

Narratives of Return:  
The Contemporary Caribbean Woman Writer and the Quest for Home

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I hereby declare that all of the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Rachel Grace Thompson. August 2014.

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To Phill, who has been there every step of this process over the past four years. For your constancy, your support, and your hugs. For listening to me and encouraging me. And for your patience and understanding through frequent tears of frustration and despair. Thank you.

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates how diasporic Caribbean women writers use the vehicle of the novel to effect a 'writing back' to the Caribbean home through what I propose to consider as a specific sub-genre of Caribbean literature: 'narratives of return'. I argue that novels which constitute 'narratives of return' reveal how diasporic identity continues to be informed by a particularised connection to the Caribbean homeland. Firstly, I propose the region's literary representation within these narratives as the home of cultural memories which fully inform the hybridised nature of diasporic subjectivity. Secondly, I investigate the narrative of return's depiction of the Caribbean as the site of historical, collective, and personal trauma which continues to influence notions of identification and belonging to the region for Caribbean people.

Whilst 'return' refers to the act of 'writing back' to the Caribbean by diasporic authors, I suggest that the 'return' represented within the narratives can also be literary, symbolic, metaphorical and physical. I investigate how the 'return' is negotiated within the text, exploring what 'narratives of return' reveal about Caribbean diasporic subjectivity and the relationship of protagonist and author with Caribbean history and the ancestral home. Theories of culture and identity acquisition will be crucial in addressing these questions, while my analysis explores how Caribbean diasporic identity is informed by an inherently traumatic and violent history of colonialism.

I argue towards the healing, therapeutic function of the discourse of the 'narrative of return' in selected novels by diasporic authors from the Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone Caribbean. My approach seeks to unveil links between islands, recognising similarities in diasporic and Caribbean experience across racial, cultural and linguistic differences. I propose the Caribbean as a space which is representative of traumatic experience for Caribbean people across racial and cultural boundaries, investigating the palliative nature of the 'narrative of return' in effecting a process of confronting and working through past traumas.

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## Introduction

[C]oming always closer to the island of my birth, but never actually going back to it, never making the final journey, the dream of our years of exile. Between language and borders, identities and colors, however, I have grieved for this. I am still grieving for it.<sup>1</sup>

You were not born here  
my child  
not here.<sup>2</sup>

Where I came from  
I do not know—<sup>3</sup>

How do you play knowing that at every moment  
in time your identity is in question  
How do you win when at every moment  
in time your identity is in question<sup>4</sup>

Questions of exile and return, issues of belonging, and related notions of identity are central to works by Caribbean writers. For those of African heritage born and raised in the Caribbean region, answers to these questions have often been sought by looking back to the homeland of their African ancestors. Yet for those Caribbean writers born or raised in North America or Britain, questions pertaining to issues of identity, belonging and return are further complicated; these writers' displacement from the archipelago causes them to look back to both the familial island home and that of their African ancestors to seek answers to questions pertaining to the nature of their complex and multifaceted diasporic identities. Reading novels by diasporic Caribbean women writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it is clear that displacement from the familial, cultural and linguistic home, the ensuing sense of loss and dislocation, and subsequent questions of return are of particular thematic importance. This observation forms the starting point for my exploration into the ways in which contemporary diasporic Caribbean women writers address the nature of the 'return' to the Caribbean and the 'quest for home' within their work.

This thesis will argue that Caribbean diasporic identity as represented in contemporary literature is inextricably linked to the Caribbean in specific, particularised ways. Firstly, I propose to consider the region's literary representation within these narratives as the home of cultural memories which fully inform the hybridised nature of diasporic subjectivity. Secondly, I investigate the ways in

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<sup>1</sup> Marie-Hélène Laforest, 'Homelands', in *The Butterfly's Way*, ed. by Edwidge Danticat (New York: Soho Press, 2001), pp.23-30 (p.30).

<sup>2</sup> John La Rose, 'Not From Here', in *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse*, ed. by Stewart Brown and Mark McWatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.102.

<sup>3</sup> Cyril Dabydeen, 'Returning', in *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse*, ed. by Stewart Brown and Mark McWatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.215.

<sup>4</sup> Gina Ulysse, 'A Poem About Why I Can't Wait: Going Home Again and Again and Again', in *The Butterfly's Way*, ed. by Edwidge Danticat (New York: Soho Press, 2001), p.219.

which ‘narratives of return’ depict the Caribbean as the site of historical, collective, and personal trauma which continues to influence notions of identification and belonging to the region for Caribbean people.<sup>5</sup> I examine the preoccupation with returning to the Caribbean within contemporary diasporic fiction through close analysis of a selection of novels by Caribbean women writers from the Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone Caribbean in order to investigate how diasporic identity continues to be informed by a particularised connection to a Caribbean homeland.<sup>6</sup> In addressing this concern, and to develop my argument further, I propose that the diasporic Caribbean woman writer’s preoccupation with a ‘narrative of return’ reflects a wider quest for home and cultural belonging in relation to both the originary, ancestral home and the diasporic home space.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst previous studies reveal a concern with analysing the region’s fiction in terms of linguistic grouping,<sup>8</sup> ethnicity,<sup>9</sup> and race,<sup>10</sup> I am specifically interested in a pan-Caribbean approach. Authors Andrea Levy, Paule Marshall and Edwidge Danticat are important to this thesis by virtue of their African/Caribbean diasporic perspective. Fiction by Julia Alvarez, more readily identified as a Latina writer, will also be considered valuable as a means of comparing work by women from the Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean with that of a Hispanic Caribbean diasporic writer.<sup>11</sup> I adopt this approach in order to consider whether the preoccupation with ‘returning’ to the ancestral home is a pan-

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<sup>5</sup> Chapter Two draws extensively on trauma theory in relation to cultural identity. For a theoretical discussion of trauma and identity see *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Introduction, pp.10-13 considers the specific meanings and contested understandings of the term, ‘diaspora’ as understood in literary criticism and cultural theory. For an extended discussion on the meanings of diaspora within postcolonial criticism see *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, ed. by Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Malden: Blackwell, 2003); *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers*, ed. by Kobena Mercer (Massachusetts: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2008); Virinder S. Kalra, Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk, *Diaspora and Hybridity* (London: Sage Publications, 2005). For a discussion more specific to African, Black or Caribbean diasporic experiences see Ronald Segal, *The Black Diaspora* (London: Faber, 1995); *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*, ed. by Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davies and Ali A. Mazrui (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); *The New African Diaspora*, ed. by Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of representations of the diasporic home space in postcolonial literature see Rosemary Marangoly George, *Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also Introduction, pp.11-13.

<sup>8</sup> For linguistic based studies see Keith M. Booker and Dubravka Juraga, *The Caribbean Novel in English: An Introduction* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001); Louis James, *Caribbean Literature in English* (New York: Longman, 1999); *Caribbean Women Writers: Fiction in English*, ed. by Mary Condé and Thorunn Lonsdale (London: Macmillan Press, 1999); Beverley Ormerod, *An Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel* (London: Heinemann, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Studies concerned with literature produced from within particular cultural or national groups include: David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *A Reader’s Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature* (London: Hansib Publishing, 1988); Bruce King, *West Indian Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1979); *Haiti: Writing Under Siege*, ed. by Marie-Agnes Sourieau and Kathleen M. Balutansky (New York: Rodopi, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> See racialised studies of Caribbean literature, including: Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 1994); *Critical Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean Women’s Literature*, ed. by Joy Mahabir and Mariam Pirbhai (New York: Routledge, 2012); *Motherlands: Black Women’s Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, ed. by Susheila Nasta (London: The Women’s Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Alvarez’s work is variably categorised within both American and Latino writing. See the discussion of her work featured in Kelli Lyon Johnson, *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005) and Julia Alvarez’s essay refuting her status as a Dominican writer, ‘Dona Aida, with Your Permission’ in *Something to Declare* (New York: Plume, 1999), pp.171-175.

Caribbean concern or one which stems from specific racial, cultural or linguistic concerns within diasporic experiences. In this respect, at one level 'return' refers to the act of 'writing back' to the region by diasporic authors. At the same time, I suggest that the 'return' represented within the different narratives can also be literary, symbolic, metaphorical and physical.<sup>12</sup>

Levy, Marshall, Danticat and Alvarez form part of a new generation of Caribbean women writers, divided between their home in North America or England and the island home their immigrant parents left behind. In her anthropological study, *Narratives of Exile and Return* (1997), Mary Chamberlain claims, 'migrants retain a Caribbean identity across generations and remain centred within kinship networks which link the Caribbean and North America'.<sup>13</sup> Taking Chamberlain's assertion as a point of departure, this thesis sets out to consider the nature of the discourse of return to be read in novels by the selected authors. I attempt to theorise literary representations of the parental or ancestral home in the formation of a hybridised diasporic cultural identity in order to gauge how Chamberlain's findings are played out by fictional 'narratives of return'.<sup>14</sup> I ask: how is the return negotiated within the text? What does the narrative of return reveal about the protagonist, Caribbean diasporic subjectivity, and the relationship of both protagonist and author with Caribbean history and the originary or ancestral Caribbean home? I use 'narrative of return' literally, symbolically and metaphorically to explore the ways in which the trope of the journey and the notion of return to a Caribbean ancestral homeland or an originary home are represented in the selected novels. This term is complex and my understanding of this key phrase is extrapolated further in the course of this Introduction.<sup>15</sup> By way of introduction to the key questions addressed in this thesis, I offer initially a consideration of the key terms and terminology of the discussion, a review of the literature contributing to the fabric of the thesis, and an outline of the parameters of the research.

### **Terms and Terminology: African/Caribbean, Diaspora and Notions of 'Home'**

Meredith M. Gadsby's *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration and Survival* (2006) recognises multiple categories of definition for black people living in the diaspora. Gadsby writes, 'I will use *Caribbean*, *Caribbean American*, and *African Caribbean* in an effort to move beyond the legacies of colonial designations for cultural identity'.<sup>16</sup> Gadsby's recognition of the problems in defining black

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<sup>12</sup> Anne M. François, *Rewriting the Return to Africa: Voices of Francophone Caribbean Women Writers* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), p.xv. See also Introduction, pp.15-18 for a discussion of the specific nature of the discourse of return.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p.3.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of hybridity and cultural synthesis see *The Creolization Reader: Studies in Mixed Identities and Cultures*, ed. by Robin Cohen and Paola Toninato (London: Routledge, 2010); Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Paris: Galliard, 1990), trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 1994; repr. 2004). See also Introduction, pp.19-20 for a discussion of hybridity in relation to culture.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of my understanding of the key term 'narratives of return' see, for example, Introduction, pp.14-18.

<sup>16</sup> Meredith M. Gadsby, *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration and Survival* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), p.10.

diasporic identities is important in highlighting the way in which identity can be limited by artificial barriers imposed by linguistic designation. Carole Boyce Davies's *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) raises similar concerns regarding monolithic labels of categorisation. For Davies, the terms that we use to name ourselves are imbued with their own 'strings of echoes and inscriptions' where 'each represents an original misnaming and the simultaneous constant striving of the dispossessed for full representation'.<sup>17</sup> Davies highlights 'West Indian' as a prime example of this misnaming, challenging the varying use of 'Black' throughout the U.S. and U.K. either to include or exclude people of Asian, Arab or Latino descent. 'African' is a similarly loaded moniker, 'an attempt to create a monolithic construction out of a diverse continent of peoples, cultures, nations and experiences'.<sup>18</sup> For Davies, 'African' operates as a defining term only in opposition to what is deemed 'European' or 'American'.

Gadsby and Davies' acknowledgement of the difficulty of representing the diversity and hybridity of a complex Caribbean identity within limiting, or culturally inclusive or exclusive, linguistic designators is important for my purposes in advocating a pan-Caribbean approach. In an effort to move away from labels which impose often artificial and contradictory boundaries of national or imperialistic identity, I use 'African/Caribbean' to describe the cultural identity of the diasporic authors and their protagonists, with 'Caribbean' signifying the presence of the New World, the Americas, and the colonial experiment which took place there.<sup>19</sup> This more readily encompasses the idea that those in the diaspora are part of the Old World and the New, both African and Caribbean, or African-Caribbean. However, unlike 'African-Caribbean', 'African/Caribbean' acknowledges that these categories are also mutually exclusive: these terms denote different identities brought together but not unrecognisably fused in cultural synthesis.<sup>20</sup> New World identity is an amalgamation of Africa, the Americas, and Europe. However, although these cultures unite to form a new diasporic identity they remain recognisable parts of a new whole.

A brief consideration of the meanings of 'diaspora' provides a necessary insight into the cultural implications of what it means to be a diasporic African/Caribbean woman.<sup>21</sup> Although the term comes from the Greek word for dispersal, it traditionally refers to Jewish experiences of migration and exile. Sophia Lehmann's 'In Search of a Mother Tongue: Locating Home in Diaspora' (1998) asserts, 'diaspora was originally coined to describe the circumstances of the Jews who lived outside of Palestine after the

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<sup>17</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>19</sup> In referring to the writers whose work this thesis considers as 'African/Caribbean', I acknowledge Alvarez more specifically as a Latina of Hispanic origin from the Dominican Republic.

<sup>20</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. See Introduction, p.32.

<sup>21</sup> Although the scope of this thesis does not allow for an extended consideration of the history of the term 'diaspora' as it is understood within postcolonial criticism, my aim here is to acknowledge the status of Levy, Marshall, Danticat and Alvarez as diasporic writers.

Babylonian exile'.<sup>22</sup> Since the 1950s it has been increasingly used to describe African experiences of forced and voluntary migration. George Shepperson's study, 'African Diaspora: Concept and Context' (1982), argues, 'between the mid-1950s and the mid 1960s [...] *African Diaspora* began increasingly to be used by writers and thinkers who were concerned with the status and prospects of persons of African descent around the world'.<sup>23</sup> This re-defining coincided with the development of the pan-African movement and the interest in recovering a common ancestral homeland to link dispersed African peoples throughout the world.<sup>24</sup>

I refer throughout this thesis to Caribbean migratory patterns and subsequent diasporic experiences. Yet there is an important distinction to be made between an African and a Caribbean diaspora which is significant with regards to the relationship between Caribbean literature and the history it is born out of. It is thus crucial to my thesis, which attempts to assert the ongoing influence of a migratory and traumatic Caribbean history upon the formation of a sense of diasporic subjectivity and the nature of subsequent literary production from the diaspora. On diaspora studies and pan-Africanism, St Clair Drake states, 'the *African* diaspora [...] involved the massive dispersal of over 10 million men, women and children from a homeland in sub-Saharan Africa between 1500 and 1850' (my italics).<sup>25</sup> Drake's definition is useful in highlighting the specificities of the African diasporic experience, enabling me to conclude that Caribbean diaspora refers to the experiences of migrants, and their descendants, of African, Asian, European and mixed heritage who were born or raised in the Caribbean, or whose families and ancestors originated from the region and relocated to Europe or North America. This distinction permits a recognition that whereas black Haitian writer Danticat could be described as belonging within both African and Caribbean diasporic communities, Alvarez's Latina roots in the Dominican Republic align her with a particularly Hispanic Caribbean diasporic community. Furthermore, the selected authors are writing and publishing in the late twentieth century. The particular relocations or migrations which led to the development of the communities from which they write are more recent than the original African migratory movement described by Drake.

African/Caribbean people living in the U.K. or U.S. are members of multiple communities; that of their diasporic life, their native Caribbean island and their ancestral African, European, or indeed, Asian, homeland.<sup>26</sup> Thus, for the writers with whom this thesis is particularly concerned, a quest for or

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<sup>22</sup> Sophia Lehmann, 'In Search of a Mother Tongue: Locating Home in Diaspora', *MELUS*, 23, 4 (Winter 1998), 101-118 (p.101-2).

<sup>23</sup> George Shepperson, 'African Diaspora: Concept and Context', in *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, ed. by Joseph E. Harris (Washington: Howard University Press, 1982), pp.46-53 (p.46).

<sup>24</sup> See Brent Hayes Edwards, 'The Uses of Diaspora', *Social Text*, 66 (Spring 2001), 45-73.

<sup>25</sup> St Clair Drake, 'Diaspora Studies and Pan-Africanism', in *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1982), ed. by Joseph E. Harris, pp.341-397 (p.18).

<sup>26</sup> Work by Asian/Caribbean women writers remains outside the scope of this thesis, which focuses primarily on novels by African/Caribbean women writers of mixed African and/or European descent. For a discussion of Indian Caribbean women's writing and diaspora see Brinda J. Mehta, *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani*

return to the original home often requires a more complicated journey into the roots of history and culture within both the Caribbean and Africa itself. I refer to the 'quest for home' of both writers and their characters as the effort to discover, or recover, familial and ancestral origins, the search for a space where they feel they belong. In accordance with Chamberlain's definition, I consider home 'a symbol of both place and belonging' and explore whether this 'home' space is African, Caribbean, or both, and the form which it takes: a geographical space, a fixed location, a linguistic or cultural 'home'.<sup>27</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George's *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-century Fiction* (1996) is also valuable for my discussion of the literary representation of the home space as it similarly notes multiple understandings of 'home', both literal and figurative. Whilst 'the word's wider signification [is] as the larger geographic place where one belongs', George writes, 'home is also the imagined location that can be more fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography'.<sup>28</sup>

Davies' discussion of 'home' is especially important in informing my research into literary representations of the 'quest for home' within diasporic novels in relation to an expression, articulation, or (re)discovery of a particularised diasporic subjectivity. Davies crucially highlights the importance of writing home as a critical link in the articulation of identity.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, she emphasises the significance of 'homelessness' and 'displacement' in constructing literary depictions or representations of 'home' for the migrant and the diasporic writer:

Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the rejection of home, become motivating factors in this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it. Still home is contradictory, contested space, a locus for misrecognition and alienation.<sup>30</sup>

Like George, whose discussion of the concept of home in postcolonial fiction recognises that 'homes and nations are defined in the instances of confrontation with what is considered "not home", with the foreign, with distance',<sup>31</sup> Davies similarly suggests that preoccupation with the 'quest for home' stems from feelings of diasporic alienation and unbelonging.

My research examines the notion of home as a symbol of place and belonging, a contradictory and contested space in diasporic Caribbean women's writing. I extend Davies' focus from 'Afro-Caribbean Women's Writing in the U.S.' to consider the rewriting of, or quest for home, in the fictional works of diasporic Caribbean women of mixed heritage (Latina and African/Caribbean) throughout the

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(Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2004); *Critical Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean Women's Literature*, ed. by Mahabir and Purbhai.

<sup>27</sup> Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return*, p.70.

<sup>28</sup> George, *The Politics of Home*, p.11.

<sup>29</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, pp.113-129. For a discussion of identity as a process of becoming see Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp.222-237 and Gadsby, *Sucking Salt*, p.10.

<sup>30</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.113.

<sup>31</sup> George, *The Politics of Home*, p.4.

international diaspora. Is the diaspora 'home' or is the Caribbean 'home' for the writers and protagonists discussed in this thesis? I will attempt to tease out notions of simultaneous belonging and unbelonging in literary representations of multiple home spaces, suggesting that this duplicity and negotiation of conflicting home spaces is fundamental to understanding the complexities of diasporic Caribbean identity in the novels. As Davies writes, 'the articulations of a variety of identities are central to our understandings of the ways in which these writers express notions of home in their works'.<sup>32</sup>

Stuart Hall's work on the African/Caribbean diaspora will be fundamental to my analysis of this 'quest for home'. Hall describes the Caribbean as 'already the diaspora of Africa, Europe, China, Asia, India', stating, 'this diaspora re-diasporized itself'.<sup>33</sup> For Hall, the British Caribbean population, to which Levy belongs, are 'products of the *new* diasporas created by the post-colonial migrations'.<sup>34</sup> Hall's 'new diasporas' in North America and Britain are fundamentally different from those created in the Caribbean at the height of British Empire; they are born from twentieth-century migratory movements. Unlike enslaved Africans, twentieth-century migrants, although possibly under pressure to relocate due to political, economic or social circumstances, left the Caribbean voluntarily. The migrations which led to the creation of the 'new diasporas' are not simply 'post-colonial migrations' as Hall appears to suggest. The novels this thesis considers are born of twentieth-century, postcolonial conditions. By this, I mean that the contemporaneity of the novels situates them within a period of modernity defined by globalisation and migratory movements effected by socio-economic or political circumstances arising within the post-independence Caribbean. However, the diasporas in which the selected writers were born or raised began to develop whilst much of the Caribbean was still under colonial rule. Therefore, in considering the 'colonial' in the 'postcolonial' or, perhaps more fittingly, 'post-independent', diasporas which Marshall, Levy, Alvarez and Danticat write from and about, I suggest that colonial legacies of racism, violence, and social inequality pervade the contemporary Caribbean and its diasporas and, consequently, diasporic literature and representations of Caribbean culture and identity.

Although I do not intend to adopt an approach which privileges a postcolonial theoretical position – my creolised theoretical framework is outlined in detail throughout this Introduction<sup>35</sup> – I employ the vocabulary of colonialism because, as this thesis consistently argues, the Caribbean experience is one which has at its core the ongoing legacy of the violence and traumas of a history of colonisation. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin remark in their seminal study, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), 'there is a continuity of preoccupations

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<sup>32</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.116.

<sup>33</sup> Kuan-Hsing Chen, 'The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual: An Interview with Stuart Hall', in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.484-503 (p.501).

<sup>34</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Question of Cultural Identity', in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. by Hall and others (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp.595-634 (p.629).

<sup>35</sup> See Introduction, pp.19-21.

throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression'.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, I avoid a singularly postcolonial theoretical stance in part because such an approach would overlook the uniqueness of the Caribbean region in terms of the complexities of cultural creolisation, linguistic and racial diversity.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, whilst the selected diasporic women writers emerge from a history of colonialism, their literature does not rest simply within categorisation as 'that which critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship'.<sup>38</sup> They do not reveal a primary concern with the colonial or postcolonial relationship between margin and centre.<sup>39</sup> Theirs is not, for example, literature which depicts the traditional postcolonial search for 'a sense of national identity which supersedes the colonial identification with [...] "the mother country"'.<sup>40</sup> Rather, as writers born or raised in North American or British diasporas, their foremost concern is the relationship between diaspora and Caribbean home and the implications of the dislocation and cultural tensions effected by migration and exile upon the diasporic subject. In light of this observation, my analysis explores how 'colonial' legacies of racism and social inequality pervade the diaspora, further necessitating the migrant's need to look to an ancestral home space for a sense of belonging and identification. Do diasporic racism and inequality push the Caribbean writer into revisiting and rewriting home through 'narratives of return'?

### **Situating the 'Narrative of Return' and 'Quest for Home' within a Literary Tradition**

My discussion of the 'narrative of return' in relation to the 'quest for home' within the selected novels borrows from the title of Chamberlain's aforementioned *Narratives of Exile and Return*. Chamberlain's study – interviews with and stories of Caribbean migrants to Britain – considers these 'narratives of exile and return' and the journeys contained within them via first hand autobiographical accounts. Whilst I am similarly concerned with relocation, return and the subsequent effects on personal and cultural identity within stories as they are told, or written, from the diaspora, my approach considers the 'narrative of return' as represented within works of fiction, specifically diasporic novels, in an effort to examine the nature of the fictional discourse of return. Some clarification of my use of 'narrative of return', which recalls an epic literary tradition in which the motif of the journey, voyaging and homecoming feature prominently, is necessary to establish the significance of the meanings of this key term in relation to my own research in contemporary Caribbean literature. Although I offer below

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<sup>36</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 1989; repr. 1991), p.2.

<sup>37</sup> For creolisation see Introduction, pp.33-34.

<sup>38</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.3.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of postcolonial literature as that which 'looks [...] from the margin to the centre' (p.12) and demonstrates a central concern with 'writing themselves back into the centre' (p.14) see Theo D'haen, 'Shades of Empire in Colonial and Post-Colonial Literatures' in *Shades of Empire in Colonial and Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed. by C. C. Barfoot and Theo D'haen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), pp.9-16.

<sup>40</sup> C. L. Innes, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.38.

a consideration of the 'narrative of return' in an effort to situate it within a literary tradition, I do not dwell at length on a discussion of the influence of the epic tradition in Caribbean literature; much critical ground has been covered in this area and the particular concern of this thesis, which is interested in fiction and women's writing, does not allow the scope for such a review.<sup>41</sup>

In *The Ballistic Bard: Postcolonial Fictions* (1995), Judie Newman argues that the study of postcolonial literature 'sheds light [...] on the means by which English literature has been – and continues to be – shaped, inviting us to speculate on the relation between postcolonial literature and its predecessors'.<sup>42</sup> The novels discussed here can be variably categorised as American, British, Hispanic, Diasporic and Caribbean. Additionally considered within the canon of postcolonial literature in that they are written by women with an attachment to former colonial territories, the novelists' use of the narrative trope of the return journey invites similar speculations regarding their literary predecessors, conjuring images of the Classical epic journey home in which the heroic male protagonist overcomes such obstacles as fate and the gods deem fit to throw into his path.<sup>43</sup> Much twentieth-century Caribbean poetry reveals the influence of this Eurocentric literary tradition, reflecting the region's colonial past, European education system and ongoing western influences on literary and cultural production from within the region and its diaspora. Recognising these influences, Michael Niblett's *The Caribbean Novel Since 1945: Cultural Practice, Form and the Nation-State* (2012) reads the 'the juxtaposition of elements of ancient epic [...] alongside the kinds of narrative techniques associated with European high modernist works' as representative of the region's history of development combined with underdevelopment.<sup>44</sup> Niblett concludes that as Caribbean writers 'develop original approaches to history, they fashion something like a new kind of epic form'.<sup>45</sup> I posit that in their literary representation of the 'narrative of return' as a way in which to uncover or recover a cultural identity rooted in traumatic history, Marshall, Levy, Alvarez and Danticat's reappropriation of this trope is an effective subversion of the epic poetic tradition.

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<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of postcolonial rewritings of classic literary texts see Judie Newman, *The Ballistic Bard: Postcolonial Fictions* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995); *Classics in Postcolonial Worlds*, ed. by Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Emily Greenwood, *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues Between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a more specific discussion of Walcott's revisioning of classical tropes see Robert Fraser, 'Mental Travellers: Myths of Return in the Poetry of Walcott and Brathwaite' in *Return in Postcolonial Writing: A Cultural Labyrinth*, ed. by Vera Mihailovich-Dickman (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp.7-13; Louis James, 'From Crusoe to Omeros: Derek Walcott' in *Caribbean Literature in English* (New York: Longman, 1999), pp.179-184; Maeve Tynan, *Postcolonial Odysseys: Derek Walcott's Voyages of Homecoming* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011) and Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

<sup>42</sup> Newman, *The Ballistic Bard*, p.2.

<sup>43</sup> As Hamner explains, 'the classic prescription [...] accommodate[s] an objective point of view, ringing oratory, glorious battles, divine intervention, arduous journeys'. See Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p.9.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Niblett, *The Caribbean Novel Since 1945: Cultural Practice, Form and Nation-State* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), p.39.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

This reappropriation of the 'narrative of return' in Caribbean literature predates the work of the selected authors. Whilst Derek Walcott's seminal narrative poem, *Omeros* (1990) depicts numerous arduous journeys, voyages, departures and returns, with a title and protagonists whose names – Philoctete, Hector, Achille – allude to Homer's *Odyssey*, the protagonists of his poem are not Kings or warriors, but peasants and fishermen, leading Robert D. Hamner to conclude that Walcott has composed 'the epic of the dispossessed'.<sup>46</sup> Other noteworthy poetic works by Caribbean writers which reflect the subversion of classical forms or tropes whilst revealing a thematic concern with issues of exile and displacement, the homecoming voyage or the return to cultural origins include Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (1956) and Edward Brathwaite's *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (1973). Whilst Césaire's concern with blackness and African cultural origins situates his work within the Negritude movement, Brathwaite's Afrocentric focus and experimentation with language and form similarly places his work in opposition to European poetry likewise preoccupied with the homecoming voyage. Thus, although these poems arguably offer a revisioning of classical tropes, they reposition them within a culturally specific African/Caribbean context.

My concerns lie specifically with representations of the narrative of return in female-authored diasporic novels; the aforementioned male poets already receive a great degree of international scholarly attention. However, in highlighting the works of Walcott, Césaire, and Brathwaite, I stress the significant historical implications in the Caribbean writers' use of a literary motif with its roots in the epic tradition. I emphasise the development of a pan-Caribbean literary tradition that simultaneously acknowledges its colonial roots and dominant European cultural influences whilst subverting the motifs of this tradition in an expression of cultural autonomy. The women writers under discussion present their protagonists on a personal quest for knowledge of their ancestral roots and Caribbean home.<sup>47</sup> This desire to access the past and uncover or recover historical knowledge via a literal, metaphorical or symbolic narrative of return refutes M. M. Bakhtin's understanding of the epic in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981) wherein Bakhtin characterises the epic as a genre with three distinct and defining features: a national epic past, a national tradition as the source for the epic, and, crucially, 'an absolute epic distance [which] separates the epic world from contemporary reality'.<sup>48</sup> Niblett's study argues that the Caribbean novel 'reworks epic form, for instead of allowing the past to remain [...] sealed off from the present, the narrative draws it close, consumes it, and in doing so rematerializes it', implying that a distanced past is brought close and remade in the Caribbean novel.<sup>49</sup> My reading of the

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<sup>46</sup> Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed*, p.23.

<sup>47</sup> This personal quest is at odds with what Georg Lukács deems one of the essential characteristics of the traditional epic, 'the fact that the theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community'. See Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Berlin: P. Cassirer, 1920), trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p.66.

<sup>48</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981; repr. 1992), p.13.

<sup>49</sup> Niblett, *The Caribbean Novel Since 1945*, p.153.

selected novels investigates how the return in Caribbean women's writing is symptomatic of a victim of trauma: if the trauma never becomes past, the victim is compelled to return to the memory and site of the experience to confront it and assign it meaning.<sup>50</sup> The past is always present; it exists as presence.

If, as Bakhtin suggests, the world of the epic tradition depicts narratives of return centred around a national heroic past, a past simultaneously absolute in its totality, and valorised through its historical distance – in the epic world-view of the past, 'everything is good'<sup>51</sup> – then the selected Caribbean women writers subvert the motif of the return journey, depicting a past that is not only present and accessible, but traumatic and painful. The epic narrative of return favours an authorial position which 'is the environment of a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendant'.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, novels considered in this study depict a female narrative voice or protagonist, feature narratives of return overwhelmingly concerned with the traumatic nature of the past, and explore how history continues to exist in and affect the present and contemporary notions of identity. Therefore, in considering literary representations of the narrative of return within contemporary diasporic novels, I explore how a new generation of Caribbean women writers use the genre of the novel to develop the precedent set by earlier poets for revisioning and subverting these classical themes.

Whilst the poetic works of Césaire and Brathwaite explore the significance of a return journey from the Caribbean to Africa, often depicting Africa as a symbolic fatherland,<sup>53</sup> the starting point for the journey back in Levy, Marshall, Danticat and Alvarez's novels, has changed; these women write back from the Caribbean diaspora in North America or England. Although like *Omeros*, *Notebook of a Return to my Native Land* and *The Arrivants*, the selected novels echo a concern with the search for roots, cultural belonging and a sense of origins, in a significant shift, they depict the journey back to the Caribbean as the point of cultural origins.<sup>54</sup> Levy, Marshall, Danticat and Alvarez are not alone in their quest. Anne M. François' recent study, *Rewriting the Return to Africa: Voices of Francophone Caribbean Women Writers* (2011) is a significant contribution to Caribbean literary studies in addressing the ways in which Guadeloupean novelists Maryse Condé, Simone Schwarz-Bart and Myriam Warner-Vieyra reconsider the trope of the return to Africa and/or the Caribbean. François highlights 'the situation of the displaced French-Caribbean population of African descent whose ontological project focuses on the quest of origins through the metaphorical/physical/spiritual return to the motherland/fatherland of

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<sup>50</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I use 'victim' to refer to a subject who has experienced or been exposed to, either directly or indirectly, a painful or traumatic event.

<sup>51</sup> Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.15.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>53</sup> Walcott notably adheres to a more Eurocentric worldview.

<sup>54</sup> Although the continuing African presence in the Caribbean region and upon Caribbean identity will be noted throughout this thesis.

Africa'.<sup>55</sup> Her research lays some important foundations for my concern with the diasporic novel as a vehicle for writing the narrative of return from North America or Britain to the Caribbean. I suggest that Caribbean writers from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds living in these English-speaking diasporas share a similar concern with the 'quest of origins through the metaphorical/physical/spiritual return to the motherland/fatherland' of their ancestral, or familial, Caribbean home.

François' work emphasises the significance of the quest of origins as a literary tradition in a passage worth quoting at length for its relevance to this thesis' undertakings:

Recent scholarship shows that migrations, displacements, and exiles are a constant component of human experience. So is, then, the return, their inverse, and complementary movement [...] to a mythical or remembered point of origin. Indeed, for the misplaced ones, *the return is a quest for a remembered past, a quest undertaken to reaffirm a lost identity due to the dispersal of slavery, migration, and erasure of history*. As a schema of human thought shaped by cultural variations, *the return can take literary, symbolic, spiritual, or physical forms*. The themes of journey, heroism, trials, and reward, which characterize the return, have been consistently explored in major founding texts of human development and spirituality, such as *The Odyssey* and the Bible. In the African context, the concept of the return takes on an additional dimension for those who endured the Middle Passage, as well as for those who attempt to represent it. For the Black Diaspora, the desire to return physically or symbolically to Africa originates in the tragic odyssey lived by their ancestors during the Atlantic slave trade (my italics).<sup>56</sup>

I argue that these principles can be similarly applied to people of Caribbean heritage living in North America or Britain, and not just those of African/Caribbean descent; all displaced peoples from the region share a traumatic history of colonialism. Although the narrative of return may take on an additionally symbolic and poignant meaning for writers of African/Caribbean ancestry, writers of mixed ancestry, like Levy, or with Latina heritage, like Alvarez, share this history of 'migrations, displacements, and exiles' which compels the 'inverse, and complementary' return to a point of origin.

In her work on postcolonial odysseys, Maeve Tynan proposes that 'much postcolonial literature, proliferate[s] with voyages, both real and imagined, by which the colonial subject rehearses the trauma of arrival, the loss of a culture of origin and explore[s] the (im)possibility of a reconnection'.<sup>57</sup> These, I suggest, are key features of the trend in writing back to the Caribbean ancestral home in contemporary diasporic novels. The novels under discussion variably represent the voyage back, or the return, either literal or metaphorical, from the diaspora to the Caribbean region, a return, or writing back, through which the subject experiences both the traumas of departure and arrival, recognises the loss of a culture of origin, and attempts a reconnection with their ancestral home.

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<sup>55</sup> François, *Rewriting the Return to Africa*, p.ix.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xv.

<sup>57</sup> Tynan, *Postcolonial Odysseys*, p.xiv.

## Framing a Theoretical Approach

Embarking upon my research into representations of the relationship between the Caribbean and its diaspora in terms of the 'narrative of return' and 'quest for home' within works by diasporic Caribbean women novelists, I acknowledge the theoretical constraints of the study. In *Touching the Body* (2007), Joan Anim-Addo highlights the 'relative critical silence with which their work has been received'.<sup>58</sup> This 'relative critical silence' poses certain difficulties when it comes to theorising Caribbean women's writing; conversations between Caribbean theorists have not had the opportunity to evolve and develop in the same way as those within less marginalised or more well established critical fields. Again, this is particularly true in terms of Caribbean women's literature, and particularly true of the women writers whose work is under consideration here.<sup>59</sup> In undertaking research into Caribbean literature from the North American and British diasporas, I foreground Anim-Addo's argument that both regions represent 'a site of critical struggle' in terms of accessible theorising of the literature.<sup>60</sup>

Where, then, can students and scholars find a relevant critical perspective and appropriate theoretical framework for a discussion of contemporary Caribbean literature written by African-heritage or Latina women living in the international diaspora? In her study on migratory subjectivities, Davies argues that 'black women's writing [...] should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing'.<sup>61</sup> Notably, Davies includes African/Caribbean women within her discussion of 'black women's writing', arguing that the diversity of influences within black women's writing, a result of the tensions between 'home' and 'diaspora', opposes the idea of generic boundaries. Davies' work is pertinent to my research; this diversity must similarly be acknowledged within Caribbean women's writing, permitting a critical approach which looks outside the region and its culture for a theoretical framework. As literature which represents and embodies what Mary Louise Pratt deems the geographic 'contact zones'<sup>62</sup> of the region, Caribbean women's writing as a genre defies easy categorisation and is simultaneously defined by its cultural, ancestral and historical hybridity. In using the term, 'hybrid', I do not intend to imply that Caribbean literature or the culture from which it arises can be simply defined as 'a thing made by combining two different elements'.<sup>63</sup> Nor do I wish to suggest that the notion of Caribbean literature or culture is

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<sup>58</sup> Joan Anim-Addo, *Touching the Body: History, Language and African-Caribbean Women's Writing* (London: Mango Publishing, 2007), p.10.

<sup>59</sup> Although Caribbean women's writing is increasingly the focus of literary study on both sides of the Atlantic since during the early 1990s a number of collections began to specifically address the overall lack of theory regarding Caribbean women's writing. See *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990); *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. by Selwyn Cudjoe (Massachusetts: Calaloux Publications, 1990); *Motherlands*, ed. by Nasta.

<sup>60</sup> Anim-Addo, *Touching the Body*, p.15.

<sup>61</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.4.

<sup>62</sup> See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>63</sup> OED

devalued or inferior in its hybridity. I use 'hybrid' throughout this thesis to refer to the multiplicity of influences which come together to shape the Caribbean experience and notions of Caribbean culture and identity both at home and in the diaspora. As Edouard Glissant argues in *Poetics of Relation* (1990), 'the explosion of cultures does not mean they are scattered or mutually diluted. It is the violent sign of their consensual, not imposed, sharing'.<sup>64</sup>

My exploration into contemporary diasporic literature as representative of hybridised Caribbean culture takes into account Glissant's notion regarding the 'sharing' of cultures within the region. I also foreground Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) which argues towards the importance of looking beyond limiting subject positions such as class, gender, location and race in exploring notions of culture. Bhabha emphasises 'the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of *cultural differences*' (my italics).<sup>65</sup> It is within this cultural exchange that Bhabha suggests modern culture is created, or indeed recreated, proposing that we look within these 'in-between spaces' of opposing cultures to understand the construction of cultural identity in the modern world.<sup>66</sup> Furthering Bhabha's proposition, I suggest that within these metaphorical spaces and gaps, Caribbean literature is born, rooted within both Caribbean and diasporic culture.

In light of Glissant and Bhabha's propositions regarding modern culture, I highlight the multiple influences upon the production of Caribbean diasporic literature, and its inherent cultural hybridity. I adopt a similarly 'hybrid' approach towards theorising the literature, encompassing European, American and Caribbean theorists working from within and across a variety of academic disciplines. Cultural research such as that by Caribbeanist Stuart Hall can be valuable in offering both a historical context for the formation of the body of literature being reviewed, and an interdisciplinary insight. An interdisciplinary and creolised approach towards theorising contemporary Caribbean transatlantic diasporic literature as I propose to offer is not only useful but necessary for an informed discussion.

In *Caribbean Transactions: West Indian Culture in Literature* (1996), Renu Juneja expresses 'reservations about importing theory [...] that [she] share[s] with many academics writing about literature from the peripheries of empires or nations'.<sup>67</sup> Whilst I understand, and, to some extent share these concerns, I argue that a resolution to the problem of theorising contemporary African/Caribbean women's literature, particularly the diasporic works under discussion here, can be found in creating a balance between imported theory and that which is emerging from within the region. Due to the creolised nature of the Caribbean, a creolised approach towards theory which addresses Caribbean

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<sup>64</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.34.

<sup>65</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>67</sup> Renu Juneja, *Caribbean Transactions: West Indian Culture in Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p.2.

concerns and perspectives but adapts western theory to create a dialogue between the two, is crucial. *Touching the Body* advocates this theoretical approach as the Caribbean novel, or 'creolised text', is a 'complex product demanding of critical reading sensitised to the social, historical and cultural mix out of which it was forged'.<sup>68</sup> Thus, Anim-Addo's work is a determining critical text in forming the foundation for my own theoretical framework; my critical approach will emulate her own 'multi-faceted approach informed by creolised cultural practice within the region'.<sup>69</sup>

In adopting this hybridised theoretical framework for my pan-Caribbean comparative study, it is also important to recognise the diversity between islands. My theoretical approach emphasises the myriad influences which have contributed to the formation of a complex Caribbean culture and identity. Although this culture varies between islands depending on the specific historical, geographical and social influences of the colonising nation, I suggest that commonalities in the region's colonial history permit, to some extent, a pan-Caribbean approach. My intention is not to suggest an overall uniformity; the novels this thesis considers illustrate the diversity of the region in terms of culture, race and language. Alvarez's novels reflect her Dominican American roots and childhood in the Hispanophone Caribbean, Danticat's work draws upon her Haitian upbringing in the Francophone Caribbean and Marshall and Levy, though writing from opposite sides of the Atlantic, are authors whose family originated in the Anglophone Caribbean, Barbados and Jamaica respectively. Thus, I embrace a creolised theoretical practice cautiously in light of the differences and similarities within the region, considering the 'quest for home' through the 'narrative of return' within a creolised theoretical framework which draws upon the work of female and male theorists outlined above.

### **The Caribbean Novel and Women's Writing**

Whilst I do not overtly locate my analysis within the framework of feminist theory, my primary focus is the gendered concerns of contemporary diasporic Caribbean women writers. In privileging the work of Caribbean women, I seek to investigate the specifically gendered concerns and meanings within the literature they produce. A brief consideration of the way in which theories of gender, sexuality and femininity interlink with the aims of this thesis is helpful in illuminating the nature of my investigation, which, privileging works by women writers, considers commonalities in gendered experiences of, and gendered responses to, exile and migration in light of traumatic Caribbean history. As Davies explains:

Feminist discourse has itself been a politics directed at changing existing power relations between men and women and in society as a whole. These are power relations which structure all areas of life: the family, education, the household, political systems, leisure, culture, economics, sexual intercourse, sexuality [...] feminism questions and seeks to transform what it is to be a woman in society, to understand

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<sup>68</sup> Anim-Addo, *Touching the Body*, p.209.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.241.

how the categories woman and feminine are defined, structured and produced [...] Feminist politics [...] is a resistance to objectification of women in society, in literature, art and culture. It is also the articulation of a critical and an intellectual practice which challenges all patriarchal assumptions and norms. It is also a politics of possible transformation.<sup>70</sup>

Levy, Marshall, Alvarez and Danticat's novels can be understood as a performance of the 'feminist discourse' which Davies outlines here. The works explored in this thesis inevitably confront 'power relations which structure all areas of life' as they variably attempt to 'return' to the source of an historical trauma, the product of a patriarchal colonial system, which dominates contemporary social attitudes towards culture, community and family. Marshall's narrative of Avey's recovery of selfhood via her rediscovery of her ancestral past seeks to renegotiate what it is to be a middle class black women in late twentieth-century American society. Levy's depiction of Faith's transformative 'return' to the ancestral Caribbean homeland similarly enables her to comprehend her diasporic position as a black British woman in 1980s England. In Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie Caco revisits the space at the heart of her mother and ancestors' traumatic experiences of violence and subjugation - the Haitian cane field - as part of a transformative journey which liberates her from a traumatic history in which black women were enslaved, commodified, and objectified. Alvarez's *García Girls* seeks to expose the tensions between American and Dominican categories of woman and feminine in order to articulate a new social and cultural role for Dominican American women which challenges and transforms what it is to be a woman whose diasporic identity straddles cultural and geographical borders. Through her fictionalisation of the revolutionary Mirabal sisters, Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* reconfigures the narrative of the underground resistance movement, writing women into the foreground of a political movement which played a crucial role in overturning General Trujillo's oppressive, patriarchal dictatorship. Danticat similarly privileges women's narratives in her re-telling of the Haitian massacre, *The Farming of Bones*, seeking to transform the notion of woman as victim by giving voice and narrative power to a female survivor.

Reading these texts comparatively reveals the diverse ways in which diasporic Caribbean women writers are seeking to transform the representation of Caribbean women in literature, utilising the contemporary diasporic novel as a means through which to depict the complexity and diversity of Caribbean women's experience, thus resisting the 'objectification of women in society, in literature, art and culture'. A comparative study of this nature demonstrates the ways in which 'feminist discourse' functions within contemporary Caribbean women's writing. However, whilst Davies champions the notion of 'feminist discourse' as a 'politics of possible transformation', she is acutely aware of the issues within utilising a hegemonic 'feminist discourse' to understand the experiences of all women,

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<sup>70</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, pp.28-29.

recognising that 'within current postmodern understandings, metanarratives of feminism have to be challenged'.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, she argues that 'questions of Black female subjectivity bring a more complex and heightened awareness to all theoretic and feminist concerns' in that 'if we take any feminist issue and run it up the scale to its most radical possibility, its most clarifying illustration will be the experience of Black women'.<sup>72</sup> She asks: 'Where are the women of colour in decision-making [...] Who speaks for us in the media? When are we seen as credible speakers? In all situations of state power globally, we are generally absent'.<sup>73</sup> If, as Davies, claims, these are some of the questions which Black women's writing addresses, I propose that Caribbean women's writing across racial boundaries addresses similar questions regarding the distribution of narrative power in light of the marginalised experiences of women from postcolonial societies living in the international diaspora. Literature is crucial in this process of representation because 'affective responses and creative articulations speak in ways the statistics cannot'.<sup>74</sup>

A hegemonic understanding of the Caribbean writers under discussion in my own project as 'Black' is inadequate to acknowledge the racial diversity of these women writers. However, race, or an absence of race, is fundamental to an understanding of the complexities of their work. Thus, whilst I acknowledge the feminist nature of my thesis due to its gendered concerns, theories of gender, sexuality and femininity do not play a central role in my analysis. My pan-Caribbean approach seeks, instead, to privilege other markers of identity and the ways in which Caribbean women locate themselves within diasporic spaces in terms of the race, language, culture, and history. I shift the focus on women's writing to address the ways in which the work of Caribbean women writers engages with the complexities of diasporic identity across a range of factors and influences. My endeavour to explore literary representations of 'writing back' and the nature of the discourse of return within diasporic Caribbean women's writing poses certain questions: why the Caribbean woman writer? Why the diasporic novel? A consideration of earlier studies into the Caribbean novel, their achievements and limitations, validates the need for and relevance of the specific focus of my pan-Caribbean approach towards theorising the literary trope of the 'return' in novels by diasporic Caribbean women writers.

In the pioneering first comprehensive study of the Caribbean novel, *The West Indian Novel and its Background* (1970), Kenneth Ramchand underscores the significance of the West Indian novel as it appeared in the early twentieth century, in paving the way for novelists in later years. Ramchand's account, which draws attention to the novel's early emphasis on 'an interest in the previously neglected

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.30.

person<sup>75</sup> and developing involvement 'in the quest for national and personal identity'<sup>76</sup> in the region, focuses overwhelmingly on the West Indian novel as a masculine endeavour.<sup>77</sup> His discussion predates the boom in Caribbean women's writing which took place in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the evolution of the female-authored West Indian novel.

David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe's *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature* (1988) develops Ramchand's ground-breaking work on Caribbean writing as an expression of black experience and identity formation, or production, amongst the backdrop of twentieth-century political and social upheaval in the region. Expanding the critical study to address poetry and drama in comparison with the work of Caribbean novelists, Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe argue that West Indian literature is a product of specific historical and contemporary experiences: 'the common experience of colonisation, displacement, slavery, indenture, emancipation and nationalism has shaped most West Indian environments'.<sup>78</sup> Like Ramchand, they highlight a number of issues central to West Indian writing, introducing alongside themes of anti-imperialism, nationalism and race, the treatment of women and female characters. Whilst opening the discussion to women and Caribbean writing, this study emphasises traditional male representations of female experience in the Caribbean, focusing on the matriarchal figure as an extension of the slave and plantation system and the Caribbean woman as a victim of rural poverty.<sup>79</sup> Accounting for the brevity of this discussion, Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe argue that 'on the whole the voice of the contemporary West Indian woman is yet to be established in the literature of the region'.<sup>80</sup>

Yet by the time Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe's *Reader* appeared in 1988, Caribbean women were writing and publishing on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>81</sup> A handful of critical works which more specifically address the increase in publication of literature by Caribbean women writers followed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe's collection, *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference* (1990) reflects the burgeoning interest in Caribbean women's writing from within the academy. A diverse and expansive collection of essays, Cudjoe presents the edition which grew out of the 1988 conference at Wellesley College in Massachusetts as 'the founding event of Caribbean women's writing,

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<sup>75</sup> Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and its Background* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970; repr. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983), p.4.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.

<sup>77</sup> With the exception of white Dominican writers Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey. See Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel*, pp.223-236.

<sup>78</sup> Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe, *A Reader's Guide*, p.13.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.43-45.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45.

<sup>81</sup> See, for example, the early work of Paule Marshall, Maryse Condé, Joan Riley, Jamaica Kincaid, Michelle Cliff, Nourbese Philip, Dionne Brand, Marie Chauvet, Merle Hodge, Grace Nichols, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Olive Senior, Erna Brodber.

for though works have been written by Caribbean women writers, these writers have never come together as a group to talk about their writings'.<sup>82</sup> The collection's lack of focus is testament to its aims:

The diversity and timeliness of these essays represent particular strengths of this volume and provide a basis upon which we can begin to understand the new configuration of Caribbean literature [...] it enlarges the boundaries of Caribbean literary discourse and thus outlines another of the many histories of America's literary imagination.<sup>83</sup>

Another notable study appearing in the same year, Elaine Savory Fido and Carole Boyce Davies' *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990), similarly acknowledged an 'absence of critical discussion of existing works by Caribbean women writers, save perhaps Jean Rhys'<sup>84</sup> and, recognising that 'in Ramchand's study [...] the primary voice is the male's',<sup>85</sup> set out to redress this balance. Davies and Fido's argument that the concept of historical voicelessness and invisibility of the Caribbean woman writer, or her marginalisation, underlies her need to find a form, or mode of expression, is central to their discussion of Caribbean women's literature.<sup>86</sup> In focusing on Caribbean women's literature, primarily as it began to develop from the late 1970s onwards, as a reappropriation of narrative voice 'from the third person male omniscient narrator to the first person feminine',<sup>87</sup> Davies and Fido's collection of essays views the new Caribbean woman's text as 'a locus for the reinscription of the woman's story in history'.<sup>88</sup> Positioning itself as 'the first major text on Caribbean women and literature', *Out of the Kumbla* recognised the need for a discussion of Caribbean women's literature in order to extend an understanding of Caribbean issues relating to women and society.<sup>89</sup> Yet Davies and Fido acknowledge that their collection is merely the beginning, an attempt to raise critical questions and instigate intellectual discussion when 'we are still at the very beginning of a literary tradition, one which integrates the work of Caribbean women of all races and cultures but which respects their particularities of difference as well'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Cudjoe, 'Introduction' in Cudjoe, p.5.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p.48.

<sup>84</sup> Davies and Fido, 'Introduction' in *Out of the Kumbla*, ed. by Davies and Fido, pp.1-22 (p.1).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p.2.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp.1-4. For historical voicelessness and invisibility of Caribbean women writers and theorists see also Anim-Addo, 'Introduction' in *Touching the Body*.

<sup>87</sup> Davies and Fido, 'Introduction' in Davies and Fido, p.5.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p.6. Marshall echoes this concern with the representation of women in Caribbean literature: 'what I discovered when I came into literature is that women were not ever central to the story. So when I started writing, it was with a sense of wanting to move women to centre stage'. See Joyce Pettis and Paule Marshall, 'A MELUS Interview: Paule Marshall', *MELUS*, 17, 4, (1991-1992), 117-129 (p.122). Danticat also comments that women from ethnic minorities are peripheral in the western diaspora: 'it is often hard to tell whether there are real, living and breathing women in conflict-stricken places like Haiti [...] The women's stories never manage to make the front page. However they do exist'. See Danticat, 'We are Ugly But We are Here', *The Caribbean Writer*, 10 (1996) available at: <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:http://www2.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/literature/danticat-ugly.htm> [accessed 20/02/2013].

<sup>89</sup> Davies and Fido, 'Introduction' in Davies and Fido, pp.16-17.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p.16.

By the time Mary Condé and Thorunn Lonsdale's *Caribbean Women Writers: Fiction in English* (1999) was published, Caribbean women's writing had grown to include publications by women writing across the international diaspora. Primary examples of the diversity of writers within this burgeoning literary tradition are those whose work this thesis discusses: Paule Marshall, whose first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* was published in 1959; Julia Alvarez, who published *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* in 1991; Andrea Levy and Edwidge Danticat, their debut novels, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* respectively, both appearing in print in 1994. Although Condé and Lonsdale's collection includes a discussion of Marshall's novels, no mention is made of more recently published works by Danticat or Alvarez, and Levy's early novels, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) and *Never far From Nowhere* (1996) are mentioned in passing as recent examples of the strong tradition of social realism in Caribbean women's writing.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, Condé and Lonsdale's study is significant, discussing a varied selection of works by women writing from the Anglophone Caribbean region and throughout its diaspora. In a noteworthy development from previous studies, the focus shifts towards an analysis of new issues confronting Caribbean women in the face of twentieth-century migration and relocation. Whilst recognising that 'the continuing issue of the past is pervasive in Caribbean women's fiction',<sup>92</sup> Condé and Lonsdale begin to draw attention to the variety of issues emerging within women's writing: nostalgia for childhood, the use of colloquial voice and idiom, the role of culture and race in constructing a sense of Caribbean identity, and, significantly, notions of home and belonging which stem from the impact of twentieth-century migration upon the construction of a new understanding of Caribbean identity in the international diaspora. Condé highlights the cultural impact of these recent migratory movements on literature produced in the 1980s and 1990s:

Moving from the Caribbean has not only created a collective Caribbean identity, as it did for many immigrants to Britain, and weakened the sense of Caribbean identity, as it has for many black people now living in Canada and the U.S., who have ranged themselves along colour lines, but it has created a 'new place' in literature.<sup>93</sup>

Condé and Lonsdale's collection was followed by M. Keith Booker and Dubravka Juraga's *The Caribbean Novel in English: An Introduction* (2001), a survey which, although a thorough account of the development of the Caribbean novel from the early twentieth century to the 1990s, in many ways reiterates the analyses of works considered in earlier publications like that of Ramchand, Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe. Emphasising the postcolonial nature of the Caribbean novel in the late twentieth century, Booker and Juraga's account does little to advance the discussion of contemporary Caribbean women's fiction. Acknowledging that 'the 1980s saw a veritable explosion in production by a new

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<sup>91</sup> Condé, 'Introduction' in *Caribbean Women Writers*, ed. by Condé and Lonsdale, pp.1-7 (p.4).

<sup>92</sup> Condé, 'Introduction' in Condé and Lonsdale, p.3.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

generation of highly skilled, professional Caribbean women novelists',<sup>94</sup> the collection excludes a discussion of the development of the Caribbean women's novel from that 'explosion in production' in the 1980s to the time of publication in 2001 and does not address the pressing issue of women's writing and migration, as highlighted by Condé and Lonsdale. Although in Booker and Juraga's account Danticat is briefly mentioned for 'introduc[ing] a new dimension to the literary relationship between the United States and the Caribbean',<sup>95</sup> no detailed analysis of her work is included.

Works which do attempt to develop and move the discussion of Caribbean women writers towards a new critical approach include Davies' aforementioned *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) and Isabel Hoving's *In Praise of New Travellers: Reading Caribbean Migrant Women's Writing* (2001). Davies' study is original in its attempts to address the gendered concerns of black women writing across a transnational diaspora. In bringing together strands of postcolonial and feminist theory her creolised critical approach explores literary representations of migratory black female subjectivity. Davies argues that 'the cross-cultural or comparative approach to Black women writers is an important way of advancing our understandings of Black women's writing'.<sup>96</sup> This thesis takes account of Davies's argument towards the importance of cross-cultural and comparative studies as central to my own discussion of Caribbean women's writing, including women writers of mixed African, European and Latina heritage. I draw upon Davies' work for its focus on the ways in which migration and mobility influence Black women's subjectivity and the issue of locating the Black female voice within literature. Yet, whilst Davies explores a number of women writers of African heritage, her analysis rests on the categorisation of women writers as 'Black', encompassing the work of African-American and African/Caribbean writers. My project is distinct in its specific interest in Caribbean women novelists and subsequent argument that the migratory and diasporic experiences of Black women writers with ancestral roots in the Caribbean are unique from those of Black writers whose New World experiences are rooted in the United States. It is my contention that unlike African-American women, African/Caribbean women writing in the U.S. retain a dual 'outsider' status, displaced from both an African and a Caribbean homeland. Their complex identities are framed and shaped by experiences of living in and negotiating an identity between the old Caribbean diaspora and the new American diaspora.<sup>97</sup>

Hoving's research expands upon Davies' emerging ideas about Black women's writing from the diaspora. Hoving appropriately highlights how changes in women's experience and concerns in the 1980s and 1990s are reflected in the literature these writers produce, addressing Caribbean migrant

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<sup>94</sup> Booker and Juraga, *The Caribbean Novel in English*, p.17.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22.

<sup>96</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.33.

<sup>97</sup> See Introduction, p.13 for Stuart Hall's concept of 'new diasporas'.

women's writing as uniquely informed by female experiences of migration, exile and displacement. In arguing that 'these women's importance for Caribbean women's writing is independent from their actual presence in the Caribbean',<sup>98</sup> Hoving brings migrant women's writing to the fore of critical and cultural debates surrounding Caribbean women's cultural production and identity in the late twentieth century: 'black and migrant women's rhetorics of the journey are closely related to a politics of identity'.<sup>99</sup> Yet, like Condé and Lonsdale, Hoving's work favours an analysis of more established women writers working in the 1980s and early 1990s such as Beryl Gilroy, Merle Collins, Grace Nichols, Jamaica Kincaid, Michelle Cliff and Nourbese Philip. Acknowledging the impact which migration continues to have upon women writers and their work, however, the ambitions of Hoving's project somewhat foreshadow my own on the more recent and less widely critiqued novels of Paule Marshall, Andrea Levy, Edwidge Danticat and Julia Alvarez.<sup>100</sup> Hoving's concern with Caribbean women's writing and the way in which migratory movements effected the creation of a new kind of Caribbean woman writer whose migratory status is reflected in the preoccupations of her work, in many ways lays the groundwork for my own study. An important difference is that whereas Hoving is concerned with issues of voice, silence and representation in relation to Caribbean migrant women's writing, my research addresses the way in which a specific selection of novels written by women from the Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone Caribbean, now living and working in the diaspora, retain a connection through literature with the ancestral home. The selected authors represent the cultural, linguistic and racial diversity of the region; a juxtaposition of their work serves to expose commonalities in Caribbean diasporic experience across cultural, linguistic and racial differences.

Recent twenty-first century publications such as Alison Donnell's *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (2006) and Niblett's aforementioned *The Caribbean Novel Since 1945: Cultural Practice, Form and the Nation-State* (2012), appear to have turned away from this focus on women's writing from the diaspora, making the need for my own project more pertinent. Whilst Donnell covers a range of literature by both male and female writers from the Anglophone Caribbean, neither Anglophone writers addressed in this thesis, Marshall and Levy, feature within her work. Similarly, the scope of Donnell's project does not extend to a comparative analysis of more recent literature written in English from across the diaspora, including that by women writers like Danticat and Alvarez. In its pan-Caribbean approach and specific focus on a comparison of works by women writers of diverse racial, cultural and linguistic heritage, now writing from across the English

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<sup>98</sup> Isabel Hoving, *In Praise of New Travellers: Reading Caribbean Migrant Women's Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.4.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>100</sup> Progress has been made with the recent publication of *Edwidge Danticat: A Reader's Guide*, ed. by Martin Munro (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010) and a couple of notable studies into the work of Julia Alvarez: Johnson, *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map* and Silvio Sirias, *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001).

speaking diasporas of North America and Britain, my research attempts to form a distinct contribution to the field of Caribbean literary studies. Building upon the work of earlier studies into migratory and diasporic women's writing, I seek to develop a nuanced insight into the complex interplay of race, language, culture, and colonial history as markers of identity for diasporic Caribbean women, and the role played by these factors in influencing and necessitating the narrative of return.

Niblett's work, whilst providing an original and comprehensive insight into the relationship between literary form and the projection of a new understanding of the nation-state as it developed through the latter half of the twentieth century in the Caribbean, again pays little attention to the Caribbean woman's novel. Privileging the political, his study deals with representations of national concerns within contemporary cultural practices and does not address the contribution of the woman writer to the evolution of the Caribbean novel since 1945. Although I do not intend to dismiss the importance of political and anticolonial discourses in the Caribbean novel, my exploration into the diasporic narrative of return as a literary trope in the contemporary Caribbean novel highlights both writer and protagonist's quest for an originary home not as a search for national identity, but for a genealogical background, a narrative which informs the transitory status of the female Caribbean migrant in the late twentieth century. Focusing on historical knowledge as the locale of an informed cultural identity, I privilege the Caribbean woman's novel as a space in which this quest for belonging is personal, a rejection of notions of nation-hood in favour of subscribing to a new understanding of a hybridised diasporic Caribbean cultural identity. However, the personal nature of the return has been made political by the collective diasporic preoccupation with narrating back to a sense of place which is imbued with a shared historical consciousness. Thus, the collective focus upon individual narratives of return to spaces emblematic of a shared colonial history enables these women writers to shape a political consciousness and sense of place which is more than personal and autobiographical.

Davies proposes that the concept of a 'nation' is a particularly male formulation, suggesting that 'this may explain why nationalism thus far seems to exist primarily as a male activity'.<sup>101</sup> Niblett's focus on the male-authored Caribbean novel supports the idea that the concern with the nation-state is traditionally masculine. In their use of the novel, the writers discussed in this thesis address the concerns of the Caribbean woman as the bearer of culture and tradition. Choosing the novel as the vehicle through which to explore diasporic concerns regarding home, cultural identity, ancestral origins and the recovery of traumatic history, these women challenge male domination of the form in the region, professionalising their traditional role as storytellers within Caribbean culture. As Brenda F. Berrian writes in 'Claiming an Identity: Caribbean Women Writers in English' (1994):

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<sup>101</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.12.

Several English-speaking Caribbean women writers stress the importance of knowing one's history. The interrelationship leads to the formation of female identity. All write about mothers as vehicles of culture and history.<sup>102</sup>

Through storytelling, Caribbean women pass on knowledge of history and ancestry, voice silenced and invisible histories, and discover, or recover, the Caribbean subjectivity and identity which these traumatic histories inform. These very specific concerns are reflected in the novels of Marshall, Levy, Danticat and Alvarez. Of female Caribbean American writers of African descent, Davies suggests, 'because they live in the United States of America, [they] did not reproduce the anti-(European) colonial text of the earlier generation of mostly male writers'.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps also because they write from the diaspora, geographically displaced from the Caribbean, nationalist and anticolonial discourses are not a central concern of the novels discussed in this thesis.

### **Theoretical Connections: Cultural Identity and Caribbean Women's Writing**

My investigation into how and why the selected authors 'write back' through narratives of return to the Caribbean attempts to ascertain the relationship between the formation or articulation of a diasporic cultural subjectivity and identity informed by historical and ancestral trauma, and the sense of belonging which can be found within a 'home' space. Considering the complexity of African/Caribbean cultural identity, how significant is the rediscovery or recovery of knowledge of the Caribbean in informing the cultural identity of the characters? To explore this central question I read Marshall, Levy, Danticat and Alvarez within the creolised theoretical framework outlined above.<sup>104</sup> I explore how Hall's thinking regarding cultural identity as a constantly evolving process can be reconciled with the journeys of cultural discovery depicted within each novel.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, I attempt to tease out an understanding of the personal and cultural identities represented in the novels in light of Jan Carew's argument in 'The Caribbean Writer and Exile' (1978) that Caribbean people are subjected to successive waves of cultural alienation and fragmentation from birth.<sup>106</sup> Carew's claim prompts a consideration of the cultural fragments that remain, or survive, in the Caribbean diaspora today, the form which these fragments take, and the ways in which they emerge within contemporary literature.

My approach takes account of Chamberlain, Davies and Hoving's work on Caribbean migration to address how the migratory history of the region impacts upon the diaspora, and, subsequently, contemporary diasporic writers and literary representations of their complex history and identity. Migratory movements and diasporic communities continue to bring together new cultural influences,

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<sup>102</sup> Brenda F. Berrian, 'Claiming an Identity: Caribbean Women writers in English', *Journal of Black Studies*, 25, 2 (Dec, 1994), 200-216 (p.200).

<sup>103</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.115.

<sup>104</sup> See Introduction, pp.19-21.

<sup>105</sup> See Hall in Rutherford, pp.222-237.

<sup>106</sup> Jan Carew, 'The Caribbean Writer and Exile', *Journal of Black Studies*, 8, 4 (June 1978), 453-475.

redefining what it means to be a person of black or African/Caribbean origins. Those within the African diaspora share the history of their ancestors' forced migration to the Americas. In her work on the migratory subjectivity of black women, Davies argues that a sense of movement and displacement are fundamental features of the Caribbean psyche:

Migration and the fluidity which it suggests or the displacement and uprootedness which is often its result, is intrinsic to New World experience, fundamental to the meaning of the (African) diaspora.<sup>107</sup>

Davies' proposition highlights the centrality of migration in the Caribbean experience. Davies is not the first scholar to recognise the importance of the tradition of migration for Caribbean people and its impact upon contemporary society and cultural production, both in the Caribbean and elsewhere.<sup>108</sup> Chamberlain establishes the concept of a 'migration ideology', a culture of migration so ingrained that relocation and estranged families are normalised. Chamberlain's work acknowledges migration as an historical feature of the Caribbean, linking it from the outset with global economics and capitalism: 'trade, labour and migration have stalked hand in hand since at least the sixteenth century'.<sup>109</sup>

Taking into account the work of these scholars, I foreground the selected novels' representations of the Caribbean experience as diasporic and migratory. My discussion investigates what literary representations of the migrant experience suggest about the production of cultural identity in the diaspora, exploring how the novels depict diasporic life and the ongoing process of migration in relation to constructions of African/Caribbean cultural identity. In exploring the dislocation and displacement inherent in the diasporic condition, I consider the notion of 'belonging' and 'unbelonging' for diasporic people and investigate whether diasporic discontent and prevailing colonial legacies of racism and inequality play a role in necessitating the protagonists' rejection of the diaspora as a space of cultural belonging and identification in favour of the ancestral homeland. To explore these issues, I consider the novels' presentations of racism in the diaspora and twentieth-century ideas regarding race and knowledge within the Caribbean region and the international diaspora. I investigate how characters come to know, or understand, their sense of self, their race and their cultural identity and heritage, both in the diaspora and through narratives of return to the Caribbean home.

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<sup>107</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.128.

