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GROUND ZERO(ES) OF THE NEW WORLD: GEOGRAPHIES OF VIOLENCE IN JUNOT DÍAZ AND EDWIDGE DANTICAT

*In early 2008, two writers born on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola—Junot Díaz from the Dominican Republic, and Edwidge Danticat from Haiti—garnered unprecedented plaudits from the anglophone literary establishment in the United States. Díaz was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, for his brilliant novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*; Danticat won the top prize in biography from the National Book Critics Circle for her family memoir *Brother, I'm Dying*. Reading Díaz and Danticat's prize-winning books alongside and in conversation with one another, this essay traces how each writer seeks not merely to illuminate their nations' hidden histories of violence, but to base their approach to those histories in a shared Caribbean identity—and in a conception of the Caribbean as the origin-place for what Díaz famously called the *fukú americanus*—"the curse or doom of the New World." In both Díaz and Danticat's work, "Caribbean discourse" serves not merely as a means of limning their own nation's hurts but of understanding the cause and effects of historical traumas in the *longue durée* of the Americas at large—up to, and including, the epochal attacks of September 11, 2001. [Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz, *Fukú americanus*, *geographies of violence, ground zero(es)*]*

I coughed nervously, sweeping the water with my binoculars. I was in search of evidence. I was eager to see a corpse, a skull, some bones, any gruesome trace of history. But the belly of the earth uttered only the echo of my cough.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot

We're all in the Caribbean, if you think about it.

Junot Díaz

In early 2008, two writers born on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola—Junot Díaz from the Dominican Republic and Edwidge Danticat from

Haiti—garnered unprecedented plaudits from the anglophone literary establishment in the United States. Díaz was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction for his brilliant novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*; Danticat won the top prize in biography from the National Book Critics Circle for her family memoir *Brother, I'm Dying*, a book which was also a finalist for the National Book Award in nonfiction. To top off those victories, the pair were awarded that year's two Dayton Peace Prizes, in fiction and nonfiction, respectively (the award, which honors "the power of literature to promote peace and nonviolent conflict resolution," claims to be "the only international peace prize awarded in the United States"). Literary prizes provide a notoriously dodgy gauge of literary merit. But one could not help but be struck by the extraordinary breadth and depth of the resonance gained by two writers born in the Caribbean, but raised in the Dominican and Haitian republics of New York, and writing in their shared second language—and by the shared themes that also joined the pairs' work.

Both Díaz and Danticat's prizewinning works engaged with the brutal histories their parents had left behind on their shared island—or perhaps better put, engaged with how they hadn't left those histories behind at all. Whether in the shape of the mild-mannered Brooklyn barber whom Danticat's father recognizes as a onetime assassin for Duvalier or in that of Díaz's New Jersey Dominicans' flashing back to the sexist violence of the Trujillato (and reenacting that violence with their daughters)—these writers' characters, fictional and real are people who incessantly return to the Caribbean in the mind. And they are people for whom trips back to the island, when undertaken in body, are made only to realize that they've never really left. For all these reasons, Díaz and Danticat's work is easily emplaced within a literary story about how "the new immigrant

writing,” by now much beloved of publishers and prize committees, addresses the experience of modern migrants who, unlike their Ellis Island forebears in the pre-jetliners-and-Internet age, forge “transnational social fields” bridging their countries of residence and of birth (Basch et al. 1994). Both writers, certainly, are also engaged with their own nations’ traumas and fate in ways that accord with the kind of “third world literature” whose narratives’ dramas, as Fredric Jameson (1986) controversially argued, reproduce their nations’ quests for self-realization. In the already-considerable corpus of criticism, both academic and popular, that Díaz and Danticat’s work has attracted, both of these lenses have been prevalent (Albritton 2008; James 2008; Mahler 2010; Row 2007). What I am concerned to show here, though, are the ways that both writers also transcend these modes of analysis—and the ways they do so, specifically, by evincing an avowedly regional, and *Caribbean*, approach to history and to writing.

Drawing on a half century and more of what Edouard Glissant dubbed “Caribbean discourse”—the recurrent tendency of its islands’ intellectuals, artists, and leaders, to “think the Caribbean,” as region and idea—both Díaz and Danticat seek to illuminate Hispaniola’s hidden histories of violence, in ways that that island’s great anthropological thinker, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, one feels, would have affirmed¹. They base their approach to those histories in a certain conceptions of the Caribbean as the origin place for what Díaz famously called the *fukú americanus*—“the curse or doom of the New World,” set in motion with Columbus’s arrival to Hispaniola. So doing, each writers’ work, especially when read together, makes the case for using “Caribbean discourse” not merely as a means of limning their own nation’s hurts but of understanding the cause and effects of historical traumas in the *longue durée* of the Americas at large—up to, and including, the epoch-making attacks of September 11, 2001.

In Díaz and Danticat’s contemporary work, the traumas of long ago are far more than mere background or back-story. The *fukú* lives in the present. It lives, in the Dominican Republic, in the corpses dumped in canefields, for three decades in the middle-1900s, by the henchmen of Rafael Trujillo (or, as Díaz terms him, “Our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a *personaje* so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up.”; Díaz 2007:3). It also surely lives in Haiti, whose nightmarishly violent Revolution

of 1791–1804, according to its vodou hounsans, unleashed sprits, which are still haunting the landscape today—a truth which its poor, the sufferers of Duvalier’s depredations of which Danticat writes, would need little help believing. And as Díaz’s tragic hero Oscar Wao knows too well, suffering the daily indignities of freshman year at Rutgers, the *fukú* can most certainly survive its victims’ journeys from the Caribbean to New York (or Miami, Toronto, or a college dorm in Jersey).

When Derek Walcott proclaimed, during his Nobel acceptance speech, that “Antillean art is [the] restoration of our shattered histories,” he was giving voice to a guiding preoccupation among Caribbean writers, with the question of how to join together the shards left by history’s traumas and with mending the wounds those shards impart². Neither Díaz nor Danticat, agewise, belongs to the Caribbean’s “Independence Generation” that put great store by the promise of decolonization as means to redemptive healing (and both, in any case, hail from nations nominally “free” since the 1800s but long beset by neocolonial thuggery). And while both are deeply engaged with nation-ness—and with the particularly Caribbean obsession with nations expressed in the famed lines from Walcott (1979) that serve as the epigraph to Díaz’s book (“*I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me| And either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation...*”)—they are also writers, like many diasporic artists from the region, centrally engaged with the *impossibilities* of nation for small islands and, as such, concerned with more encompassing conceptions of Caribbean identity. Long resident in “the northern capital of the Caribbean” that is New York, they are preoccupied with relations among the region’s people and with those people’s prospects for conciliation with one another—and in the first instance, for this pair from the two halves of Hispaniola, with *each others’* nations’ such prospects. For both writers, exploring the attributes of diaspora as a space where the memory of violence can be salvaged (and the issue of Dominican–Haitian rapprochement, more specifically, broached) is a central concern—as is the question, at once literary and historiographic, about how to forge a literature equal to a history that could not just produce but condone a dictator “so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up.”

Start at the beginning. That’s were Junot Díaz does, in the opening lines of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú*—generally a curse or doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the *fukú* of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims; despite “discovering” the New World the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices. In Santo Domingo, the Land He Loved Best (what Oscar, at the end, would call the Ground Zero of the New World), the Admiral’s very name has become synonymous with both kinds of *fukú*, little and large; to say his name aloud or even to hear it to invite calamity of you and yours. (Díaz 2007:1)

The Admiral, of course, is Cristobal Colon—Columbus—whose very name, like the history set in motion by his arrival in Santo Domingo in 1492, is an obscenity: a nightmare from which Oscar, obliquely introduced here, will spend this novel trying, if not to awake from, then reconcile with. The opening lines of Díaz’s opus, toggling back-and-forth from past to present, and introducing the entwined themes of history and malevolent metaphysics, herald not a few key points of the book *in toto*: that something distinct and powerful entered world history through that “nightmare door” in the Antilles; that the people of the island where that history commenced may stand in special proximity to its mal-effects; that even so, that history (like those mal-effects) is anything but past—that it reaches out and onward, suffusing the lives of characters in the Rutgers dormitories and chemical-perfumed New Jersey towns, hard by the erstwhile shadows of the towers whose felling, on September 11, 2001, represent but another Ground Zero in the Americas’ history reaching back to Columbus.

