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## Figures of Flight and Entrapment in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*

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Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat's 1995 short-story cycle *Krik? Krak!* deftly moves from Haiti to the U.S. with an opening story dramatizing the treacherous oceanic journey of those fleeing Haiti for refuge in the Bahamas or the U.S., several narratives illustrating Haitian life at different moments across the twentieth century, and two concluding tales devoted to those in diaspora, along with an epilogue.<sup>1</sup> In addition to interrogating linkages, direct and remote, between twentieth-century occurrences and the much longer, complex history of black experience in the Americas, these narratives about Haitians experiencing violent forms of displacement engage with vernacular literary traditions of Haitian, Afro-Caribbean, and African diasporas in a way that does important diasporic cultural work. Danticat's stories construct imaginative discourses of community by evoking, hybridizing, and reworking folklore and legends of the black Atlantic as well as twentieth-century literary retellings of these narratives.

Indeed in its rather brief academic life thus far, *Krik? Krak!* has already generated a rich, substantial, and constantly growing body of literary criticism. However, still insufficiently examined is Danticat's development of the theme of flight, especially in connection with the story, "A Wall of Fire Rising," whose historical complexity and intertextual dimensions call for more elaborate treatment.<sup>2</sup> By "flight," I refer to various kinds of physical flight—that is, flying through the air with wings or their equivalent (as in the traditional, literal understanding), traveling in the air by means of apparatuses such as balloons or airplanes, and also fleeing from circumstances that one desires materially to escape. At the same time, flight carries with it more explicitly figurative dimensions and can be linked to broader notions of ascension, elevation, and escape. An extended reading of "A Wall of Fire Rising," a story that interrogates the character Guy's flight in a way that has implications for how we understand images of flight and associated images of transcendence in the story cycle as a whole, sheds light on Danticat's imaginative exploration of the concept of flight—clearly a powerfully rendered theme in black diasporic literary history in the Americas. By critically considering questions of flight and entrapment through the cultural lens of her own positioning in the late twentieth

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century, Danticat is able to wrestle with the challenges of a diasporic predicament that is at once reminiscent of the history of slavery in Haiti and suggestive of new forms of exploitation and bondage. Moreover, the narrative examines a politics of resistance by foregrounding issues of gender, and it is through this context of engagement that Danticat enters into a dialogue with highly significant vernacular literary antecedents, both oral and written. These antecedents include the diasporic legend of flying Africans (and its many variants) as well as the twentieth-century retelling of this legend found in Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* (1977). At the same time, the story also engages with Haitian revolutionary folklore, including the kinds of representations found in Alejo Carpentier's retelling of the Haitian Revolution in his novel *El reino de este mundo* (1949), translated into English as *The Kingdom of This World*.

Set in a village in Haiti, "A Wall of Fire Rising" provides a glimpse of three critical days in the life of an apparently ordinary Haitian family struggling to survive without gainful employment. While several signs in the text, along with a maternal family tree sketched in a subsequent story, place this family in the mid-twentieth century, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact time in which this story takes place. The main source of work in the village is the local sugar mill, owned and managed by an Arab family—"Haitians of Lebanese or Palestinian descent whose family had been in the country for generations" (60). The father, Guy, is deep on the wait list for permanent employment at the mill, and the mother, Lili, during their most impoverished times, purchases spices on credit and attempts to sell them at the marketplace. Through all of this financial hardship, they are trying to raise a son, Little Guy, and aspire to give him life opportunities beyond a career of backbreaking work at the sugar mill.

Throughout the twentieth century and even into the twenty-first, the grueling labor and exploitative practices of the sugar industry on the island of Hispaniola continue to be reminiscent of slavery and its legacy on the island.<sup>3</sup> Haitian sugar cane fields are reminders of when French-owned sugar plantations worked by enslaved Africans made Haiti (St. Domingue) France's most profitable colony in the Americas, supplying a great share of the world's consumption of sugar. In Carolyn Fick's words, Haiti was "one of the greatest wealth-producing slave colonies the world had ever known" (91). Indeed sugar cane fields are a repeated setting in Danticat's fiction and allow her to explore issues of violence and trauma across different historical moments in Haitian history. For instance, cane fields are the site of sexual violence in Danticat's first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994); this is where the mother, Martine, was raped by a macoute.<sup>4</sup> The sugar plantation is the setting for genocide in Danticat's historical novel, *The Farming of Bones* (1998),

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which examines the 1937 slaughter of Haitian immigrants living and working in the Dominican Republic. “Nineteen Thirty-Seven,” Danticat’s second story in *Krik? Krak!*, also ponders the legacy of this brutal massacre. Guy, “born in the shadow of the sugar mill” and now living with his family in a small “shack” in the “shantytown” surrounding the mill, is clearly associated with this historical lineage of dispossessed Haitian laborers. That Guy’s career aspirations at this point are circumscribed by the improbability of even securing a place within this exploitative industry indicates the expendability of his labor and the degree of economic constriction he experiences. While the family’s lived experience of oppression is evident, the specific forces and structures of entrapment are less discernible in the story, as Guy, Lili, and their son struggle to survive within brutal economic structures in which power appears effectively dispersed. Likely points of intervention, reform, or protest within this economic system remain terribly unclear.