<sup>108</sup> See also Hoving, *In Praise of New Travellers* and Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return*. Another useful sociological/anthropological study into twentieth-century Caribbean migratory movements and their impacts upon personal identity and belonging within diasporic communities is *Caribbean Narratives of Belonging: Fields of Relations, Sites of Identity*, ed. by Jean Besson and Karen Fog Olwig (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 2005).

<sup>109</sup> Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return*, p.28. Colin Brock, editor of the earlier work, *The Caribbean in Europe* (1986) also supports Chamberlain and Davies' view of Caribbean migration, arguing that 'migration within the Caribbean basin is of long-standing and until relatively recent restrictions, almost customary'. See Brock, 'The West Indian Dimension of Western Europe' in *The Caribbean in Europe: Aspects of the West Indian Experience in Britain, France and the Netherlands*, ed. by Colin Brock (London: Frank Cass, 1986), pp.3-14 (p.4).

Discussing the ‘narrative of return’ as the literary representation of the search for a space in which the displaced, diasporic African/Caribbean protagonist feels at home, I recognise Hall’s proposition that the diasporas from which the selected authors write are themselves a collection of diasporic communities.<sup>110</sup> The hybrid cultural identities of these authors and their protagonists are rooted in a Caribbean cultural identity which is itself hybridised and diasporic. Despite this multiplicity of influences, Hall argues that we can think of cultural identity in terms of a single shared culture:

Our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning [...] this ‘oneness’ [...] is the truth, the essence, of ‘Caribbeanness’, of the black experience.<sup>111</sup>

In ‘New Ethnicities’, included in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (1996), Hall formulates that ‘we all speak for a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture’.<sup>112</sup> He proposes that the particular experience, the essence of the ‘oneness’ which underlies a shared black cultural identity is essentially diasporic, highlighting the importance of an ‘awareness of the black experience as a *diaspora* experience’.<sup>113</sup>

Hall’s argument presents a departure point for my investigation into how fictional works represent the cultural identity of people of African/Caribbean ancestry living in the international diaspora. At the same time, an understanding of the heterogeneity and complexity of Caribbean cultural identity (as outlined by Hall) is important to my discussion of Marshall, Levy, Danticat and Alvarez’s works as representative of the cultural diversity of a region with a shared diasporic history. In its hybridity, Caribbean cultural identity takes on a complex meaning. It is not simply the sharing, meeting, or merging of two homogenous cultures – the European and the African – but, to borrow Glissant’s phrase, ‘a clash of cultures’ including indigenous Arawaks and Caribs, different African influences, various European colonisers, and, later, indentured Asian workers.<sup>114</sup> Glissant writes about Caribbean hybridity as a form of cultural synthesis, suggesting ‘the tendency towards synthesis can only be an advantage, in a world destined to synthesis and the “contact of civilizations”’.<sup>115</sup> Referring to Caribbean ‘hybridity’ throughout this thesis, I embrace Glissant’s understanding of the ‘hybrid’ nature of Caribbean culture as recognition of its synthesis of multiple diverse cultural influences. For Glissant, this cultural synthesis has brought about ‘*another reality*’ in that ‘synthesis is not a process of

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<sup>110</sup> Chen, ‘The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual: An Interview with Stuart Hall’, in Morley and Chen, p.501. See also Introduction, p.13.

<sup>111</sup> Hall in Rutherford, p.223.

<sup>112</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘New Ethnicities’, in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.441-449 (p.447).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p.447.

<sup>114</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.74.

<sup>115</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by Michael J. Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989; repr. 1999), p.6.

bastardization [...] but a productive authority through which each element is enriched'.<sup>116</sup> Just as Bhabha rejects traditional subject positions in the framing of cultural identity for an approach which favours difference and the renegotiation of identity in the gaps between cultures, so Glissant 'abandon[s] the idea of fixed being' in light of the 'mingling of experiences' and 'metamorphosis' which takes place on Caribbean soil.<sup>117</sup>

Whether we refer to Caribbean cultural identity as a 'hybrid' construct, built in the gaps between cultures, as Bhabha formulates, or the product of an enriching cultural synthesis, as Glissant proposes, it is essentially mixed.<sup>118</sup> Recognising that a uniquely Caribbean identity evolved through the creolisation of multiple opposing cultures on Caribbean soil is central to understanding the contemporary diasporic quest for cultural origins through narratives of return. Whilst my analysis allows limited scope for an exploration into the much contested definition of the process of creolisation, it is vital to recognise that the Caribbean islands are the site of many diverse cultures.<sup>119</sup> This is not to assume a generic pan-Caribbean identity as each territory is the product of a particular cultural mix, the result of specific historical experiences, those of colonisation and slavery and the legacies of inequality and cultural hybridity which centuries of migration and colonial oppression left behind. My research highlights the importance of Caribbean history and the inherited historical traumatic experiences of rupture, dislocation and oppression, and considers how this traumatic history necessitates the writer and protagonists' return to the site of the traumatic colonial experience, the Caribbean. I investigate how this return through literature leads to the recovery or (re)discovery of a hybridised and historically informed culture and identity. Thus, I consider how the return represents the victim of trauma's inability to escape revisiting the traumatic experience.

This discussion cannot ignore the way in which the diasporic novel's narrative of return represents a return to the past, to ancestral history, in order to understand the construction of diasporic cultural identity in the present. The presence of historical events and experiences in informing Caribbean culture and identity cannot be understated. In exploring how the return to the Caribbean functions as a return to the site of ancestral traumatic experience, I further examine how the return to cultural and ancestral origins depicted within the work of Marshall, Levy, Danticat and Alvarez simultaneously constitutes a return to history.<sup>120</sup> I propose that, in representing the Caribbean home

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>117</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.14.

<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, I am wary of Glissant's approach which emphasises only the positive aspects of cultural creolisation and in my discussion of the diasporic discontent represented within the selected author's novels I acknowledge both the benefits and difficulties of a cultural identity which, occupying the space in-between defies categorisation.

<sup>119</sup> See *The Creolization Reader*, ed. by Cohen and Toninato.

<sup>120</sup> Chapter Four of this thesis will consider how novels of historical fiction can be considered a return in that they enact a writing back process which re-envision and attempts to rewrite historical events from a previously undocumented perspective. Caroline Rody's *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (Oxford:

space which marked the beginning of the colonial experience on New World soil, the islands stand within Caribbean cultural and collective memory and writing as the site of trauma. The significance of this within the literature lies in the writing of the metaphor of return. Thus, I argue towards the physical return journey as a metaphor for the quest for cultural and ancestral knowledge which permits a full understanding of a complex and historically traumatised African/Caribbean self. I further propose that the narrative of return to a space emblematic of historical, contemporary, collective and individual traumas functions as a 'working through' of and confrontation with past trauma and its continuing effects, to initiate a healing process which enables a vision of a less painful, violent and traumatic Caribbean future. My argument emphasises the nature of Caribbean cultural identity as hybrid, emerging from the gaps between cultures, proposing that the return to the region is particularly significant because the islands are a physical manifestation of Bhabha's metaphorical gap between cultures.<sup>121</sup> I posit Caribbean cultural identity as the product of an enriching cultural synthesis which is inherently mixed, and propose that the fundamental nature of the black experience as a shared 'diaspora' experience' permits comparisons to be drawn, and connections made, between representations of the return journey within fiction written from across the Caribbean region and its diasporas.<sup>122</sup> My analysis suggests that the narrative structure of the novels, which often traverse past and present, Caribbean and diaspora, reiterates the connection between the Americas, Britain, and Africa: the histories of the regions and their people are revealed to be intricately interwoven.

Because of the complex nature of diasporic black, or African/Caribbean cultural identity as migratory, fluid and subject to constant change and evolution, the origins of this identity cannot be traced to one specific geographical location. In their international and temporal scope, the selected novels represent both the cultural connections and fragmentations inherent within Caribbean diasporic identity, revealing the fragmentation of cultural identity affected by colonisation and slavery. Indeed, the fiction of the selected authors presents the three cultural presences – *Présence Africaine*, *Présence Européenne* and *Présence Américain* – which Hall suggests are crucial elements of Caribbean identity.<sup>123</sup> I contend that the Caribbean embodies the metaphorical cultural 'in-between' space in that it exemplifies, both literally and figuratively, the home of modern culture, a site of global cultural contact, subsequent creolisation and cultural evolution. Acknowledging the Caribbean as the space within which this cultural experiment effected by colonialism and migration took place, I explore how a literary depiction of a physical return journey to the Caribbean region represents a metaphorical journey into African/Caribbean cultural heritage and a traumatic history of rupture, colonialism and

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Oxford University Press, 2001) deals in depth with the notion of historical fiction by Black women writers as an imaginative return to a traumatic ancestral past.

<sup>121</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

<sup>122</sup> Hall in Morley and Chen, p.447.

<sup>123</sup> Hall in Rutherford.

enslavement. In doing so, I investigate whether a complex African/Caribbean, or black diasporic cultural identity, can be reclaimed through a literary narrative of return.

### Theoretical Connections: Culture, History and the Past as Presence

The narrative of return to the Caribbean to rediscover, reclaim or remember a lost history, culture or identity is central to this thesis. However, the concept of recovering the Caribbean past and its inherent traumas in order to enable healing and transcendence of past traumas, is problematic because so much remains undocumented. My discussion will refer to two different kinds of history: remembered history and the history of the more distant past. This distinction is important with regards to my study of novels which ‘return’ to the region and its traumatic history because one of the crucial ways in which that often undocumented history of the more distant past can be salvaged is through literature.<sup>124</sup> As my research explores how writing back to the region can act as a means by which diasporic writers and their characters salvage historical knowledge in an effort to inform their sense of self, it is important to recognise this duality and consider how different kinds of history are created. So much of the Caribbean past remains unaccounted for that it cannot be reconstructed in the same way as that which I refer to as remembered history. By this, I mean that which exists in living memory. Living memory can be used to piece together a collective history for any given current generation; ancestral history – memories of which have died along with previous generations – is more complex to recover. Within a Caribbean context the role of living memory within remembered history is paramount because much of the region’s cultural tradition is based on an oral tradition; history is communicated and passed on through generations within storytelling, folk tales and songs.<sup>125</sup>

The relationship between history and memory has been the subject of various investigations.<sup>126</sup> A creolised version of history which recognises the colonial bias in official history whilst also considering memories of both the living and the dead can help shape a fresh historical perspective regarding the African/Caribbean traumatic past. Kerwin Lee Klein’s ‘On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse’ (2000) argues that ‘memory’ is ‘the word most commonly paired with history’.<sup>127</sup> Where Klein argues that ‘instead of just saying “history” [...] we may substitute “public memory” or “collective

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<sup>124</sup> Chapter Four’s analysis of two novels of historical fiction as ‘narratives of return’ will explicitly address how literature can be used to recover a largely undocumented or unrecorded traumatic history.

<sup>125</sup> The diasporic literature I am exploring reflects this tradition. In Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: Plume, 1983), Avey Johnson recalls the stories recounted to her by her Great Aunt, who in turn is retelling the stories passed down to her from her Gran, about their African ancestors’ arrival as slaves in the New World, pp.37-39.

<sup>126</sup> For example, *Centre of Remembrance: Memory and Caribbean Women’s Literature*, ed. by Joan Anim-Addo (London: Mango Publishing, 2002); Kerwin Lee Klein ‘On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse’, *Representations*, 69 (Winter 2000), 127-150; Wulf Kansteiner ‘Finding Meaning in Memory’, *History and Theory*, 41, 2 (May 2002), 179-197; Aleida Assmann, ‘History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony’, *Poetics Today*, 27, 2 (Summer 2006), 261-273; Jeffrey Andrew Barash, ‘The Sources of Memory’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 58, 4 (October 1997), 707-717.

<sup>127</sup> Klein, ‘On the Emergence of Memory’, pp.128-9.

memory”’,<sup>128</sup> Wulf Kansteiner is adamant that ‘collective memory is not history, though it is sometimes made from similar material’.<sup>129</sup> Kansteiner’s distinction is important; to make ‘history’ and ‘memory’ interchangeable terms overlooks the distinction between different kinds of memory. While both critics signal that this is contested theory, Kansteiner is in danger of ignoring the significance of collective memory altogether – it is an important tool in the reconstruction of a lost history, particularly in a Caribbean context. The significance of collective memory is crucial to this thesis; the reconstruction of lost history and cultural identity is central to my analysis of the narrative of return as the search for a space of cultural belonging and identification. If a Caribbean home can be found within cultural identification, or knowledge of ancestral history, then the role of the collective and collective memory is paramount in shaping and informing this home space.

Discussing the reliability of memory as historical testimony, Aleida Assmann writes, ‘memories are important [...] because they can help bridge the gap between the abstract academic account, on the one hand, and the intensely painful and fragmented personal experience, on the other’.<sup>130</sup> She continues, ‘history has received a potent rival or partner in its claim to access, reconstruct, and represent the past, namely memory’.<sup>131</sup> Collective memory is fundamental within Caribbean culture: historical and cultural knowledge are transmitted orally. Collective memory is therefore influential in informing diasporic writers’ perceptions of the Caribbean as home. As Anim-Addo notes, ‘the significant role of collective memory within creolised culture is reflected in the literature’.<sup>132</sup> Susan Crane’s ‘Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory’ (1997) highlights the importance of collective memory as a tool for historical recovery, arguing that ‘collective memory’ operates ‘simultaneously and competitively with history’.<sup>133</sup> Collective memory plays a crucial role in shaping an awareness of Caribbean history and culture within diasporic communities. It is therefore important for my analysis of the recovery and rediscovery of an historically informed cultural identity in Levy, Marshall, Danticat and Alvarez’s work to consider how, and by whom, this history is constructed.

In exploring the significance of memory in shaping diasporic consciousness of the Caribbean as the home of cultural identity, I bring to the fore Carew’s proposition that ‘perhaps, we all carry deep in our unconscious minds the traumatic memory of the ancestral crossing in the Columbian and slave era’.<sup>134</sup> Here, Carew suggests an alternative kind of memory to that of collective memory, proposing an idea of ancestral or inherited memory reminiscent of Nietzsche’s argument that ‘man carries within

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p.129.

<sup>129</sup> Kansteiner, ‘Finding Meaning in Memory’, p.180.

<sup>130</sup> Assmann, ‘History, Memory and the Genre of Testimony’, p.262.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p.262.

<sup>132</sup> Anim-Addo, *Touching the Body*, p.283.

<sup>133</sup> Susan Crane, ‘Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory’, *The American Historical Review*, 102, 5 (December 1997), 1372-1385 (p.1372).

<sup>134</sup> Carew, ‘Caribbean Writer and Exile’, p.473.

himself the memory of all past generations'.<sup>135</sup> It is important to consider the validity of this kind of inherited, intergenerational memory as Carew's hypothesis also posits the question of a new concept of trauma. If memories can be inherited, it follows that traumatic memory may be inherited as a form of indirect traumatic experience. Thus, I investigate how the diasporic writer and protagonist's preoccupation with returning to the Caribbean, the site of trauma, can be read as symptomatic of a victim of trauma whose mind is dominated by the traumatic experience which refuses to be relegated to the realm of the past.<sup>136</sup>

An exploration into the influence of traumatic history upon the contemporary Caribbean and the work of its diasporic writers requires a consideration of trauma as it is understood in current theory; rooted in the west, trauma theory has its basis in Freud's work.<sup>137</sup> Freud insists 'on disassociation as a major symptom' and maintains that the victim of trauma 'has retained an unconscious memory'<sup>138</sup> that 'they had been unable to cognitively register at the time it happened'.<sup>139</sup> Freud perceived the paradoxical nature of trauma in that '[he] simultaneously and contradictorily characterised the victim as capable of remembering and testifying to the traumatic experience *and* as prone to an inherent forgetting of it'.<sup>140</sup> Twentieth-century European theorists adopted this as the foundation for further study: Cathy Caruth asserts in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) that a traumatic event 'is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time'.<sup>141</sup> Theorists who base their work on Freud's research traditionally argue that the fundamental commonality between victims of traumatic memory is a disassociation between the past event and present life, and an inability to successfully integrate the former into the consciousness of the latter. Essentially, traumatic experience represents a rupture of reality and, as Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart explain, the victim becomes trapped between 'two different worlds: the realm of the trauma and the realm of their current, ordinary life'.<sup>142</sup>

This splitting can be observed in the work of diasporic writers and their fictional protagonists, particularly those writers whose experiences of the Caribbean home space are tainted with recent traumas. Danticat, who spent part of her childhood under the oppressive Duvalier regime in Haiti, and Alvarez, whose family fled the Dominican Republic to escape Trujillo's military dictatorship, are

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<sup>135</sup> Nietzsche in Barash, 'The Sources of Memory', p.716.

<sup>136</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I use 'victim of trauma' to refer to a subject who has been exposed to, or experienced – whether directly or indirectly – a painful or violent traumatic event.

<sup>137</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974) and Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. by John Reddick (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>138</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p.27.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>140</sup> Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.300.

<sup>141</sup> Cathy Caruth, 'Trauma and Experience: Introduction' in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp.3-12 (p.4).

<sup>142</sup> Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Caruth, pp.158-182 (p.178).

diasporic writers whose work bears the scars of the violence and brutality of their ancestral island.<sup>143</sup> Yet they write of these Caribbean traumas from the diaspora, signifying both Bhabha's cultural 'in-between space' and the split between the 'two different worlds' which they simultaneously occupy; that of the ancestral home and the traumatic past, and that of their diasporic life. Having acknowledged Caribbean history is problematic, I reiterate the primary concern of this thesis: how do the selected novels represent the difficulty, and necessity, of returning to a traumatic Caribbean past in order to recover, or discover the fragments of history and culture which inform the identities of dispersed Caribbean people? Acknowledging Carew's hypothesis that 'perhaps, we all carry deep in our unconscious minds the traumatic memory of the ancestral crossing in the Columbian and slave era',<sup>144</sup> and noting the crucial role which memory plays in recovering Caribbean history, I utilise theories of trauma, memory and history to address whether memories of the traumatic Caribbean past can be inherited, or intergenerational. Within this framework, I explore how inherited knowledge of ancestral trauma influences diasporic writers, revealing itself within fiction which 'returns' to the ancestral home.

Discussing Alvarez's work, William Luis argues that the Caribbean writer's separation from their ancestral home represents a rupture with the past, suggesting that 'the rupture with the past [...] is transformed into a desire to recover a lost moment in time'.<sup>145</sup> Luis' proposition prompts the question: does the diasporic writer's 'narrative of return' function as a way in which to recover fragments of lost moments in time and make sense of them? These narratives are a return to origins, a search for a familial, cultural identity, a quest for roots, and, crucially, as I shall argue through the course of this thesis, a quest for meaning and reconciliation.<sup>146</sup> Luis continues, 'in revisiting the past, Alvarez comes to terms with her trauma'.<sup>147</sup> Acknowledging Luis, I approach my analysis of the novels with an understanding that diasporic writers are working not only under the shadow of inherited ancestral trauma, but of their own personal trauma; their geographical dislocation and the sense of unbelonging this imposes. Aware of the impact of her Caribbean ancestry on her sense of self, African/Caribbean Canadian Nourbese Philip describes herself as 'a writer whose recent history is colonial and continues to cast very long shadows'.<sup>148</sup> From beneath these shadows diasporic writers try to make sense of both their history and their present, an understanding which serves to inform their personal and cultural identity in the diasporic home.

The work of Alvarez, Danticat, Marshall and Levy contains a return to familial, ancestral, cultural, linguistic and historic origins. As I intend to illustrate through my readings of the narratives of

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<sup>143</sup> For scars of violence see Chapter Four, p.162.

<sup>144</sup> Carew, 'Caribbean Writer and Exile', p.473.

<sup>145</sup> William Luis, 'A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*', *Callaloo*, 23, 3 (Summer 2000), 839-849 (p.839).

<sup>146</sup> This argument culminates in my analysis of novels of historical fiction as healing narratives of return in Chapter Four.

<sup>147</sup> Luis, 'A Search for Identity', p.847.

<sup>148</sup> Nourbese Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue Her Silence Softly Breaks* (London: The Women's Press, 1993), p.78.

return contained within these authors' novels, the 'returns' to the site of ancestral and personal trauma reflect the victim of trauma's need to confront and reconcile the traumatic experience, to make sense of and understand it in relation to a diasporic sense of self. Thus, my analysis explores the different meanings and understandings of diasporic Caribbean identity contained within the selected novels. In many respects, their work is intensely personal and at times semi-autobiographical.<sup>149</sup> Yet whilst these novels constitute a form of expression for the African/Caribbean self, through writing, the authors simultaneously search to define the African/Caribbean self which strives to be expressed. By this, I mean that in looking back to the Caribbean through literature, the selected writers redefine their own diasporic perspective. Philip writes:

If we accept that living language continually encapsulates, reflects, and refines the entire experiential life and world view of the tribe, the race and consequently of society at large; and if we accept that the poet, the storyteller [...] express this process in their work, then we must accept that this process becomes one way in which a society continually accepts, integrates and transcends its experiences, positive or negative.<sup>150</sup>

Through narratives of return which confront the Caribbean past and its inherent traumas, Caribbean women writers attempt to integrate and transcend the traumas – both historical and contemporary – of the Caribbean experience. Levy, Marshall, Danticat and Alvarez's novels reflect and express the experiences of the Caribbean people as diasporic, displaced and dispersed. Through the literary expression of this unique 'experiential life' and 'world view', the past can be explored, recognised, and, finally, reconciled. As Philip argues, 'it is imperative that our writing begin to recreate our histories and our myths, as well as integrate that most painful of experiences – loss of our history and our word'.<sup>151</sup>

### Parameters of the Thesis

The main body of the thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One, 'The Physical Return and Complex Identities in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*', investigates how narrative discourse which depicts a physical, literal return journey from the diaspora to the Caribbean represents a quest for home which forms part of a wider search for a sense of cultural identity and belonging. The analytical focus of this chapter is on the effect of a recovery or (re)discovery of racial and cultural knowledge upon diasporic subjectivity. Through an analysis of Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), this chapter attempts to address the following key questions: what knowledge do the protagonists uncover as a result of their

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<sup>149</sup> These authors discuss the personal/semi-autobiographical nature of their work in a number of articles, essays and interviews. See, for example: Alvarez, *Something to Declare*; Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2010); Paule Marshall, *Triangular Road: A Memoir* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2009); Pettis, 'A MELUS Interview'; Andrea Levy and Susan Alice Fischer, 'Andrea Levy in Conversation with Susan Alice Fischer', *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, 12, 3 (2005), 361-371.

<sup>150</sup> Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue*, p.80.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p.91.

return to the Caribbean which forces them to confront and realise the complexity of their racial and cultural identity? How does the acquisition of knowledge pertaining to ancestral roots permit the articulation of diasporic subjectivity? To address these central questions I explore how the protagonists' (re)discovery of knowledge of the ancestral African/Caribbean presence on Caribbean soil fully informs a hybrid cultural identity, enabling the articulation of diasporic subjectivity. Despite varying diasporic perspectives (Marshall's Bajan American and Levy's Jamaican British), both novels depict a central character undertaking a physical journey to the Caribbean, reflecting the common transatlantic interest in a search for ancestral, cultural and historical origins within literary representation. Considering the relationship between the return and the diaspora, this chapter also investigates whether diasporic discontent in part necessitates the return journey and the search for racial and cultural knowledge which informs a sense of self and cultural identification outside the diasporic home. I attempt to tease out how a rediscovery of cultural inheritance and ancestral heritage, and the historical traumas of the African/Caribbean experience, enables the protagonists to rediscover the complexities of their diasporic cultural identity. Compelled, or sent, to the islands, both protagonists embark upon a journey to the region which I propose to consider as a metaphor for their simultaneous journey into the past.

Expanding upon Chapter One's understanding of cultural identity as informed by the (re)discovery of ancestral and historical knowledge, Chapter Two, 'Metaphors of Return: Trauma and History in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994)', will address the concept of a 'narrative of return' through a consideration of literary representations of the presence of ancestral trauma and traumatic Caribbean history in the contemporary Caribbean. This chapter investigates whether Danticat and her characters can be perceived as victims of both ancestral and contemporary traumas, possessed by Haiti and the traumas of the Haitian past. Is the African/Caribbean diasporic writer's preoccupation with returning to the Caribbean, the site of historical and ancestral trauma, symptomatic of a victim of trauma whose mind is dominated by the traumatic experience which refuses to be relegated to the realm of the past? How do these return journeys to Haiti and to specific sites of ancestral and contemporary trauma on the island represent a metaphorical return to history? To what extent does the return constitute an exploration or affirmation of a historically traumatised Haitian identity? This chapter is primarily concerned with the role of traumatic history in necessitating the protagonist's return journey(s) to Haiti, and, ultimately, to the cane field, the site of past, present, collective and individual traumas. My analysis will focus on the motif of the cane field as a link between past and present – between ancestral and contemporary traumas – and discusses the motif's historic symbolism as a reminder of colonial slavery and the lasting effects of the plantation economy. My consideration of the past as presence in Haiti through an analysis of the cane field motif will necessitate an exploration of the wider colonial legacy in the contemporary Caribbean. Thus, I examine political upheaval and

corruption in late twentieth-century Haiti as a result of traumatic political history and explore how Danticat's novel looks beyond colonial history towards the African presence in a return to other significant cultural influences in order to make sense of contemporary Haiti and Haitian identity.

Taking the previous chapters' findings with regards to cultural identity and traumatic history into account, Chapter Three, 'Where to (Re)Turn? Language, Trauma and Belonging in the work of Julia Alvarez' will explore questions of diasporic identity in relation to the traumatic separation from the Caribbean homeland. With a focus on Alvarez's novel, *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) and her collection of autobiographical essays, *Something to Declare* (1999), I consider how Alvarez's work reflects the absence, or denial, of blackness in the Dominican Republic, privileging instead alternative markers of Hispanic identity, such as Spanish language and culture. In doing so, I consider the presentation of the relationship between home, language, culture and identity formation, or production, in the diaspora. I posit that Alvarez's works simultaneously express, depict, and enact an identity suspended between languages (native Spanish and American English) and cultures; the 'Old World' Latina Dominican, and the 'New World' Anglicised North American, and consider how this 'suspension' can effect a kind of 'language trauma' which manifests itself as a psychological fracture, or fragmentation of the self. Thus, this chapter investigates how the concept of a 'return' applies when protagonists and writer are suspended between languages and cultures, and the ways in which a 'narrative of return' functions as a process of healing to reconnect the fractured halves of the diasporic psyche. This chapter aims to explore the notion of identification and cultural belonging within language and linguistic expression in texts representative of the Hispanophone Caribbean diasporic experience. Once in the diaspora, where do characters 'turn' to discover, or rediscover, a 'home' space? What effect do the traumas of cultural alienation, or dislocation, and diasporic discontent have upon the diasporic writer and protagonist's sense of self? To address these key questions regarding the return/turn within Alvarez's work, I consider Alvarez's fictionalised representations of cultural tensions and the idea of the return/turn to Dominican culture – to the island home, and to the Hispanic language, culture and values which this home space embodies – alongside Alvarez's discussion of cultural tensions and diasporic identity in her series of autobiographical essays.

In the analysis of the novels considered in Chapters One, Two and Three, the primary focus is on a central protagonist and the nature of the narrative discourse of return – whether physical and literal, emotional and symbolic, metaphorical and linguistic, or perhaps all of the above – to a Caribbean home space. In contrast, Chapter Four, 'Returning Home through Historical Fiction: Writing the Traumatic Past in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (2008) and Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994)', analyses novels which depict a collective, shared Caribbean historical experience, referring specifically to two works of historical fiction. In this sense, the authors' writing back, or

fictionalising of historical events, performs the 'return' to the region and its past. These novels rewrite historical events from either side of the island of Hispaniola: Danticat's Haiti and Alvarez's Dominican Republic. In light of established theoretical discussions concerning the importance of literature as a means through which to salvage marginalised Caribbean histories, this final chapter asks, as a narrative of return to the past, how does the historical novel testify to the traumatic history of the Caribbean region? How do Danticat and Alvarez's novels suggest new ways for interpreting and recording traumatic history? To what extent do these texts reveal the intertwining histories of Hispaniola and the complexities of the shared Caribbean experience and shared traumas? My comparison of *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Farming of Bones* attempts to explore the impact which Trujillo's dictatorship had on the lives of both the Haitian and Dominican people, enacting a comparative approach in keeping with the nature of this thesis which considers literature from across the Caribbean and its diasporas.

The idea of Caribbean history (individual and collective), its traumatic nature and the way in which it influences the construction of a complex diasporic identity is central to my thesis. In exploring why, and how, diasporic writers narrate back to their ancestral home I aim to tease out the specificities of this return journey and its connection to the diasporic quest for home. Speaking about growing up in Brooklyn with Barbadian parents, Marshall says:

It was very early on that I had a sense of a very distinct difference between *home*, which had to do with the West Indies, and *this country* which had to do with the United States [...] it was a little confusing because to me home was Brooklyn and by extension America, and yet there was always this very strong sense [...] of this other place that was also home [...] this place that was so important [...] I began to sense it was important in whomever I was going to discover myself to be [...] the other home seemed important to me in order to answer certain questions about myself [...] in a sense that's what the work is primarily about; it's my trying to find answers.<sup>152</sup>

Levy echoes these sentiments in an interview discussing her work with Susan Alice Fischer: 'it was about exploring aspects of *my life*, although in fiction [...] Before I wasn't so interested in the link between Jamaica, the Caribbean and Britain [...] now I think it is absolutely important and so fascinating' (my italics).<sup>153</sup> She continues, 'if I felt I had any answers, I would stop'.<sup>154</sup>

Like Marshall and Levy, I am trying to find answers regarding representations of Caribbean identity and the diasporic notion of a 'home' space in contemporary Caribbean women's writing. Is

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<sup>152</sup> Marshall in Pettis and Marshall, 'A MELUS Interview', pp.117-118.

<sup>153</sup> Levy and Fischer, 'Levy in Conversation with Susan Alice Fischer', p.362.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p.363. In an interview with Blake Morrison, Levy similarly talks about her writing as a personal endeavour; 'that's been very important to me, to bring that story and their parents' story and their parents' parents' story into the mainstream of British culture – so that we know those stories too, and understand those people'. See Andrea Levy and Blake Morrison, 'Andrea Levy Interviewed by Blake Morrison', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 20, 3 (2009), 325-338 (p.329). Alvarez also talks about writing as enacting the process of becoming, of identity exploration and acquisition in *Something to Declare*, p.156: 'In this new culture, my sisters and I had to find new ways to be, new ways to see [...] new ways to speak. It was this opportunity to create ourselves from scratch that led me to become a writer'. Chapter Three of this thesis further explores Alvarez's writing as part of a process of self-actualization.

'home' geographical, imaginary, or a cultural space? How do women writers 'return' to the Caribbean 'home' through literary representation and the act of writing back? I am similarly concerned with the importance of a home space in relation to Caribbean diasporic identity, and the ways in which a 'return' a home space which embodies historical and contemporary traumas functions as a way in which to reconcile and transcend past traumas. Can Caribbean writers find the answers they are looking for through literary narratives of return? Is the concept of home the key to understanding both the Caribbean diasporic self, and the contemporary Caribbean region? In short, I investigate whether through fictional 'narratives of return' contemporary diasporic Caribbean women writers and their protagonists find answers pertaining to the question of the nature of a diasporic identity rooted in a traumatic history of colonialism and its effects.

## Chapter One

### The Physical Return and Complex Identities in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*

In order to ascertain the significance of the Caribbean as a site of cultural and ancestral memory which informs diasporic black subjectivity and identity, this chapter examines two novels which utilise the trope of the return journey: Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). I argue towards the physical return journey as a metaphor for the quest for cultural and ancestral knowledge which permits a full understanding of a complex African/Caribbean self. Although written from opposite sides of the Atlantic and published fifteen years apart, both novels depict female protagonists who travel from North America or England to the Caribbean. Both novels' representations of diasporic life for black women in the twentieth century offer an insight into the conditions which compel this narrative of return to an alternative cultural home space. The significance of a physical return upon the rediscovery of a black cultural identity rooted in a traumatic history of enslavement and rupture is considered through an investigation into the journey made by each protagonist. What knowledge do the protagonists uncover through their return which forces them to confront and realise the complexity of their racial and cultural identity? How does the acquisition of knowledge pertaining to ancestral roots permit the articulation of diasporic subjectivity?

Firstly, this chapter investigates the relationship between author and text to better understand the diasporic positioning from which the novels are written. Exploring the return to origins as a quest for home, I examine the significance of a return to 'Africa' within the 'African/Caribbean' experience and the diversity and hybridity of the African/Caribbean culture which is gradually (re)discovered. I consider what constitutes this African/Caribbean culture and the way in which it is constructed with relation to the work of Hall, Glissant, Bhabha, and Gadsby.<sup>155</sup> This consideration will necessitate a discussion as to the presence/absence of African/Caribbean culture in the diaspora. How do the novels depict access to knowledge regarding African/Caribbean culture from within the diaspora? I investigate the extent to which diasporic conditions necessitate the return to cultural origins to inform a sense of self, asking what role diasporic discontent and racism play in compelling the protagonists to return to the Caribbean region. An examination of twentieth-century ideas regarding knowledge and race and the way in which these ideas inform African/Caribbean diasporic identities is crucial in addressing these questions. Finally, I explore whether diasporic conditions permit the protagonists to reprioritise their

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<sup>155</sup> See Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in Rutherford, pp.222-237; 'New Ethnicities' in Morley and Chen, pp.441-449; 'The Question of Cultural Identity' in *Modernity*, ed. by Hall and others, pp.595-634. See also Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* and *Caribbean Discourse*; Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*; Gadsby, *Sucking Salt*.

lives at the expense of forgetting their black roots and identity and examine how a return to the Caribbean re-informs this sense of blackness.

### Diasporic Writers and the Return: Cultural Identity and the African/Caribbean Diasporic Self

Paule Marshall was born in 1929 in Brooklyn, New York to Barbadian parents whilst Andrea Levy's father sailed from Jamaica to England on the *Empire Windrush* in 1948, with her mother joining him soon after.<sup>156</sup> Born in London in 1956, Levy still resides in the city. Despite Marshall and Levy's different Anglophone Caribbean backgrounds and the geographical diasporic setting of their novels, their work reveals a transatlantic preoccupation with narrating the return to the Caribbean. Both authors use autobiographical material in their writing; like Marshall, *Praisesong's* Avey Johnson lives in New York.<sup>157</sup> Avey travels to the Caribbean islands on a cruise which sees her take a day trip around Martinique before disembarking at Grenada and visiting the island of Carriacou. In *Triangular Road: A Memoir* (2009) Marshall writes about the experiences which inspired *Praisesong*, revealing how she was personally affected by a return to the islands. Staying on Grenada in 1962, Marshall was encouraged to join an annual excursion so she could witness 'the Big Drum/Nation Dance ceremony held every year on Grenada's tiny satellite island of Carriacou':<sup>158</sup>

Shortly after dusk the ceremony got underway [...] the drums were nothing more than a few hollowed-out logs with a drumhead of goatskin. The drummers themselves were elderly men [...] over the course of the long night, their drums held securely between their legs, and sustained by the jars of white rum beside their chairs, the old fellows proved capable of playing until dawn [...] the men drummed and the women danced. Only women performed the Nation Dance [...] it was not a single dance, but rather a number of separate and distinct dances, each signifying a different nation.<sup>159</sup>

Marshall's experiences recall the Ring Shout, a tradition she read about in James Weldon Johnson's memoir: 'Johnson described a circular dance called the Ring Shout that the old folk in his segregated neighbourhood of Jacksonville, Florida, performed'.<sup>160</sup> Struck by these parallels, she later writes,

the idea for a novel I would write almost a decade later grew out of this overnight trip [...] a well-heeled black American widow, an unapologetic bourgeoisie [...] recovers something of her true-true self after experiencing the Carriacou Big Drum/Nation Dance.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> <http://www.andrealevy.co.uk/biography> [accessed 31/7/2011].

<sup>157</sup> As I shall note throughout this thesis, the selected writers all draw on aspects of their own lives in the writing of their narratives of return. Thus, their work is arguably semi-autobiographical/semi-fictional in 'testifying' to the diasporic experience of both author and protagonist. This notion of the semi-autobiographical narrative of return as a testimony to Caribbean diasporic experience is developed in the final chapter into a consideration of how narratives of return through historical fiction perform the function of 'testifying' to a traumatic past.

<sup>158</sup> Marshall, *Triangular Road*, p.140.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p.143.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p.145.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p.147.

When Avey travels from America to Grenada and then Carriacou her fictional narrative mirrors both Marshall's own physical journey, and her metaphorical journey towards a rediscovery of her black heritage. Witnessing the Nation Dance, Avey is similarly struck by its familiarity; it reminds her of the Ring Shout performed by her Great Aunt Cuney. Watching the dances, Avey is transported back in time to those summers she spent in Tatem:

It was a score of hot August nights again in her memory, and she was standing beside her great-aunt [...] under cover of darkness she was performing the dance that wasn't supposed to be dancing, in imitation of the old folk shuffling in a loose ring inside the church [...] The Ring Shout. (*Praisesong*, p.248)<sup>162</sup>

In light of these parallels, I suggest Avey's recovery of a sense of self through cultural rediscovery and return to the Caribbean reflects Marshall's desire to recover her own roots. Indeed, Marshall acknowledges the significance of the Caribbean in informing her sense of self, writing that 'the missing chapter in the manuscript of [her] life' was created by her father, who 'refused to ever speak of father, mother, sister or brother: who wouldn't even name his birthplace'.<sup>163</sup> Marshall lacks knowledge of her paternal ancestors and her 'nation'. In writing Avey, the author transposes her detachment from her ancestry to a fictional character, rewriting her experiences on Grenada and Carriacou. This reveals the personal significance of rediscovering roots; unable to trace her paternal ancestry Marshall seeks answers regarding the question of her diasporic origins through her fictional protagonist.<sup>164</sup> Both writer and character experience the Nation Dance/Big Drum, are reminded of the African-American Ring Shout, and are profoundly moved by this experience.

*Fruit of the Lemon* reveals similar parallels between author and protagonist. Like Levy, Faith Jackson lives in London, born to immigrant Jamaican parents. In an article published in *The Guardian* in February 2000, Levy reveals the deeper connections between herself and her main character. Growing up black and British, Levy writes that she 'was educated to be English' and describes how 'everything from Jamaica' seemed odd to her.<sup>165</sup> As a child, she was eager to denounce her Jamaican heritage and identity; she 'wanted just to fit in and be part of everything that was around [her], and these strange parents were holding [her] back'.<sup>166</sup> Faith reflects Levy's attitudes as she, too, is frustrated at her parents' inability to just let her fit in and becomes annoyed with their concern and overprotective parenting, which she interprets as interfering and restrictive. Moving into a shared house, Faith neglects

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<sup>162</sup> Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: Plume, 1983). All further references are to this edition and will be given as page numbers in the body of text.

<sup>163</sup> Marshall, *Triangular Road*, pp.109-110.

<sup>164</sup> Marshall speaks of her work as an attempt to find answers in Pettis and Marshall, 'A MELUS Interview', p.118.

<sup>165</sup> Andrea Levy, 'This is My England', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/feb/19/society1?INTCMP=SRCH> [accessed 16/8/2011]. Levy also discusses how the personal need to explore her heritage is reflected in her fiction in selected interviews. See Levy and Morrison, 'Andrea Levy Interviewed by Blake Morrison'; Levy and Fischer, 'Levy in Conversation with Susan Alice Fischer'.

<sup>166</sup> Levy, 'This is My England'.

to tell her parents that there are male housemates, knowing that with their traditional, conservative outlook, 'it wasn't how they would have liked their only daughter to go' and would have preferred to see her 'swathed from head to toe in white lace' (*Fruit*, p.19).<sup>167</sup> Yet as adults both Levy and Faith return to the ancestral and cultural home they rebuffed as children. Both are received enthusiastically: Levy welcomed 'like a prodigal daughter'<sup>168</sup> and Faith almost suffocated by her cousin Vincent's excitement upon meeting her as 'the man ran through the crowd and crushed [her] into his chest' (*Fruit*, p.176).

In Jamaica, Faith learns about her ancestors through the oral history mostly imparted to her by her Aunt Coral. Of her own efforts to trace her family history, Levy writes:

It is hard for anyone to research their genealogy, but it is even harder (though not impossible) for someone with my background. Most of the records are incomplete or unavailable at best; destroyed or non-existent at worst. I discovered it would take a great deal of time, patience and expensive travelling for me to put together my definitive family tree. So I did the next best thing. I talked to my mum.<sup>169</sup>

Levy learns her history from her mother, Faith from her Aunt. Author and character acquire a family history from matriarchal figures, recognising the important role of women in the formation of female identity. Berrian emphasises the relationship between knowing one's history and the formation of female identity, suggesting that once this function is removed, daughters become confused about their history and place within it.<sup>170</sup> Whilst the nature of this transmission of information for Levy and Faith reinforces the fundamental role of women – 'vehicles of culture and history' – and the oral tradition in Caribbean society,<sup>171</sup> it also reiterates the author's personal connection to her character, evident in the mirroring of their African/Caribbean identity, diasporic home cities and quest for knowledge from a matriarchal figure. Levy explains, 'the stories that I learned from my mum I pieced together into what I call a fictional family tree for my novel *Fruit of the Lemon*'.<sup>172</sup>

The characters' diasporic connections to the ancestral home are a key feature of both novels. Born and raised in the diaspora, both protagonists are disconnected from the Caribbean people, their families and their collective history; the cultural identity and sense of self which these connections foster have been damaged. Through their depiction of Avey and Faith's narratives of return, Marshall and Levy suggest that a return to the Caribbean can re-establish these lost links, subsequently reshaping and remoulding the characters' cultural identities. In depicting characters with similar backgrounds and experiences to their own, these displaced authors also use their female protagonists allegorically as a

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<sup>167</sup> Andrea Levy, *Fruit of the Lemon* (London: Headline Review, 1999; repr. 2004). All further references are to this edition and will be given as page numbers in the body of text.

<sup>168</sup> Levy, 'This is My England'.

<sup>169</sup> Levy, 'This is My England'.

<sup>170</sup> Berrian, 'Claiming an Identity', p.200.

<sup>171</sup> Caribbean women are widely acknowledged as carriers of tradition within their society. See Berrian, 'Claiming an Identity', p.200.

<sup>172</sup> Levy, 'This is My England'.

way in which to forge, or express, a reconnection with their own African/Caribbean subjectivity, thus enacting the process of identity formation and writing the hybridised diasporic African/Caribbean subject into contemporary diasporic literature. In her work on autobiography, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001), Leigh Gilmore identifies that ‘from the newly ubiquitous literary memoir to first person accounts of trauma, and a range of autobiographical projects beyond these, the current emphasis is on a person telling his or her story’.<sup>173</sup> Whilst the works under discussion here are undoubtedly fictional, in their blending of autobiographical material with fictional narrative, Marshall and Levy reflect the shifting emphasis towards telling one’s story, representing the way in which autobiography has – and continues to be – reconceived to the point of moving ‘into uncharted territory where what “one” or “I” once was is a matter of radical interpretation’.<sup>174</sup>

Where the work of Marshall and Levy is important (and, as I shall explore in subsequent chapters, also that of Danticat and Alvarez) in terms of assisting in reconceiving and establishing an autobiographical voice is in forging a representative space for marginalised women. Indeed, ‘it is easy to cite the glaring omission of non-white authors from earlier autobiography scholarship, and the absence of women has been well documented, as have the silences around these exclusions’.<sup>175</sup> As Davies argues, ‘the autobiographical subjectivity of Black women is one of the ways in which speech is articulated and geography redefined’.<sup>176</sup> ‘Geography’ is arguably redefined by the works of these writers in the sense that both the borders of literary representation and those within which we locate cultural and national identities are eroded, crossed, blurred. Thus, the privileging of the autobiographical voice in this chapter serves to explore issues of home, belonging and exile in a way which gives voice to the reality of the gendered experiences of diasporic women for whom the issue of ‘redefining’ physical and metaphorical borders is essential. The authors’ utilisation of autobiographical material in their fiction assists in deconstructing these borders and simultaneously constructs a credible female diasporic voice, demystifying romanticised notions of home and family, with the stable matriarchal figure as the core of a fixed notion of Caribbean identity.<sup>177</sup> Both Marshall and Levy problematize Berrian’s notion of women as ‘vehicles of culture and history’ in Caribbean society,<sup>178</sup> in that through their blending of autobiography and fiction they point to the losses sustained to female subjectivity in the diaspora. As Davies notes in her study of black women’s writing: ‘mystified notions of home and family are removed from their romantic, idealised moorings, to speak of pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in

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<sup>173</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001), p.17.

<sup>174</sup> Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*, p.18. Other authors whose work is discussed in this thesis similarly represent this expansion in terms of reconceiving autobiography. See, for example, Chapter Three’s discussion of Alvarez’s *García Girls*.

<sup>175</sup> Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*, p.21.

<sup>176</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.21.

<sup>177</sup> See Berrian, ‘Claiming an Identity’, p.200.

<sup>178</sup> Caribbean women are widely acknowledged as carriers of tradition within their society. See Berrian, ‘Claiming an Identity’, p.200.

complex ways [...] the complicated notion of home mirrors the problematizing of community/nation/identity that one finds in Black women's writing from a variety of communities'.<sup>179</sup>

Levy and Marshall's protagonists' personal identities are inherently linked to their cultural identities as knowledge, or lack of knowledge, regarding their African/Caribbean roots informs their diasporic sense of self. The African/Caribbean sense of self is an elusive concept as, like their authors, Avey and Faith's diasporic perspective blurs the boundaries between cultures and countries, confusing a precise understanding of their hybrid cultural identity.<sup>180</sup> Acknowledging Bhabha's work on the creation of modern culture, I emphasise Caribbean cultural identity as 'hybrid', emerging from the spaces in-between cultures, the product of an enriching cultural synthesis.<sup>181</sup> Faith and Avey's hybrid identity has its roots in the creolisation of cultures brought about by the colonising process, through the continuing migration of culturally diverse peoples in and out of the region. This is the identity which, through their journeys, the protagonists attempt to unravel so that in time they come to contextualise and claim their diasporic, migrant subjectivity. Born and raised outside of the African/Caribbean home, both women are, to borrow Hall's phrase, 'in but not of' the place in which they live.<sup>182</sup>

As women of African/Caribbean descent living in the diaspora, Avey and Faith variably inhabit multiple identities whilst their cross-cultural upbringing in part defies categorisation. Avey's inability to know herself without ancestral and cultural knowledge which will enable her to lay claim to this hybrid identity is evident in her failure to recognise herself. Catching sight of her reflection during dinner on the cruise ship, 'for a long confused moment Avey Johnson could not place the woman in beige crepe de Chine and pearls' (*Praisesong*, p.48). On previous occasions Avey has been similarly confused by the unfamiliarity of her reflection: 'shopping in her favourite department store she would notice a black woman of above average height [...] coming toward her amid the floor-length mirrors (*Praisesong*, p.48). Elsewhere, 'the same stylishly dressed matron surprised her from the dingy windows of the train', or 'accosted Avey Johnson in her bathroom mirror' (*Praisesong*, p.49). Avey's estrangement from herself is epitomised when she meets Lebert Joseph, the old man with whom she later travels to Carriacou. Lebert is able to regale Avey with long lists of his family, living and dead, and proudly declare, 'It's a Joseph [...] From Ti Morne, Carriacou [...] Near everybody in Ti Morne is family to me' (*Praisesong*, p.163) and 'It's a Chamba! From my father's side [...] My mother now was a Manding' (*Praisesong*,

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<sup>179</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.21. The privileging of the autobiographical voice in order to position, represent, and speak to the experiences of Caribbean women is an idea which will be developed in subsequent chapters.

<sup>180</sup> In using 'hybrid' I draw attention to the diverse cultural, racial and linguistic influences which have shaped the Caribbean experience and continue to shape notions of selfhood for Caribbean people. For 'hybrid' see Introduction, pp.19-20.

<sup>181</sup> See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.2. For 'enriching benefits of cultural synthesis' see Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. Nevertheless, I am wary of an approach that emphasises only the 'enriching' aspects of creolisation, or a hybridised identity. Chapter Three's analysis of Julia Alvarez's work provides a discussion of the problems encountered in navigating an identity suspended between two cultures.

<sup>182</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Politics of Mugging', in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, ed. by Stuart Hall and others (London: Macmillan Press, 1978), pp.327-394 (p.357).

p.166). In contrast, Avey is disconnected from her family, unable to name her people. When Lebert asks, 'What's your nation?' Avey simply states she is a tourist from New York (*Praisesong*, p.167).

Avey's encounter with Lebert demonstrates her alienation from her African roots. Immersed in her diasporic life she has lost this connection to her people, their original home and the sense of cultural identity which this connection fosters. The concept of an 'enriching cultural synthesis' which nourishes a 'hybrid' Caribbean cultural identity becomes problematic here as Avey's separation from knowledge of her black cultural roots suggests that Bhabha's 'in-between' space has become something of a cultural void, at least in terms of Avey's African culture. Her hybrid diasporic identity appears to have become consumed and overpowered by her New World, American identity, at the expense of her African roots. Overlooking the 'African' fragment, or *Présence Africaine*, of her cultural identity, Avey has become estranged from herself. Visiting the Caribbean, she is not simply a tourist from New York but, crucially, a black tourist and the inhabitant of multiple cultural identities, both New World American and African. How can we reconcile Avey's cultural identity within these multiple and often conflicting categories?

In addressing Avey's hybrid cultural identity, I highlight an excerpt from Hall which acknowledges the difficulties posed in defining the concept of identity in the modern era:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as 'production', which is never complete, always in process.<sup>183</sup>

Hall perceives identity as part of a continuum, ever-changing and evolving, not a fixed concept. Gadsby presents a similar argument, suggesting that identity is subject to constant redefinition, and 'must be characterised as fluidly ever changing'.<sup>184</sup> Perhaps, then, Glissant's 'synthesis' does not produce a fixed notion of cultural identity, but one which is constantly renewing itself as part of an ongoing process of cultural evolution. In considering how we might reconcile Avey's contradictory New World American/African cultural identity, I posit that an inherently hybrid African/Caribbean, or black, identity occupies these multiple categories simultaneously and is subject to constant change and redefinition as a result of diaspora and ongoing migration.

### **The Caribbean in Motion: Migration, Diaspora, and Identity**

The global scale of migratory movements plays a key role in the construction of black diasporic identity and the creation of an international black diaspora to which both Avey and Faith belong. As Brock writes, 'migration within the Caribbean basin is [...] long-standing and until relatively recent

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<sup>183</sup> Hall in Rutherford, p.222.

<sup>184</sup> Gadsby, *Sucking Salt*, p.10.

restrictions, almost customary'.<sup>185</sup> The initial diasporic communities established by the traumatic history of the mass transportation of enslaved Africans to the islands were followed by subsequent migrations within the region, first as part of the trade in slaves and later as post-emancipation movements between islands and throughout the Americas in search of work or education. Twentieth-century relocations to Europe and North America established black diasporic communities in new metropolitan centres, 'each of those migratory movements occur[ing] within a particular pocket of time'.<sup>186</sup> Each movement contributed to the expansion of existing black diasporic communities, or the creation of new ones. In light of this migratory history, Hall argues towards an 'awareness of the black experience as a *diaspora* experience'.<sup>187</sup> For Hall, discussing the black experience involves 'recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category "black"'.<sup>188</sup> The roots of this diversity lie in this history of international migratory movements which established black diasporic communities throughout the world.

To develop Hall's argument with regards to my analysis of Levy and Marshall's novels, I propose that the fundamental nature of the black experience as a shared '*diaspora* experience' permits comparisons to be drawn, and connections made, between Avey, in New York, and Faith, living in London. Initially, Faith shows no perception of her diasporic subjectivity. Although her parents, first generation migrants, retain a connection to the Jamaican home they left behind, born and raised in London, Faith cannot conceive of an alternative cultural home space. Her migrant identity is in part forced upon her by others, like the 'bully boys' at primary school who chanted, "'Faith is a darkie and her mum and dad came on a banana boat'" (*Fruit*, p.3). It is through her narrative of return that Faith begins to comprehend this migrant history and subsequent diasporic experience as crucial to her black British identity. She evolves to assume a subjectivity which encompasses some recognition of Davies's argument that 'migration and the fluidity which it suggests or the displacement and uprootedness which is often its result, is intrinsic to New World experience, fundamental to the meaning of the (African) diaspora'.<sup>189</sup> Both Davies and Hall stress migration and diaspora as crucial in understanding the nature of the black experience. My reading of the selected novels proposes that they similarly present the migrant experience as the founding, essentialising feature in the construction of identity for those, like Faith, born and raised within the international black diaspora.<sup>190</sup>

Ongoing migratory movements continue to bring together new cultural influences, redefining what it means to be a person of black or African/Caribbean origins. This understanding enables us to

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<sup>185</sup> Brock in Brock, p.4.

<sup>186</sup> Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return*, p.32.

<sup>187</sup> Hall in Morley and Chen, p.447.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p.443.

<sup>189</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.128.

<sup>190</sup> In Chapter Three I extend this argument to Hispanic Caribbean experience, suggesting that regardless of racial origins, Caribbean people across racial boundaries collectively share a history of migration and diaspora.

draw connections between Glissant's rejection of the notion of a fixed Caribbean identity, Hall's definition of cultural identity as constantly in production, and Davies' argument towards the significant impact of a Caribbean migratory tradition upon the Caribbean psyche today. Chamberlain's concept of a 'migration ideology' supports an understanding of migration as a defining feature of the Caribbean psyche.<sup>191</sup> Levy's depiction of Faith's own familial migratory history highlights the complexity of her position as a black British woman of African/Caribbean descent. Her journey to Jamaica reveals the long-standing tradition of migration in her family and the roots of her Caribbean cultural identity as inherently diasporic. Ultimately, Faith's return to origins permits the acquisition of knowledge of her people, enabling her to contextualise her black British subjectivity and articulate her hybrid identity.

In Jamaica, Faith discovers African, Irish, Scottish, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and native Arawak/Indian ancestors and realises these identities were brought together on Caribbean soil, a result of the cultural interaction affected by global migratory movements instigated under colonialism. Levy's novel is framed by Faith's family tree, presented in its simplest form at the beginning, displaying only four names: Mildred Campbell and Wade Jackson, Faith's parents, followed by Faith and her brother, Carl Jackson. Faith's physical journey to Jamaica in the second half of the novel reflects the metaphorical journey of self-discovery she undertakes as she meets relatives and hears the stories they have inherited. Levy uses the image of the family tree as a symbolic representation of Faith's journey; with the addition of each relative's tale, more names are added and the branches of the tree spread upwards and out. The tree depicted on the final page of the novel appears to be in full bloom as Faith comes to a full understanding of her diverse ancestry and returns to England. The symbolism of the tree reinforces the idea of Faith's burgeoning understanding of herself as securely rooted in history, of finding her roots. Although the branches spread upwards and out, paradoxically it is Faith's roots in the African diaspora which are uncovered. To extend this symbolism further, as the uppermost branches of the tree fill out, they cast longer and more extended shadows across the lower branches, over Faith's own name. The image of the shadows cast by the tree's higher branches also functions metaphorically: as Faith uncovers more of her family history, she comes to realise that she is living in the shadows of the past. Her journey towards knowledge of her ancestral history and hybrid identity does not begin and end in England, where she is born and raised, and where she returns after her trip to Jamaica. Her metaphorical journey into becoming begins with her ancestors' initial migration to the Caribbean from various corners of the world.

Through the stories told by her Jamaican family, Faith traces her African/Caribbean identity as far back as her maternal great-great-great-grandmother, an unnamed slave woman who gives birth to 'the illegitimate daughter of an English plantation owner' (*Fruit*, p.259). Mr Livingstone, a man

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<sup>191</sup> Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return*, p.7.

rumoured to have ‘fathered several hundred children by the slave women on his estate [...] ran into serious debt after he had freed nearly all the female childbearing slaves [...] sold the plantation and went back to England’ (*Fruit*, p.259).<sup>192</sup> Faith’s cyclical journey, from England, to Jamaica, and back again mirrors that undertaken by Livingstone, and, undoubtedly, some of her other English ancestors. The narrative structure of the novel similarly mirrors this cyclical journey. The novel can be roughly divided into two more or less equal parts of approximately 150 and 170 pages, and a third much smaller part barely half a page long. Titled ‘Part I: England’, ‘Part II: Jamaica’ and ‘Part III: England’, the first section narrates the circumstances which precede Faith’s journey to Jamaica, closing with her parents’ decision to send her to the island on ‘a little holiday’ (*Fruit*, p.162). Part II narrates her stay in Jamaica, opening and closing in the airport with Faith’s arrival and departure from the island. Part III, containing one final chapter consisting of just two paragraphs, depicts Faith’s thoughts and feelings having landed back on English soil. The circle, Faith’s metaphorical journey into becoming, into knowledge of family and history, and her literal journey, from England, to Jamaica, and back again, are complete.

Levy’s use of this cyclical narrative structure reiterates the continuing connection between the Caribbean and Britain as the histories of the regions and their people are intricately interwoven. This history begins with the bringing together of colonisers like Livingstone with unnamed slaves like Faith’s great-great-great grandmother. In this sense, African/Caribbean identity was born on Caribbean soil, the result of a liaison between an English plantation owner and his African slave or, perhaps more accurately as Berrian puts it, pointing towards the inherently traumatic and violent nature of the origins of the African/Caribbean diaspora, born out of ‘the rape of an enslaved ancestor by her white plantation owner’.<sup>193</sup> Indeed, the nature of the colonial legacy as inherently violent and the enduring destructive influence of this violent, traumatic legacy upon contemporary Caribbean society and notions of selfhood is an argument which shall be developed throughout the course of this thesis. With regards to Faith’s ancestors, these characters represent both the roots of the Caribbean experience as essentially migratory (one African, one British, brought together in the Caribbean), and Faith’s own migratory identity. Whilst, like Faith, Livingstone returned to England, the legacy he and his contemporaries left behind remains in the blood, the faces, and the hybrid cultural identity of Caribbean people. The pattern of migration established under colonial rule continues to exist. Faith’s migratory ancestral and familial history reflects Chamberlain’s belief in the ‘circularity of Caribbean migration’<sup>194</sup> and is mirrored in the cyclical structure of the narrative as, centuries after Livingstone’s journey from England to Jamaica, Faith’s Jamaican parents joined the generation of twentieth-century migrants relocating to the mother

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<sup>192</sup> Livingstone’s name alludes to that of Scottish medical missionary Dr. David Livingstone, often credited by the west as having discovered Africa during his time there from the mid-nineteenth century.

<sup>193</sup> Berrian, ‘Claiming an Identity’, p.208.

<sup>194</sup> Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return*, p.6.

country from the Caribbean. Furthermore, the hybridity of the cultural inheritance which Faith begins to unearth validates Chamberlain's concept of a 'migration ideology' within the region which 'continues to shape the perspectives, behaviour and identities of Caribbean migrants'.<sup>195</sup> These migratory movements continue to affect Faith; through knowledge of her ancestry she comes to identify her place in the international diaspora and inhabit her diasporic subjectivity.

The histories recounted by Aunt Coral on behalf of her ancestors and relatives further reveal how global migrations, or a 'migration ideology', have contributed to the formation of a collective history which shapes international diasporic identities. Whilst learning about Faith's Aunt Eunice, whose appearance reflected the diverse cultural mix of the region as she 'had a straight nose like her father and long hair that was black, wavy and manageable' (*Fruit*, p.211), we are told about Great Aunt Myrtle, who left Jamaica and married an African American. They separated, but Myrtle remained in America and 'found a job working in service to a childless white couple' (*Fruit*, p.213). When Myrtle later writes to Jamaica asking for a granddaughter to come and help care for her, Eunice accepts the invitation, eventually marrying Earl Harrington, another Jamaican who moved to New York with his family many years earlier. Earl was 'in the air force during the war and returned to New York full of hope for a new life and a new deal for black ex-servicemen' (*Fruit*, p.216). Eunice's story reveals how the history of the Caribbean is intertwined with the history of North America as both regions share a history of migration. Additionally, it reveals how integral the motif of the journey is within Faith's extended family and the black experience as a whole. Myrtle, Eunice, and Earl originate from Jamaica but migrate or journey at different times to the United States where they integrate into American society. All three are also of African/Caribbean heritage, and their journeys first began centuries earlier with the capture and enslavement of their ancestors in Africa. An ex-serviceman, Earl represents the relationship between Britain, her Empire, and her American allies. Earl is of African descent, was born in Jamaica, migrated to the United States, and served in the Allied Forces in World War Two, a British colonial fighting an international cause on behalf of the Mother Country. How might we define Earl's cultural identity? African? Jamaican? British? American? I argue that he represents the intertwining of cultures brought about by the journeys made throughout the British Empire, and the Caribbean region's history of migration. Earl embodies the globalisation affected by colonisation and the British Empire: the colonised, diasporic, African/Caribbean migrant.

When she hears Aunt Coral's stories, Faith acquires knowledge of her hybrid cultural identity and ancestry which enables her to fully possess her diasporic subjectivity and understand the impact which migration has had on the construction of her cosmopolitan self. Articulating the acquisition of this subjectivity, Faith declares:

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<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

I am the granddaughter of Grace and William Campbell. I am the great-grandchild of Cecelia Hilton. I am descended from Katherine whose mother was a slave. I am the cousin of Afria. I am the niece of Coral Thompson and the daughter of Wade and Mildred Jackson. (*Fruit*, p.327)

This articulation reveals an understanding of herself as a product of the relationships between these historical migrants. Faith's identity is rooted in international migratory history; her ancestors belonged to one of the world's earliest representations of a globalised, multicultural society. As Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert writes, the Caribbean constituted 'the site of the first multi-national, multi-cultural experiment, the crucible of diversity, the cradle of ethnic and cultural syncretism'.<sup>196</sup> The Caribbean islands form the landing point for the cultures of the world. Faith's mixed heritage represents the migratory history and ethnic diversity of the region: her African, European and Arawak background reflects the 'ethnic and cultural syncretism', the aforementioned hybridity effected by colonialism. However, the tradition of migration to and from the region also foreshadows the sense of disconnection and cultural alienation experienced within the contemporary Caribbean and its diaspora.

This begs the question, what, then, is lost through 'ethnic and cultural syncretism'? Does an explanation for Faith or Avey's diasporic lack of identity lie in Davies's interpretation of the New World experience as based on a tradition of migration? Hall's understanding of diasporic identity is useful here in terms of linking Davies's argument regarding the fluidity of the region to Hall's similarly fluid concept of the construction of cultural identity.<sup>197</sup> Hall expands the idea of cultural synthesis as a process:

Cultural identities are emerging which are not fixed but poised, *in transition*, between different positions, which draw on different cultural positions at the same time [...] people who have been *dispersed* forever from their homelands [...] retain strong links with their places of origin and their traditions [...] obliged to come to terms with the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely.<sup>198</sup>

Hall espouses a concept of cultural identity which is adaptable, moulding and redefining itself to encompass new experiences, reflecting the process of creolisation. This creolised diasporic identity encompasses both the originary culture and that of the new, host country, emulating the cultural border-crossing inherent in migratory movements in and out of the Caribbean region. Yet Hall's definition is problematic in understanding the cultural identity of Avey and Faith, who, living in the Caribbean diaspora in America or England, appear not to have 'retain[ed] strong links with their places

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<sup>196</sup> Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, 'Women Against the Grain: The Pitfalls of Theorizing Caribbean Women's Writing' in *Winds of Change*, ed. by Adele Newson and Linda Strong-Leek (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), pp.161-168 (p.161).

<sup>197</sup> The fluidity of identity is similarly proposed by Glissant in his abandonment of 'the idea of fixed being' and his argument that cultures are constantly redefined and renewed through their confrontation with opposing cultures. See Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.14.

<sup>198</sup> Hall in *Modernity*, ed. by Hall and others, p.629.

of origin and their traditions'. Their lack of knowledge suggests assimilation has occurred, at least in part, at the expense of their black identity.<sup>199</sup>

Foregrounding Hall's observation that 'the Caribbean is already the diaspora of Africa, Europe, China, Asia, India'<sup>200</sup> I argue that through rediscovery of their ancestry and traditions on New World soil, Faith and Avey come to understand their elusive cultural identities as a composite of their British, or American identities, in equal parts to their African American or Caribbean selves and their original ancestral African culture. Davies' notion of migratory subjectivity, that the diasporic migrant is 'a member of overlapping communities', assists in supporting this argument regarding Avey and Faith's migratory subjectivity.<sup>201</sup> Through their return to the Caribbean, both women recover knowledge about specific aspects of their identities which the diaspora has failed to nurture and inform. Thus, the construction of this complex cultural identity, or lack thereof, is related to Faith and Avey's narratives of return in that the return to ancestral and cultural origins enables the women to recognise their position within the international black diaspora. The birthplace of black diasporic culture in the Americas, the Caribbean, holds the key to understanding *Présence Africaine* within Avey and Faith's complex African/Caribbean identities.

### The Return to Ancestral 'Origins' through the Rediscovery of Africa

The 'African' element is a crucial ingredient in the complex mixture of Faith and Avey's conflicting racial and cultural identities. The women's displacement from the originary home gives rise to a certain degree of alienation as both protagonists have, to varying degrees, allowed their sense of self to be dominated by the culture of the diasporic home as opposed to that of their African/Caribbean ancestors. Each protagonist faces a cultural void, a missing link. Hall suggests that Caribbean identity is constructed from three essential 'presences': *Présence Africaine*, *Présence Européenne* and *Présence Américain*.<sup>202</sup> He underscores the important African presence, emphasising the profound and ongoing impact of the loss of Africa for diasporic African people: 'Africa is the name of the missing term [...] which lies at the centre of our cultural identity and gives it a meaning'.<sup>203</sup> He proposes that 'the rift of separation, the "loss of identity", which has been integral to the Caribbean experience only begins to be healed when these forgotten connections are once more set in place'.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Chapter Three further investigates how assimilation can occur at the expense of one's originary, Caribbean cultural identity and subsequently create a crisis of unbelonging for the diasporic subject. In Chapter Three this notion is specifically developed in light of the Hispanic Caribbean experience through an analysis of the work of Dominican American Julia Alvarez in order to ascertain similarities in pan-Caribbean diasporic experience and literary preoccupations with the narrative of return.

<sup>200</sup> Hall in Morley and Chen, p.501.

<sup>201</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.2.

<sup>202</sup> See Introduction, p.34.

<sup>203</sup> Hall in Rutherford, p.224.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.224-5.

The Africa which was left behind, that crucial 'presence' in contemporary Caribbean society and African/Caribbean cultural identity cannot truly be reconnected with because that Africa, the pre-colonial land from which Faith and Avey's ancestors came, no longer exists. Although the African presence can be confronted in every black, brown, mulatto and perhaps even white face in the Caribbean and its diaspora, as Hall explains:

[W]hether it is, in this sense, an *origin* of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could find any final or literal sense return, is more open to doubt. The original 'Africa' is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible. We must not collude with the West which, precisely, normalises and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past. Africa must at last be reckoned with by Caribbean people, but it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered.<sup>205</sup>

Whilst he acknowledges that Africa has changed, and with it the originary African culture of the African/Caribbean people, Hall still emphasises the image or idea of the continent as central to the construction of diasporic black identity:

It is because this New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to 'lost origins' [...] to go back to the beginning.<sup>206</sup>

I propose that whilst neither Faith nor Avey is able to make a physical return to the Africa which has been left behind, there is an alternative return which is of cultural value: the return to lost origins can also be achieved symbolically, or metaphorically.