The Jersey demi-monde where much of the action in *Oscar Wao* takes place is one that Díaz has showed us before. In *Drown*, the lauded book of short stories that made his name in 1996—and commenced his, and our, 11 years of tortured waiting for his novel to appear—Díaz brought readers into the worlds where he grew up. (Born in Santo Domingo in 1969, Díaz emigrated to New Jersey at age seven.) With stories alternately

set in an impoverished Dominican *campo* where young boys grow accustomed, each year, to shitting worms that their mamis don’t have the medicine to treat, to the scarcely-better off life of public housing in New Jersey, where those same boys hide the “government cheese” when girls come over and where—as Díaz’s narrator counsels in perhaps that book’s most memorable piece, “How to Date a White Girl, Brown Girl, or Halfie”—“Tell her about the pendejo who stored cannisters of Army tear gas in his basement for years until one day they all cracked and the neighborhood got a dose of military-strength stuff. Don’t tell her that your moms knew right away what it was, that she recognized the smell from the year the United States invaded your island” (Díaz 1997:252).

With its similar settings and themes—the “immigrant experience,” the shadow history of U.S. empire, a boy’s struggle to get laid—one can read Díaz’s novel as a kind of continuance of *Drown* with more capacious aims. Commencing as a story about a corpulent “ghetto-nerd” struggling with daily indignities and an in-progress fantasy novel in his college dorm, giving Oscar’s tale its due, it quickly becomes clear, necessitates telling a host of other stories as well: of what horrors befell Oscar and his sister Lola’s mother, Belécía, during a childhood whose horrid memories she long ago “deposited in the dark, uncharted trenches of her soul”; of the state murder of Oscar’s grandfather, Abelard, for daring to question Trujillo’s right to make his daughter a concubine; of the larger course of Dominican history, under a the surreal reign of a demonic dictator who made “the *fukú*... real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in” (Díaz 2007:258).

With a structure that moves, like its opening sentences, back and forth from present to past, Díaz’s novel alternates chapters on Oscar’s story with ones showing us what befell his mother in the years before she chose to board a plane with “other First Wavers...Many waters waiting to become a river.” Fleshing out connections between the worlds Díaz showed us in *Drown*—connections, that is, between an immigrant family’s present and past—*Oscar Wao* is also more. This is a novel which, tracing its hero’s quest to know his family’s history, becomes little less than a retelling of modern Dominican history, filling in the “paginas en blanco” left by a dictator who sought (sometimes with U.S. backing) to write a national history in his own image³. Rendered in the colloquial, self-reflexive voice of Oscar’s

roommate (and his sister's sometime *novio*), Yuniór, it is also a kind of meditation on historiography and the powers and limits of writing itself.

This, in other words, is no small book. And it employs, as one would expect, no small number of special tricks to complete its task, beginning with the footnotes that literally and figuratively undergird the narrative—and which signal, from the first one on Trujillo, the lasting impress of history on the present. Rendered in the same colloquial spanglish voice as the narrative above, Díaz's footnotes contain capsule histories of various and sundry characters ranging from the native prince Hatuey (“the Taino Ho Chi Minh”) and venal post-Trujillo leader Joaquín Balaguer, (“appeared as a sympathetic character in Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*”) (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 2000:892–907; James 2008)⁴. Serving as but one more way to underscore history's presence in the Now, Díaz's footnotes may also signal key aspects of the novel and the circumstances of its creation (Mahler 2010:119–140)⁵. Rejecting claims that his citational practice is akin to that of the “postmodern white boy gang,” Díaz has said that the primary inspiration for his notes in *Oscar Wao* were those employed by the Martinican Patrick Chamoiseau in his great novel of Fort-de-France's slums, *Texaco*—wherein Chamoiseau's footnotes, he has suggested, mimic the experience of telling stories (or writing a book) in a place where noise and interruptions are constantly coming in through the window. Whatever the extent to which one embraces Chamoiseau's technics or Díaz's embrace thereof, Díaz's citation of his Francophone colleague signals the extent to which his work is engaged with a multilingual conversation about Caribbean letters also signaled in Díaz's choice of Derek Walcott, rather than a Dominican like Pedro Mir, for his epigraph (a choice on which he's dilated in interviews) (Cid 2008)⁶. *Wao* may be a national novel—and it's certainly that, it's a national epic—but it is, more significantly here, an avowedly *Caribbean* novel. Not least in the ways it embraces, in its use of footnotes and other devices in the narrative, Walcott's dictum that all Caribbean art seek “the restoration of [our] shattered histories” (Walcott 1993)⁷.

Narrated by a character who is himself a writer, these literary obsessions are signaled by how Yuniór, in his prefatory remarks about the *fukú*, describes the concept of *zafa*: the *fukú*'s antidote, uttered whenever the Admiral's name is spoken (and by “my tío Miguel in the Bronx, whenever...

the Yanks commit an error in the late innings”). The idea of *zafa*, we're told, may have been “bigger...in Macondo than in McOndo,” but that doesn't mean some don't still employ it—and that this novel, in its way, may be a form of *zafa*: an antidote to history itself. Beyond the belief in writing's power embedded in this argument, what is also notable about this language of antidotes and spells, in the context of this novel, is how that language accords with the *particular* literary idiom—science fiction—that Díaz, early on, insists is uniquely applicable to describing the history his novel limns. As Yuniór puts it his preface: “[Oscar] was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of world we were living in. He'd ask: what more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (Díaz 2007:6).

The contention embedded in that query goes to the heart of this book's novelty—but also, it's important to note, isn't wholly new. For although Oscar's frames of analogic reference may be foreign to readers unfamiliar with Middle Earth's byways and *The Fantastic Four*, the thrust and content of his query—predicated on the conception of Caribbean ontology and the modes of writing needed to represent it as distinct—is one that goes back nearly to the start of something calling “Caribbean literature.” To wit:

Y es que, por la virginidad del paisaje, por la formación, por la ontología, por la presencia fáustica del indio y del negro, por la revelación que constituyó su reciente descubrimiento, por los fecundos mestizajes que propició, América está muy lejos de haber agotado su caudal de mitologías. ¿Pero qué es la historia de América toda sino una crónica de lo real maravilloso?

For all the years accompanying the putative “Boom” in Latin American literature, Alejo Carpentier's 1948 essay on “Lo Maravilloso Real”—and its concluding query—has served as a kind of misleading ur-query for magical realism: “For what is the history of America, but a chronicle of the marvelous real?” In this part of the world, as Carpentier (1967) puts it, where “for the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black, for the revelation that constituted its recent discovery, for the fertile *mestizajes* it launched, America is very far from having exhausted its wealth of mythologies.” Carpentier's essay, which first appeared as the preface to his novel of the Haitian Revolution,

The Kingdom of this World, was predicated (1) on the Caribbean as a synecdoche for the Americas at large and (2) based in a conception about what was *essentially* distinct about a part of the world where, say, a humble enslaved draughtsman in Sainte Domingue, inspired equally by a voodoo rites of his fellows and The Declaration of the Rights of Man, could lead the only successful slave revolt the world has ever known.

During the era of Latin America's literary ascendance led by Gabriel García-Marquez and Mario Vargas-Llosa, "Lo Maravilloso Real" was endlessly cited as the manifesto underlying such now-hackneyed tropes of magic realism as the years-long sleeps, flying beauties, and miracle-wielding gypsies who populate *Cien Años de Soledad* (a book whose author and setting, its worth noting, is a product not of Andean Colombia but the slave ports and banana fields of its Caribeño coast). Since that time, not a few younger writers have bewailed the fantasist expectations under which Latin American novelists, all of whom were now expected to ape Marquez's style, even during decades when the lived realities of brutal violence and surreal *dictaduras* might have made for a different kind of literature, at once more topically exigent and more surreal than anything the Boom's putative leaders, with their propensity for befriending dictators right-wing and left, could dream up (Goldman 2007; James 2008)⁸. In the Caribbean itself, the essentializing tendencies of Carpentier's "marvelous real" have attracted fair critique from thinkers questioning his tacit belief that European surrealists, say, will always suffer a paucity of vision because their perceptions grow from outside a continent where "magic" remains a part of everyday life. (It was this belief that led Carpentier to reject out-of-hand André Masson's Martinique-inspired paintings, for example, while sanctifying the Afro-Cuban surrealism of Wilfredo Lam). Others have pointed out, more damningly still, how Carpentier's argument suffers from leaving intact actual inequalities, and oppressive conceptions of difference, as they were developed over centuries of colonial conquest (Richardson 1996:13). As the Haitian philosopher Jacques Gourgue has put it: "Surrealism and the real marvelous would be intrinsically linked to poorly industrialized countries...[and so] justify hazy ideas and illogical actions that one would prefer to leave hidden behind centuries" (Gourgue 1992:7; Richardson 1996:13)⁹.