“A Wall of Fire Rising” is governed by two parallel plot lines involving the respective plights of the father and son. Little Guy has been given the honor of performing the role of the Haitian revolutionary leader Boukman Dutty in his school play. Little Guy enthusiastically announces this news just as Guy Sr. holds back on his news that he has been given a few hours of work cleaning latrines at the sugar mill—his first job at the mill in nearly six months. Thus, one storyline consists of Little Guy rehearsing the glorious revolutionary rhetoric attributed to the legendary Boukman, a slave from Jamaica who was sold into slavery in Haiti and became an inspirational political leader. The reputed vodou priest Boukman, according to legend, spoke powerful words of freedom in defiance of the French colonizers and helped to spark the revolution that led ultimately to the abolition of slavery and the founding of the Haitian republic in 1804. However, while the son gains mastery over Boukman’s words, the father, in the other storyline, turns inward in response to their impoverished conditions and also becomes increasingly obsessed with his desire to fly a hot air balloon, thus inaugurating the theme of flight. As Little Guy proudly announces, “I am Boukman” (54) and subsequently recites Boukman’s famous call for freedom, the setting of the story reminds us that this is a family that is still very much in bondage. And the transcendent feelings produced by Little Guy’s eloquent revolutionary rhetoric—not to mention the intellectual promise demonstrated by his facility in memorizing these rhetorically complex lines—are in marked contrast with the family’s abject poverty as well as the father’s increasing misery. Little Guy’s defiant words draw attention to a twentieth-century Haitian community in desperate need of liberation. Quite tellingly, as Little Guy triumphs in mastering the first passage from Boukman’s speech, Guy Sr. completes his first day cleaning toilets (72).

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Images of Guy's emasculation and infantilization in the narrative further underscore his misery, and he becomes preoccupied with the thought of flying a hot air balloon. A multivalent symbol in the text, the balloon signals different kinds of flight. In its initial appearance in the story, it alludes to migration/immigration as one way, perhaps, for impoverished Haitians to begin life anew, and some of Guy's comments in the narrative reveal precisely this desire to start a new life, to "be something new" (73). The balloon had been acquired in the U.S. by the son of the factory owners, and he "occasionally flew over the shantytown skies" with it (60)—an activity that seems to mock a village community mired in poverty and characterized by immobility. Ominously it is stored behind a fence of barbed wire, and the narrative depicts Guy longing for this, lost in his dreams about flying it, with his hand pushed through the barbed wire that restricts access to it. If the hot air balloon represents the infinite promise of the mythified immigrant journey to America, then the barbed wire is a sober reminder of the many obstacles confronting Haitian immigrants as they attempt to reach the shores of the U.S. Indeed the forbidding image of barbed wire may bring to mind the perilous oceanic journey undertaken by many refugees, as thematized in the opening story of *Krik? Krak!*, "Children of the Sea," which follows the desperate journey of a boat of refugees fleeing Haiti with little chance of reaching the shores of the U.S. The barbed wire also invokes U.S. immigration policies of the late twentieth century that refused entry to so many Haitian refugees fleeing state violence and seeking political asylum.<sup>5</sup> The promise of a new horizon, a chance to begin life anew, is at once evoked and taken away by the image of the fenced-in balloon.

While the story alludes specifically to immigration to the U.S. as one form of escape, albeit a dangerous and improbable one, it also explores the depth of Guy's yearning for some kind of transcendence of his constricted life, a yearning that takes the form of a desire to soar like a bird by piloting the hot air balloon. This becomes evident in his dialogue with Lili:

"Pretend that this is the time of miracles and we believed in them. I watched the owner for a long time, and I think I can fly that balloon. The first time I saw him do it, it looked like a miracle, but the more and more I saw it, the more ordinary it became."

"You're probably intelligent enough to do it," she said.

"I am intelligent enough to do it. You're right to say that I can."

"Don't you think about hurting yourself?"

"Think like this. Can't you see yourself up there? Up in the clouds somewhere like some kind of bird?"

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“If God wanted people to fly, he would have given us wings on our backs.”  
“You’re right, Lili, you’re right. But look what he gave us instead. He gave us reasons to want to fly. He gave us the air, the birds, our son.”  
“I don’t understand you,” she said.  
“Our son, your son, you do not want him cleaning latrines.”  
“He can do other things.”  
“Me too. I can do other things too.” (67-68)

Guy’s words effectively conflate literal flight (involving clouds, air, and birds) with figurative flight (connected with his sentiments toward his son and thoughts about their future). Successfully flying the hot air balloon comes to represent, for Guy, the transcendence of a life whose circumstances continually emasculate, infantilize, and entrap him. Guy’s emphasis on his possession of the craft and ingenuity required to fly the balloon may bring to mind the efforts of the mythical Daedalus, a craftsman who, according to Greek legend, skillfully fashioned the wings that allowed him and his son, Icarus, to rise above and liberate themselves from the labyrinth that ensnared them. The metaphorical implications of Daedalus’ efforts to escape King Minos’ labyrinth in Crete enable us to see more clearly Guy’s reliance on his ingenuity to escape a labyrinthine economic system that continually diminishes his sense of agency. Guy’s utter lack of economic agency within this system is perhaps best exemplified by his position of “number seventy-eight” on the company’s wait list for “permanent hire” (66). Of course Daedalus attempted to bring his son with him—an attempt that ultimately failed when Icarus flew too close to the sun—whereas Guy’s dream of flying is, it turns out, an individual one. Guy does successfully pilot the balloon and soars above the shantytown, his flight cheered on by a delighted crowd of laborers. But the excitement quickly turns to horror, for Guy unexpectedly climbs out of the basket and within seconds was “hurtling down towards the crowd,” falling to his death (77).

