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The Work of Water in Edwidge Danticat's Environmental Imagination

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THE WORK OF WATER
IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S
ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English Literature

by
Gabrielle Nugent
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that focusing on seascapes in Danticat's fiction unsettles former land-sea relations and, in turn, generates fluid conceptual alternatives to rigid colonial histories, hierarchies, and temporal scales. Investigating how the water in Danticat's fiction upends cultural narratives of colonial progress and modernization's processes also yields considerations of how Danticat's novels entail a widening of the customary aperture of ecocriticism. Thinking about Danticat's fiction environmentally raises the stakes for how we may think about the links between "the local" and contexts of planetary reach on an "ecoglobal" scale. Foregrounding these concerns when reading Danticat's work bears directly on contemporary pairings between literary studies and the environmental humanities. An attention to Danticat's seascapes thus enriches ecocritical approaches to not only Danticat's fiction, but also offers a narrative point of intersection in which two previously divergent schools of thought may be paired. Braiding postcolonial perspectives with ecocritical critiques outlines how literature's imaginative capacities can galvanize forces for not just social, but also global environmental change. Thus, this paper, in coalescing an analysis of the ubiquity of water in Danticat's work with questions of how the narrative itself takes up tidal patterns of circulation, is primarily concerned with how the forms of Danticat's fiction articulate and circulate reflections on empire, American foreign policy, what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence," and methods of resistance. I contend here that Danticat's aesthetic strategy mediates socioenvironmental transformation through the trope of water. Water, this essay claims, as both a natural resource and source of history, offers us innovative ways of thinking

about how it can initiate possibilities for prompting socioenvironmental change—and reflects what is at stake if we don't.

DEDICATION

To Regina and Edward Nugent—my wildest dream advocates and most enthusiastic supporters—your unfailing love, unwavering generosity, and constant encouragement have made this possible in more ways than I could ever begin to express. Thank you for sharing your profound admiration and respect for the sea with me from an early age. Thank you for always indulging my endless curiosity about the world, and for satiating it by filling our home with literature and my life with travel.

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Edwidge Danticat's novels are principally about water. Three bodies of water in particular are consistently featured in Danticat's work: the Massacre River, named after the genocide that occurred on the Dominican side of its banks; the Caribbean Sea; and the Atlantic ocean, which holds, according to Danticat, the stories of those who live "life eternal, among the children of the deep blue sea" (*KK* 7).¹ The paradox of the sea as an originary space and the sea as a passageway to freedom through death is routed through many of Danticat's works, which are primarily set in Haiti. Since most arrivants to islands before the twentieth century came by water, the sea is often positioned as "an origin for the diverse peoples of the Caribbean and the Pacific" (DeLoughrey 23).² And yet, Danticat's prose often draws on the stories of her "foremothers and forefathers" showing "such deep trust in the sea that they would jump off slave ships and let the waves embrace them" ("We are..."). Danticat writes extensively, in both her fiction and nonfiction pieces, on her ancestors' confidence in the sea as "the beginning and the end of all things," the "road to freedom and their entrance to Guinin," where they believed their spirits would ultimately return.³ Her texts frequently ruminate on Haiti's long drowned history: that is, of its roots in the trans-Atlantic slave route and of those lost to the bottom of the ocean during the Middle Passage—"the holocaust" of the slave trade

¹ For this paper's purposes, in-text citations from Danticat's short story collection, *Krik? Krak!*, will be identified by the abbreviation *KK*; I will similarly denote in-text citations for *Claire of the Sea Light* as *CSL*.

² My use of broad terms like "European," "Western," "Caribbean," "Pacific," in this essay are necessary to outline my argument but are not intended to displace the real complexity of peoples associated with these geographic regions. Similarly, this sentence here is by no means representative of all native Caribbean arrivants nor all indigenous historiography.

³ In a nonfiction essay Danticat wrote early on in her writing career titled, "We are Ugly, But We are Here," she explains that her "foremothers," when enslaved, "believed that when they died their spirits would return to Africa," most specifically to a "peaceful land" called "Guinin, where gods and goddesses live." Both quotes here are taken from that piece.

that Danticat asserts is part of Haiti's "legacy." Danticat's prose not only addresses water's historical, spiritual, and cosmic significance, but also explores its role, as a natural resource, in understanding the economic and environmental conditions in Haiti as well.