The debate over magical realism has been a confused one from the start—not least since

writers like Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez, editors of the notorious *McOndo* anthology (1996) who decried the formulaic magical-realist expectations placed on MFA students at the University of Iowa, failed to note how Carpentier had anticipated and seconded many of their contentions about formulaic fiction (Hanna 2010:512)¹⁰. Given longstanding disagreements and misconstruals of *what*, exactly, magic realism is, it is perhaps little wonder that one of the more striking aspects of *Oscar Wao*'s critical reception has been the disagreements among critics over whether the novel represents a rejection of magical realism, per se, or a brilliant new exemplar of the form¹¹. Díaz may be an avowed partisan of "McOndo, not Macondo"—a member of the generation who grew up with a conception of history shaped by violent realities anything but magical in their cause or effect (and who face that history head on in their work). But his novel bears more than a few key debts to the magical realist tradition. Beginning with its asking us, from the first, to ascribe, to the contours of the historical narrative to follow, some grandly metaphysical energy (the *fukú*). But even more notably, for my purposes here, in its insistence that there *is* something distinct in Caribbean ontology and history that demands a distinct mode of storytelling—or, at the least, suffuses all stories emanating from this part of the world where "the Nightmare Door" of New World history first cracked open.

This set of intertwined truths—along with what distinguishes Díaz's work from the magical realism of old—are laid bare in one scene from his novel. That scene finds Oscar and Lola's mother, Belí, clinging for life in a darkened sugarcane field after her doomed affair with a man we know as The Gangster (who also happens to be Trujillo's brother-in-law) comes to its inevitable end. The boots and billy-clubs of power leave Belí's skull "egg-shelled," her ribs broken, her body left to expire in the dark. "And now we arrive at the strangest part of our tale," our narrator informs us. "Whether what follows was a figment of Belí's wracked imagination or something else I cannot say," he says, before saying that as Belí lay there for dead, she was visited by a mysterious creature. Lying in the cane, there appears a kind of Mongoose with black pelt and leonine eyes. It murmurs repeatedly to Belí that she must move—that she must crawl toward the road if she is to survive, as we know she must, to give birth to the daughter and son whose story we're reading. And so, in the event, she does. At the creature's urging, she drags

herself far enough toward the darkened highway that a band of passing *bachateros*, on their way home from a gig, pauses long enough to take pity on the beaten woman. Her life is saved when the band, resisting the prudent course under Trujillo's reign, to avoid meddling in dark affairs, loads her in their lorry and takes her to hospital in town¹².

In this appearance of a magical mongoose—who also appears (a la the cyclical apparitions of *Cien Años de Soledad*) to other of this novel's characters at other points in time—we have what seems a prototypical moment of magical realism. What marks this moment as self-consciously (post) modern, though, are two. First is the ironical distancing that Yuniór employs, to insist that the story, as it were, is unclear—he doesn't know what happens. The second is more complex because it both identifies with a key trope of magical realism and tweaks it. Our narrator may not know what happened—but he acknowledges, too, that one can never totally discount such tales in this part of the world.

Beyond the Wall few have ventured. But no matter what the truth, remember: Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived?

The argument: Dominicans, at the end of the day, are *Caribbean*. And that that's all we need to know, really, about what informs their tolerance for "extreme phenomena." Díaz, like Carpentier and Marquez before him, may credit the importance of imagination in understanding, and giving language to, the surreal aspects of American history. Part of what marks Díaz as distinct from his forebears, though, is his tacit insistence that those imaginative tropes are derived not from some long ago myths, or anything essential in the Americas' soil, but from the extreme history of violence and the very real modes of coping, "irrational" and otherwise, to which people have turned to survive it. This is a kind of magic (or sci-fi, if you will) that grows out of the very real history of violence (or *surreal* history of violence, if you like) with which all Caribbean families have contended across recent decades. Implicit to this argument are an engagement (unlike, as many have accused others have accused Marquez) with what Díaz has called "the Americas' hidden history of apocalypse"—and an insistence, too, that that history can be most effectively figured in the idiom that

our narrator subtly references in his admitting, about the tale of the mongoose, that he doesn't know exactly what did happen: "Even your Watcher has his silences, his *paginas en blanco*."

The reference is to the same comic book, *The Fantastic Four*, from which Díaz takes his book's first epigraph: "of what import are brief, nameless lives to...*Galactus*?" And here, as at the book's outset, Díaz's use of *The Fantastic Four* underscores the ways in which Yuniór has chosen to frame this story along the lines of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's comic, and to model himself, in turn, on the comic's Watcher, who comes to earth to observe—and sometimes shape—the actions of the four protagonists. (As Díaz himself has noted, Oscar Wao's four main characters—Oscar, Lola, Belicia, and Abelard—are loosely modeled on the Four; Hanna 2010:515). Alongside all that's conveyed by Díaz choosing to make a comic-book one of this novel's key intertexts, Yuniór's choice of Kirby and Lee's book—a work, as Monica Hanna has noted, about "freaks" and outcasts—"emphasizes the focus of his historiography on antiheroes, outsiders, and the forcibly marginalized" (Hanna 2010:515). All of this, of course, is invisible to readers ignorant of *The Fantastic Four*, as may be the other references, buried elsewhere in the text, to the *X-Men*, Tolkien, and *Watchmen*—a book which Oscar takes with him on his final journey, notable for its pregnant closing question: "Who watches the watchmen?" (Moore & Gibbons 1995).

Díaz's use of comics, like his footnotes, aren't new to contemporary fiction. Indeed some of the best-known figures in American fiction—especially forty-something "white boys" (as Díaz might term them) like Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem, who have used comic-book metaphors of superpowers and invisibility to describe the hopes and frustrations of male adolescence. Part of what's novel about Díaz's own use of comic books, though, is his insistence on their metaphors' unique ability to speak to kids in the inner city (especially in a *machista* Domo-culture where womanizing and brawn are the sole marks of manhood)¹³. "You really want to know what being an X-man feels like?" he writes, "Just be a smart bookish boy of color in contemporary U.S. Ghetto." (Díaz 2007:22) Yuniór, explaining how Oscar got his name, describes how, dressing up as Dr. No for Halloween one year, had born a distinct resemblance, in the eyes of his collegiate peers, that famed fat *maricon*, Oscar Wilde. The latter's surname, as such things go in college dorms, was

then nonsensically shortened to “Wao.” (“And the tragedy?” Yuniór relates: “He started *answering* to it.”) (Díaz 2007:180) Not content merely to narrate his roommate’s troubles, Yuniór also can’t resist intervening when, for example, Oscar finally finds a popular girl in his dorm with whom to spend some time, and Yuniór—currently dating three women himself—rather than being happy for his boy, does his best to sabotage a relationship he begrudges his roommate. (“A heart like mine, which never got enough affection growing up, is terrible above all things.”) (Díaz 2007:185)

As certain feminist critics have noted, the largely male set of desires and “optics” endemic to Díaz’s fiction can have a way of echoing, in their particular anxieties and concerns, the very machista mores such critics would like to see Díaz more pointedly deconstruct (Suárez 2006). The point is surely fair. Yet also of the same limited critical use, one suspects, as endless debates over whether hip-hop lyrics, in describing violent settings and acts, reinforce those behaviors or question them. And in this respect, nerd-boy culture—with its dreams of bulging muscles and voluptuous superettes; superpowers and invisibility; the ability to pay back any bully—speak in particularly potent ways to the uncertain masculinity of adolescence—and also, as Oscar’s tale shows, in particularly potent ways to the cult of reclaiming manhood that has been endemic to Third World nationalisms from Fanon to Malcolm X (“either I’m no one, or I’m a nation”). In any case, the test of fiction—and hip-hop songs—is whether its characters’ enact stories complexly true to their flaws, believable in their foibles and successes both. Oscar is, it must be said (as are his sister Lola and mother Beli, with her tragically familiar tale of attaching emotionally to machista men whose machismo dictates that they treat women cruelly).