In many ways a desire to reclaim individual agency in a world characterized by the destruction of such agency, Guy’s dream of piloting the hot air balloon perhaps also resonates with the cluster ballooning phenomenon in our popular culture these past few decades.<sup>6</sup> It is fair to say that both the endurance of the Daedalus myth and the recent media spectacle of ordinary individuals drawn to the dangerous yet exhilarating practice of cluster ballooning contribute to the semiotic context in which “A Wall of Fire Rising” acquires meaning. However, the particular nature of Guy’s bondage highlights additional, crucial associations. His life “in the shadow of the sugar mill,” this industry’s connection with the history and legacy of slavery in the Americas, and the explicit references to Haitian revolutionary history construct an explicit linkage to various renderings of the New

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World legend of Africans who magically transcended their bondage by flying back to Africa. There are many instances and versions of this legend throughout the Americas—kept alive and frequently reworked not just orally but also in twentieth-century literature. Danticat’s story is also evocative of a specifically Haitian legend of flying that, according to folklore, was central to the revolutionary imagination of the late eighteenth century and, by some accounts, contributed to the historic events culminating in Haitian independence in 1804.

Guy’s flight, even if it leads to a violent, tragic conclusion, does evoke various New World tales of flying Africans and a whole set of twentieth-century literary reworkings of these narratives. Most fundamentally, this is a legend that circulated among enslaved African communities in the Americas. “First named in [the collection] *Drums and Shadows* [1940],” observes Olivia Smith Storey, “the Flying Africans specifically refers to African born slaves flying from slavery in the Americas” (1-2). In prominent literary works such as Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988), as well as in Julie Dash’s acclaimed film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), the legend is connected with the West African slaves that landed off the coast of Georgia in 1803. According to the basic folk tale, after landing on St. Simons Island, a group of enslaved Africans transcended the conditions of slavery by flying back to Africa. The strictly rationalist outsiders’ perspective is that these slaves committed suicide and *that* was the only form of transcendence. Yet the flying African stories passed down in folklore are celebratory tales of magic and freedom.

For Storey, the trope of the flying Africans functions as “a system of rhetorical devices that facilitates the possibility of expressing the diasporic predicament” (3). Gay Wilentz, in emphasizing the historical and cultural specificity of this trope, explains that the legend symbolized “the collective resistance of those in the diaspora to a system which denied their humanity” (31)—namely, slavery in the Americas. In addition, Barbara Christian observes that the legend of flying Africans is “a touchstone of New World Black folklore. Through this story, people of African descent emphasized their power to determine their own freedom, though their bodies might be enslaved” (qtd. in Wilentz 29). If the trope of the flying Africans expresses, as Storey suggests, the “diasporic predicament” of Africans in the New World, then we should ask (and try to answer here) how Danticat, writing from the vantage point of the late twentieth century—positioned between Haiti and the U.S.—sketches the “diasporic predicament” in her particular fashioning of this legend.

While “A Wall of Fire Rising” invokes stories of flight that, to borrow a phrase from Wendy Walters, had “wide geographic currency” in the Americas—that is, in

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African-American, Afro-Latin, and Afro-Caribbean communities (Walters 4)—it is also important to acknowledge some of the specific ways in which symbols in the text resonate with Haitian revolutionary history. Fittingly, the story was first published independently in 1991,<sup>7</sup> the bicentennial of the legendary 1791 Bois Caïman ceremony over which Boukman presided and where he was said to have spoken his famous prayer and call to revolution.<sup>8</sup> The image of a rising “wall of fire,” conveyed by the story’s title, historically refers to the dramatic sight of insurrection in 1791 after the Bois Caïman ceremony, when slaves burned down the sugar plantations that had enslaved them. We find, for instance, this very image in C.L.R. James’ historical description of the fires that erupted: “in a few days one-half of the famous North Plain was a flaming ruin. From Le Cap the whole horizon was a wall of fire. From this wall continually rose thick black volumes of smoke, through which came tongues of flame leaping to the very sky” (88). For several weeks, recounts James in another metaphorical turn, “a rain of burning cane straw” enveloped the city (88). The story’s title is also echoed in Little Guy’s recitation of Boukman: “*A wall of fire is rising and in the ashes, I see the bones of my people. Not only those people whose dark hollow faces I see daily in the fields, but all those souls who have gone ahead to haunt my dreams. At night I relive once more the last caresses from the hand of a loving father, a valiant love, a beloved friend*” (56). Both in the legend that developed around Boukman’s speech and in Little Guy’s rehearsal of Boukman, there is a continuity suggested between Boukman’s revolutionary fervor and the spirits of those enslaved Africans who came before; these ancestral souls inspired and strengthened the revolutionary cause taken up by Boukman.

We discover that the fire imagery occurs not only in revolutionary lore, but also in Danticat’s description of Guy’s present-day conditions, specifically in the portrayal of his desire to liberate himself from his “shackles.” The fire imagery helps to link these different moments in Haitian history. For instance, the mechanics of firing the hot air balloon with which Guy is preoccupied—that is, heating the air with a flame in order to cause the hot air to rise, thereby lifting the balloon into flight—also resembles a “fire rising” and thus extends the significance of the story’s title and links Guy’s twentieth-century aspirations for freedom to the revolutionary fervor of the late eighteenth century. Guy’s flight and death are anticipated when he attempts to demonstrate to his wife the laws of physics by burning a piece of paper “to an ashy film” and then watching the “burning paper [float] in the night breeze for a while, landing in fragments on the grass.” This, explains Guy excitedly, “with a flame in his eyes brighter than the lighter’s,” is how the balloon works (62). My contention is that the proliferation of images of

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fire, flames, and ashes in the narrative, when considered in relation to the trope of flying as well as Little Guy's enactment of Boukman's prayer, conjures up images of Boukman's revolutionary predecessor: the figure of Macandal, a slave who was burned at the stake by French colonial authorities but reportedly rose up through the flames and flew.