This paper argues that focusing on seascapes in Danticat's fiction unsettles former land-sea relations and, in turn, generates fluid conceptual alternatives to rigid colonial histories, hierarchies, and temporal scales. Investigating how the water in Danticat's fiction upends cultural narratives of colonial progress and modernization's processes also yields considerations of how Danticat's novels entail a widening of the customary aperture of ecocriticism. Thinking about Danticat's fiction environmentally, or "ecologically," offers a perception of raised stakes as to the significance of the links between "the local" and contexts of planetary reach on an "ecoglobal" scale, a "whole-earth way of thinking and feeling about environmentality" (Buell 227). Foregrounding these concerns when reading Danticat's work bears directly on contemporary pairings between literary studies and the environmental humanities. An attention to Danticat's seascapes thus enriches ecocritical approaches to not only Danticat's fiction, but also offers a narrative point of intersection in which two previously divergent schools of thought may be paired. Braiding postcolonial perspectives with ecocritical critiques outlines how literature's "imaginative capacities" can galvanize "nonliterary forces for social change" and engages the "representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence" (Nixon 33). A key question there arises: in coalescing an analysis of the ubiquity of water in Danticat's work with

questions of how the narrative itself takes up tidal patterns of circulation, how do the forms of Danticat's fiction articulate—and circulate—reflections on empire, American foreign policy, “slow violence,” and methods of resistance? And furthermore, how does Danticat's aesthetic strategy mediate socioenvironmental transformation through the trope of water? Water, as a natural resource and source of history, offers innovative ways of thinking about how it can initiate possibilities for prompting social and environmental change—and reflects what is at stake if we don't.

The ocean's intrinsic ability to reflect its content parallels how these novels seek to convert environmental crises in Haiti into narratives that more fully represent the relationship of global forces to them. Though islands are scattered all over the globe, the spaces that “signify as islands” are generally the small landmasses close to the equator, associated with “tropical fertility,” that are former outposts of empire (DeLoughrey 2). Our cognitive maps, Elizabeth DeLoughrey asserts, do not chart a “shared islandness across the globe;” we are “more likely to perceive the islandness of Jamaica than, say, Iceland” (2). An attention to this division, where island became a sort of metonym for “colony,” and “continent” for “empire,” pinpoints how geography has been used to uphold a series of political and cultural assumptions. These skewed ideological constructions of “islandness” are rendered materially visible in the ways the landscape of the island colonies in the Global South subsequently became subjected to empirical observation, experiment, and exploitation by its continental visitors.⁴ The trope of water

⁴ Tropical islands have not only functioned as colonial or sociopolitical laboratories of experiment, but they have facilitated tremendous developments of ecological, anthropological, and biological theories. As both DeLoughrey and Richard Grove note, “islands provided the material basis for the establishment of the natural

in Danticat's writing is thus instrumental in emphasizing how natural spaces absorb and reflect human history.

It is water's specific properties that provide Danticat with a natural site of synthesis in which considerations of resource scarcity, unsustainable practices of resource and mineral extraction, and the invisible but insidious forces driving those practices can be merged and raised. The novel, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), uses specific bodies of water to supply the material basis for a critique of modernization processes and the pollution and displacement they produce. In *Claire of the Sea Light*, Danticat, by depicting characters who are, either directly or indirectly, grappling with the systematic deprivation of holding "environmental practices and concerns of their own," renders this nearly-imperceptible violence of dispossession visible through a series of arresting images, including: a disappearing seabed "buried under silt and trash," "reeking landfills smoldering on the edge" of "oil-streaked storm drains," a plague of frogs dying along brooks and streams, and "ashen black" patches of the Caribbean Sea (Nixon 2; *CSL* 45, 9, 107, 112). Furthermore, *Claire of the Sea Light* also underscores how the bodies of water depicted here serve as the material sites through which a critique of the exploitative practices of globalization can be "circulated" through the aesthetic form of the novel. This essay contends that fundamental to comprehending what work water's role performs in Danticat's literature is interpreting how water courses through not just the themes of her work, but the narrative form as well.

sciences, and the first scientific academies of Europeans" (9). Conversely, however, DeLoughrey also cites that European deforestation of the Canary and Caribbean islands—and Haiti especially—positioned many of these spaces as laboratories for the study of global climate and ecology: the colonial devastation of natural resources here, naturally, prompted the "first environmental conservation laws in Spain, Britain, and France" (9).