Furthering Davies' argument that migration, displacement and uprootedness are central to the meaning of the African diaspora, I contend that these diasporic experiences and their ramifications upon the contemporary African/Caribbean psyche are central in understanding the significance of the metaphorical journeys which Faith and Avey make.<sup>207</sup> Contemporary diasporic cultural alienation can be linked to that initial ancestral dislocation, the traumatic rupture from Africa. Carew writes that 'the Caribbean person is subjected to successive waves of cultural alienation from birth – a process that has its origins in a mosaic of cultural fragments'.<sup>208</sup> For Carew, slavery and its effects are crucial to understanding the identity crises amongst black people in the contemporary diaspora: 'to rob people or countries of their name is to set in motion a psychic disturbance which can in turn create a permanent crisis of identity'.<sup>209</sup> As a result of the fragmentation of African culture enforced by colonial slavery, Caribbean people were forced to disconnect from *Présence Africaine*. Thus, Carew argues that

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p.231.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p.236.

<sup>207</sup> Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, p.128.

<sup>208</sup> Carew, 'Caribbean Writer and Exile', p.454.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., pp.457-8.

the Caribbean writer undertakes a search for this identity in his or her work, moving 'inwards towards some undiscovered heartland', towards an originary home and knowledge of the African experience in the New World in an effort to recover the cultural fragments which have been lost.<sup>210</sup>

Levy and Marshall's novels represent the fragmentation of cultural identity effected by the experience of African slavery; their work presents the three cultural presences – *Africaine*, *Européenne* and *Americain* – which Hall suggests are crucial elements of Caribbean identity.<sup>211</sup> At the crux of *Praisesong* is Avey's buried memory of her Great Aunt Cuney, the woman with whom she was annually sent to spend summer holidays as a schoolgirl. Avey spent every August on Tatem Island 'just across from Beaufort, on the South Carolina tidewater' (*Praisesong*, p.32). Cuney is the carrier of the family's black, or African, history and culture.<sup>212</sup> She still lives in the south, near the cotton plantation where, presumably their more distant African ancestors worked. She maintains traditional cultural and religious practices, attending Church services and Ring Shout ceremonies until she is evicted for 'crossing her feet' in a gesture mistakenly interpreted as a forbidden dance move (*Praisesong*, p.33). She is the only relative to refer to Avey by her full name, 'Avatara', after her grandmother (*Praisesong*, p.32). The description of Cuney, 'who resembled the trees in her straight, large-boned mass and height' (*Praisesong*, p.32), further connects her to the geographical history of the area in which she lives.<sup>213</sup> Like Levy, who uses the concept of a family tree to frame her novel, Marshall uses the image of the tree to reinforce the idea of a connection to ancestral roots and Cuney's connection to the family's African ancestors. The tree imagery implies that Cuney has roots which stretch far beneath the surface, into the depths of a dark and buried history. The tree additionally symbolises Cuney's connection to the landscape; she is solidly and deeply rooted in the land which her ancestors were brought to in chains, with a firm hold on her sense of this history and her own place within it.

When Avey recollects her bi-weekly trips across Tatem to Ibo Landing, Great Aunt Cuney's role exemplifies her connection to African history, to Hall's '*Présence Africaine*' on New World soil, and her role as carrier of this history. Cuney and Avey would trek across Tatem, along 'the footpath the old woman knew by heart' until 'coming to meet them like an eager host through the trees, there could be heard the bright sound of the river that was their destination. And over it, farther off, the distant yet powerful voice of the sea' (*Praisesong*, p.37). As a link to the sea, and thus to the Middle Passage, the river symbolises Avey and Cuney's enduring links to the memory of their African ancestors and originary

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<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p.469.

<sup>211</sup> See Hall in Rutherford, pp.224-5.

<sup>212</sup> Recalling Berrian's claim regarding Caribbean women, or mother figures as 'vehicles of culture and history'. See 'Claiming an Identity', p.200.

<sup>213</sup> See Rhonda Cobham, 'Revisioning Our Kumblas: Transforming Feminist and Nationalist Agendas in Three Caribbean Women's Texts', *Callaloo*, 16, 1 (Winter 1993) 44-64, for a discussion of how the androgynous depiction of Great Aunt Cuney, emphasis on functional clothing, physical strength and communion with nature as specifically feminine attributes also functions as a transformative approach to gender-bound social roles.

home. Beverley Ormerod writes about the inherent symbolism of water imagery in Caribbean literature, referring to the sea as 'one repository of the epic past'.<sup>214</sup> Carew, too, writes that 'racial memories are rivers leading to the sea where the memory of mankind is stored'.<sup>215</sup> The river and the sea hold the key to knowledge and understanding of Avey's African heritage as the body of water acts as a link, both literal and metaphorical, between the African and American continents, between the black past and the diasporic present.<sup>216</sup>

Marshall's depiction of the women's journey to the river, to the source of their diasporic experience, reinforces the idea of a displaced, migratory people. Young Avey has journeyed from Brooklyn, to Tatem, and across Tatem to the Landing, travelling backwards to the source of her ancestors' experiences in the New World. An interpretation of the journey motif as metaphor here emphasises the emotional and historical distance which Avey must travel to recover memories of this ancestry. Marshall's description of the surrounding landscape propels both Avey and the reader back in time in an attempt to reconnect with a distant African past:

All semblance of a road vanished, the trees and plant cover disappeared and the countryside opened into a vast denuded tract of land that had once, more than a century ago, been the largest plantation of sea island cotton thereabouts. (*Praisesong*, p.36)

The image conjures what Ormerod describes as 'the power that landscape has [...] to evoke the forgotten past'.<sup>217</sup> References to the American Civil war during which 'the huge field had fallen victim to the pillaging and had never been replaced' (*Praisesong*, p36) are similarly atmospheric, evoking memories of a traumatic past. The area is steeped in an American history deeply linked to the history of the African diaspora. The now defunct cotton plantation is a stark reminder of the suffering and exploitation of black slaves, and the reference to General William Tecumseh Sherman recalls a war between the slave states of the Deep South and the more progressive free states of the North. The vast emptiness of the deserted landscape, the site of so much pain for the Africans brought to live there, exudes a haunting quality.

Surrounded by reminders of the painful and traumatic history of their African ancestors, Cuney tells Avey the story of a slave ship's arrival in the Americas:

It was here that they brought 'em. They taken 'em out of the boats right here where we's standing [...] Nobody remembers how many of 'em it was, but they was a good few 'cording to my gran' who was a little girl no bigger than you when it happened [...] The minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran said, and taken a look around [...] They seen things that day you and me don't have the power to see.

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<sup>214</sup> Ormerod, *Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel*, p.42.

<sup>215</sup> Carew, 'Caribbean Writer and Exile', p.457.

<sup>216</sup> Thus, when Avey's transformation takes place on a sea voyage it reflects an inversion of the Middle Passage. See Chapter One, pp.67-68.

<sup>217</sup> Ormerod, *Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel*, p.41.

'Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you 'bout things happened long before they was born and things to come long after they's dead. Well, they seen everything that was to happen 'round here that day. The slavery time and the war my gran' always talked about, the 'mancipation and everything after that right on up to the hard times today [...] they turned, my gran' said, and looked at the white folks what brought 'em here [...] and walked on back down to the edge of the river here [...] They just kept walking right on out over the river [...] chains didn't stop those Ibos none. Neither iron [...] They just kept on walking like the water was solid ground [...] They realised there wasn't nothing between them and home but some water. (*Praisesong*, pp.37-39)

The story takes on a mythological quality in its re-telling and has become something of a family legend. Passed down from Cuney's grandmother, who allegedly witnessed the event as a child, it is cemented in their familial oral tradition. Avey fulfils her role as receptor of this mythology when 'back home after only her first summer in Tatem she had recounted the whole thing almost word for word to her three brothers' (*Praisesong*, p.38). Like her Aunt, Avey passes on the story which signifies her own ancestors' arrival in the Americas. The value of the tale lies not in its accuracy – the original witness is a young girl, and the story has survived multiple generations of re-telling – but in the Ibo's resilience and defiance and the message of determination and hope which their return to Africa conveys.

Avey's eventual challenge to the truth of the Ibos' return and Cuney's response reveal the importance of belief in this myth of survival and return to the ancestral homeland. Not until she is ten – 'that old!' – does Avey ask how the Ibo people, in their chains and irons, managed to walk back to Africa without drowning (*Praisesong*, p.39). For Rhonda Cobham, 'Avey's questioning of the legend's authority [...] reveals she has missed the connection with an African past that it maintains'.<sup>218</sup> Avey's questioning of the legend also marks in the novel the beginning of her alienation from her African self, a process which is reversed through her journey to Carriacou and participation in the Big Drum/Nation Dance: 'she has learned enough to reconnect with this vision forty years later at the meeting on Carriacou'.<sup>219</sup> Avey's challenge is met with 'disappointment and sadness' and Cuney's verbal retort, 'did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?' (*Praisesong*, p.40). In comparing the Scriptures, stories from the Christian Bible, and the Ibos, Cuney's response illustrates the importance of faith.<sup>220</sup> Regardless of the incredibility of events recorded as history, mythology, or folklore, belief in their possibility provides communities with hope. Equating African folklore with Biblical stories, Cuney asserts the cultural autonomy of her people and challenges the religious authority assumed by Christian colonisers in their conversion efforts. Most importantly, this story chronicles a captured people's return home. Their historic journey is

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<sup>218</sup> Cobham, 'Revisioning Our Kumblas', p.54.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54.

<sup>220</sup> Barbara T. Christian refers to Ibo Landing as Cuney's church, 'her religion' in 'Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*', *Callaloo*, 18 (Spring-Summer 1983), 74-84 (p.76).

remembered and celebrated on behalf of the millions of dispersed African people who will never have the same opportunity to return to the land which their ancestors were forced to leave. Avey's own enslaved ancestors were not able to return: they were separated from their families and communities, longing for the homeland, the language, and the culture left behind. This traumatic initial separation has continuing repercussions as Cuney, Avey, and millions of people of African descent are displaced from their ancestral home.

Avey is a woman now unable to recognise herself, haunted by dreams and memories of her childhood in Tatem. In neglecting her African heritage and her family's slave origins in the Americas, Avey has denied part of herself and failed to achieve the enriching 'cultural synthesis' which Glissant advocates, or occupy the cultural 'in-between' spaces which Bhabha argues towards. She has lost the fragments of her black cultural identity and her African ancestral history and become detached from a full understanding of her sense of self, suffering what Joseph Young and Jana Evans Braziel term a kind of 'cultural amnesia'.<sup>221</sup> This amnesia and denial ultimately lead to Avey's identity crisis, her inability to understand – 'what was the man going on about?' (*Praisesong*, p.167) – let alone answer, Joseph Lebert's question, 'and what you is?' (*Praisesong*, p.166). Levy's Faith suffers a similar breakdown which is explicitly linked to her inability to comprehend her racial identity:

I could see my reflection in the wardrobe mirror. A black girl lying in a bed. I covered the mirror with a bath towel. I didn't want to be black anymore. I just wanted to live. The other mirror in the room I covered with a tee-shirt [...] I don't know how long I stayed there. I heard rain hitting the window and sometimes a shaft of light as fine as a pin would dart into the room. But it would never get me. I was safe. (*Fruit*, pp.160-161)

Discussing Marshall's novel, Cobham argues that narratives about marginalised peoples often utilise madness or socially deviant behaviour as a strategy for representing the character's rejection of the roles assigned by the dominant culture.<sup>222</sup> This argument is also applicable to my reading of Faith's crisis as she struggles with Britain's perception of blackness as an endorsement of her alien status, or cultural difference. Unable to reconcile her British identity with her diasporic black subjectivity, Faith attempts to hide from knowledge of her blackness by covering the mirrors which reflect it, perceiving her skin colour negatively without comprehending the significance it has on her personal identity and the collective traumatic history which she shares as a member of the black diaspora.

Like Marshall, Levy uses the motif of the mirror and the idea of alienation from one's reflection to represent her protagonist's failure to know herself. Whereas Avey fails to recognise her reflection in mirrors, estranged from understanding the meaning of her black identity, Faith actively hides from hers.

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<sup>221</sup> Joseph Young and Jana Evans Braziel, 'Introduction: Cultural Amnesia and the Academy' in *Race and the Foundations of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2006), pp.1-31 (p.1).

<sup>222</sup> Cobham, 'Revisioning Our Kumblas', pp.57-58.

She, too, suffers a kind of 'cultural amnesia'. Discovering their daughter's depression, at the end of Part I of the novel, Faith's parents send her to Jamaica because 'it might help' and 'everyone should know where they come from' (*Fruit*, p.162). When Faith becomes acquainted with her Jamaican family, knowledge of her ancestry helps her overcome this amnesia and accept her blackness as representative of a heritage to take pride in, substantiating Cobham's argument that in Caribbean women's novels, mental breakdowns 'are used as emotionally releasing devices which help the female protagonist articulate her sense of social inadequacy and spiritual deprivation'.<sup>223</sup> Subsequent chapters explore how Danticat and Alvarez similarly use the narrative strategy of a breakdown, or identity crisis, as a turning point for their protagonists to embark upon a journey towards healing and recovery of their fractured and fragmented identities.<sup>224</sup> Following the emotional release of their crises, Faith and Avey embark upon journeys which will reinstate a sense of social consequence and spiritual connection with an international black diasporic community and their shared history.

Towards the end of Faith's visit, Aunt Coral and cousin Vincent take her to Jamaica's Blue Mountains where they visit 'a big house which overlooks Kingston' (*Fruit*, p.324-5). Her relatives have brought her to see what is behind the house:

It was a shed. It had an opening for the door and two windows that had no glass. It was made of wood [...] inside were wooden bunks like three large shelves up a wall. Slave quarters, Vincent had told me. (*Fruit*, p.325)

Faith confronts her ancestors' lives as slaves in the Caribbean and the conditions in which they lived, in dilapidated sheds behind the grand houses of their slave-owning masters. This confrontation forces her to recognise her heritage and be proud of the traumas, struggles and hardships which her people endured and survived. She can no longer avoid looking at her reflection: Faith accepts the African 'presence' within her as an essential fragment of her cultural identity. When Faith pronounces, 'I am descended from Katherine whose mother was a slave' (*Fruit*, p.327), she articulates this process of identity formation and acquisition, brought to her via knowledge of her diverse ancestral roots, and she finally begins to feel a sense of belonging. At the end of the novel, Faith realises, 'I thought my history started when the ship carrying my parents sailed from Jamaica and docked in England on Guy Fawkes' night. But I was wrong' (*Fruit*, p.325). Faith's acknowledgement of her hybrid, diasporic cultural identity reflects the relevance of the region's migratory history within contemporary Caribbean society. Her history, and the construction of her diasporic cultural identity, begins not in England, but in the Americas, in the Caribbean, and, crucially, in the African presence within that New World experience.

Although both protagonists embark upon a journey which compels them to realise the significance of their African ancestry within the context of traumatic colonial history, neither woman

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<sup>223</sup> Cobham, 'Revisioning Our Kumblas', p.58.

<sup>224</sup> See Chapter Two, pp.112-116; Chapter Three, pp.144-148.

makes the physical return to Africa. They discover, or rediscover, their African roots and identity on Caribbean, 'New World' soil. The 'African' in their 'African/Caribbean' identity can never truly be revisited – as Hall acknowledges, the Africa of their enslaved ancestors no longer exists.<sup>225</sup> A return to Africa is somewhat redundant as although their hybrid identity contains an African *Présence*, element, or fragment, neither Faith nor Avey can claim some notion of a pure African cultural identity. Referring to the twentieth-century preoccupation of a 'return to Africa' amongst black diasporic people, Glissant asks, 'what to make of the fate of those who return to Africa, helped and encouraged by the calculating philanthropy of their masters, but *who are no longer African?*'.<sup>226</sup> I posit that the return to Africa does not constitute a return to an ancestral home in its entirety: although black diasporic people may claim African ancestry, the origins of the uniquely hybrid identity of people like Avey and Faith are found within Bhabha's in-between spaces. Because of the complex nature of diasporic black, or African/Caribbean cultural identity as migratory, fluid and subject to constant change and evolution, the origins of this identity cannot be traced to one specific geographical location.

However, through their narratives of return to the Caribbean, Avey and Faith come to know the origins of their complex identity as it evolved on New World soil and understand the *Présence Africaine* within their hybridised diasporic selves. Of Marshall's Avey, Gadsby formulates, 'it is perfectly logical that she would travel to one of the most diverse regions for peoples of the African diaspora to redefine herself'.<sup>227</sup> Gadsby draws this conclusion because Avey and Faith's identities are framed by the African experience in the diaspora. It is this diasporic African identity which is realised, not some notion of the pure African identity left behind by their ancestors. Avey and Faith visit the 'crucible of diversity',<sup>228</sup> the place where that multiplicity of identities – African, Arawak/Indian, English, Irish, Scottish, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese, Indian – fused to become the elusive 'Caribbean' diasporic identity which the women come to consciously assume.

### **Race, Knowledge and Diasporic Discontent**

Faith and Avey's 'narratives of return' revolve around the acquisition of knowledge regarding their history and ancestry; both women leave the diaspora and learn about their racial and cultural backgrounds. They discover their hybrid cultural identity not in the diaspora, where they were born and raised, but abroad, in the Caribbean; the diaspora fails to inform their racialised identities. In 1952, Frantz Fanon wrote, 'in the Antilles that view of the world is white because no black voice exists',

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<sup>225</sup> See Chapter One, p.57.

<sup>226</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.17.

<sup>227</sup> Gadsby, *Sucking Salt*, p.159.

<sup>228</sup> Paravisini-Gebert in Newson and Strong-Leek, p.161.

implying a colonial bias in perspective and representation for black people.<sup>229</sup> In the latter half of the twentieth century, historians and critics like Fanon and Carew began to widely acknowledge the lack of a black voice, black representation and knowledge of black history within the western dominated field of academia as a reflection of longstanding racial denial within Caribbean society itself.<sup>230</sup> Thus, finding the black voice in the Antilles has been a prevalent concern in Caribbean literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Freed, to an extent, from the constraints of an oppressive colonial rule, postcolonial writers, particularly those living in the diaspora like Levy and Marshall, may look back to the Caribbean to rediscover knowledge of the region, their history, their culture and race.

In *Race and the Foundations of Knowledge* (2006), Joseph Young and Jana Evans Braziel argue towards a 'cultural amnesia' within the academy regarding the ways in which race has come to be constructed, understood, and known, suggesting that their book 'offers both deliberate critical resistance to the historical erasures of public memory [...] and revisionist attempts to restore what has been erased within the cultural memory of the Americas'.<sup>231</sup> Elizabeth McNeil relates the idea of cultural amnesia to her analysis of *Praisesong*, arguing that 'loss of the ability to narrate one's past is a sort of amnesia resulting in a diminished sense of self and inability to play a leading role in one's life'.<sup>232</sup> Paulette Brown-Hinds makes a similar case that Avey is 'haunted by memories of the past and suffering from a type of cultural amnesia'.<sup>233</sup> Indeed, *Praisesong* reveals that Avey has forgotten her *Présence Africaine*, startled by her black reflection. However, if we consider the cultural memory of the African diaspora as a whole, not simply ways of knowing race and racialised understanding in the United States, we come to a larger problem concerning the erasures within both familial and official history. These erasures also affect Faith who lacks knowledge of her African/Caribbean family history. Acknowledging past erasures and oppressions of race and racialised knowledge, we can begin to understand race as it is constructed and known by black diasporic people in literary representations from the late twentieth century. Young and Braziel further suggest, 'the Americas have distorted or erased their own Africanist presences'.<sup>234</sup> This implication that racialized knowledge can be erased or denied from within supports my reading that Avey and Faith's knowledge of their racial identity has in part been erased by the black

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<sup>229</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 2008), p.118. In discussing how novels of historical fiction 'return' to the past to re-tell history from an undocumented, marginalised perspective, Chapter Four deals more specifically with the notion of historical perspective. See Chapter Four, pp.158-160.

<sup>230</sup> See Carew, 'Caribbean Writer and Exile'; Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001).

<sup>231</sup> Young and Braziel, *Race and the Foundations of Knowledge*, p.1.

<sup>232</sup> Elizabeth McNeil, 'The Gullah Seeker's Journey in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*', *MELUS*, 34, 1 (Spring 2009), 185-209 (p.203).

<sup>233</sup> Paulette Brown-Hinds, "'In the Blood": Performing Memory in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*' in *Centre of Remembrance* ed. by Joan Anim-Addo (London: Mango Publishing, 2002), pp.95-112 (p.97).

<sup>234</sup> Young and Braziel, *Race and the Foundations of Knowledge*, p.1.

community: Faith and Avey's own ancestors' attitudes towards their racial heritage may have significantly influenced the protagonists' notions of identity.

To illustrate this point I turn to Levy's novel, which reveals the history of race within the Caribbean as one of self-denial, or, as Ormerod puts it, 'the prevalence of racial shame in the heritage of slavery'.<sup>235</sup> Faith's paternal great-grandfather was remembered as 'part French and part Arawak', or 'part-Indian and part-Spanish', even at times, 'part-Irish and the other part-Indian Maharaja' (*Fruit*, p.282). Her paternal great-grandmother was 'Arawak and Indian', as Aunt Coral tells Faith, 'your grandmother would say her parents were anything – they were descended from anywhere where the skin is darker than a white man. Anywhere except Africa' (*Fruit*, p.282). The pigmentocracy implemented under colonial rule effected the denial of African roots within Caribbean society. An awareness of the denial and oppression of African roots in New World history informs an understanding of Faith and Avey's identity crises and lack of knowledge regarding their black cultural identity as a result of the legacy of denial which colonial prejudices instilled.<sup>236</sup> This world-view, distorted by centuries of colonial domination, continues to influence black people in the international diaspora as a legacy of self-denial confuses knowledge of racial origins. The rediscovery of this knowledge via a return to the ancestral home transforms the way in which Faith and Avey view race, and their own racial identities, enabling them to take full possession of their black diasporic subjectivity.

In 'Bittersweet (Be)Longing: Filling the Void of History in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*' (2006), Elena Machado Sáez suggests that the advent of British multiculturalism has led to, not a society which is racially tolerant, but one which is racially unaware. She advocates that, 'multiculturalism does not translate into racial tolerance, but rather creates what I term a "regime of colour blindness"'.<sup>237</sup> This idea of 'colour blindness' is akin to Braziel and Young's 'cultural amnesia' in that it implies a form of forgetting, neglect, denial or ignorance of one's roots. It is particularly applicable to Faith, who appears ignorant of the significance of her black identity, an ignorance which is perhaps not so surprising when we consider the precedent set by her great-grandparents' efforts to deny African blood. Alexis Shotwell argues a similar case about attitudes towards race in the contemporary United States suggesting that, 'the last fifteen years have seen a decided turn towards a rhetoric of "colour blindness" [...] bringing implicit racialized stances of uneasiness together with a liberal discourse of

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<sup>235</sup> Ormerod, *Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel*, p.13.

<sup>236</sup> The skin whitening episode discussed in Chapter Two reveals how pervasive the legacy of colonial racism is throughout the Caribbean region. See Chapter Two, p.107. Chapter Three considers how language and culture are privileged as markers of identity where there is a pervasive denial of black racial heritage in the Hispanic Caribbean.

<sup>237</sup> Elena Machado Sáez, 'Bittersweet (Be)Longing: Filling the Void of History in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*', *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, 4, 1, article 5 (2006). Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol4/iss1/5>, p.1.

“freedom and equality for all”<sup>238</sup>. Shotwell proposes that modern liberalism is in danger of ignoring the real issue of racism in contemporary society in favour of a colour blind attitude which advocates equal rights whilst forgetting the inherent racial prejudices which underlie a historically unequal society.

Bringing Shotwell’s concerns in line with Levy’s portrayal of Faith’s embarrassment of her Jamaican parents, her ignorance of her African/Caribbean heritage, and her close relationship with her best friend Marion’s white, racist family, I understand ‘colour blindness’ as an inability to recognise obvious racial difference, or a denial or ignorance of racial difference, whilst failing to confront ingrained racial prejudice. As Young and Braziel argue:

[T]he rhetoric of colour blindness places us squarely in the vise of an insidious racial bind. For individuals who insist on colour blindness, it remains an interrogated common knowledge that ‘race does not exist’. Yes, race is a cultural construct. Yet why insist on and persist in thinking that cultural constructs ‘do not exist’? Not only do they exist, but they are encoded with real material, political, and social forms of power.<sup>239</sup>

If race is a cultural construct, it is specifically one constructed by the ‘Other’. One can only be ‘Black’ in the face of ‘Whiteness’, or vice versa. Therefore, knowledge of race and related cultural identity comes through an acknowledgement of difference and racial diversity. It follows that societal or individual ‘colour blindness’ can itself be a covert form of racial oppression, as it fails to realise the significant influence which racial origins have on the formation of a complex black diasporic identity. In forgetting, neglecting or denying the African presence in their hybrid identities, Faith and Avey enact a form of cultural oppression upon themselves. Their return journeys to the ancestral home serve to liberate them from this.

The diaspora permits, allows, and even at times encourages, Avey and Faith’s ‘cultural amnesia’ and ‘colour blindness’. The women are only liberated from denial or ignorance of their complex cultural identity through their return to the Caribbean. This suggests that diasporic life enables oppressive attitudes towards blackness: the diaspora fails to inform the women’s hybrid diasporic black subjectivities. This lack of information leads to the crises which compel them to seek out knowledge of their cultural identities which will enable them to embrace their migratory and diasporic subjectivity, elsewhere. Thus, the diaspora is partly responsible for these crises for failing to cultivate the women’s complex identities in full. For Avey and her husband Jay, the annual trip south to Tatem ‘became a thing of the past [...] so did the trips they used to regularly make over to Harlem to see their old friends [...] All such was soon supplanted by the study manuals, the self-improvement books’ (*Praisesong*, p.116). The pressures of the diaspora and the demands of working life supersede the connections Avey and

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<sup>238</sup> Alexis Shotwell, ‘Commonsense Racial Formation: Wahneema Lubiano, Antonio Gramsci, and the Importance of the Nonpropositional’ in *Race and the Foundations of Knowledge*, ed. by Joseph Young and Jana Evans Braziel (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006) pp.46-62 (p.46).

<sup>239</sup> Young and Braziel, *Race and the Foundations of Knowledge*, p.4.

her family have to their roots, their African ancestry and Harlem community. Faith, too, feels pressure from the diaspora to conform in order to succeed. Discussing the problems faced by black women in the workforce with her mother, Faith imagines,

I could feel her mentally combing at my 'too long and a little fuzzy' hair, straightening it, cutting it short, neat [...] dressing me in a knee-length skirt with a nice white button-up cardigan and placing a copy of the New Testament in my hand. (*Fruit*, p.73)

Avey and Faith are aware that they must assimilate and conform to become more employable and successful. These examples illustrate that the diaspora demands Avey and Faith disconnect themselves from their African heritage to improve their standard of living.

The overwhelming demands and influences of diasporic life are in part responsible for the women's identity crises; the balance of representation of the women's hybrid identities must be restored. This is further demonstrated by representations of the diaspora in the novels' depictions of Faith and Avey's breakdowns. When Avey quits her cruise at Grenada before irrationally deciding to attend the Big Drum/Nation Dance, she is effectively rejecting the western diaspora, symbolically represented by the luxurious *Bianca Pride*, with its 'wealth of silver crystal', 'chandeliers, wall sconces and gilt-framed mirrors' (*Praisesong*, p.46) in favour of the Caribbean *Emanuel C*, 'a relic, with the same scarred and battered look' (*Praisesong*, p.193). In the midst of her breakdown, Avey turns her back on the *Bianca Pride* and boards the *Emanuel C*, marking the beginning of her metaphorical journey towards a cultural renewal of her black roots. Much critical ground has been covered in addressing the significance of Avey's rebirth aboard the *Emanuel C* as representative of a reverse Middle Passage. McNeil writes that 'the ancestral re-memory of the Middle Passage is suddenly revealed to her, which allows Avey to put her middle-class American pain into perspective'.<sup>240</sup> Missy Dehn Kubitschek similarly suggests that 'during the crossing to Carriacou, the island where her true self is reborn, Avey recovers her connections to a defining element of her ancestral history, the Middle Passage'.<sup>241</sup>

Whilst my intention is not simply to reiterate previous studies, it is significant to note the symbolism inherent in the trope of the sea voyage in Caribbean literature. Allusions to the Middle Passage and its accompanying trauma are inescapable, yet Gadsby's work on *Praisesong* revises this notion of the subverted Middle Passage. Unlike McNeil and Kubitschek, Gadsby emphasises the symbolism of the *Bianca Pride* over that of the widely discussed *Emmanuel C*. For Gadsby it is the cruise liner which represents the reverse Middle Passage as the vessel in which Avey leaves the diaspora and arrives in the Caribbean, and the space where breakdown first manifests itself:

While aboard the cruise ship she is plagued by dreams, disorientation, and frequent nausea. The cruise also represents Avey's complete disconnection from her Southern

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<sup>240</sup> McNeil, 'The Gullah Seeker's Journey', p.196.

<sup>241</sup> Missy Dehn Kubitschek, 'Paule Marshall's Women on Quest', *Black American Literature Forum*, 21, 1/2 (Spring-Summer 1987), 43-60 (p.47).

roots on Tatem Island [...] a reverse Middle Passage in showing Avey's ability to embrace the trappings of middle-class life, signified by her voyage to the colonies as a privileged passenger on board a cruise ship, followed by her personal transformation.<sup>242</sup>

Thus, having rejected the *Bianca Pride*, aboard the dilapidated schooner, *Emmanuel C*, Avey experiences 'a shock of recognition' (*Praisesong*, p.193) seated amongst the other black passengers. She begins to reconnect with their collective history; knowledge of her true self and ancestry are reawakened and her colour blindness and cultural amnesia begin to dissipate.

Avey's ignorance of her blackness and subsequent breakdown are particularly interesting because, unlike Faith, as a young adult, she appears secure in knowledge of her race. As part of their Sunday ritual, Avey and her husband treasured the spirituals, as 'black voices rose all morning from the secondhand Philco [...] The Southerneers, The Fisk Jubilee Choir, Wings Over Jordan [...] The Five Blind Boys of Atlanta, Georgia' (*Praisesong*, p.124). The couple took pleasure and solace in the culture of the black diaspora. Jay would recite poems he was taught as a boy in his small segregated school in Kansas, complaining 'schools up north didn't teach coloured children anything about the race, about themselves' (*Praisesong*, p.125). A lack of racial knowledge in the diaspora can therefore also be partly attributed to the failure of the education system to cater for its country's multicultural population. This is similarly true for Faith: although her English school teaches its pupils about the colonial slave trade, Faith feels no connection to this history. She recalls in a detached manner, 'we had to write essays telling the facts – how the slaves were captured and then transported from Africa to the New World' and remembers, 'we drew diagrams [...] like we drew diagrams of sheep farming in Australia' (*Fruit*, p.4). The pupils are not engaged with the realities of colonial history and this history's impact upon the formation of multicultural twentieth-century Britain. Faith feels no more informed regarding the history of the African diaspora, to which she belongs, than that of distant Australasia.

Where, then, can knowledge of racial and cultural origins be found in the diaspora? In Marshall's novel, home exists as the space in which to transmit this kind of knowledge. Domestic activities, such as listening to the Sunday spirituals and learning about black poets are important in enforcing Avey's black cultural identity. In observing certain rituals Avey and Jay reinforce their race consciousness and pass this knowledge on to their children. Keith A. Sandiford writes:

[I]nsofar as Jay and Avey found sustenance and renewal in their weekly observances of the racial myth embodied in jazz (Avery Parrish), spirituals (Fisk Jubilee Choir and the Five Blind Boys of Atlanta), and poetry (Langston Hughes, Dunbar, and Johnson), they ensured the survival of the Ibo myth and the protective power it afforded.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Gadsby, *Sucking Salt*, p.157.

<sup>243</sup> Keith A. Sandiford, 'Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*: The Reluctant Heiress, or Whose Life is it Anyway?', *Black American Literature Forum*, 20, 4 (Winter 1986), 371-392 (p.380).

These aspects of black culture – music, poetry and religion – provide strength for Avey and Jay in segregated America. The race-consciousness which Avey gleans from these cultural practices remains strong throughout her young life and early marriage. Over time, Avey disassociates herself from the black collective, turning to denial as a coping mechanism against the racial ignorance and violence within America, living ‘most of the sixties and the early seventies as if Watts and Selma and the tanks and Stoner guns in the streets of Detroit somehow did not pertain to her’ (*Praisesong*, p.140).<sup>244</sup> Thus, Avey ends up aboard the *Bianca Pride*, having neglected, or forgotten, knowledge of her ancestral origins, partly as a result of her own self-denial.

### **Diasporic Discontent: Racism in *Fruit of the Lemon***

I use ‘diasporic discontent’ to refer to diasporic attitudes towards race which make life difficult for migrants from minority ethnic groups, particularly those of African/Caribbean descent. My analysis of the selected texts discussed in this thesis refers to different kinds of and varying degrees of diasporic discontent.<sup>245</sup> This discontent is often a result of diasporic hostility regarding the migrant’s racial, linguistic, cultural or religious identity and includes negative stereotypes or derogatory attitudes which inhibit the social cohesion, socio-economic progress and general emotional and physical well-being of minority groups. However, I refer in this section particularly to the presentation of overt and covert racism and the relationship between diasporic discontent and Faith’s need to seek out an alternative cultural home as a site of identification and belonging. According to Sáez, Levy’s novel ‘constructs a Caribbean diasporic identity through the nostalgic acquisition of a historical context that is invested or maintained by commodities’; it is ‘through a combination of consumer citizenship and family history that Faith is later able to formulate an Afro-Caribbean and Black British subjectivity’.<sup>246</sup> Although I emphasise the important influence which the acquisition of a family history has upon the formation of Faith’s African/Caribbean and specifically black British identity, I dispute Faith’s breakdown as connected to what Sáez interprets as the commodification of her black ethnicity. Her lack of identity is primarily a result of diasporic discontent: cultural alienation, disengagement from the ancestral home and lack of knowledge regarding her racial origins. Arguing that multiculturalism in the novel does not translate into racial tolerance, but creates a ‘regime of colour blindness’, Sáez fails to acknowledge the racial tensions within Britain and denies the reality of the problem of societal and institutionalised racism which contribute to diasporic discontent.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> The argument towards violence as a legacy of colonial prejudice is developed in more detail throughout this thesis.

<sup>245</sup> For diasporic discontent see also Chapter Two, pp.108-110; Chapter Three, pp.124-128.

<sup>246</sup> Sáez, ‘Bittersweet (Be)Longing’, p.1.

<sup>247</sup> Sáez, ‘Bittersweet (Be)Longing’, p.1.

Levy's novel addresses the difficulties encountered by people of African/Caribbean descent living in London. Contextualising the novel at this point enables an appreciation of the racial tensions within the society in which it is set. As Sáez notes, references to popular culture, to films such as *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972), public figures like Margaret Thatcher (Prime Minister 1971-1990) and events like Lady Diana's marriage to Prince Charles (1981), 'give the reader the sense that the novel is set sometime during the 1980s'.<sup>248</sup> The last of the restrictive Commonwealth Immigration Acts (1962, 1968, 1971 and 1981) had been passed and the era coincided with a renewed interest in definitions of Englishness and the purity of English national identity.<sup>249</sup> The early 1980s saw a period of economic recession and against this backdrop there were outbreaks of social and political unrest including clashes between police and black Britons, most notably the Brixton riots of 1981 and 1985 which led to nationwide unrest in which racial tensions played a pivotal role. Support for the National Front and black rights was a key issue within the African/Caribbean diasporic community as racially motivated attacks heightened tensions within multicultural England.

Levy depicts how specific racial tensions in the diaspora can lead to diasporic discontent, thus necessitating the return in search of alternative cultural origins for the diasporic subject. The novel reveals how diasporic racial tensions manifest themselves within British society, and the particular ways in which incidents of societal racism influence Faith's life in the diaspora. The school-yard racist chant in the opening paragraph – 'Faith is a darkie and her mum and dad came on a banana boat' (*Fruit*, p.3) – reflects an underlying societal racism and foreshadows Faith's experiences as a young black woman in England. Throughout Part I, Faith is forced, even amongst friends, to confront what it means to be black within a predominantly white and inherently racist society. Faith's friend Marion's family welcome Faith when she visits their house: Marion's mother greets her warmly, and tells her to 'come in, sit down', offering her a cup of tea, a sandwich, a biscuit, a Coke, and, finally, 'what about a jacket potato, Faith? Won't take me a minute...' (*Fruit*, p.81); Marion's gran tells her, 'you look so nice Faith. You always look nice' (*Fruit*, p.82); Marion's younger sister, Trina, greets Faith with a smile and asks, 'How are you?' (*Fruit*, p.83); her father smiles and winks, joking, 'Long time no see [...] I miss you round here eating us out of house and home' (*Fruit*, p.84). Levy presents a white working class family who are fond of Faith and enjoy her company. Yet the derogatory language used in Faith's presence reveals a worryingly casual racism underneath these niceties.

Recounting an incident from school, Trina tells Marion, 'I had a fight with some wog [...] stupid coon spat at me and pulled me hair. So I hit her', before asking Faith, 'do you see anyone famous when you're at work?' (*Fruit*, p.83). Most disconcerting is Trina's indifference to Faith's black presence and

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<sup>248</sup> Sáez, 'Bittersweet (Be)Longing', p.1.

<sup>249</sup> See Gilroy, Chapter One in *The Black Atlantic* for his discussion on the relationships between race, culture, nationality and ethnicity during this period.

complete ignorance of the offensive terms 'wog' and 'coon' as she quickly disregards them and turns to chat to Faith. Marion's dad recounts the incident in similar language:

She went and clocked some darkie. And this coon's mum and dad came up the school wanting to see Trina. They said she'd been bullying their daughter. Now their daughter is a great big, six foot bloody gorilla [...] But then they starts shouting in my face that I don't know how to bring up my kids properly. I thought that's bloody rich coming from a coon. (*Fruit*, pp.84-85)

Both characters use the racist terms 'darkie' or 'coon'. Yet Marion's dad's account has a sinister undertone as his description of the black schoolgirl as 'a great big, six foot bloody gorilla' emulates colonial stereotypes of the black, primitive jungle dweller. Marion's gran's intervention, 'you don't need no bloody help from no nig-nog' (*Fruit*, p.85) reiterates these attitudes. Standing amongst this white family as they fling racist language around the room, Faith says, 'Marion looked at me briefly, smiled and shrugged a little' (*Fruit*, p.85). Marion's acknowledgment of Faith intimates that she is aware of the sensitivity of her friend's position and her family's insults but she smiles, shrugging them off. Marion does not contribute to the conversation but remains unapologetic for her family's behaviour and fails to intervene. Whilst Marion's dad suspects Faith is uncomfortable – 'you all right, Faith, you're ever so quiet?' (*Fruit*, p.85) – he fails to relate her silence to offence he may have caused.

As Marion and her dad get into Faith's car, his offensive remarks continue with 'no offence, Faith love – but women drivers...' (*Fruit*, p.86). The ellipsis implies the insult but whereas Marion's dad is able to vocalise his racism without hesitation, he is unable to explicitly state his opinion of women drivers, allowing his sentence to trail off so that the insult is implicit in his silence. This suggests sexual discrimination is more taboo than racial discrimination. Or, perhaps Marion's dad's reluctance to complete his sexist comment is due to the presence of his daughter; Marion is immediately defensive, exclaiming, 'I wish you wouldn't say things like that. You know it upsets me. Women are just as capable as men. I don't know why you say it' (*Fruit*, p.86). That Marion ignores her family's racism and opposes her dad's sexism suggests a desensitisation towards racist language which does not personally affect her. Although Marion opposes sexism from her female perspective, she seems unaware of the impact of racial stereotyping. Faith's best friend and her family disregard her blackness yet continue to hold racist attitudes towards black people as a collective. Şebnem Toplu summarises this point in, 'Homeland or "Motherland": Translational Identities in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*' (2005), writing, 'Marion's family treats Faith as one of the family, while exposing their hatred towards all the other blacks and explicitly using derogatory terms in Faith's presence'.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Şebnem Toplu, 'Homeland or "Motherland": Translational Identities in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*', *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, 3, 1, article 7 (2005). Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol3/iss1/7>, p.5.

Marion's family are implicit in the 'regime of colour blindness' which Sáez suggests has afflicted British society, although their 'colour blindness' applies only to Faith. Sáez argues that 'colour blindness and its insidious effects are evident during two pivotal moments' in the novel, citing Faith's experiences on the job market and her witnessing of a racist attack on a black bookstore owner.<sup>251</sup> These episodes will be explored below but first I wish to propose that Marion's family's hypocritical and selective 'colour blindness' is an important example of how racism, or 'colour blindness and its insidious effects' manifests itself in the private sphere, quietly passed on through generations behind closed doors. This is the racist climate in which Faith was born and raised. This covert racism is as dangerous as overt discrimination or violence in that its perpetrators attempt to rationalise their attitudes. When Marion's dad heckles a black dub poet, Marion becomes 'sheepish' (*Fruit*, p.92). Again, she does not seem insulted or offended on Faith or the poet's behalf, merely embarrassed. Her explanation seems like an attempt to excuse her dad's behaviour; she tells Faith he thinks she is 'different' and tries to justify his attitudes, saying 'my dad's not bad, it's just [...] a cultural thing' (*Fruit*, p.93). Marion's family reinforce Faith's 'colour blindness' as they refuse to acknowledge her affinity with the people they refer to as 'wogs', 'darkies' and 'coons'. Faith is not different in the way that Marion's dad describes, but is essentially different from Marion's family. That difference comes in the form of the diasporic black subjectivity which her narrative of return enables her to claim, not in her alignment with white friends.

In her professional life in the costume department at the BBC, Faith is forced to acknowledge her difference when her colleague tells her that 'they don't have black dressers' (*Fruit*, p.70). Informing Faith that the managers 'didn't think the actors would like a black person putting their clothes on them', Lorraine nevertheless encourages Faith to apply because, she says, 'everyone likes you' (*Fruit*, p.71). Just as Marion's dad exempts Faith from his racism by referring to her as 'different', Lorraine similarly dissociates Faith from the black collective, suggesting that, unlike other potential black dressers, she is liked and could succeed. Societal attitudes towards race constrain black people to a specific path; the limitations placed on Faith's career are clear. Even if she is promoted, she will always be a 'black' dresser. These attitudes echo the reception Faith's artwork received at college where Faith's tutor suggested she was offered a job because her work 'has an ethnicity which shines through [...] a sort of African or South American feel' (*Fruit*, p.31). Born and bred in Haringey, this leaves Faith wondering, 'perhaps it was that I was just better than everyone else' (*Fruit*, p.31). Faith's tutor fails to recognise the value of her work on its own merit, undermining Faith's talent by insinuating that she is unable to compete on an equal footing with the white students; her work is somehow inherently different. If Faith's job offer is based on the perceived ethnicity of her art, this reinforces the idea that diasporic attitudes towards race have pre-determined, or constrained Faith's path in life.

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<sup>251</sup> Sáez, 'Bittersweet (Be)Longing', p.4.

Faith is forced onto a path which leads back towards the Caribbean in order to rediscover the cultural heritage which the diaspora fails to understand and inform. The idea that white attitudes towards race force Faith on a journey to the Caribbean from the diaspora evokes symbolic parallels with the journey which her ancestors were forced into from the African continent to the Americas. Whereas that journey led to a traumatic rupture and fragmentation of African cultural identity, Faith's journey to the same destination has opposite effects, leading to a revival in knowledge of her hybrid roots. White attitudes towards race play a pivotal role in necessitating, or forcing, both the journeys of Faith and her enslaved ancestors. A black Briton, Faith is disengaged from her blackness by her white friends and colleagues, who help reinforce her existing 'colour-blindness'. As with Marion's family, when Faith confronts racism in the workplace, she remains silent, but says, 'my hands began to shake' (*Fruit*, p.71). Sáez argues that Faith's silence, 'her inability to voice this anger is directly a consequence of the colour-blindness regime – to whom should she direct this anger and what is she angry about?'.<sup>252</sup> Articulation of her anger would necessitate an admission that she is the victim of racial discrimination, acknowledging her black identity. These incidents heighten Faith's awareness of ingrained racism in the diaspora and contribute towards her personal crisis, necessitating her return to Jamaica.

The episode in which Faith and her housemate Simon witness a violent attack on a black female bookstore owner, upon whose face 'were several strings of blood – thick, bright red blood' (*Fruit*, p.150), is a pivotal moment in which Faith is unavoidably forced to confront her blackness and acknowledge diasporic discontent. The attack is vehemently racist:

The shop has been spray painted with angry red paint. And all over it said NF, NF, NF [...] A swirling hate of NF NF NF Fuck Off. Books were strewn over the floor and an unmistakable stench of piss came from somewhere. A half-full bag of shit was splatted on the table – while the other half of its contents slid down the bookcase [...] the black and Third World fiction was spray-painted with 'Wog'. (*Fruit*, p.153)

The hate within the derogatory language used by Marion's family translates into violence here; the words displayed in 'angry red paint' highlight the 'thick, bright red blood' on the victim's face. The idea of racial violence as a legacy of colonial attitudes and prejudice will be elaborated on through the course of my research but I wish here to emphasise the violent nature of this specifically racially motivated attack.<sup>253</sup> Faith identifies with the injured black woman, saying 'my head was hurting like it had come out in sympathy' (*Fruit*, p.154). Sáez argues that 'Faith's previous coping mode of denial cannot function in this space of blatant racist violence'.<sup>254</sup> She continues, 'Faith's identification with the woman moves her [...] formulating the bookstore owner as an individual and fellow person in suffering'.<sup>255</sup> Faith cannot

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<sup>252</sup> Sáez, 'Bittersweet (Be)Longing', p.6.

<sup>253</sup> For violence as a legacy of colonialism see, for example, Chapter Two, p.82, p.110; Chapter Four, p.176, p.191, pp.197-198.

<sup>254</sup> Sáez, 'Bittersweet (Be)Longing', p.6.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

ignore the crime she is confronted with. As Simon recounts the incident to their housemates, struck by its menacing reality, Faith concedes, 'it was now a fact that three men walked into a bookshop in daylight and hit someone over the head with a blunt instrument because they didn't like them' (*Fruit*, p.155). The attack is a breakthrough in terms of Faith's self-identification; she recognises the victim's blackness and relates it to her own. Faith says, 'Simon had just called her the woman who worked there. Twice I had to tell them that the woman that was struck on the head was black like me' (*Fruit*, p.157).

Faith's response to the story's retelling reveals that she can no longer deny her black identity. Faith's white housemates dismiss the attackers light-heartedly as 'just a bunch of thugs' (*Fruit*, p.157) because, as white Britons, they pose no immediate threat to them. Sáez observes that none of them 'reference the trauma Faith has experienced as well, having seen a woman "just like" her become a victim of racist violence'.<sup>256</sup> In their 'colour blindness' Faith's housemates fail to perceive their friend's vulnerability in the current social and political climate. Faith observes that they talk 'as if just a bunch of thugs couldn't hurt you [...] couldn't make you change direction in the street or take cover in a shop' (*Fruit*, p.157). Racism in 1980s England forces Faith to realise her difference and she is pushed to crisis point by her struggle to deny her black roots within this context. As Toplu remarks, Faith is 'coerced into acknowledging her "difference"'.<sup>257</sup> Fleeing to her parents' home, Faith wants 'to be with [her] own people' (*Fruit*, p.158), expecting them to understand how she felt 'black on the outside and cowardly-custard yellow on the inside' (*Fruit*, p.158). As Sáez writes, 'her mother's insistence on the specificity of Jamaica as a location for Faith's recovery from her nervous breakdown is explicitly formulated in terms of a recovery of cultural roots'.<sup>258</sup> Diasporic discontent forces Faith to recognise her blackness and return to the Caribbean, to cultural roots, to enable her to articulate her diasporic African/Caribbean subjectivity. In insisting upon Faith's return to the ancestral home, her parents seek to give their daughter the cultural identification which England fails to provide.

### **Diasporic Discontent: Shifting Priorities and Forgetting Blackness in *Praisesong***

Avey's decision to abandon her cruise and embark upon a journey of rediscovery is a result of a gradual loss of her sense of racial identity over a long period of time. It is important to underscore my use of the term 'rediscovery' because, unlike Faith, who was embarrassed by and shielded from her black culture by life in an overwhelmingly white community, Avey has not denied her black identity throughout her life. As Kubitschek writes, 'Avey's underlying identity [...] seems not to dissipate [...] but to slumber'.<sup>259</sup> Through her return journey, Avey reawakens this sleeping sense of her black identity;

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>257</sup> Toplu, 'Homeland or "Motherland"', p.5.

<sup>258</sup> Sáez, 'Bittersweet (Be)Longing', p.8.

<sup>259</sup> Kubitschek, 'Paule Marshall's Women on Quest', p.52.

her diasporic discontent led her to reprioritise her life at the expense of her black culture. As a child, Avey was connected to her roots. Whereas Faith's life revolved around her white friends and their families, Avey's childhood trips to Tatem and excursions up the Hudson River placed her firmly within a diasporic black community which fostered a sense of belonging. Avey describes how she felt standing amongst her family and the growing crowd on the pier:

Waiting for the *Robert Fulton* to heave into sight, she would have the same strange sensation as when she stood beside her great-aunt outside the church in Tatem [...] she would feel what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her [...] to people she recognised from the neighbourhood [...] to those she didn't know as well, such as the roomers just up from the South and the small group of West Indians. (*Praisesong*, p.190)

Avey felt a physical connection with the community, imagining herself linked to the people around her through invisible silken threads, related in a way in which she has yet to understand but can already sense. As Susan Rogers argues, the feelings Avey experiences here are 'not a sensation of bondage or restriction but of energy, connection and support'.<sup>260</sup> Although Avey feels this connection, as a child, she has no conscious knowledge of the ancestral and cultural history which the black diasporic community shares. Avey's sense of belonging is inherent; she knew 'we weren't just going to this place [...] to loll on the grass and eat fried chicken and potato salad [...] but to lay claim [...] boat rides up the Hudson were always about something that momentous and global' (*Praisesong*, p.192). Avey recognises the symbolism of the excursion upriver without knowing the historical significance or connotations of slavery which the transportation of a black community aboard a ship might have had.

Sandiford emphasises the importance of the rituals and ritual celebrations described above as crucial in enforcing Avey's sense of Afro-consciousness, recognising the significant historical connotations of the Middle Passage in the community's upriver journey. He writes, 'as a child, Avey received powerful intimations of her linkage with Ibo myth even before she started to make her yearly visits to Tatem', arguing that Avey's recollections of her feelings during the Hudson boat excursion reveal that she experienced her existence and reality 'as a being in unity and umbilical nexus with other beings'.<sup>261</sup> The invisible silken threads align Avey with the black community and reveal how the African diaspora is united through shared traumatic history. These threads act in the same way as Cuney's roots, connecting Avey to the rest of the black diaspora. This journey upriver again links the black diaspora to the sea, connecting them to the ancestral homeland. Their mode of transportation

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<sup>260</sup> Susan Rogers, 'Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*'. *African American Review*, 34, 1 (Spring 2000), 77-93 (p.90).

<sup>261</sup> Sandiford, 'Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*', p.378.

symbolises a desire to uphold and maintain the memory of the enslaved African past.<sup>262</sup> Avey's childhood appreciation of this journey suggests that knowledge of this traumatic past manifests itself within the subconscious, always present in the black diasporic community's lives.<sup>263</sup> Sandiford supports this interpretation, arguing that the ancestral history of slavery operates like an underlying presence:

The spirit of the Landing attends these occasions and informs their meaning. The same redesigning, subversive power the Ibos exercised at Tatem Landing functions to make this excursion a re-enactment of their sorrowful odyssey across the sea.<sup>264</sup>

Avey's account of the Hudson excursion reveals the sense of self she possessed as a child. This connection with *Présence Africaine* was maintained by rituals like the Hudson excursion, the annual vacation to Tatem and trips to Ibo Landing. These rituals exist in different forms in her early marriage. Returning home, Jay would immediately 'turn up the volume on the phonograph' and 'let Coleman Hawkins, The Count Lester Young [...] The Duke – along with the singers he loved: Mr B., Lady Day, Lil Green, Ella – work their magic' (*Praisesong*, p.94). Avey recalls some days called for the blues, 'the records, all collector's items, had been left him by his father [...] the names of the yellowed labels read Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, Big Bill Broonzy, Mamie Smith' (*Praisesong*, p.94). Music is a form of cultural inheritance, passed down from Jay's father, easing 'the fatigue and strain of the long day' (*Praisesong*, p.94). Avey associates the black music which filled her home with the accompanying happiness. They were carefree: '[Jay] might suddenly stage an impromptu dance just for the two of them in the living room' (*Praisesong*, p.95). These escapist episodes, fantasy nights on the town, ended with Avery Parrish's 'After Hours', which 'they played over and over again. Jay's arms around her waist, her circling his neck, their bodies fused and swaying' (*Praisesong*, p.124). The repetition of the song and their accompanying dance signifies its value as one of the rituals which comforted and nourished them through the difficulties of the daily grind of their early married life.<sup>265</sup>

The novel suggests Avey and Jay's emotional strength is a result of their observance of cultural traditions which enforce a sense of self-worth, feeding the couple's determination to overcome poverty. As Jay becomes more successful, they move to the desired house in North White Plains and Avey leaves Brooklyn and her black cultural identity behind. As financial success becomes paramount the couple neglect the traditions which have kept them rooted in knowledge of their racial and cultural identity. Avey pinpoints this change following a particular argument. Her life 'was absorbed by the

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<sup>262</sup> The importance of remembering and commemorating the traumatic past through the vehicle of the novel is discussed in Chapter Four through my analysis of historical fiction which 'returns' to traumatic Caribbean history.

<sup>263</sup> This recalls Carew's argument, 'perhaps, we all carry deep in our unconscious minds the traumatic memory of the ancestral crossing in the Columbian and slave era' in 'Caribbean Writer and Exile', p.473. See Introduction, p.36, p.38.

<sup>264</sup> Sandiford, 'Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*', p.379.

<sup>265</sup> For a detailed discussion of rituals in *Praisesong* see Christian, 'Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*'.

demands of three growing children and her own job'.<sup>266</sup> Overwhelmed, Avey accuses Jay of adultery. Sandiford argues that as the couple become 'caught up in the great American secular myth of multiple jobs and the soul-sapping pursuit of material progress, the praisesongs of a Sunday would give way to irritability and even marital suspicion'.<sup>267</sup> Avey's frustrations come tumbling out as she shouts at Jay that 'she should never have moved with him to this godforsaken place. Should never have let him stick her up on some freezing top floor having a baby every time she looked around. Should never have married him...' (*Praisesong*, p.104). The argument reaches a climax when Avey echoes the words of the desperate tenant in the flat below who trawls the streets at night in search of her no-good husband, '*Goddam you, nigger, I'll take my babies and go!*' (*Praisesong*, p.106). Italicisation emphasises the impact of this pivotal argument both within the couple's lives and the narrative as a whole; following this row, they realise the extent of the discontent effected by their neglect of their cultural heritage.

Yet Avey and Jay fail to recognise the relationship between their relentless pursuit of the American Dream at the expense of their cultural heritage, and their increasing unhappiness.<sup>268</sup> The couple take their anger at the world out on each other, and this turning in on themselves marks the beginning of the decline of their race-consciousness: 'any race-consciousness died during these years'.<sup>269</sup> Avey and Jay equate their efforts to rise up with rising not simply out of Brooklyn and their working class life, but out of their racial and cultural identity. In chasing the American Dream, they strive to obtain the success they equate with white middle class America, leading to a denial, or forgetting, of their African heritage. En route to material success, they forget their roots; Jay blocked out everything else and 'even things that had been important [...] such as the music, the old blues records [...] found themselves abandoned' (*Praisesong*, p.115). The music literally disappears from their lives as they focus on Jay's studies, jobs and attempts to make something of himself and improve the quality of life for his wife and children. The annual vacation to Tatem becomes a thing of the past, as did 'the trips they used to regularly make over to Harlem' (*Praisesong*, p.116). Sandiford explains this reprioritisation: 'the sacred (Avatara) is supplanted by the secular (Avey), obviously a style more suited to the middle-class ethos she and Jerome were fast adopting'.<sup>270</sup> As they leave behind the rituals of their earlier life, Avey becomes disconnected from her ancestry, community, and black diasporic subjectivity.

Avey is too preoccupied with dreams to realise what she is losing in terms of cultural identity: 'the thought of rooms, of large, warm, sunny rooms, sustained her [...] through the hardship' (*Praisesong*, p.119). The irony of their success is that in striving for material gain, Jay and Avey sabotage their happiness by disconnecting themselves from their past, from family, friends and community,

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<sup>266</sup> Sandiford, 'Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*', p.380.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, p.380.

<sup>268</sup> See James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (London: Routledge, 1938) for the American Dream.

<sup>269</sup> Sandiford, 'Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*', p.380.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p.381.

severing their roots and forgetting to believe in the myth of Ibo Landing. According to Sandiford, Avey and Jay's acquisition of material wealth and subsequent loss of their black cultural identity proceeds 'on a dialectic of expansion and contraction in material and ceremonial processes'.<sup>271</sup> He argues that 'as the forces generate equal and opposite reactions within human consciousness, material expansion displaces ritual value'.<sup>272</sup> Thus, the financial success which Avey and Jay viewed as necessary to ease the diasporic discontent their poverty perpetuated actually supplants their Afro-consciousness. The couple abandon their cultural heritage as a source of sustenance and renewal, having replaced these things with financial success and its accompanying privileges.

### The Physical Return: To the Caribbean and Back Again

Avey's return to the Caribbean and her experiences on Carriacou reawaken the need to preserve and pass on cultural heritage. She reconnects with her role as receptor of this mythology, the role she began to fulfil after Great Aunt Cuney first told the story of Ibo Landing and 'she had recounted the whole thing almost word for word to her three brothers' (*Praisesong*, p.38). Through returning to cultural origins, Avey is reacquainted with knowledge of her race and her complex identity and recognises the protection and sustenance it provides. She travels back to the United States, compelled to share the story of her physical journey and the metaphorical return to an ancestral past which it initiated. This rediscovery reminds Avey of the need to pass on knowledge of the African diasporic experience to preserve and maintain a full understanding of diasporic black identity. Recalling the 'angry bewilderment' of her taxi driver on Grenada as he described the out-islanders' annual excursion to Carriacou (*Praisesong*, p.254), Avey resolves she would tell him the story of Ibo landing, 'the story which had been drilled into her as a child, which had been handed down from the woman whose name she bore' (*Praisesong*, p.254). Avey 'would take it upon herself to speak of the excursion to others [...] her territory would be the street corners and front lawns of their small section of North White Plains [...] shopping mall and train station [...] canyon streets and office buildings' (*Praisesong*, p.255). She resolves to find those who have become detached from their black roots and absorbed by secular white America, 'unaware, unprotected, lacking memory and a necessary distance of the mind [...] she would stop them and before they could pull out of her grasp tell them' (*Praisesong*, p.254).

This ending is important in signalling the cultural value of Marshall's novel; to reattach the black diaspora to the invisible silken threads which unite this international community and to reinforce knowledge of ancestral origins. McNeil writes that, 'Marshall's fiction demonstrates her conviction that African based cultural and historical rituals have the power to resist centuries of loss and psychological

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., p.372.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., p.372.

colonization'.<sup>273</sup> If we read *Praisesong* as demonstrative of this conviction, the novel's narrative of return to cultural origins can be interpreted as enacting a form of cultural resistance, preserving knowledge of African tradition against the dominating influences of the diaspora. As Christian writes, 'Paule Marshall, like Avey Johnson, must continue the process by passing on the rituals. And this function is finally the essence of *her* praisesong'.<sup>274</sup> Similarly, within the novel, this ending points towards the lasting impact of Avey's cultural rediscovery through her return journey upon her sense of self. In her discussion of *Praisesong*, Cobham contends:

The structure of the narrative re-enacts the structure of a dance or jazz improvisation, moving between the linear narrative of Avey's long day and the remembered melodies of her Tatem childhood which thread their way into her consciousness with ever-increasing clarity until the final, grand movement on Carriacou. This narrative structure allows the reader to experience a sense of fulfilment at the end of the tale although the linear narrative itself remains open-ended and incomplete.<sup>275</sup>

I contest Cobham's reading of the novel's structure and the function of the ending on a number of grounds. The narrative of Avey's experiences in the Caribbean progresses in a linear manner in that the novel opens with her decision to disembark the *Bianca Pride* at Grenada and closes with her departure from Carriacou after paying homage to her African ancestors by participating in the Big Drum/Nation Dance. However, this story is juxtaposed with recollections from her past, recalling the hardships and joys of life in New York and the 'remembered melodies of her Tatem childhood'. Marshall structures the novel so that past and present intertwine and interrupt each other, a distortion of chronology which links Avey's ancestral past, her personal past, and her understanding of herself in the present day.<sup>276</sup>

Much like Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*, Avey's narrative of return is not linear, as Cobham suggests, but cyclically structured so that the complete physical journey reflects the sense of wholeness gleaned through the protagonist's metaphorical journey. Avey travels from the trappings of her diasporic life (symbolised by the luxurious *Bianca Pride*), back to her ancestral African roots (represented through her participation in the Big Drum/Nation Dance on Carriacou), and her narrative ends with her preparing to depart Carriacou to travel back to America. This cyclical narrative reiterates the continuing connection between black diasporic people, the cultures and histories of Africa and the Caribbean. In ending the tale with Avey contemplating a return to the Tatem of her childhood, 'to fix it up' and 'live part of the year there' (*Praisesong*, p.256), Marshall brings Avey's transformative journey full circle, reconnecting her not only with her lost past, but with Tatem and the little girl who unquestioningly believed in the myth of Ibo Landing. Far from the linear narrative remaining 'open-ended and

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<sup>273</sup> McNeil, 'The Gullah Seeker's Journey', p.185.

<sup>274</sup> Christian, 'Ritualistic Process', p.83.

<sup>275</sup> Cobham, 'Revisioning Our Kumblas', p.50.

<sup>276</sup> Christian's 'Ritualistic Processes and the Structure of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*' provides a comprehensive argument towards the narrative structure of the novel as organised around the rituals which Avey participates in throughout her journey from Tatem to Carriacou.

incomplete', Marshall's utilisation of a cyclical structure itself enacts a kind of completeness and resolution which provides the reader with that sense of fulfilment. Past and present, diaspora and originary home are seamlessly united: the ending reveals how Avey's journey to the Caribbean and into the African diasporic past has reawakened the value of preserving racial knowledge, fittingly concluding with Avey's resolution that 'each summer she would ask that her grandsons be sent to spend time with her in Tatem' as well as 'some of the children' from her daughter Marion's school (*Praisesong*, p.256). Then, she will, 'at least twice a week in the late afternoon [...] lead them, grandchildren and visitors alike, in a troop over to the landing' (*Praisesong*, p.256). In this closing image, Avey symbolises the link between the African diasporic past, and the unknown future. Although she has travelled back to the Caribbean, the beginning of her ancestors' New World experience, and carries with her knowledge of their rituals, their story of survival and myth of return, Avey does not look backwards. Avey looks to the next generation and the diasporic future. Indeed, a shared feature of the narratives of return discussed throughout this thesis is their concern with 'returning' to the region to confront, transcend, and heal past traumas in order to shape a more positive vision of the future. A metaphor for her journey into the past, Avey's return ensures the cultural survival of future generations of diasporic African people.

Faith undertakes a similar journey as she returns and lays claim to the African/Caribbean heritage which enables her to fully possess and articulate her black diasporic subjectivity. Through visiting the Caribbean she comes to know her origins, her roots, and, like Avey, experiences a cultural regeneration which enables her to journey back to England secure in knowledge of her diverse hybrid ancestry and her position within traumatic black diasporic history. In travelling to the Caribbean, Faith undertakes a metaphorical journey into history to reclaim her lost identity and bridge the gap between her people's past and their future. She effectively heals what Hall refers to as 'the rift of separation, the "loss of identity", which has been integral to the Caribbean experience'.<sup>277</sup> Returning to the ancestral home through a journey to the Caribbean, both Avey and Faith attempt to overcome the fragmentation, and its repercussions, which Carew suggests are integral to the Caribbean experience.<sup>278</sup> At the end of the novel, Faith realises Aunt Coral 'was surprised at my ignorance [...] at how little of my past had been carried on that banana boat to England' (*Fruit*, p.333). Having absorbed all the knowledge which her Jamaican family have to impart, like Avey who returns resolved to 'tell them' (*Praisesong*, p.254), Faith returns to England declaring, 'I was coming home to tell everyone...My mum and dad came to England on a banana boat' (*Fruit*, p.339). Like Avey, Faith is compelled to pass on the story of her people. In writing narratives of return which culminate in the protagonists' resolve to spread knowledge and 'tell everyone' of their African/Caribbean culture and ancestry, Marshall and Levy articulate their own

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<sup>277</sup> Hall in Rutherford, pp.224-5.

<sup>278</sup> Carew, 'Caribbean Writer and Exile', p.454.

diasporic black subjectivities. Their fiction enacts the process of cultural production, reflecting their protagonists' desires to 'tell them' by writing their people's histories into literature and thus communicating the need for active resistance to cultural amnesia.

Avey and Faith's narratives of return to the Caribbean embody Bhabha's argument that culture can be located in those in-between spaces, in the gaps between cultures. The return is significant because the islands are a physical manifestation of Bhabha's metaphorical gap between cultures, the space where African, Arawak, Indian, and European cultures met and fused, giving birth to the ever-changing diasporic culture which Faith and Avey rediscover. Thus, I contend that the Caribbean is the essential cultural 'in-between' space. Subsequent chapters will develop the discussion of how diasporic discontent, and the sense of dislocation which pervades the diaspora, necessitates the need for a return journey and quest for an alternative home space. In further investigating the diasporic writer and the diasporic novel's preoccupation with returning to the Caribbean, I continue to trace the significance of the journey motif as metaphor, itself a symbolic re-enactment of the intercontinental journeys undertaken by the first generation of African diasporic people. I move to explore the underlying influence of ancestral history upon contemporary African/Caribbean people, considering how the traumatic colonial history which has been discussed in this chapter through the lens of diaspora and migratory movements, shapes and informs the identity of African/Caribbean diasporic people today.