It is worth noting that such images of fire, ashes, and subsequent flight/transcendence (both in Danticat's narrative and in Haitian revolutionary lore) may bring to mind the symbol of the phoenix as it has developed from classical mythology through the many versions and retellings in subsequent centuries.<sup>9</sup> In perhaps the most familiar account, the archetypal phoenix experiences death through the combustion of his nest, yet it is from the flames and ashes of this combustion that a young phoenix emerges. Characterized by life, death, and this dramatic rebirth, the phoenix conveys both the notion of *continuity* (or immortality even, for the phoenix, in a way, lives on) and that of *transition*, for a new phoenix rises up from the ashes and thus inaugurates a new cycle, a new life, a new day.<sup>10</sup> Without denying the richness and explanatory power of archetypal figures such as the phoenix, my emphasis in this essay is on exploring the linkages Danticat's story develops between Haitian revolutionary folklore and the day-to-day struggles of this ordinary Haitian family living in the shadow of the twentieth-century sugar mill.

Folklore and a highly incomplete historiography identify Macandal as the West African slave in Haiti who, in 1758, called upon the gods of vodou and escaped the flames of his execution at the hands of French colonial authorities by emerging from the fire and flying free from bondage. A slave who had previously escaped the sugar plantation, Macandal had organized maroon slave communities in rebellion against the French more than thirty years before the revolutionary activities of the 1790s in which Boukman played a prominent role. It was precisely Macandal's revolutionary activity that led the French to orchestrate a very public execution by fire in 1758. Some versions of Haitian revolutionary history suggest that Boukman inherited or was inspired by Macandal's spirit in a way that allowed him to deliver his powerful words at the famed vodou ceremony in 1791.<sup>11</sup> The legend of Macandal was maintained in Haitian oral traditions and fashioned for a global audience in 1949 by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier in his novel about the Haitian Revolution, *El reino de este mundo* [*The Kingdom of This World*]. Carpentier portrays Macandal's magical flight in his chapter titled "The Great Flight." Demonstrating her familiarity with Carpentier's work, Danticat penned the introduction to the 2006 English translation edition of *The Kingdom of This World*.

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The patrilineal inheritance, from Macandal to Boukman, so central to a certain nationalist vision of Haitian independence, is in some ways critically restaged by Danticat's positioning of father and son, Guy and Little Guy, in the concluding sequence of the story. Danticat's restaging also introduces the powerful presence and intervening voice of the mother, Lili. Just after witnessing his father's flight and then seeing his corpse on the ground, his blood "soaking the landing spot" (77), Little Guy reprises his performance of Boukman's lines, with "his voice rising to a man's grieving roar." Infused with a profound sense of tragic loss, Little Guy's defiant call for freedom functions as a ceremonial act that aligns itself with Boukman's legendary ceremony of 1791: "*There is so much sadness in the faces of my people. I have called on their gods, now I call on our gods. I call on our young. I call on our old. I call on our mighty and the weak. I call on everyone and anyone so that we shall all let out one piercing cry that we may either live freely or die*" (79-80). If Boukman channeled the fiery energy of his predecessors in his speech at Bois Caïman, then we might say that Little Guy's dramatic performance upon the land soaked with his father's blood channels the power and pathos of his father's aspiration for freedom. Even if his father's flight lacks the magical qualities and revolutionary agenda of Macandal's mythic flight before his executioners, Little Guy's final declaration about a people's desire for freedom is a fitting tribute to his father's aspirations. And while the efficacy of Little Guy's speech is questionable, his words do voice the outrage of a family in bondage.

But if Macandal's flight has been constructed in highly mystical terms, and the many narratives of Africans flying from bondage in the New World are also characterized by magic, the ending of Danticat's story seems brutally realist and marked by the lack of that sort of transcendence. At the end of his flight, Guy is portrayed as "climbing over the side of the basket" and then "hurtling down towards the crowd" and crashing, while the "balloon kept floating free" (77-78), making it difficult to read the conclusion as other than tragic. It should be noted that according to a certain African diasporic cosmology, upon death one's spirit returns to the African homeland, and by this logic, we can say that Guy has finally gone home.<sup>12</sup> While this may hold true, this is far from the emphasis of the narrative in its concluding lines, as we see in the imagery cited above. Guy has certainly escaped his bondage, but it is hardly a triumphant tale. It is Guy's desire, his aspiration for freedom from a set of structures bound up with the legacy of slavery and colonialism in Haiti, that speaks directly to the expressions of resistance found in diasporic legends of flying—his aspiration and a momentary brilliance, that is. Guy's ascendance in the balloon is cheered on by the laborers bearing witness to his flight. Several women "were waving their head rags at the

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sky, shouting, ‘Go! Beautiful, go!’” (76). Even the owner of the balloon expresses wonder and disbelief: “How did he get up there? You need a whole crew to fly these things.” The foreman of the factory is also drawn out to witness the spectacle of “a man flying above the factory.” But the delight and astonishment quickly turn to horror when Guy falls to his death, with his wife and son among the audience.