A global environmental approach to Danticat's novels is seldom, if ever, centrally applied. Thus, this paper will seek to expand the conversation surrounding Danticat's fiction by examining what the pairing of an eco-critical and postcolonial framework of thinking might newly offer when considering Danticat's work. I situate Danticat's fiction here as part of a broader political effort to critically engage with, to borrow from Ursula K. Heise, "modernization processes and their consequences" on Haiti's natural resources, to imagine more equitable social structures, and to "rethink the material basis" on which such structures might be founded (251). Danticat's waterscapes uncover the dangerous relationships of power that underpin and govern the living conditions of her (mostly) fictional characters. Moreover, an analysis of water's role in Danticat's short story collection, *Krik? Krak!* (1996), and the novel, *Claire of the Sea Light*, reveals energizing possibilities for thinking about stronger formulations of the relationships between environmental conservation, historical memory, and social justice—and, more broadly, the theoretical fields of ecocriticism and postcolonialism as well.

Strengthening the connections between environmental and postcolonial literary studies through an approach that privileges both the material and metaphorical associations of water is at the theoretical heart of this project. Influential environmental literary critics like Rob Nixon, Wai Chee Dimock, Lawrence Buell, and Ursula K. Heise, have begun to forge innovative and long overdue connections between literary environmentalism and postcolonial criticism. As Nixon notes, figures like Edward Said, who demonstrated strong materialist commitments within postcolonial and/or anti-imperial work were the exception, not the rule; the dominant concerns of postcolonial and

environmental literary studies have previously approached one another with reciprocal indifference, mistrust, and reluctance (233).⁵ However, the interweaving of concerns over social justice with environmental conservation has led scholars to speak of what Graham Huggan has termed a “productive overlap” between the two fields that offers “opportunities for a fruitful alliance” between these theoretical schools (701). Moreover, as Heise poses, eco-critics have increasingly come to de-emphasize ecosystems of purity in favor of stressing how environmental problems cannot be solved without addressing issues of “wealth and poverty, over-consumption, underdevelopment, and resource scarcity” (252). On the other hand, postcolonial critics, while still highlighting “historical struggles over colonial and neocolonial power structures,” have also come to address how contemporary conflicts over economic globalization have involved, and continue to revolve around, fundamental environmental questions of, according to Heise, “land ownership, energy needs, use of natural resources...and local and global patterns of consumption” (252). As the forms of these two critical orientations collide, they have developed and produced “energizing interdisciplinary possibilities, the unrealized creative bridgework, between environmental literary studies and the social sciences” (Nixon 31). As both Nixon and Heise outline, the work of exploring the connections between eco-criticism and post-colonialism has the potential to complicate and multiply

⁵ The preeminent critics/writers associated with postcolonialism—such as Edward Said, Sara Suleri, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—have lived across national boundaries in ways that have given a “personal edge” to their investment in questions of “dislocation, cultural syncretism, and transnationalism” (Nixon 237; Heise 253). Conversely, the most prominent American environmental writers and critics are largely “mononationals,” who have forged deep-rooted connections and imaginative commitments to a particular region: Utah for Terry Tempest Williams, Appalachian Kentucky for Wendell Berry, Willa Cather’s Nebraska, New England for Frost and Thoreau, etc. What Nixon and Wai Chee Dimock call for, instead, is environmentalism that is more “transnational,” than it is “transcendental” (Nixon 238; Dimock 3). So, for instance, where ecocritics are deeply interested in ties to place, and postcolonialists foreground displacements, both theoretical schools miss potential and fruitful sites of connection within the other.

the connections between environmental conservation and collective forms of justice from a national to an international scale, and perhaps even ultimately incorporating a global framework of thinking. Whereas scholars like Nixon lament the tardiness of American environmental historians and scholarship to consider the environmental repercussions of American foreign policy, particularly as that relates to contemporary imperial practices, I offer here a reading of Danticat's work here that aims to address that gap.