Beyond such concerns, the point I’d like to make here, about the larger place Díaz proposes for comics and sci-fi in approaching *Caribbean* history, is that he himself makes plain the link between “Caribbean discourse” and what we might call “sci-fi discourse.” One key way he does so, as noted above, is by pairing his epigraphs from Walcott and *The Fantastic Four*: “Of what import are brief, nameless lives...to *Galactus*?” (Díaz 2007; Lee and Kirby 1961) There as elsewhere in the book, the allusion may be obscure for those unfamiliar with 1960s comics. But the world it figures—of a world shot through with unequal power relations; of malevolent unseen forces; of countless lives, begun in what was once

called the Third World, treated as disposable by the powers that be—shouldn’t be. And it is based on this truth that he makes the link not just implicit but plain. This occurs some ways through the novel, when our narrator next mentions *Fantastic Four* in a footnote: “It’s hard as a Third Worlder,” he writes, “not to feel a certain amount of affinity for Uatu the Watcher; he resides in the hidden Blue Area of the Moon and we DarkZoners reside (to quote Glissant) on “*la face cachée de la Terre*” (Earth’s hidden face.”) (Díaz 2007: 92)

Tossed off with a one-word reference in this footnote, and not likely to be caught by casual readers, this nod to Edouard Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse* resounds as a loud signal for readers steeped in a conversation about Caribbean literature within which Glissant’s voice, for decades up to his death last year, has long been one of the most prominent. As his collegial commentator Judith Graves Miller, for one, put it while he was still with us: “[Glissant is] the most important theoretician from the Caribbean writing today...No one writes of Antillean literature; no one *writes* Antillean literature without reference to Édouard Glissant” (Graves Miller 2000). Whether that perhaps hyperbolic praise is strictly true, Miller’s words point toward the acknowledged existence of something called Antillean literature—and to the truth that Díaz, in embracing that tradition’s most prominent voice in reference to a comic book, is engaging with, and writing from a position within, that conversation, whose core aims and anxieties are perhaps distilled in Glissant’s own choice of epigraph, in his influential *Poetics of Relation*, from two of his anglophone colleagues from the region: “Sea is History” (Walcott); and “The Unity is Submarine” (Brathwaite) (Glissant 2000: front-matter)¹⁴.

Without pausing overlong on Glissant’s complex body of thought, it is enough here to note that his thought has long been defined by an insistence in conceiving of the Caribbean, and Caribbean literature, as a multilingual totality—and by an insistence, too, that that Caribbean literature may occupy singular location and power in the cultural history of the world (Glissant 2000:33)¹⁵ Equally crucial is the fact that Glissant’s conception of *antillanité*—Caribbean-ness—is based not in something essential or given. The thin threads “woven together from one side of the Caribbean to the other” may be glimpsed, for those looking, in “cultures derived from plantations;... social pyramids with an African or East Indian base and a European peak;

languages of compromise; general cultural phenomenon of creolization; pattern of encounter and synthesis; persistence of the African presence; cultivation of sugarcane, corn, and pepper; site where rhythms are combined; peoples formed by orality” (Glissant 1999:221). But these commonalities, he is careful to emphasize, are “not inscribed in consciousness” (Glissant 1999:221). The existence of *antillanité*, as both literature and political project “to [actualize] a collective Caribbean identity,” exists only in the telling—in the ways that writers like Brathwaite, committed to building some sort of unity from the mass of fragments, articulate that unity in literature.

In considering how to place Díaz within “Caribbean discourse,” the case of Brathwaite is instructive because his work is marked on the one hand by a concern with finding a Caribbean unity and on the other by his commitment to “nation language”—lived, oral speech—as a means of forging authentic Caribbean literature, transcendent of history’s violence. (Brathwaite 1984)¹⁶. “Nation language,” as its name implies, may be a theory closely tied to the idea of the nation—a vision of forging a literature not in colonial verbiage and pentameter but from the mash of creolized tongues and experience that produced, on each of those islands, unique oral languages of their own. With his theory’s basing in the Anglophone Caribbean (to say nothing of poetry rather than prose), the applicability of Brathwaite’s “nation language” conceit to Díaz’s novel may be a stretch. And indeed his novel’s language, a kind of Spanish-inflected immigrant’s English, mirrors not the quotidian tongue of Santo Domingo’s streets but the hybrid language evolved by its emigrants. And yet, one must certainly credit that Díaz’s work, with its analogous attempts to produce a literature rendered in what Glissant called “the language in use ‘at present,’” is also consciously aimed to engage with many of the questions at the heart of discussions over Caribbean literature for a very long time.

Quite beyond the interesting question of how his book has been received at home in the Dominican Republic, the key test of *Oscar Wao* as Caribbean text perhaps lies in examining its reception by critics and readers from other of the region’s islands and diasporas. And that reception, by and large has been rapturous. The Jamaican novelist Marlon James’s rave in the *Caribbean Review of Books* (an outlet published in Port of Spain) stands to underscore the point. “*Oscar Wao*,” he begins, “is more than simply an innovative work or a groundbreaking one”:

It is, in my opinion anyway, where Caribbean fiction must go. This is the type of book that will make people want to write books. A work that divorces itself from colonial and postcolonial reference points and admits that we’re far more influenced by hip-hop, Starsky and Hutch, reality TV, Jay-Z, the card game Magic: The Gathering, Spanglish, dancehall, and reggaeton than we care to admit. In this regard, with its sampling, borrowing, stealing, and co-opting, *Oscar Wao* may be the first true hip-hop novel (James 2008).

Bracketing for a moment James’s elision, here, of the descriptors “Caribbean” and “hip-hop” (even though there are may be interesting reasons for that claim, in hip-hop’s Jamaican roots), it is telling enough, here, that the praise he lavished on Díaz’s book is framed in terms of its merits as “Caribbean novel.” Narrated by a writer who is driven by an old-school concern with writing’s moral weight (“John Gardner would be proud,” he notes), this is a book tasked with no less an aim than illuminating, if not mending, the Caribbean’s untold history of violence. Whether or not Oscar’s quest, like the book bearing his name, is ultimately successful is left unanswered at this novel’s end. The *fukú* works its way inside those it harms; it prompts Lola to say sadly to her machista man Yuniór, on one of their last nights as *novios*, that “ten million Trujillos is all we are”; and it brings an idealistic kid, like Oscar, to his end in a canefield just like the one where his mother was beaten near to death (Danticat 2007a). But surely, it seems to ask and say, there’s something heroic in speaking that violence’s name, tracing its contours—and understanding how, for example, a dictator “aspired to become an architect of history, and through a horrifying ritual of silence and blood, machete and perejil, darkness and denial, inflicted a true border on the two countries, a border that exists beyond maps, a border that is carved directly into the histories and imaginaries of a people” (Danticat 2007a:225).

What “people” is Díaz referring to here? Dominicans, we might suspect. But the “people” to whom he refers, given the line about “machete and perejil,” may well be the larger collectivity of Dominicans and Haitians together; the Caribbean “people” whose being torn asunder by is the self-same topic of a writer who Díaz has called a “quintessential American writer, tackling the new world’s hidden history of apocalypse and how one survives

it” (Jaggi 2004). Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* is set hard by the Haitian border and in the shadow of Pico Trujillo, the highest peak in Hispaniola just renamed for the dire dictator whose diabolic deeds drive its narrative. The novel tells of how Trujillo, in 1937, went about forging his nation in contradistinction to the *negros* who cared for its babies and cut its cane, egging on peasant-militias to kill its immigrant workers with machetes. Tracing this tale through the intimate lives of a small coterie of characters—a Haitian house-girl, Amabelle, and her cane-cutting lover; the Dominican family for whom Amabelle works; their parish *padre* and neighbors—Danticat’s narrative unfolds in the ominously named village of Alegría. This is a place where Haitians have long lived, but where, as one character puts it, “to them we are always foreigners, even if our grandmemes’ grandmemes were born in the country.” In *The Farming of Bones*, enough die beneath *Trujillistas*’ machete blades that the river that flows by Alegría, at novel’s end, runs red.