Guy’s illicit acquiring of the balloon and his “stolen moment” of flight may remind some readers of strands of another black diasporic folk tale, “A Flying Fool.” Though it offers a brand of humor clearly divergent from Danticat’s serious, sobering tale, “A Flying Fool” similarly depicts flight as brief and illicit—achieved only when an African-American man steals wings from the kingdom of heaven after St. Peter, designated gatekeeper of a racially exclusionary heaven, refuses him entrance. In this story, the flying man is eventually cornered, with his wings broken and nowhere to go; he is expelled from the kingdom of heaven but relishes the experience of having flown. One might argue that Guy, in making the most of his stolen moment and then plunging out of the balloon to his death, is in some ways more like the flying fool who gets cornered than the flying African who transcends; with nowhere to go, instead of returning to his conditions of enslavement, he chooses to jump to his death.

In many of the popular folk narratives of flying Africans who triumph by liberating themselves and returning to Africa, the essence of the power of flight is the retention of one’s African culture. To put it more conceptually, we might say that it is precisely an unobstructed connection to one’s cultural heritage that allows one not only to withstand but also to transcend the conditions of enslavement in the New World. By contrast, “A Wall of Fire Rising” seems to emphasize a diasporic predicament characterized by the remoteness of both an African heritage and Haitian revolutionary culture. The magic is in the culture, or to allow a slippage into metaphor, the magic *is* the culture, which is precisely what Guy and his family seem to lack access to. For instance, the powerful words of Boukman are only accessible in highly mediated, distorted form. While Little Guy’s initial recitation of Boukman’s speech allowed the parents to feel “as though for a moment they had been given the rare pleasure of hearing the voice of one of the forefathers of Haitian independence in the forced baritone of their only child,” the third-person narrative points out, “It was obvious that this was a speech written by a European man, who gave to the slave revolutionary Boukman the kind of European phrasing that might have sent the real Boukman turning in his grave” (56).<sup>13</sup> Even though the activity of the school play contributes to the historical memory of the Haitian Revolution and Boukman’s role therein, what has already been taken away or made remote by layer after layer of colonial historiography is the most cherished,

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magical quality of Boukman—his *voice*, the words that called on the *loa* or spirits in the vodou ceremony at the center of the nationalist mythology. Interestingly, in many versions of the legend of flying Africans, maintaining one’s African tongue, or at least being reminded of one’s native language by an elder when it has been forgotten, was a precondition of flight. According to the cultural logic of these tales of transcendence, keeping intact or recovering one’s culture prior to the distortion wrought by enslavement gave one the resources, the “magic,” to transcend the conditions of enslavement—in many stories literally and in several twentieth-century literary reworkings, metaphorically. The diasporic predicament sketched by Danticat in this tale presents a family struggling in a system of continual exploitation, yearning for freedom, and lacking access to the kinds of cultural resources that might allow them not only to withstand but also to transcend their material circumstances.

The notion of drawing strength from cultural forms undistorted by slavery is developed prominently in Carpentier’s magical retelling of Macandal and Boukman’s roles in the Haitian revolution. Graciela Limón observes that “Carpentier penetrates to the core of African mysticism—voodoo—showing how the Haitian slaves drew from it a source of self-identity and ultimately political freedom” (195). Moreover, Limón explains, “The mystique of Macandal is passed on to the Jamaican Boukman who mobilizes his people in the name of the gods of Africa who demand that their people be liberated.” By calling on the *loas* or spirits of Africa, Boukman creates “the ultimate linkage between Haiti and the continent which will lead to freedom” (Limón 199). In “A Wall of Fire Rising,” we see little opportunity for this family to recover fully such a linkage to a cultural heritage and to find in it a source of transcendence. If key elements of West African culture are preserved in the practice of vodou, which was to have infused Boukman’s speech with spiritual power, the words passed down to Little Guy are far removed from these cultural sources. Moreover, the political leaders of eighteenth-century Haiti had clear targets in their revolutionary agenda, whereas the powers that economically entrap Guy and his family appear dispersed, without clearly visible points of vulnerability or intervention around which to build a new political movement. While Little Guy’s impassioned words upon his father’s death create a bridge to the revolutionary history of Haiti and thus possibly reignite powerful political sentiments, it is unclear how the next chapter of history will be written.

Furthermore, even though Guy has, through death, liberated himself from the chains of his bondage, in the end it is virtually impossible to see him as heroic, for the logic of the narrative problematizes his actions on several levels. The strongest

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voice of opposition comes from his wife, Lili, as Danticat importantly foregrounds gender difference in exploring the significance of Guy's flight. Guy's individualist, masculine assumptions are revealed in a conversation with Lili prior to his decision to fly off in the balloon. Lili pointedly exposes the limitations of Guy's dream of flying:

"If you were to take that balloon and fly away, would you take me and the boy?"

"First you don't want me to take it and now you want to go?"

"I just want to know that when you dream, me and the boy, we're always in your dreams." (73)

Unable to engage with the implications of her query, Guy fails to respond. The suggestion here of different, gendered ways of dreaming problematizes Guy's final actions and creates a space within these narrative traditions of flight to contemplate questions about those left behind. Certainly these are important questions for an author like Danticat, whose commitment to recuperating black diasporic folklore throughout her literary career also reveals strong feminist sensibilities that complicate simple notions of cultural inheritance. We finally learn about Lili's unfortunate fate in a subsequent story, "Between the Pool and the Gardenias," wherein the narrator, Marie, in recounting the female figures in her extended family (characters found in various tales across the story cycle), refers to her "godmother Lili who killed herself in old age because her husband had jumped out of a flying balloon and her grown son left her to go to Miami" (94). This parcel of information, tucked into this subsequent story, further complicates claims about Guy's transcendence. The son becomes another figure of departure, whose own subsequent flight from Haiti compounds Lili's sense of isolation. When one parent flies off in a quest for transcendence, Danticat's narrative seems to ask, what about those who are left behind? Of course this is one of the central thematic questions raised in Toni Morrison's retelling of the flying Africans myth in her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*, which initiates an important cultural dialogue that Danticat's narrative continues.