Nearly everything Danticat writes, particularly as it considers the relationship of Haiti's land and the waters that surround it, engages with issues of globalization and its effects: borders, identity, immigration, and the destructive "flows" of investment that can "blast the top off of a local mountain, poison the air and water, and displace communities" (MacLeod 42). However, much of the current conversation surrounding Danticat's work is often studied in terms of the counter-hegemonic histories it supplies and, specifically, for its expansive reflections on mother-daughter relationships, displacement, and storytelling.⁶ In addition, Danticat's work often relies on historical events for its narrative framework: for example, Danticat's novel, *The Farming of Bones* focuses on General Trujillo's 1937 massacre of Haitian migrant workers in the Dominican Republic.⁷ Central to *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) is the "Papa Doc"

⁶ See: Susana Vega-Gonzalez's "(Dis)Locations of Oppression: Redemptive Forces in Edwidge Danticat's 'Krik? Krak!'" ; Helen Scott's "Replacing the 'Wall of Disinformation'" ; Wilson C. Chen's "Figures of Flight and Entrapment in Edwidge Danticat's 'Krik? Krak!'" ; and Lisa M. Ortiz's "Re-Membering the Past: 'Weaving Tales of Loss and Cultural Inheritance in Edwidge Danticat's 'Krik? Krak!'"

⁷ Known as the Parsley Massacre, this genocide was carried out in November 1937 against Haitians living on the Haitian-Dominican border. The massacre, carried out by Dominican Army troops acting on the direct orders of the dictator Rafael Trujillo, has an estimated death toll that ranges from an astonishing 12,168 to 35,000. The story goes that the Dominican soldiers would hold up a sprig of parsley to someone and ask what

Duvalier regime's midcentury acts of sexual violence as a means of instigating terror and generating control in Haiti. The United States' ruthless exploitation of Haiti and its merciless immigration policy and interdiction procedures serve as the backdrop of the short story collection, *Krik? Krak!* and her memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007). However, reading Danticat with an eye trained only on these features neglects how some of the most central aspects of her work are routed through specific bodies of water.

In the short story "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," in *Krik? Krak!*, for instance, the violent and unresolved history of the Parsley Massacre is explored and negotiated through a body of water now called the Massacre River. The Massacre River emerges in this story as a topographic site where the memory of this violence is preserved as much as its role in saving the lives of Josephine, the narrator, and her mother is, paradoxically, defined.⁸ During the Parsley Massacre, Josephine's mother, pregnant with Josephine at the time, narrowly escapes death by swimming beneath the surface of the bloodied river water from the DR and to the Haitian side. Every year, on the anniversary of the night of her grandmother's death and Josephine's birth, Josephine's mother brings Josephine with her on a pilgrimage back to the River. This annual journey, for Josephine, only fortifies the link between her identity and this body of water: "We were all daughters of that river, which had taken our mothers from us... We came from the bottom of that river where the blood never stops flowing" (*KK* 41). Birth and death images violently converge in the

it was; how the person pronounced the Spanish word for parsley (*perejil*) ostensibly determined their fate. If they pronounced it the French or Creole way, they were executed. Crossing the river that separated the borders of two nations was the only way to reach safety; as such, many of the murders occurred on these riverbanks (hence its name, "Massacre River").

⁸ At a later point in the story, Josephine reveals that her mother only survived the massacre by diving beneath the surface of the water and swimming to safety on the Haitian side, rather than trying to flee across its surface, as many other women (including Josephine's grandmother) tried to do.

turbulent waters of the Massacre River, and in their collision, indicate that Josephine is, both literally and figuratively, a daughter of this river. “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” thus exemplifies how an emphasis on natural waterways encodes participatory avenues for conceptualizing how we think about history, geography, and the environment.