## Chapter Two

### Metaphors of Return: Trauma and History in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath Eyes Memory*

One might read in her work a metaphor not of exile, but of return. Return to childhood: *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Return to history: *The Farming of Bones*. Return to the home country: *After the Dance*.<sup>279</sup>

Having attempted to tease out the specificities of the trope of the return journey as metaphor for the rediscovery of racialised knowledge concerning African/Caribbean traumatic history as depicted in novels by diasporic women writers from the Anglophone Caribbean, I turn to work representative of the Francophone Caribbean diaspora. In doing so, I develop the ideas emerging in Chapter One regarding the rediscovery of knowledge of racial history, placing this history within a wider context of colonialism, its inherent violence and traumatic legacy. A growing body of research into representations of trauma within Edwidge Danticat's fiction has focused primarily on her depiction of violence and use of nightmare.<sup>280</sup> In contrast, bringing to the fore Carew's hypothesis that 'perhaps, we all carry deep in our unconscious minds the traumatic memory of the ancestral crossing in the Columbian and slave era', I posit via close reading of Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) that the African/Caribbean diasporic writer's preoccupation with returning to the Caribbean, the site of historical and ancestral trauma, is symptomatic of a victim of trauma whose mind is dominated by a traumatic experience which refuses to be relegated to the realm of the past.<sup>281</sup>

Whilst Danticat's oeuvre broadly deals with the nature of historical and contemporary traumatic experience and the impact of both upon society and the individual, I choose here to focus solely on her debut novel as the best example of her work through which to explore the theme of traumatic experience and memory in relation to the gendered experiences of Caribbean women. In its exploration of the effects of traumatic violence upon the perpetrators, *The Dew Breaker* (2004) is significant both for its depiction of contemporary trauma and for the way in which Danticat questions the nature of victimhood. A collection of short stories, *Krik? Krak!* (1995) explores a community of voices representing the contemporary Haitian experience, and the autobiographical memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007) is more considered in its retelling of Danticat's elderly Uncle's death in a U.S.

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<sup>279</sup> Lyonel Trouillot, 'To the Text' in *Edwidge Danticat: A Reader's Guide*, ed. by Martin Munro (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), pp.180-183 (p.181).

<sup>280</sup> Carole Sweeney's article 'The Unmaking of the World: Haiti, History and Writing in Edouard Glissant and Edwidge Danticat' *Atlantic Studies*, 4, 1 (April 2007), 51-66, goes some way towards exploring the effects of traumatic history on the characters in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. For articles which address violence and nightmare in Danticat's other works, see Heather Hewett, 'At the Crossroads: Disability and Trauma in *The Farming of Bones*', *MELUS*, 31, 3, (Fall, 2006), 123-145; Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef, 'Narrative as Palliative in Danticat's Fiction' in *Writing Rage: Unmasking Violence Through Caribbean Discourse* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2006); Kristen E. Pitt, 'Tortured Citizens: Terror and Dissidence in Luisa Valenzuela and Edwidge Danticat' in *Body, Nation and Narrative in the Americas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>281</sup> Carew, 'Caribbean Writer and Exile', p.473.

immigration facility, highlighting the injustices which the migrant community continue to face. Her 1998 historical novel, *The Farming of Bones*, a fictional retelling of the 1937 Haitian massacre, will be considered in Chapter Four where, in a comparative analysis with Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), I address how works of historical fiction function as 'narratives of return' to a traumatic past. Whilst Danticat's subsequent works are similarly preoccupied with the way in which traumatic experience effects individuals, families, and communities, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* offers the most cohesive depiction of the relationship between historical and contemporary traumas and their specific and ongoing effects upon Haitian women. The female narrative voice and focus upon a family of women spanning three generations assists in uniquely revealing how the violence and traumas of colonialism continue to influence and shape the identities of Haitian women both in the diaspora and at home.

Acknowledging Caruth's assertion that 'to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event', I contend that as victims of both ancestral and contemporary traumas Danticat and her characters are possessed by Haiti and the traumas of the Haitian past.<sup>282</sup> They navigate return journeys to places on the island which are emblematic of these traumas, revealing the way in which, as Ormerod argues:

[W]orks by French Caribbean women writers show remembrance as a complex phenomenon in Caribbean society. They stress the weight of historical memory, the underlying awareness within communities and individuals of past oppression which is at the root of much present-day suffering and violence.<sup>283</sup>

Ormerod's emphasis on an inherited awareness of the presence of the past in Caribbean women's writing links with Carew's proposition regarding the traumatic memory of the ancestral crossing, Hall's argument towards the black experience as a diaspora experience and Davies' assertion that migration and displacement (which has its origins in colonial slavery) is central to the meaning of the African diaspora. Emphasising diaspora, migration, enforced separation from Africa, the ancestral crossing or 'weight of historical memory', these critics argue towards the presence and influence of the ancestral past in shaping the Caribbean present, reinstating historical traumas – the ongoing effects of the initial enforced rupture, or fragmentation from Africa, and colonial enslavement – as central to the African/Caribbean experience. As Anim-Addo acknowledges of Caribbean women's writing, 'the literature is marked by the impact of a specific colonial heritage central to which is endemic slavery and its racialised meanings'.<sup>284</sup> Or, as Ormerod explains in her discussion of works by French Caribbean women writers, 'the victims of a crippling personal past are also the products of a historical situation.

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<sup>282</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp.4-5.

<sup>283</sup> Beverley Ormerod, 'Attitudes to Memory: Reappraisal and Self-Discovery in the Works of French Caribbean Women Writers' in *Centre of Remembrance: Memory and Caribbean Women's Literature*, ed. by Joan Anim-Addo (London: Mango Publishing, 2002) pp.17-27 (p.26).

<sup>284</sup> Joan Anim-Addo, 'Introduction' in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Joan Anim-Addo, pp.ix-xv (p.x).

Individual obsessions and failures cannot be separated from social factors set in motion by Caribbean history'.<sup>285</sup> Therefore, my interrogation of the significance of Danticat's metaphors of return as literary representations of a return to Haitian history will develop arguments emerging in Chapter One, namely an understanding of the lived implications of the African/Caribbean experience as a shared diaspora experience rooted in a traumatic and violent history of colonialism, migration and enslavement.

Reading the return journeys portrayed within Danticat's novel as symptomatic of a victim of traumatic experience, I ask: what are these returns and how are they represented? How do these return journeys to Haiti and to specific sites of ancestral and contemporary trauma on the island represent a metaphorical return to history? Ormerod highlights the connection between the memory of African/Caribbean history and the construction of contemporary notions of selfhood for Caribbean people, citing 'the general fragility of a sense of identity among the scattered descendants of uprooted slaves'.<sup>286</sup> Noting Ormerod's observation regarding the influence of historical memory upon contemporary identity, this chapter investigates the extent to which the return constitutes an exploration or affirmation of a historically traumatised Haitian identity, particularly in light of the notion that the work of contemporary French Caribbean women writers reveals 'a sharp awareness of the consequences for West Indian society not only of the historical loss of Africa, but also of the imposition of European colonial attitudes with regard to race and class hierarchies'.<sup>287</sup>

This chapter looks specifically at Danticat's depiction of the Haitian traumatic past in the present, focusing on the motif of the cane field as a link between past and present, between ancestral and contemporary traumas. I will discuss the motif's historic symbolism as a reminder of colonial slavery and the lasting effects of the plantation economy, considering particularly the traumatic experiences of enslaved blacks and women in this space. My consideration of the presence of the past in Haiti through an analysis of the cane field motif in Danticat's novel leads to an investigation of the wider significance of the colonial legacy in the contemporary Caribbean. I go on to examine how political upheaval and corruption in late twentieth-century Haiti can be read as a result of a traumatic political and social history that dates back to the beginning of European colonisation in the late fifteenth century. Furthermore, I explore whether Danticat's novel looks beyond colonial history in a return to other significant cultural influences and experiences in order to make sense of contemporary Haiti.

Addressing the return to pre-colonial roots and the *Présence Africaine* crucial in constructions of Haitian identity, I consider how this 'presence' exists alongside and fuses with a European, colonial presence and experience.<sup>288</sup> How integral are the traumas of Haitian history to the construction of this

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<sup>285</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, pp.17-18.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>288</sup> Hall in Rutherford. See also Introduction, p.34; Chapter One, pp. 56-58; Chapter Two, pp.99-104; Chapter Three, pp.119-121, pp.130-133.

multi-faceted identity? My analysis of Danticat's migratory characters explores how an identity borne of a traumatic history rooted in Haiti adapts to life in the diaspora. To what extent is Haitian diasporic discontent symptomatic of a victim of trauma, doomed to re-experience the event across temporal and spatial boundaries? Discussing women writers from Guadeloupe and Martinique, Ormerod argues:

When presenting contemporary Caribbean society, women writers have been drawn to the exploration of characters whose minds are governed by their own past, trapped in the involuntary recollection of events, or situations that they cannot accept. Hindering their personal growth, memory serves the negative function of impelling them towards wrong choices.<sup>289</sup>

Ormerod's argument is equally applicable to women writers throughout the Caribbean and its diaspora; Danticat's work reveals a preoccupation with diasporic Haitian characters for whom memories of both personal and collective past events are ever-present, demonstrating how individual and shared historical traumas continue to inform and influence her characters' identities, choices and actions. In light of this, I consider the role of traumatic history in necessitating Danticat's protagonist's return journey to Haiti, and, ultimately, to the cane field, the site of historic, traumatic labour, and of past, present, collective and individual traumas. I discuss whether characters continue to be 'trapped in the involuntary recollection of events' and consider whether memory serves a 'negative function'. I foreground Ormerod's suggestion that 'the weight of memory may be felt as a burden, or it may be an agent of transcendence, a decisive element in determining a psychological outcome'.<sup>290</sup> Thus, I seek to investigate how the return to the cane field functions as a transformative confrontation with history and traumatic experience in order to transcend the psychological traumas of violence and oppression associated with Haiti's troubled past and look towards a more positive future.<sup>291</sup>

### **Introducing Haiti's Traumas: Death in the Cane Fields**

Danticat's text is important at this stage of my thesis because, in its portrayal of the lives of three generations of Haitian women, it is exemplary in its depiction of the cyclical continuity and inheritance of past traumas and violence for a people whose ancestral history has at its core the violence of colonialism and an unparalleled history of fierce uprisings and brutal revolution. Danticat's novel focuses on the Caco family: Grandmother Ife, her daughters Atie and Martine, and Martine's child, the novel's narrative voice, Sophie. In *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (2010), Danticat attests to the traumas of these women:

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<sup>289</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.23.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>291</sup> Throughout this thesis I emphasise the transformative, therapeutic and palliative function of 'narratives of return' as they confront the traumatic past in order to effect positive change in the present and for the future. See, for example, Chapter One, pp.78-81; Chapter Two, pp.115-117; Chapter Three pp.146-150; Chapter Four, pp.178-191, p.197.

lfe Caco, the grandmother, loses her husband to a chain gain. Martine Caco, the older daughter, as a teenager is raped by a brutal Tonton Macoute whose face she never sees. Atie Caco, Martine's sister, harbours a secret unrequited love for another woman. Sophie Caco, the granddaughter, the narrator of the book, is the child who is born as a result of the mother's rape. All of these women share a trauma: all had mothers who regularly inserted the tips of their fingers into their daughters' vaginas to check that they were still virgins.<sup>292</sup>

Danticat highlights the women's shared trauma as that of the testing ritual, when, as Martine describes, 'my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside' (*Breath*, p.60).<sup>293</sup> Yet Danticat implies that the testing ritual is one of many traumas occurring in a novel framed by a history of collective and individual traumas including death and rape. At the root of these abuses lies the shared history of the black diaspora, the initial fragmentation and enslavement in the colonial era, as brought to light in the discussion in Chapter One. How are these shared traumas, the testing, associated experiences of violence and sexual abuse, the rape, and the tragic death of Sophie's grandfather connected to the Haitian past and thus representative of a return to traumatic history?

The revelation of Sophie's grandfather's death in the sugar cane fields is a pivotal moment towards the beginning of the novel as it foregrounds the significance of the cane fields as a site of trauma and a historically evocative and emotive space. As Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef write in *Writing Rage: Unmasking Violence through Caribbean Discourse* (2006), 'the location is significant because it points to the abuses inherent in forced and voluntary labour within the death-generating cane fields'.<sup>294</sup> The symbolism of this recurring motif as a constant reminder of 'past oppression' is developed throughout this chapter.<sup>295</sup> Sophie recalls:

Whenever she was sad, Tante Atie would talk about the sugar cane fields, where she and my mother practically lived when they were children. They saw people die there from sunstroke every day. Tante Atie said that, one day while they were all working together, her father – my grandfather – stopped to wipe his forehead, leaned forward, and died. My grandmother took the body in her arms and tried to scream the life back into it. They all kept screaming and hollering, as my grandmother's tears bathed the corpse's face. (*Breath*, pp.4-5)

For the Caco women, working the cane fields in twentieth century Haiti offers a means of survival. The description of Martine and Atie as having 'practically lived' there as children whilst their parents worked in the fields to provide for the family indicates the important function of this space in their formative years. The fields shaped their daily childhood experiences and represent a communal space in which

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<sup>292</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, pp.31-32.

<sup>293</sup> Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (London: Abacus, 2006). All further references are to this edition and will be given as page numbers in the body of text.

<sup>294</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.216.

<sup>295</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.26. See this chapter, pp.83-88, p.90, p.91, p.95, p.99, p.116.

the family was united, 'all working together'. However, this space is overshadowed by death as Martine and Atie 'saw people die there from sunstroke every day'. Thus, Danticat posits the dichotomy between life and death in 'the sugar cane fields'. This form of manual labour provided an alternative to poverty and starvation; it was a living for the Caco family and many other Haitians. Yet Atie's recollection of her experiences introduces the cane fields to the reader as a place overwhelmingly associated with memories of 'past oppression': exhausting manual labour, sadness, suffering, and, ultimately, death.

When, later in the novel, Martine describes her homeland as a place 'where in one instant, you can lose your father and all your dreams' (*Breath*, p.165), she is referring to the cane fields as the site of her father's death. Martine's reference to the simultaneous loss of 'all your dreams' provides a sense of the repercussions of this tragic and traumatic event for the Caco women who have not just lost a husband and father, but their hopes for the future. Emotionally, the family will never be complete again, and, more practically, Martine and Atie's future opportunities are increasingly limited having lost half the parental income. This overwhelming sense of loss is inherited by Sophie as her use of the possessive first person pronoun 'my' (*Breath*, p.4) in her retelling of her grandfather's death reveals a strong awareness of her own place within this family history and her identification with her grandmother, aunt and mother's suffering. Ormerod suggests that 'two kinds of memory are evoked and sometimes interwoven' in works by French Caribbean women writers:

There is the historical memory – collectively shared – of the Caribbean past, the loss of Africa, the centuries of slavery and French colonial rule, and the psychological and economic consequences of all this for West Indian society. And there are the private memories of a particular individual whose life is conditioned, or even dominated, by what has happened in some personal past.<sup>296</sup>

I argue that Danticat melds these two kinds of memory: the private memory, the story of Sophie's grandfather's death and the Cacos' suffering, plays out against the backdrop of a historical, collective, shared memory of the Caribbean past and collective suffering amongst the cane. Furthermore, the traumatic event of her grandfather's death does not exist in Sophie's living memory as she was not there to witness it and did not see how 'they all kept screaming and hollering' as '[her] grandmother's tears bathed the corpse's face' (*Breath*, pp.4-5).<sup>297</sup> Yet, when she retells the story, Sophie identifies her place within the sad history of the cane fields, saying, 'nothing would bring *my* grandfather back' (*Breath*, p.5, *my* italics). Sophie reinforces the idea that 'victims of a crippling personal past are also the products of a historical situation' as in claiming the story of her grandfather's death she aligns herself with a shared history of traumas in the cane fields.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.17.

<sup>297</sup> For living memory and different kinds of memory see Introduction, p.35.

<sup>298</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.17.

Danticat's use of the sugar cane fields as a site of both life – a place to earn a living – and death, reiterates the underlying past oppression which Ormerod suggests is a feature of Francophone women's writing.<sup>299</sup> I contend, in accordance with Carew's proposition that 'we all carry deep in our unconscious minds the traumatic memory of the ancestral crossing', that the traumatic memory of ancestral slavery is present in the form of inherited, or intergenerational memory.<sup>300</sup> In her discussion of the relationship between memory and history, Assmann suggests: '[i]ntergenerational memory normally fades away after the span of three generations, a period of about eighty to one hundred years at most'.<sup>301</sup> Whilst Assmann's work refers to the experiences, memories and testimonies of Holocaust survivors, adopting the 'creolised' theoretical approach advocated by Anim-Addo, I suggest that Assmann's notion of 'intergenerational memory' has evident ramifications within Caribbean studies, particularly with regards to my analysis of Danticat's novel because, as Aitor Ibarrola-Armendáriz notes, '[t]here are few places around the globe where the memories of a traumatic past are so present in the everyday life of the population as in Haiti'.<sup>302</sup> I extend Assmann's concept of 'intergenerational memory' to suggest that the ancestral, or inherited memories of colonialism, displacement, migration and slavery in the Caribbean, and, specifically, the legacy of colonial violence and oppression in Haiti, do not fade away after 'about eighty to one hundred years'. Rather, intergenerational memories of the experiences of African/Caribbean history permeate across temporal boundaries spanning hundreds of years:

From the very moment in which Columbus set foot on the island of Hispaniola to claim it for the Spanish Crown in 1492, the history of the place has been characterised by conquest, rigid stratification along racial lines, foreign interference, and violent exploitation.<sup>303</sup>

Intergenerational, or ancestral memories of this colonial legacy manifest themselves within contemporary social structures of poverty, corruption, violence and oppression. Moreover, this manifestation ensures that the intergenerational memory of past oppression remains ever-present within the community's shared remembrances. In this sense, the notion of intergenerational memory is closely aligned with that of collective memory in that, as Crane remarks, 'collective memory is a conceptualization that expresses a sense of the continual presence of the past'.<sup>304</sup>

As is typical of traumatic memory, the intergenerational memory of traumatic ancestral experience haunts, or possesses, the contemporary Caribbean psyche, forcing a rupture in temporal experience as it invades the present. The death of Sophie's grandfather whilst working in the cane fields

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<sup>299</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.26. See this chapter, p.83.

<sup>300</sup> Carew, 'Caribbean Writer and Exile', p.473.

<sup>301</sup> Assmann, 'History, Memory and the Genre of Testimony', p.271.

<sup>302</sup> Aitor Ibarrola-Armendáriz, 'Broken Memories of a Traumatic Past and the Redemptive Power of Narrative in the Fiction of Edwidge Danticat' in *The Splintered Glass: Facets of Trauma in the Post-Colony and Beyond*, ed. by Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allue (Netherlands: Rodopi, 2011), pp.3-27 (p.3).

<sup>303</sup> Ibarrola-Armendáriz in Herrero and Baelo-Allue, p.3.

<sup>304</sup> Crane, 'Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory', p.1373.

represents this link with the traumatic past, evoking the function of the motif of the cane field within the novel as a site of both personal, contemporary, trauma, and collective, ancestral trauma. Glissant emphasises the ongoing impact of ancestral trauma in the Caribbean, underscoring the significance of colonial slavery as a trauma which continues to influence the contemporary psyche:

Would it be ridiculous to consider our lived history as a steadily advancing neurosis? To see the Slave Trade as a traumatic shock, our relocation (in the new land) as a repressive phase, slavery as the period of latency, 'emancipation' in 1848 as reactivation, our everyday fantasies as symptoms, and even our horror of 'returning to those things past' as a possible manifestation of the neurotic's fear of his past? Would it not be useful and revealing to investigate such a parallel?<sup>305</sup>

Developing the concept of intergenerational memory with regards to Glissant, I argue towards 'intergenerational trauma' as the inherited memory of a traumatic ancestral experience. As Morgan and Youssef write, 'Danticat portrays a multitude of personal and collective crises [...] passed from generation to generation through symbiosis, empathy, attachment, enmeshment, personal or collective identification, parenting and acculturation'.<sup>306</sup> This concept provokes 'questions of generational transmission', a notion explored by Michael Rothberg in his work on the multidirectional nature of memory within Holocaust studies.<sup>307</sup> Again, I cite the relevance of Rothberg's concept of the 'transgenerational transmission' of memory within Holocaust studies to the field of Caribbean studies; Morgan and Youssef's argument suggests a kind of 'transgenerational transmission' of trauma, an intergenerational trauma evident within Danticat's work which reveals what Rothberg refers to as 'the *connections* between different eras and the persistence of the unresolved past in the present'.<sup>308</sup>

The death of Sophie's grandfather and those like him who died of sunstroke or exhaustion in the fields reveals 'the persistence of the unresolved past in the present', suggesting one of the ways in which the traumas of slavery and the plantation economy are passed from generation to generation: descendants of the enslaved suffer a similar fate on the same site as victims of these 'indirect or vicarious traumas'.<sup>309</sup> Carole Sweeney writes that the slave trade in Haiti 'was a particularly brutal and violent version [...] as is indicated by the fact that slave mortality rates far exceeded birth rates'.<sup>310</sup> The impact of this brutal and inhumane system of slavery and its contemporary repercussions cannot be underestimated. Supporting Sweeney, Ibarrola-Armendáriz writes with reference to Danticat's work that, 'it goes without saying that slavery, with its abrupt displacements and systematic infliction of pain

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<sup>305</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, pp.65-66.

<sup>306</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.211.

<sup>307</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), p.276.

<sup>308</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.285, p.276.

<sup>309</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.211.

<sup>310</sup> Sweeney, 'The Unmaking of the World', p.52.

and punishment, is at the very origin of an historical legacy plagued with traumata'.<sup>311</sup> In highlighting 'the abuses and the unspeakable crimes that the plantation economy fostered' Ibarrola-Armendáriz emphasises the pivotal role of the plantation, at the centre of which was life amongst the cane, in generating this trauma.<sup>312</sup> Reading Ibarrola-Armendáriz alongside Glissant's argument towards the traumatic nature of African/Caribbean experience, I suggest that an awareness of intergenerational trauma is key to understanding Danticat's depiction of twentieth-century Haiti and the ways in which traumatic history informs contemporary identity and attitudes towards the island as home. As Rothberg suggests, '[m]ost discussions of coming to terms with the past tend to assume a homology between collective memory and national or ethnic identity'.<sup>313</sup>

However, western trauma theory arguably fails to appreciate the ongoing impact past trauma has upon the present, or 'the underlying awareness [...] of past oppression' within Danticat's novel, as demonstrated by the use of the historic cane field as the site of the Caco family's traumatic experiences.<sup>314</sup> Trauma theory traditionally argues that the victim becomes trapped between 'two different worlds: the realm of the trauma and the realm of their current, ordinary life'.<sup>315</sup> This assertion can be interpreted as a rupture between past and present, creating two different and separate worlds of reality. The trauma, which took place in the past, exists outside the present life of the sufferer. By way of contrast, E. Ann Kaplan suggests that 'individual trauma certainly should not be viewed as linear registration of an event that avoids the unconscious', identifying a kind of traumatic experience in which disassociation and cognition both play a part, allowing for the trauma to be in conscious memory.<sup>316</sup> Developing Kaplan's idea with relation to my analysis, I emphasise trauma as something simultaneously disassociated and constantly experienced, always returned to. For example, the Caco family's experiences of hardship and death in the cane fields parallels that of their enslaved ancestors and

all those descendants of slaves who, for want of money and education, were driven to become ill-paid field workers in the very plantation milieu which inevitably recalled the forced expatriation and ultimate death of their ancestors.<sup>317</sup>

Although there is a temporal distance between the lived traumas of enslaved Haitians and the Cacos, suggesting a disassociation, the family (re)lives their ancestors' traumatic experiences as their own; the associated traumas of the cane field are constantly (re)experienced.

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<sup>311</sup> Ibarrola-Armendáriz in Herrero and Baelo-Allu, p.4.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>313</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p.271.

<sup>314</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.26. See this chapter, p.83.

<sup>315</sup> Van der Kolk and Van der Hart in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Caruth, p.178.

<sup>316</sup> Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, pp.36-38.

<sup>317</sup> Beverley Ormerod, 'The Representation of Women in French Caribbean Fiction' in *Introduction to Caribbean Francophone Writing: Guadeloupe and Martinique*, ed. by Sam Haigh (Berg: Oxford; New York, 1999), pp.101-117 (p.103).

If, as Caruth proposes, an unconscious response to traumatic experience usually consists of literally re-experiencing a past event, the Caco family's re-experiencing of their ancestors' suffering on the same site supports the idea of trauma's constant presence and defining role in the formation of one's identity.<sup>318</sup> The continuing influence of past trauma on the experiencing subject(s), in this case, the Cacos, discredits the idea of a complete rupture between past and present, or the existence of separate realities in response to a traumatic event: the trauma invades and shapes the present day reality of the sufferer(s). Danticat's use of the cane fields as the site of death for the Caco family reveals the author's awareness of the ongoing repercussions of past oppression; their suffering alludes to their ancestors' experiences on the same site. In addition to representing death through the loss of Sophie's grandfather, the cane symbolically stands for the human cost of colonial history and the effects of the plantation economy. Therefore Danticat's representation of life and death in the cane fields of twentieth-century Haiti supports the idea that there is no rupture between past and present because the region's traumatic past is constantly re-lived and re-experienced.

### **The Female Body and the Cane Fields: Martine's Rape**

To develop my argument regarding Danticat's depiction of contemporary trauma in the Haitian cane fields as a metaphor of return to a traumatic past, symptomatic of the intergenerational trauma of the Haitian collective, I examine how Danticat uses this recurring motif throughout her novel. How are the cane fields returned to, and what does this return signify about the relationship between Haiti and its violent history? An analysis of the presentation of Martine Caco's rape and the way she later re-imagines this experience and responds to Haiti as the site of her trauma is important in addressing these questions because although this event occurs in twentieth-century Haiti it occupies an historically traumatised space in that it takes place amongst the cane. Martine's account of her ordeal is brief:

The details are too much [...] but it happened like this. A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body. I was still a young girl then, just barely older than you [...] I did not know this man. I never saw his face. He had it covered when he did this to me. But now when I look at your face I think it is true what they say. A child out of wedlock always looks like its father. (*Breath*, p.61)

Sophie observes that despite 'the sadness in her voice', her mother 'did not sound hurt or angry, just like someone who was stating a fact' (*Breath*, p.61). Martine's narrative resonates with a detachment typical of victims of trauma for whom 'the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it'.<sup>319</sup> A sense of latency is apparent in Martine's conscious re-calling of the traumatic event which contrasts with the vivid reality

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<sup>318</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp.5-6.

<sup>319</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p.4.

of the recurring nightmares which possess Martine to extent that she ‘tore her sheets and bit off pieces of her own flesh’ because ‘the nightmares were just too real’ (*Breath*, p.139).

When Sophie declares, ‘it took me twelve years to piece together my mother’s entire story’ (*Breath*, p.61), she reveals the difficulty Martine had in remembering, or expressing the truth of her experience. When the pieces eventually come together, Sophie is able to recount the event in more graphic detail than her mother:

My father might have been a *Macoute*. He was a stranger who, when my mother was sixteen years old, grabbed her on her way back from school. He dragged her into the cane fields, and pinned her down on the ground. He had a black bandana over his face so she never saw anything but his hair, which was the colour of eggplants. He kept pounding her until she was too stunned to make a sound. When he was done, he made her keep her face in the dirt, threatening to shoot her if she looked up. (*Breath*, p.139)

Martine described how she was ‘grabbed’ and told Sophie that this man ‘put you in my body’. As she is not the direct victim of the traumatic experience, Sophie is able to speak its violent reality more accurately; her mother was ‘dragged’ like an inanimate object, dehumanized by her attacker who then ‘pinned’ her before ‘pounding’ Sophie into her body. The harshness created by the parechesis within the verbs ‘grabbed’ and ‘dragged’ and alliteration of the consonant ‘p’ in ‘pinned’ and ‘pounding’ emphasise the force and mercilessness of the attack Martine is subjected to. This brutality contrasts Danticat’s depiction of Martine; her youth and innocence are highlighted through her description as a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl. The setting is significant as Martine is placed in the midst of an ordinary daily activity, returning home after school with her education, representing social mobility and progress, suggesting hope and optimism for the country’s future. Depicted in this idealistic manner, Martine represents youth, promise and the potential for socio-economic progress for the next generation of Haitians. Her forcible repositioning from the schoolhouse to the cane fields and subsequent rape is not only a horrific violation of a young girl, but suggestive of reverse social progress. The sixteen-year-old school girl symbolises promise and hope for the future and the cane fields, with all the traumatic history that site embodies, represent the horrors of its past. This rape scene can therefore be read not only as a metaphor of return to a traumatic ancestral past but as an allegory of the self-destruction of Haitian society. Ormerod reminds us of the tragedy of Haiti’s ‘fall from grace’:

[O]nce the proud leader of a Caribbean revolution that showed the way to liberty and equality for all former slaves. Now Haiti is destitute, betrayed by generations of corrupt and ill-advised leaders.<sup>320</sup>

If the traumatic experience is simultaneously both past and present, a memory which is literally re-experienced, possessing at will the one it inhabits, Martine’s rape supports the idea that Haitian society is traumatised by history and, symptomatic of a victim of trauma, is literally re-experiencing its

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<sup>320</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.22.

past in the present.<sup>321</sup> In a parallel to Martine's rapist's possession, or forceful invasion, of her body, the traumatic past possesses at will, forcing itself into the Haitian present. The ongoing effects of this ordeal are evident in Sophie's description of her mother:

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. (*Breath*, p.42)

There is a haunting undertone to this passage which speaks for the unfulfilling experience of Haitian independence and recalls the 'fall from grace' remarked upon by Ormerod. Liberated from French colonial rule in 1804, for ex-slaves freedom meant not having to work the cane yet families like the Cacos continue to live, work, and die in the fields. Furthermore, Martine's rape suggests this site continues to function as a particularly dangerous space for women. Despite the hopes of successful revolutionaries, Haitians never have stopped suffering in the cane fields which have physically marked and scarred Martine. As the cane signifies an enslaved past which is at the core of Haitian history and the African/Caribbean diasporic experience, the physical markers left on her body reveal the permanence of this history. It cannot be left behind because intergenerational trauma has indelibly marked the bodies and minds of the Haitian people.

If the scarring and sunburn are the physical markers of Martine's experiences amongst the cane then the nightmares which continue to possess her in New York, infiltrating her diasporic life, are the psychological scars. When Sophie is sent to live with her mother in America, she witnesses Martine's night-terrors, her 'voice screaming as though someone was trying to kill her' although she was 'alone thrashing against the sheets' (*Breath*, p.48). When Martine says, 'I see horrible visions in my sleep' (*Breath*, p.48) she reduces the reality of her nightmares to 'visions', suggesting an imagined horror. Later, she admits the reality of these dreams to Sophie, confessing, 'I live [the rape] every day [...] you saved my life many times when you woke me up' (*Breath*, p.170). Martine's mind permanently resides in the sphere of the cane fields; she has never really left Haiti. Sophie's description of her mother might well read: 'it was as though she had never stopped being raped in the cane fields'. Haitian history has been burned into Martine's body and her mind; not only can she never escape the physical reminders of the traumas of working in the cane, she is similarly psychologically scarred. Caruth acknowledges that 'the trauma is a repeated suffering of the event'<sup>322</sup> but for Martine the trauma lies also in the return to the historically significant site of the event. In returning to her rape through nightmares, Martine is constantly realigned with generations of African/Caribbean women who suffered a similar fate on the

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<sup>321</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p.6.

<sup>322</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p.10.

same site. Indeed, 'at the level of gender, she is woman as victim' and not just a victim of rape, but a victim of the historic violence of the cane fields and the plantation economy.<sup>323</sup>

Martine's rape serves as a poignant and painful reminder of what Ormerod describes as 'the sexual helplessness of the female slave, who was forced to be a breeding machine for the plantation'.<sup>324</sup>

As Morgan and Youssef write:

The location points backwards to the sexual abuses endured by generations of women in the cane fields as part of slavery's mechanism of dominance. It intimates that generations later the daughters of the diaspora are not free from this grim legacy, wielded now by new recipients of power.<sup>325</sup>

In Danticat's novel we see the 'grim legacy' of sexual abuse manifest itself within contemporary Haiti as a Macoute's violent rape of a young girl in a cane field. In plantation society, the abuse of enslaved women was widespread as black women's bodies were forced to breed to cater to the plantation economy's demand for slave labour and raped to satisfy the sexual demands of their overseers and colonial masters. Reading Danticat's novel within the 'post-slavery continuum'<sup>326</sup> advocated by Anim-Addo supports the argument that Haiti continued to replicate this 'grim legacy, wielded now by new recipients of power', beginning with the mass slaughter of French women on Haitian soil during the dawn of independence. Robert Debs Heinl and Nancy Gordon Heinl's comprehensive account of Haitian history, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People 1492-1995* (2005), describes this incident:

The deed seemed too horrible: the soldiers would not commence the slaughter. Then Clervaux broke the spell. Riding down a white woman, he snatched her nursing baby by the leg and smashed its skull against a boulder. As the sticky blancmange of blood and brains trickled to the ground, the soldiers roused themselves and fell to with saber and bayonet.<sup>327</sup>

Arguably an act of atrocious and pitiless vengeance, this violence reflected the atrocities the French had long inflicted upon the enslaved black population, particularly abuses against black women. Just as the newly liberated Haitians' violence against French women asserts itself as a statement of autonomous political control, violence against women in contemporary Haiti, like Martine's rape, serves a similar purpose, reinforcing the power and dominance of the corrupt Duvalier regime.

In 'Desiring Diaspora: "Testing" the Boundaries of National Identity in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*' (2012), Claire Counihan maintains that there is a 'history of Haitian women's sexual violation under slavery and the use of rape as a tool of contemporary political terrorism'.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Ormerod in Haigh, p.103.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., p.103.

<sup>325</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.216.

<sup>326</sup> Anim-Addo, *Touching the Body*, p.11.

<sup>327</sup> Robert Debs Heinl and Nancy Gordon Heinl, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People 1492-1995*, (Maryland: University Press of America, 2005), p.120.

<sup>328</sup> Claire Counihan, 'Desiring Diaspora: "Testing" the Boundaries of National Identity in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*', *Small Axe*, 16, 1 (March 2012), 36-52 (p.39).

Counihan links violence against women in past and present Haiti, specifically the sexual abuse and rape of African/Caribbean women. She continues, 'Martine's rape by the Tonton Macoute in a cane field connects the sexual brutality of slavery to the post revolution torments of the "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" regimes'.<sup>329</sup> To amplify Counihan's argument, I emphasise the cane field as the space to which Martine returns both literally as a victim of rape, and metaphorically, her experiences symbolising both the terrors of contemporary Haiti and the sexual abuse of her enslaved female ancestors. I contend that Danticat uses the motif of the cane field as the site of Martine's trauma, and the site to which she is transported during her nightmares, to represent traumatic historical moments and experiences of societal violence and abuse of women as current and central to contemporary Haiti.

### **The Presence of History: Politics and Power in Contemporary Haiti**

When Danticat writes, 'Coming from where I come from, with the history I have – having spent the first twelve years of my life under both dictatorships of Papa Doc and his son, Jean-Claude' she urges us to consider what this history is and how it continues to impact upon the cultural identity of Haitians at home and in the diaspora.<sup>330</sup> Referring to 'the history I have', Danticat is not simply alluding to her first twelve years in Haiti, but to colonial history, to a black diasporic history with its roots in Africa, to a collective, intergenerational memory of traumatic history. This history encompasses Carew's 'traumatic memory of the ancestral crossing in the Columbian and slave era',<sup>331</sup> and the subsequent colonial rule which Ormerod highlights as the 'past oppression which is at the root of much present-day suffering and violence'.<sup>332</sup> An awareness of this past moulds the historicised Haitian identity which Danticat lays claim to as she locates and frames herself, and subsequently her work, within a certain historical experience. Danticat's use of the possessive 'I have' implies ownership of this past yet Danticat, like the characters in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, simultaneously owns, and is owned, or possessed and haunted, by 'this history'.

Danticat's diasporic fragmentation from Haiti, the country of her birth, mirrors the rupture felt by her enslaved ancestors as each are to some degree alienated from their homeland. Indeed, 'this history', that of Danticat's traumatised homeland, underpins *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as the focal point of the novel is the violence and trauma of the historically evocative sugar cane field and the surrounding landscape. The act of writing back from the diaspora is in itself Danticat's metaphorical return to the home of her childhood and ancestors; Danticat's writing both enacts and reveals a complex, traumatically informed, historicised Haitian identity. When Heintz and Heintz offer an introduction to Haiti

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<sup>329</sup> Counihan, 'Desiring Diaspora', p.39.

<sup>330</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, p.10.

<sup>331</sup> Carew, 'Caribbean Writer and Exile', p.473.

<sup>332</sup> Ormerod, *Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel*, p.26.

as ‘a place of beauty, romance, mystery, kindness, humour, selfishness, betrayal, cruelty, bloodshed, hunger and poverty’ they encapsulate the complexity of the nation’s historically informed identity.<sup>333</sup> Danticat’s portrayal of Haiti is similarly complex and contradictory. The novel opens with a presentation of an idyllic childhood home: watching from the house she has grown up in with her Tante Atie, Sophie sees ‘the children across the street were piling up the leaves in Madame Augustin’s yard. The bigger ones waited on line as the smaller ones dropped onto the pile, bouncing to their feet, shrieking and laughing’ (*Breath*, p.6). The image conjures a carefree, happy community where children run around and play outside amongst neighbours’ houses. There is no obvious awareness of an underlying past oppression. Rather, Sophie observes how the children ‘grabbed one another and fell to the ground, rejoicing as though they had flown past the towering flame trees that shielded the yard from the hot Haitian sun’ (*Breath*, p.7). The imagery suggests a Haiti where children are joyful, the simile ‘as though they had flown’ emphasising their freedom to play happily in the yard, their delight in innocent pleasures. Nevertheless, this idyllic scene bears undertones of potential danger as the ‘towering flame trees’ rise high into the sky, both an imposition bearing over the children and a protective shield from the searing power of the ‘hot Haitian sun’. Paradise, it seems, is not without its dangers. As the children play beneath the shadow of the trees, their towering presence serves as a subtle reminder of the shadows cast by enslavement, colonial rule and oppressive dictatorships.

Writing about the Caribbean, in striking accordance with Ormerod, Philip states, ‘something terrible happened which continues to cast a long shadow on present events’.<sup>334</sup> She describes herself as ‘a writer whose recent history is colonial and continues to cast very long shadows’.<sup>335</sup> The literary preoccupation with metaphors of return to the traumatic Caribbean past reflects the shadows under which the contemporary Caribbean and its diasporas exist. The ‘towering trees’ of Sophie’s childhood Haiti symbolise both the shadows cast by Haiti’s corrupt, dictatorial governing powers, a post-revolutionary shadow, and the historical legacy of colonialism, the shadows still cast by the pre-revolutionary period. Although life in the yard seems carefree, the Haiti Sophie leaves behind when she joins her mother in the U.S. is troubled. When Sophie is travelling to the airport, the taxi driver tells Tante Atie, ‘there is always some trouble here’, explaining, ‘they are changing the name of the airport from Francois Duvalier to Mais Gate, like it was before Francois Duvalier was president’ (*Breath*, p.33). The driver’s use of ‘always’ reveals the normality of the volatile situation. The historical reference

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<sup>333</sup> Heint and Heint, *Written in Blood*, p.1.

<sup>334</sup> Philip in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.11.

<sup>335</sup> Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue*, p.78.

recalling the changing of the airport's name also helps contextualise Danticat's novel, revealing, as Helen Scott suggests, a 'narrative present running from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s'.<sup>336</sup>

Set in the late twentieth century, the novel deals with an era of intense political and social upheaval on an island which has endured centuries of political and social upheaval. Sophie's Haiti is 'a country with nearly 200 subsequent revolutions, coups, insurrections, and civil wars'<sup>337</sup> and the continuing cycle of repetitive violence is apparent at the main entrance to the airport:

Army trucks surrounded a car in flames. A group of students were standing on top of a hill, throwing rocks at the burning car. They scurried to avoid the tear gas and the round of bullets that the soldiers shot back at them [...] They screamed at the soldiers that they were once again betraying the people. One girl rushed down the hill and grabbed one of the soldiers by the arm. He raised his pistol and pounded it on top of her head. She fell to the ground, her face covered with her own blood. (*Breath*, p.34)

There are startling similarities between this fictional account of violence, and that of the Heins's historical account of the slaughter of French women.<sup>338</sup> In both, soldiers use weapons to assault innocent, unarmed women (and, in the first instance, also children) and in both the violence focuses on the destruction of the victim's head in a brutal, frenzied attack. Yet the Heins's description is of black soldiers' violence against white French ex-colonisers, an act of vengeance, whereas Danticat's narrative reveals the country's self-destruction as it turns on itself. This excerpt shows Haitian authorities destroying a female student, significant because, like Martine the sixteen-year-old schoolgirl, her characterisation as female and currently in education suggests the destruction of hope, the termination of potential and promise for the country's future.

The revolution and freedom from French rule is a turning point in Haitian history and identity and informs a strong sense of political awareness amongst Haitians. At a Haitian restaurant in New York Sophie observes 'a group of men sitting in a corner loudly talking politics. The room was packed with other customers who shouted back and forth adding their views' (*Breath*, p.54). Protesting twentieth-century American occupations, one man shouts, 'they treated our people like animals. They abused the *konbit* system and they made us work like slaves' (*Breath*, p.54). The man's comments, and the people's fervour and passion for their country's political situation, even from a diasporic position, reveals the importance of self-rule and freedom within Haiti, values which the revolution fought for and independence has failed to uphold. The political awareness and upheaval evident in Danticat's depiction of the activism and violence at the airport, and the opinions flaunted in the Haitian restaurant in New York, demonstrate an island and a people scarred by the violence of their revolution. As Danticat

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<sup>336</sup> Helen Scott, 'Ou libere? Transformation and the Struggle for Freedom in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath Eyes Memory*' in *Haiti: Writing Under Siege*, ed. by Marie-Agnes Sourieau and Kathleen M. Balutansky (New York: Rodopi, 2004), pp.459-478 (p.461).

<sup>337</sup> Heins and Heins, *Written in Blood*, p.7.

<sup>338</sup> See this chapter, p.94. For diasporic violence associated with colonial racial prejudices see Chapter One's analysis of the incident in which Faith witnesses the violent attack on a book store owner, p.73.

writes, 'Haiti had gained its independence through a bloody twelve-year slave uprising, the only time in the history of the world that bond servants successfully overthrew their masters and formed their own state'.<sup>339</sup> Its sense of nationhood is rooted in a sense of autonomy, in the island's status as the first black republic, home of the only slave uprising which successfully overthrew colonial rule.

Yet the violence of this revolution, a bitter struggle for independence and freedom, resulted in mass bloodshed, huge loss of life, and economic ruin.<sup>340</sup> The repercussions of this socio-political violence are also still relevant to contemporary Haiti as the nation's independent birth was marred by the legacy of colonialism. Ibarrola-Armendáriz notes:

[W]hat had seemed for a short while exciting socio-political opportunities for freedom and equality soon became rapid cycles of invasion, violence, corruption, and dictatorships that have punctuated the nation these past two centuries.<sup>341</sup>

Ibarrola-Armendáriz's use of 'cycles' here is telling and is echoed in Sweeney's work: 'the traces of violence, rupture and dislocation continue to possess and to haunt generations of Haitians, thereby producing a present that is played out as repetition and recurrence'.<sup>342</sup> The notion of cyclical violence is important to my discussion of metaphors of return as it supports the idea of revisiting, or re-experiencing, a traumatic past. Sweeney also highlights the 'rupture and dislocation', the fragmentation of the African/Caribbean experience advocated by Hall, Carew and Davies. Haiti fails to liberate itself from inequality, corruption and oppression, becoming trapped in a destructive cycle which repeats colonial patterns of behaviour. Heint and Heint reiterate this idea of cyclical and repetitive violence: 'deep in the psyche of Haiti [...] lies a violence that goes beyond violence [...] that this is so is demonstrated by more than five centuries of history dominated at every turn by death and terror'.<sup>343</sup> Their account suggests a society in which violence, death, and terror are inherent and inescapable, reflecting the way in which trauma is inescapable in its repeated possession of its victim.

The clashes between civilians and soldiers at the door to the airport reveal the destructive cycle which Sophie is physically leaving behind as she departs Haiti; the idyllic image which Danticat depicts as the view from Tante Atie's yard is just one facet of Haitian life. Though Danticat's portrayal of the yard initially suggests life in Haiti is carefree and joyful, the complexity and contrasting reality of the situation is summed up by the taxi driver's eagerness to leave the airport: 'there could be some more chaos [...] I want to go before things become very bad' (*Breath*, p.35). The female student's cry that 'once again' the soldiers are 'betraying the people' (*Breath*, p.34) echoes far beyond this immediate

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<sup>339</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, p.97.

<sup>340</sup> For a thorough account of the Haitian revolution see C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2001); Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Heint and Heint, *Written in Blood*.

<sup>341</sup> Ibarrola-Armendáriz in Herrero and Baelo-Allu, p.5.

<sup>342</sup> Sweeney, 'The Unmaking of the World', p.54.

<sup>343</sup> Heint and Heint, *Written in Blood*, p.6.

passage, recalling two hundred years of political corruption in independent Haiti which succeeded centuries of past oppression under colonial rule. The brutality of the clashes between the army and the people represent the country's ongoing struggle for liberation from violent, oppressive ruling powers, a struggle which Sweeney refers to as 'an ever-reiterating cycle of not-quite-achieved-change'.<sup>344</sup>

The origins of these cyclic and repetitive traumas lie in the island's history of colonial rule and enslavement. This 'past oppression' informs the women's attitudes towards the island as home and the need for a departure or return. Yet their sense of identity is derived also from an awareness of the multiplicity of the African/Caribbean experience, of a pre-colonial era and an understanding of the traumas endured and survived by their ancestors, that 'traumatic memory of the ancestral crossing'.<sup>345</sup> The significance of the intergenerational trauma of colonialism and enslavement is revealed through recognition that the African/Caribbean experience did not begin with enslavement. Haitian identity is therefore a hybrid concept in that it extends beyond the boundaries of colonisation, the plantation economy and two hundred years of turbulent independent rule infected with the destructive legacy of colonialism to embrace a notion of selfhood with roots in West Africa. Danticat's novel reveals a Haiti which, although shaped by centuries of past oppression, cyclic and repetitive violence, detects roots in an originary African home. Hall's argument towards the profound and ongoing impact of Africa, the originary ancestral home, and the centrality of the loss of *Présence Africaine* in constructions of African/Caribbean cultural identity, supports this argument that the initial dislocation from Africa is ever-present in the contemporary African/Caribbean psyche.<sup>346</sup>

### **Before Colonialism: The Prevalence of Africa and Representations of Guinea**

The African presence – *Présence Africaine* – is revealed in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* through Danticat's characters' awareness that their ancestors originated elsewhere. Sophie describes 'a stifling August day' (*Breath*, p.93), referring to the heat of 'the sun, which was once god to my ancestors' (*Breath*, p.94). Sophie demonstrates an understanding of the role of the natural world and the place of the sun in her African ancestors' lives, claiming these people as 'my ancestors' and indicating, in line with Hall's argument towards the centrality of *Présence Africaine* in constructions of African/Caribbean cultural identity, an underlying sense of pre-colonial history and some notion of an African identity. The allusion to an African presence and past function as a metaphor of return to an African history and homeland, informing a full sense of a historically informed Haitian identity and referencing the diasporic dislocation which is the oneness of an African/Caribbean sense of self.<sup>347</sup> Representations of Africa

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<sup>344</sup> Sweeney, 'The Unmaking of the World', p.54.

<sup>345</sup> Carew, 'Caribbean Writer and Exile', p.473.

<sup>346</sup> Hall in Rutherford, pp.224-5. For *Présence Africaine* see also Chapter One, pp.56-64; Chapter Three, p.119.

<sup>347</sup> See Introduction, p.34 and Hall in Rutherford, p.223.

manifest themselves within the Haitian consciousness throughout Danticat's novel, which contains spiritual references to voodoo: gods such as Erzulie (*Breath*, p.87), and practices such as doubling (*Breath*, pp.155-6). As Myriam J. A. Chancy writes in *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* (1997), 'in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Haitian women are represented through images drawn from folk traditions'.<sup>348</sup> In keeping with voodoo tradition, there is a strong presence of African folklore and mythology in the novel, particularly references to the ancestors and Guinea.

Danticat's use of voodoo recognises the African presence in Haitian identity and the origins of the Haitian experience in Africa. Nods to African folklore and tradition are a way in which to look back to an originary ancestral homeland and culture. Furthermore, as Chancy writes, 'in invoking *vodou* traditions, [Danticat] strives, moreover, to disassociate them from their prevalent use as tools of state control during the Duvalier years of terror'.<sup>349</sup> Danticat reinstates the positivity and hope of these traditions, recalling the uplifting spirituality of an African belief system. Danticat explains:

In Vodou, it is believed that when one dies, one returns to Ginen, the ancestral homeland from which our forebears were taken before being brought to the New World as slaves. Ginen stands in for all of Africa, renaming with the moniker of one country an ideological continent which, if it cannot welcome the returning bodies of its lost children, is more than happy to welcome back their spirits.<sup>350</sup>

Guinea is highlighted as the site of return; it functions as the *Présence Africaine*, the link to a migratory and diasporic identity and an originary home. It represents a lost ancestral homeland, a place of ancestral origin to which one can spiritually return, despite the fact that a physical return is no longer possible. This again calls to mind Glissant's criticism of the Negritude movement: 'What to make of the fate of those who return to Africa [...] but *who are no longer African?*'.<sup>351</sup> A physical return to Africa from the diaspora might not confront these complex issues of unbelonging, because, as Hall acknowledges, 'the original "Africa" is no longer there'.<sup>352</sup> Ormerod, too, implies the complexities of contemporary African/Caribbean identity when she suggests that 'returning to Africa should not be an end in itself, but only an initiatory step in the process of fully assuming one's Caribbean identity'.<sup>353</sup> Though the concept of the 'return to Africa' as the cultural homeland might be problematic for the contemporary African/Caribbean subject, the mythologized 'Ginen', existing as it does in the diasporic imaginary, cannot be refuted.

When Tante Atie tells Sophie stories about Guinea, the spiritual and ancestral home for African diasporic people, she alludes to the struggles of the African diaspora:

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<sup>348</sup> Myriam J. A. Chancy, *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* (Rutgers University Press: New Jersey, 1997), p.120.

<sup>349</sup> Chancy, *Framing Silence*, p.120.

<sup>350</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, pp.134-135.

<sup>351</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.17. See Chapter One, p.63.

<sup>352</sup> Hall in Rutherford, p.231.

<sup>353</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.20.

She told me about a group of people in Guinea who carry the sky on their heads [...] the people of Creation. Strong, tall and mighty people who can bear anything. Their Maker [...] gives them the sky to carry because they are strong. These people do not know who they are, but if you see a lot of trouble in your life, it is because you were chosen to carry part of the sky on your head. (*Breath*, p.25)

Atie's reference to 'the people of Creation' refers to the African people, the first to inhabit the earth and a group whose collective lives have seen 'a lot of trouble'. The tale acts as a metaphor for the history of African people, celebrating the strength and survival of a group forced to bear the weight of historical oppression, colonial subjugation and slavery. The transmission of this intergenerational trauma necessitates the need for a contemporary belief in a return to a land where there is no suffering. As Ormerod writes, 'Africa, then, is not so much a geographic entity as a talisman, a symbol of the vanished bliss which preceded enslavement, a time associated with innocence and natural joy'.<sup>354</sup> Atie's stories are a way in which to return to this primordial bliss, memories of the land of Creation, untainted by the traumatic history set in motion by enslavement and colonialism. Her account of Sophie's conception, and the natural elements which gave birth to her – 'petals of roses', 'water from the stream' and 'a chunk of the sky' (*Breath*, p.47) – supports this interpretation. Discussing Haitian writer Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew*, Ormerod suggests, 'it is the mention of Guinea which transforms the landscapes of these passages into paradise gardens of the past and the future'.<sup>355</sup> Developing this analysis with regards to my research, I propose that Danticat's use of paradisiacal language in Atie's Creation story further links Sophie, a Haitian of African heritage, to ancestral Guinea, that Edenic land.

Sophie's understanding of Guinea as 'a place where all the women in my family hoped to eventually meet one another, at the very end of each of our journeys' (*Breath*, p.174) reveals her personal sense of her African ancestry and origins. This ancestral presence reverberates throughout the novel: meeting her granddaughter and namesake, Sophie's child, Brigitte Ife, Grandmother Ife comments, 'Isn't it a miracle that we can revisit with all our kin, simply by looking into this face?' (*Breath*, p.105). The Caco history is within Brigitte as her face reflects the ancestors who have come before her. Ife's comment recalls what Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo refers to as 'the African belief in the endless cycle of life and death, a belief retained in Haitian culture'.<sup>356</sup> Furthermore, Patrick Samway states of Danticat's novel that 'even if one or other female character is absent from a particular scene, the truth is otherwise'.<sup>357</sup> A metaphorical return to the Caribbean past is therefore possible through close family ties, through knowing one's kin: Ife's observation suggests that blood ties connect people to all their

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<sup>354</sup> Ormerod, *Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel*, p.1.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>356</sup> Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo, 'Rewriting Folklore: Traditional Beliefs and Popular Culture in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!*', *MaComere*, 3 (2000), 123-140 (p.124).

<sup>357</sup> Patrick Samway, 'A Homeward Journey: Edwidge Danticat's Fictional Landscapes, Mindscapes, Genescapes, and Signscapes in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*', *Mississippi Quarterly*, 57, 1 (Winter 2003), 75-84, (p.77).

relatives, living and dead, and this sense of the presence of ancestry pervades throughout the narrative. N'Zengou-Tayo and Samway both highlight Grandmother Ife's name as an allusion to an African heritage. The moniker, Samway observes, 'points in a specific direction, back to a city and civilization in Nigeria'.<sup>358</sup> N'Zengou-Tayo elaborates, explaining, that 'the name reminds one of "Ife" the sacred city where African slaves would return after their death and where Vodou Priests have to go for a mystical pilgrimage'.<sup>359</sup> Suzanne Crosta writes about the significance of naming:

[A] response to the effects of French colonial rule in the Caribbean, where naming was never a personal issue but a political and cultural one, given its impact on race and power relations on the plantation. In raising the issue of naming and its historical, political and social significance, Caribbean writers speak of their struggle (and by extension their communities' struggle) to name themselves.<sup>360</sup>

Naming the novel's matriarchal figure Ife, Danticat seizes cultural and political autonomy for her Haitian characters, asserting their black identity in relation to an originary ancestral home. This allusion to Africa illustrates that both Sophie's Haitian and African ancestors are ever-present. When she returns to Haiti as a young woman, Sophie literally revisits her ancestors as she and Atie visit 'a tree-lined cemetery' where Atie instructs her niece, 'walk straight [...] you are in the presence of family' (*Breath*, p.149). However, the novel's references to Africa and Guinea as a place where one's spirit returns in death – Tante Atie talks of a friend's death, saying 'Grace went to Guinea' (*Breath*, p.104) – suggest that though their bodies remain on Haitian soil, 'these ghostly ancestors', as Samway writes, 'have all returned to "Guinea", heaven'.<sup>361</sup>

Guinea signifies both birthplace and resting place: it is a land of spiritual and cultural origins and a place to which all of Sophie's family will return at the end of their earthly journeys. Ormerod asserts that, 'for the Haitian peasant, Guinea symbolises Africa, the land of his racial origin. It is a legendary, rather than a geographic, place, to which the souls of the dead are believed to return; it is incorporated within voodoo ritual'.<sup>362</sup> In Danticat's novel this belief is enacted and kept alive through black diasporic cultural practices. Discussing Negro spirituals with Sophie's family, her husband, Joseph, describes, 'hymns that the slaves used to sing [...] to do with freedom, going to another world. Sometimes that other world meant home, Africa. Other times, it meant Heaven' (*Breath*, p.215). Martine's boyfriend Marc's response, 'it sounds like *vaudou* song' (*Breath*, p.215), articulates the link between the international African diaspora. Displaced Africans throughout the Americas share a heritage rooted in the traditions of West Africa. Like Grandmother Ife and Brigitte Ife's names, this

<sup>358</sup> Samway, 'A Homeward Journey', p.78.

<sup>359</sup> N'Zengou-Tayo, 'Rewriting Folklore', p.124.

<sup>360</sup> Suzanne Crosta, 'Breaking the Silence: Cultural Identities and Narrative Configurations in the French Caribbean Novel' in *An Introduction to Caribbean Francophone Writing: Guadeloupe and Martinique*, ed. by Sam Haigh (New York: Berg, 1999) pp.159-176 (p.166).

<sup>361</sup> Samway, 'A Homeward Journey', p.77.

<sup>362</sup> Ormerod, *Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel*, p.21.

tradition points back, towards a lost homeland, and anticipates the return to Africa, or Guinea, the paradise of the imaginary consciousness, a version of 'Heaven'.

As a kind of Heaven, the place to which displaced African spirits are believed to return, Ormerod suggests that 'by a logical extension, Guinea, the land of the ancestors, is associated with peace, power and felicity – the conditions attributed to the paradise of pre-colonial Africa, to the time before slavery'.<sup>363</sup> Moreover, references to Guinea as a place in which generations of family hope to be reunited calls to mind the African belief that in death, one is free to return to their place of origin. This belief is especially significant in the context of this thesis' focus on narratives of return and the quest for home as this conviction in part necessitates representations of the return journey to an originary home in contemporary Caribbean literature. In Danticat's novel, images of Guinea in the African/Caribbean consciousness reveal the connection to this lost history and the concept of an alternative ancestral home to which one's displaced and diasporic spirit is eternally connected. As Ife's name suggests, Africa is an underlying presence throughout the novel and this presence is further revealed via figurations of Guinea and voodoo traditions, folklore and mythology. In line with Ormerod's suggestion of a kind of 'emotional dependence on voodoo ritual' I contend that characters in Danticat's novel draw strength and courage from voodoo practices and traditions as they unite the community and help form a shared sense of collective identity and belonging.<sup>364</sup>

Sophie's description of the neighbourhood 'konbit potluck dinner' (*Breath*, p.3) brings people and families together: 'the smaller children sat playing marbles [...] older boys huddled in small groups near the school yard fence [...] girls formed circles around their grandmothers' feet, learning to sew' (*Breath*, p.9). This is a place with a strong sense of family and community: the potluck reveals how the community's cultural identity is rooted in history, in the traditions of their ancestors. These traditions are a historical link to the island itself, to the Haitian land. Tante Atie explains how the potlucks started a 'long time ago in the hills [...] a whole village would get together and clear a field for planting [...] women would cook large amounts of food while the men worked [...] everyone would gather together and enjoy a feast of eating, dancing, and laughter' (*Breath*, p.11). The community grows around a shared history, and a sense of belonging and unity is formed through this collective past. In her work on the motif of the *konbit*, or *coumbite*, in French Caribbean literature, Ormerod writes:

The coumbite is [...] a bond with Guinea and the lost Eden of Africa, a miraculous survival of Dahomean co-operative work in which a team of labourers, led by a drummer, traditionally cultivated the fields for the benefit of their village.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., p.22.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., p.25.

There may no longer be a field to plant, but the ancestral traditions rooted in Dahomey, West Africa, and brought to the New World, are upheld. Ormerod adds that ‘another important aspect of the *coumbite* is the harmony which it represents between man and earth, a harmony which allows man the mastery of his life and destiny’.<sup>366</sup> The celebration unites the community with the land which they work and live off. However, in Sophie’s Haiti ‘the workers used their friendships in the factories or their grouping in the common yards as a reason to get together, eat, and celebrate life’ (*Breath*, p.12). Twentieth-century modernity has changed Haitian society as there has been a shift in production from working the land to working in factories. Yet the essential communal spirit remains undamaged and people continue to come together in the same way as their rural Haitian and African ancestors. This shift from rural to urban working life increases the importance of these ritual celebrations as a link to ancestral culture and a distant past, and particularly to an agricultural past rooted in the land.

What is the significance of the traditions, practices and rituals depicted in Danticat’s novel? Why are they necessary in contemporary Haiti, removed from an African past and colonial rule by over two hundred years of independence? Ormerod emphasises the Haitian peasants’ ‘profound need to set the unbearable harshness of their existence, the apparent futility of their efforts, within the framework of a supernatural system which somehow makes sense of it all’.<sup>367</sup> I emphasise the nature of Haiti’s colonial past, and, indeed, of post-independence Haiti, as inherently violent and traumatised. Thus, I propose that representations of Africa, Guinea, and an adherence to voodoo rituals, spirituality and traditions, form the basis of a belief system which provides oppressed and otherwise dispossessed Haitians with hope, optimism, and a collective memory of a shared history which offers a sense of solidarity and collective belonging.

### **Skin Colour and the Colonial Myth in the Diaspora**

Despite the prevalence of *Présence Africaine* in Danticat’s depiction of Haiti, the novel reverberates with allusions to an over-bearing colonial past which complicates the concept of a Haitian identity with its roots in African tradition and practices. I want to explore the duplicity and hybridity of a Haitian African/Caribbean identity which has both African and European influences, through an analysis of the complex symbolism contained within Sophie’s reference to ‘the sun, which was once god to my ancestors’ (*Breath*, p.94). The sun was god to her people, the source of light and life; it nurtured people and crops, a creative and life-giving force. According to Carew, the sun continued to have great significance for African people in the Caribbean. Writing about the role of the sun in the Caribbean psyche, Carew says, ‘the Caribbean writer is a person from the sun’.<sup>368</sup> However, he

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid., p.26.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., p.22.

<sup>368</sup> Carew, ‘Caribbean Writer and Exile’, p.464.

continues, 'in the Caribbean world-view the sun is a dialectical entity: it is creative and destructive, it gives life and takes it away'.<sup>369</sup>

This image of the sun is laden with symbolism in the Caribbean. If we consider the colonial context of the islands the dialectical attitude proposed by Carew can be more easily understood. The sun is literally the source of light, without which no living thing can grow; it is also a source of great heat. The heat of the sun was seen by the white coloniser as a destructive force because the power of the sun's rays to darken skin ultimately led to the destruction of whiteness. Carew writes, 'the European, settling in the tropical world [...] invented the myth that only dark-skinned peoples could do strenuous manual labour in the sun'.<sup>370</sup> The sun is simultaneously both the giver of light and life, and the taker of it, as enslaved Africans suffered and died toiling under its burning rays, linking with Danticat's portrayal of the dichotomy of life and death in the cane fields. In the African/Caribbean consciousness, the sun represents an omnipotent force; not only was it worshipped by Sophie's ancestors on African soil, it was both giver and taker of life on New World soil. The 'myth that only dark-skinned peoples could do strenuous manual labour in the sun' references a colonial past at the core of which is the original traumatic rupture, the enslavement and oppression of African heritage people, and the plantation economy. In exploring the relationship between traumatic colonial history and constructions of selfhood in the Caribbean, I am interested in how this 'myth' affects contemporary Haitian society – how it plays out in the 'post-slavery continuum'<sup>371</sup> – as depicted in Danticat's novel, and how colonial attitudes towards the sun continue to impact upon the contemporary Caribbean sense of self, representing a metaphor of return to traumatic history.

Representations of the sun symbolise light, heat, and life. For African/Caribbean people, the sun also conjures images of a distant past in which the sun was worshipped, and, paradoxically, a traumatic colonial past in which the sun's power was used to create a myth which formed the rationale for the subjugation of African people. As Carew explains, this 'myth' has a continuing influence upon the contemporary Caribbean psyche:

The myth is now embraced not only by its originators but also by its victims [...] creoles will still declare unblushingly that their constitutions are too delicate for them to attempt strenuous manual labour in the sun; that only blacks or coolies are fit for that kind of thing. Exile from the sun, therefore, begins in the creole mind. It is the result of a plot hatched by parents who are mesmerized by colonial fantasies of class and colour escape. The parents begin telling children [...] the only hope for them is to go abroad, away from the sun [...] the sun darkens the complexion and threatens to hurl the creole back into the ranks of the blacks and coolies.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid., p.464.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., p.465.

<sup>371</sup> Anim-Addo, *Touching the Body*, p.11.

<sup>372</sup> Carew, 'Caribbean Writer and Exile', p.465.

Carew highlights the relationship between class and colour: the black working class, and the white upper class. The only way to escape working class status was to escape the skin colour which relegated one to this socioeconomic position. The sun, with its power to darken the skin and confine African heritage people to the lower classes, lingers as a force which can relegate blacks to poverty, or, worse, to re-living history as manual labourers in the realm of the cane field (like the Caco family). It is no longer godly, but has been re-appropriated for African heritage people on New World soil by white colonisers who insist upon interpreting the power of the sun as a negative force. Ironically, the only way for African/Caribbean people to escape the sun's rays is to leave their homeland for cooler climates, detaching oneself from the land which fostered these attitudes. This exile perpetuates the alienation and fragmentation set in motion by colonialism, further alienating African/Caribbean people from the *Présence Africaine* of their cultural identity. Thus, colonial attitudes towards the sun contribute to African/Caribbean estrangement – both physical and cultural – from the Caribbean home. The sun cannot be perceived purely as the god of Sophie's ancestors; the historical connotations attached to this image play a role in justifying primitive attitudes towards blackness.

Like Carew, Ormerod links colour and class in the Caribbean, suggesting that blackness, and a black identity, was something to resist or deny to increase potential for social mobility. Ormerod writes, 'the social hierarchies of the Caribbean, for centuries inseparably linked with race and colour, are another important factor in [...] the inability to accept racial identity'.<sup>373</sup> Ormerod recognises the specificity and complexity of the Haitian situation, where, 'since a revolutionary coalition of blacks and mulattos expelled the slave owners in 1804, mulattos have occupied the elite social positions once held by the white plantocracy'.<sup>374</sup> Elsewhere, she writes of 'the ways in which prejudices tied to race [...] have historically conditioned West Indian society and influenced events in [the] twentieth century'.<sup>375</sup> The novel demonstrates how this colonial legacy still reverberates in the African/Caribbean consciousness and remnants of the pigmentocracy affected under colonial rule – a psychological manifestation of *Présence Européenne* – are apparent when Sophie describes how on a shopping trip in America, 'my mother brought some face cream that promised to make her skin lighter' (*Breath*, p.51). The non-judgemental, observational way in which this comment is made suggests the normalcy of this purchase and the general acceptance of an approach towards beautification which favours Caucasian skin. Crucially, this episode takes place on diasporic soil, in New York.

Although she has physically left Haiti for the diaspora, Martine continues to adhere to Haitian attitudes towards race and colour inherited from colonial prejudices, revealing the extent to which colonial attitudes towards blackness have become ingrained in her psyche. In effect, Martine has

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<sup>373</sup> Ormerod, *Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel*, p.13.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>375</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.22.

internalized the traumatic Haitian past: she is removed from the island whose colonial society fostered these attitudes towards white racial supremacy but continues to enact ritual skin-bleaching, unable to psychologically detach herself from the myth of the colonising forces. When Sophie talks about her mother's beauty regime, describing how 'the eggplant shade came back to her skin, as it always did before she applied her skin bleaching creams' (*Breath*, p.188), her use of 'always' reinforces the ritualistic nature of her mother's skin-bleaching. Martine's behaviour proves that physical separation from Haiti does not act as a barrier between the Haitian subject and their historically informed identity as the effects of the traumatised past are transported to the diaspora. Although Martine's body is in the diaspora she retains a Haitian consciousness. Martine's departure from and return to Haiti reflects her complicated relationship with the island as, in a psychological sense, she can never really leave. As the nightmares make the traumatic experience of her rape continually present, her skin bleaching illustrates that the trauma of a colonial past is similarly inescapable.

