it also creates images of sacrifice, war, and guilt. More, it is sometimes associated with magical power of witchcraft.

Tante Atie suggests that Sophie eat reddish natural foods. As mentioned before, food is not something Sophie enjoys, but something she has to take in to sustain her body. Sophie is taught by Tante Atie that the redness of natural foods will strengthen her body: "Tante Atie always said that eating beets and watermelon would put more red in my blood and give me more strength for hard times" (56). Red fruit and vegetable are considered as particularly useful for nourishing female body. Tante Atie also uses leeches kept in a jar to suck "the blood out of her lump until they were plump and full" (148). The sight of this makes Sophie feel like vomiting, but Tante Atie would tell her, "[i]t's only blood, bad blood at that" (149). Tante Atie would explain it as a treatment of keeping her health. The act of Tante Atie's feeding Sophie of reddish food and showing her leeches such the blood appears grotesque. There is also description of her standing under the flaming red tree, which can be read as her hidden passion: "Tante Atie was standing under the red flamboyant tree, clinging to a low branch as the van pulled

away" (173). As an image of color red bears, Tante Atie can be associated with having supernatural power of witchcraft. More, Tante Atie being infertile, she seems to be somewhat neutral and liberated from such sufferings of patriarchal culture as Martine is affected with, although she is in the position to transfer traditional Haitian values to Sophie.

As she matures after the relationship with her mother is reconciled, Sophie ensures the bonding by sharing of same blood: "My mother line was always with me,' I said. 'No matter what happens. Blood made us one'" (207). Martine is also characterized by blood from the scene of her suicide: "In blood. She was lying there in blood" (224). Sophie chooses a dress in Martin's favorite color dress for her funeral, which she knows it does not suit the occasion: "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" (227). Sophie recognizes the color red became her mother's favorite color after she left for America from Haiti. Both Martine and Sophie choose to wear red clothing.

Moreover, the Haitian folktale stories which seem to be created with the intention of controlling female body in the work, are also characterized by images of blood. For example, the novel also presents a story about a wealthy old man who married to a very young girl who did not bleed on their wedding night. The man used a knife to get some blood to show because "the man had his honor and reputation to defend" (155). The blood kept flowing out of her and she bled to death. The girl who could not prove her virginity died after losing too much blood. There is another story about a lark offering a beautiful red ripe pomegranate to a girl. It turns out that lark has been planning to get a girl's beating heart for the prince in order to cure his illness. Although she manages to escape from the

lark, the tale warns girls of seduction and sexuality. There is also story about a woman who escapes by flying out of her skin at night. The husband intended to teach her lesson and peppered her skin when she was gone. She could not put her body back into her skin when she came back and she died. There is a story about a woman who bled for twelve years; she asked Erzulie, a legendary spirit of flowers, to turn her into butterfly, which made her bleeding stop.

As an adult, Sophie remarks that these stories are told because of “our mothers’ obsession with keeping us pure and chaste” (154). Sophie has negative opinions about these stories, although later she understands the cultural background from which the stories were created and learn to accept them. The Haitian folktale that was told to Sophie warns that women whose behaviors are deviant will be severely punished by their husbands and the community. By telling folktale stories, maternal agents teach younger women significant lessons and, thus, control their bodies. The women who resist the patriarchal system are to be punished and such stories are filled with images of blood sacrifice. Thus, the novel is characterized by the ambivalent color of red, which bears positive as well as negative meanings as symbol.

While Haitian folktale stories are filled with oppressive and horrific image associated with the color red, Brigitte is a baby girl who offers a positive image of this color, being associated with the energy of life. Brigitte is the only child of Sophie and African American husband, Joseph. Brigitte’s body represents healthiness and strength, as opposed to the disabled bodies of Martine and Sophie. In appearance, she resembles the members of the Caco family, as Sophie remarks: “Isn’t it a miracle that we can visit with all our kin, simply by looking into this face?” (105). Sophie’s daughter is referred to and emphasized as to having “Caco blood” (185). The family name

Caco also indicates recurring color, the name of a red bird, the color of which is “so crimson, it makes the reddest hibiscus or the brightest flame trees seem white” (150). The color red symbolizes passion and strength as well as life and death attached to the image of blood. About Brigitte, Sophie states that, “[s]he is a true Caco woman; she is very strong” (102). Sophie is physically affectionate to her daughter and gives her the maternal cares that Martine could not give to Sophie.

