

7-4-2015

The Distorted Lens: Immigrant Maladies and Mythical Norms in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Isabel Valiela
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/wgsfac>



Part of the [Caribbean Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Recommended Citation

Valiela, Isabel, "The Distorted Lens: Immigrant Maladies and Mythical Norms in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*" (2015). *Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Faculty Publications*. 9.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/wgsfac/9>

This open access conference material is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

The Distorted Lens: Immigrant Maladies and Mythical Norms in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Abstract

The immigrant experience is riddled with the complexities of uprooting, and the challenges of fitting into a new environment where the issue of difference plays an important role. An immigrant's life is multireferential in terms of how he or she views difference and is viewed as different. Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat's first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* has instances of extreme disfunctionality due to the interplay of past experiences in Haiti and new encounters in New York City, and it includes many scenes in which characters express and negotiate different sets of cultural expectations, trying to reconcile their differences. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

immigration, Edwidge Danicat, Haiti, mythical norm, immigrant experience

Disciplines

Caribbean Languages and Societies | Comparative Literature | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Comments

This paper was presented at the [Bridges Across Cultures conference](#), in Florence, Italy, on July 4, 2015, sponsored by the International Studies Institute and Washington & Jefferson College.

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

"The Distorted Lens:

Immigrant Maladies and Mythical Norms in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*"

Isabel Valiela

Gettysburg College

Introduction

The immigrant experience is riddled with the complexities of uprooting, and the challenges of fitting into a new environment where the issue of difference plays an important role. An immigrant's life is multireferential in terms of how he or she views difference and is viewed as different. Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat's first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* has instances of extreme dysfunctionality due to the interplay of past experiences in Haiti and new encounters in New York City, and it includes many scenes in which characters express and negotiate different sets of cultural expectations, trying to reconcile their differences. These scenes are manifestations of the immigrant maladies grounded in the distortions produced by what Audre Lorde (1934-1992) called the "Mythical Norm". Lorde first coined this term to analyze the ways in which human categories of difference such as race, class, gender, age, and sexual orientation are understood and manipulated in our society, producing a social hierarchy based on binary power relations resulting from the perceived notions of "the norm" and the "not norm", ie. "other."

Audre Lorde's essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," was one of the most influential theoretical essays of the emerging Third Wave feminist movement of the early 1990s, conceptualizing difference in terms of intersectionality. It begins with a critique of the way we are conditioned to see

human differences “... in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior...there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women.” (64). Lorde, describes herself as “... a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple.” Through the prism of this experience as an outsider on multiple counts, she conceived the notion of the Mythical Norm, the impossible standard by which all of us who live in the United States, consciously or unconsciously, measure ourselves. She states: “Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows ‘that is not me’. In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing.”(p.66). Lorde challenges all of us to look beyond one single category of difference by embracing our and other people’s multiple identities and group belongings. And in order to effectively do that, we must challenge the idea of a one-dimensional allegiance, or a single personal identity. She defends her right to live in a way that all the important aspects of her life are integrated, rejecting the idea of one-dimensional struggles based on

categories of difference, and challenging the binary nature of the Mythical Norm. At this juncture, we can pose the question of how the immigrant experience fits into this theoretical framework that emphasizes the importance of equal relationships across multiple differences. What can we learn about an immigrant's challenges as he or she navigates through past and present Mythical Norms. What external and internal resources does an immigrant have in order to overcome the distortions of multiple and historically rooted inequalities? We turn now to a novel that tells a tale of immigration in a way that is far removed from Audre Lorde's theoretical language, but yet addresses the fundamental question inferred in her essay: How does a person become whole in the midst of these conflicting pressures?

Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

The main characters in Edwidge Danticat's first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) have lives in Haiti and the United States, each country fraught with internal contradictions rooted in a history of inequality. However, the novel is a rather intimate coming of age first-person narrative, in which a young protagonist becomes aware of circumstances that shaped her life and are beyond her control.

Childhood memories are a significant influence in the style and structure of this novel. Family circumstances are revealed through the growing awareness of a child who goes from childhood to adolescence and young adulthood, discovering societal expectations along the way. The narrator and protagonist Sophie Caco goes from a happy and loving childhood environment with her aunt Atie in the small Haitian town of Croix-des-Rosets to a very unstable life with her mother Martine in New York City. Within the childhood memories represented in this narrative, there

are some personal and social circumstances that the child perceives. For example, it is slowly revealed that aunt Atie is illiterate and of very humble peasant stock, which is the reason that she is rejected by the love of her life, Monsieur Augustin. This represents the personal consequences of classism in Haitian society, but it is not directly expressed. Details such as this construct in the reader's mind the Haitian Mythical Norm, what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable.