Milkman, the protagonist of *Song of Solomon*, journeys in the U.S. South in the 1960s in search of his familial and cultural roots. He is overjoyed to discover that his enslaved ancestor, Solomon, liberated himself by flying back to Africa; Milkman is thrilled to learn that his "great-granddaddy could fly! ... didn't need no airplane. Didn't need no fuckin tee double you ay. He could fly his own self!" In response to Milkman's spirited announcement, his lover, Sweet, perceptively asks, "Who'd he leave behind?" (328). Morrison's novel, even as it celebrates the beauty of Solomon's flight and especially the power of the cultural memory thereof,

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re-imagines the narrative of flight by opening up a space of inquiry concerning those left behind and those compelled by circumstances to express their resistance through other means. Ryna, the woman Solomon left behind along with their twenty-one children, apparently lost her mind after Solomon departed. In later years, the ghost of Jake, one of the children Solomon left behind, hauntingly admonishes, “You can’t just fly on off and leave a body” (332). Furthermore, Milkman, in his quest for knowledge, also learns in the end that there are *other* ways to fly, as demonstrated by his aunt Pilate, the strongest maternal figure in the novel. Milkman comes to realize that Pilate (a name invoking its suggestive homophone “pilot”) could fly “Without ever leaving the ground,” for it had always been Pilate’s maternal strength, nurture, song, and storytelling that maintained the cultural vitality of their family vis-à-vis a dominant culture that continually threatened cultural annihilation or erasure. Pilate’s example of maintaining the family’s heritage, traditions, and values in such an aggressively hostile world represents another form of transcendence. This is what produced the magic of her flight.

Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!* also explores an alternative model of flight and transcendence, a way of producing the magic of flight with consequences quite different from Guy’s plummet out of the balloon. I would suggest that our understanding of the tragic conclusion of Guy’s flight allows for a fuller engagement with Danticat’s representation of Défilé’s flight in the preceding story, “Nineteen Thirty-Seven.” This tale is set in the period shortly after *El Corte* [*The Cutting*],<sup>14</sup> the horrifying 1937 massacre of Haitian immigrants living in the Dominican Republic, many of whom labored in sugar plantations that demanded cheap, exploitable Haitian labor. “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” focuses on the relationship between a daughter, Josephine, and her mother, Défilé, a Haitian survivor who had escaped the genocide by fleeing across the Massacre River and reaching Haitian soil—all while she was pregnant with Josephine. Just as Défilé reached Haitian land, her own mother was murdered by soldiers on the Dominican side of the river; it was on the very same night she lost her mother that Défilé gave birth to Josephine. The story begins a number of years later when Défilé has been imprisoned by Haitian authorities on the basis of allegations that she flew illicitly at night; Josephine, now much more grown up, regularly visits her mother in prison. A central question the narrative poses concerns whether or not Défilé could indeed fly and, if so, what it means for her to rise up in flight.<sup>15</sup>

The prison authorities, under the sway of their own theories about women who flew, construct Défilé’s flight as a dreadful, horrifying act. She was badly beaten, arrested, and imprisoned upon accusations that she was a *lougarou*, a dreaded

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mythical creature who sheds her skin at night to fly about and prey on children.<sup>16</sup> Défilé was beaten and arrested when she was falsely accused of causing the death of a friend's baby. Imprisoned with other women accused of being loulou and flying at night, "like birds on fire" (38), Défilé suffers abuse at the hands of the guards, and they eventually beat her to death. N'Zengou-Tayo, in an insightful discussion of the loulou and Danticat's rewriting of this figure in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!*, associates the loulou with transgressive female figures and emphasizes the normative gender and cultural assumptions behind common accusations. She explains, for instance, that "the 'loulou' as re-written by Danticat [in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*] appears to be a woman who does not abide by male 'rules'" (128). Another feminist perspective, explains N'Zengou-Tayo, suggests that "the community generally accuses of being 'loulou' women who cannot fulfill male expectations in terms of sexuality and procreation" and that even "if they are married women, usually they lack the submissiveness expected from them" (128). Hence, the imputation of this identity has a policing function, for it seems to target women who transgress—fearful figures who violate masculine expectations and thereby incite public fear and anxiety. In this discourse, a flying woman is a monstrous figure who fails to stay within certain boundaries of convention. In "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," the authorities imprison and abuse these women in an effort to take away their power of flight.