Shining light on a horrific historical event whose occurrence was so successfully shrouded in silence by Trujillo (along with Haiti’s complicit leadership at the time, and both government’s US backers) that estimates of the death toll, to this day, range from several hundred to 35 thousand, Danticat’s book gives vivid life to desperately poor laborers who “communicate with the simple flutter of a smile all those things we could not say because there was the cane to curse, the harvest to dread, the future to fear” (Danticat 1998:131). Many of the Haitian laborers here are new arrivals: Amabelle’s man Sebastien, we are told, has come because “[his] father was killed in the great hurricane that struck the whole island—both Haiti and the Dominican Republic—in 1930” (Danticat 1998:25)¹⁷. But many others are “non-vwayajè Haitians”: people, as one would expect in the borderlands of this not-terribly large island, who have lived and intermarried for generations in Hispaniola’s central mountains. (Naturally enough, Trujillo himself had a Haitian grandmother.) Like all the work of this writer from a nation whose people, as the journalist Mark Danner has put it, have the distinction of “walking in history,” (Danner 2010) *The Farming of Bones* is a novel that makes plain its links between Haiti’s revolutionary past and the novel’s present. “When Dessalines, Toussaint, Henry...walked the earth, we were a strong nation,” laments one Haitian character during a town meeting. “Those men would go to war to defend our blood. In all this, our so-called

president says nothing, our Papa Vincent—the poet—he says nothing at all to this affront to the children of Dessalines, the children of Toussaint, the children of Henry; he shouts nothing across this river of blood” (Danticat 1998:212)¹⁸.

If all this sounds a bit pat, that’s because it is. *The Farming of Bones* isn’t the best book in Danticat’s oeuvre. It is, however, a novel which, in engaging a forgotten episode in Caribbean history, sought, like Díaz’s work, to make an intervention in Hispaniola’s historiography. And to striking effect, too, because the book prompted a telling bit of back-and-forth correspondence between Danticat and the Dominican historian Bernardo Vega (Saurez:13–17). Vega, who first wrote Danticat to thank her for citing his work in her novel’s acknowledgements, took issue with her representation of Dominican civilians as complicit in massacres which were prosecuted by Trujillo’s military on the orders of their commander-in-chief. The particular scenes to which Vega objected, in writing that Dominicans in the border regions were terrified during the massacres and hid from the military, were Danticat’s descriptions of Dominican townspeople spitting on Haitians and forcing them to say the word *perejil*. Danticat responded to Vega that she makes sure to emphasize, in all her public talks, that the massacres resulted from orders issued by Trujillo to his army—but she also insisted that many victims’ testimonies she’d read made it impossible for her to believe that no friends and relatives of soldiers took part in the killings—as did the fact that the only time she’d seen her great-uncle cry was when he heard Dominicans use the word *perejil* to slander a dark-skinned candidate for their country’s presidency. (Her great-uncle, Danticat explains, was a cane cutter forced to undergo the *perejil* ritual by his neighbors in the border region.) Danticat’s response to the historian, beyond evincing the swirl of controversy that still surrounds this hazy event, also serves to exemplify the larger aims of a writer whose fiction, drawn of an approach to history that is never untied from personal and family memory, has long been devoted to making plain how “our past is more akin to flesh than air”¹⁹.

Born in Port-Au-Prince a few weeks after Díaz on the other end of the island, Danticat has had a career distinguished by a similar kind of early success—and more remarkably still, by the aplomb with which she survived it. Having arrived to Brooklyn at age 12 with but a few words of English, Danticat’s debut novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), was published scarcely a decade

later. With that novel landing on Oprah's book club, Danticat—whose second work, *Krik Krak*, featured its photogenic young author on the cover—appeared in danger, for a time, of being pigeonholed as a kind of rough Haitian equivalent to Alice Walker. Fortunate for her that she possessed none of the writer's block that afflicted Díaz, nor, evidently, a desire to hue to the Oprah-friendly pieties of her elders, she went on to grow in accomplishment with each book, first with *The Farming of Bones* (1998) and then, in 2004, *The Dew Breaker*, an ingeniously structured story-collection-cum-novel that takes place not in the Haiti of her girlhood or ancestors, but in the immigrant precincts of Flatbush and Queens where she reached young adulthood. The *Dew Breaker*, in ways strikingly similar to Díaz's *Oscar Wao*, endeavors not merely to draw connections between island traumas and American lives but to show how violence past continues to shape the present. More than implicitly pointing to the long-durée of history that's impoverished Haitians and made them leave their island, but showing how the violence of a contemporary dictatorship is by no means escaped by that migration, a point it makes by tracing the life of its eponymous protagonist—a “dewbreaker,” or hitman, in the Duvalier regime—through the lens of various characters come into contact with him by varying degrees: the daughter whom he's always told his facial scar came from being imprisoned in one of Duvalier's jails (rather than guarding its inmates); the young reporter who, interviewing a Haitian bridal seamstress in her home out by JFK airport, learns of how this woman, who tells of a tormentor from her past moving in down the block, is a person whose “tremendous agonies [fill] every blank space in their lives”; a customer in the dew breaker's barbershop who, decades after their first encounter, recognizes him as one of those assassins known for knocking on their quarries' doors with the dawn, arriving at dawn to take those their dictator needed dead (Danticat 2004:137). Here as in Díaz, the aim of shedding bare “the Caribbean's hidden history of violence,” and how that history is lived and relived by her characters, is Danticat's chief aim. The personal is political, goes the old saw. The personal is historical, too, insist her books—perhaps none more potently, as I'd like to suggest here, as in her two recent works of nonfiction.

“My family's story isn't the *Dew Breaker*,” Danticat has said, “and thank God.” Thank god,

indeed—even as she insisted, in the same piece, that they could have been: not much space, in Duvalier's Haiti, between the roles of victim and executioner. In Danticat 2007a “family memoir,” *Brother, I'm Dying*, Danticat fleshed in aspects of her own story long gestured at in interviews and glimpsed in her fiction but never laid bare in writing. She writes of how, at age 2, her parents left her for a new life in America, leaving her in the care of her uncle Joseph and *tante* Marie; of being told at age 12, by an unfeeling officer at Haiti's US Embassy, that she and her little brother were going to be allowed to join their parents in America “for better or worse”; of boarding a plane with her brother who put a pat of melting foil-stuck butter in his pocket; of moving to settle in a cold land she didn't know that defining passage she has compared to the flight of Assotto Saint, the Haitian American poet and performance-artist, who, reunited with his mother at 14, after 10 years of separation: “i wanted to write a happy care-free poem / for my childhood / lost too fast.... / somewhere in the air / between port-au-prince & New York city” (Danticat 2010:117; Saint 1996).

Like many novelists' memoirs, *Brother* can be read as a book that reveals the source material for much of Danticat's fiction—from the grandmother with whom she shared a bedroom in her uncle's house, whose stories became the basis for *Krik Krak!*; to relating how, as a teenager in Flatbush, riding in the passenger seat of the livery cab her dad drove for 14 hours each day to make a living, she discovered, in the same Brooklyn Library where Paule Marshall determined to become a writer, the “Livres Haitiennes” section that convinced her to break her silence forever. Unlike the kind of valedictory epitaph common from older writers, though, Danticat's book, as distinct from the sort of valedictory memoir common from elder writers, is not a work occasioned by its author's urge to reflect on a life in literature. It is, rather, an urgent tale precipitated by recent trauma.