Sophie and aunt Atie encounter violent incidents as they approach the airport in Port-au-Prince where Sophie will board the plane to New York. Aunt Atie asks the taxi driver "Is there some trouble?" and he responds "There is always some trouble here." (p.33). Once on board the plane Sophie encounters a young boy whose father, a corrupt Haitian politician, has just been killed. The shock of these violent episodes is both a reminder of what Sophie is leaving behind and a prelude to the shocking revelations she will face once she encounters her mother Martine, the woman she had only known from a single portrait in her aunt's house. As she enters the receiving area of Kennedy Airport, she meets a mother who looks totally different from the woman in the portrait: "She did not look like the picture Tante Atie had on her night table. 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." (p.42). 12-year-old Sophie, has no idea why Martine is in such a dire physical condition, except for the fact that she had once worked in the cane fields. As time goes on she finds out that her mother has nightly nightmares because she was raped

by a masked man, probably a *Tonton Macoute*, in the cane fields when she was 16, the result of which was her pregnancy with Sophie. The shame of unwed pregnancy led Martine's family to send her away as a *réstavèk*, a child slave with another family. This is one example in the novel in which we can see the negative impact of the common incidences of rape, and the strong prejudices in Haitian society regarding sexual morality. There is flagrant contradiction at the heart of a society where rape is a common occurrence that haunts every woman, while at the same time men demand that their brides be virgins, and an entire society bows to these expectations. As aunt Atie tells Sophie: "Haitian men, they insist that their women are virgins and have their ten fingers... each finger had a purpose. It was the way she had been taught to prepare herself to become a woman. [Here she lists ten gender-based activities as part of Haiti's Mythical Norm for women] 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." (p.151).

Danticat's novel frequently illustrates a rigidly patriarchal Haitian set of norms. The custom of mothers testing their daughters to make sure they are virgins before marriage is the most flagrant example of an oppressive practice passed on from generation to generation. It was done to Sophie's mother, and to Sophie in her late teens, with an extreme traumatic effect, to the point that Sophie breaks her own hymen with a pestle so that she doesn't have to undergo the pain and humiliation of her mother's testing anymore. As a result, Martine throws her out of the house and

she decides to marry Joseph, an African-American musician who lives next door to their house in New York. Sophie soon has a baby girl, Brigitte. Her relationship with Joseph is haunted by the testing experience, and Sophie cannot have normal sexual relations with her husband due to the physical pain and psychological issues, among which is an exaggerated body image and bulimia. Sophie develops these symptoms in the U.S., where anorexia is a common ailment among young women, whereas in Haiti this ailment is practically non-existent. Martine's response to Sophie's bulimia explains why: " 'How does that happen?' she said. 'You are so tiny, so very petite. Why would you do that? I have never heard of a Haitian woman getting anything like that. Food, it was so rare when we were growing up. We could not waste it.'" (p.179). Is Sophie's anorexia a result of American media and obsession with thinness, or is it only due to the trauma of virginity testing, or both? Regardless of the answer, the fact is that Sophie has internalized the feeling of otherness, of feeling wrong. Suffering from bulimia in her early 20s, Sophie returns to Haiti with the baby, and there, she reveals her distorted self-image: "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." (p.112). Even Martine develops a body image issue that is common in the U.S. but not in Haiti. She uses skin-whitening creams to lighten her skin, which is symptomatic of an internalized racism (p.51). Both of these body image problems illustrate the impact of what Lorde calls the Mythical Norm, while at the same time revealing the complexity of the immigrant experience in which

norms often collide, causing a distorted lens due to internalized multiple oppressions.

Sometimes an immigrant will accommodate certain practices from the home culture to situations in the new country. For example, Sophie uses a Haitian concept of “doubling” while being tested by her mother: “I had learned to double while being tested. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known. The lukewarm noon breeze through our bougainvillea. Tante Atie’s gentle voice blowing over a field of daffodils....There were many cases in our history where our ancestors had doubled. Following in the voodoo tradition, most of our presidents were actually one body split in two: part flesh and part shadow. That was the only way they could murder and rape so many people and still go home to play with their children and make love to their wives. ... After our marriage, whenever Joseph and I were together, I doubled.”(p.156). A voodoo tradition is thus transported to a new land in order to seek relief from the consequences of a practice brought from the country of origin. We also see how a religious practice is manipulated by a ruthless political class in Haiti. The practice of doubling is an attempt to deal with incompatible realities, an inability to integrate the inner self with the external reality. These unsavory components in the novel illustrate how complicated an immigrant’s life can be, especially coming from a place ravaged by a history of violence and political instability. Sophie’s situation represents the fragmented self seeking to be whole, but the act of *doubling* does not help her solve her problems.