The daughter, Josephine, who narrates the story, wonders about the alleged flying powers of her mother and eventually arrives at a different conclusion about her mother's capacity for flight. While at certain moments Josephine reveals considerable confusion, at the end of the narrative, just after her mother's death, a memory comes rushing back to her. Significantly, the memory returns in the explicit form of a story:

Then the story came back to me as my mother had often told it. On that day so long ago, in the year nineteen hundred and thirty-seven, in the Massacre River, my mother did fly. Weighted down by my body inside hers, she leaped from Dominican soil into the water, and out again on the Haitian side of the river. She glowed red when she came out, blood clinging to her skin, which at that moment looked as though it were in flames. (49)

The story of Défilé's flight back to Haiti is a tale of tenacity and miraculous survival—about a courageous leap toward life that carried her through a river of blood whose stains appeared like flames. Défilé survived a most horrendous episode of violence and lived to tell the tale of her feat in which she carried the weight of her daughter in her womb across the river. In some ways, Défilé's flight with the weight of her child in her womb resembles those stories of flying Africans

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that feature a mother flying while bearing the weight of her child. In the story “All God’s Chillen Had Wings,” both men and women flew, and those who were mothers flew with infants suckling at their breasts. Virginia Hamilton also relates a similar story about Sarah and her baby in “The People Could Fly.” Upon being chased and whipped by the overseer, Sarah not only lifted herself in flight but also carried her child in her arms, and then flew back home to Africa.

Just as Défilé’s flight made possible Josephine’s life, Josephine enables the preservation, even mythification, of this memory of Défilé. The story is preserved in the cultural transmission from mother to daughter, enacted in the first two lines of the foregoing passage as the daughter begins telling this story in her own inspired voice: “On that day so long ago, in the year nineteen hundred and thirty-seven....” Josephine had learned in her annual pilgrimage to the Massacre River, which she and her mother would make with other women survivors of the genocide, that her “mother’s dive toward life—her swim among all those bodies slaughtered in flight—gave her those wings of flames” (41). All of these women survivors had the power of flight, for Défilé suggests, in a rather cryptic lesson to her daughter, that “All of the women who came with us to the river, they could go to the moon and back if that is what they wanted” (43). Contained within this remark is the notion that not only did these women survive this tragic episode of history, but they also lived to tell their stories. These pilgrimages to the river encapsulate what is actually a lifelong process of remembering, memorializing, and giving testimony—a process that allows these women, in spite of their material circumstances, to soar. The memory of Défilé’s flight, preserved and mythified in stories, exceeds in imaginative breadth and power the monstrous flight the authorities imputed to her. Moreover, in “Nineteen Thirty-Seven,” Danticat counters the discourse of the *lougarrow* by re-appropriating the figure of the flying woman and reconceptualizing the magic of her flight.

Just as Défilé dove into the Massacre River in her effort to find life on the other side, survivors of such violence engage in testifying and storytelling in their efforts to reach figuratively the steady ground of the other side. This analogy becomes clearer when we look at Danticat’s use of similar imagery in her foreword to Beverly Bell’s edited collection *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women’s Stories of Survival and Resistance* (2001). In the concluding lines of a foreword in which she acknowledges both the strength of these women survivors of violence and the power of their testimony, Danticat exhorts, “Let us gather around and listen to them. For after every night must come the dawn, a dawn that will take us not only midstream but all the way to the other side, away from the fires and the coals and hopefully toward more solid ground” (Danticat xi). Similar to how Défilé emerged from the

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water glowing red with “wings of flame,” these women survivors are capable of “walking on fire,” and it is their inspirational stories that revitalize a community in its journey to reach the other side. In other words, it is through this communal practice of storytelling—which maintains histories, memories, and traditions even in the face of the most difficult of circumstances—that a community can take flight, often without even leaving the ground.<sup>17</sup>

In “A Wall of Fire Rising,” Guy does achieve liftoff, much to the excitement of the workers at the sugar mill, and his powerful yearning for freedom at all costs is deeply reminiscent of many inherited tales of enslaved Africans flying free from bondage. The imagery surrounding his flight, placed within the context of his son’s performance, is also evocative of Haitian revolutionary folklore. Yet Danticat reworks this inherited trope by revealing the conditions that deepen his entrapment and ultimately take the magic out of Guy’s flight. And just as Morrison opened up a space for pondering questions of gender in her refashioning of the legend of the flying Africans, Danticat exposes the highly individual, masculine sensibilities underlying Guy’s flight. A sustained analysis of Guy’s tragic flight enables a fuller engagement with Défilé’s flight in the story “Nineteen Thirty-Seven,” which demonstrates the creation of a myth or legend of flying in its focus on the mother-daughter relationship and the transmission of memory, history, and stories that takes place within this bond. In a slight reconfiguration of the epigraph to Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, it seems appropriate to conclude with the thought, “The mothers may soar / And the children may know their names.”<sup>18</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The nine stories plus epilogue of *Krik? Krak!* can appropriately be described as a short-story cycle, which James Nagel observes is “less unified than a novel but has much greater coherence and thematic integrity than a mere collection of unrelated stories” (17). Applying Nagel’s definition of the genre, we can also say that these independent stories “contain continuing elements of character, setting, action, imagery, or theme that enrich each other in intertextual context” (15). Many literary critics have carefully traced the linkages that unify *Krik? Krak!*, which include recurring characters, common geographical settings, female figures connected across the stories by familial ties, repeated themes/motifs, and an epilogue that helps to unify the work. See, for instance, Rocio G. Davis, J. Misrahi-Barak, and Amanda Putnam.

<sup>2</sup> Both Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef’s *Writing Rage* (2006) and Helen Scott’s *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalization* (2006) discuss the theme of flying in “A Wall of Fire Rising” in insightful ways. However, the many resonances of Danticat’s representation of flight in this story require more elaborate treatment. Several critical works also consider Défilé’s flight in the tale “Nineteen Thirty-Seven.” A fuller engagement with the concept of flight in “A Wall of Fire Rising,” though, will also deepen our understanding of the nature of Défilé’s flight.