Martine has internalised and transported to the diaspora both the psychological traumas of a colonial legacy, and the traumas of her own experiences amongst the cane. Counihan writes about 'Haitian trauma reasserting itself in New York':

*Breath, Eyes, Memory* suggests not only that what the nation remembers and what it forgets travels beyond its own discrete borders but also that the simultaneous action of memorializing and sanitizing the past extends the original traumas of history, carrying them far beyond their limited temporal moment [...] Martine's actions also dramatize the unbearableness of the burdens of embodied memory and the inefficacy of trying to enforce the boundaries between Haiti and the United States.<sup>376</sup>

The traumas of history expand beyond temporal borders: the past associated with the cane field and plantation economy – the racial and sexual abuses of this system – reverberate throughout the present day showing that the traumatic past exists in the present even in the diaspora. In embodying memories of past and present suffering in Haiti, Martine becomes a vessel for traumatic experience. Consequently, these experiences surpass linear time as they are cyclically re-lived as a kind of 'travelling memory and travelling history'<sup>377</sup> whilst simultaneously refusing to be constrained by national boundaries. Martine's skin bleaching, perpetuation of the testing ritual and recurring nightmares reveal the way in which she internalizes and transports both personal and intergenerational trauma from rural Haiti to the city of New York. Counihan writes, 'the women's tradition of testing – and its occluded precursor, rape – marks the bodies of Haitian women with a past that will not stay in the past [...] Martine and Sophie [...] carry with them, even into their new geography, the physical markers of personal histories and national history'.<sup>378</sup> Yet through the internalization of traumatic experiences

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<sup>376</sup> Counihan, 'Desiring Diaspora', p.41.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.

rooted in Haitian history, I argue that the Caco women more crucially carry with them into their new geography the psychological and emotional markers of both their personal and national histories.

### **Diasporic Discontent and Narratives of Return in *Breath, Eyes, Memory***

The psychological and emotional markers of African/Caribbean traumatic history continue to influence the Caco women's lives in the diaspora, and the internalization of traumatic experience contributes towards the characters' feelings of diasporic discontent, heightening the need for a return to Haiti to confront traumatic history. As discussed in Chapter One, I use 'diasporic discontent' to refer to a variety of ways in which life in the diaspora is problematic for displaced, migratory subjects.<sup>379</sup> Here, I use the term to refer to feelings of unbelonging which manifest themselves in the diaspora as a result of both external factors, such as racism or poverty, and internal factors, emphasising the crippling nature of discontent resulting from the pervasiveness of inescapable intergenerational trauma, travelling memory, and history. Sophie's impressions of America begin as she is reunited with the mother she has no memory of at the airport. When Martine leads her young daughter to her car, Sophie notes, 'outside it was overcast and cool' (*Breath*, p.41) in stark contrast to the heat of the Haitian sun. Her mother's 'pale yellow car' has 'a long crack across the windshield glass. The paint was peeling off the side door' and inside were 'tattered cushions on the seats' (*Breath*, p.41). New York appears muted and dulled, from the climate to the 'pale' colour of the car which lacks the vibrancy of the 'bright' and 'colourful' giant poincianas in Haiti (*Breath*, p.6) or the daffodils 'the colour of pumpkins and golden summer squash' (*Breath*, p.21). Martine's battered car suggests that life continues to be a struggle in the diaspora. In the car, Martine reminisces about the optimism of childhood, how she and Atie 'dreamt of becoming important women', adding wryly, 'imagine our surprise when we found out we had limits' (*Breath*, p.43). This cynical and defeatist attitude is reinforced by the over-bearing and oppressive character of the city. Sophie observes:

All the street lights were suddenly gone. The streets we drove down now were dim and hazy. The windows were draped with black bars; black trash bags blew out into the night air. (*Breath*, p.43)

In her discussion of diasporic life in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Semia Harbawi writes:

The rift between mother and daughter is made yet more gaping by the desolate, overcast urban setting. The slate greyness of the sky oozes a lead-heavy depression that seems to close in on Sophie and make her yearn all the more bitterly for Haiti. Her feeling of dislodgement is further intensified by [...] the roving cars and the superciliousness of the towering, soulless buildings.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> I use 'diasporic discontent' to refer to diasporic attitudes towards race which make life difficult for minority ethnic groups, particularly those of African/Caribbean descent. See Chapter One, p.69.

<sup>380</sup> Semia Harbawi, 'Against All Odds: The Experience of Trauma and the Economy of Survival in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*', *Wasafiri*, 23, 1 (March 2008) 38-44, (p.39).

Rather than emphasising the description of New York as evidence of Sophie's estrangement from her biological mother, I suggest that the contrast in description of Haiti, where Danticat uses language and imagery to conjure a sense of the island's natural beauty, and New York, which lacks the warmth and vibrancy of island life, emphasises the rift between Sophie and her homeland. New York appears alien, unwelcoming and unfriendly as the flora and fauna are replaced with cars and bags of rubbish; the image of children playing is contrasted with towers blocks with barred windows. Sophie's sense of dislocation is further exacerbated by the strangeness and unfamiliarity of her new environment, which seems increasingly hostile as 'there were young men standing on street corners, throwing empty cans at passing cars. My mother swerved to avoid a bottle that almost came crashing through the windshield' (*Breath*, p.43). Even the inner-city poverty differs from that of Haiti, where community and family are always at the fore of the narrative. In rural Croix-des-Rosets, Sophie passes 'a line of thatched huts where a group of women were pounding millet in a large mortar with a pestle' and 'in the cane fields, men chopped cane stalks as they sang back and forth to one another' (*Breath*, p.22). The urban poverty of New York is lonelier and more intimidating:

There was writing all over the building. As we walked towards it, my mother nearly tripped over a man sleeping under a blanket of newspapers [...] thick dirty glass was covered with names written in graffiti bubbles. (*Breath*, p.43)

Sophie's diasporic discontent stems from the trauma of her alienation from the familiar, her separation from the home, people and culture she has grown up with. The people are as unwelcoming as the urban environment and American racism further prevents Sophie and her mother from assimilating into life in New York. Sophie is 'accused of having HBO – Haitian Body Odour' and the media fosters this antagonism towards Haitian immigrants as many of the children 'had heard on television that only the "Four Hs" got AIDS – Heroin addicts, Hemophiliacs, Homosexuals and Haitians' (*Breath*, p.51). Despite this hostility, Martine embraces New York as the place where her daughter can receive the education which will increase the social and economic status of the family, telling Sophie, 'if you make something of yourself in life, we will all succeed. You can *raise our heads*' (*Breath*, p.44). Sophie's opportunity for education and a better life – the promise of which were cut short for Martine when she was raped as a teenager – represents the family's escape from the working classes, from the cane field, the realm of their enslaved and impoverished ancestors and relatives. However, rejecting an American education, Martine sends Sophie to a Haitian Adventist School. Sophie 'hated' the French medium school because it enhanced and reinforced her outsider status: 'outside the school, we were "the Frenchies", cringing in our mock-Catholic school uniforms as the students from the public school across the street called us "boat people" and "stinking Haitians"' (*Breath*, p.67). The diasporic environment

develops from one which is passively hostile to one which is actively and aggressively racist.<sup>381</sup> Although the Caco women make little attempt to integrate into the wider community, remaining in their Haitian neighbourhood, embracing a familiar education system and restaurants which remind them of home, the presence of racism in the diaspora suggests this internalization is a means of self-preservation. Paradoxically, Sophie's diasporic discontent intensifies as she fails to integrate into New York life, spending six years doing nothing but 'school, home, and prayer', bored by 'the monotony of [her] shuffle between home and school' (*Breath*, p.67). She remains always on the periphery, an outsider defined by her Haitian-ness.

By insisting upon a diasporic life which revolves around Haitian society in New York, and seeking the same insularity for her daughter, who must 'keep away from those American boys' (*Breath*, p.67), Martine both embraces her Haitian identity as a source of sustenance whilst simultaneously shunning her homeland because of the trauma it embodies: 'there are ghosts there that I can't face' (*Breath*, p.78). This paradox is at the crux of Martine's crisis because the 'ghosts' are within her and are thus inescapable. Relocating to New York cannot cure Martine as she brings her traumatic history and her Haitian identity with her, in part fostering her own diasporic discontent. As Counihan writes:

The novel, despite itself, suggests that the trauma of diaspora is not 'merely' the loss of a homeland – the wrenching knowledge of inalienable homelessness – but, more chillingly, the awareness that home and all its assault follow the fleeing subject into the clean, empty space of escape.<sup>382</sup>

Home follows Martine as she is unable to detach herself from the memory of her experiences in Haiti. Sophie is similarly unable to separate herself from Haiti, a connection which is evident in her response to the physical separation from her homeland and surrogate mother, Tante Atie. At the post office in New York, Sophie feels 'there was more I wanted to send to Tante Atie. If I had the power to shrink myself and slip into the envelope, I would have done it' (*Breath*, p.50). She is 'missing home' (*Breath*, p.58), connected to her surrogate mother and motherland through the sense of loss and alienation which she feels in New York.

When Sophie returns to Haiti and is reunited with her aunt and grandmother, she tells Tante Atie, 'I wish I had never left you [...] I wish I had stayed with you' (*Breath*, p.136). Her departure from the island to join her mother in New York is a rupture from both motherland and surrogate mother. Martine and Sophie's diasporic status reflects the fragmentation of the African/Caribbean family. In addition to bequeathing a legacy of violence and brutality, of racism and inequality, of corruption and the unequal distribution of political power, colonialism initiated a tradition of migration – a 'migration

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<sup>381</sup> This progression reflects the shift from casual racist language to violent racially motivated attacks in the diaspora as depicted in *Fruit of the Lemon*. See Chapter One, p.73.

<sup>382</sup> Counihan, 'Desiring Diaspora', pp.51-2.

ideology' – which the island's unstable and volatile political situation continued to exacerbate.<sup>383</sup> Writing in 2005, Heint and Heint acknowledge that 'one in four Haitians now lives outside Haiti',<sup>384</sup> claiming, 'the one Haitian export that had multiplied under Papa Doc [was] economic and political refugees'.<sup>385</sup> Danticat, Martine and Sophie's dispersal from their homeland reveals them to be part of this mass migratory movement, caught in socio-political circumstances beyond their control.

When Tante Atie tells her niece, 'in this country, there are many good reasons for mothers to abandon their children' (*Breath*, p.20), she reveals how Sophie's personal experience of estrangement from her biological mother – left as a baby in the care of her aunt – is shared by many families. Atie's comments also reveal an underlying parallel between past and present African/Caribbean experience as the separation of a child from its biological mother to be raised by a surrogate alludes to the history of the African diaspora, the forced separation of millions of African men, women and children, from their tribes, families, and homeland, to the New World. The estranged matriarchal family unit depicted in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* reflects the dispersal initiated through the capture, enslavement and resale of Africans whilst also echoing the structure of the plantation family community as run by women. Writing in 1949, Fernando Henriques argues that the contemporary family structure in the Caribbean, particularly where there is 'an unconscious and a conscious bias towards the maternal [...] owes its character to the historic condition of slavery'.<sup>386</sup> Henriques' argument predates, but supports Ormerod's, who more recently suggests, 'the traces of slavery in present-day family structures are recorded in the depiction of matrifocal households'.<sup>387</sup> The Caco women are 'products of a historical situation' and their actions and life choices cannot be 'separated from social factors set in motion by Caribbean history'.<sup>388</sup> Sophie's separation from her family – first, her mother, then her reunion with her mother and separation from her aunt, grandmother, and Haiti itself – can be perceived both as a reflection of the matriarchal family and the fragmentation of the family unit effected by colonialism. Her constant estrangement from a mother or mother figure fosters her feelings of unhappiness and discontent in the diaspora, necessitating the return home to Haiti, to the motherland.

### Returning Home to Trauma: Confronting Haiti's History

The notion of return for both Martine and Sophie is tied up with the significance of what Haiti represents for each woman as a site of pain, violence, suffering and trauma. Martine's feelings are

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<sup>383</sup> For 'migration ideology' see Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return*, pp.6-7. See also Introduction, p.31; Chapter One, pp.52-54.

<sup>384</sup> Heint and Heint, *Written in Blood*, p.3.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, p.613.

<sup>386</sup> Fernando Henriques, 'West Indian Family Organization', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 55, 1 (July 1949), 30-37 (p.37).

<sup>387</sup> Ormerod in Haigh, p.116.

<sup>388</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, pp.17-18.

complicated by her experience of rape. Living in the diaspora, physically yet not psychologically separated from her homeland, Martine feels incapable of returning for a prolonged period of time:

I have to go back to make final arrangements for your grandmother's resting place [...] I don't want to stay there for more than three or four days. I know that sounds bad, but that is the only way I can do it. There are ghosts there that I can't face, things that are still very painful for me. (*Breath*, p.78)

She is haunted by her ordeal, living in fear of the memories which will resurface and the pain she will feel upon returning to the site of her trauma. Consequently, Martine returns to Haiti just once, in search of Sophie, who hasn't spoken to her mother in two years. Leaving her husband, Joseph, a vague note, declaring, 'I needed to go somewhere and empty out my head' (*Breath*, p.184), Sophie has fled and taken their baby, Brigitte, to stay with her grandmother and aunt. Sophie's return to Haiti is not just 'somewhere'. It is, significantly, a return to her roots and the matrifocal family which raised her, to the women who are the 'vehicles of culture and history' at a point of crisis in her life.<sup>389</sup> Joseph, worried for his wife and daughter, contacts Martine to express his concern, and when Martine immediately suspects Sophie may have returned to Haiti she reveals an understanding of the importance of Haiti as a place of belonging and identification. She sends a letter in the form of a cassette tape enquiring of Sophie's whereabouts. Grandmother Ife's cryptic reply, 'you needn't worry about Sophie [...] The bird, it always returns to the nest' (*Breath*, p.142) confirms Martine's suspicion, suggesting Sophie has not only returned to Haiti, but to the nest, her home. Sophie's return to her grandmother and aunt is a return to family, ancestry, culture and history as much as it is a return home.

When she is reunited with Joseph, Sophie finally refers to Haiti as home, causing Joseph to respond, 'you called it home [...] you have never called it that since we've been together. Home has always been your mother's home, that you could never go back to' (*Breath*, p.195). Naming Haiti as her homeland, Sophie reaffirms her sense of identity. When she chooses to return to Haiti to 'empty out [her] head', Sophie finally accepts the island's important role not simply as the embodiment of ancestral and personal trauma but as a crucial presence, a refuge, and a special place of belonging. In contrast, Martine's return to Haiti in search of her daughter is less fulfilling as she continues to struggle to transcend her traumatic past on the island and reconcile these experiences with her Haitian identity. Martine comes not to seek refuge, but tells Grandmother Ife, 'I decided to come and see Sophie and take care of your affairs [...] I plan to stay for only three days' (*Breath*, p.160). Her return conjures powerful memories of the traumatic past and she tells Sophie, 'whenever I'm there, I feel like I sleep with ghosts. The first night I was there, I woke up pounding my stomach' (*Breath*, p.189). The psychological pain manifests itself within Martine in physical ways as the night-terrors take control; she begins to re-live her rape and re-enact past violence upon herself. Her body continues to respond

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<sup>389</sup> Berrian, 'Claiming an Identity', p.200.

physically to the return to Haiti as she feels ill towards the end of her visit and preparing to travel back to America Martine tells Sophie her illness is due to 'discomfort with being in Haiti [...] I want to go back there only to be buried' (*Breath*, p.179). Despite her body's reaction to Haiti Martine reveals her permanent ties to the island; she cannot extricate herself completely and wants to return to Haiti to be buried after her death. In this respect, Martine claims her identity as one of the 'daughters of the hills' (*Breath*, p.20), eternally rooted to the Haitian land. Although she feels unable to return to live on the island, trapped as she is by the memory of her traumatic rape, for Martine, death signals a freedom from this recurring nightmare which will enable her return to Haiti to rest.

Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw suggests in 'Home is Where the Heart is: Danticat's Landscapes of Return' (2008), that 'the restorative power of a return to this particular location in the mountains is very similar to a mythical return to an African homeland'.<sup>390</sup> Just as Guinea represents the spiritual home in death, Haiti embodies the physical homeland; Martine and Sophie's diasporic and traumatised Haitian identities are literally rooted in the land, in African/Caribbean experiences in the cane fields. Martine's desire to return to Haiti in death signifies a belief in freedom through death, a release from the traumas of her lived experiences in order to return home, unburdened by trauma's accompanying neurosis. Walcott-Hackshaw continues, 'the link between freedom and location is important [...] to find a home where they can liberate themselves from nightmares that inhabit both their real and dream worlds'.<sup>391</sup> For Martine, the return to Haiti can only be fully realised through dying and obtaining freedom from the physical and psychological scars of her traumatic experiences on the island, and, more symbolically, from the traumatic experiences of her ancestors on the same site. For Sophie, the return to the island to confront these traumatic experiences is the path to freedom in itself. Discussing the benefits of therapy to help heal the wounds of her trauma, Martine protests, 'What if they want to hypnotise me and take me back to that day? I'll kill myself' (*Breath*, p.190). The irony is that without psychiatric help Martine is constantly taken back to that day, to the cane fields, in her nightmares. Martine exemplifies one of those characters 'whose minds are governed by their own past, trapped in the involuntary recollection of events, or situations that they cannot accept'.<sup>392</sup> This unbearable experience of uncontrollable return to trauma ultimately moves Martine to commit suicide to escape re-living her rape in the cane fields.

Although Martine dies having failed to realise the importance of a return to confront and heal her trauma, the restorative power of the return journey is recognised by Sophie's therapist, Rena. After

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<sup>390</sup> Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw, 'Home Is Where the Heart Is: Danticat's Landscapes of Return', *Small Axe*, 12, 3 (October 2008), 71-82 (p.80).

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, p.80.

<sup>392</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.23. See this chapter, p.85.

she travels back to America from Haiti with her mother and daughter, Rena asks Sophie if the women returned to 'the thick of the cane field' (*Breath*, p.210) where Martine was raped. She advises:

You and your mother should both go there again and see that you can walk away from it. Even if you can never face the man who is your father, there are things that you can say to the spot where it happened. I think you'll be free once you have your confrontation. There will be no more ghosts. (*Breath*, p.211)

In failing to achieve closure through taking control of her return to the space which embodies her personal traumas and centuries of intergenerational trauma, Martine cannot survive, seeing death as the only way in which to free herself from the burden of the traumatic past: 'she stabbed her stomach with an old rusty knife [...] seventeen times' (*Breath*, p.224). When Sophie responds to her mother's suicide, saying, 'she is going to Guinea [...] or she is going to be a star. She's going to be a butterfly or a lark in a tree. She's going to be free' (*Breath*, p.228), she draws upon traditional voodoo belief to make sense of Martine's death. Her mother has found freedom from the violence of her physical home through returning in death to her spiritual home, Guinea. Nevertheless, Martine's death tragically continues the repetitive cycle of violence against women and the violation of the female body in Haitian society. As Morgan and Youssef acknowledge:

[V]iolence is violence whatever the specificity of the historical, political and domestic determinants [...] And women's disempowered positions in human societies dictate that they suffer a disproportionate share of the outcome of state, societal and family violence. The violent traumas experienced by Danticat's protagonists crisscross and multiply in all of their complex interlocking manifestations.<sup>393</sup>

Martine's trauma, inextricably interwoven with Haiti's traumas, leads her to perpetuate the cycle of violence upon herself. Following Martine's death, hope for the future lies in Sophie's potential to return once more to Haiti and confront this traumatic history to liberate herself, her daughter, and future generations of Haitian women, from suffering a similar fate, haunted and possessed by both personal and related intergenerational traumas.

As Counihan recognises, 'Sophie will achieve a healed self by exorcising the traumas of Haitian history'.<sup>394</sup> Grandmother Ife similarly recognises the need for Sophie to heal by letting go of the past, telling her granddaughter, 'you cannot always carry the pain. You must liberate yourself' (*Breath*, p.157). Although Ife is referring to the pain of the testing ritual, passed on through generations of Haitian women, her words resonate with deeper significance in accordance with Counihan's assertion regarding the traumas of Haitian history. Sophie must unburden herself from centuries of traumatic history, from an ancestral history of enslavement, subjugation and violation which replicate themselves as contemporary traumas of testing, rape and casual violence. She must return to Haiti to exorcise the

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<sup>393</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.211.

<sup>394</sup> Counihan, 'Desiring Diaspora', p.42.

ghosts of this traumatic past. Ibarrola-Armendáriz argues that '[Danticat] is mostly interested in documenting the poverty, crimes, anxiety and internal unrest that govern life in her homeland, and the kind of psychological "dis-eases" that result from them'.<sup>395</sup> However, this stance overlooks the palliative function of Danticat's narrative in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Indeed, Ormerod suggests that 'recent fiction by women is more optimistic about the possibility of coping with the memory of past trauma', citing as an example the 'strength of the notion of healing in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*'.<sup>396</sup>

Whereas Counihan 'positions the Caco women's bodies as the sites of memory that encode and testify to the history of the nation',<sup>397</sup> I argue that Sophie's second return to Haiti for her mother's funeral reveals the cane fields to be the site of memory which testifies to the history not simply of the Caco women, but collective Haitian experience. The cane fields are depicted as the space in which Sophie can confront intergenerational memories, the legacy of traumatic history and its manifestations in contemporary society and social structures. Returning to Ormerod's remark that 'the weight of memory may be felt as a burden, or it may be an agent of transcendence, a decisive element in determining a psychological outcome', then, though Martine succumbs to the burden of this memory, Sophie, in her final return, confronts the site of personal and ancestral traumas in order that she may heal, achieve emotional liberation, and transcend the repetitive cycles of violence and abuse.<sup>398</sup>

Having buried her mother on Haitian soil, Sophie turns and recalls, 'from the top of the hill, I saw our house, between the hills and the cane field' (*Breath*, p.233). The image epitomises Sophie's Haitian experience: a domestic space sandwiched between the mountainous natural landscape symbolising the mythology and folklore essential to understanding Haitian identity, and the cane fields, which, in Ormerod's words, 'hold the ancestral memory of captivity and suffering'.<sup>399</sup> Sophie must navigate her diasporic Haitian identity through reconciling both halves of her Haitian experience. She runs down the hill, flinging herself into the cane fields:

I ran through the field, attacking the cane. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk [...] I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground [...] The funeral crowd was now standing between the stalks, watching me beat and pound the cane. My grandmother held back the priest as he tried to come for me. (*Breath*, p.233)

Grandmother Ife understands the significance and necessity of Sophie's violent confrontation with the site of her family and ancestors' traumas, holding back onlookers who would attempt to restrain her. In attacking the cane, Sophie avenges all the wrongs and injustices her family, her ancestors, and, indeed, the African/Caribbean people, have suffered in association with this space, the epitome of

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<sup>395</sup> Ibarrola-Armendáriz in Herrero and Baelo-Allue, p.5.

<sup>396</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.23.

<sup>397</sup> Counihan, 'Desiring Diaspora', p.37.

<sup>398</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.24. See this chapter, p.85.

<sup>399</sup> Ormerod, *Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel*, p.42.

colonialism and a traumatic African/Caribbean past. Danticat's use of the verb 'pound' here is incredibly poignant, linking with Sophie's description of her mother's rape, the attacker who 'kept *pounding*' (*Breath*, p.139, my italics) at her amongst the cane, and the student protester who is attacked by a soldier who 'raised his pistol and *pounded* it on top of her head' (*Breath*, p.34, my italics). This link reveals how Sophie's punishment of the cane addresses both its role in her own personal traumas, and those of the Haitian collective, the intergenerational traumas which manifest themselves in contemporary social structures of poverty, violence, corruption and oppression. Finally, as Scott writes, 'Sophie [...] confronts the past, expresses her anger and her fears and begins to heal'.<sup>400</sup>

The return to the site which embodies the personal and intergenerational memory of past traumas is crucial to this liberating and healing process. Through confronting this historically significant space, 'memory at last becomes, not an inhibiting force, but the point of departure for illumination and personal change'.<sup>401</sup> The return to the cane fields, the site which embodies and represents her mother and ancestors' traumatic experiences, enables Sophie to comprehend the complexity of her diasporic identity and the crucial role of Haiti and the traumatic past in the formation of this identity, realising, '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' (*Breath*, p.234). An awareness of this past and its inherent traumas is crucial in the construction of African/Caribbean identity. Danticat's novel builds towards this realisation through Sophie's final return journey to the cane fields, her ultimate destination. Closing with a return to a space which epitomises African/Caribbean history, the novel reiterates Ormerod, 'stress[ing] the weight of historical memory, the underlying awareness within communities and individuals of past oppression which is at the root of much present-day suffering and violence'.<sup>402</sup> However, through Sophie, Danticat presents a hopeful vision for Haiti's future. Sophie's ability to return, confront the past, and set in motion a process of emotional liberation and psychological healing, suggests 'an optimistic vision of the future: the past can be seen not as an obstacle, but as a spur to personal and social transformation'.<sup>403</sup>

The narrative 'returns' contained in and represented by Danticat's novel are manifold. Whilst the novel itself 'returns' in that it writes back to Haiti from the author's diasporic perspective, it also depicts the physical and metaphorical return journeys made by Sophie and her mother from the diaspora to their Haitian homeland. Like the literal returns traced in Chapter One, the journeys undertaken by Sophie and Martine function as metaphor, specifically here as metaphor for the return to a traumatic and violent past which continues to influence and shape contemporary Haitian society

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<sup>400</sup> Scott in Sourieau and Balutansky, p.477.

<sup>401</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.24.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>403</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.27.

and notions of Haitian identity. This chapter has sought to investigate the implications of the return to specific sites which are emblematic of historical and individual traumas as a metaphor for the return to traumatic history, concluding that these metaphorical returns can initiate a confrontation with the traumatic past which effects a process of liberation and healing from intergenerational, collective and individual traumas which influence notions of identity and belonging for Caribbean people. A central thread of this thesis' argument is the connection between literary depictions of the return to the Caribbean as a metaphor for the return to a traumatic past, and the continuing influence of traumatic history upon contemporary notions of selfhood, identification and belonging for diasporic Caribbean people which in part necessitates this return. Thus, addressing the relationship between the diasporic self and the return to a Caribbean home, in Chapter Three I move to problematize the notion of the physical return as a metaphor for a return to origins which fully informs diasporic subjectivity for protagonists whose traumatic separation from the island home, and subsequent relocation and assimilation in the diaspora, has left them suspended between cultures and languages. Turning to texts representative of the Hispanophone Caribbean, I develop the emerging argument towards the transformative, therapeutic, and healing function of the 'narrative of return' as a return to the past to initiate a confrontation with, and enable a process of working through, the traumatic past.

### Chapter Three

#### Where to (Re)Turn? Language, Trauma and Belonging in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* and *Something to Declare*

You  
you are not Black  
you are Indian

Here  
here we all have it  
we have Black behind the ears<sup>404</sup>

Addressing 'narratives of return' representative of the Hispanic Caribbean diaspora, this chapter turns to a consideration of the work of Dominican American writer, Julia Alvarez. Attitudes towards race, racial identity and knowledge or understanding of racialised history have been paramount to my discussion of the narrative of return as a 'return' to the Caribbean home in order to confront a traumatic past which continues to influence diasporic identity in the present. Hence, I foreground my discussion of Alvarez's work with the above excerpt from Dominican poet Blas Jiménez's 'Discrimination Dominican-style', and an acknowledgement that race is a complex phenomenon in the Dominican Republic, where there is an overwhelming denial of African heritage. David Howard explains in *Colouring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic* (2001):

African ancestry in Dominican society is largely ignored or denied [...] A plethora of terms is used to avoid the implication of African ancestry. *Trigueñola*, *rosaditola*, *desteñidola*, *rubiola*, and *cenizola* respectively refer to skin colour as wheat-coloured, rosy, faded, blond or fair, and dark or ashen. These terms are regularly applied to the slightest variation of colour and tend to be wholly inconsistent and variable in their usage.<sup>405</sup>

This denial of African heritage pervades much Dominican literature; Lucía M. Suárez refers to 'a series of self-imaginings constructed by Dominican intellectuals to create a history of Indian and Spanish heritage, negating African influences on the culture and the peoples'.<sup>406</sup> Luis also references '[t]he race issue so conspicuously absent from Dominican literature', acknowledging, 'racial issues exist in Dominican society, even though upper-class and elite writers have omitted them from the literature'.<sup>407</sup> Social attitudes towards race, specifically, a denial of blackness, are important to bear in mind

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<sup>404</sup> Blas Jiménez, 'Discrimination Dominican-style' in *Caribbean African Upon Awakening*, trans. by Antonio D. Tillis (London: Mango Publishing, 2010), p.101.

<sup>405</sup> David Howard, *Colouring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), p.9.

<sup>406</sup> Lucía M. Suárez, *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), p.108.

<sup>407</sup> William Luis, *Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997), p.259; p.239.

throughout my analysis of Alvarez's work as, in stark contrast to the work of Marshall, Levy and Danticat, *Présence Africaine* is crucially absent. Where the African presence is taken out of the question of one's Caribbean identity, as I shall demonstrate in this chapter, alternative markers of identification such as language and culture are privileged.

Taking the previous chapters' findings with regards to cultural identity and traumatic history into account, this chapter further explores questions of diasporic identity in relation to the traumatic separation from the Caribbean home with a specific focus on the role played by language in relation to culture in the process of identity production for diasporic Caribbean people.<sup>408</sup> I turn here to texts representative of the Hispanophone Caribbean experience: Alvarez's novel, *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) and her collection of autobiographical essays, *Something to Declare* (1999). Through a comparative analysis I consider the presentation of the relationship between home, language, culture and identity formation, or production in order to investigate how the selected texts express, depict, and enact an identity suspended between languages (native Spanish and American English) and cultures; the 'Old World' Latina Dominican, and the 'New World' Anglicised North American. Confronted with the absence, or denial, of *Présence Africaine*, I explore the notion of identification and cultural belonging within language and linguistic expression, which reveals the privileging of *Présence Européenne* and *Présence Américain* as markers of Caribbean diasporic identity.

With an emphasis on Alvarez's employment of reverse chronological narrative structure, scholarship on the novel by critics including William Luis, Catherine Romagnolo, and Karen Castellucci Cox has overwhelmingly foregrounded the central thematic of the protagonist's return to the Caribbean homeland as a metaphor for the return to the past in search of cultural origins.<sup>409</sup> Acknowledging the limitations of scholarship which favours a discussion of the protagonist's retrospective narrative as a marker of the return journey as metaphor, this chapter also seeks to address the return within narrative form, seeking to contest an understanding of the novel as a straightforward 'return' to some notion of an essential Dominican origin. I take as a starting point the argument of Julie Barak, who perceives the novel's narrative structure as a spiral within which the García girls are simultaneously pulled both toward and away from their island home, and toward and away from their diasporic home, within what

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<sup>408</sup> For a discussion of identity as a process of becoming see Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in Rutherford; Gadsby, *Sucking Salt*, p.10. See also Introduction, n.29; Chapter One, p.50.

<sup>409</sup> Luis, 'A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*'; Catherine Romagnolo, 'Recessive Origins in Julia Alvarez's *García Girls: A Feminist Exploration of Narrative Beginnings*' in *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. by Brian Richardson (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), pp.149-165; Karen Castellucci Cox, 'A Particular Blessing: Storytelling as Healing in the Novels of Julia Alvarez' in *Healing Cultures: Art and Religion as Curative Practices in the Caribbean and its Diaspora*, ed. by Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp.133-148. See also Fatima Mujčinović, *Postmodern Cross-Culturalism and Politicization in U.S. Latina Literature: From Ana Castillo to Julia Alvarez* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) and David J. Vázquez, *Triangulations: Narrative Strategies for Navigating Latino Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

Barak deems a 'widening gyre'.<sup>410</sup> In light of the cultural tensions between diasporic and Caribbean home evident throughout Alvarez's work, this chapter examines how the concept of a 'return' applies when protagonists and writer are positioned within this 'gyre', suspended between languages and cultures. Where do they 'turn' to discover, or rediscover, a 'home' space? What effect do the traumas of cultural alienation, or dislocation, and diasporic discontent have upon the diasporic writer and protagonists' sense of self?

Much contemporary scholarship has highlighted an identity based reading of the novel.<sup>411</sup> Sarika Chandra cites this thematic as the reason for the popularity of Alvarez's novel within academic scholarship in the U.S., suggesting:

One of the reasons that *The García Girls* has been so readily accepted into the canon of American literary studies can be inferred in the tendency of scholarship to emphasize the novel as a story about girls growing up in New York as 'Latinas', trying to assimilate within the United States while still holding on to Dominican cultural practices.<sup>412</sup>

Whilst Chandra recognises the pertinence of these readings, she encourages a contextualised approach towards Alvarez's work, arguing that 'the old/new cultural practices dimension of the novel is best understood when read in connection with the rest of the novel, as well as its sociohistorical milieu'.<sup>413</sup> Although scholars have addressed the search for identity in *García Girls*, the significance of the concept of the return has frequently been explored quite unilaterally as a return to cultural origins through revisiting the past.

In addressing key issues regarding the suspended subject and the return/turn within Alvarez's work, this chapter will problematize the notion of the 'return' to cultural origins for the protagonist and writer whose identity is considered to be suspended between cultures, languages, and geographical home spaces. It will contextualise this literary representation of the question of the (re)turn, taking into account the island's 'sociohistorical milieu' and particularly the socio-political background to Alvarez's life and writing as a Dominican American.<sup>414</sup> I consider Alvarez's fictionalised representations of cultural tensions and the idea of the return/turn to Dominican culture – to childhood, to the island home, and to the Hispanic language, culture and values which this home space embodies – alongside Alvarez's discussion of cultural tensions and diasporic identity in her autobiographical essays. Finally, in light of

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<sup>410</sup> Julie Barak, "'Turning and Turning in the Widening Gyre": A Second Coming into Language in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*', *MELUS*, 23, 1 (Spring 1998), 159-176.

<sup>411</sup> See, for example, Lucía M. Suárez, 'Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation', *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 5, 1 (2004), 117-145; Trinna S. Frever, "'Oh! You Beautiful Doll!": Icon, Image and Culture in Works by Alvarez, Cisneros and Morrison', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 28, 1 (Spring 2009), 121-139, which provides a discussion of the girls' cultural identity through an analysis of the doll scene (pp.130-135); Jennifer Bess 'Imploding the Miranda Complex in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*', *College Literature*, 34, 1 (Winter 2007), 78-105; Luis, 'A Search for Identity'. Identity based readings also underlie the work of Barak, Castellucci Cox and Vázquez.

<sup>412</sup> Sarika Chandra, 'Re-Producing a Nationalist Literature', *American Quarterly*, 60, 3 (September 2008), 829-850, (p.841).

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, p.842.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, p.842.

my discussion of Alvarez's literary representation of the 'suspended' diasporic subject, I investigate the implications of the author's employment of retrospective narrative form within *García Girls* with reference to the social and historical context within which Alvarez's work is produced.

### Introducing the García Girls

Divided into three parts – I: 1989-1972, II: 1970-1960, and III: 1960-1956 – Alvarez's novel tells, in reverse chronological order, the story of the García family – Carlos, Laura, and their four daughters – chronicling their life in the Dominican Republic and the family's migration to the U.S. in the early 1960s after a failed assassination attempt upon military dictator General Rafael Trujillo's life. Implicated in the plot due to his involvement in the revolutionary group responsible, Carlos is forced to flee the island and Trujillo's dictatorship to ensure the safety of his family. The young García girls leave behind their native island home, their extended Dominican family, a large comforting network of uncles, aunts and cousins, and the life of financial security and privilege which they have hitherto lived as fair-skinned Dominicanas of wealthy, Hispanic lineage. Growing up in the U.S. the girls are by no means impoverished (their family is well connected in the States and their father continues to work as a doctor, later sending his girls to private school), but they experience racial prejudice and linguistic alienation as they struggle to reconcile the cultural tensions between their allegiance to the Dominican Old World of their parents and their desire to assimilate and enjoy the freedoms of life as young American women. Raised in the gap in-between cultures, for the García girls these tensions are never fully resolved and Alvarez's novel details the girls' struggles to reconcile the two halves of their American/Dominican identity and claim their hybrid subjectivity.<sup>415</sup>

The texts discussed in Chapters One and Two are, to varying degrees, semi-autobiographical in their depiction of character, family history and diasporic experience. Like Levy, Marshall, and Danticat, whose novels have been shown to reflect the authors' own personal concerns with reconciling their cultural identity within an historical context which informs their diasporic Caribbean subjectivity, Alvarez's novel is borne of personal experiences; those of migration, exile, and the complexities of an evolving hybridised cultural identity. Alvarez explains:

One of my theories [...] is that there is no such thing as straight-up fiction. There are just levels of distance from our own life experience, the thing that drives us to write in the first place. In spite of our caution and precaution, bits of our lives will get into what we write.<sup>416</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> For gap in-between cultures, see Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.2. See also Introduction, p.34; Chapter One, p.81. For clarification of my use of the term 'hybrid' throughout this thesis, see Introduction, pp.19-20. A discussion of the 'two halves' of the girls' identities can be found in this chapter, pp.137-144.

<sup>416</sup> Julia Alvarez, *Something to Declare* (New York: Plume, 1999), p.275. All further references are to this edition and will be given in the body of text.

Jennifer Bess asserts that ‘*Something to Declare* [...] clearly identifies the author with her protagonist’ and this connection between Alvarez’s life and that of the fictional Garcías has already warranted a degree of critical attention.<sup>417</sup> Listing the similarities in the families’ experiences, Barak argues that ‘in many ways the stories of the García girls are repetitions of Alvarez’s own stories [...] Alvarez reinvents her own literary and personal past and repeats it in the stories of the four sisters’.<sup>418</sup> Both Alvarez’s own claims about her work and literary scholarship widely recognise this assertion. David J. Vázquez’s argument towards Alvarez’s employment of ‘genre blending’ in her novels of historical fiction is equally applicable to her semi-autobiographical novels, the *García Girls* and its sequel, *¡Yo!*, which ‘are often considered fictionalised autobiographies’.<sup>419</sup>

Alvarez’s employment of ‘genre-blending’ in her autobiographical fiction can be linked to the idea of a personal ‘narrative of return’ and ‘quest for home’. Critics of her work further recognise that within this semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional family, Alvarez creates a fictional alter ego. In her article on the use of ‘pseudo-memory’ in what she deems Alvarez’s ‘autobiographical novels’, *García Girls* and *¡Yo!*, Jessica Wells Cantiello writes:

Alvarez crafts a pseudo-family and an alter ego named Yolanda García, whose stories draw from Alvarez’s own life and imagination to depict the experiences of growing up under the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, immigrating to the United States, and becoming a writer.<sup>420</sup>

Referring to the third García sister, one of the novel’s dominant narrative voices, Barak writes that ‘it is also probable that Yolanda functions as Alvarez’s alter ego’.<sup>421</sup> A number of critics have attended to Alvarez’s characterisation of Yolanda García – Luis asserts unequivocally that ‘Yolanda is the author’s alter ego’<sup>422</sup> – although some of the more astute analyses are provided by Vázquez and Suárez, with Vázquez asserting that ‘the shortened form of Yolanda’s name, Yo, corresponds to the first-person pronoun in Spanish. Thus “Yo” can be interpreted as “I”, playfully pointing to the author as an extra-textual source for Yolanda’s character’.<sup>423</sup> Suárez’s extension of this argument recognises that ‘in Spanish, *yo* can only occupy a subject position’ and goes on to read Yolanda’s character within Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis suggesting that ‘*Yo*, the Spanish pronoun, can be translated into ego – one of the three agencies of id, ego, and superego’.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> Bess, ‘Imploding the Miranda Complex’, p.88.

<sup>418</sup> Barak, “Turning and Turning in the Widening Gyre”, p.16. See also Castellucci Cox’s assertion that “Alvarez leans heavily on personal experience to create a fictional Dominican family” in ‘A Particular Blessing’, ed. by Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, p.135.

<sup>419</sup> Vázquez, *Triangulations*, p.140, p.137.

<sup>420</sup> Jessica Wells Cantiello, “That Story about the Gun”: Pseudo-Memory in Julia Alvarez’s Autobiographical Novels’, *MELUS*, 36, 1 (Spring 2011), 83-108 (p.83).

<sup>421</sup> Barak, “Turning and Turing in the Widening Gyre”, p.163.

<sup>422</sup> Luis, ‘A Search for Identity’, p.840.

<sup>423</sup> Vázquez, *Triangulations*, p.148.

<sup>424</sup> Suárez, ‘Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation’, p.136.

I do not intend to dwell at length on a comparison between the lives of author and protagonist as Alvarez makes this link clear in *Something to Declare* and critical analyses of her employment of multiple generic forms in her blending of autobiography and fiction have been conducted. My intention is to establish the link between novel and author: a semi-autobiographical 'narrative of return' which I suggest reflects an authorial 'quest for home'. In foregrounding the notion of Alvarez's novel as autobiographical fiction, I seek to ascertain how the text interrogates issues pertaining to cultural suspension and cultural tensions in its attempts to function as a 'narrative of return' and 'quest for home' for both author and protagonist. Noting that "'Yo" means "I" in Spanish', Stephanie Lovelady remarks that this moniker 'both playfully alludes to Yolanda's status as an autobiographical character and points to her ongoing search for identity', making both character and author's quest for identity in the novel explicit.<sup>425</sup>

Chapter One argued that through their narratives of return, Levy and Marshall articulate their own diasporic black subjectivities; their fiction, which draws heavily upon the authors' life experiences and ancestral histories, enacts a process of cultural production whilst writing their African/Caribbean histories into literature and communicating the need for active resistance to cultural amnesia.<sup>426</sup> Alvarez's experience differs from that of Marshall and Levy. As a Latina woman from a society and culture which privileges *Présence Européenne* and *Présence Américain* as markers of Caribbean identity, she does not claim their black heritage.<sup>427</sup> Neither was she born in the diaspora to parents who immigrated from the Anglophone Caribbean. Although she was born in the U.S., Alvarez's family returned to the Dominican Republic where she lived until she was ten years old. Alvarez subsequently retained strong familial ties with the island throughout her childhood and adolescence. In this respect, Alvarez's experiences of migration and diaspora are more similar to those of Haitian American Danticat, who also spent her childhood in the Caribbean. Despite ancestral and cultural differences between Levy, Marshall, Danticat, and Alvarez, I suggest that the search for identity via a narrative return to the familial island home in *García Girls* reveals the 'narrative of return' is a pan-Caribbean preoccupation for diasporic writers. I further posit that as a writer from the Hispanophone Caribbean, Alvarez shares the inheritance of an inherently diasporic Caribbean experience lived in the shadows cast by the legacy of colonialism, the traumas of cultural alienation and separation from the originary home.<sup>428</sup> How do the traumas of exile continue to impact upon notions of identity and belonging to the island for the subject suspended between languages, cultures, and home spaces? In addressing this question via an

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<sup>425</sup> Stephanie Lovelady, 'Walking Backwards: Chronology, Immigration, and Coming of Age in *My Antonia* and *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*', *Modern Language Studies*, 35, 1 (Spring 2005), 28-37, (p.35).

<sup>426</sup> See Chapter One, p.81.

<sup>427</sup> For attitudes towards blackness and race in the Dominican Republic see this chapter, p.118.

<sup>428</sup> For a discussion of Caribbean experience as a fundamentally diasporic experience see Hall in Morley and Chen, p.447. See Introduction, n.108, p.32.

analysis of the work of a Dominican American writer, this chapter furthers a pan-Caribbean approach towards theorising diasporic Caribbean literature as it investigates whether, like Levy, Marshall and Danticat, Alvarez's novel similarly centres upon the return as a way in which to inform diasporic subjectivity through knowledge of cultural origins.

### The Traumas of Exile: Diasporic Discontent and Cultural Assimilation in *García Girls*

Growing up as Caribbean immigrants in New York, the Garcías are, like Levy's Faith, Marshall's Avey, and Danticat's Sophie, 'in but not of' the place in which they live.<sup>429</sup> An outsider or alien status is forced upon the girls, who are repeatedly reminded of their difference by a hostile local community. The Garcías are immediately made to feel unwelcome in their new home as 'the old woman in the apartment below [...] had been complaining to the super since the day the family moved in'.<sup>430</sup> The nature of the complaints – 'their food smelled. They spoke too loudly and not in English' (*García*, p.170) – are a direct attack on aspects of the family's cultural identity; their Dominican food and their native language. When the building's Puerto-Rican superintendent attempts to console Mrs García, his behaviour suggests an affinity with the family's migrant identity: 'he shrugged his shoulders, helpless', saying, 'it is a difficult place, this country, before you get used to it. You have to not take things personal' (*García*, p.170). These words of reassurance ring hollow as the neighbour's attack on the foundation of the Garcías' identity – their Hispanic language and culture – cannot be perceived as anything but personal. The escalation of the complaints to racist abuse as the neighbour stops mother and daughters, spitting at them, 'Spics! Go back to where you came from!' (*García*, p.171), exposes a resistance on the part of the host country to make space for the newcomers.

The America represented by the unwelcoming woman in the Garcías' apartment building reveals a clear message: there is no room for Dominican migrants, Dominican culture or language. I return here to Glissant's work advocating the enriching benefits of cultural synthesis, and his suggestion that the explosion of cultures does not mean they are scattered or mutually diluted as 'the tendency towards synthesis can only be an advantage, in a world destined to synthesis and to the "contact of civilizations"'.<sup>431</sup> According to Glissant, cultural synthesis has brought about '*another reality*' in that 'synthesis is not a process of bastardization [...] but a productive authority through which each element is enriched'.<sup>432</sup> Yet, in Alvarez's novel America is hostile towards the Dominican Garcías, suggesting an inability to perceive the inevitability of cultural synthesis in a globalised world. Instead, Alvarez depicts a community's resistance to embrace cultural synthesis as a productive and enriching process.

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<sup>429</sup> Hall, 'The Politics of Mugging' in Hall and others, p.357. See Chapter One, p.49.

<sup>430</sup> Julia Alvarez, *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991; repr. 2004), p.170. All further references are to this edition and will be given in the body of text.

<sup>431</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.34, p.6.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8. For Glissant and cultural synthesis see Introduction, p.10, pp.32-34; Chapter One, pp.49-50.

The hostility and aggression encountered by the Garcías in the U.S. is directed at them as a result of their inherent racial, cultural and linguistic difference: they are 'Other'. As a result, the girls reject their Dominican identity, revealing a desire to blend in to their new community and alleviate their outsider status. Bhabha argues towards the need 'to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences' as 'these in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood [...] that initiate new signs of identity'.<sup>433</sup> As teenagers resisting their parents' Old World, island values the García girls enact these moments or processes as they draw on the New World culture they find themselves surrounded by in order to initiate a new, diasporic identity for themselves.<sup>434</sup> Alvarez writes, they 'began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, and soon, Island was old hat, man' (*García*, p.108). The author's use of American slang, 'old hat, man', is at odds with the tone of her prose which more often intersperses Spanish vocabulary with Standard English, a technique which reiterates the privileging of markers of identity which reflect the influences of *Présence Européenne* and *Présence Americain* upon Dominican selfhood, in addition to emphasising the stilted and unfamiliar nature of the American vernacular to the García girls. This forced use of American slang further reflects the girls' rejection of the *Présence Européenne* which defines their Hispanic cultural identity and their efforts to repress their Dominican voice, their Dominican subjectivity, which is attacked by the hostile American community. Their use of American English reveals their desire to 'initiate new signs of identity', embracing twentieth-century notions of *Présence Americain* (with the American presence here referring to the cultural dominance of the United States of America) and placing them firmly in an in-between cultural space, suspended between the Old World Dominican and the New World American. Alvarez's unnatural and jarring use of language mirrors the artificiality of the Garcías' attempt at forcing an American cultural identity upon their Dominican selves.

I read these conscious attempts at cultural assimilation as a way in which to overcome the 'Otherness' which is a result of the trauma of exile and repress the 'articulation of cultural difference' in the diaspora. I suggest we can understand this assimilation crudely as an effort to blend into what Bhabha deems the gaps between cultures, a way in which the migrant can attempt to lessen cultural difference, and thus lessen discrimination. However, must some notion of a distinct 'Caribbean-ness' be relinquished in order to be accepted in the diaspora? Alvarez's novel suggests that America will find room for its migrant population on the condition that it Americanise itself, both culturally and linguistically. For the Garcías this assimilation must come at the expense of their Dominican identity, a rejection of the other crucial presences which contribute towards a full understanding of their Caribbean cultural identity in favour of *Présence Americain* as the dominant cultural influence of the

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<sup>433</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.2. See Introduction, p.20.

<sup>434</sup> For further discussion of identity as a process of becoming. See also Introduction, n.29; Chapter One, p.50.

United States. One Christmas, Yolanda's mother presented her with a set of monogrammed pencils, 'inscribed with [her] so-called name in gold letters: *Jolinda*' (*García*, p.90). She recalls, 'my mother had tried for my own name Yolanda, but the company had substituted the Americanized, southernized *Jolinda*' (*García*, p.90). The Americanisation of Yolanda's Spanish name implies the host country's inability to accept and integrate her Hispanic self. America will not make space for Yolanda; she must become, at least in part, Jolinda. In this sense, to find a space in the wider community of the new country, Yolanda must suppress her Dominican subjectivity. This Americanisation of Yolanda's name reflects both the tensions between the Old World and the New, and the pressures felt by the young *García* girls to Americanise in order to belong, to assimilate in order to eradicate the cultural 'Otherness' which the host country attacks. Crucially, this Americanisation also represents, or suggests, the suppression of Yolanda's Dominican subjectivity; the removal of her true name in her native language implies a silencing of her true, Hispanic Caribbean self.

Although the *García* girls make an effort to integrate into the wider community, their difference, or outsider status, cannot be overcome through a simple name change or an abandonment of one's native tongue. A strong sense of herself as inherently un-American remains with Yolanda throughout her life, revealing the way in which, despite their efforts at cultural assimilation, the girls remain 'in but not of', suspended between their Dominican origins and their American diasporic home.<sup>435</sup> A college student after nearly a decade in the United States, Yolanda still struggles to come to terms with her hybridity: 'for the hundredth time, I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everyone was making on the last two digits of the year, 1969' (*García*, pp.94-95). Yolanda's somewhat sheltered Spanish-speaking Dominican upbringing has not prepared her for adulthood in the America of the 1960s and 70s. Furthermore, differing cultural attitudes towards sex, and particularly gendered attitudes towards sex – staunchly Catholic, conservative attitudes in Dominican culture assist in inhibiting the sexual liberation of women – heighten her sense of exclusion. However, crucially, language here is posited explicitly as a barrier to cultural assimilation, preventing Yolanda from participating fully in conversation and connecting with her American-born peers. This linguistic exclusion and isolation furthers a sense of 'Otherness', intensifying her outsider, immigrant status as it prohibits her from fully relating to her classmates. Thus, I propose that the linguistic hostility first encountered from the neighbour who claims, 'they spoke too loudly and not in English' (*García*, p.170), combined with the ongoing marginalisation effected by Yolanda's inability to access the jokes and vernacular of her American peers, constitutes a social and cultural segregation, or alienation, the effects of which I deem a kind of 'language trauma'. By this, I mean the traumatic fragmentation and repression of the self which is brought about as a result of the

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<sup>435</sup> Hall in *Policing the Crisis*, ed. by Hall and others, p.357. See this Chapter, p.124. See also Chapter One, p.49.

diasporic subject's efforts to oppress their native language and voice in order to participate in dialogue with mainstream America, whilst always to some degree remaining linguistically isolated and disconnected from the new home country.

The subsequent effects of the psychic fracture, or identity crisis, which results from this 'language trauma' will be investigated throughout this chapter. However, as Alvarez's novel shows, the effects of this linguistic alienation first manifest themselves in real terms within the subject's gendered experiences of socio-cultural interactions and relationships. Dating an American boy at college, Yolanda finds that 'his vocabulary turned me off', admitting, 'I didn't want to just be in the sack, screwed, balled, laid, and fucked' (*García*, pp.96-97). Rudy's casual use of what Yolanda, a non-native speaker of English, and a young woman raised in a conservative, Catholic, and sexually repressive culture, perceives as particularly obscene language, poses an impenetrable barrier to their establishing a mutual physical or emotional connection. Because of their inability to find a shared vocabulary through which to communicate the terms of their relationship, Yolanda and Rudy remain distant and at odds with each other, linguistically, culturally, emotionally and physically. Whilst the language of sexual intimacy is paramount here in preventing the couple from engaging in a dialogue about their physical relationship, the repercussions of the effects of this linguistic alienation are that Yolanda's first romantic relationship with an American fails on the basis of her perceived prudishness towards sexual intimacy. Somewhat despairing, she imagines her future: 'I saw what a cold, lonely life awaited me in this country. I would never find someone who would understand my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles' (*García*, p.99). Yolanda attributes the breakdown of her relationship to a specifically gendered cultural difference; as a woman, her religious and cultural upbringing has shaped her somewhat prudish attitude towards sexual relationships. Whilst I do not underestimate the significance of this cultural difference, I emphasise the important role which language – and the pair's inability to communicate in a shared vocabulary of sexual intimacy – plays in the demise of their relationship. Neither Hispanic Dominican nor Anglophone American, Yolanda paints a picture of the limitations of linguistic incompatibility and the 'cultural synthesis' advocated by Glissant, as she struggles to occupy the in-between spaces which Bhabha argues provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood and initiating new signs of identity.<sup>436</sup>

Yolanda's diasporic discontent reveals the problem of cultural duality; both Hispanic Caribbean and American, Yolanda feels at home in neither domain. Despite conscious efforts to integrate themselves as American teenagers, the girls' annual vacation trips to stay with 'la familia' on the Island (*García*, p.109) revive contradictory allegiances, suggesting that although their identities evolve to encompass the new American they can never fully relinquish their sense of themselves as Dominicanas;

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<sup>436</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.6; Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.2.

they remain suspended between these two halves, straddling the hyphen in their Dominican-American subjectivities.<sup>437</sup> Alvarez writes about the girls' feelings as they depart the island each summer:

Tia Carmen's love revives our old homesickness. It's like this monkey experiment Carla read about [...] These baby monkeys were kept in a cage so long, they wouldn't come out when the doors were finally left open. Instead, they stayed inside and poked their arms through the bars for their food, just out of reach. (*García*, p.131)

Alvarez's allusion to the 'cage' acts as a metaphor for the girls' feelings towards their parental home as they come to perceive their irreversible ties to the island as a trap, restricting and limiting the authenticity of their evolving desired American-ness, which remains 'just out of reach'. Despite efforts to assimilate culturally and linguistically, and metaphorically trapped by the Old World, the García sisters fail to feel completely at home in the diaspora. The host country's resistance to the Caribbean migrants' racial, cultural, and linguistic difference promotes and fosters feelings of diasporic discontent and unbelonging.<sup>438</sup> The protagonists' traumatic geographical separation from the parental homeland at a young age, distancing them from their native culture and language throughout their formative years in a way that is irreparable, provokes similar feelings of unbelonging with regards to the island. In treading the line between the Caribbean and New York, the Old World and the New, Alvarez's characters fall not so much in to the spaces in-between cultures; rather, they appear to navigate their lived migrant experience in suspension, balanced on the hyphen, the precipice between two cultures.

### **An Identity Suspended between Languages**

Alvarez repeatedly expresses the sentiment that as Caribbean immigrants in New York, her own family were suspended in a kind of limbo, 'caught between worlds, value systems, languages, customs' (*Something*, p.120). As in the case of her literary alter-ego, Alvarez raises the issue of linguistic alienation alongside associated cultural isolation, suggesting the crucial role played by language in the creation of a home space, and a sense of belonging. An exile suspended somewhere between her Spanish-speaking Dominican childhood and Anglophone American adolescence, struggling to reconcile the influence of both on her adult identity, Alvarez refutes any sole claim to either linguistic, cultural, or national identity. 'Caught between worlds' she is neither Dominican nor American, yet she paradoxically inhabits both cultural spaces simultaneously.

Like her alter-ego, Alvarez struggles to integrate her Dominican subjectivity into her diasporic self: 'so much of who I was seemed to have no place in this world and culture' (*Something*, p.165). Both personally and professionally, she has difficulty seeing herself as Dominican, having learnt her craft from American greats and 'taken lessons from Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman and Toni Morrison':

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<sup>437</sup> In *Something to Declare* Alvarez refers to the 'hybrid' subject as a 'hyphenated' person, p.66.

<sup>438</sup> For diasporic discontent see Chapter One, pp.63-69; Chapter Two, p.108-110.

I am *not* a Dominican writer. I have no business writing in a language that I can speak but have not studied deep enough to craft [...] I am not a Dominican writer or really a Dominican in the traditional sense. (*Something*, p.172)

Instead, Alvarez adds further weight to the argument that her problem in identifying and defining herself as a writer exiled from her Caribbean homeland and raised in the diaspora is one of language, an idea to which she frequently returns in *Something to Declare* and which is ever-present throughout *García Girls*. Indeed, the novel's full title, *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, points to an issue concerned with the loss of language, the loss of a Spanish accent, in direct relation to the notion of cultural loss. Although, as Steven G. Kellman notes, '[r]ecounting in meticulous English prose the story of translingual transformation that became her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, Julia Alvarez [...] demonstrates that she has lost her own accent as well'.<sup>439</sup> Cultural and linguistic loss are inseparable here; the ongoing ramifications of these combined and mutually interconnected losses set in motion the psychological fracturing, or identity crisis, which I suggest constitutes the effects of a kind of 'language trauma'. These experiences of the traumas of exile and their subsequent psychological effects underpin both Alvarez and Yolanda's diasporic experiences.

In her study of Latin American writing in exile, *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora* (1999), Amy K. Kaminsky writes about the connection between language and the body, suggesting that 'language is punctuated and emphasized through gesture, gestures that are specific to individuals, but also to culture and to gender and class within particular cultures'.<sup>440</sup> Kaminsky's work can be used in support of my argument towards the psychological effects of the combined loss of a native language and associated culture for the diasporic subject living in exile, as she makes a case for 'the extent to which language *is* culture', explicitly articulating the link between language and cultural identity.<sup>441</sup> If, then, language is culture, or at the very least a signifier of culture, the loss of one's native language is arguably related to a sense of cultural loss. How does Alvarez's literary representation of the tensions for the migrant suspended between a native language and that of the host country reveal language as a signifier of cultural loss and alienation?

Nowhere is this suspended identity more evident than within the linguistic tensions which are played out in the novel between the girls' Spanish Dominican selves, and their evolving Anglophone American identities. In the novel's opening pages, which depict adult Yolanda's return to the island after a five-year absence, Alvarez highlights her alter-ego's loss of Spanish as a signifier of her alienation from her native island; as Kelli Lyon Johnson observes in the first full length academic study of Alvarez's work, *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map* (2005), 'the relationship between language and exile is

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<sup>439</sup> Steven G. Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p.10.

<sup>440</sup> Amy K. Kaminsky, *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp.61-62.

<sup>441</sup> Kaminsky, *After Exile*, pp.61-62.

clear in the first chapter [...] when Yolanda returns “home” to the Dominican Republic’.<sup>442</sup> The aunts enquire after the rest of the family, and ‘in halting Spanish, Yolanda reports on her sisters. When she reverts to English, she is scolded, “¡En español!” The more she practices, the sooner she’ll be back into her native tongue’ (*García*, p.7). Yolanda is naturally inclined towards English, the language within which she is more comfortable and fluent, the language in which she lives her daily life. Writing that ‘Yolanda had forgotten her language; she did not speak fluent Spanish and relied on English to express herself’, Luis argues that ‘Yolanda and her sisters’ retrospective voyages represent a desire to find the original language and accent, one that was lost in the present’.<sup>443</sup> Furthermore, if, as Kaminsky argues, ‘language is culture’, then these ‘retrospective voyages’ represent not only a desire to find the original language and accent, but also the original culture. However, as Alvarez recognises of her own experience, this voyage towards the original language and culture is not a simple process of recovery: ‘we couldn’t go back as easily as that. Our Spanish was full of English’ (*Something*, p.64).

This linguistic assimilation represents the process of cultural assimilation Alvarez and her sisters were undergoing as they disowned their native Spanish (exemplifying *Présence Européenne*) in their attempts to Americanise (privileging solely *Présence Américain*). Alvarez admits, ‘I grew insecure about Spanish. My native tongue was not quite as good as English’ (*Something*, p.24). As a child, Alvarez felt she must sacrifice Spanish to belong in her new American home, where English is revered and Spanish admonished and mocked. Both the language and accent are seen as barriers to social progress in the diaspora. Alvarez recalls a shopper overhearing her mother speaking Spanish and muttering, ‘if we wanted to be in this country, we should learn the language’ (*Something*, p.61). She writes that if her father was making an important phone call he would put her mother on the phone because ‘she would get better results than he would with his heavy, almost incomprehensible accent’ (*Something*, p.62). Similarly for the Garcías, it is not so much racial foreignness which sets them apart in their diasporic home but, as María Cristina Rodríguez acknowledges, ‘the foreignness of language upon entering the United States immediately sets apart the woman in the novels of [...] Julia Alvarez’.<sup>444</sup> The García girls are bullied and mocked for their language and accent. In school, ‘a gang of boys’ who bully Carla, calling her names, throwing stones and pulling at her clothes, mercilessly mock her pleas for them to leave her alone: “‘Eh-stop!” they mimicked her. “Plees eh-stop”” (*García*, p.153).

In this hostile and unwelcoming climate, the Garcías perceive their mother tongue as an obstacle to assimilation and social cohesion. Alvarez, too, looks more favourably upon English from an early age, partly because her first education is conducted in English at the Carol Morgan School and her

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<sup>442</sup> Johnson, *Julia Alvarez*, p.62.

<sup>443</sup> Luis, ‘A Search for Identity’, p.843.

<sup>444</sup> María Cristina Rodríguez, *What Women Lose: Exile and the Construction of Imaginary Homelands in Novels by Caribbean Writers* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), p.59.

mother, 'one of the first girls to be allowed to join her brothers' (*Something*, p.23) in attending boarding school in America, impresses upon the girls the value of an English education: 'it was very important, she kept saying, that we learn our English' (*Something*, p.24). It is no surprise, then, that as Alvarez and her sisters spent more time in English medium education, soon 'there wasn't a sentence that wasn't colonized by an English word' (*Something*, p.24). Alvarez's use of the provocative verb 'colonized' is highly suggestive, symbolising the way in which English invaded and transformed their Spanish, recalling how the cultures and languages of indigenous Caribs, Arawaks, and enslaved Africans, were colonised, invaded, and for the most part eradicated by European colonisation. Johnson elaborates upon this border crossing and colonisation between Spanish and English:

These two images – border crossing and colonization – resound in Alvarez's multiple experience with Spanish. It is indeed the language of the conquistadores who colonized the Caribbean, but when she takes the language to the United States from the Dominican Republic, she is treated herself as if she is crossing a border into a country where she does not belong and where, in fact, she is not welcomed by its inhabitants.<sup>445</sup>

There is a poignant role reversal in this instance in which Spanish, once the colonising language of the Conquistadores, finds itself under attack by an Anglophone United States which seeks to conquer and subjugate, to suppress the migrant's Hispanic Dominican subjectivity. The allusion towards English, affiliated with the U.S., as an invading and conquering force also serves as a subtle reminder of the 'sociohistorical milieu' within which Alvarez's works should be understood and the twentieth-century background to Alvarez's life and writing.<sup>446</sup> U.S. intervention in Dominican affairs and military occupations of the Dominican Republic in both 1916-1924 and 1965-1966 denote the U.S. as the ruling neo-colonial power and consolidate the American presence – both literally and culturally – on the island.<sup>447</sup> The Carol Morgan school, an American educational institution, itself symbolises an American invasion of Dominican cultural, linguistic, and geographical space and an ingrained American presence. Alvarez writes, 'my education was a colonialist one [...] I was to learn the culture, tongue, manners of the powerful country to our north that had set our dictator in place and kept him there for thirty-one years' (*Something*, p.135).

Even on the island, then, the conditions for Alvarez the child to comprehend the importance of Spanish as a marker of her Dominican identity are poor, and *Présence Americain* is culturally privileged. English is revered as the language of power, education, progression, and learning, effecting a traumatic separation from – and diminishing an appreciation of the value of – her native Hispanic culture,

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<sup>445</sup> Johnson, *Julia Alvarez*, pp.58-59.

<sup>446</sup> Chandra, 'Re-Producing a Nationalist Literature', p.842.

<sup>447</sup> Jan Rogoziński, *A Brief History of the Caribbean* (London: Plume, 2000), p.255. For a detailed account of Dominican-U.S. relations see Howard J. Wiarda and Michael J. Kryzanek, *The Dominican Republic: A Caribbean Crucible* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1982; repr. 1992).

language, and selfhood, even as she is raised on the island surrounded by her Dominican family. Alvarez is taught to regard English as the language of the educated upper class to the extent that when she arrives in the U.S. and hears the working classes and ‘bums on the street’ speaking English, she writes, ‘it took some time before I understood that Americans were not necessarily a smarter, superior race’ (*Something*, p.27). From a young age Alvarez has been conditioned to esteem English over her native Spanish, marking the beginning of the process of language trauma in initiating a cultural and linguistic alienation which serves to distance her from her Dominican roots and Hispanic subjectivity. Perhaps, then, it is for this reason that as an adult, Alvarez confesses, ‘I wanted to regain the language that would allow me to feel at home again in my native country’ (*Something*, p.73). Although a loss of fluency in Spanish accelerated the process of assimilation and acculturation for Alvarez in the diaspora, if ‘language *is* culture’ the associated effects of this language trauma, this loss, have ultimately heightened Alvarez’s alienation from her ancestral homeland and cultural roots.<sup>448</sup> As an adult, she attempts to regain her native language in an effort to heal this rift and the fragmentation of her identity brought about by the associated traumas of exile.<sup>449</sup>

Yolanda’s similar experiences, torn between English and Spanish, America and the Caribbean, reflect Alvarez’s own with linguistic tensions representing the conflicts between opposing cultures. Addressing the bilingualism evident in her work, Alvarez writes, ‘sometimes I hear Spanish in English (and of course, vice versa). That’s why I describe myself as a Dominican American writer’ (*Something*, p.173). This mix of Spanish and English is reflected both in the language of her writing and in the voices of her characters who amalgamate Spanish words and phrases into their English. Laura García’s English is ‘a mishmash of mixed-up idioms and sayings that showed she was “green behind the ears,” as she called it’ (*Garcías*, p.135) and she imports Dominican sayings, such as ‘with patience and calm, even a burro can climb a palm’ into her ‘scrambled English’ (*Garcías*, p.138). Through her use of language, then, as an adult, and particularly as a writer, Alvarez asserts and claims her hybrid subjectivity through writing in the voice of the bilingual migrant.