That event is the death of her Uncle Joseph in US custody, a victim, when fleeing violence in homeland, of paranoid policies in the wake of 9/11. Rendered more piquant by the truth that Joseph's death corresponds, in the life of Danticat's family, with her first pregnancy and her father nearing his own death from pulmonary disease—perhaps a result from those years in the livery cab—the recounting of her uncle's death and its meanings, Danticat makes clear from the start, necessitates a larger plumbing of a family

history that is also her nation's. "I am writing this because they can't," she writes at the start of her tale. She then backs up to the 1950s, to tell of how her father, proprietor of a shoe shop in Port-au-Prince where Duvalier's Tonton Macoutes often walked in and left with whatever they wished, taking whatever they wished, met her mother when she walked into the same story; and of how, after having Edwidge and her little brother Fred, her father and mother determined they couldn't make a living in Haiti, and thus must emigrate to work in America, they leave their young daughter and son with Mira's brother Joseph, pastor of a church in the capital's poor suburb of Bel Air. Like Mira, a backer of the charismatic opposition leader Daniel Fignole, in the 1950s, Joseph becomes, though his church, a key figure in his neighborhood, staging such quiet acts of resistance as reading plays by Camus and Genet in its backyard. Joseph and his little family may escape attention, but their lives, like all Haitians in those decades, were touched deeply by Duvalier's violence. When Edwidge's elder cousin Marie Micheline ("I adored her since she was kind and pretty") becomes scandalously pregnant with a neighborhood boy, she is rescued from shame by a man who, suspiciously okay with wedding a young woman pregnant by another man, turns out to be pathologic member of Duvalier's Tonton Macoutes. Acting with the impunity accorded such men, he moves his young bride to a remote mountain village where he imprisons her in a cabin and subjects her to horrid abuse. When Danticat's uncle heads into the mountains, and, risking death to steal Marie Micheline away from her captor, gives her new life by carrying her home, his quiet heroism accords with what we've come to expect from this man who, taking young Edwidge and her brother into his home, becomes their "second father."

That Joseph and his family survive not only the Duvaliers' reign of terror, but then the throat cancer that left him to speak using a voicebox, before his personal story reaches its climax, is but one cruel irony of a personal history that unfolds from October 2004. During a bout of political unrest, all too familiar in Haiti but this time occasioned by the putative return-to-power of Bertrand Aristide, a crazed gang of youth ransack Joseph's church. He is driven from his home, and homeland, with just his briefcase and the clothes on his back. Arriving to Miami and requesting temporary asylum in a country he's visited countless times to see his family or for

health issues, he is denied a visa with no explanation and sent, with the nephew accompanying him, to Krome: the special Federal detention facility, in South Florida, earmarked especially for "processing" Haitians. Recounting how she herself, living in a home just miles from the airport, was repeatedly denied information, by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), about what had befallen the uncle who didn't arrive at her house as scheduled, she alternates, in her account, between a tone of intimate despair and one coolly forensic; she reconstructs, with the help of INS records obtained with a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)-request, what befell Joseph during a nightmarish few days which saw him not only locked up, but then denied proper medical care when he suffers a seizure shortly after entering Krome, his body convulsing as he vomited through the tracheotomy hole in his neck. Reflecting on what she saw when she finally does gain entry to Krome, Danticat writes of how the tableau on display there—with rows of black bodies, some in shackles, being poked and prodded, their teeth inspected by doctors—can't help but resonate (how could they not?) with a deeper history. Her own "processing" of what befell her uncle, in Danticat's book, involves thinking about the larger histories that forged the conditions of possibility for its happening—along with new Department of Homeland Security regulations which make even its aftermath a horrid ordeal. For Danticat, the issue of how and whether his body can be repatriated to his homeland in a plane's cargo hold—it can't: he is buried next to his brother in Queens—prompts in her a reference to Garcia Márquez. "A person does not belong to a place," the Colonel says to his family, "until someone is dead under the ground" (Danticat 2010:17; García-Marquez 1967).

A "topical" memoir pointing up not a few collateral effects of the War on Terror, *Brother I'm Dying* is also a book that insists on examining Haitians' current predicament in the light of the larger imperial history of what José Martí termed the "continent's fair-skinned nation." In this Caribbean tale, like every one, history is never far from the surface. More specifically, though, it is also a book that insists on approaching the contemporary Caribbean as ground-zero for the contemporary empire which, as Junot Díaz put it, made Hispaniola "Iraq before Iraq was Iraq"—and whose current flexing of imperial might, now, was prompted by a pair of planes, not unlike the thousands that carried Haitians and Dominicans

to New York, smashing violently into those two towers in lower Manhattan.

“My favorite flights depart late in the afternoon or early in the evening,” writes Danticat in a memorable piece from her exemplary 2010 essay-collection, *Create Dangerously*. From the time of her first flight, from Haiti to a new life in America, as Danticat writes, her main experience of planes had come from occasional trips home to see her family. Now, as a successful author, she has had to conquer her flyer’s unease, to embark on book tours that often find her on a plane each day for two and three weeks on end. But increased frequency or no, planes still evoke memories—of melted butter in her brother’s pocket, of her uncle’s death, of her own journey to America. Such thoughts are especially present on those planes that leave near dusk:

While on those flights, I always imagine what the plane must look like to a very small child from the ground, a silvered speck racing across a flaming orange sky, nurturing the child’s own dreams of escape, like they once did Assoto Saint’s and countless others (Danticat 2010:118).

Emigrating by plane travel, as Danticat has said, a la Díaz, “[resembles] space travel in the sense that you leave one completely different world, get in a steel machine that flies and suddenly you’re a resident of a vastly different planet.” The prevalence of airplanes in the social worlds and imaginations of people on islands where every family history includes plane flights like the one on which Belcía Cabral glimpsed Nueva York from above, for the first time, or on which little Bob Danticat melted the butter in his pocket. If the canoe and then the caravel defined much the first centuries of the Caribbean’s human history, to paraphrase B.W. Higman, the region’s guiding image, and tool, may now be the jetliner: the technology by which these islands, in the wake of sugar’s demise, welcome the tourists they rely on to keep their listing economies afloat, and the mode of space-age transit on which their ex-peasants rely to emigrate, in a ceaseless stream, to First World cities.

All of these resonances are present in Danticat’s essay “Flying Home”—but that essay, like *Brother, I’m Dying*, is also a piece that in certain ways is occasioned by, and revolves around, the aftermath of 9/11. The particular flight about which Danticat writes, at the essay’s start, finds her returning to New York from a book tour in Japan.

Falling asleep after arriving to her home from the airport in the early morning, she is perplexed, when she wakes for a moment to watch her TV, that its only “snow” she sees. When she is awoken a second time by an urgent phone call from her father, telling her that the towers have been destroyed, she realizes that that snow was a result of the TV transmitter atop one of them being felled in the attacks. Danticat’s book about “the immigrant artist at work”—a book nominally addressed that hoary old question: What is the writer’s role?—it becomes clear through its course, is a book about how one can write about a series of traumatic events in the writer’s hemisphere and world: Columbus’ arrival to the New World; the attacks on 9/11; the Haitian Revolution; the earthquake that laid Haiti low months before this book appeared.

“Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously,” she writes.

This is what I’ve always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someone may risk his or her life to record them. Coming from where I come from...that is what I’ve always seen as the unifying principle among all writers.

Any kind of literature, of course, may fit this criterion (Danticat quotes Osip Mandelstam: “Only in Russia is poetry respected—it gets people killed.”)(Danticat 2010:11) But the interpretation of “create dangerously” on which she settles comes from Camus, who suggests that writing is “a revolt against silence—a revolt against her own silence, in Danticat’s case, as a soft-spoken immigrant girl in Brooklyn; and, later on, revolt against her people’s silence about violence they’d lived. This, she explains, is why she wrote *The Dew Breaker*, and why, too, she chose from that book an epigraph from Mandelstam:

May be this is the beginning of madness...

Forgive me for what I am saying.

Read it...quietly, quietly.

Writing of her own formative experience as a reader—the experiences, that is, that made her become a writer—Danticat recalls discovering Jacques Stephen Alexis, the Haitian physician-writer “who wrote such beautiful prose that the first time I read his description of freshly baked bread, I raised the book closer to my nose to sniff

it” (Danticat 2010:13). She then describes how Alexis, trying to return to Haiti from exile in 1961, was imprisoned and murdered as a suspected plotter against Duvalier. Turning again to Camus, she writes admiringly of his view that “a person’s creative work is nothing less than a slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three images in whose presence his or heart first opened” (Camus 1961; Danticat 2010:18). For Danticat, one such image is the one she recounts at her book’s start, from the era of Alexis’s killing, of two young men, members of an exile group of young anti-Duvalier dissidents, whose execution by the dictator’s firing squad, in 1964, was captured on a film she’s watched again and again.