While Martine and Sophie represent a dreadful past and present in Haiti, Brigitte represents the future for women of Haitian origin. Unlike Martine, who answers that she performed virginity tests on daughter just because her mother done the same, Sophie is aware of vicious cycle that has maintained a system of control over the Haitian female body. Sophie has dealt closely with a troubled relationship to her own body and her mother, and by witnessing her mother suffering from a similar experience, Sophie becomes conscious of the problem. With her learning and reinterpretation of her own culture, it can be assumed that Sophie has the strength to stop the vicious cycle of traditional Haitian culture that has been maintained by women. Sophie, as a narrator, is able to be objective of Haitian culture, which her mother’s generation has not able to do. Moreover, Brigitte’s healthiness and strength seems to suggest hope for the future generation of women of Haitian origin. Sophie takes picture with her grandmother and Brigitte: “I want Brigitte to know you when she gets older,” I said. “I want her to know how much of each of us is in her” (129). Sophie takes the photograph to create a memory for her family and descendants. Sophie wants Brigitte to be aware and ensure that she inherits the memory of the Caco women, just as Sophie did, even though her body is alienated from them. Sophie is also strong and determined enough to resist bodily

exile. In looking into Brigitte's face and finding all the faces in her, and by assuring Brigitte to have "Caco blood" indicate that the Caco women will continue to live and acquire new space for their lives in America.

In connection with memory, oral story-telling is an important parental method of maintaining the traditional female cultural values. Tante Atie tells stories to a young Sophie, including a variety of folktales that would teach her about Haitian cultural values and beliefs. As an adult, Sophie also feels "a sudden urge to tell [Brigitte] a story" (110). Although Sophie was born as a result of sexual assault, Tante Atie invents a beautiful folkloric story around Sophie's birth:

The two of us would sit by the window and Tante Atie would tell me stories about our lives, about the way things had been in the family, even before I was born. One time I asked her how it was that I was born with a mother and no father. She told me the story of a little girl who was born out of the petals of roses, water from the stream, and a chunk of the sky. That little girl, she said was me. (47)

Here, oral story-telling is direct physical act of communication in a maternal relationship by conveying story of the past. As Danticat writes in her essay *Kitchen Poet*, associating with cooking to feeding, she states that story-telling is similar to nurturing. Toward the end, Sophie discovers that the stories are not merely personal ones but are a collective memory, which is being passed on so that Haitian history and culture are maintained. It is the moment when she finally becomes aware of the significance of story-telling. As in the story of Sophie's birth Tante Atie offered, she recognizes that story-telling not only transmits patriarchal and traditional values, but also realizes positive aspect of transformation of the facts for the sake of

survival:

Listening to the song, I realized that it was neither my mother nor my Tante Atie who had given all the mother-and-daughter motifs to all the stories they told and all the songs they sang. It was something that was essentially Haitian. Somehow, early on, our song makers and tale weavers had decided that we were all daughters of this land. (230)

She analyzes the different aspects of story-telling. She notices that the women overcome and survives difficulties by recreating stories around their experiences:

There is always a place where women live near trees that, blowing in the wind, sound like music. These women tell stories to their children both to frighten and delight them. These women, they are fluttering lanterns on the hills, the fireflies in the night, the faces that loom over you and recreate the same unspeakable acts that they themselves lived through." There is always a place where night mares are passed on through generations like heirlooms. Where women like cardinal birds return to look at their own faces in stagnant bodies of water. (234)

Becoming a story-teller, Sophie points out that woman have been passing down cultural practices that may threaten younger generations. She sympathizes and indicates inescapability of cultural norms for most women. Sophie, until near the end of the novel, is told stories by female members of her family, and stays passive and receptive to them. In the end, however, she becomes a story-teller, taking control of the narrative with her own interpretation. This indicates that she speaks for new generation of Haitian women who have historically been silenced. They passed down these stories privately because they had not been given a voice in the public

sphere. Sophie gains a voice and takes over the role of story-teller who speaks of a collective memory, achieving the position in which she can make Haitian female culture visible. Haitian mothers visit constantly to influence daughters throughout life even after death. She clarifies that cultural memories are inseparable from the female physical experience, which she metaphorically expresses in this climactic statement:

I came 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 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. (233-34)

She links the bleeding woman in folktale with her mother. She finds the inevitable influence of mothers on daughters. Sophie imagines that Martine chooses to live on as a butterfly, associating her with the special one that lives after her death in a folktale. In the story, the bleeding woman in Haitian folklore who could not stop bleeding turned into a butterfly. She also considers herself as sharing the commonalities with her mother, as she becomes aware of her Haitian identity in the end. Martine's will is passed on to Sophie as a new butterfly that carries memory and knows where to return. Danticat associates immigrant experience of body with that of butterfly: "My favorite kind of butterfly is the monarch butterfly. It flies 3,000 miles each winter, from colder climates to warmer ones. The butterfly that leaves the cold climate is not the same one that returns the following spring. I often equate that to the immigrant experience" (Alexandre and Ravi 113). The monarch butterfly Dan-

ticat mentions travels as much as 3,000 miles, and the butterflies know where they came from even though those are not the ones started traveling and comes back to the place where they originally came from. Similar to the butterflies Danticat refers to as somehow inherit destination, the daughters of immigrant mothers return to place through memory. As the way Danticat comments on Haiti as “home,” Haitian immigrants have ambivalent attitudes toward “home” in general:

“Since so many Haitians have been forced to leave the country, I think there will always be a kind of ambivalence about migration: having to leave but wishing you could stay. I don’t know when that song was written, but it is a precise description of the migration experience. Nostalgia is part of the life of every immigrant, and so is that ambivalence.”  
(Alexandre and Ravi 115-16)

Sophie also feels ambivalence toward home, which can be seen in her refusal to call Haiti “home” until she rediscovers Haiti after living in America for a long time: “‘My grandmother was preparing her funeral,’ I sad. ‘It’s a thing at home. Death is journey. My grandmother thinks she’s at the end of hers.’ ‘you called it home?’ he said. ‘Haiti.’ What else would I call it?’ ‘You have never called it that since we’ve been together’” (195). As shown in the dialogue between Sophie and her husband Joseph, she is able to embrace and consider Haiti as home by accepting it as basis for her identity toward the end of the novel. The female characters’ conditions are closely intertwined with history in both Haiti and the United States.

In an interview, Danticat states that she believes in significance of memory in immigrant lives: “I think memory is the great bridge between the present and the past, between here and there, even between life and death. It’s what helps us rebuild and start over

in another country, to reconstruct our lives” (Alexandre and Ravi 125). Haitian folkloric stories about women can be read as a haunted memory of the past from which Sophie understands Haitian women in history. French historian Pierre Nora, introduces the term, *lieux de mémoire*, and discusses the significance of the site of memory and haunting for representation: “Site of memory are particularly useful in considering representations of memory and haunting in black life because the term itself speaks to the sometimes beautiful, sometimes harrowing playfulness of haunting, a play rooted in slippages between and across time and space” (Brogan 10). Haiti becomes a site of memory and is recognized as basis for Sophie’s identity in the end. Sophie becomes able to positively embrace her Haitian identity. Thus, the Caco women have covertly resisted oppressive patriarchal culture that silences women through their attempts to control their own bodies and understanding cultural background of Haitian memory. The Caco women’s strengths of self-preservation and Sophie’s reconstruction of identity are passed on to Brigitte, who embodies and symbolizes the future for Haitian women. The ending indicates that Sophie becomes able to interpret Haitian conditions herself and, thus, turns into an active agent in creating a communal memory. Sophie, as well as Danticat herself as a story-teller, strategically using representations of female body, resists the tradition of silence imposed on women and gives voice to women who have been buried in the history.

#### Notes

1. For maternal body and grotesque, see Covino 8-11.
2. The image of Haitians is stigmatized and considered to be “triple minorities” in Konczal and Stepick 445.
3. For image of “red”, see de Vries 382-84 and see de Vries 52-54 for

“blood.”

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