Johnson’s argument that ‘the tension in Alvarez’s fiction between English and Spanish reflects the tension between the space of the island and the space of the United States’, supports a perception of the host community as resistant to multiculturalism and the cultural synthesis which takes place within Bhabha’s third space, in the gap between cultures.<sup>450</sup> However, Alvarez’s reflections on the loss of her native language also reveal how language functions as a cultural home space and forms a crucial part of one’s sense of identity, begging the question as to whether both languages can represent ‘home’

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<sup>448</sup> Kaminsky, *After Exile*, p.62.

<sup>449</sup> For fragmentation of the Caribbean identity see Carew, ‘Caribbean Writer and Exile’. On fragmentation and the rift caused by exile see also Introduction, p.30, p.34; Chapter One, pp.57-58, p.73, p.80; Chapter Two, p.95, p.98, p.106, pp.110-111.

<sup>450</sup> Johnson, *Julia Alvarez*, p.61. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

for Alvarez. In her writing, she does not appear to choose between English and Spanish, recognising the role each play within her representation of herself as a diasporic author. By claiming English and mixing it with a Caribbean tongue, interspersing Spanish words and Dominican sayings throughout *García Girls*, Alvarez attempts to retain a connection to both the crucial *Présence Européenne* and *Présence Américain* of Caribbean cultural identity. In this way, the hybridity of the complex Caribbean cultural, and essentially diasporic experience shared by Alvarez and the Garcías is effectively communicated.

### Voicing the Self: The Struggle for Linguistic Control

In a further reflection of the author's own experiences, Yolanda's recognition of the tensions between Spanish and English again point towards the lasting effects of the traumatic cultural loss associated with linguistic alienation and this distancing from one's mother tongue. Johnson argues that 'the negotiation of both these cultures for Alvarez centres on language'.<sup>451</sup> Therefore, the aunts' encouragement of Yolanda to use her Spanish (*García*, p.7) will enable the beginning of a recovery of the lost Dominican part of her hybrid identity. Yet Yolanda anticipates that in rediscovering her Spanish-speaking Dominican self she will begin to lose fluency in English as a reawakening of her Hispanic Caribbean subjectivity supplants the Anglophone American half of her hybrid self: 'when she returns to the States, she'll find herself suddenly going blank over some word in English' (*García*, p.7). Although this implies the enduring presence of the native language it also suggests a lack of power; linguistic control eludes Yolanda as Spanish ousts English words and thoughts. This hints towards a kind of psychic fracture inherent within the nature of traumatic loss associated with language as the diasporic subject struggles to reconcile the two linguistic, and cultural, halves of their hybrid self.<sup>452</sup>

During her return to the island, Yolanda attends a party hosted by a cousin, where she meets a poet who 'argued that no matter how much of it one lost, in the midst of some profound emotion, one would revert to one's mother tongue' (*García*, p.13). The poet's comments suggest that Yolanda never truly loses her connection to her mother tongue, her Dominican subjectivity and voice. Furthermore, if 'language is culture', or a signifier of culture, an extension of the poet's argument would imply that Yolanda never completely loses her connection to a native Dominican culture. This suggests that some kind of essential notion of the self is rooted in expression in one's native language, and that within states of emotional profundity the language – and culture – of the true self will be located and revealed, calling to mind Kellman's question regarding translingual writers, 'Does the writer choose the language, or does the language choose the writer?'.<sup>453</sup> Although, if the protagonist, subject, or writer is unable to

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<sup>451</sup> Johnson, *Julia Alvarez*, p.57.

<sup>452</sup> The nature of this fractured self and the 'two halves' of a fractured psyche will be further expanded upon with reference to Alvarez's texts throughout this chapter. See in particular, pp.137-146.

<sup>453</sup> Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination*, p.13.

control the language within which they express themselves emotionally this might imply a core linguistic identity, the poet's argument also insinuates a powerlessness over language. This idea is supported by research conducted by Aneta Pavlenko, who observes that respondents to a survey on bilingualism frequently used the discourses of 'one language-one personality' and 'language socialization' to articulate their experiences, leading Pavlenko to conclude, 'both discourses [...] display a non-agentive view of the speaker, who does not speak the language but is rather spoken by it'.<sup>454</sup> In 'the midst of some profound emotion' are bi- or multilingual subjects unable to control their linguistic response, unable to choose the language within which they express, experience, and process the emotion?

In the scene which depicts adult Yolanda's return to the Dominican Republic after a five-year absence we witness how a state of emotional profundity functions as a barrier to linguistic control and expression, reinforcing Yolanda's identity as a suspended subject, caught between Spanish and English. Against the advice of her aunts, and determined to go independently in search of the guavas she recalls eating as a child (a quest which in itself functions as a metaphor for Yolanda's adult yearning to reconnect with the Dominican roots of her childhood), Yolanda finds herself on an isolated road in the mountains with a car with a flat tyre. She is discovered by two men in 'ragged work clothes' with 'machetes' and immediately assumes the worst, considering that 'they are strong and quite capable of catching her if she makes a run for it' (*García*, p.19). Yolanda's instinctive and specifically gendered reaction, likely exacerbated by the lingering echo of her aunts' warnings which rustle amongst the leaves of the guava trees – 'you will get lost, you will get kidnapped, you will get raped, you will get killed' (*García*, p.17) – is to perceive the masculinity of the Dominican workmen's presence as a direct threat to her safety through an innate perception of herself as a privileged female. Her inability to communicate with the Spanish-speaking workmen in the midst of her fears reveal her alienation – or fracture – from her Dominican self. Yolanda 'considers explaining that she is just out for a drive before dinner at the big house, so that these men will think someone knows where she is [...] but her tongue feels as if it has been stuffed in her mouth like a rag to keep her quiet' (*García*, pp.19-20). Her inclination to align herself to the 'big house' for protection also reveals her inherent class prejudice as she considers her social status the only weapon in her armoury with which to intimidate these workmen.

In her analysis of this scene, Johnson argues that 'the distance between [Yolanda] and the campesinos is one of nationality, language, gender, and class, and because she no longer identifies herself as *dominicana*, she is unable to bridge that gap, to read, interpret, or send the appropriate signals'.<sup>455</sup> Yet Yolanda's inability to express any of these thoughts in the Spanish which the men will understand also reveals that in this state of profound emotion – fear – she is frozen, suspended in

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<sup>454</sup> Aneta Pavlenko, 'Bilingual Selves' in *Bilingual Minds* ed. by Aneta Pavlenko (Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 2006), pp.1-33 (p.13).

<sup>455</sup> Johnson, *Julia Alvarez*, p.63.

speechlessness, and unable to grasp at either her mother tongue or English. The men's question, '¿Americana?', offers Yolanda a respite from her state of suspension as she is able to locate herself and 'as if the admission itself loosens her tongue, she begins to speak, English, a few words, of apology at first, then a great flood of explanation' (*García*, p.20). Thus both Yolanda's privilege and her Americanness function as a bulwark against the threat posed by the Dominican workmen as 'Yolanda identifies herself as an American, which saves her from the danger'.<sup>456</sup>

Crucially, Yolanda does not instinctively turn to Spanish in her fear. Neither does she turn immediately to English, suggesting that within this state of 'profound emotion' she is unable to locate herself within American or Dominican cultural and national spaces of identification, nor posit herself as either a Spanish or English-speaking subject. This scene reveals how the issue of language cannot be separated from issues of cultural or national identity, or, as Johnson writes, 'the question of language cannot be separated from the spaces of nation and identity' so that for the García girls, 'distance in space from their (home)land becomes a distance from their language, culture, and identity as well'.<sup>457</sup> Therefore, in reading Yolanda within a state of suspension, we might view her hybridity as a paradoxical occupation of both territories and linguistic spaces, whilst she remains voiceless, unable to assert her agency or articulate her diasporic subjectivity within either. The tension and struggle between English and Spanish, and the complexities of Yolanda's bilingual, hybrid selfhood, elicit from her a pause as she struggles to occupy both Dominican and American subject positions. Balanced on the hyphen, Yolanda is unable to express or claim her diasporic subjectivity and loses control of language.<sup>458</sup>

Alvarez depicts the characters' struggles to wrest linguistic control and assert their subjectivity through language throughout *García Girls*. Although Yolanda 'had been a terrible student' in the Dominican Republic, 'in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language' (*García*, p.141). Again, Yolanda echoes the events of Alvarez's own life as she, too, took root in language in an effort to forge a space for herself in her new homeland. 'In sixth grade', Alvarez recalls, 'I had one of the first in a lucky line of great English teachers who began to nurture in me a love of language' (*Something*, p.27). 'A beginning wordsmith' (*Something*, p.26), as she falls in love with the creative possibilities of her new language, Alvarez writes, it became 'a charged, fluid mass that carried me in its great fluent waves, rolling and moving onward, to deposit me on the shores of my new homeland. I was no longer a foreigner with no ground to stand on. I had landed in the English language' (*Something*, p.29). Language becomes a space for Alvarez within which she can stand and locate herself and her evolving diasporic subjectivity.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Luis, 'A Search for Identity', p.846.

<sup>457</sup> Johnson, *Julia Alvarez*, p.62.

<sup>458</sup> See Alvarez's reference to the 'hybrid' subject as a 'hyphenated' person, *Something to Declare*, p.66.

<sup>459</sup> For a thorough interrogation of issues of space and place in relation to language and exile as represented in Latin American diasporic writing see Kaminsky, *After Exile*, in particular pp.38-80.

More than this, though, in becoming a space in which diasporic subjectivity can be located and expressed, language becomes a space of reinvention, a living, forward moving entity which, through its capacity for creation and recreation, reflects the ongoing process of identity production and evolution in the diaspora.<sup>460</sup>

Johnson understands this creative process as one of improvisation, where Alvarez's writing reflects 'her construction of language as a space in itself, a location in which to improvise identity in exile'.<sup>461</sup> On Alvarez's declaration that she 'landed in the English language', Johnson observes, 'language becomes for Alvarez a space of her own'.<sup>462</sup> Using the vocabulary of space, on the one hand Johnson hints towards the notion of an improvised, or imagined, home in the diaspora which is to be found within the creative possibilities of language. Yet references towards language as a space within which to 'improvise identity' point to the centrality of language in the process of self-definition, an idea supported by Kaminsky in her argument that 'beyond the abstractions of "language" and "space", the specific language and the particular place [...] are constitutive of culture and identity'.<sup>463</sup> Within language, then, Alvarez finds a space in which to feel at home in the diaspora because, through language, she is able to forge a meaningful understanding of her experiences and express these in a language which accommodates her evolving hybridised identity.

A child in transition, uprooted from her familial home and culture, Yolanda also attempts to find a home space within the creative possibility and reinvention possible within language. Turning to English, Yolanda endeavours to ground her evolving hybrid self and to find the comfort, security and stability afforded by a home space. Although she has little control over the changes taking place in her life, like Alvarez, Yolanda attempts to make sense of her migrant experience and the traumas of displacement, cultural loss, and exile, through the language of the diaspora. Philip writes:

If we accept that living language continually encapsulates, reflects, and refines the entire experiential life and world view of the tribe, the race and consequently of society at large; and if we accept that the poet, the storyteller [...] express this process in their work, then we must accept that this process becomes one way in which a society continually accepts, integrates and transcends its experiences, positive or negative.<sup>464</sup>

A budding poet, Yolanda's writing can therefore be read as a way in which to not only improvise her identity, asserting her agency and creating and recreating her evolving diasporic self, but as part of a process of meaning making. Writing in a language which reflects her Americanised identity, Yolanda tries to find a way to integrate and transcend her experiences of exile and associated traumatic separation from the originary cultural home.

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<sup>460</sup> For identity as a process see Hall in Rutherford, pp.222-237. See also Introduction, n.29; Chapter One, p.50.

<sup>461</sup> Johnson, *Julia Alvarez*, p.54.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59.

<sup>463</sup> Kaminsky, *After Exile*, pp.59-60.

<sup>464</sup> Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue*, p.80. See also Introduction, p.39.

Yolanda creates and recreates her experiences through language, controlling and playing with words as ‘hunched over her small desk, the overhead light turned off, her desk lamp poignantly lighting only her paper, the rest of the room in warm, soft, uncreated darkness, she wrote her secret poems in her new language’ (*García*, p.136). This scene symbolises a kind of rebirth – from her Spanish Dominican self she evolves to claim her American subjectivity. The darkness within which she cocoons herself suggests a reinvention of the self as she creates and recreates her world and her life experiences in her new language until, eventually, she finds her voice and, echoing Alvarez’s claim that ‘she had landed in the English language’ (*Something*, p.29), ‘[Yolanda] finally sounded like herself in English’ (*García*, p.143). Through language Yolanda attempts to integrate and transcend the traumatic separation at the core of her experience of exile in order to feel at home in the diaspora.

However, Yolanda’s revelation that she has found her voice, herself, and her home, in English, does not resolve the cultural tensions which pull at her whilst she balances on the precipice between the Dominican and American halves of her migrant experience; finding her voice in English does not enable her to speak the complexities of her hybrid subjectivity. Whilst I do not use ‘hybrid’ to simply mean ‘two halves’, because of my particular concern here regarding the tensions between Hispanic and American cultural and linguistic influences upon diasporic subjectivity, I use the terminology of ‘halves’ to develop my argument regarding the fractured psyche and the divided self.<sup>465</sup> Yolanda’s privileging of the Anglophone American half of her diasporic subjectivity at the expense of her Hispanic Dominican roots means that, like *Praisesong’s* Avey who neglects her black cultural roots in her efforts to fulfil her American Dream of a house in North White Plains, she struggles to maintain a coherent sense of self, eventually suffering a full identity crisis.<sup>466</sup> Like Avey, Yolanda turns away from familial and ancestral cultural origins. The novel contains early warning signs regarding Yolanda’s inability to articulate and assert her hybrid identity as a diasporic subject who occupies two cultural and linguistic spaces when those around her – parents, siblings, lovers and doctors – claim dominion over Yolanda’s sense of self through their constant renaming of her.<sup>467</sup> The novel contains countless examples of the abuse of Yolanda’s Spanish name, calling into question and compromising the Dominican half of her migrant identity at various stages. When, at a poetry reading of Yolanda’s, her mother unknowingly sits herself next to her daughter’s professor lover, she tells him, ‘that’s her nickname, Yo, Yoyo [...] She complains she wants her name, but you have to take shortcuts when there’s four of them’ (*García*, p.47). The professor humours the mother and feigns ignorance, although ‘Yolanda had already filled him in on her family and her bastardized name – Yo, Joe, Yoyo. He knew better than to take shortcuts. Jo-laahn-dah,

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<sup>465</sup> For my use of the term ‘hybrid’ see Introduction, pp.19-20. For ‘divided self’ and ‘fractured psyche’ see this chapter, p.137.

<sup>466</sup> See Chapter One, pp.61-62.

<sup>467</sup> Note the significance of the loss of one’s originary name also plays into Avey Johnson’s identity crisis in *Praisesong* as Avatara becomes displaced by Avey in her quest to fulfil the American Dream. See Chapter One, p.58, p.77.

she had drilled him' (*García*, p.47). The fragmentation and fracturing of her identity which leads to her eventual breakdown, her identity crisis, starts in familial space; her individual identity is supplanted by her collective identity as one of 'the García girls'.

As 'Alvarez focuses on Yolanda's many names to demonstrate her multiple identities'<sup>468</sup> she reveals the initial deconstruction of her complete self. She is no longer Yolanda, but one of the four girls' (*García*, pp.40-42, p.190) – a homogenised female identity – and throughout her life she has battled against both Spanish and American perversions of her moniker: 'Yolanda, nicknamed *Yo* in Spanish, misunderstood *Joe* in English, doubled and pronounced like a toy, *Yoyo* – or when forced to select from a rack of personalised key chains, *Joey*' (*García*, p.68). With this fragmentation of the self and the multiple identities Yolanda is presumed to occupy by those who force multiple personas upon her – *Yo*, *Yoyo*, *Joe*, *Joey*, *Jolinda* – her own sense of self becomes increasingly confused. Divided between Spanish speaking Dominican Yolanda and Anglophone American *Jolinda*, between the familial *Yo* and the American lover's *Joe*, Yolanda is left struggling to articulate both halves of her Dominican American subjectivity from within a diminished sense of self.

For Johnson, 'the nicknames create further distance between *Yo* and herself, and this distance separates Yolanda fully from her language. The multiple names, and the confusion of identities that they represent, destroy Yolanda's marriage and lead her to be hospitalised'.<sup>469</sup> Whilst the issue of naming is representative of Yolanda's confusion, the root causes of her marriage breakdown and the crisis which leads to her hospitalisation lie within Yolanda's suspension, and the psychic fracture which is a result of her inability to culturally and linguistically locate herself without enacting a fragmentation of her character into two halves. I suggest that an inability to reconcile these halves, as demonstrated by her suspension between languages and cultures, and her initial adoption of English as the singular medium through which to integrate and transcend a diasporic migrant experience with its roots in Hispanic culture, leads to her breakdown. However, naming, misnaming and renaming in the novel are a crucial reflection of the fragmentation of Yolanda's identity and her inability to know herself in order to articulate her position belonging within the spaces of both Dominican and American cultures, within that third space within which modern culture is created.<sup>470</sup>

### Traumas of Breakdown: The Divided Self

Try as she might to assume an American subjectivity through wresting control of language, Yolanda's breakdown, closely inter-linked with a fragmentation of the self as a failure to unite the two halves of her Dominican American identity, is expressed through a loss of voice, and a failure to

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<sup>468</sup> Johnson, *Julia Alvarez*, p.63.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, p.63.

<sup>470</sup> See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

communicate and control language. Yolanda continues to try and control and manipulate language, as is evident through her word play in the name-rhyming game she plays with her husband. She puns, 'John's a hon, lying by the pond, having lots of fun' and in response he asks, 'What rhymes with Joe-lan-dah?' (*García* p.71). Yolanda offers up one of her many personas as a compromise, "[U]se Joe. *Doe, roe, buffalo,*" she rhymed', leaving herself open to appropriation (*García* p.71). As the conversation evolves, Yolanda reverts to her Hispanic Dominican self:

'Sky, I want to be the sky.' [...]  
 'Your own rules: you've got to rhyme with your name'  
 'I' – she pointed to herself – 'rhymes with the sky!'  
 'But not with *Joe!*' John wagged his finger at her. [...]  
 'Yo rhymes with *cielo* in Spanish.' Yo's words fell into the dark, mute cavern of John's mouth. *Cielo, cielo*, the word echoed. And Yo was running, like the mad, into the safety of her first tongue, where the proudly monolingual John could not catch her, even if he tried. (*García* p.72)

Yolanda's efforts to control and manipulate language, to find an appropriate rhyme for her name, lead her back to the Dominican part of herself as she aligns a shortening of her name in Spanish – Yo – with *cielo*, the Spanish word for 'sky'. This excerpt, which shortly precedes Yolanda's breakdown, sees Yolanda struggling with her suspended identity in an apparent attempt to turn back towards her native tongue in a return to her linguistic roots. Alvarez suggests that Yolanda turns her back on her relationship with 'proudly monolingual John', highlighting the difference between the couple. John, with his singular linguistic and cultural identity, is placed in opposition to Yolanda, who even within the above excerpt drifts between her two selves, Hispanic Yo and American Joe. Reading John's 'proudly monolingual' stance as representative of Americans more broadly, Johnson writes, 'the Americans' refusal to speak another language reflects a deeper refusal even to accept another language as valid or meaningful'.<sup>471</sup> Therefore, we might read Yolanda in opposition to a nation, and a host community which refuses to accept her hybridity – her linguistic and cultural bilingualism – as valid or meaningful.

The turn to Yo, to *cielo*, and to 'the safety of her first tongue' enacts a distancing from John's Joe and Yolanda's Anglophone American self in a symbolic turn away from a diasporic home which fails to comprehend the societal value of her migrant experience as enriching the cultural fabric of the nation. Away from this hostility and reluctance to value and integrate the immigrant experience into the American experience as a whole, language becomes not only a separate space of improvisation, recreation and self-invention, but 'a safe space in which she can distance herself from John'<sup>472</sup> and, by a logical extension, from a hostile host community which devalues the 'otherness' of her migrant experience and hybrid identity. Indeed, John 'could not catch her', suggesting that in this return to her

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<sup>471</sup> Johnson, *Julia Alvarez*, p.64.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64.

Dominican roots, Yolanda emphasises the linguistic and cultural gulf between them, alienating herself from her American husband and diasporic home.

In turning away from John, Yolanda symbolically moves further away from her improvised American self. However, in this turn away from her Americanised self she remains suspended as she continues to struggle to integrate the Dominican aspect of her hybrid identity. Yolanda is unable to fully comprehend the return to her Dominican roots without losing her grip on her essentially diasporic, migrant identity and her dual occupation of both American and Dominican linguistic and cultural spaces. The language of linguistic duality and associated fragmentation of the self recurs throughout scholarship on bi- and multilingualism. Pavlenko's 'Bilingual Selves' (2006) is particularly helpful in illuminating an understanding of this 'discourse of schizophrenia' within my analysis of the two halves of Yolanda's fractured psyche. Pavlenko foregrounds the notion that 'in traditionally monolingual societies, bilinguals are at times seen as people with two conflicting personalities whose shifting linguistic allegiances imply shifting political allegiances and moral commitments'.<sup>473</sup> She cites the 'view of bilingualism as a problem of two incompatible identities, referred to here as the discourse of bilingualism as linguistic schizophrenia'.<sup>474</sup> I do not intend to suggest a medical schizophrenia afflicts subjects like Yolanda, who find themselves torn, suspended between their 'conflicting personalities' or 'incompatible identities'. However, the discourse of schizophrenia is useful in helping to articulate the nature of the identity split, the fracturing of the self, a result of the effects of the language trauma experienced by the migrant who, whilst alienated and detached from their mother tongue, retains similar feelings of isolation in relation to the host country. Pavlenko's findings enable her to conclude:

[T]he dominant metaphors and tropes that appear in bilinguals' reflections on language – tongue snatching, border crossing, borrowing [...] fragmentation, multiplicity, split, gap, alienation, dislocation, and double vision – reinscribe the feeling of duality and invoke the discourse of schizophrenia.<sup>475</sup>

The use of these metaphors helps to convey 'angst over the inability to bring together one's incommensurable worlds, and sadness and confusion caused by seeing oneself as divided, a self-in-between, a self in need of translation'.<sup>476</sup>

The effects of this 'angst' and 'confusion' are the resultant language trauma which manifests itself within the cracks which open up in Yolanda's relationships, both with herself and those around her. Her initial alienation from her husband culminates in the total breakdown of their relationship. During one argument John exclaims angrily, 'what you need is a goddam shrink!' as his 'words threw themselves off the tip of his tongue like suicides' (*García*, p.73). Alvarez points to the destructive, and

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<sup>473</sup> Pavlenko, 'Bilingual Selves', p.2.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

potentially self-destructive power of language as 'like suicides' John hurls words towards his wife and callously declares that she needs psychiatric help. The comparison implies that words and language are killing their relationship. Furthermore, if language is a signifier of culture, then linguistic and cultural difference may also be construed as a destructive force in their relationship. However 'suicides' suggests a kind of self-destruction and puts the onus of responsibility for their marriage's failure firmly upon their inability to work through the linguistic and cultural tensions which plague them both as individuals and as a couple. In other words, through their inability to reconcile the linguistic tensions between them Yolanda and John are killing their relationship. In addition to acting as a signifier of cultural loss and psychological breakdown, language becomes the means through which and, as a space in itself, becomes the stage upon which, John and Yolanda play out the breakdown of their relationship.

Within this chaos, Yolanda increasingly loses grip of her sense of self. As John accuses her of needing a 'shrink', Yolanda protests that she is not the only crazy one:

She said just because they were different, that was no reason to make her feel crazy for being her own person. He was just as crazy as she was if push came to shove. My God! she thought. I'm starting to talk like him! Push comes to shove! She laughed, still half in love with him. 'Okay, okay,' she conceded. 'We're both crazy. So, let's both go see a shrink.' She winced, taking on his language only to convince him. (*García*, p.73)

Yolanda feels she is being attacked 'for being her own person' whilst the reality is the problem of Yolanda's inability to know how to be her own person because she does not know how to rebuild her fractured self into a coherent whole. This points to what Pavlenko refers to as 'the darker side of immigrant bilingualism, which may also motivate internal conflict, mental distress and, ultimately, silence'.<sup>477</sup> Writing about the link between language and the psyche, Kaminsky notes the structural relation between language and the self:

[L]anguage itself constructs us, in a synecdoche for the mind. The structure of language turns out to be the structure of the psyche, which in one chronology is another way of saying that language structures the psyche.<sup>478</sup>

Pavlenko, too, observes her bilingual respondents' 'categorical, non-modalized assertions that proclaim language and culture to be a unified 'package' [...] and thus links language/culture and personality'.<sup>479</sup>

Framing my analysis within this theoretical discourse, Yolanda's linguistic breakdown can be read as a reflection of psychological fracture. Language structures the psyche, and the breakdown in language and communication represents the deconstruction of her sense of self. Her inability to know herself, or be her own person, or 'personality', is reinforced through her adoption of other people's language and words. Yolanda takes on John's language, mimicking his way of speaking as her own voice

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<sup>477</sup> Pavlenko, 'Bilingual Selves', p.5.

<sup>478</sup> Kaminsky, *After Exile*, p.59.

<sup>479</sup> Pavlenko, 'Bilingual Selves', p.12.

becomes increasingly lost. Here, not only does Yolanda's loss of voice appear to signify the loss of a culturally and linguistically specific sense of herself as Dominican American, but the fragmentation of her gender identity as a Dominicana, a wife and lover, is also apparent in her adoption of the masculine language and voice of her husband. She thus arguably attempts to relinquish the gendered and social limitations imposed on her identity by an allegiance to Dominican culture. However, in claiming Yo rhymes with *cielo* Yolanda makes the initial turn towards her native language, away from her American self and American husband. Nevertheless, because Yolanda does not know how to be her own person through a reconciliation of both halves of her fractured identity, or, perhaps more fittingly, a reconciliation of the multiple *Présences* which construct her sense of diasporic Caribbean selfhood, she struggles to maintain this connection, suggesting the psychological problems inherent in the 'possibility that bicultural bilinguals may have distinct personalities associated with their respective languages and cultures'.<sup>480</sup> Instead of completing the (re)turn towards her Dominican roots to unite the two halves of her fragmented, diasporic identity, and bridge the gap between cultures, she loses all sense of self, clinging to the language of her husband.

Eventually, Yolanda loses the ability to communicate altogether as words – and the language in which she has tried to control and assert her Americanised diasporic subjectivity – become incomprehensible and meaningless. John buys flowers, and as he hands them to Yolanda, 'she could not make out his words'. Although 'they were clean, bright sounds [...] they meant nothing to her' (*García* p.77). She repeatedly asks him what he is trying to say, but John speaks 'in a language she had never heard before [...] in sounds she could not ascribe meanings to' (*García* p.77). Yolanda's loss of self, reflected in her struggle to maintain a simultaneous connection with both Dominican and American halves of her hybrid identity, leads to a complete loss of agency – she can no longer articulate and express herself in her own voice – and she fails to place herself within a specific linguistic and cultural context, or space. She cannot make sense of herself or render a linguistic space within which to transcend and integrate the traumas of dislocation and exile.<sup>481</sup> This breakdown in meaning is epitomised by a breakdown in language which leaves Yolanda unable to hear or speak coherently, completely unable to communicate. Her conversations with John deteriorate rapidly to the nonsensical:

'Babble babble.' His lips were slow motion on each syllable.  
He is saying *I love you*, she thought! 'Babble,' she mimicked him. 'Babble babble babble babble.' Maybe that meant, *I love you too*, in whatever tongue he was speaking.  
(*García*, p.78)

Yolanda is institutionalised as she continues to adopt the language of others: 'She quoted famous lines of poetry and the opening sequences of the classics [...] She quoted Frost; she misquoted

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<sup>480</sup> Pavlenko, 'Bilingual Selves', p.15.

<sup>481</sup> For transcend the traumas of exile see Introduction, p.35, p.39.

Stevens; she paraphrased Rilke's description of love' (*García* p.79) and she 'quoted from *Don Quijote* in the original' before translating 'the passage on prisoners into instantaneous English' (*García*, p.80). Here, Yolanda is presented as a subject living in transition, suspended between her Anglophone and Hispanic selves, and, crucially, as a subject whose life is lived in translation. For Kellman, the problems associated with the bilingual writer 'living in translation' are emotionally and psychologically destabilising; he writes, 'for those who live in and through words, living in translation is to be racked between life and death'.<sup>482</sup> This issue of translation points to problems inherent within Yolanda's positioning as a translated subject as she, herself, attempts to reinterpret and transform her selfhood in a diasporic context. Furthermore, as a writer who 'live[s] in and through words' it is important to note, as Johnson does, that 'Yolanda is not speaking her own language; she is mimicking the language of others, specifically male writers – the only tradition that she knows'.<sup>483</sup> Johnson's point is important; as a woman writer Yolanda lacks a cultural tradition in the language of her originary home. Issues of censorship during her childhood under Trujillo's dictatorship would undoubtedly have encouraged the suppression of cultural and creative art forms. Yet her traumatic separation from this cultural home at a young age and an American education have meant that her schooling in literature is part of a cultural tradition to which she cannot relate. When Yolanda does recite a literary text in her mother tongue, her immediate translation of this particular passage in *Don Quijote* from Spanish into English reveals the core issue underlying her breakdown: the Americanisation of her Hispanic self and the suspension – presented here as a kind of cultural imprisonment – of her identity between these two halves.

Significantly, as a writer – and, more importantly, as a woman writer – Yolanda cannot situate herself within a literary tradition. In *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* (1983), a book which was, for Alvarez as a Latina writer, 'like a clarion call' (*Something*, p.168), editors Alma Gómez, Cherríe Moraga and Mariana Romo-Carmona write of their desire to locate their Latina literary tradition after leafing through volumes of literary anthologies and 'seldom seeing a name or a line by a Latina writer that speaks accurately of our experience' because, 'our lives and the lives of the women before us have never been fully told, except by word of mouth'.<sup>484</sup> *Cuentos* responds to the fact that, '[they] need una literatura that testifies to [their] lives, provides an acknowledgement of who [they] are: an exiled people, a migrant people'.<sup>485</sup> Both Alvarez, and, as we see from the way in which her breakdown is played out in relation to her identity as a wordsmith and a writer, Yolanda lack access to a body of literature, that which *Cuentos* acknowledges is lacking for Latina women, which testifies to their specifically gendered experiences on the precipice, the space between two cultures. Yolanda is isolated

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<sup>482</sup> Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination*, p.5.

<sup>483</sup> Johnson, *Julia Alvarez*, p.65.

<sup>484</sup> Alma Gómez, Cherríe Moraga and Mariana Romo-Carmona, 'By Word of Mouth' in *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Colour Press, 1983), pp.vii-xii (p.vii).

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, p.vii.

from the extended, close-knit family back home on the island which historically would provide the oral literature to enable her to locate herself within a cultural and literary tradition. Subsequently, she has nowhere to turn except to those writers from whom she learns the language, literature and culture of the diasporic home, and the Anglophone literary tradition within which the American canon is rooted.

Yolanda does not belong to the tradition of English-speaking male writers from whom she quotes in the midst of her breakdown, nor can she locate herself within a Hispanic tradition, alienated as she is from her ancestral and familial home. She is at once Yo and Joe, but lacks a frame of reference, or the words to improvise herself in either space. When Yolanda's parents visit her in hospital, Alvarez writes, 'Yo went quiet for the first time in months [...] "*Tears, tears,*" Joe said, reciting again, "*tears from the depths of some profound despair.*" [...] "*But men die daily for lack of what is found there,*" Yo quoted and misquoted' (*García*, p.80). Not only is she continuing to quote from a literary tradition which is not her own, turning to the words of Tennyson in an effort to communicate the despair of her own internal crisis, but the issue of naming continues to be pertinent here. Within this brief passage she flits from Yo to Joe – note that she is Joe when quoting nineteenth-century English poetry – and back again to Yo. The fact that Alvarez refers to Joe when she is quoting suggests that Joe represents the imposition of an inauthentic persona. Pavlenko's research reveals that bilinguals often cite 'the feeling that the first language is "real" and "natural", while later learned languages are "fake", "artificial", and "performative"'.<sup>486</sup> The Anglophone Joe could thus be interpreted as somewhat 'fake' or 'artificial', performing the Americanised identity, the *Présence Americain* which Yolanda has privileged through her cultural and linguistic assimilation. 'Joe' can therefore be perceived as an adoption of a selfhood which is not wholly representative of her hybridised self.

In the recovery process following the breakdown and identity crisis effected by the language trauma she experiences as a diasporic subject, Yolanda begins to understand the importance of healing the two halves of her fractured self. As an adult, she is fiercely protective of the name which has either been lost amongst the collective descriptor 'the four girls' (*García*, pp.40-42, p.190) or appropriated by others throughout her life. Following her hospitalisation, she reclaims her name, ensuring her lover knows its correct pronunciation, now possessing a fuller sense of herself as a diasporic subject with roots in the Hispanic Caribbean. She confidently identifies herself as Yolanda, pronounced as in Spanish 'Jo-laahn-dah'. When Sandi refers to her as Yo, Carla corrects her sister, saying 'she wants to be called Yolanda now' to which Yolanda angrily exclaims, 'what do you mean, *wants to be called Yolanda now?* That's my name, you know?' (*García*, p.61). Yolanda's refusal post-breakdown to be re-named, to have her identity compromised or constructed by others, reveals her desire for self-definition and her acknowledgement of the crucial role which her Hispanic self must occupy within this process of

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<sup>486</sup> Pavlenko, 'Bilingual Selves', p.18.

identification. As Johnson argues, 'although language may be used against her, in the way that John, her doctor, and even her parents wield nicknames against her and her sense of self, Yolanda realises that she can use language to protect herself and, more important, to define herself'.<sup>487</sup>

Linking the issue of naming with the confusion surrounding Yolanda's identity, linguistic and cultural suspension, and, ultimately, the identity crisis and breakdown effected by her experience of language trauma, Luis uses the 'discourse of schizophrenia' referred to by Pavlenko when he writes, 'she is also Yolanda and not Yolanda. This idea is present in the novel by the multiple names used. She is Yolanda, Yoyo, Yosita, Yo and, last but not least, the English Joe'.<sup>488</sup> Whilst Luis connects the issue of naming to the fragmentation of Yolanda's Dominican American self, his conclusion regarding the multiplicity of Yolanda's hybrid identity implies her inability to ever fully locate herself within a particular cultural space:

One of her nicknames is Yoyo, which recalls the toy in constant motion, going up and down, moving from one extreme to the other, from one culture to the other, touching upon both but not remaining a part of either one of them. The protagonist's onomastic displacement will be continuous. It characterizes a search for identity, for a voice that will offer a coherent understanding of her circumstances, but also the impossibility that any one perspective exists which can explain the complexity of her inquiry. *She will always be Yolanda and someone else* (my italics).<sup>489</sup>

Luis' claim suggests there is no resolution for Yolanda's identity crisis and implies an unresolvable schizophrenia will forever characterise her sense of self. Ultimately, how can Yolanda come to know and understand herself, reconciling two halves of a complex diasporic identity which Luis appears to suggest are irreconcilable? The (re)turn to both cultures is crucial here.

Whilst Yolanda remains in the 'gyre', suspended, and unable reconcile the two halves of her identity without privileging one language or culture at the expense of the other, she will always be Yolanda and someone else. Pavlenko surmises that 'the twentieth century was marked by the ever-present tension between discourses that glorified belonging to one language and culture, even at the price of assimilation, and those that asserted the legitimacy of dual allegiances'.<sup>490</sup> In asserting 'the legitimacy of dual allegiance' it is not 'assimilation', but 'integration' which will enable Yolanda to position herself within America as a diasporic subject whose linguistic and cultural identity is rooted in the Hispanophone Caribbean. Indeed, 'integration functions as a powerful metaphor that acknowledges linguistic and cultural differences, yet allows bilinguals to position themselves discursively as a whole'.<sup>491</sup> Only by returning to her Dominican self and integrating the fragments of her

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<sup>487</sup> Johnson, *Julia Alvarez*, p.66.

<sup>488</sup> Luis, 'A Search for Identity', pp.846-7. For 'discourse of schizophrenia' see Pavlenko, 'Bilingual Selves', p.3.

<sup>489</sup> Luis, 'A Search for Identity', p.847.

<sup>490</sup> Pavlenko, 'Bilingual Selves', p.27.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

fractured identity – both the Hispanic Yo and the Anglophone Joe – can she unite these cultural halves, or presences. Only then, as she ceases to be Yoyo and asserts her agency as ‘Jo-laahn-dah’ may she discover that although there is no single perspective ‘which can explain the complexity of her enquiry’, as a diasporic subject she is privileged to a multicultural perspective which, as Alvarez states, ‘is the perspective of some of the most interesting writers of this late twentieth century’ (*Something*, p.173).

### **The Return to Self: Healing through Words**

Yo’s breakdown details the deterioration and loss of language as a reflection of her loss of self and lack of subjectivity, the effects of the language trauma she suffers in the diaspora, the distancing and alienation from her mother tongue and associated Hispanic Caribbean cultural identity. She loses her voice and is subsequently unable to claim or articulate the complexities of her hybrid diasporic subjectivity. Like Marshall’s Avey, Levy’s Faith, and Danticat’s Sophie, Yolanda’s is a transformative breakdown in that the writer utilises the trope of the breakdown as transformative process; for Yolanda it leads to a reclamation of the self through a return to cultural origins and a recovery of both halves of the hybrid diasporic self.<sup>492</sup> This reclamation of a complex Dominican/American/Spanish/English subjectivity is brought about through a return to her Dominican self, and an integration of this half of her hybrid identity in order to repair her psychological fracture. It is only after her breakdown that Yolanda insists on being known as ‘Jo-laahn-dah’ (*García*, p.47), in a process of self-definition through which she articulates her diasporic Dominican American subjectivity.

In order to heal, recover from her language trauma and reconcile the two halves of her fragmented and divided self, Yolanda must reclaim language and, crucially, reclaim both halves of her hybrid self within her use of language. The key to Yolanda’s recovery lies in her ability, firstly, to acknowledge, and secondly, to articulate both halves of her hybrid identity. Of her own experiences as an immigrant, Alvarez writes, ‘what I needed was to put together my Dominican and American selves [...] the problem was that American culture, as we had experienced it until then, had left us out, and so we felt we had to give up being Dominicans to be Americans’ (*Something*, p.167). For Alvarez, uniting these two halves is achieved through writing. The imaginative possibilities of language enable Alvarez to reconcile the Dominican and American halves of her lived migrant experience and write herself into contemporary literature:

What finally bridged these two worlds for me was writing. But for many years, I didn’t have a vocabulary or a context to write about the issues I had faced or was facing. Even after I discovered female role models and found my own voice as a woman writer, I did not allow my ‘foreignness’ to show. I didn’t know it could be done. I had never seen it done. I had, in fact, been told it couldn’t be done. (*Something*, p.167)

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<sup>492</sup> For a discussion of the transformative breakdown see Chapter One, p.62.

Alvarez's autobiographical essays testify to the fact that language functions for the immigrant, the hybrid, the 'hyphenated' (*Something*, p.66) subject, as a means of self-expression, improvisation, (re)creation, invention, and self-definition. Language as a way of assigning meaning and understanding to one's experiences is key to the process of recovery and healing for the fractured psyche of the immigrant suspended between cultures, traditions, and home spaces. Through recovering language (and, by association, culture), the bilingual subject comes to recognise 'the split as a source of both anguish and creative enrichment'.<sup>493</sup> Indeed, for Yolanda, language functions both as a symptom of her psychological illness and the means through which recovery is realised. As a symptom, in the midst of her identity crisis, Yolanda becomes unable to control her physical response to certain words, her psychic fracture manifesting itself bodily in the form of an allergic reaction.<sup>494</sup> When her doctor asks her what love is, 'the skin on her neck prickles and reddens. She has developed a random allergy to certain words' (*García*, p.82). More significant, though, is the fact that Yolanda cannot answer the doctor's question. He reassures her, 'we constantly have to redefine the things that are important to us. It's okay not to know. When you find yourself in love again, you'll know what it is' but for Yolanda it is 'scary not to know what the most important word in [her] vocabulary means' (*García*, p.82).

Just as she cannot comprehend, understand, or assign meaning and definition to herself and her experiences balanced on the precipice between cultures, Yolanda loses the ability to understand and define those words and feelings, the meanings of which are most important to her. She must reinstate meaning and definition to begin the process of self-definition and articulate her hybrid self. Determined to 'build immunity to the offending words' Yolanda repeats them, growing in confidence until 'the words tumble out, making a sound like the rumble of distant thunder, taking shape, depth, and substance [...] so many words. There is no end to what can be said about the world' (*García*, p.85). Once she has regained control over language, assigning meaning and understanding to the world, to her experiences, her memories and emotions, realising that what can be said about the world is limitless, and that she possesses the language and vocabulary through which to express all the above, Yolanda heals her psyche through the process of storytelling. She communicates her experience and asserts her agency through narrative. As Barak writes, 'Yolanda faces and works through her identity problems in her writing. She tells stories, literally, to save her life'.<sup>495</sup> This therapeutic healing process which enables Yolanda to unite and reconcile her fractured self takes place via a narrative 'return'.

The process of returning to traumatic events through narrative recall begins during Yolanda's hospitalisation; looking out through a window to where her Doctor sits outside, Yolanda begins, 'In the beginning, Doc, I loved John' (*García*, p.69). Immediately, 'she recognizes the unmistakable signs of a

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<sup>493</sup> Pavlenko, 'Bilingual Selves', p.5.

<sup>494</sup> Avey's psychological breakdown in *Praisesong* also manifests itself in physical forms. See Chapter One, pp.67-68.

<sup>495</sup> Barak, "'Turning and Turning'", p.173.

flashback: a woman at a window, a woman with a past, with memory and desire and wreckage in her heart' (*García*, p.69). Whilst this scene unfolds as an imagined conversation, it points towards a crucial aspect of therapy for victims of different kinds of traumatic experience: the talking cure. The concept of the talking cure and retrospective narrative challenges the ingrained and pervasive 'culture of silence' which Vázquez points out as having characterised Trujillo's rule in the Dominican Republic.<sup>496</sup> The socio-political context from within which Alvarez and Yolanda, as Dominican born women, are writing, has been noted in numerous studies of this author's work. Castellucci Cox refers to Alvarez as a writer 'whose inheritance from growing up in a police state has been a command to silence herself'.<sup>497</sup> As a child, Yolanda, too, is discouraged from telling stories as her fictions can endanger her family.<sup>498</sup> Castellucci Cox points to this suppression of Yolanda's authorial voice as the trigger for her mental breakdown, arguing that 'despite a childhood of punishments and a family infuriated by her revelatory fiction, Yo's adult struggles with mental breakdown and identity crisis are rooted more deeply in the political turmoil of her homeland, the fallout of that persecution on the private home, and the scars it inflicts on Yo's authorial voice'.<sup>499</sup> However, in my analysis of Yolanda as a subject suspended between cultures, unable to turn towards either Dominican or American cultural spaces to locate her complex identity, I emphasise the breakdown in language as a reflection of Yolanda's loss of culture. It is these traumatic losses which cause the psychological fracture I suggest is the root cause of Yolanda's breakdown; she is suspended, unable to turn to either language or culture for an affirmation and validation of the meaningfulness and significance of her diasporic experience.

However, the power of storytelling, both as a destructive and restorative force, is central to Alvarez's work. Although Alvarez notes, 'I was raised in a storytelling culture' (*Something*, p.145), acknowledging, 'the power of stories was all around me, for the tradition of storytelling is deeply rooted in my Dominican culture' (*Something*, p.138), she is careful to also note the dangerous abuses of storytelling in the society into which she was born; the suppression of truths, the blurred line between fact and fiction, and the repercussions of the myths created by the Trujillo regime in erasing and distorting historical and contemporary truths:

This fictive cast of mind extends, of course, beyond families and small communities to politics and government and to the wider culture. Who more than my Dominican family should understand this? We had undergone thirty-one years of a dictatorship in which the wildest myths had to be accepted as fact on pain of death. The dictator, for instance, decreed the country officially a "white nation" even though we are ninety percent mulatto and proof of that is all around us. There was also the fiction presented

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<sup>496</sup> Vázquez, *Triangulations*, p.138.

<sup>497</sup> Castellucci Cox, 'A Particular Blessing', p.137.

<sup>498</sup> For an extended analysis of storytelling and the suppression of storytelling in Alvarez's novel see, for example, Wells Cantiello, "That Story about the Gun".

<sup>499</sup> Castellucci Cox, 'A Particular Blessing', p.137.

to the world and acted out by Dominicans that we had a democratic form of government. (*Something*, p.124)

In considering the ways in which historical fiction can be used as a tool through which to reclaim a subverted or suppressed national historical narrative, the final chapter of this thesis deals more specifically with the collective erasures of Dominican history and the ways in which a narrative of return to this traumatic history can enable a process of working through to envision a more positive future. Considering the plight of Yolanda as an individual character, however, I wish here to emphasise the necessity of a personal narrative, the ability to tell one's story and validate, testify to and transcend the traumas of one's lived experiences. Storytelling remains a crucial way in which migrants attempt to preserve the past and remember the life left behind. Laura García, for example, 'had a favourite story she liked to tell about each one as a way of celebrating that daughter on special occasions' (*Something*, p.42). In this way, the mother, the traditional keeper of familial oral history, preserves memories of the past, acting as the vehicle through which familial history is passed on through generations.

Yet, particularly for victims of the traumatic experience of exile and displacement, those like the García girls and Alvarez, storytelling recalls the losses sustained through traumatic separation from the familial home, native language, and originary culture, particularly those which Alvarez associates with 'never having grown up in the Dominican Republic amid my own people' (*Something*, p.100). For Yolanda and Alvarez, assembling a narrative which can enable the articulation of these traumatic losses, and the hybrid subjectivity borne of this displacement is crucial. Confirmation of Yolanda as the narrator of Alvarez's text, teller of the story of the García girls and their experiences of the traumas of exile and displacement, the loss of an accent, language, culture, tradition, and originary home, comes in the novel's final pages where the narrative voice addresses the reader, 'You understand I am collapsing all time now so that it fits in what's left in the hollow of my story?' continuing, 'I began to write, the story of Pila, the story of my grandmother [...] I grew up, a curious woman, a woman of story ghosts and story devils' (*García*, pp.289-290). This interjection follows the novel's narrative ending, but chronological beginning, as it is preceded by Yolanda's narration of the earliest story from her childhood. In telling the story of the García girls, Yolanda returns to the source of their trauma, to the beginning, to a lost childhood, culture, and language in the Dominican Republic.

I have postponed a discussion of the retrospective nature of the narrative, which itself literally returns as the story unfolds in reverse chronological order, in order to emphasise the significance of this narrative return through form in contrast to the thematic content of the narrative, my analysis of which supports the argument towards Yolanda's presentation as a suspended subject. The returning narrative, then, formally enacts the thematic quest for home undertaken by the adult Yolanda in her desire to locate her lost origins and recover her Dominican selfhood. Whilst the content points towards

the protagonist's suspension, problematizing the notion of the (re)turn, the recessive nature of the narrative points towards the text and the process of writing and writing back as crucial to healing and recovery, fundamental in the process of becoming for the diasporic subject. This coming into oneself, then, from a state of perpetual suspension, is achieved via a narrative return, a working through, narrating back to the source of one's trauma, the initial dislocation from the familial 'home' space. As Castellucci Cox observes, 'the incremental revelation of the narrative [...] could be compared superficially to the recursive process of psychoanalysis, during which the patient is directed to peel back the layers of adult protection to discover the repressed childhood nightmares that have given rise to the illness'.<sup>500</sup> The final section of this chapter is subsequently dedicated to a discussion of the formal return enacted by a retrospective narrative which, in its recession, reflects the healing process of the therapeutic talking cure which Yolanda initiates in her imagined conversation with her doctor.

### **The Structural Return and the Chronology of Storytelling in *García Girls***

Chapter One of this thesis read Faith's journey towards a recovery of her ancestral roots and black identity in Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* as a mirroring of the novel's cyclical structure; from England, to Jamaica, and back again. A comparison with Marshall's *Praisesong* concluded that the cyclical structure of the novel similarly mirrored both Avey's physical journey from the U.S., to the Caribbean, and back again, and her metaphorical journey into a rediscovery of ancestry and cultural identity. In Chapter Two I concluded that Danticat's interlinking of past and present, U.S. and Caribbean, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, reflects the complex ways in which the memory of traumatic experience and the history of colonialism in the Caribbean haunts the psyche both in the diaspora and at home. Although in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* the narrative traverses past and present, revealing the presence of the traumatic past in contemporary Haiti, Sophie and Martine's journeys from the Caribbean to the U.S. and back again enact a cyclical narrative progression which performs a kind of structural closure. Indeed, the climactic scene in the cane fields linking past, present, collective and individual traumas, seeks to resolve a history of trauma as it symbolically brings the cycle to an end.

With its recessive narrative, Alvarez's *García Girls* is not simply a writing back to a Dominican childhood, but also structurally returns from the Caribbean, to the U.S., and back again. In the novel's opening scene Yolanda is depicted arriving at the family compound in the Dominican Republic to a welcoming party complete with a 'cake in the shape of the Island' and, as Yolanda's cousin Lucinda explains, 'five candles [...] one for each year you've been away' (*García*, p.6). We learn that Yolanda and her sisters emigrated to the U.S. as children with their parents twenty-nine years ago (*García*, p.11) and whilst Yolanda's recent five-year absence from visiting her Dominican family remains unexplained, this

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<sup>500</sup> Castellucci Cox, 'A Particular Blessing', p.136.

opening chapter reveals what has brought her back: blowing out the candles on her island cake, an adult Yolanda wishes, 'let this be my home' (*García*, p.11), revealing the suspended subject's ongoing quest for a home space underlies her return. Later, standing amongst the Dominican landscape, surrounded by foothills and listening to the light breeze rustling the palm trees, Yolanda realises, 'this is what she has been missing all these years without really knowing that she has been missing it. Standing here in the quiet, she believes she has never felt at home in the states, never' (*García*, p.12). These opening pages introduce the main thematic concern of the novel; the tensions between Yolanda's Dominican roots and her outsider status as 'Miss America' (*García*, p.4), her cultural and linguistic suspension as an outsider in both the Dominican Republic, her birthplace, and the U.S., where she was raised and lives. Thus, Yolanda's birthplace is initially presented as a space to which to return in search of some notion of her originary Dominican self; as Luis writes, 'Yolanda returns to the Dominican Republic in search of her own Dominican identity'.<sup>501</sup>

The narrative continues to structurally mirror the return enacted by Yolanda to her island origins as the novel's final chapter, 'The Drum', is also set in the Dominican Republic whilst the mid-section relates the Garcías' experiences living in the diaspora and adjusting to diasporic life. However, a closer inspection of this final chapter reveals the ambiguity of the novel's cyclical structure as a return to the originary home which represents a return to Dominican identity, or to some kind of essential Dominican cultural home. 'The Drum' relates an incident in Yolanda's childhood wherein she receives 'a magnificent drum' as a gift from her Mamita after a trip to New York (*García*, p.275). Yolanda's grandparents and father's regular trips to America reveal the Garcías' proximity to American culture even before their migration. The drum in question is described with 'its sides bright red', 'its top and bottom white' and 'a broad blue strap' (*García*, p.275). The allusions to the red, white, and blue of the American flag, a potent symbol of American pride and nationalism, further suggest an American presence underlies Yolanda's Dominican experience. I turn here to Chandra and a passage which bears much relevance to my analysis of the symbolism of the drum:

The novel speaks to a condition in which, due to the U.S. presence in the Dominican Republic, one's identity shifts in relationship to the United States well before any physical act of migration [...] caught in the turmoil of rapidly changing political events, the García family is sketched against a backdrop of what is already a complex historical account. But this history is mentioned in much of the scholarship of the novel in a cursory way and often with little or no reference to the history of U.S. intervention.<sup>502</sup>

Chandra references the long history of U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic throughout the twentieth century. Suárez also urges, 'let us remember that the Dominican Republic's national history includes a thirty-one year dictatorship between 1930 and 1961 under the U.S.-backed military leader

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<sup>501</sup> Luis, 'A Search for Identity', p.846.

<sup>502</sup> Chandra, 'Re-Producing a Nationalist Literature', p.845.

Rafael Trujillo [...] Alvarez's experiences are shaped by Cold War politics'.<sup>503</sup> Suárez highlights the significant role of the U.S. in the Dominican Republic, their support for Trujillo's dictatorship as a bulwark against the spread of Communism in the area, and the U.S. military invasion of the island in 1965, following which the number of Dominican migrants to the U.S. dramatically increased.<sup>504</sup> Recognition of this twentieth-century history of U.S. intervention is crucial to understanding the novel within its 'sociohistorical milieu'.<sup>505</sup>

Although at a structurally basic level the narrative is cyclical in that it opens and closes in the Dominican Republic, with the mid-section primarily focused on narrating the Garcías' diasporic experiences in the U.S., America pervades sections of the text which, on a surface level, appear to be concerned with narrating Dominican experiences. This American presence (the red, white and blue drum) hints towards the self-serving neo-colonial powers which surreptitiously controlled Dominican fates whilst simultaneously drawing into question the authenticity of Yolanda's desired return to Dominican origins, and the very notion of an essential Dominican-ness for the Garcías. The cyclical structure of the narrative in fact points towards an American presence in the Garcías' lives long before their physical migration to New York. The drum – a symbol of American nationalism and their interventionist foreign policy – complicates a reading of the novel's cyclical structure as a reflection of the text's narrative recession towards some notion of an essential Dominican origin. This American presence on the island negates a reading of the cyclical structure as a reflection of Yolanda's return to the Dominican Republic to find a home space for her Dominican identity.

Nevertheless, at a superficial level the return in the form of the novel does serve to highlight the metaphorical returns Yolanda makes in an attempt to reclaim and rediscover the Dominican in her complex Dominican American diasporic subjectivity. Whilst the narrative structurally returns in that it relates in reverse chronology the story of Yolanda and her family's migration from their island home to the U.S., at the same time the reader witnesses the symbolic return contained within this recession; to family and the familial ancestral home, to native language, to Dominican culture, to childhood, and, most crucially, to the past. In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Invention in Narrative* (1984), Peter Brooks defines 'plot' as 'the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning'.<sup>506</sup> Brooks argues that 'our common sense of plot [...] has been molded by the great nineteenth-century narrative tradition that [...] conceived certain kinds of knowledge and truth to be inherently narrative, understandable (and expoundable) only by way of sequence, in a

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<sup>503</sup> Suárez, 'Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation', p.122.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid., p.123.

<sup>505</sup> Chandra, 'Re-Producing a Nationalist Literature', p.842.

<sup>506</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Invention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), p.xi.

temporal unfolding'.<sup>507</sup> In her reversal of chronological narrative structure, Alvarez 'shapes the story' and gives it a 'certain direction' or 'intent of meaning', firstly by highlighting the multi-faceted nature of the 'return' to Yolanda's Dominican 'home' and secondly by using reverse chronology to demonstrate the importance of the return to the past in order to glean meaning and understanding of her Dominican American selfhood in the present. As Fatima Mujčinović argues, 'Yolanda's trip back to the Dominican homeland [...] signifies one's attempt to recreate the past in order to gain understanding of one's present positioning'.<sup>508</sup> The narrative return to the past thus mirrors Yolanda's search through the past for meaning, or, as Lovelady writes, 'the desire to change or understand a life, inspires the character to look further and further into the past'.<sup>509</sup>

In 'Recessive Origins in Julia Alvarez's *García Girls: A Feminist Exploration of Narrative Beginnings*' (2008), Catherine Romagnolo offers a detailed discussion of Alvarez's use of beginnings, arguing that the recession induced by the reverse chronology 'opens a space for the emergence of a complex understanding of the relationship between events in our histories and the development of individual and cultural identities'.<sup>510</sup> Like Lovelady, who links Yolanda's desire to return to the past with a yearning to understand herself in the present, Romagnolo links Yolanda's return to the past specifically with a search for cultural identity. Yolanda's 'return' to the Dominican Republic is part of a 'quest for home' in which she seeks knowledge of the past to inform her cultural identity and diasporic subjectivity in the present. Furthermore, Romagnolo highlights 'the importance of beginnings and origins in relation to any discussion of subjectivity, identity, and nation formation'.<sup>511</sup> Thus, the reverse chronology reflects one of the central thematic concerns of the novel – the search for origins to inform a complex diasporic subjectivity and hybrid cultural identity – whilst embodying the multiple return/turn(s) evident throughout the text.

The reverse chronology points backwards, and leads the reader backwards, to the García's lives in the Dominican Republic, returning in terms of place/space to a geographical island home, returning to the home of her native language and culture, and returning to Yolanda's childhood. Yet, as the drum also symbolically demonstrates, Alvarez's novel points towards the fragility of beginnings as a place from which to glean meaning or a sense of cultural wholeness. These Dominican beginnings are unstable in that they reveal *Présence Americain* as having been central throughout Yolanda's life, reflecting U.S. influences in shaping collective Dominican experience in the twentieth century. In closing the novel at the chronological beginning of the story with 'The Drum', an episode from Yolanda's childhood in the Dominican Republic, Alvarez suggests America is lurking within the narrative at both

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<sup>507</sup> Ibid., p.xi

<sup>508</sup> Mujčinović, *From Ana Castillo to Julia Alvarez*, p.92.

<sup>509</sup> Lovelady, 'Walking Backwards', p.32.

<sup>510</sup> Romagnolo, 'Recessive Origins', p.159.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid., pp.149-150.

chronological and formal beginning and ending. This reinforces 'the formal and conceptual instability of beginnings' as 'neither nation [...] is allowed structurally to stand in as a goal or as an authentic cultural origin to which the characters return in order to establish cultural wholeness'.<sup>512</sup> Far from affirming her status as a Dominican, the return to the past suggests that Yolanda will always be and always has been a border woman, juggling U.S. and Dominican influences upon her subjectivity and cultural identity.

Romagnolo concludes that 'the form offers an alternative to the binary construction of U.S. and Dominican identities; the circular structure forges an alternative subjectivity with connection to both cultures'.<sup>513</sup> She argues that 'Yolanda does not find the wholeness of the authentic origin for which she searches' as there is 'no authentic home or self to which she may return'.<sup>514</sup> Romagnolo's conclusion suggests that there is no wholeness to be found within hybrid culture, within those diasporic subjects who occupy Bhabha's gap between cultures, implying that only through the recovery of an 'authentic origin' could Yolanda find her 'authentic home'. Whilst Alvarez's narrative questions the authenticity of the return to the geographic space of the Dominican Republic as a search for an authentic cultural home, it does not imply that wholeness through a reconciliation of both halves of a fractured identity is unachievable. For Yolanda, as a border woman, this home space straddles Dominican/American experiences. Home is not a geographical space, but a space of creative reinvention and imagination which reflects the process of identity becoming and evolution for diasporic subjects; for Yolanda and Alvarez, as writers, language and storytelling functions as the home space which provides cultural affirmation and validation and the possibility of a sense of wholeness and belonging. It is within language, through writing and storytelling, that they are able to transcend the traumas of exile and dislocation and give meaning to the migrant experience.<sup>515</sup>

Castellucci Cox argues that 'because the narrative recedes rather than proceeds, the reading experience becomes one of simultaneous loss and recovery. Even as the narrative unfolds in reverse to reveal what feels like the recouping of a relinquished culture, the stories record a past that is not actually recoverable but irretrievably abandoned'.<sup>516</sup> Yet I suggest that in returning to the Dominican Republic on a quest for some notion of an essential Dominican identity, Yolanda's perception of her homeland and the nature of 'Dominican-ness' are revealed to be somewhat misguided. In returning to the past, to the island of her childhood, Yolanda realises not the loss of an essential Dominican selfhood, but recovers the hybridity and cultural synthesis which have always characterised her Dominican experience, reconnecting the multiple presences – in this case *Présence Americain* and *Présence*

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<sup>512</sup> Ibid., p.156, p.160.

<sup>513</sup> Romagnolo, 'Recessive Origins', p.160.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid., pp.162-163.

<sup>515</sup> For using the word to transcend trauma see Introduction, p.39.

<sup>516</sup> Castellucci Cox, 'A Particular Blessing', p.136.

*Européennee* – which characterise her Caribbean identity. Thus, the narrative becomes one of simultaneous loss and recovery in that an idealised vision of the originary home is abandoned and replaced with a more realistic vision of a Dominican childhood in a country over which the neo-colonial superpower to the north has historically waived crucial political, social and cultural influence.

Alvarez's novel returns from Yolanda's adulthood, from her life in the U.S., through her childhood experiences living in the diaspora and associated cultural tensions, back to the Dominican Republic and Yolanda's early childhood, to the site of the original trauma. I argue that this original trauma is located in the Dominican Republic and is linked both to the Garcías' traumatic separation from their island home and the difficulties of life in exile, suspended between languages, cultures and traditions. Furthermore, the reverse chronology of the narrative can be read as part of the therapeutic healing process for victim(s) of language trauma and associated traumas of exile and displacement. The recessive narrative form and structure of *García Girls* can be read through the lens of trauma theory as a reflection of the return necessary in the process of working through traumatic experience to reconcile and integrate it into the conscious mind and into one's lived experiences.

Neither American nor Caribbean, Alvarez and the García girls simultaneously and paradoxically belong within both cultural spaces, physical embodiments of the inevitability of cultural synthesis in a world destined to synthesis and the contact of civilizations.<sup>517</sup> As Kellman acknowledges, 'linguistic purity is of course a chimera; English, Korean, and Arabic are already mongrel, and creolization among existing languages proceeds wherever cultures touch and collide – which is to say, virtually everywhere'.<sup>518</sup> Thus, cultural and linguistic creolisation, assimilation, and integration are inevitable in a globalised world in which 'colonialism, war, increased mobility, and the aesthetics of alienation have combined to create a canon of translingual literature'.<sup>519</sup> To overcome the traumas of exile and displacement from the originary home, and reconcile the two halves of their fractured and fragmented cultural identities, Yolanda, and Alvarez, must first come to terms with the inevitability of their hybridity, and their traumatic separation from the ancestral island home, so that they might proudly accept and articulate their cultural and linguistic difference in their new home. Only then can they come down from the precipice, take their place in modern America, and rightfully claim the space in-between.

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<sup>517</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.6.

<sup>518</sup> Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination*, p.15.

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

## Chapter Four

### Returning Home through Historical Fiction: Writing the Traumatic Past in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

Previous chapters have discussed selected novels by diasporic Caribbean women writers with a focus on the significance of the narrative of return to uncover, or reconnect with knowledge of the ancestral and familial Caribbean home which fully informs diasporic subjectivity. I have underscored the influence of colonial history in shaping attitudes towards race, language and culture across the Caribbean region in order to emphasise the way in which notions of race, language and culture moulded by a violent and traumatic history of European colonisation continue to function as markers of identity for Caribbean people both at home and in the diaspora. Chapter One revealed the pertinence of a racialised diasporic identity in necessitating the protagonist's return to the Caribbean and the subsequent recovery of knowledge of African diasporic history which informs contemporary notions of diasporic blackness. Moving to consider the ramifications of the inherited memory of an historical experience rooted in colonial violence, racial oppression and the plantation economy, Chapter Two explored how the legacy of colonialism and its traumatic aftermath continues to impact upon contemporary Haiti and the Haitian diasporic experience. Looking to the Dominican Republic, Chapter Three provided a discussion of diasporic identity for Dominican Americans. This chapter revealed how a denial of the African presence in Dominican society and an inability to confront issues pertaining to race and racial identity leads to a privileging of alternative markers of a particularised Hispanic identity, specifically the Spanish language and a strong cultural identification with the Americas.

Through my analysis of texts representative of the Anglophone, Francophone and Hispanophone diaspora, I have sought to uncover the beginnings of a trend within Caribbean women's writing in English and to extrapolate from this shared diasporic experience, and shared preoccupation with the literary narrative of return, some generalities applicable to a pan-Caribbean approach towards diasporic Caribbean women's writing. My analysis has emphasised the crucial place of the Caribbean, the region's cultures, languages, and the continuing legacy of an inherently violent and traumatic colonial history in the formation and production of contemporary notions of identity and belonging for diasporic people across cultural and linguistic boundaries. This final chapter will demonstrate how key elements of this thesis' argument towards the defining role of traumatic history in necessitating a 'narrative of return' are exemplified by two novels of historical fiction, Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1999). These texts rewrite twentieth-century history from either side of Hispaniola, Danticat's Haiti and Alvarez's Dominican Republic. In their portrayal of the lived experience of the Trujillo dictatorship, they depict a shared historical

experience, its affects upon the people of Hispaniola, and the implications of its traumatic legacy for Caribbean people at home and abroad.

I turn here to a comparative analysis of texts written from either side of Hispaniola because the island's history exemplifies the violence and traumas of colonialism and its continuing effects. Furthermore, as Lucía M. Suárez observes in the opening to her important study into Haitian and Dominican diaspora memory, *The Tears of Hispaniola* (2006):

The island of Hispaniola is extremely important in the history of the New World: for example, Haiti was the first free black nation in the Americas. Yet today's Haiti and Dominican Republic have been destroyed by the politics of colonial and postcolonial manipulations, class demarcations, natural disasters, and suffocating dictatorships. The resulting strife has prompted mass migrations to lands believed to hold promise of a respite from violence and human degradation.<sup>520</sup>

Foregrounding Hispaniola as an exemplar of colonialism and its violent legacy in the Caribbean – 'men have violently battled for centuries to control Saint Domingue'<sup>521</sup> – in turning to texts by Hispaniolan writers, the final chapter of this thesis itself 'returns' to a Caribbean space which embodies the region's founding traumas. The island encapsulates a fractured and traumatic colonial history fraught with multiple silences and historical erasures, most evident in the fracturing of the island itself into two halves and the violent and antagonistic history of conflict between the two nations. Furthermore, this chapter emphasises how, through rewriting the past as historical fiction, the novel can force a direct confrontation with specific historical traumas and violence. I investigate how rewriting the traumatic past serves to bring about this confrontation to initiate a process of healing and liberation for Caribbean people and, ultimately, to force a recognition of a history of traumatic violence and its insidious effects upon the contemporary Caribbean in order to effect positive social and political change in the present.