The presence of all this in Danticat’s work, fiction and non-, is clear enough. What, though, does it all have to do with the “immigrant artist” in general? Does the category even matter? In *Create Dangerously*, she anticipates the query. Here, she is in America, writing in her second language. But who, after all, isn’t an immigrant in our global and globalizing world? “Even without globalization,” she writes, “the writer becomes a loyal citizen of the country of his readers.” She quotes her friend Dany Leferriere, a fellow Haitian novelist in exile, who published a novel called *Je suis un écrivain japonais (I Am a Japanese Writer)*. “I am surprised,” he wrote there,

how much attention is paid to writer’s origins...I repatriated, without giving it a second thought, all the writers I read as a young man. Flaubert, Goethe, Whitman, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Cervantes, Kipling, Senghor, Césaire, Roumain, Amado, Diderot, they all lived in the same village I did. Otherwise, what were they doing in my room? When, years later I myself became a writer and was asked, “Are you a Haitian writer, a Caribbean writer or a Francophone writer?” I would always answer that I took the nationality of my reader, which means that when a Japanese reader reads my books, I immediately become a Japanese writer. (Danticat 2010:15; Laferrière 2009)²⁰.

All of this though, too, can be said of all writers too. And yet, and yet, *is* there something distinct about the ways in which the Caribbean writer, hyper-conscious, always, of an “outside,” seeks to address that outside and connect with its readers? Is there a literary analogue to what Harry

Belafonte, the Jamaican-American singer who charmed the world to change it, said about his own work: “I always felt universal, being from the Caribbean”? Danticat’s answer to this question isn’t absolute, even as she notes that “the nomad or immigrant who learns something rightly must always ponder travel and movement, just as the grief-stricken must inevitably ponder death” (Danticat 2010:16). Reading as much, one imagines that being from Haiti, say, one can’t not ponder the traumas of history, of its Revolution, and the relationship of the land of her home to the land (and region) of her birth.

Writing on the bicentennial of its triumph, she approaches the Haitian Revolution’s relationship with America by noting how closely the words of Toussaint (obliquely quoted in *The Farming of Bones*) resemble those spoken by Jefferson a few years before. “In overthrowing me,” said L’Ouverture when he was captured by the French, “they have only felled the tree of Negro liberty... It will shoot up again, for it is deeply rooted and its roots are many.” The words closely resemble Jefferson’s dictum that “the tree of liberty needs to be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants”—and call to mind, for her, the United States’ failure to respect “Negro liberty,” for much the first century of Haiti’s existence (Danticat 2010:97). Noting that original sin as crucial to Haiti’s isolation, economic and otherwise, in the wider world, she also notes that “in *The Kingdom of this World*,... Alejo Carpentier allows us to consider the possibility, with which his own Cuba would later grapple, that a revolution that some consider visionary might appear to others to have failed” (Danticat 2010:110). The turn here to Carpentier isn’t innocent; Danticat reminds us that it was during a visit to Haiti, undertaken to investigate its Revolution, that he developed his theory of the marvelous real. “I was treading earth where thousands of men eager for liberty believed,” he wrote in 1948. “I entered the Laferriere citadel, a structure without architectonic antecedents...I breathed the atmosphere created by Henri Christophe, monarch of incredible undertakings... With each step I found the marvelous real.” He continues, bringing us back to what happened here, describing how “the machete suddenly buried itself in the belly of a black pig, which spewed forth guts and lungs in three squeals,” she quotes him, describing the famed rite that turned these men into revolutionaries, through the medium of Africa:

Then, called by the name of their masters, for they had no other, the delegates came forward one by one to smear their lips with the foaming blood of the pig, caught in a wooden bowl....The general stuff of the insurrection had been named....And in view of the fact that a proclamation had to be drawn up and nobody knew how to write, someone remembered the goose quill of the Abbe de la Haye, priest of Dondun, an admirer of Voltaire who had shown signs of unequivocal sympathy for the Negroes ever since he had read the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

“Would the Abbe lend a hand and a pen? was the burning question,” Danticat concludes her essay on Carpentier. “Eventually, a proclamation was drawn up and a revolution was launched, with or without the Abbé’s goose quill.” Beyond reminding us that Haiti—and the Haitian Revolution, more precisely—is the source for *lo real maravilloso*, this particularly enduring theory of Caribbean unity, Danticat’s dialogue with the Cuban Carpentier also signals her crucial interest in evincing and engaging what unifies “Caribbean diasporic peoples” (Danticat 2007b).

The point is brought home nowhere more strongly than with the place—or person—with which she closes that essay on flying, and 9/11. One of the people in the ashes south of Canal street, she writes, was a Jamaican-born sculptor called Michael Richards,

who had created a bronze cast statue of himself dressed as an African American World War II combat pilot, a Tuskegee airman, with dozens of miniature airplanes shooting through his body. Richards had a studio on the ninety-second floor of Tower One of the World Trade Center and was there when the first plane struck the building at 8:45 AM. He had spent the night working on, among other things, a piece showing a man clinging to a meteor as it plunges from the sky. Richards had been interested in aviation and flight and had used them in as motifs in his work for many years.

Why does she seize on Richards? One reason, certainly, is his interest in planes—but another, we suspect, is his Jamaican heritage: his past as a young boy, that is, who once watched planes fly over his island and dreamed those dreams of escape. This image, of course, rhymes loudly with

much in the work of Danticat and Díaz alike, with their entwined interests in a region wherein, as I’m reminded every time I fly there, the preeminent and best-read regional publication is *Caribbean Beat* magazine—the in-flight magazine of Caribbean Airlines, and a symbol, if ever there was one, that contemporary migration isn’t a one-way street. Alive to the new realities of immigration at a time when immigration is no longer a one-way street, at this time when, as Danticat has put it, immigrants, no longer “disappear joyfully into America’s melting pot”:

These days immigrants are transnational global ambassadors for both the country they live in and the one they’ve moved from. Even as they pay taxes and contribute to the economic structure in the United States, they also build schools and clinics and support businesses in the countries of their birth, helping to rebuild the fabric that forced their own migration [and possibly slowing down the exodus of others.] (Danticat 1999:xi, Saurez:31)

True before the 14th day of January, 2010, when the earth leveled not a few of those schools and clinics, to say nothing of the lives of “200,000 maybe more,” as the succinct dedication to Danticat’s book goes, these words are only more true today.

How to write about the unthinkable? “I have not written one word,” the Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad, paradoxically wrote soon after September 11, “no poetry in the ashes south of canal street” (Danticat 2010:123; Hammad 2003). This, in the earthquake’s aftermath, is Danticat’s instinct too. That she doesn’t shy from the uneasy task of speaking for the collective, in that horrible moment, suggests much about a writer who doesn’t merely take seriously her role as a writer (if not, as she’s wisely replied to an interviewers’ query about whether she writes “to bear witness”: “I try...but I do it more for my own salvation and emotional survival than anything else.”) but has had the patience to gently point to all the larger historical truths evinced by the fact that an earthquake, in this horribly impoverished land of “tin can” homes and throw-away concrete, could kill 200 thousands and not two or twenty. That story, of course, is one bound up in the history of how the second free nation in the New World was isolated and abused by the

first, for much the first two centuries of their existence—and is a story lived in the present, by Danticat when she arrives to the Port-au-Prince airport after the earthquake to find US military guarding its perimeter (Saurez 21). “Whose borders are they protecting?” she asks. “I soon get my answer. People with Haitian passports are not being allowed to enter the airport.” (Danticat 2010:168) When she boards her flight home, full of relief workers from the States, its pilot welcomes his passengers with a cry, before take-off, of “God Bless America.” Danticat, settling into her seat, screamed out “God Bless Haiti Too!” (Danticat 2010:73).