As stated before, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* has many scenes in which the characters are negotiating with conflicting expectations. When Sophie meets Joseph,

they talk about her future plans, and the dialogue showcases the difference between Haiti and the United States regarding individual choices. Joseph asks Sophie what she will study in college, and she says she will be a doctor because that is what her mother wants, to which he responds "What would Sophie like to do?... It is okay not to have your future on a map...That way you can flow wherever life takes you."

Sophie responds "That is not Haitian...That's very American...Being a wanderer. The very idea." And he responds: "I am not American...I am African-American. She asks "What is the difference?" and he says "The African. It means that you and I, we are already part of each other." (p.71-72). Here Sophie and Joseph are approaching each other's perspectives, Joseph challenging Sophie to move beyond the expectations of her mother to reach for her own dreams of a future life, possibly joined with his. But it is also about American individualism versus Haitian family priorities, and beyond that, a background of struggle for survival that marks Sophie's individual decisions. Sophie's mother clearly tells her that she must study hard and become a doctor. She tells Sophie: " 'You are going to work hard here, ... 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 succeed. You can *raise our heads*.'" (p.44). In contrast to Joseph's emphasis on individual choice, there is a clear priority set on a common family destiny and pride, a collective family identity.

One of the points that Audre Lorde makes in her essay is the significance of intergenerational relationships for forging a strong sense of self rooted in community. She talks about joining hands to examine the living memories and

asking the important question, "Why?" In this novel we see conflict between mother and daughter, but we also see a community of women supporting each other. Sophie returns to Haiti precisely because she needs to ask the question Why? The following dialogue with her grandmother Ifé shows an intense questioning: "The testing? Why do mothers do that?' I asked my grandmother. 'If a child dies, you do not die. But if your child is disgraced, you are disgraced. And people, they think daughters will be raised trash with no man in the house.' 'Did your mother do this to you?' '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.'..."I hated the tests,' I said. 'It is the most horrible thing that ever happened to me. When my husband is with me now, it gives me such nightmares...' 'With patience, it goes away.' 'No Grandmé Ifé, it does not.'...'My heart, it weeps like a river,' she said,' for the pain we have caused you.'" (p.156-157). The dialogue is a give-and-take between two women who love each other but struggle to breach the divide in their perspectives. Yet, in the end of their conversation, the grandmother recognizes the pain inflicted by this practice. This is an example of the importance of the positive intergenerational ties between Grandmother Ifé, Atie, Sophie, and to some extent, baby Brigitte, who represents a future free of the burdens of previous generations. There is a next morning scene that captures Sophie's gradual relief from the burden of the past, not only because of her previous conversation with her grandmother, but also because she brings with her the typical American practice of jogging: "The next morning, I went jogging, along the road, through the cemetery plot, and into the

hills. The sun had already dried some of the puddles from the drizzle the night before. Along the way, people stared at me with puzzled expressions on their faces. *Is this what happens to our girls when they leave this place?* They become such frightened creatures that they run like the wind, from nothing at all.” (p.157)

Sophie’s new-found sense of freedom is misinterpreted by people who can only conceive of a running girl who runs from real dangers, and not for her own sake.

Conclusion

Near the end of the novel Sophie’s mother commits suicide because she was never able to overcome the psychological scars of her rape. Sophie, on the other hand, manages to save herself from the trauma of the testing and the impact of her mother’s circumstances. Both women suffered external and internalized oppressions, but Sophie grasps at those elements in the U.S. and in Haiti that facilitate a healthy exit from the burdens of the past. After her mother’s funeral, Sophie runs through the cane fields in which she was conceived by an act of rape, wildly attacking the cane stalks, yanking them from the ground. “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 quavering with her sobs. ‘Ou libéré!’” (p.233). This ending with the repeated expression in Creole, first a question, and then an affirmation, highlights both Sophie’s liberation and the solidarity among the women of Haiti. Her individual triumph comes from her effort and ability to process all the aspects of her complicated life due to two sets of historically grounded expectations and practices, the Mythical Norms in her life.

References

- Danticat, Edwidge. 1998. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries.
- Lorde, Audre. 2010. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." In *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, 7th edition. Ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.