It is imperative that we read Caribbean women's narratives of collective, ancestral and personal experiences in addition to male representations of Caribbean history; this comparison enables a full understanding of historical experience and permits readers to understand the similarities and differences in gendered experiences of racial oppression and gendered responses to historical and individual trauma. However, in keeping with the focus of this thesis which privileges a reading of women's narratives of return, I focus here exclusively on the work of female writers which provide access to the unspoken histories of women. This is important, because as has been noted time and again by historians, theorists and critics, historical narratives are overwhelmingly dominated by the male voice. As highlighted in the Introduction to this thesis, Caribbean women's writing was largely critically neglected until the latter part of the twentieth century. Thus, representations of women's narratives remain relatively under explored in relation to those of men within Caribbean literature. In

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<sup>520</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.1.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, p.108.

particular, this chapter privileges specific works by Danticat and Alvarez because both novels strive to give voice to the gendered historical experiences of women within violently patriarchal societies.

A brief discussion of the relationship between history and Caribbean literature will serve to illuminate the crucial role of the historical novel in a Caribbean context. It is widely accepted that 'since the seventeenth century, historical writing in the region has been dominated by European and European-centred visions of what constitutes history'.<sup>522</sup> Caribbean histories sought to celebrate imperial glories and defend the validity of colonial social institutions.<sup>523</sup> Fanon writes that history is 'written by the Westerners to serve their purposes',<sup>524</sup> an argument supported by Glissant, who refers to history as a 'fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone "made" the history of the World'.<sup>525</sup> Glissant elaborates upon history 'written with a capital H', arguing that 'it is a totality that excludes other histories that do not fit into that of the West'.<sup>526</sup> For Glissant,

[O]ne of the most disturbing consequences of colonization could well be this notion of a single History, and therefore of power, which has been imposed on others by the West [...] The struggle against a single History for the cross-fertilization of histories means repossessing both a true sense of one's time and identity: proposing in an unprecedented way a reevaluation of power.<sup>527</sup>

Michel-Rolph Trouillot also links the production of historical narratives to structures of power. Suggesting that history is inseparable from issues of socio-political power, Trouillot maintains that 'history is a story about power, a story about who won'.<sup>528</sup> Fanon, Glissant and Trouillot point towards the problem of historical perspective and the voicelessness of Caribbean people within what constitutes history; Trouillot recognises that 'any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly'.<sup>529</sup>

I argue that works of historical fiction, like those discussed in this chapter, constitute part of the 'operation' to 'deconstruct these silences' in the Caribbean. The contemporary Caribbean woman writer is crucial both in this deconstruction and in forcing a re-evaluation of the 'notion of a single History'.<sup>530</sup> Laura Durden's argument connecting the deconstruction of historical silences brought about through rewriting Caribbean history with the effort to define and locate a uniquely Caribbean cultural identity is of particular relevance to the undertakings of this thesis as it seeks to ascertain how

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<sup>522</sup> Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (Oxford: James Currey, 1998), p.14.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>524</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.177.

<sup>525</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.64.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, p. p.75.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, p.93.

<sup>528</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p.5.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

<sup>530</sup> See, for example, Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (London: Headline Review, 2011) and Margaret Cezair-Thompson's *The True History of Paradise* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

traumatic history continues to influence notions of identity and belonging for diasporic Caribbean people. Durden argues that the 'practice of remembering history and locating silences is evident in postcolonial Caribbean writing that has as two of its central aims the reclaiming of Caribbean history and the defining of a distinctly Caribbean cultural identity'.<sup>531</sup> For Durden, 'one result of colonization has been the erasure and/or restructuring of the colonized people's history'.<sup>532</sup> She, too, emphasises the problem of historical silence, arguing that 'in order for colonized peoples to recover their histories they must learn to overcome decades of silence'.<sup>533</sup>

The issue of overcoming silence and giving voice to 'groups hitherto depicted as objects of history'<sup>534</sup> is central to the novels discussed in this final chapter; Hispaniola has an extensive history of traumatic violence fraught with silences, erasures, and denials. As Suárez notes, '[o]ne explanation for these erasures can be found in a long history of violence'.<sup>535</sup> Literature is crucial in the process of giving voice to marginalised subjects and depicting events from an alternative historical perspective, particularly in the case of women writers for whom the issue of giving voice to marginalised female subjects is central within the process of rewriting history. As Gillian Kathryn Smith surmises:

Traditionally, West Indian writers have engaged in a quarrel with traditional historiography and the representation of West Indian history. They have encouraged the revisioning of history as a creative enterprise, where the subconscious is led by the cultural, personal and emotional experience to produce valid testimonies of the West Indian historical experience. Our female writers not only contest the imperialist version of Caribbean history, but also object to the neglect of the female experience. They extend the dialogue by seeking to locate the women's experience in the sphere of historiography through female-authored fictional scenarios.<sup>536</sup>

Smith's observation is especially true of Danticat and Alvarez's novels, which in their depiction of female protagonists and employment of female narrative voices specifically concern themselves with the production of 'valid testimonies' of West Indian women's historical experience. Literature is crucial in the process of deconstructing silence and reclaiming Caribbean history because, as Wilson-Tagoe argues, literature is able to present a more fluid re-imagining of the past, to offer multiple perceptions of events, to utilise ancestral memory and the oral tradition, and to move beyond the scope of a cause-and-effect methodology: 'in terms of the capacity to possess and utilise history, the imaginative writer's freedom is boundless. Unlike the historian he has a freedom of emphasis and a freedom from conclusions'.<sup>537</sup> Likewise, in rewriting Caribbean history, Walcott notes, 'what has become necessary is

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<sup>531</sup> Laura Durden, 'The Fall of the Great House: Uncovering Familial Silences in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*' in *Swinging Her Breasts at History*, ed. by Moira Inghilleri (London: Mango Publishing, 2006) pp.224-238 (p.224).

<sup>532</sup> Durden in Inghilleri, p.224.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, p.225.

<sup>534</sup> Wilson-Tagoe, *Historical Thought*, p.27.

<sup>535</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.96.

<sup>536</sup> Gillian Kathryn Smith, 'Romancing the Land of Look Behind: Ti Marie and the Quarrel with Traditional Historiography' in *Swinging Her Breasts at History*, ed. by Moira Inghilleri (London: Mango Publishing, 2006) pp.79-92 (p.79).

<sup>537</sup> Wilson-Tagoe, *Historical Thought*, p.33.

imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention'.<sup>538</sup> Through the 'revisioning of history as a creative enterprise'<sup>539</sup> the Caribbean woman writer comes to terms with the absences in 'the thin scraps of recorded history',<sup>540</sup> using literature as a means through which to rewrite the 'notion of a single History',<sup>541</sup> to assist in deconstructing historical silences, and to recover undocumented, alternative version(s) of the Caribbean past.

In light of existing theory regarding the role of the historical novel as a vehicle for rewriting history and voicing marginalised historical perspectives, my juxtaposition of Danticat and Alvarez's novels explores the impact which Trujillo's dictatorship had on the lives of both Haitian and Dominican people and the ways in which these novels enable a return to a traumatic past in order to provide a written testimony to a largely undocumented history of the region and its people's lived experiences. I begin with a discussion of how the authors combine history and imagination to produce texts which embody the cultural memories of a shared traumatic history. I investigate how these works of historical fiction function as testimonials to the traumatic history of Hispaniola and consider the narrative techniques which contribute to this testimonial effect. I address the issue of the validity of the novel as a vehicle to provide fictional testimony to a lived traumatic history, and reflect upon the way in which a narrative 'return' to the past might effect a review of the place of traumatic and inherently violent history in the contemporary Caribbean. Finally, I move to assess the role played by narratives of return in enabling a vision of a more positive, productive and hopeful Caribbean future. My analysis responds to Suárez's proposal that 'scholars would benefit from examining the diasporic literary production of the two nations comparatively, exposing the multiple functions of history and memory in Hispaniola's long and fascinating legacy'.<sup>542</sup> Suárez confesses herself 'astounded by the relative paucity of comparative studies of Haitian and Dominican experiences'.<sup>543</sup> My comparison of Dominican American Alvarez and Haitian American Danticat's works enacts a comparative approach in keeping with the nature of this thesis which considers literature written throughout the Caribbean diaspora.

### **The Twentieth-Century Text and Cultural Memory: Creolising History in *The Farming of Bones* and *In the Time of the Butterflies***

Stories passed down through generations and works of historical fiction – a combination of the oral tradition and 'imagination as necessity'<sup>544</sup> – are vital in helping to piece together a more widely

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<sup>538</sup> Derek Walcott, 'The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 16, 1 (1974), 3-13 (p.6).

<sup>539</sup> Smith in Inghilleri, p.79.

<sup>540</sup> Wilson-Tagoe, *Historical Thought*, p.25.

<sup>541</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.93.

<sup>542</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.2.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>544</sup> Walcott, 'Culture or Mimicry?', p.6.

representative version of Caribbean history in an attempt to overcome silences enforced upon colonised people by historical erasures and denials. The same notion applies for the more recent history of Hispaniola and twentieth-century Haiti and the Dominican Republic, nations which, under a series of brutal, oppressive dictatorships, witnessed the erasure, manipulation, and falsification of historical events. Studies of historical representation in the Caribbean literary imagination understandably lean towards a discussion of texts which demonstrate a desire to recover, or return to an undocumented perspective of history from within the colonial and post-emancipation Caribbean. Certainly, a discussion of these representations of pre twentieth-century Caribbean experience is warranted. But what of the repressed, distorted, misrepresented and unrecorded histories of the twentieth-century Caribbean? How might creative writers assist in the recovery and representation of more recent silenced histories?

Haitian writer Evelyne Trouillot claims, 'what interests me is what is not said [...] when we learn history we go over all the great men of history but we do not go beyond that'.<sup>545</sup> It is these unsaid – or unwritten – twentieth-century histories which concern Danticat and Alvarez in their literary returns, particularly the unspoken histories of women and ordinary people, those marginalised perspectives which the 'notion of a single History'<sup>546</sup> often neglects or fails to record. Suárez notes, 'the missing voice of women, Haitian Dominicans, and homosexuals glares blatantly at any researcher seeking a more complex interhistory of Dominican lives'.<sup>547</sup> *The Farming of Bones* gives voice to ordinary people, particularly women and Haitian Dominicans, documenting historical events from a personal angle and focusing on a particular tragedy in Hispaniolan history. The protagonist, Amabelle, is a young Haitian woman working for a prominent Dominican family, forced to flee to Haiti to avoid persecution at the hands of the Trujillato. Perpetuating the myth of Dominican 'whiteness' and furthering an anti-Haitian agenda, Trujillo ordered the killing of thousands of Haitian migrants in the border area. The massacre exemplifies the racial denial inherent within Dominican society. Luis notes:

Certainly, racial issues exist in Dominican society, even though upper-class and elite writers have omitted them from the literature [...] dark-skinned or black people are not considered Dominicans, but Haitians. Statistics show that an overwhelming majority of Dominicans are non-white. However, in the Dominican Republic Haitians are the blacks and are considered to be inferior and savage. This attitude was made brutally evident when, in 1937, Trujillo ordered the massacre of more than 15,000 Haitians who lived near the border.<sup>548</sup>

Military and civilian Dominicans were both implicated in the genocide; as Pamela J. Rader acknowledges, 'the 1937 massacre marks a disturbing point in time and space where some machete-

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<sup>545</sup> Evelyne Trouillot in J. Michael Dash, 'Roundtable: Writing, History and Revolution', *Small Axe*, 9.2 (2005), 189-199 (p.198).

<sup>546</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.93.

<sup>547</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.7. Whilst a consideration of representations of the voices of gay and lesbian experiences of history within Caribbean literature lies beyond the remit of this thesis, there remains scope for future scholarship in this area.

<sup>548</sup> Luis, *Dance Between Two Cultures*, p.239.

armed Dominicans adopted General Trujillo's attitudes of ethnic cleansing'.<sup>549</sup> The massacre began on October 2nd 1937 and lasted for three brutal days, during which 'the Dominican National Police and Army rounded up Haitian men, women, and children and systematically slaughtered them'.<sup>550</sup> *Bones* tells the story of these migrants, following Amabelle and her companions in their attempts to flee the violence and return to Haiti. In contrast, Alvarez's protagonists are fictional representations of real women, the Dominican Mirabal sisters who grew up under Trujillo's dictatorship and joined the underground resistance to fight the oppression and human rights abuses perpetrated by the regime. Alvarez's fictional account of these historical figures narrates their growth from young girls into courageous revolutionaries, combining stories of their personal and political lives, their imprisonment, and the death of three of the four sisters whose murder at the hands of Trujillo's SIM was staged as a car accident on a mountain road.

I turn to Danticat and Alvarez's literary representations of twentieth-century historical events on Hispaniola to explore how events in recent history, those which exist within living memory of survivors and victims, are recorded and remembered.<sup>551</sup> As Suárez acknowledges, 'the real need lies in the process of "memorialization", giving literary voice to the lost and/or reframed points of history and to the ever-present scars of violence'.<sup>552</sup> Specifically, I consider literary representations of traumatic Caribbean histories within which the 'ever-present scars' of both colonial and contemporary violence are central. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin recognise, '[t]he West Indian situation combines all the most violent and destructive effects of the colonizing process'.<sup>553</sup> Through a textual return the past, the selected novels speak through the erasures and silences surrounding the violence of Trujillo's military dictatorship. I argue that the violence central to his regime can be read as the product of an historical legacy of colonial violence. In doing so, I foreground the work of Morgan and Youssef, who argue towards an understanding of the 'multigenerational impact of violence'.<sup>554</sup> Thus, I enhance arguments made in Chapter Two regarding the intergenerational transmission of trauma; if violence is at the heart of trauma, then, as trauma is passed on through generations, so too is its inherent violence.<sup>555</sup> Morgan and Youssef directly link violence and its traumatic effects, concluding that 'violence can and does generate a range of traumas'.<sup>556</sup> They perceive the violence which afflicts contemporary Caribbean

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<sup>549</sup> Pamela J. Rader, 'What the River Knows: Productive Silences in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and '1937'', *Antipodas*, XX (2009), 27-46 (p.28).

<sup>550</sup> Elizabeth Abbott, *Haiti: The Duvaliers and their Legacy* (London: Robert Hale, 1991), p.49.

<sup>551</sup> For living memory and remembered history see Introduction, p.35. See also Chapter Two, p.87.

<sup>552</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.8. For scars of violence see Introduction, p.38. For a discussion of the physical and psychological scars of traumatic history see Chapter Two, p.93, p.113. For psychological fracture as scarring see Chapter Three, p.148.

<sup>553</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p.26.

<sup>554</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.2. For intergenerational memory and history see Introduction, p.37.

<sup>555</sup> For a detailed discussion of the multigenerational effects of inherited trauma see Chapter Two, pp.89-93, p.99, p.101, pp.107-108. For a discussion of healing from intergenerational trauma see Chapter Two, pp.114-116.

<sup>556</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.8.

society as occurring within a cycle of historical violence set in motion by colonialism, referring to 'the epistemological and ontological violence which was pivotal to colonialism and its aftermath':<sup>557</sup>

Caribbean social structure [...] is rooted in epistemic and social abuses of slavery and imperialism. It is within this framework that the current phenomenon of violence must be understood; for violence does reproduce itself, and there are significant continuities between violence enacted against a society or portion thereof and its reproduction among individuals so brutalized and damaged.<sup>558</sup>

Foregrounding twentieth-century violent traumas as the 'scars' of colonialism, this final chapter reads the violence of the Trujillato as a reproduction of colonial violence, part of a cycle set in motion by European colonisation. Recent years have seen an increase in literary representations of Trujillo and a number of articles have addressed this preoccupation within Dominican national and diasporic imagination. Sandra Cox observes, 'representations of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina's dictatorship permeate English-language fiction about the island of Hispaniola'.<sup>559</sup> Trenton Hickman, discussing Junot Díaz's 'extensive use of Trujillo and his legacy' notes that 'most of the other major Dominican-American prose writers – including Julia Alvarez [...] also feel compelled to employ the *trujillato* as an important feature in at least one of their novels'.<sup>560</sup> Suggesting that Caribbean 'narratives of dictatorship' have adapted and developed 'the conventions of the dictator novel in Latin America', Daynalí Flores-Rodríguez argues that 'the dictator novel [...] has provided Caribbean writers with a structure that allows them to discuss power and oppression within a recognizable tradition they can claim authority over'.<sup>561</sup> However, in addressing and confronting the horrors of the regime through historical fiction, Alvarez and Danticat shift the literary focus from that of the dictatorial presence to ordinary civilians, and particularly women, further speaking in opposition to the regime's atrocities as their works attempt to write a silenced history by giving voice to an oppressed majority.

Dictatorships characterized by the absolute power of a ruling mythologized figure involve the total control of the medium through which events are recorded and represented. Totalitarian regimes control how history is created, often entailing complete control of media, creative and cultural arts forms, and the education system. In their profile, *The Dominican Republic: A Caribbean Crucible* (1982), Howard J. Wiarda and Michael J. Kryzanek write:

Trujillo's rise to power in 1930 was the result of ad hoc intimidation, manipulation, and fraud. His rule as president and dictator for the next thirty-one years saw the

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>559</sup> Sandra Cox, 'The Trujillato and Testimonial Fiction: Collective Memory, Cultural Trauma and National Identity in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*', *Antipodas*, XX (2009), 107-126 (p.107).

<sup>560</sup> Trenton Hickman, 'The *Trujillato* as Desideratum in Dominican-American Fiction', *Antipodas*, XX (2009), 157-171 (p.157).

<sup>561</sup> Daynalí Flores-Rodríguez, 'Addressing the *Fukú* in Us: Junot Díaz and the New Novel of Dictatorship', *Antipodas*, XX (2009), 91-106 (pp.91-92).

institutionalization of these features and the addition of others; namely, personal aggrandizement, economic control, and brutal and systematic repression.<sup>562</sup>

They further acknowledge, 'Trujillo ran one of the tightest dictatorships the world had ever seen. The web of controls included military might, political and governmental absolutism, economic monopoly, thought control, educational and intellectual conformity, systemic terror, and control over all socioeconomic groups'.<sup>563</sup> Danticat writes in a similar vein of growing up under the Duvalier dictatorship that 'because of the dictatorship and its brutal censorship, I knew no child who had read even a short novel by a Haitian-born writer'.<sup>564</sup> In dictatorships like those on Hispaniola throughout the twentieth century, communities live in fear, ruled by secret police. Subsequently, the oral transmission of news is stifled and monitored, enabling the suppression of historical events and manipulation of truths.

Danticat's text attempts to speak through these historical silences with a specific purpose: her depiction of the massacre brings a human perspective to an event overlooked amongst centuries of violence and bloodshed on the island. In recent years, activist groups like Border of Lights – in which both Alvarez and Danticat are involved – have come together to educate and engage Haitians and Dominicans in the diaspora and at home in commemorating the massacre.<sup>565</sup> However, coverage within academia and by historians is frequently lacking. Although Elizabeth Abbott describes the massacre as 'unparalleled in the Caribbean or North America [...] the bloodiest single paragraph in Haiti's twentieth century history' her four hundred page history accords this event a mere couple of pages.<sup>566</sup> Similarly in Olwyn M. Blouet's *The Contemporary Caribbean* (2007) the massacre is described as 'a most famous act of brutality' but summarised in a few sentences.<sup>567</sup> Jan Rogoziński's description in *A Brief History of the Caribbean* (2000) is fittingly brief: 'in October 1937 hostile relations with the Dominican Republic became worse. The Dominican army [...] massacred perhaps as many as 50,000 Haitian labourers'.<sup>568</sup> Ignoring contradictory facts and figures (Rogoziński's '50,000 Haitian labourers'<sup>569</sup> becomes 'possibly over 10,000'<sup>570</sup> in Blouet's account, and a similarly vague '20,000 to 30,000 Haitians'<sup>571</sup> in Abbott's), Danticat's novel focuses on Amabelle's loss of friends and family, the psychological and physical damage inflicted upon Haitian people, and the emotional testimonies of survivors. Danticat 'turns' from the diaspora and 'returns' through fiction both to her familial homeland, and to the history of her island

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<sup>562</sup> Wiarda and Kryzanek, *The Dominican Republic*, p.35.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>564</sup> Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, p.60.

<sup>565</sup> See <http://www.borderoflights.org/>

<sup>566</sup> Abbott, *Haiti*, p.49.

<sup>567</sup> Olwyn M. Blouet, *The Contemporary Caribbean: History, Life and Culture Since 1945* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p.44.

<sup>568</sup> Rogoziński, *Brief History*, pp.267-8.

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.267-8.

<sup>570</sup> Blouet, *Contemporary Caribbean*, p.44.

<sup>571</sup> Abbott, *Haiti*, p.49.

home to capture a neglected perspective which will 'go beyond' the 'great men' of history.<sup>572</sup> As Rader notes, 'while Trujillo's dictatorship and its affiliated genocide do not appear to be remembered with the Holocaust and other twentieth century ethnic cleansing initiatives, fiction creates an alternative space for creativity and remembering'.<sup>573</sup> It is 'the process of "memorialization", giving literary voice [...] to the ever-present scars of violence'<sup>574</sup> which is central within Danticat's fictionalised account; she focuses upon the psychological impact of the violence of genocide on the individual, and the impact of traumatic events upon personal relationships. Her characters are 'diverse and individualistic; in short, they are ordinary people with ordinary weaknesses, needs, hopes and aspirations'.<sup>575</sup> Her re-imagining of the massacre, 'in Spanish *El Corte*, the cutting, and in Haitian Kreyol, *kout kouto*, the stabbing',<sup>576</sup> brings neglected Hispaniolan history into the contemporary Caribbean and diasporic consciousness, enabling a memorialisation of and confrontation with its inherent violence and traumatic effects, in addition to deconstructing the silences which pervade the history of Hispaniola's people.

Although Danticat's characterisation of Amabelle is fictional, the processes of historical research and imagination which combine in her representation, or memorialisation, of the massacre demonstrate the creolised approach necessary in reimagining Caribbean history.<sup>577</sup> In an interview with Elvira Pulitano, Danticat explains how she became interested in the massacre 'as we were approaching the fifty-year anniversary [...] in 1987'.<sup>578</sup> Beginning by 'just reading about the massacre [she] was trying to read it from both sides [...] but it was really hard to find much documentation on the Haitian side'.<sup>579</sup> She visited Haiti and the Dominican Republic to 'talk to people on the border and in the area'.<sup>580</sup> Speaking to Bonnie Lyons, Danticat recalls, 'I read a lot of books [...] I also spoke to lots of people, older people, and read accounts in archives of justices of the peace along the border'.<sup>581</sup> In an interview with Opal Palmer Adisa, Danticat states, 'I decided to write [*Bones*] because I visited the Massacre River where some of the killing took place and saw no markers whatsoever. A lot of the survivors were dying and I wanted to talk to them. Out of these conversations and a lot of reading emerged the character Amabelle'.<sup>582</sup> Danticat's comments recall Suárez, reiterating the idea that her novel functions as a

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<sup>572</sup> Trouillot in Dash, p.198. Through her presentation of Faith's complex ancestry in *Fruit of the Lemon*, Levy demonstrates a similar concern with capturing an alternative historical perspective, highlighting the region's essentially migratory and global history. See Chapter One, pp.52-55.

<sup>573</sup> Rader, 'What the River Knows', p.28.

<sup>574</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.8.

<sup>575</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.218.

<sup>576</sup> Hewett, 'At the Crossroads', p.123.

<sup>577</sup> For a theoretical discussion of a creolised approach towards Caribbean history see Introduction, pp.34-36.

<sup>578</sup> Edwidge Danticat and Elvira Pulitano, 'An Immigrant Artist at Work: A Conversation with Edwidge Danticat', *Small Axe*, 15.3 (November 2011), 39-61 (p.53).

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53.

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53.

<sup>581</sup> Edwidge Danticat and Bonnie Lyons, 'An Interview with Edwidge Danticat', *Contemporary Literature*, 44.2 (Summer 2003), 183-198 (p.191).

<sup>582</sup> Edwidge Danticat and Opal Palmer Adisa, 'Up Close and Personal: Edwidge Danticat on Haitian Identity and the Writer's Life', *African American Review*, 43.2/3 (Summer/Fall 2009), 345-355 (p.350).

‘memorialization’ of the stories of survivors, ‘giving literary voice to the lost and/or reframed points of history’.<sup>583</sup> Danticat also reveals how conversations with survivors prompted her to consider the narrative form of the retelling:

At some point you really had to let the imagination take over. I also liked the idea of testimony, because I felt that in the research that I was doing, that’s what was lacking. People were saying, ‘You know, there are few direct testimonials,’ and that’s where I felt I needed to create these testimonies in the novel, because that’s almost what I wished I had when I started.<sup>584</sup>

Writing ‘what [she] wished [she] had when [she] started’, Danticat implies the novel evolved as a response to a lack of ‘valid testimonies of the West Indian historical experience’ regarding Haitian experiences of the massacre.<sup>585</sup>

I posit that Anim-Addo’s call for a creolised approach towards theorising the Caribbean can be equally applied to the need to historicise the region from an alternative perspective.<sup>586</sup> Danticat’s utilisation of historical records, oral testimonies and accounts, and ‘imagination as necessity’<sup>587</sup> exemplify this creolised approach towards history. As Danticat iterates in the ‘Acknowledgements’ succeeding the novel, ‘This book is a work of fiction based on historical events. Many dates have been changed, some events altered for narrative flow [...] please forgive the reach of my artistic license’ (*Bones*, p.311).<sup>588</sup> *Bones* is a work of creative fiction which draws upon Danticat’s research into the personal testimonies of survivors and their relatives, and the reports and records available in recorded history.<sup>589</sup> The text responds to the lack of written testimonials concerning Haitian experiences of the massacre. Combining these sources, Danticat attempts to right the balance of historical representation by memorialising a forgotten history and giving voice to the Haitian community. As acknowledged by Morgan and Youssef, ‘in Danticat’s reading of Haitian society, it is imperative not to forget. Her narratives are an extension of an oral tradition intended to record the stuff of life’.<sup>590</sup> Through fiction, uniting official, recorded history, oral histories, and her diasporic imagination, Danticat creates a creolised account of an event within Hispaniolan history. Though she uses different vocabulary to express the concept, Danticat reveals an acute awareness of this creolisation of history, writing of her ‘desire’ as a diasporic writer ‘to tell some of [her] stories in a collaged manner, to merge [her] own narratives with the oral and written narratives of others’.<sup>591</sup>

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<sup>583</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.8. See this chapter, p.162.

<sup>584</sup> Danticat and Pulitano, ‘An Immigrant Artist at Work’, p.53.

<sup>585</sup> Smith in Inghilleri, p.79.

<sup>586</sup> See Anim-Addo, *Touching the Body*, p.209. See Introduction, pp.20-21 for discussion of a creolised theoretical approach.

<sup>587</sup> Walcott, ‘Culture or Mimicry?’, p.6. See this chapter, p.160.

<sup>588</sup> Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (London: Abacus, 2008). All further references are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in the body of text.

<sup>589</sup> See Hewett, ‘At the Crossroads’, p.123; Danticat and Lyons, ‘An Interview with Edwidge Danticat’, p.191.

<sup>590</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.211.

<sup>591</sup> Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, p.62.

*Butterflies* offers a similarly creolised account of a specific historical event, or events which occurred within a specific period although, unlike Danticat, Alvarez's protagonists are fictional representations of historical figures. Alvarez writes about what prompted her to write a novel based on the Mirabals, recalling the moment she first learned of the women, when she was ten years old, and identifying a personal connection with the sisters:

When my father read of the murder of the Mirabal sisters, he must have felt a shocking jolt at what he had so narrowly missed. Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa were members of the same underground he had bailed out of in order to save his life [...] four months after we had escaped, they were murdered. (*Something*, p.198)

Because 'these three sisters stood in stark contrast to the self-saving actions of my own family and of other Dominican exiles', the Mirabals 'haunted' Alvarez (*Something*, p.198). She writes, 'they haunted the whole country' (*Something*, p.198), suggesting a spectre looming over the Dominican present: the ghosts, victims of its past who sacrificed themselves in their efforts to assist in freeing the nation from the Trujillato.<sup>592</sup> Yet it is not until one of her return visits to the Dominican Republic as an adult in 1986, when Alvarez is asked to contribute a paragraph to a publication on a Dominican heroine of her choice that she begins to confront this spectre. Alvarez visits several Dominican bookstores and notices that although 'any shoeshine boy on the street or campesino [...] knew the story of the Mirabal sisters' there is a dearth of written information regarding the women: 'all I found on that first trip was a historical "comic book"' (*Something*, p.199).

Like Danticat, Alvarez faces the challenges posed in researching the lives of people whose experiences and stories are largely undocumented within recorded history. She attempts to uncover the story of the Mirabals: a cousin introduces Alvarez to one of the sisters' surviving children, she visits the valley where the women grew up, the museum dedicated to them which has been established in their mother's house, and 'the past turned into the present' in her imagination (*Something*, p.199). Alvarez realises, 'I was bound to write a novel about the Mirabals' but the project comes to a standstill as she 'couldn't yet imagine how one tells a story like this' (*Something*, p.202). Years later, on her annual return visit in 1992, Alvarez meets Dedé, the surviving sister, at the house where the four girls grew up. After this meeting, she writes:

I decided to write a novel about the Mirabal sisters. I wanted to understand the living, breathing women who had faced all the difficult challenges and choices of those terrible years. I believed that only by making them real, alive, could I make them mean anything to the rest of us. (*Something*, p.203)

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<sup>592</sup> Interestingly, Danticat uses the same language to talk about traumatic events in Haiti, referring specifically to the execution of revolutionaries Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin when she writes, 'All artists, writers among them, have several stories – one might call them creation myths – that haunt and obsess them' (*Create Dangerously*, p.5). The 'haunting' of history is an idea which recurs throughout this thesis.

Alvarez's language – 'to make them mean anything' – suggests a need to return to the past and confront the spectres which haunt the imagination of the Dominican people in order to make sense of the Mirabals' sacrifice, to comprehend its meaning and recognise the significance of their lives within Dominican history and diaspora memory. She travels the island and meets grown-up children and family, revolutionary comrades in arms and fellow prisoners, priests and family friends, those too young to have known the sisters but who have inherited their story from parents, aunts, cousins, and communities. 'Everywhere we went,' Alvarez writes, 'it seemed we could reach out and touch history. And always there were plenty of living voices around to tell us all their individual versions of that history' (*Something*, p.207). Herrero and Baelo-Allue surmise that '[a]n event becomes a cultural trauma when it reaches many individuals, who preserve the memory of the event and pass it on to the next generation'.<sup>593</sup> The murder of the Mirabals belongs to the history of the Dominican people under the Trujillato: the women's lives, imprisonment, torture, and violent deaths, represent the traumas inflicted upon ordinary people throughout Trujillo's regime of terror. Alvarez's account of her research reveals how, in exemplifying the trauma of the Trujillato, the story of the Mirabals has become 'a cultural trauma' following Herrero and Baelo-Allue's definition in that 'it reaches many individuals, who preserve the memory of the event and pass it on'.

Like Danticat, Alvarez's task is that of creating a written account of an undocumented history at the heart of which is the shared experience of trauma and violence. Through interviews and conversations with members of the community who carry the memories and stories of the sisters within them, Alvarez's job becomes one of collating these versions of history, turning oral histories and collective memories into a novel which embodies and performs the cultural memory of the often mythologized Mirabals, providing a testimonial to life under the Trujillato. In the novel's postscript Alvarez writes, 'the characters took over, beyond polemics and facts. They became real to my imagination. I began to invent them' (*Butterflies*, p.323).<sup>594</sup> As Isabel Zakrzewski Brown shows in 'Historiographic Metafiction in *In the Time of the Butterflies*' (1999), Alvarez drew heavily upon, whilst also adapting, biographical information regarding the lives of the sisters.<sup>595</sup> However, acutely aware of her role as author, not historian, Alvarez insists upon the imaginative nature of her project, echoing Walcott's belief in 'imagination as necessity'<sup>596</sup> in the recovery of an undocumented past:

[What] you find in these pages are not the Mirabal sisters of fact, or even the Mirabal sisters of legend [...] what you will find here are the Mirabals of my creation, made up but, I hope, true to the spirit of the real Mirabals [...] I sometimes took liberties – by changing dates, by reconstructing events, and by collapsing characters or incidents [...]

<sup>593</sup> Herrero and Baelo-Allue, *The Splintered Glass*, p.xiv.

<sup>594</sup> Julia Alvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1994). All further references are to this edition and will be given in parenthesis in the body of text.

<sup>595</sup> See Isabel Zakrzewski Brown, 'Historiographic Metafiction in *In the Time of the Butterflies*', *South Atlantic Review*, 64.2 (Spring 1999), 98-112.

<sup>596</sup> Walcott, 'Culture or Mimicry?', p.6.

I wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination. A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart. (*Butterflies*, p.324)

Like Danticat, Alvarez's creolisation of history, her combination of meagre historical accounts and records, oral history and the creative possibilities afforded by a diasporic writer's imagination and diaspora memory in the production of her historical novel, is an effort to speak to the human cost of a traumatic and violent past 'rooted in horrible human tragedy'.<sup>597</sup> In creolising history, both authors highlight the plight of the individual, contesting 'this notion of a single History'<sup>598</sup> as they attempt to deconstruct historical silences. The novel, with the creative and imaginative scope the form permits, comes to stand as a unifying tool in this endeavour, bridging the gap between oral history and the scraps of recorded history regarding the Mirabal sisters and Dominican and Haitian victims and survivors of the massacre. As cultural products rooted in the oral testimonies of survivors and inheritors of ancestral memories, Alvarez and Danticat's texts memorialise the cultural traumas inflicted upon ordinary Hispaniolan people by the Trujillato. As texts which memorialise the psychological scars of a traumatic, violent history, the novels both embody and perform the collective memories of these events. These diasporic novels represent a moment in the history of an island, providing a creolised history which testifies to the experiences of its people.

### **'The Need to Tell': Stories of Survival in *Bones***

In 'Witnessing History: *Metatestimonio* in Literary Representations of the Trujillo Dictatorship' (2009), Nereida Segura-Rico writes that Alvarez and Danticat's novels 'share a common ground in engaging historical discourse from the point of view of witnesses that acquire roles as subjects through the illocutionary power of their account, that is, through their testimony'.<sup>599</sup> This testimonial function of *Bones* – that of giving voice to marginalised individuals whose stories remain unheard – is echoed within the thematic content of the novel. Following the massacre, survivors relate their experiences, providing testimonies which, whether oral or written, are crucial in contributing to an historical account which goes beyond the 'great men of history'.<sup>600</sup> In *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), Kalí Tal argues that 'literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it "real" both to the victim and to the community'.<sup>601</sup> For Amabelle and other survivors of the massacre in *Bones*, the desire to tell one's story is a way to validate both

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<sup>597</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.30.

<sup>598</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.93.

<sup>599</sup> Nereida Segura-Rico, 'Witnessing History: *Metatestimonio* in Literary Representations of the Trujillo Dictatorship', *Antipodas*, XX (2009), 173-190 (p.175).

<sup>600</sup> Trouillot in Dash, p.198. See this chapter, p.161.

<sup>601</sup> Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.21.

one's experience and one's survival, 'to make it "real"'. The characters endured, and they survived. Furthermore, Morgan and Youssef suggest that 'in the telling' of trauma experiencing subjects 'come to terms with disempowering identity constructions imposed by the powers that control and violate them' as 'through their speaking, they reconstruct themselves as empowered survivors'.<sup>602</sup>

Having fled the genocide at the border, Amabelle and her friend, Yves, are found carrying the dead body of their companion Odette, whose lover Wilner was shot by Dominican soldiers whilst attempting to cross the river to return to Haiti. Discovered 'by a priest and a young doctor who were walking the savannas, looking for survivors' (*Bones*, p.204), they have been seriously injured in their attempts to escape the violence. Amabelle and Yves are taken to a 'field dotted with large tents' (*Bones*, p.204), makeshift clinics 'where people were squeezed together on benches and clustered on blankets on the floor' (*Bones*, p.205). Amabelle continues to witness the atrocities of the massacre as she receives medical care, 'taken past a line of people with burns that had destroyed most of their skin, men and women charred into awkward poses [...] a woman with her leg dangling by a fragile bend of her right knee' (*Bones*, p.206). Amongst the injured and dying there are some who speak their pain and who 'called [...] attention to their wounds' (*Bones*, p.205). Amabelle recounts, 'their cries rose above the groans of others who like me were unable to speak their desires' (*Bones*, p.206). This observation posits two survivor responses to trauma; those able to vocalise their pain, both physical and psychological, and those, like Amabelle, who have lost the ability to communicate their suffering and need into coherent speech.<sup>603</sup> For the latter, this suggests a kind of numbness and an inability to make sense of their experience through language, to convey the trauma of the ordeal, or the pain of survival.

Despite the numbness and shock, there are many for whom the need to testify and bear witness through language, 'to make it "real"', both for themselves and future generations, is paramount. Indeed, in writing the novel *Danticat* 'arguably set out to [...] invite readers to take note and, in turn, to become witnesses',<sup>604</sup> to convey the reality of the horrific past to future generations. Gathering in groups, 'taking turns, they exchanged tales quickly [...] greater than their desire to be heard was the hunger to tell' (*Bones*, p.209). *Danticat*'s emphasis on the telling, as opposed to the hearing, of the story, shifts the focus of the testimony to the speaker's assertion of agency and validation of existence through the representation of their experience in narrative form.<sup>605</sup> The survivors narrate their stories: 'I was there [...] when they shut seven hundred souls into a courtyard [...] and shot them' and 'I was there [...] when they forced more than two hundred off the pier' (*Bones*, p.210). The use of

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<sup>602</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.210.

<sup>603</sup> The loss of speech as a result of trauma is also explored in Chapter Three through an analysis of Yolanda's breakdown and loss of language as a result of the psychological effects of her traumatic separation from the cultural and linguistic home. See Chapter Three, pp.140-145.

<sup>604</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.210.

<sup>605</sup> This supports Morgan and Youssef, that 'through their speaking, they reconstruct themselves as empowered survivors'. See *Writing Rage*, p.210. See above, p.170.

the repeated first-person clause 'I was there' reinforces the physicality of the survivor-witness role and specifics such as 'seven hundred' and 'two hundred' add further credence to the teller's account. Their ability to vocalise their experiences reveals the importance of testimony as proof of existence. Testifying to having endured the threat to one's life, one's humanity, reassures the individual of their own existence and their survival: 'narrative is in and of itself an empowering act'.<sup>606</sup> Yet testifying to a traumatic experience can also be a means through which to understand an inconceivable violence, or a way to process or seek meaning within a confusing reality.<sup>607</sup> Suárez argues that 'Danticat's work as a writer gives meaning to the memories of violence [...] Her novels serve as a monument against silenced tragedies and also as a vehicle to recovery for individuals'.<sup>608</sup> She continues, 'Danticat's work allows people [...] to confront violence, recognize its existence, and celebrate their own strength and capacity to survive the memory of violence and its unrelenting presence'.<sup>609</sup> Although on one level the novel contains the testimonies of its characters, it also functions as a testimony in itself. A fictional testimony, the text speaks on behalf of the Haitian community and survivor-witnesses as a collective: 'it is a memorial to the dead and the dispossessed of Hispaniola'.<sup>610</sup> It retells the story of the massacre, deconstructing the silences surrounding Haitian traumatic experiences of the violence so that the cultural memory of the event can be accepted and reconciled into the community's historical consciousness, creating 'a space essential to overcome the weight of tragedy and loss'.<sup>611</sup>

Danticat's novel suggests that whilst the individual's need to tell their story is important, the testimonial function of a written narrative as documentation of traumatic experience is crucial. Characters in the novel reinforce this notion that it is not only the telling, but the recording, of one's experience, which is integral to the testimonial process. Enacting this desire to not only speak and be heard, but to have their stories documented, survivors of the massacre flock to seek an audience with 'officials of the state, justices of the peace, who listen to those who survived the slaughter and write their stories down' (*Bones*, p.231). They queue for hours in an attempt to narrate the stories of their traumatic experiences, their injuries, losses, escape and survival. One morning, Amabelle and Yves join the crowd, 'a group of more than a thousand people' (*Bones*, p.232). When they are told there is no more time, that no more people will have the opportunity to tell their stories to officials, 'the group charged the station, looking for someone to write their names in a book [...] to concede that what they had witnessed and lived through did truly happen' (*Bones*, p.236). Danticat suggests that the need to relate a traumatic experience stems from the desire to testify to its truth; the process of writing, of

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<sup>606</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.3.

<sup>607</sup> Recognition of the importance of telling as a way to process traumatic experience is also evident in the other novels discussed in this thesis. See Chapter Two, pp.112-114; Chapter Three, pp.148-149.

<sup>608</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.30.

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31.

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31.

creating a written record, is crucial in acknowledging its validity. To communicate to an outside being the horrors of an ordeal and to have them recognise and confirm that ordeal in the form of a written record which constitutes an historical account confirms the reality of the trauma and validates one's experience and existence.

The idea of the re-telling as emphasising the truth of a traumatic experience – of making it 'real' – is recognised in trauma studies. Caruth describes the 'unthinkable *realities* to which traumatic experience bears witness' (my italics),<sup>612</sup> and Tal argues that 'one of the strongest themes in the literature of trauma is the urge [...] to testify to the people the *truth* of their experience' (my italics).<sup>613</sup> Trauma literature is concerned with establishing the traumatic event as reality outside the mind of the experiencing subject and integrating it into the wider social and political history of collective experience. By this, I mean that the telling of a traumatic experience, its vocalisation, places the story into the collective historical consciousness of the people whom it affects, both directly and indirectly. They cannot ignore the reality of the trauma once it has been put into words: language makes the experience transmissible. However, Caruth argues of the 'difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story'.<sup>614</sup> Danticat's novel responds to this problem inherent in the necessity of telling the traumatic experience. Amabelle considers collating her story with Yves', wondering, 'perhaps Yves and I would go in together and make both our stories one' (*Bones*, p.232). Amabelle reduces the significance of her testimony as she prepares to turn her and Yves' accounts into 'versions of the same story'. This negates the agency required in the telling of one's truth. Collating their accounts, Amabelle and Yves would effectively censor the reality of their experiences through the erasure of a unique first-person perspective. Although they may have witnessed the same atrocities, they witnessed from different perspectives; to merge their cognitive responses to experiencing violence, to assume the same traumatic losses and affects experienced by each character throughout the massacre, is to manipulate the truth of their experience. Rader points to this excerpt as a reminder of 'history's selective memory: what is documented becomes what is officially remembered'.<sup>615</sup> Danticat's allusion to the self-censorship of testimonies reiterates the fallibility of recorded history which remembers and recalls only selected events and perspectives, always subject to the censorship of the narrator and the authority of the writer.

Having failed to gain an audience with the justice of the peace and hearing 'that the priests at the cathedral listen and mark down testimonials of the slaughter', that 'they're collecting tales for

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<sup>612</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p.xi.

<sup>613</sup> Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, p.120.

<sup>614</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p.vii.

<sup>615</sup> Rader, 'What the River Knows', pp.36-37.

newspapers and radio men' (*Bones*, p.246), Yves and Amabelle again consider offering their oral testimonies to become part of a written record. Amabelle, however, remains unable to confront and communicate her experience – 'I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. I wanted to scream, but summoning the will to do it already made me feel weak' (*Bones*, p.244) – whilst Yves suggests the futility of offering his testimony, saying, 'you tell the story, and then it's retold as they wish, written in words you do not understand, in a language that is theirs and not yours' (*Bones*, p.246). Yves alludes to the issue of authorship in recorded history, a problem highlighted by Suárez:

The historical record – that body of information such as government documents and media reports that one community or other recognizes as giving a valid picture of history – can be manipulated, often telling a monolithic story documented by the literate and empowered in furtherance of their vested interests.<sup>616</sup>

This issue of authorship points to another inherent problematic within a discussion of Danticat's fictional text as a representation of the testimonies of survivors: as author, Danticat arguably engages in this re-interpretation of survivor testimonies, writing in a language that is hers (English) and not the Creole of the experiencing subject. However, as Rader notes, Danticat can 'create and invent a truth through fiction and its possible stories. Amabelle and Yves are fictional characters who serve as Danticat's ambassadors or agents for relaying oral testimonies and educating her readers'.<sup>617</sup>

Nevertheless, through Yves' astute comments, Danticat alludes to the wider problems inherent in providing a testimony, in telling and recording traumatic experience in written form. Truth is easily manipulated, and much can be lost between telling, re-telling, and the translation of a traumatic experience from the language of the survivor to the language of the storyteller. Nevertheless, re-imaginings of the unrecorded history of the Caribbean by writers who can claim as their inheritance the collective, ancestral memory of specific traumas, play a crucial role in attempting to deconstruct the silences in recorded history. These are their stories to narrate. As Danticat writes, 'the dead who have no use for their words leave them as part of their children's inheritance' (*Bones*, p.256). Indeed, 'Danticat's stories pass from generation to generation within the bloodstream of inheritance'.<sup>618</sup> It is not simply the trauma, or the memory of it, which is passed on, but the story itself, and with it the need to return to a repressed, collective history, to confront and memorialise an historical legacy of violence.

### Historical Fiction as *Testimonio*: Creating a Written Testimony in *Butterflies*

Like Danticat's *Bones*, Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* provides an imagined re-telling of the lived experiences of the Trujillo dictatorship, offering a written fictional testimony to the traumas

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<sup>616</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.47.

<sup>617</sup> Rader, 'What the River Knows', p.37.

<sup>618</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, pp.218-219.

inflicted by the Trujillato. Critics have discussed Alvarez's novel within the *testimonio* genre, testifying to the Mirabals' story, and to the collective trauma of the Dominican people under the Trujillato. Wells Cantiello writes, 'there has been much critical discussion of *In the Time of the Butterflies* [...] as a testimonial novel following in the line of the Latin American *testimonio* tradition'.<sup>619</sup> In a discussion of *Bones*, which has been the subject of similar generic debates, Marta Caminero-Santangelo notes the distinction between the often conflated literature of historical trauma and *testimonio* narratives in literary studies, arguing that 'to some degree this classification overlap makes sense, for *testimonio* as a genre can surely be said to arise out of conditions of social and cultural trauma and testify to these'.<sup>620</sup> Nevertheless, Caminero-Santangelo is careful to distinguish between literature of trauma and *testimonios*, recalling critical debates surrounding *testimonio* narratives which understand the genre as texts which speak to the reader in order to generate social change.<sup>621</sup> For Caminero-Santangelo, the crucial distinction arises from the difference in 'ethical and temporal orientations' of literature of historical trauma and *testimonio* narratives: 'one [...] is oriented towards the past; the other is oriented towards the present'.<sup>622</sup>

As historical fiction, like *Bones*, *Butterflies* looks to the past, documenting the stories and voices of historical figures within fictional form. Thus Alvarez's novel arguably fits within a generic classification of literature of historical trauma as that which 'is oriented towards the past'.<sup>623</sup> In narrating the Mirabals' lives, the novel returns to the past to voice the silenced stories in the history of the twentieth-century Dominican Republic. However, might Alvarez's novel be simultaneously oriented towards the present? Suárez argues that 'with the presence of so much violence, stories of survival and narrative restructuring of horrors may be the only route to reconciliation and reconstruction of personal and national memory and integrity'.<sup>624</sup> This suggests that looking backwards to find a narrative form for past horrors functions as a healing tool at both a personal and collective level, an argument equally applicable to Danticat's fictional re-imagining of the border massacre.<sup>625</sup> Furthermore, Suárez proposes:

Bringing important human rights infringements out of the shadows of shame into a public forum for discussion, and possible redress, is a first step towards finding resolutions that may change the dire circumstances of the poorest people on the

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<sup>619</sup> Jesscia Wells Cantiello, "'Tell us!': Before We Were Free and Julia Alvarez's Testimonial Cycle', *Antipodas*, XX (2009), 141-156 (p.141). Kimberley A. Nance's Introduction in *Can Literature Promote Justice? Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006) provides an excellent overview of the development of the Latin American *testimonio* genre. See Nance, pp.1-18.

<sup>620</sup> Marta Caminero-Santangelo, 'At the Intersection of Trauma and Testimonio: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*', *Antipodas*, XX (2009), 5-26 (p.5).

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>622</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>624</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.9.

<sup>625</sup> The idea of looking backwards to narrate from the source of one's trauma is discussed in my analysis of *García Girls* in Chapter Three. See pp.149-150.

island. Through the voices of Hispaniola's diaspora writers, the divisive rhetoric about the island's people and continuing human rights crimes is being challenged.<sup>626</sup>

Alvarez's novel returns to 'past horrors' and documents horrific human rights violations within a marginalised and silenced history. In the process, the author commemorates and recognises the historical struggles fought for Dominican freedom by ordinary men and, significantly, ordinary yet remarkable women. Therefore, we might read a dual function within Alvarez's novel which seeks not only to commemorate and memorialise, but through returning to 'past horrors' also highlights continuing human rights violations, violence, and poverty on the island. Like Danticat's, Alvarez's text 'journey[s] into a memory of misery [...] that is exacerbated by a long list of continuing atrocities'.<sup>627</sup> Just as Danticat 'tries to make sense of the senseless violence of the past and the continuing elimination of Haitians on Dominican soil' as 'her story attempts to re-member the past in order to understand the present',<sup>628</sup> so Alvarez seeks to 're-member the past' because 'for violence to be battled in the present, its long historical trajectory must be exposed, reprimanded, and changed'.<sup>629</sup> In highlighting the historical abuses of the Trujillato we can infer a plausible societal function for Alvarez's novel as a return to a history of traumatic violence to effect action against these continuing violations in the present. Literature's ability to inspire and motivate social change is articulated by Morgan and Youssef:

The aim of literature is to draw readers into imaginative participation in the fictional scenario and perchance to alter their attitudes and opinions [...] Readers are moved by more than the bare facts, and this moving can translate into a desire to motivate and contribute to change.<sup>630</sup>

As a literary narrative of return to a traumatic and violent past, I read Alvarez's novel within the boundaries of the *testimonio* genre. Nance notes that the defining text of Latin American *testimonio*, *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, 'gave voice to an entire class of people whose history had been ignored'.<sup>631</sup> Nance asserts, 'the tripartite combination of a first-person narrative of injustice, an insistence that the subject's experience is representative of a larger class, and an intent to work toward a more just future soon came to define the genre'.<sup>632</sup> Although semi-fictional, Alvarez's text functions within this generic definition, embracing the defining features noted by Nance; the utilisation of first-person narrative voice relating a story of injustice – the novel is split into chapters which in turn narrate from the first person perspective of one of the four sisters – and an implication that the struggles of the Mirabals are to some extent representative of all victims of Trujillo's repressive regime. Reflecting

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<sup>626</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, pp.11-12.

<sup>627</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.30.

<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48.

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22.

<sup>630</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.4.

<sup>631</sup> Nance, *Can Literature Promote Justice?*, p.1.

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

upon the deaths of her sisters, Dedé, the surviving sister, concludes, 'it is *our* tragedy really, the whole country's' (*Butterflies*, p.312). Dedé alludes to the collective tragedy of the Trujillo dictatorship and its legacy, and the nation's shared loss of the Mirabals who have posthumously become symbols of resistance and defiance in the face of injustice, oppression, and corruption.<sup>633</sup> But what of the speaker(s) and author's intentions? We cannot assume the intentions of the fictionalised, murdered sisters. However, Alvarez's text provides a vehicle through which their efforts to resist oppression through subversive revolutionary actions are finally vocalised – albeit within a fictional literary text.

Segura-Rico's argument towards the novels as '*Metatestimonio*', is useful here in enabling an understanding of the duality of *Butterflies*' testimonial function:

The act of giving testimony itself becomes a rhetorical gesture of inscription in which the democratic dimension of *testimonio*, in giving voice to the unrecognized protagonists of history, is tied to the texts' meditations about how to rewrite history from the perspective of the victims and the disenfranchised.<sup>634</sup>

In other words, like Danticat's, Alvarez's novel, whilst testifying to the lived experiences of the Trujillo dictatorship, is equally as concerned with the prospect of who testifies, or the act of telling the story – 'on the issue of who talks, how one talks and for whom' – as it is with the story itself.<sup>635</sup> The act of telling in the voice of each of the four sisters is central to the novel's meaning; through the polyvocal testimonies in *Butterflies*, the Mirabals' actions of resistance are heard, the silences enforced upon them during their lifetimes are deconstructed. Alvarez's novel functions as the outlet through which these voices of resistance and justice are heard. As 'metatestimonial fiction' *Butterflies* focuses 'on the nature and meaning of the act of testifying'.<sup>636</sup>

Along with those voices of the three murdered Mirabals, *Butterflies* also contains the testimony of the surviving sister who played an important role in Alvarez's research as the only sister to whom she could turn for a first-hand account. Alvarez's fictionalisation of Dedé suggests that the telling of the story, her constant return to offer a cohesive narrative of the truth of the traumatic past, is her sacrifice, the price of her survival. Dedé appears angry at the endless intrusions from journalists, tourists and enthusiasts who desire to hear her narrative, telling her niece, 'everyone feels they can impose' (*Butterflies*, p.312). Minou's response, 'why don't you just refuse [...] when will you have given enough?' (*Butterflies*, p.312) points towards Dedé's testimony as something forced, given to others for their sakes, not spoken for her own. Nevertheless, I read a 'need to tell' within Dedé's testimony; her role as

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<sup>633</sup> Notably, Suárez suggests that Dominican literature has tended to ignore the 'violence and strife the country continues to experience', focusing instead on 'romantic, myth-forming stories' such as that of the Mirabals. She argues that Alvarez's text substantiates this argument as, although it departs from a violent act it, too, does not confront violence head on but serves to honour the 'brave lifework' of the Mirabals. *Tears of Hispaniola*, pp.7-8.

<sup>634</sup> Segura-Rico, 'Witnessing History', p.175.

<sup>635</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.175-176.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.*, p.176.

the 'oracle' (*Butterflies*, pp.312-313) is a release from earlier enforced silences. Dedé was silenced her entire life under Trujillo's regime, including in the aftermath of the murder of her sisters. When Dedé and her husband transport the sisters' coffins home, Dedé's attempts to voice the truth of the Trujillato continue to be stifled. As Jaimito approaches SIM posts at various towns, Dedé shouts, 'Assassins! Assassins!' (*Butterflies*, p.308) and recalls, 'Jaimito gunned the motor to drown out my cries' before finally bringing the pickup to a stop and asking, 'what is it you want – to get yourself killed, too?' (*Butterflies*, p.308). His words explain his actions; Jaimito's need to silence Dedé is an effort to protect her out of fear that by speaking out she too will become a victim of the regime. Although Dedé suggests an anger at her role as 'oracle', testifier, interviewee, and storyteller, I argue that this ability to tell, to finally speak without restraint to an audience which hears and records her story, represents a tension as well as a freedom which, now permitted and claimed, she cannot relinquish.

Dedé further defends her role as 'oracle' to friends who question her, arguing, 'I'm not stuck in the past, I've just brought it with me into the present. And the problem is not enough of us have done that. What is that thing the gringos say, if you don't study your history, you are going to repeat it?' (*Butterflies*, p.313).<sup>637</sup> Dedé here suggests an understanding of how the story of her sisters functions within a larger canon of Dominican history, and the importance of looking back in order to move forwards and carve a positive, hopeful national future.<sup>638</sup> She recalls the time when, following her sisters' murders, she was able to break through decades of imposed and enforced silencing and open her doors to people who came to listen: 'After the fighting was over and we were a broken people [...] I started talking. We had lost hope, and we needed a story to understand what had happened to us' (*Butterflies*, p.313). Storytelling plays a crucial palliative role here as it is pivotal to the process of coming to terms with traumatic experience: 'narratives then become platforms for individual and collective reconstruction'.<sup>639</sup> Storytelling reiterates the value of humanity. As Morgan and Youssef argue, '[i]n a society in which crises and social unrest take lives casually and efficiently such that human existence is cheapened, persons are cherished through narrative and their memories kept alive intergenerationally'.<sup>640</sup> In her characterisation of Dedé, Alvarez depicts a woman who feels a societal need, even duty, to tell her story in order to understand her nation's traumatic history and prevent it from recurring.<sup>641</sup> Furthermore, she presents a woman who recognises the importance of confronting

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<sup>637</sup> This alludes to the repetitive cyclical nature of violence and trauma first brought to light in the discussion in Chapter Two. See Chapter Two, p.98.

<sup>638</sup> Recalling Suárez, that bringing human rights infringements into public forums for discussion is the first step towards affecting societal change. See *Tears of Hispaniola*, pp.11-12.

<sup>639</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.210. The importance of storytelling in individual and psychological reconstruction was highlighted in Chapter Three. See pp.147-149.

<sup>640</sup> Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.219. For the importance of storytelling in Caribbean culture see Introduction, p.30 and p.35.

<sup>641</sup> This recalls Chapter One's discussion of protagonists who resolve to 'tell' their recovered histories in an effort to preserve their cultural identity and prevent the loss of ancestral history. See p.80.

past traumas in order to move forwards to a better future. As Danticat's novel reveals, for victims of traumatic experience the future is often incomprehensible: Amabelle confesses, 'the future seemed a lot more frightening than the past' (*Bones*, p.246) and appears unable to move on, marvelling at how others have coped and wanting 'to ask them how it was that they could be so strong, what their secret was, how they could wash their lives clean, if only for brief moments, from the past' (*Bones*, p.247). Amabelle fears carrying her experiences into the future whereas Dedé is able to acknowledge the importance of confronting and remembering the past; in understanding and integrating past horrors into a national historical consciousness, the people might glean a more positive future.

Dedé's testimony, and Alvarez's novel, therefore reveal a clear 'intent to work toward a more just future'.<sup>642</sup> As Segura-Rico acknowledges, 'both Alvarez and Danticat affirm the value of their books as repositories of memory that, in Alvarez's case, can achieve a function as redeeming narrative'.<sup>643</sup> The author of a fictional text which shares the essential function of a *testimonio*, emulating many of the genre's established conventions and narrative traits, Alvarez shares this vision of the future, writing in the postscript to *Butterflies*:

I would hope that through this fictionalized story I will bring acquaintance of these famous sisters to English-speaking readers [...] To Dominicans separated by language from the world I have created, I hope this book deepens North Americans' understanding of the nightmare you endured and the heavy losses you suffered – of which this story tells only a few. (*Butterflies*, p.324)

Whilst returning to the past, *Butterflies* undoubtedly looks to the future. The novel returns to the era of Trujillo to commemorate and memorialise this historic trauma whilst bringing it into contemporary consciousness, initiating a confrontation with the spectres which haunt the imagination and memories of both the Dominican diaspora and those on the island. Through this confrontation and quest for understanding, the novel encourages healing and reconciliation, whilst simultaneously moving the contemporary reader to recognise the sacrifices which were made – and which continue to be made worldwide – by ordinary people in the fight for justice, freedom from oppression, corruption, and human rights violations.

### **Fictional *Testimonios*: Dedé's Account and Mate's Diary**

Whilst Dedé speaks of the necessity of testifying to traumatic history, in Danticat's *Bones*, Amabelle is both refused and rejects the opportunity to provide a testimony of her experiences. Rader foregrounds the dedication which precedes Danticat's text – 'In confidence to you, Metrés Dlo, Mother of the Rivers' – as recognition that Amabelle's is 'a story untold':

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<sup>642</sup> Nance, *Can Literature Promote Justice?*, p.2.

<sup>643</sup> Segura-Rico, 'Witnessing History', p.181. Narrative's power to redeem is highlighted in Chapter Three. See argument towards the therapeutic power of storytelling, pp.147-149.

[I]f we are to remain acutely aware of the novel as a testimony told to no one but to the Mother of Rivers, we must also see this as a narrative that creates the *illusion* of telling us the story as it unfolds when it is actually told many years – even decades – after the massacre. The illusion is two-pronged: that Amabelle tells the story in the present as it unfolds and that she has an audience or witness to hear her story [...] the illusion's success hinges on our forgetting that Amabelle does not tell her story to anyone but the river.<sup>644</sup>

Amabelle's testimony remains unheard within Danticat's text, yet in Alvarez's novel, Dedé's is spoken to a specific listener. Despite its preoccupation with history and its narrative 'return' to the past, Alvarez's novel is framed by a present day scenario, a structural device which serves to reinforce my argument that the text is concerned with looking both backwards and forwards, straddling the boundary between literature of historical trauma and *testimonio*. Alvarez returns to this present day scene, that of the researcher interviewing the surviving sister, at various points throughout the novel. The nameless '*gringa Dominicana*' who 'is originally from here but has lived many years in the States' (*Butterflies*, p.3) is frequently referred to as 'the woman' (*Butterflies*, p.3, p.5) or 'the interview woman' (*Butterflies*, p.63, p.174), a characterisation of Alvarez's role in the wider story of her research and return to the tale of the Mirabals.

Alvarez's novel is divided into three parts, Part I narrating the girls' childhood in the 1940s, Part II set in the late 1940s and 1950s, and Part III relating the events of 1960, the year of the murders. Each contains four chapters, opening with a 'Dedé' chapter which begins with Dedé and the interviewer in the present (1994) before returning to the past to tell Dedé's version of life under Trujillo's dictatorship. The subsequent three chapters in each section, bearing the names of the murdered sisters, narrate events from each of their perspectives, providing a version of history from each of the four Mirabal sisters and a *testimonio* in each voice, a technique which Rich suggests creates a 'polyphonic consciousness' in the novel, as 'the differing voices of the sisters [...] cumulatively evoke the experience of living under a political dictatorship in a way that transcends the narrative of each individual voice'.<sup>645</sup> This technique reinforces the author's concern with providing a valid testimony to the historical experiences of West Indian women.<sup>646</sup> Finally, in the Epilogue, Dedé reflects upon events in the aftermath of the murders, bringing the novel full circle back to 1994, the present day.<sup>647</sup>

Segura-Rico argues of Danticat and Alvarez's texts that, 'while these are certainly not the first novels to appeal to fictionalized personal stories as a way to access the historical reality of a nation or

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<sup>644</sup> Rader, 'What the River Knows', p.31.

<sup>645</sup> Charlotte Rich, 'Talking Back to El Jefe: Genre, Polyphony, and Dialogic Resistance in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*' *MELUS*, 27.4 (Winter 2002), 165-182 (p.167).

<sup>646</sup> See this Chapter, p.155.

<sup>647</sup> Other 'narratives of return' considered in this thesis also employ a circular narrative structure which reflects the relevance of traumatic history upon the contemporary Caribbean psyche. For a discussion of cyclical narrative structure see Chapter One, p.53, pp.79-80; Chapter Two, pp.112-114; Chapter Three, pp.150-152.

group, their inscription of such perspective acquires a new dimension within the critical debates about *testimonio*'.<sup>648</sup> Others have similarly noted the role Danticat and Alvarez's novels play in the evolution of the genre; Isabel Dulfano argues that 'the old *testimonio* is no longer sustainable' and Alvarez's text offers 'an interesting example of an alternative style'.<sup>649</sup> In using the genre of historical fiction to create a new kind of *testimonio* narrative, Alvarez utilises different narrative modes and sources. Segura-Rico has observed that Danticat and Alvarez employ 'a realist, documentary approach in their inscription of other voices and reference to other texts and to other sources'.<sup>650</sup> This intertextuality is most evident in *Butterflies* in the form of 'embedded diaries' which, Wells Cantiello notes, although fictional, might be 'based on the manuscripts by the real María Teresa Mirabal'.<sup>651</sup> Regardless of their authenticity, the inclusion of these diaries is an effective narrative device in 'further contributing to the multi-generic and multi-vocal nature of the text'.<sup>652</sup>

It is the youngest sister, María Teresa, or Mate, whose chapters take this form. In the first of her three chapters, Mate introduces the diary as her '*Little Book*', a gift from elder sister Minerva 'for [her] first communion' (*Butterflies*, p.30). Instructed by Minerva that 'keeping a diary is also a way to reflect and reflection deepens one's soul' (*Butterflies*, p.30), ten year old Mate fills the pages with her daily concerns. It chronicles her journey towards becoming a young woman as she attempts to balance bigger questions regarding religion, 'What does it mean that I now *really* have a soul?' (*Butterflies*, p.31), politics, 'Why should we celebrate Benefactor's Day in the cemetery?' (*Butterflies*, p.37), and morality, 'It's like if I were to find out Papá did something wrong. I would still love him, wouldn't I?' (*Butterflies*, p.40). In many ways the first diary chapter reads as that of a typical young girl. Her adoration of Minerva is clear as she writes, 'she's always getting compliments' (*Butterflies*, p.33) and 'Minerva is so smart' (*Butterflies*, p.35). She looks to Minerva as her guide and Minerva willingly takes on the role of initiator into adulthood, educating her younger sister about sex: 'Minerva explained everything to me in detail with diagrams' (*Butterflies*, p.33). In addition to documenting the sisters' close relationship, the diary exudes the frivolity and excitement of a young girl with frequent references to clothes, shoes and boys. Mate even includes a drawing of a pair of new 'patent leather shoes' and Minerva's 'cute red-and-white checkered swimsuit with a little skirt' (*Butterflies*, pp.35-36).

Alvarez's employment of the diary form gives realistic voice to the daily experiences of a young girl, one of a number of techniques which 'succeed in providing an intimate, immediate sense of the lives of these legendary figures'.<sup>653</sup> Her use of this first person narrative mode evokes empathy for the

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<sup>648</sup> Segura-Rico, 'Witnessing History', p.175.

<sup>649</sup> Isabel Dulfano, 'Testimonio: Present Predicaments and Future Forays' in *Woman as Witness: Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women*, ed. by Linda S. Maier and Isabel Dulfano (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), pp.81-96 (p.93).

<sup>650</sup> Segura-Rico, 'Witnessing History', p.174.

<sup>651</sup> Wells Cantiello, "'Tell Us!'", p.149.

<sup>652</sup> Rich, 'Talking Back to El Jefe', p.170.

<sup>653</sup> *Ibid.*, p.166.

character, enabling the reader to identify Mate as an ordinary young woman. This helps to destabilise the mythologised depiction of the Mirabals, allowing a full appreciation of their extraordinary bravery and courage. As Segura-Rico argues, '*Butterflies* attempts to get at the heart of the loss by demystifying the Mirabal sisters, showing that heroic acts are possible for ordinary people'.<sup>654</sup> Alvarez depicts the women as 'ordinary'. Under Mate's girlish enthusiasm lies an empathetic vulnerability; she confides, 'I always cry when people laugh at me' (*Butterflies*, p.31) and her morality is tested against familial loyalty when she is forced to lie to the nuns to protect Minerva from getting into trouble for sneaking out of school. Confronting Minerva, she reacts angrily, writing, 'I told her that if I was going to commit a Mortal sin, as lying to a religious can't be Venial, the least Minerva could do was tell me what I was risking my immortal for' (*Butterflies*, p.38). Following this incident Mate's innocence and naivety are shattered.