As I write, what the devastation wrought by the quake will mean for Haiti’s people remains unclear. The disaster, certainly, has focused world attention back on a country whose revolution, as Trouillot wrote, “entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened” (Trouillot 1995:73)—and, we hope, it has stirred some new awareness of the history that’s unfolded there since. Whatever happens, the role of the writer aware of that truth is to know that “so much of our experience as Caribbean Diasporic peoples, so much of it, exists in silence.” And it is to ask, “How can we talk about our experiences in any way if both our own local cultural and the larger global culture do not want to talk about them and actively resists our attempt to create language around them?”

In the present context, it matters that those words, echoing so closely Glissant and Walcott and a hundred other makers of “Caribbean discourse,” were spoken by an author with whom Danticat’s work, like this essay, is also in conversation. The question comes from a chat Danticat had with Junot Díaz for the magazine *BOMB* in 2008, shortly after each of their prize-winning books appeared. The interview concludes with Danticat asking her friend whether, in the end, the *fukú americanus* was—or can be—vanquished in a novel like his:

For me...the real issue in the book is not whether or not one can vanquish the *fukú*—but whether or not one can even see it. Acknowledge its existence at a collective level. To be a true witness to who we are as a people and to what has happened to us. That is the essential challenge for the Caribbean nations—who, as you pointed out, have been annihilated by history and yet who’ve managed to put themselves together in an amazing

way. That’s why I thought the book was somewhat hopeful at the end. The family still won’t openly admit that there’s a *fukú*, but they’re protecting the final daughter, Isis, from it collectively, and that’s close, very close to my dream of us bearing witness to (in Glissant’s words) “the past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us (but that) is however, obsessively present.” (Danticat 2007b)

Quite.

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NOTES

1. During the week that I was completing final revisions on this essay, we learned of Trouillot’s sad passing. It is my humble hope that these reflections may do honor to his proud legacy, and immense contributions—not least by pointing to some of the ways that the exemplary writers discussed here, have done already. We are all in his debt.

2. See Walcott’s Nobel lecture (1993). The full quote: “Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.”

3. As Díaz has put it: “I don’t think there’s a Dominican writer, past or present, who’s matched the awful narrative puissance that Trujillo marshaled; his “work” deformed, captured, organized us Dominicans in ways we can barely understand, and this “work” has certainly outlasted his physical existence. (And unless I’m nuts, this writing continues to be more popular than the work of any of the competition—me and my peers included. What I write about the Haitian community moves maybe three people, but what he “wrote” about the Haitian community still moves the fucking pueblo.)” See Danticat 2007b.

4. Among other aspects of Díaz’s footnotes that may bear further scrutiny is what their interpolated addressee (“In case you missed your two minutes of Dominican history...”) signals about this book’s desired audience—and perhaps contradict Díaz’s prior arguments concerning how “so

many Latinos and black writers who are writing to white audiences, who are not writing to their own people. If you are not writing to your own people, I'm disturbed because of what that says about your relationship to the community you are in one way or another indebted to." (Which isn't to say that one can't have it both ways, or to suggest that *Oscar Wao* isn't a book, as James (2008) argued, "that might be read by the people its about—a by no means small achievement."

5. As Anne Garland Mahler has described the rhetorical effect of Díaz's footnotes: "While the footnotes give the appearance of an academic text in which there is a separation between the content and the historical data that inform it, the footnotes are written in the voice of the narrator and serve to further integrate Dominican history into the fantastical fiction created by Díaz, collapsing the difference between historiographical and fictional registers by inextricably blending the two."

6. In his interview with Giselle Rodriguez Cid, Díaz says: "[the epigraph was a toss-up between [Walcott] and the other great Caribbean titan, Pedro Mír, but so many people had already used Mír's incantatory lines, it would have felt like a re-tread."

7. The line is from Walcott's Nobel lecture (1993). In larger context, "Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole...Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent."

8. As James put it in identifying Díaz with this new generation led by Bolaño: "In his own way, Díaz moves to the front ranks of new Latino novelists for whom the patron saint is the Chilean Roberto Bolaño. Writers who, like Bolaño, disavow magical realism largely because the sheer madness of their respective oppressive regimes was surreal enough. These are writers who distance themselves from the blind elitism of their forbears, calling out, explicitly or implicitly, novelists like Gabriel García Márquez for befriending dictators like Castro, and Vargas Llosa for rewriting the history of monsters so that they become heroes." (James 2008).

9. Gourgue, as quoted by Richardson, continues: "The 'irrationalities' that Europeans venerate among us have been combated by them to reach the present technical domination."

10. As Carpentier puts it, and Hanna discusses: "Pero, a fuerza de querer suscitar lo maravilloso a todo trance, los taumaturgos se hacen

burócratas. Invocando por medio de formulas consabidas que hacen de ciertas pinturas un monótono baratillo de relojes amelcochados, de maniqués de costurera, de vagos monumentos fálicos, lo maravilloso se queda en paraguas o langosta o máquina de coser, o lo que sea, sobre una mesa de disección, en el interior de un cuarto triste, en un desierto de rocas. Pobreza imaginativa, decía Unamuno, es aprenderse códigos de memoria. (Carpentier 1967:117), Translation: "The result of willing the marvelous or any other trance is that the dream technicians become bureaucrats. By invoking traditional formulas, certain paintings are made into a monotonous junkyard of sugar-coated watches, seamstresses' mannequins, or vague phallic monuments: the marvelous is stuck in umbrellas or lobsters or sewing machines or whatever on a dissecting table, in a sad room, on a rocky desert. Poverty of the imagination, Unamuno said, is learning codes by heart."

11. See, e.g. Hanna, who writes of *Oscar Wao*, that "throughout the text, magical realism is presented as a Caribbean mode of understanding and representing history," (Hanna 2010:509) as opposed to James, who argues that Díaz "disavows magical realism largely because the sheer madness of their respective oppressive regimes was surreal enough" (James 2008).

12. The Mongoose figure is footnoted as follows: "The Mongoose, one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers. Accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean. Since its earliest appearance in the written record—675 B.C.E.; in a nameless scribe's letter to Ashurbanipal's father, Esarhaddon – the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies. Believed to be an ally of Man. Many Watchers suspect that the Mongoose arrived to our world from another, but to date no evidence of such a migration has been unearthed."

13. Díaz has also spoken of how comic-book sci-fi also speaks to—and derives from—"race-thinking" as well: "Without shit like race and racism, without our lived experience as people of color, the metaphor that drives, say, the X-Men would not exist! Mutants are a metaphor (among other things) for race, and that's one of the reasons that mutants are so popular in the Marvel Universe and in the Real. I have no problem re-looting the metaphor of the X-Men because I know it's my silenced experience, my erased condition that's the secret fuel that powers this

particular fucking fantasy. So if I'm powering the ship, at a lower frequency, I'm going to have a say in how it's used and in what ports of call it stops." See Danticat 2007a.

14. On Brathwaite's relation with Glissant more broadly, see Kelly Baker Josephs, "Versions of X/Self: Kamau Brathwaite's Caribbean Discourse" *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 1.1(2003). Web only.

15. Glissant writes: "The Caribbean, as far as I'm concerned, may be held up as one of the places in the world where Relation presents itself most visibly, one of the explosive regions where it seems to be gathering strength."

16. About Brathwaite's coinage, and poetics, Glissant writes: "[I]t is the language of enslaved persons. For him, nation language is a strategy: the slave is forced to use a certain kind of language in order to disguise himself, to disguise his personality and to retain his culture. And he defines that language as 'forced poetics' because it is a kind of prison language" (Glissant 1999:16).

17. This quote seems to emphasize intrinsic links between Haiti and the Dominican Republic (and ins such a way as to echoing Michaelle Ascensio's argument [1990] that shared vulnerability to hurricanes is one of the Caribbean nations' key common attributes), continues: "He lost his father and almost everything else. This is why he left Haiti. This is why I have him. A sweep of winds that destroyed so many houses and killed so many people brought him to me."

18. Another fact bearing on Vincent's "betrayal" of his people, although not mentioned in the novel, is that the presence of Haitian cancutters in the Dominican Republic was, in many cases, the result of agreements he brokered with Trujillo to send cheap labor across the border. See Rigaud, *Stenio Vincent, révélé par la justice et par l'opinion publique* (Port-au-Prince: H. Deschamps, 1957), as discussed by Saurez 37.

19. Danticat 1998: 281.

20. Laferriere's idea here echoes Roland Barthes' argument that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 1977).

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