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<sup>3</sup> Recent documentary films such as Bill Haney's *The Price of Sugar* (2007) and Amy Serrano's *The Sugar Babies* (2007) reveal tremendously exploitative practices in the sugar industry even today, as these two films focus on the miserable treatment of Haitian workers on sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic.

<sup>4</sup> The Tontons Macoutes were a voluntary militia force known for brutalizing and terrorizing people during the dictatorship of François Duvalier (1957-1971) and also his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier (1971-1986).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. immigration policy in the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, treated Haitians as undesirable and refused to grant asylum to many desperate Haitian refugees. Critics of this policy drew attention to a double standard according to which lighter-skinned Cubans fleeing a communist country were favored over darker-skinned Haitians fleeing the Duvalier dictatorships.

<sup>6</sup> The cluster ballooning phenomenon these past few decades was inspired by Larry Walters' ingenious and arguably reckless 1982 flight in Southern California. Walters, attempting to transcend the mundane, constricting circumstances of his life, engineered a flying machine consisting of a lawn chair and a cluster of helium balloons. He soared to an astonishing altitude of 16,000 feet, somehow managed to avoid plummeting to his death, and won admirers all over the world and also a number of imitators in subsequent years. While Walters was fortunate enough to survive his 1982 flight, in the years that followed he fell into a depression and, sadly, committed suicide in 1993.

<sup>7</sup> It was originally published as "A Wall of Fire" in the Summer 1991 issue of *Cymbals: The National Student Literary Magazine*.

<sup>8</sup> There has been considerable debate among historians over what actually happened at Bois Caïman. Historians have debated numerous issues including the actual geographic location, the date, the religious aspects of the ceremony, the speeches delivered, the political decisions made, the number of slaves in attendance, etc. Some have even questioned whether this ceremony actually took place. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see David Geggus (81-92). My references to the Bois Caïman ceremony typically refer to the lore/legend/mythology that has been passed down and that structures certain nationalist and indigenous visions of the Haitian Revolution.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (15.392-407) for one account of how the phoenix produces its own rebirth. For a description of the function of fire in the phoenix's rebirth, see the subsequent versions found in Lactantius' "The Phoenix" and also the Old English anonymous poem, "The Phoenix."

<sup>10</sup> Along these lines, it is quite common to connect the death and rebirth of the phoenix with the setting and rising of the sun. Hence, even as these symbols suggest eternal life, they also suggest the transition to a new era. See R. van den Broek's *The Myth of the Phoenix: According to Classical and Early Christian Traditions* for an extensive overview of the symbol of the phoenix.

<sup>11</sup> C.L.R. James has written vividly about the Bois Caïman ceremony that has become a part of the nationalist mythology of Haiti. James provides memorable lines about Boukman's role as a "High Priest" who spoke the now famous prayer at the vodou ceremony (86-87). Geggus, however, in examining the historiography, cautions that "it is not evident that Boukman was himself a religious leader" (89).

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Alan Rice points out that among African slaves in the New World "The belief that when [Africans] died they would return to their homeland was very strong and gave

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friends of the deceased a potent link to Africa” (85). Rice goes on to observe, “With such a belief system underpinning African spiritual praxis in the New World, it is little wonder that suicide was seen by many Africans as a perfectly legitimate response which might hasten their passage ... back home” (86). However, I find that Danticat depicts Guy’s death ultimately in tragic as opposed to utopian terms.

<sup>13</sup> In an interview Danticat explains that some versions of Boukman’s speech are made to sound “like Shakespeare” and that in plays it is “washed of the anger” (Shea 2). Moreover, our awareness of the historiographic questions mentioned earlier—some of which came to the fore in the bicentennial celebrations of Bois Caïman—further magnifies the issue of lack of access to cultural resources concerning this revolutionary history. See Geggus (81-82).

<sup>14</sup> In Haitian Creole, this tragic episode is referred to as *Kout Kouto* [*The Stabbing*].

<sup>15</sup> See the two essays by Jana Evans Braziel for her illuminating analyses of the character Défilé’s connection with the historical Dédée Bazile, also known as Défilée-la-Folle, the sutler who, according to legend, gathered and then buried the remains of Haitian leader Dessalines’ severed and mutilated body when he was assassinated in 1806. Observing that Dédée Bazile is the “common ancestor” that connects the many maternal figures in *Krik? Krak!*, Braziel suggests that Danticat, in remembering this figure, “stitches together ... an ancestral line for *femmes d’Ayiti* beginning with Dédée Bazile and extending *lòt bò dlo* (the other side of the waters) to her diasporic daughters” (“Re-membering Défilée” 16).

<sup>16</sup> Marie-José N’Zengou-Tayo describes some of the characteristics of the loup-garou: “Mainly, she is an old woman who removes her skin at night to fly like a ball of fire. She drinks young children’s blood or eats human flesh” (128). N’Zengou-Tayo also cites Alfred Métraux’s study that traces stories about the loup-garou to West African beliefs.

<sup>17</sup> To be sure, the story cycle *Krik? Krak!* presents a variety of vernacular spaces in which storytelling practices allow participants, both speakers and listeners, to rise above the daily circumstances of their lives. The very title *Krik? Krak!* makes reference to a vibrant storytelling tradition in Haiti and other parts of the black Caribbean, characterized by a call-and-response pattern in which a storyteller’s provocative “Krik?” generates in response an enthusiastic “Kra!” from an active, listening audience.

<sup>18</sup> The epigraph to Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* reads as follows: “The fathers may soar/And the children may know their names.”

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