Finding out that Minerva has been meeting a man in trouble with the government, Minerva's response that 'she wanted me to grow up in a free country' provokes Mate's realisation that her carefree childhood has been something of a bubble; she deliberates, 'isn't it that already?' (*Butterflies*, p.39). Although 'the ten-year-old girl's diary is initially full of talk of her first communion, school events, and descriptions of new clothes [...] Maria Theresa's initiation into the truths of El Jefe's regime soon comes through Minerva'.<sup>655</sup> This conversation proves a turning point; Mate begins to see the world anew and 'everything looks just a little different [...] I hear a police siren and I think who is going to be killed' (*Butterflies*, p.39). Her embedded diary entries resemble a kind of bildungsroman, a shattering of childhood naivety and growth into maturity. As violence and the prospect of police or government brutality enter Mate's world she increasingly questions everything around her. Now confronted with issues of political corruption and her nation's freedom, Mate is forced to reflect upon the structures which organise and shape her world view, namely Religion and Trujillo. Her life becomes structured around this pivotal event – the realisation of the truth of the Trujillato – and a loss of innocence propels Mate to think in the scheme of a before and after as 'before, I always thought our president was like God, watching over everything I did' whereas after Minerva's revelation she lives in fear that '[Trujillo] is trying to catch me doing something wrong' (*Butterflies*, p.39).

Rich argues that 'while initially equating the dictator with God, just as Trujillo intended his subjects to do, Maria Theresa's childish faith in their leader is now shattered'.<sup>656</sup> Furthermore, the shattered Trujillo myth causes Mate to question her faith in God and, as readers of the diary, we witness Mate's attempts to interpret and understand herself and her country in the aftermath of this crisis of faith in both God and Trujillo. Her first diary chapter ends with the symbolic burial of her innocence represented by both the literal burial of the diary and of her nephew, elder sister Patria's stillborn baby.

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<sup>654</sup> Segura-Rico, 'Witnessing History', p.182.

<sup>655</sup> Rich, 'Talking Back to El Jefe', pp.170-171.

<sup>656</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171.

Emily Robbins relates Alvarez's 'repetitive use of images of hiding, withholding and burying' to the way in which Dominicans have 'had to work within the crypt', an extended metaphor which she uses to describe the burial and repression of national and individual traumas during, and in the aftermath, of Trujillo's reign of horror.<sup>657</sup> These burials of trauma, new life and the first diary, suggesting the simultaneous loss of hope and innocence, coincide in the final pages of the Little Book. Minerva's revolutionary friend Hilda has been captured and those associated with their meeting group have 'been told to destroy anything that would make them guilty' (*Butterflies*, p.43). In the final entry, Mate writes that Minerva, 'burying all her poems and paper and letters', and having noticed Hilda's name mentioned in the diary, 'says we have to bury you too' (*Butterflies*, p.43). Thus Mate's diary, whilst functioning as a first-hand account to add authority to Alvarez's fictional *testimonio*, also suggests reasons for the lack of historical documents which might testify to Dominican lived experience of Trujillo's regime. The characters' burial of their personal communications reveals the dangers of recording historical truths or expressing opinions in opposition to the authority of the governing powers. There is no space for questioning Trujillo or an alternative version of events – the only account permissible is that officially sanctioned. Therefore, along with poems and letters, the young girl's diary – suggesting an uncensored alternative historical perspective – is silenced.

Mate's diary entries function as testimony to her experiences, documenting her interpretation of lived history as subsequent chapters also take the form of a diary which acts as her confidante. Her second chapter is the 'new diary book' Minerva gives her 'as she thought it would help' (*Butterflies*, p.118) following their father's death. Having been incarcerated when the family came under suspicion for their involvement in revolutionary organisations, he is released in ill-health and never recovers. Now a young woman in her late teens, Mate's second diary records and reflects upon the family's ongoing encounters with the Trujillato and their attempts to remain in favour: 'every once in a while Trujillo has to be buttered up' (*Butterflies*, p.121). Mate records Minerva's dissent as she 'lies under the bed listening to illegal stations' and reflects upon her sister's determined involvement in the underground: 'I agree with her ideas [...] I think people should be kind to each other and share what they have. But never in a million years would I take up a gun and force people to give up being mean' (*Butterflies*, p.123). These entries function as a testimony to both personal and political lives. As Rich observes, 'this narrative form closely interweaves Maria Theresa's activism with poignant personal details [...] while it convincingly dramatizes her growing political consciousness'.<sup>658</sup> Alongside her angst at discovering their father's marital betrayal and second family (*Butterflies*, p.119), Mate continues to record her hopes, dreams, matters of the heart – 'almost twenty-two years old and not a true love in sight' (*Butterflies*,

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<sup>657</sup> Emily Robbins, 'Uncovering the Silent Crypts: Memory, Trauma and Testimony in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*', *Antipodas*, XX (2009), 127-140 (p.134).

<sup>658</sup> Rich, 'Talking Back to El Jefe', p.170.

p.137) – and the excitement of her graduation party. She lists, describes, and sketches gifts she has received, encouraging the reader to literally see the world through Mate's eyes (*Butterflies*, p.128).

Observing the significance of Alvarez's use of multiple narrative perspectives, Segura-Rico writes, 'by making the sisters "talk" through first-person accounts of personal as well as political experiences and events [...] the narrator discloses the inner lives of these women in order to demystify them'.<sup>659</sup> Alongside the narration of everyday occurrences which serve to 'demystify' Mate and her sisters, references to the dangerous political climate continue, offering an account of the lived implications of Trujillo's regime for ordinary Dominicans. Criticism – or even references – to Trujillo and his followers are highlighted as dangerous since the Mirabals discovered their yard boy spying on them: 'our trusted Prieto has been reporting everything he hears in the Mirabal household down at security for a bottle of rum and a couple of pesos' (*Butterflies*, p.129). Mate's use of the inclusive pronoun 'our' highlights the servant's betrayal of the family as he defects for such little reward. Mate's concern over her diary as an incriminating record of her mistrust of the regime, and suspicions about her sister and brother-in-law's revolutionary actions are clearly founded. The diary, a personal account of a young girl's intimate and private life, again becomes a politicised document. Mate fears, 'what if I don't find a good hiding place and you fall into the wrong hands?' (*Butterflies*, p.130) and wonders 'for the hundredth time in the last few months [...] whether I shouldn't burn you?' (*Butterflies*, p.146).

As the chapter progresses, Mate reveals increasing suspicions regarding Minerva and her husband's involvement in the revolution. Staying at their house she receives a delivery from a courier with 'the sweetest man's face I'd ever seen' (*Butterflies*, p.141) and helping to hide the box, Mate confesses, 'immediately I'd fallen in love with this stranger's mission' (*Butterflies*, p.141). Again, Alvarez intertwines Mate's personal and political lives, her love story beginning with an introduction to a man who delivered 'enough guns to start a revolution!' (*Butterflies*, p.142). Somewhat disparagingly, Dulfano reads Mate's politicisation as that of 'the ingenuous and impressionable youth who join the guerrilla movement out of infatuation and idealism'.<sup>660</sup> However, whilst Mate's youthful, impressionable nature is evident throughout her entries, Alvarez's depiction of her revolutionary involvement as interwoven with her personal love story suggests an attempt to understand the motivations behind the women's extraordinary courage. Mate's politicisation is as much about freedom and the excitement of the cause – 'I wanted to join. I could feel my breath coming short with the excitement of it all' (*Butterflies*, p.142) – as it is about following her heart. She writes, using the code name of her future husband, 'I want to be worthy of Palomino' (*Butterflies*, p.142). Mate's diary entries therefore have a twofold function: to testify to the lived experiences of María Teresa Mirabal the woman, to her life as a daughter, sister,

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<sup>659</sup> Segura-Rico, 'Witnessing History', p.182.

<sup>660</sup> Dulfano in Maier and Dulfano, p.93.

wife and mother, and to testify to the lived experiences of Mariposa (#2) the revolutionary who risks her life through her work in the underground movement to fight oppression and liberate the country from Trujillo's violent regime.

### Relating Trauma: Censored Histories, Partial Testimonies

Mate's third diary is the most compelling of her entries in testifying to the violence of the Trujillato and the intertwining private and political lives of the youngest sister. Rich argues:

Her diary account of her experiences in prison is the most revealing glimpse into Maria Theresa's consciousness, indicating that the youngest Mirabal sister does not endure the incarceration as bravely as appears. Though she tries to maintain courage with thoughts of her family and Minerva's strong example, Maria Theresa's prison diary expresses secretly her despair, anger, and terror.<sup>661</sup>

The diaries continue to depict the human vulnerability of the mythologised sisters, revealing Mate's inner conflict between her loyalty to her sister, to her young family, and to the political cause. Whilst she follows Minerva's example and refuses to accept the pardon which would release them from prison because 'accepting a pardon meant we thought we had something to be pardoned for' she confesses, 'I'd have taken that pardon. But what was I supposed to do? Leave Minerva behind to be a martyr all by herself? [...] Every day, my little girl is growing up without me' (*Butterflies*, p.236). Revealing Mate's emotional struggles during her period of incarceration, and her distress at being separated from her daughter, the final diary also serves a more specific historical purpose in contributing to the creation of a fictional record of the real human rights abuses perpetrated by Trujillo's regime.

Spanning March to August 1960, the 'notebook' (*Butterflies*, p.227) has been smuggled in to the prison where Minerva and Mate remain incarcerated. It explicitly functions as a record of their experiences; Mate writes, 'it feels good to write things down. Like there will be a record' (*Butterflies*, p.227). The diary 'records' in multiple ways. It records the amount of time the sisters have been imprisoned as alongside the date of each entry Mate notes the day of their imprisonment. The first entry is headed, 'Wednesday March 16 (55 days)' (*Butterflies*, p.227). Like the testimonies of the massacre survivors in *Bones* who validate their oral accounts with specific geographical and numerical facts, Mate provides facts and figures which create a realistic picture of their imprisonment, recording the practicalities of their existence:

Three bolted steel walls, steel bars for a fourth wall, a steel ceiling, a cement floor. Twenty-four metal shelves ("bunks"), a set of twelve on each side, a bucket, a tiny washbasin under a small high window [...] We're on the third floor (We believe at the end of the long corridor. Cell #61 facing south towards the road [...] Twenty-four of us eat, sleep, go to school, and use the bucket – everything – in a room 25 by 20 of my size 6 feet. (*Butterflies*, p.228)

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<sup>661</sup> Rich, 'Talking Back to El Jefe', p.171.

Mate's description is followed by a 'diagram of our cell' and the surrounding prison (*Butterflies*, p.229). Her sketches have evolved throughout the novel with her shifting priorities, reflecting Mate's changing preoccupations with her political awakening; her drawings progress from clothes (p.36), a new ring (p.128), and a sketch of 'The Tavárez-Mirabal "Residence"' (p.139), to a bomb (p.144), and finally the diagram of her prison which accompanies the description of the cell. As Rich notes, 'these graphic representations signify the youngest Mirabal sister's maturation from childish things to the dangerously serious work of political resistance'.<sup>662</sup> Mate's drawings reflect her growth from a carefree schoolgirl into a politically minded young woman who displays astonishing bravery and resilience, a contrast which highlights the significance of her courageous actions.

Despite the notebook's function as a record of the reality of incarceration, it is the vulnerability which permeates Mate's final chapter that enables it to function as a compelling testimony to human suffering and survival in the direst circumstances. In these final entries Alvarez portrays humanity at its best and worst, and 'Maria Theresa's prison diary also reveals that her essential belief in the goodness of others is not destroyed'.<sup>663</sup> Mate's account reveals the camaraderie amongst the women prisoners. When Mate is observed crying looking out of the window she notes that a number of women began to offer her their turns to look outside: 'the touchingest thing happened [...] soon I had a whole other half hour to stand on the bucket if I wanted to [...] I immediately stepped down, because I didn't want to deny anyone their ten minutes of feasting on the world. But it raised my spirits so much, the generosity of these girls' (*Butterflies*, p.230). The focus on the camaraderie of women is significant; both Alvarez and Danticat depict female protagonists in an effort to return to the lesser told stories of women and document their place in history.<sup>664</sup> Elizabeth Wilson notes that 'it is by now a cliché to say that woman in History has been characterized by her absence', suggesting that 'many women deserving of a place in "History" are nowhere to be found'.<sup>665</sup> Thus, it is an important shift that, as Segura-Rico notes, 'Alvarez chooses to offer a portrayal of the regime not through the lens of socio-historical forces but through an imaginative rendering of the inner lives of women'.<sup>666</sup>

Through Mate's diary, Alvarez champions the solidarity, resilience, and strength of ordinary women. Her youngest protagonist writes of her fellow prisoners, the 'non-politicals', that 'the more time I spend with them, the less I care what they've done [...] what matters is the quality of a person. What someone is inside themselves' (*Butterflies*, p.230). The connection between the women, and the

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<sup>662</sup> Rich, 'Talking Back to El Jefe', p.175.

<sup>663</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171.

<sup>664</sup> For an extended discussion of the relationship between women and history in Caribbean literature, see *Swinging Her Breasts at History*.

<sup>665</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, 'Francophone Caribbean Women Writer and/in History: Writing the Balance – From Suzanne Césaire to Maryse Condé' in *Swinging Her Breasts at History*, ed by. Moira Inghilleri (London: Mango Publishing, 2006), pp.16-29 (p.17).

<sup>666</sup> Segura-Rico, 'Witnessing History', p.183.

support they provide each other, is paramount to their survival during incarceration. Mate describes a conversation with her fellow prisoners:

Magdalena and I had a long talk about the real connection between people. Is it our religion, the colour of our skin, the money in our pockets? [...] the girls started congregating, one by one [...] everybody contributing their ideas [...] we were talking about love, love among us women. There *is* something deeper. Sometimes I really feel it in here, especially late at night, a current going among us, like an invisible needle stitching us together into the glorious, free nation we are becoming. (*Butterflies*, p.239)

Readers witness Mate's continuing journey towards spiritual and emotional maturity and the crucial role played by other women in her development. Alvarez demonstrates how the pressures of incarceration affect the women both physically and psychologically when Mate confesses, 'I broke down last night. I feel so ashamed' (*Butterflies*, p.230). Her shame suggests a perceived duty to display an outward strength. Yet the reality, that 'every day and night there's at least one breakdown – someone loses control and starts to scream or sob or moan' (*Butterflies*, p.231), testifies to the horror of the women's experiences, imprisoned unjustly and indefinitely in squalid conditions without trial, conviction or sentence. The diary continues to be crucial in heightening the testimonial effect of Alvarez's novel as 'flowing on the page, free from any narrative contextualization [...] María Teresa's accounts share the intimacy of diaries and letters that are closely associated with women's writing but also with the force of testimonial accounts'.<sup>667</sup>

In later entries the diary is explicitly formulated as a vehicle for the provision of a written testimony. When OAS Peace Committee members are sent to the prison to investigate reported human rights abuses, 'one prisoner from each pavilion' is chosen by head guards to be interviewed (*Butterflies*, p.250). Mate is picked to represent her pavilion, writing, 'Minerva says it's because they don't think I'll complain' (*Butterflies*, p.250). Perceived by Minerva as an easy choice because her kind heart will prevent her from reporting the regime's abuse in case the head guards – whom Mate insists 'haven't done anything [...] they're victims, too' (*Butterflies*, p.250) – are punished for their prisoners' dissent, Mate displays extraordinary understanding and empathy for the men who guard their cells. This is particularly striking as it is Mate who has suffered the most violent abuse at the hands of the SIM. The narrative delays telling Mate's most harrowing testimony to the regime's violence; throughout her final chapter we are given hints regarding her treatment. An entry entitled, '*Not sure what day it is*' reads:

Still very weak, but the bleeding has stopped.  
I can't bear to tell the story yet.  
Just this – I've either bled a baby or had a period. And no one had to do a thing about it after the SIM got to me. (*Butterflies*, p.240)

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<sup>667</sup> Segura-Rico, 'Witnessing History', p.183.

Earlier entries record Mate's suspicions that she may be pregnant and fears for her pregnancy in prison. Subsequent entries are sporadic and vague, recording how other women cared for her and describing how a kind guard, Santicló, has been bringing 'broth with crunched-up saltines' to help aid her recovery (*Butterflies*, p.240). Mate notes, 'Minerva keeps asking me. I tell her I can't talk about it yet [...] Minerva says, Write it down, that'll help Mate' (*Butterflies*, p.241). Therefore, in addition to providing a historical record and personal testimony to the women's ordeal, the act of writing is specifically proposed as a working through process for Mate, a way in which to come to terms with an unmentionable and unspeakable trauma.<sup>668</sup>

A couple of entries later, following Mate's introduction, 'Here is my story of what happened in La 40 on Monday, April 11th' the text reads, '[pages torn out]' (*Butterflies*, p.242). The removed pages are included at the end of the chapter and only then does the reader learn the extent of Mate's treatment in prison. Rich explains:

The most horrific experience in her imprisonment is one that she is not able to write about for some time; it is later revealed that she was taken to La Cuarenta, an infamous location for torturing political prisoners. The young woman was shocked with electric cattle prods in front of her husband, a fellow revolutionary, to force him to reveal information. This story, its pages ripped out of the diary and included further on, is the omitted centre of Maria Theresa's prison narrative, and its dramatic impact heightened by gradual, retrospective revelation.<sup>669</sup>

Missing pages are not unusual; pages are removed throughout Mate's prison journal for various practical reasons as it provides the only paper upon which the women have to write. Pages are also taken for the purpose of providing a written testimony for the Peace Committee representatives. Because of the risks of speaking openly in her interview – 'the hall will be bugged with secret microphones no doubt' – Mate writes that 'Minerva and Sina have written up a statement I must somehow slip to the committee' (*Butterflies*, p.250). Minerva insists that they also 'need someone to write a personal statement' (*Butterflies*, p.250). She refers specifically to Mate's journal entries as the testimony which would best provide this personal account of the abuses perpetrated by the Trujillato, arguing, 'we can just tear out the pages in your journal and put them in with our statement' (*Butterflies*, p.251). Mate's diary continues to be a politicised document with socio-political ramifications beyond a mere account of a young woman's private life. Minerva explicitly formulates Mate's record of her torture as a testimony to the violence of the regime which might effect societal change and achieve some kind of justice and retribution. She answers Mate's reluctant protestations about sharing her account with the emphatic declaration, 'it won't stop unless we stop it' (*Butterflies*, p.251).

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<sup>668</sup> Writing is also explicitly formulated as a working through process in Alvarez's essays and other fictional works. See Chapter Three, pp.147-149.

<sup>669</sup> Rich, 'Talking Back to El Jefe', p.171. For a discussion of the influence of torture upon notions of selfhood, see Morgan and Youssef, *Writing Rage*, p.9.

However, although she slips the group statement to the committee member, Mate decides against offering her personal testimony because she fears punishment for prison guard Santicl6 should the statement be traced back to their cell: 'I just couldn't take a chance and hurt my friend' (*Butterflies*, p.252). Rich suggests that 'the youngest Mirabal sister's fundamental kindness is shown in her concern for the guard despite the fact that this story could bring about her own release'.<sup>670</sup> Whilst this act demonstrates Mate's enduring kindness despite her suffering, it also suggests self-censorship. Despite the opportunity to provide a testimony of her imprisonment, fear, for herself and others, continues to silence Mate and she rejects the chance to provide her account. Furthermore, when we do read the statement which Mate was considering giving to the Committee, we discover that not only has she omitted her own name, but that she has 'blotted out some names' because 'she is afraid of getting innocent people in trouble' (*Butterflies*, p.254). Had Mate provided the Committee with her journal entry as a testimony of her experiences it would have been a censored and edited version of her account. As with the self-censored and debated nature of testimonial accounts provided in Danticat's novel, through the presentation and proposal of Mate's journal as a testimony to her traumatic experience, Alvarez similarly highlights the problem inherent within the notion of *testimonio* narratives.<sup>671</sup> How might creative writers, in reconstructing traumatic history, utilise oral and written testimonials and first-hand accounts which are themselves manipulated, subject to the fallibility of memory, and censorship of narrator and author? Imagination helps to fill the gaps in these censored testimonies and partial accounts to create an alternative historical perspective of the Trujillo regime as '[f]iction can evoke the affects experienced by the individuals in the shadows of official histories'.<sup>672</sup>

Of the difficulty of transforming history into story, Hayden White argues, 'narrative becomes a *problem* only when we wish to give to *real* events the *form* of a story' and asks, 'what is involved, then, in that finding of the "true story", that discovery of the "real story" within or behind the events that come to us in the chaotic form of "historical records"?'.<sup>673</sup> With reference to the traumatic history represented as fiction in the work of writers like Danticat and Alvarez we are, arguably, reading another subjective account of an ill-documented traumatic past. Responding to criticism from Dominican readers that she unfairly portrayed Dominican participation in the massacre, and Haitian critique that she did not go far enough in portraying its brutality, Danticat acknowledges the impossibility of creating an objective account of history:

[J]ust the idea of 'I' is laughable, or somebody saying it's biased. Of course it is biased. How can you not be biased? Everything demands a point of view. I felt like I had done a good job when both sides were angry for their different reasons. What I tried to do

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<sup>670</sup> Rich, 'Talking Back to El Jefe', p.172.

<sup>671</sup> See this chapter, p.174.

<sup>672</sup> Su6rez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.47.

<sup>673</sup> Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality' in *On Narrative*, ed. by W J T Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp.1-23 (p.4).

was to create human beings, but of course there is a perspective, there is a point of view.<sup>674</sup>

Danticat highlights a crucial issue in using historical fiction to testify to a traumatic past, and the impossibility of an unbiased version of any story. Historical accounts are always subject to the bias of their narrator, and historical fiction is subject to the limitations of the partial historical records and censored, manipulated, or re-interpreted testimonies from which it draws credence and inspiration.<sup>675</sup> Like Alvarez, who emphasises that although based in truth, hers is a work of fiction, Danticat is keen to differentiate her work from that of anthropologists and historians. She states that ‘readers have to remember that we’re writing fiction, telling stories’<sup>676</sup> and warns of the dangers of generalising the experiences depicted in her fiction: ‘I never anticipated that people wouldn’t be able to make the distinction between one family’s story and an entire group’s story’.<sup>677</sup> An understanding of the ‘return’ to traumatic history within novels of historical fiction must appreciate and recognise that the creative writer does not pursue the same ‘truth’ as the historian: theirs is a subjective narrative, giving voice to neglected perspectives, deconstructing silences, and going beyond the great men of history.

### Returning to the Past, Looking to the Future

As historical fiction, *Butterflies* testifies to the experiences of ordinary Dominican people under the Trujillato. Functioning as a new kind of *testimonio* narrative, Alvarez’s novel suggests the multiple ways in which history can be created and recorded, utilising different narrative modes and forms which record or embody history within a novel which itself functions as a kind of historical vessel in that it provides a re-imagining of past events. *Bones* similarly functions in this way, although as a writer of African/Caribbean, as opposed to the Hispanic/Caribbean heritage Alvarez shares, Danticat’s novel also evokes the sense of testimony to a long history of oppression and subjugation. As Hewett argues, the title of Danticat’s novel ‘invites us to draw comparisons between the cane fields and the 1937 massacre’ as the double meaning in ‘farming of bones’ refers both to ‘the punishing work of the cane life’ and also ‘to the massacre, the cutting’.<sup>678</sup> Pollard notes:

[F]or Caribbean people the cane-field has been the location of most anguish and it has been recognized in this way in the literature [...] Danticat, Haitian novelist, writes poignantly of Haitians cutting cane in the Dominican Republic, giving their lifeblood to it. She describes it as the “farming of bones”.<sup>679</sup>

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<sup>674</sup> Danticat and Pulitano, ‘An Immigrant Artist as Work’, p.54.

<sup>675</sup> This recalls the bias and censorship regarding Faith’s ancestral history in *Fruit of the Lemon*. See Chapter One, p.65.

<sup>676</sup> Danticat and Lyons, ‘An Interview with Edwidge Danticat’, p.190.

<sup>677</sup> *Ibid.*, p.191.

<sup>678</sup> Hewett, ‘At the Crossroads’, p.127. Chapter Two provides an extended argument towards the past as presence in Danticat’s fiction.

<sup>679</sup> Velma Pollard, ‘History and Caribbean Women’s Writing: The Transformation of History by Creative Memory’ in *Swinging Her Breasts at History*, ed. by Moira Inghilleri (London: Mango Publishing, 2006), pp.150-161 (p.156).

The Dominican cutting of Haitian migrant workers mirrored their work cutting the cane as 'Trujillo ordered his soldiers to use machetes and other crude weapons instead of guns'.<sup>680</sup> The cane fields are a reminder of slavery, violence and oppression, a site symbolic of the African/Caribbean traumatic past; the cane leaves both physical and psychological scars on its victims.<sup>681</sup> Danticat represents these scars; early in the novel, Amabelle observes a group of elderly women, their bodies marked by decades of hardship: 'one was missing an ear. Two had lost fingers. One had her right cheekbone cracked in half, the result of a runaway machete' (*Bones*, p.61). But these are commonplace as Amabelle's lover, Sebastian, also sports 'cane-scarred hands' (*Bones*, p.131), 'palms where the lifelines had been rubbed away by the cane cutting' (*Bones*, p.143). In 'sugar land [...] living is only work, the fields' (*Bones*, p.107).

The psychological scars of a traumatic and violent history of slavery and racial inequality are also evident. Sebastian's identity is consumed by his role as a cane worker, the lifelines on his hands are scarred and faded, his waking hours are dominated by work and his very humanity is at stake as he is defined by his role as a labourer. As commodities, working cogs in a line of production, the cane cutters are defined in ancestral terms as beasts of burden. A Dominican officer corners a group of Haitian workers and declares, 'you work like beasts who don't even know what it is to stand' (*Bones*, p.154). Sebastian yearns 'to teach them that our lives are precious too' (*Bones*, p.66). The lack of value placed upon the cane cutters' lives by Dominicans echoes the colonial attitudes of overseers towards their slaves. Considering Danticat's depiction of the treatment of Haitian cane cutters in 1937, one cannot avoid questioning whether, despite a century of emancipation, the people are free from the bondage of slavery; this ancestral trauma appears to continue to haunt them in the present.<sup>682</sup>

The image of the cane field and accompanying traumatic connotations of slavery, violence and hardship, exemplifies Caribbean history. However, this image is also important in reflecting how Caribbean people, despite ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, share the archipelago which shaped their families, societies and collective histories. Danticat's 'return' through historical fiction points to the ways in which a shared history of colonialism has shaped the contemporary Caribbean, a region which has inherited a legacy of oppression, racial inequality, government corruption, violence and human rights abuses. In Chapter Two I foregrounded Ormerod's assertion that an 'underlying awareness within communities and individuals of past oppression [...] is at the root of much present day suffering and violence'.<sup>683</sup> Here, I extend this analogy to enhance an understanding of the political instability, dictatorial rule, and social oppression experienced as a result of the Trujillo dictatorship

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<sup>680</sup> Hewett, 'At the Crossroads', p.123.

<sup>681</sup> See Chapter Two for an extended discussion of the significance of the cane fields as a site of historic and contemporary trauma and violence in Danticat's fiction. For the psychological and physical scars of the cane fields see in particular Chapter Two, pp.92-94.

<sup>682</sup> This recalls the argument made in Chapter Two that 'the intergenerational memory of traumatic ancestral experience haunts, or possesses, the contemporary Caribbean psyche'. See p.88.

<sup>683</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.26. See Chapter Two of this thesis.

across Hispaniola. Trujillo's rule bears the hallmarks of a colonial legacy of racial oppression, social inequality, horrific violence, and neo-colonial political interference. As Wiarda and Kryzanek explain:

These forces have served to retard the nation's development, and coupled with an incredible and often bizarre history, a complex racial melting pot, some major distortions in the economy, and conflicting cultural traditions, they have left the Dominican Republic a country of contradictions. Unable to break with a past that is authoritarian, elitist, and semifeudal, its destiny shaped as often by foreign conquests and intervention as by domestic needs, mired in enormous social and economic problems, and unable to devise a political formula for development that resolves its various contradictions.<sup>684</sup>

It is through narrative 'returns' to the past that, as Dedé acknowledges when she says, 'if you don't study your history, you are going to repeat it' (*Butterflies*, p.313), Caribbean writers commemorate, memorialise, and process the contradictions of a contemporary, twentieth-century Hispaniola which condemns its colonial past whilst continuing to enact its traumatic legacy of injustice and violence. Alvarez and Danticat provide literary representations of twentieth-century traumas whilst returning through fiction to confront an historical legacy of ancestral, collective and individual traumas. They 'return' to find a story through which 'to understand what had happened to us' (*Butterflies*, p.313), to comprehend and, where possible, find meaning and reconciliation in the present through reviewing past traumas. I argue that literary narratives of return and the multiple 'returns' these narratives contain and perform, as demonstrated through my analysis of selected novels in this thesis, play a crucial role in this process of working through past traumas. The protagonists discussed in Chapter One work through their identity crises and articulate their complex diasporic subjectivities through a 'return' which enables the recovery of historical knowledge that informs their hybrid identities. The protagonist of Danticat's *Breath Eyes Memory* discussed in Chapter Two liberates herself from the repetitive cycle of a traumatic and violent past through a 'return' to confront the site of ancestral and personal traumas and, in Chapter Three, the protagonist of Alvarez's *García Girls* 'returns' through narrative to the source of her trauma – that initial separation from the cultural and linguistic home – to re-inform her diasporic sense of self. The texts discussed in this thesis demonstrate the multiple ways in which returning to the past can enable healing in the present, and a more positive vision for the future. The return through historical fiction specifically functions as part of a testimonial process, finding hope for the future from amongst the ashes of the past. Lío, the Mirabals' friend, captures this when he says, 'The nightmare is over, Dedé. Look at what the girls have done':

He means the free elections, bad presidents now put in power properly, not by army tanks. He means our country beginning to prosper, Free Zones going up everywhere, the coast a clutter of clubs and resorts. We are now the playground of the Caribbean, who were once its killing fields. The cemetery is beginning to flower. (*Butterflies*, p.318)

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<sup>684</sup> Wiarda and Kryzanek, *Dominican Republic*, p.23.

This powerful image of the flowering cemetery suggests that from death, tragedy and sacrifice, new life and hope might spring.

Danticat's novel also suggests hope for the future through Amabelle's return to confront sites symbolic of past trauma. In the closing scene, Amabelle has returned to Haiti and to the river, the site of the collective trauma of the border massacre, and of individual trauma, where, as a child, she witnessed her parents drown.<sup>685</sup> The river is a mass grave: 'every now and then [...] a swimmer finds a set of white spongy bones, a skeleton, thinned by time and being buried too long in the riverbed' (*Bones*, p.308). Amabelle recalls 'all of them – my mother and father, Wilner, Odette, and the thousands whose graves are here' (*Bones*, p.308). She returns to the river in search of meaning, looking for answers and, ultimately, for peace. Although she refers to the memory of her parents' drowning, the river and the surroundings are evocative of all those who died either side of the watery border during the massacre and its aftermath. When Amabelle confesses, 'I thought that if I relived the moment often enough, the answer would become clear [...] if I came to the river on the right day, at the right hour, the surface of the water might provide the answer: a clearer sense of the moment, a stronger memory' (*Bones*, p.309), her words resonate with deeper meaning and we read the memory of both her parents' drowning and the slaughter in these words. In a symbolic rebirth, this final scene sees Amabelle stripped naked as 'unclothed' she 'slipped into the current' where she lies in the shallows, 'paddling like a newborn in a washbasin' (*Bones*, p.310). Amabelle bathes in the memory of those whose unknown graves lie amongst the riverbed: 'I looked to my dreams for softness, for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed, where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow' (*Bones*, p.310).

Danticat uses dream sequences throughout *Bones* to reveal how memories of the past invade Amabelle's mind. Whilst Alvarez's text switches between the present (1994) and events between 1943 and 1960, Danticat's novel suggests there is not a clear distinction between concepts of time. In her work 'past and present meld and mingle without apology', suggesting a 'return' to a history, to a traumatic past, which is ever present.<sup>686</sup> Amabelle's most recurrent dream memory is 'the one that [she has] all the time, of [her] parents drowning' (*Bones*, p.1). Speaking about her dreams, Amabelle says, 'it's either be in a nightmare or be nowhere at all. Or otherwise simply float inside these remembrances' (*Bones*, p.2). Amabelle feels she exists only within memories of the past, in her nightmares or remembrances. In a sense, this is true because although Amabelle exists physically in the present, her mind constantly returns to the past and her present identity is consumed by past experiences. These

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<sup>685</sup> This resembles Sophie's return to the cane fields in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* to confront and liberate herself from collective and individual trauma. See Chapter Two, pp.112-114.

<sup>686</sup> Pollard in Inghilleri, p.153. The issue of the presence of the past and its influence in shaping notions of contemporary identity and society has been consistently raised and argued towards throughout this thesis.

experiences and memories continue to resurface, becoming less frequent in the latter half of the novel after Amabelle's return to Haiti. One explanation is that the dream sequences revolve around her childhood in Haiti, from which she is both physically and emotionally removed having lost her parents and moved to the other side of the island. Upon re-entering Haiti, Amabelle's imagination is less crucial in her remembrance of the past as she confronts tangible reminders. These dream sequences stand out not only in their thematic preoccupation with Haiti and childhood, but in their visual presentation. In bold typeface, they are set within separate chapters between the main narrative of Amabelle's present life, representing the way in which dreams and memories of the past co-exist within Amabelle's present consciousness. Danticat's use of tense further emphasises this permeability: 'My mother's cooking *takes* all day/ 'I *am* always curious as to what is boiling inside' (*Bones*, p.82, my italics). In Amabelle's memories the dead come alive as she revisits the past and is reunited with her parents; her dreams are filled with the presence of the spectres which loom within her personal history.

Returning to the river having survived both the river crossing which took her parents' lives, and the massacre, Amabelle succumbs to these remembrances. Looking to dreams and memories for comfort and relief she submerges herself in the memory of past traumas whilst 'looking for the dawn' (*Bones*, p.310). Amabelle's naked bathing implies a purification and rebirth from the ashes of the past. The river, then, as a repository of the memories of the traumatic past, also functions as a space within which to look to the future for new hope and new life. The literary narrative of return functions in a similar way as it too serves as a repository of memories of the traumatic Caribbean past and a space which looks towards a more optimistic vision of the future. Through her own complex return, through reconciliation with history in order to comprehend and envisage a positive future, Amabelle can cleanse the wounds of the past and begin the search for new beginnings.<sup>687</sup> This memorialisation of the past to reframe the present and renew hope for the future is crucial. Although Ormerod suggests the island's troubled history is one of the factors which perpetuates violence and trauma in the present, she also emphasises the benefits of remembering past trauma, highlighting the necessity of facing past oppression and historical trauma in order to overcome and transcend its influence on the present: 'understanding of the past is essential to a clear and sympathetic vision of contemporary society'.<sup>688</sup>

Remembrance of a traumatic past does not have to be negative. Amabelle's dreams and remembrances are a source of both pleasure and pain. Although Amabelle draws comfort from fond memories of her childhood in Haiti, these recollections are tainted by the loss of her parents. However, Amabelle's ability to recall happier childhood experiences alongside traumatic memories allows her to find hope for the future. Re-living the past through her dreams provides comfort. This is particularly

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<sup>687</sup> As previously noted, this is also the overarching sentiment in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. See Chapter Two, pp.112-114.

<sup>688</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.26.

true after she loses Sebastian, and a number of other companions in the massacre. She admits, 'you may be surprised what we use our dreams to do, how we drape them over our sight and carry them like amulets to protect us from evil spells' (*Bones*, p.265). Thus, Amabelle's past, a source of both pleasure and pain, is also a place in which she can find the strength to survive and persevere. These dreams containing both traumatic and joyful memories provide hope and inspire Amabelle as she clings to them to arm herself against disillusionment and despair.

As Amabelle uses her memories and dreams to arm herself against the present and provide hope for the future, so the Caribbean people can similarly use traumatic history to shape more peaceful, tolerant and progressive contemporary societies. Ormerod writes, 'a history of bitter struggle can co-exist with an optimistic vision of the future: the past can be seen not as an obstacle, but a spur to personal and social transformation'.<sup>689</sup> Works of fiction are crucial in presenting traumatic Caribbean history in a way that is accessible and relatable. Writers of historical fiction like Danticat and Alvarez speak on behalf of those traumatised Caribbean people who cannot. Roberta Culbertson states that 'the survivor most often [...] becomes silent about his victimization, though the experience nevertheless in every case remains somehow fundamental to his existence'.<sup>690</sup> In her literature, Danticat describes and documents traumatic experiences which others, for reasons of historical oppression or perhaps simply because of an inability to vocalise the horror of their ordeal, have been unable to attest to. She maintains that 'once victims are able to tell their stories, they are going to be OK. The biggest obstacle is often telling the story of what has happened to you'.<sup>691</sup>

Novels like those discussed in this chapter function as a means of testifying to the author's own personal and ancestral traumatic experiences, and a way in which the island home and diasporic community can access a shared traumatic history. If the people are able to speak their pain, to vocalise their traumatic past, it will be 'OK'. In this respect, the authors can be said to write on behalf of the region and its people. As survivor-witnesses of collective and indirect ancestral traumas, Danticat and Alvarez write the histories of their people and the region as validation of their shared experience. These authors embrace the task of making traumatic history transmissible through historical fiction. The process of writing back, returning to the Caribbean through fictionalising traumatic history, enables a collective remembering of traumatic historical events, and acts as way in which to reclaim a shared cultural historical experience, uniting the people of Hispaniola across national and diasporic boundaries. These authors' works extend the region's traumatic history into the collective national and diasporic consciousness through the production of texts which function as repositories of memory, performing

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<sup>689</sup> Ormerod in *Centre of Remembrance*, ed. by Anim-Addo, p.27.

<sup>690</sup> Roberta Culbertson, 'Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self', *New Literary History*, 26.1 (1995) 169-195 (p.169).

<sup>691</sup> Danticat and Lyons, 'An Interview with Edwidge Danticat', p.197.

and embodying the cultural memories of traumatic historical events which have shaped and defined contemporary Hispaniola and its people.

## Conclusion

### Returning Home: History, Trauma, and the Narrative of Return

Through an analysis of selected novels as ‘narratives of return’, this thesis has investigated literary representations of Caribbean diasporic identity by contemporary Caribbean women writers in an attempt to explore how notions of diasporic subjectivity are informed by particularised connections to the Caribbean familial or ancestral home. This investigation allowed for a consideration of the influence of an inherently traumatic and violent history of colonialism upon contemporary notions of identity and belonging for diasporic Caribbean people. It enabled me to track the specific ways in which a sub-genre of diasporic fiction, novels which I deem ‘narratives of return’, reveal a connection to the Caribbean as the home of cultural memories which fully inform hybridised diasporic subjectivity for the displaced subject. Furthermore, it permitted an analysis of the multiple ways in which the Caribbean functions as a site of historical, collective, and personal trauma for Caribbean people, and the implications of this in the reading of the metaphor of return within diasporic fiction.

Exploring the trope of the return as metaphor for the rediscovery of ancestral and cultural history, Chapter One argued towards the significance of the Caribbean as a site of ancestral and cultural memory, concluding that the ‘return’ to this space informs a complex diasporic African/Caribbean sense of self, enabling the articulation of diasporic subjectivity and deepening an understanding of the ways in which ancestral traumas set in motion a global history of migration and displacement which continues to inform Caribbean cultural identity in the present. Taking as a starting point the arguments developing in Chapter One regarding the nature of Caribbean history as traumatic, Chapter Two investigated the return to sites of personal and familial trauma on the island as representative of a return to confront collective, ancestral traumatic experience. I argued towards the notion of intergenerational trauma, reading the protagonist’s return in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as a means through which she might effect a confrontation with a traumatic past in order to liberate herself and future generations of women from cycles of repetitive violence and abuse.

Chapter Three brought together the findings of Chapters One and Two regarding the nature of Caribbean identity and diasporic subjectivity as rooted in a migratory and traumatic history. Expanding the scope of the thesis’ concern with ‘narratives of return’ to texts representative of the Hispanophone Caribbean experience and Latina author/protagonists, this chapter problematised reading the return as a straightforward return to cultural origins which fully informs a sense of self, arguing towards the diasporic subject’s need to reconcile and integrate both ‘Old’ and ‘New World’ identities to articulate the hybridity of their diasporic subjectivity. Reading separation from the familial home as a founding trauma, this chapter argued towards the return as a fundamental aspect of ‘working through’ trauma,

both a journey into the past and a narrative trope through which to heal the psychological fracturing initiated by the traumas of exile and displacement from the originary cultural and linguistic home.

Chapter Four sought to consolidate arguments made in the preceding chapters regarding the significance of the traumatic histories underlying 'narratives of return'. Through an analysis of works of historical fiction, this chapter argued towards the crucial place of the Caribbean, the continuing psychological legacy of traumatic history and its inherent violence, in the formation and production of contemporary notions of identity and cultural belonging for Caribbean people both at home and throughout the diaspora. My analysis revealed how the process of writing back through historical fiction enables a collective remembering of traumatic events which have shaped and defined contemporary Caribbean society and diasporic consciousness. This memorialisation serves to validate a largely undocumented historical experience in addition to providing a narrative of shared traumas, enabling a collective confrontation with the past to initiate social change and psychological healing in the present.

My juxtaposition of the works of these contemporary diasporic women writers as 'narratives of return' to the Caribbean home is significant in initiating a comparative study of female authors of Caribbean heritage whose works are often considered primarily in terms of their significance as writers within the fields of American, Postcolonial, or Black British Literature. In bringing to the fore the trope of the 'return' in the selected novels, I have made significant progress in beginning to extrapolate the historical and contemporary implications of this important, and critically under-researched, motif in the work of diasporic contemporary Caribbean women writers of Anglophone, Francophone and Hispanophone heritage. There is much scope for this literary sub-genre of 'narratives of return' to be investigated in the work of a host of international writers of Caribbean heritage and, although the limitations of this study did not permit an extended examination of the work of diasporic male writers, such as that of Dominican American Junot Díaz or Black British writer Caryl Phillips, the field of Caribbean literary studies can only be enriched by further investigation into the significance of this enduring trope. A comparative consideration of representations of the 'return' in the works of both female and male diasporic novelists might enable a fuller understanding of gendered attitudes towards the 'return', providing a space within which to consider gendered experiences of and responses to collective and individual traumatic histories. My research also paves the way for exploration into representations of the diasporic narrative of return in other literary forms; Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* and Díaz's *Drown* might provide an interesting, comparative starting point for considering representations of the trope of the narrative of return in short story collections by female and male diasporic writers.

Whilst my project paves the way for future research into the diasporic narrative of return, it is significant in revealing the historical and contemporary implications of the narrative 'return' to the ancestral Caribbean home within novels by the selected diasporic women writers, and my findings are

important in that they begin to uncover the diasporic significance of the 'return' to personal, familial, and ancestral trauma, building upon and expanding existing scholarly discussion of diasporic Caribbean women's writing. My research is supported by Suárez's assertion that 'diaspora writers – who feel as connected to their island of descent as to their new homelands – are haunted by the ongoing strife experienced by the countries that shaped them'.<sup>692</sup>

As this project has revealed, for diasporic Caribbean women writers home is as much an emotional landscape as it is a geographical space.<sup>693</sup> Roberta Rubenstein explains in her discussion of representations of 'home' in contemporary women's fiction:

Not merely a physical structure or a geographical location but always an emotional space, *home* is among the most emotionally complex and resonant concepts in our psychic vocabularies, given its associations with the most influential, and often most ambivalent, elements of our earliest physical environment and psychological experiences as well as their ripple effect throughout our lives'.<sup>694</sup>

The 'narratives of return' discussed throughout this thesis are necessitated by this complex emotional and psychological connection to the familial or ancestral homeland. This connection is as much to do with the nature of Caribbean identity as inherently migratory and hybrid,<sup>695</sup> as it is with the legacy of violence and abuse set in motion by colonialism in the Caribbean.<sup>696</sup> This traumatic legacy continues to influence notions of identification and belonging to the region for Caribbean people. My reading of the selected texts has revealed the ongoing impact of what Suárez describes as 'the forces set in motion by the trans-Atlantic African slave trade, which shaped a major, painful, and violent diaspora whose legacy still torments us, and by the colonial mechanisms of dehumanization, plunder, and terror'.<sup>697</sup>

Memories of a past rooted in the traumas inherent within colonialism – the effects of forced and voluntary migration, cultural and linguistic alienation, enslavement, racial inequality and oppression – are pivotal in compelling the narrative return to the Caribbean home to enable a remembrance of and confrontation with past traumas. For protagonists and authors, this return is a crucial renegotiation of a subjectivity rooted in memories of past oppression and dislocation, particularly significant because, as Suárez writes, 'we live in a culture of memory; that memory is critical to how identity is negotiated, how communities are structured, how families function, and how the

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<sup>692</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.183.

<sup>693</sup> See Introduction, pp.11-13. See Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, in particular pp.113-115. See also George, *The Politics of Home*. The complexities of 'home' prominently feature in the work of diasporic women writers; *Homelands: Women's Journeys Across Race, Place, and Time*, ed. by Patricia Justine Tumang and Jenesha De Rivera (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2006) contains an extensive collection of reflective essays upon notions of home and diaspora by contemporary women writers.

<sup>694</sup> Roberta Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp.1-2.

<sup>695</sup> See Introduction, p.13, pp.31-32.

<sup>696</sup> See Introduction, pp.13-14, pp.34-36.

<sup>697</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.186.

world responds to different national and international crises'.<sup>698</sup> Furthermore, the narrative of return is a traumatic return in that, through returning to the site of historical and familial traumas, protagonists confront the memories of past traumas. The selected authors thus provide a vehicle for the memorialisation of the past in addition to providing a narrative to assist in the working through and recovery from past trauma. Indeed, Vázquez remarks that 'storytellers aid in renarrativizing traumatic events, they create the possibility of moving beyond fragmented history'.<sup>699</sup> Moreover, '[s]ince stories potentially offer alternative versions of history, they offer a powerful tool for processing trauma'.<sup>700</sup> In bringing together Levy, Marshall, Danticat and Alvarez's novels, I have revealed how 'narratives of return' function as a renegotiation, and rearticulation, of a Caribbean diasporic identity rooted in the migratory history of the region, whilst also providing a memorialisation and narrative of the past which offers a way to confront and work through the historical and contemporary traumas which continue to influence notions of Caribbean identity at home and abroad.

### Migratory History and the Diasporic Voice

Towards the end of Andrea Levy's *Never Far From Nowhere* (1996), Jamaican born Rose Charles laments her London born and raised daughter Olive's desire to 'go back' to Jamaica. She bemoans to her younger daughter, Vivien:

Your sister says she want to live in Jamaica [...] She says it where she belongs because she black [...] she doesn't know what she talking about. She belong here. It's all she know. I tell her she doesn't know what it like in Jamaica [...] But you know what she tell me? No. She knows she will be accepted in Jamaica because she black [...] All this black colour stuff. I tell her, 'You're just you,' and she belong here where she was born [...] But no, she says she wants to go back with little Amy. Go back! [...] I tell her, how you go back? You were born here, it's all you know. How you go back? I can go back but you children can't [...] But you belong here [...] Tell her Vivien...go on, tell your sister. Vivien, tell her, tell her where you belong.<sup>701</sup>

Implored by her mum, Vivien considers, 'Where did we belong? I answered my mum the only way I could. I said, "I don't know"'.<sup>702</sup> Olive's attitude – 'I'm going to live somewhere where being black doesn't make you different'<sup>703</sup> – exemplifies the diasporic discontent felt by protagonists like Levy's Faith Jackson, Marshall's Avey Johnson, Danticat's Sophie Caco and Alvarez's García girls.<sup>704</sup> As this thesis has shown, this sense of difference and unbelonging plays a crucial role in necessitating the protagonist's return, their 'quest for home' and desire to 'go back' to a familial or ancestral home space.

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<sup>698</sup> Ibid., p.186.

<sup>699</sup> Vázquez, *Triangulations*, p.153.

<sup>700</sup> Ibid., p.154.

<sup>701</sup> Andrea Levy, *Never Far From Nowhere* (London: Headline Review, 1996), pp.280-281.

<sup>702</sup> Ibid., p.281.

<sup>703</sup> Ibid., p.272.

<sup>704</sup> For diasporic discontent see Chapter One, pp.63-69; Chapter Two, p.108-110; Chapter Three, pp.124-128.

Yet Vivien's ambivalence, her inability to confirm her mum's hope that her daughters should feel emotionally and physically at home in the country in which they were born, raised, and educated, reflects a central concern within much diasporic literature by Caribbean women writers, that:

In terms of identity, it is the task of diaspora to question the fixedness of identities and conceptions of home and nation, and to show that home is not necessarily a stable issue or a merely positive and empowering site. Rather, in the era of globalization concepts such as home, homeland, and belonging have become highly problematic.<sup>705</sup>

Through her depiction of Olive's diasporic discontent, Vivien's uncertainty regarding notions of belonging to her country of birth, and their mum's insistence that 'she belong here where she was born',<sup>706</sup> Levy articulates the problematic notion of 'the fixedness of identities and conceptions of home or nation' for the diasporic subject. She highlights the diasporic protagonist's sense of unbelonging and desire to 'go back', to return to an ancestral homeland to search for somewhere she does not feel 'different'. But the notion of belonging is complex, and the desire to return is further complicated for subjects born or raised in the diaspora in that the migrated subject cannot embrace a fixed notion of cultural or national identity. British born Olive and Vivien are not Jamaican. Whilst they may claim Jamaican ancestry, Olive and Vivien, like Faith Jackson, cannot claim as home the island nation upon which they have never set foot. Yet, as Levy acknowledges with '[a]ll this black colour stuff',<sup>707</sup> neither are they English in the same way as their white friends and colleagues. Vivien poignantly recalls, 'even when I was young [...] I knew that English people hated us'.<sup>708</sup> The closing scene of Levy's novel captures the multiplicity of their diasporic identity, and the migrant's ability to articulate their sense of self only when they are able to perceive themselves in relation to their familial and ancestral history, embracing their diasporic subjectivity in relation to a history of migration and displacement. Olive encounters 'a white-haired old woman' on a train who asks, 'Where do you come from, dear?'.<sup>709</sup> She deliberates but, acknowledging the influence of her migratory family history, articulates her subjectivity, positioning herself in relation to both diasporic and ancestral home: 'I looked at my reflection in the train window – I've come a long way, I thought [...] "My family are from Jamaica", I told her. "But I am English"'.<sup>710</sup>

This example from Levy's *Never Far From Nowhere* encapsulates the dilemma encountered by the diasporic characters discussed throughout this thesis in their quest for a home space and a sense of their own place in relation to diasporic and Caribbean home. Chapter One revealed how Faith's narrative of return enables her to confront her ancestral history and articulate the complexities of her

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<sup>705</sup> Jopi Nyman, *Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction* (New York: Rodopi, 2009), p.24.

<sup>706</sup> Levy, *Never Far From Nowhere*, p.281.

<sup>707</sup> Levy, *Never Far From Nowhere*, p.281.

<sup>708</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>709</sup> *Ibid.*, p.282.

<sup>710</sup> *Ibid.*, p.282.

diasporic subjectivity.<sup>711</sup> She admits, 'I thought my history started when the ship carrying my parents sailed from Jamaica and docked in England on Guy Fawkes' night. But I was wrong' (*Fruit*, p.325). Likewise, Avey Johnson's return to the Caribbean empowers her to articulate the link between her migratory ancestral history – the story of Ibo Landing – and her own diasporic subjectivity.<sup>712</sup> She resolves to pass on 'the story which had been drilled into her as a child, which had been handed down from the woman whose name she bore' (*Praisesong*, p.254). Danticat's Sophie's awareness of her ancestry is similarly important in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and linked explicitly to a return to Haiti in the novel in that upon returning with her baby, one of Sophie's first observations on Haitian soil is to notice the power of 'the sun, which was once god to my ancestors' (*Breath*, p.94).<sup>713</sup> Furthermore, when she is introduced by her grandmother to Uncle Bazie, the 'old man' asks where Sophie is from and her grandmother replies, 'here [...] she's from right here' (*Breath*, p.116). Sophie's grandmother reveals how, despite her diasporic status, Sophie's return to Haiti reaffirms her emotional and geographical connection to the island. Yolanda García's connection to the familial home is similarly reiterated through a narrative return when, following her breakdown and having returned in the process of her recovery to the memory of her Dominican childhood (and, later, returning physically to her cultural and linguistic home) she insists on being known by her birth name, 'Jo-laahn-dah' (*García*, p.47). Yolanda's return to the past enables her to articulate the process of self-definition through which she fully possesses her Dominican American diasporic subjectivity.<sup>714</sup>

My research reveals how the migratory nature of Caribbean history and an awareness of the ancestral past pervades 'narratives of return' and influences the characters' notions of belonging and unbelonging to both Caribbean and diasporic home. In the above excerpt from *Never Far From Nowhere*, which encapsulates the tension between diasporic and Caribbean home inherent within diasporic Caribbean identity, Vivien, like the characters discussed in this thesis, pronounces the multiplicity of a complex diasporic Caribbean subjectivity. As Nyman acknowledges, diasporic texts revision a notion of identity grounded in plurality: '[i]n imagining new identities and new homes, narratives of diaspora are also critiques of pure origins and of national identity. By inscribing multiplicity and hybridity into formerly monocultural spaces, diasporic narratives transform the allegedly uniform identity of the nation-state'.<sup>715</sup> As Vivien's declaration – 'My family are from Jamaica [...] But I am English'<sup>716</sup> – reveals, 'the diasporic text plays a significant role in the construction of nation,

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<sup>711</sup> See Chapter One, p.62.

<sup>712</sup> See Chapter One, p.78.

<sup>713</sup> See Chapter Two, p.99.

<sup>714</sup> See Chapter Three, p.146.

<sup>715</sup> Nyman, *Home, Identity, and Mobility*, p.26.

<sup>716</sup> Levy, *Never Far From Nowhere*, p.282.

supplementing the traditional notion of a national subject with that of a transnational subject affiliated with more than one national formation'.<sup>717</sup>

In articulating the hybridity of her diasporic identity, black British with Jamaican ancestry, Vivien recognises a familial cultural origin in the Caribbean but lays claim to a diasporic home. Yet Vivien's recognition of '[t]he Caribbean legacy' which left her 'with fair skin and black wavy hair'<sup>718</sup> and her appreciation of the fact that she has 'come a long way', subtly alludes to an historical journey which began centuries ago and thousands of miles away. In ancestral terms, her journey began on the shores of Africa and Europe, as both her enslaved and colonial ancestors departed for the Americas. There, Africa, Europe and Americas converge as, like Faith, Vivien shares a diverse ancestry: her mum's 'great-grandmother was a slave, but in her freedom she married a fairer-skinned man' whilst her own grandmother 'married a man descended from Scottish farmers' and her 'father's mother was part Spanish, part Indian, part African' and 'married a man of north African descent'.<sup>719</sup> Therefore, Vivien articulates two fundamental aspects of my argument: firstly, that the diasporic Caribbean protagonist's narrative of return is borne of an inherently migratory and diasporic history and, secondly, that the roots of this history lie in the inherently traumatic and violent history of colonialism and its effects.

### Traumatic History and the Contemporary Caribbean

The significance of a history of displacement and rupture is central to this thesis' argument towards understanding the 'quest for home' in contemporary diasporic women writers' 'narratives of return' as a search for a space of cultural belonging. However, whilst a history of migration and diaspora are fundamental to my reading of the selected novels as narratives of return, the importance of the colonial history which set this pattern of migration in motion is paramount. In *A Small Place* (1988), Antiguan American writer Jamaica Kincaid's discourse on colonialism, the author asks, 'Do you ever try to understand why people like me cannot get over the past, cannot forgive and cannot forget?'.<sup>720</sup> Kincaid's question points to the continuing effects of the legacy of colonialism upon Caribbean society and the contemporary Caribbean psyche. The works of the diasporic writers discussed in this thesis must be understood within this history of colonisation, central to which is migration, but also cultural, linguistic and racial oppression and inequality, and, crucially, a history of slavery and associated violence and human rights abuses. Kincaid further posits:

Have you ever wondered to yourself why it is that all people like me seem to have learned from you is how to imprison and murder each other, how to govern badly, and how to take the wealth of our country and place it in Swiss bank accounts? Have you

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<sup>717</sup> Nyman, *Home, Identity, and Mobility*, p.26.

<sup>718</sup> Levy, *Never Far From Nowhere*, p.2.

<sup>719</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2. See Chapter One, pp.62-63 for a discussion of Faith's diverse ancestry.

<sup>720</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988; repr. 2000), p.26.

ever wondered why it is that all we seem to have learned from you is how to corrupt our societies and how to be tyrants?<sup>721</sup>

Kincaid articulates the specific social, political and economic ramifications of colonialism upon the contemporary Caribbean: casual violence, dictatorial governments, institutionalised corruption, social oppression and racial inequality.

My research has revealed that the resultant traumas effected by the historical experience of colonialism, as highlighted by Kincaid, underpin the sub-genre of Caribbean women's fiction which I deem 'narratives of return'. Whilst in Chapter One, Faith and Avey trace the origins of their complex identities to the beginning of the colonial experience in the Americas to enable them to assume and articulate their diasporic, migratory subjectivities, Chapter Two revealed how a specifically violent history associated with the traumas of the plantation economy and the abuses inherent in the system of slavery continues to manifest itself in contemporary social structures and behaviours in Haitian society and culture. Chapter Three demonstrated how the contemporary diasporic subject's dislocation from the originary culture and language functions as a founding trauma which effects a psychological fracturing and identity crisis for the subject suspended between cultures, languages and home spaces. Chapter Four particularly extrapolated the ways in which a history of traumatic violence and oppression continue to shape twentieth-century Hispaniola, arguing that novels of historical fiction can function as testimonies to a largely unrecorded traumatic history. My specific analytical focus has revealed that the diasporic writer is in a unique position to 'return' to this history; they are at once removed from and always connected to the migratory and colonial history within which their diasporic experience is rooted. As Suárez notes, '[c]onfronted with continuing hardships in their homelands, as well as newfound injustices in their new worlds, they are tormented by images of violence'.<sup>722</sup>

The novels considered in this thesis function as, and simultaneously embody or contain, narratives of return to the Caribbean and its history. I return here to François' research into literary representations of the return to Africa in the work of Francophone women writers, foregrounded in the Introduction to this thesis:

[F]or the displaced ones, the return is a quest for a remembered past, a quest undertaken to reaffirm a lost identity due to the dispersal of slavery, migration, and erasure of history. As a schema of human thought shaped by cultural variations, the return can take literary, symbolic, spiritual, or physical forms.<sup>723</sup>

Whilst the returns in the selected novels take various forms, they share a common purpose: to reaffirm a lost or neglected identity, and to confront the traumas of Caribbean history. These, I argue, are

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<sup>721</sup> Kincaid, *A Small Place*, p.34.

<sup>722</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.183.

<sup>723</sup> François, *Rewriting the Return to Africa*, p.xv. See also Introduction, p.18.

interconnected aims in that it is only through a confrontation with the memory of past trauma that knowledge and remembrance of this traumatic past can be processed and transcended, enabling a coherent articulation and understanding of a complex diasporic Caribbean identity. Caroline Rody writes that '[i]n an era obsessed with historicity, African-American and Caribbean women writers share a historiographic enterprise with a distinctive political and psychological burden: revising received narratives of their own people's traumatic histories'.<sup>724</sup> She argues that historical fiction 'has always been intimately connected to group identity'.<sup>725</sup> Whilst not all the novels discussed constitute historical fiction per se, they share a preoccupation with history – particularly historical trauma – and demonstrate how history is connected to collective and individual identity. Vázquez suggests that 'the history of the nation is based on a transformative history of the self'.<sup>726</sup> I argue that the ensuing 'returns' undertaken within and through the novels considered in this thesis have a transformative function in that they enable a healing process via a narrative working through of historical traumas. Examining the prevalence of historical traumas in novels discussed throughout this thesis, I have referred to both those traumas which accrue 'over the span of an individual life and across generations'.<sup>727</sup>

### Looking Backwards, Moving Forwards

The selected novels, whilst both functioning as and containing literal, physical, metaphorical, and symbolic narratives of return, look backwards in order to move towards a more positive future. Using the language of nostalgia and mourning, Rubenstein constructs an argument which relates to my own concern with the diasporic writer's preoccupation with the 'return' as looking back to a lost history, culture, language, or ancestry. Rubenstein suggests that nostalgia, looking backwards in diasporic women's fiction, represents a kind of grieving process:

Resolving mourning – whether for lost parents, lost ancestors, lost selves, lost youth and possibilities, lost lives, lost places, lost cultures – is a means of imaginatively fixing the past by revising its meanings in – and for – present and future. Through nostalgia, authors provide their characters with a vehicle for discovery or transformation of consciousness. For the authors themselves, narrative nostalgia provides opportunities to work through mourning, to revisit and revise the emotional sites of loss. Such healing transformations are, of course, narrative and fictive ones [...] However, the transformation of grief into art may be the vehicle for and the resolution of nostalgic mourning in real terms as well.<sup>728</sup>

Significant to my argument is Rubenstein's observation that imagining the past through literature functions as a way in which to revise its meaning 'in – and for – present and future' and her emphasis

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<sup>724</sup> Rody, *The Daughter's Return*, p.5.

<sup>725</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>726</sup> Vázquez, *Triangulations*, p.169.

<sup>727</sup> *Ibid.*, p.136.

<sup>728</sup> Rubenstein, *Home Matters*, p.164.

on narrative nostalgia as a process of healing transformation. Levy, Marshall, Danticat and Alvarez depict protagonists whose 'return' to the Caribbean, the essential cultural in-between space, representing, to varying degrees, what Rody refers to as 'their people's founding trauma, New World slavery', initiates a process of healing transformation.<sup>729</sup>

With regards to Marshall's protagonist, as Rubenstein acknowledges, Avey is 'compelled to confront not only her personal history but the cultural history from which she is equally disaffected' and 'returns home transformed by her island sojourn [...] she confronts her spiritual disaffection and discovers her home within a larger cultural history and geography'.<sup>730</sup> Levy's Faith undergoes a similar transformation which enables her to recognise the globalised nature of her black British identity, coming to understand that, as Nyman explains, 'the making of black British identity is not a mere reflection on the racialized construction of Britishness but that it is also embedded in larger global and diasporic frameworks'.<sup>731</sup> Whilst the focus of Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is not so much on the nature of the return in effecting a review of the protagonist's perception of their hybrid subjectivity, Sophie similarly undergoes a transformative return 'home', presented as a liberation from past traumas which inform her sense of self, as her return functions within a wider cultural history of colonisation and violence. Sophie's final return to the cane field reveals the transformative effect of the return and permits an articulation of her diasporic Haitian subjectivity: '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' (*Breath*, p.234). In confronting the cane, a space emblematic of African/Caribbean historical traumas, and embodying the memories of more recent familial violent traumas, Danticat's novel seeks to heal and transform as it 'denounces the very real violations, highlights the webbing of memory, and imagines futures freed of the grip of violent memories'.<sup>732</sup>

Alvarez's Yolanda's journey into the past is similarly transformative, functioning as part of a specific healing process for the protagonist suspended between diasporic and Caribbean cultural and linguistic homes. Rubenstein's reading of her narrative as that which 'both defines and embodies a reparative vision that neutralizes and transmutes loss' supports my analysis of the retrospective nature of the narrative as a crucial aspect of the process of working through trauma. Rubenstein continues, '[b]y figuratively unravelling and reknitting into a different and more satisfying design the strands of her family's history and her own experience of exile, Yolanda fixes the past: geopolitical dislocation is repatterned to articulate a restorative hybrid vision of cultural and linguistic identity'.<sup>733</sup> The 'narrative

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<sup>729</sup> Rody, *The Daughter's Return*, p.3. Whilst as a writer of Hispanic Caribbean descent, Alvarez claims a Latino identity, I suggest that as a member of Caribbean society she nevertheless shares in the historic legacy of colonialism and its effects. For the Caribbean as the essential cultural in-between space see, for example, Introduction, p.34; Chapter One, p.81.

<sup>730</sup> Rubenstein, *Home Matters*, p.162.

<sup>731</sup> Nyman, *Home, Identity, and Mobility*, p.28.

<sup>732</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.74.

<sup>733</sup> Rubenstein, *Home Matters*, p.161.

of return' enables Yolanda to heal her fractured psyche and revision her migratory subjectivity, permitting her to understand and accept her position within the Dominican American diaspora.

But perhaps the most explicit way in which 'narratives of return' can be perceived as engaging with the past to inspire a revisioning of present and future is through Danticat and Alvarez's historical fiction. These texts engage directly with traumatic history to provide a narrative of historical traumas. I turn here to Vázquez and Suárez, whose research recognises the therapeutic function of these authors' fictional works. Of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Vázquez writes:

Alvarez's reworking of history provides a therapeutic tool for working through collective historical trauma. As she notes, the implications of the Mirabals' murder affect more than surviving family members. Indeed, their murder provided part of the rationale for deposing Trujillo [...] the Mirabals' murder was also the impetus for creating the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women celebrated on the anniversary of their death. Hence working through this history has hemispheric, even global, implications [...] By positioning her novels as a space for collective remembrance and affirmation, others can access (and presumably work through) this traumatic history.<sup>734</sup>

Thus, Vázquez recognises the international implications for working through this particular aspect of Dominican traumatic history via historical fiction. Suárez writes in a similar vein of the therapeutic power of Danticat's novels, arguing:

[Her] work looks to the future by creating a narrative space for multiple histories and memories [...] Danticat's work allows people, alone in the settings of their new urban lives, to confront violence, recognize its existence, and celebrate their own strength and capacity to survive the memory of violence and its unrelenting presence. This narrative space allows healing [...] Her literature looks at the past but, more important, creates a vision for the future, both in the realm of literature, understood as a pragmatic act, and in the realm of politics, through work with human rights groups [...] Danticat's literature, through stories of human survival, creates the space for mourning, a space essential to overcoming the weight of tragedy and loss.<sup>735</sup>

Recognition of the therapeutic, healing power of 'narratives of return' is paramount to understanding the diasporic writer's preoccupation with returning to the Caribbean through the literary imagination. The writers whose novels are considered in this study are important in revealing the multi-faceted nature of the literary return from the diaspora to the Caribbean home. Furthermore, by virtue of its pan-Caribbean comparative approach, my research is significant in revealing that this return is imbued with both contemporary and historical implications for diasporic women writers of Caribbean heritage across racial, linguistic, and national differences. Whilst the return functions within a history which has effected an ingrained culture of migration, or migration ideology, in the region, it also has specific meanings when read through the framework of trauma theory, as demonstrated through my

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<sup>734</sup> Vázquez, *Triangulations*, pp.144-145.

<sup>735</sup> Suárez, *Tears of Hispaniola*, p.31.

analysis of the selected novels. The diasporic narrative of return functions as an authorial quest for home, yet, more than this, it reveals the pivotal role played by writers and the literary imagination in the attempt to work through historical and contemporary traumas and their violent effects for Caribbean people at home and throughout the diaspora. Through narratives of return to the Caribbean, the familial, ancestral and cultural home, and, most importantly, to the space which embodies the founding trauma for Caribbean people across racial and cultural boundaries – that of colonialism and its insidious effects – the contemporary Caribbean woman writer confronts the past in order to prompt a process of healing and liberation from traumatic memories and ongoing cycles of violence and abuse. This literary confrontation attempts to realise an understanding of the traumatic past and its continuing legacy in an effort to initiate positive social and political change in the present, and for the future.

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