Danticat’s work, through its investigation of the relationship between the environment, history, and processes of globalization, unsettles the notion that Haiti’s slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles by seeking to give them a shape and form in her novels. The violence of climate change, deforestation, pollution, and acidifying oceans, mirror the speedier political and economic violence inflicted by corrupt politicians on Haiti’s peasantry, whose deepening poverty is at the center of Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light*. Danticat describes in her fiction the compromised environment left in the wake of Haiti’s complicated history as the epitome of what Rob Nixon describes as slow violence: that is, “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). This kind of violence is no less acute because of its slowness, but its gradual clip poses a vexing dilemma: how can we compensate for the “drama deficit” of climate change (Nixon 265)? The novel form enters here as an aesthetic artifact seeking to enact political aims by cogently portraying the pressing nature of slow violence. Though Danticat’s characteristic concerns with social justice, preservation of cultural memory, and the privileging of marginalized female voices materializes in her novels, so too does a strong commitment to environmental justice that strives to convert into narrative form

the kind of violence that has pervaded Haitian history as much as it has polluted Haiti's water.

Tidalectic Temporality & Seas as History:⁹

The critical work of recuperating the role of the ocean in Caribbean island discourse emerges as an act of resistance in which colonial models of history, linear time, and “islandness,” are subverted and supplanted by more cyclical and active ones. The ocean’s perpetual movement is “radically decentering,” and as such, according to Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “resists attempts to fix a locus of history” (21). This radical decentering, which hinges on fluctuating ocean tides, is of particular import to the Caribbean and Pacific islands in which the sea is not only conceptually linked to human origins, but emerges as an “enduring characteristic of island literature” (DeLoughrey 23). Writers of the Pacific and Caribbean have long turned to narratives of “transoceanic migration” to undermine the myth of the “confined islander,” an ontological contrast to the mobile European male who “produces world history by traversing space” (DeLoughrey 20). In opposition to the mobile European male, postcolonial seafaring emerges as a practice and metaphor for resisting Western models of passive and empty space. Thwarting linear temporal scales and undermining the myth of the confined islander emancipates island literature from terracentric histories and terrestrial boundaries. Suspending these imposed chronologies and invoking the water to invert them—i.e., seascapes for landfall—makes it possible for these narratives to more fully

⁹ The phrase “tidalectic” is one I borrow from the poet and scholar, Kamau Brathwaite. His theory of tidalectics is a methodological tool that foregrounds “how a dynamic model of geography can elucidate island history...and provide the framework for exploring the complex and shifting entanglement between sea and land” (DeLoughrey 3).

See also: Brathwaite, Kamau. *Barabajan Poems, 1492-1992*. New York: Savacou North, 1995. Print.

The phrase “Sea as History,” is used here in reference to Derek Walcott’s poem, “The Sea is History,” whose opening stanza reads: “Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? / Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, / in that grey vault. The sea. The sea / has locked them up. The sea is History” (1-4).

engage with their spatial and historical complexity, or, what Édouard Glissant calls, “the language of landscape” (145).

Danticat’s literature, by invoking the rhythm of the ocean, disputes geographical assumptions of the Atlantic Ocean as “*aqua nullius*,” a space of transit in which the water is a blank space to be traversed. The seascapes Danticat describes aren’t empty. Rather, they confront these assumptions that mystify the importance of the sea by figuring the sea as a character with its own agenda, heedless of how it unsettles human relations: “The sea was both hostile and docile, the ultimate trickster...You could take as much as you wanted from it. But it too could take back” (CSL 199). Danticat’s portrayal of the sea in this passage rejects the cognitive and literal maps of colonial seafaring that sought to relegate the vastness of ocean space into passive place. The descriptions of the sea here offer a model of the seascape that is wily, mobile, and flexible. Neither the ocean nor Danticat’s fiction are static entities; in fact, even the boundaries of the texts themselves prove permeable. The myriad repetitions of tropes, landscapes, and characters between and across Danticat’s works make the boundaries of her world more fluid, moving more broadly over space and time, and more freely from one text to another. The constant links back to the fictional town of Ville Rose, the Caribbean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Massacre River anchors the universe of Danticat’s opus to bodies of water, and dispels any lingering perceptions of water as merely a space of transit in between lands or in texts.

The water in Danticat’s literature also highlights how the narrative forms similarly emulate the cyclical movement of the ocean’s waves. The intertextual narrative

arrangement of the novel, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), is especially instructive here. As *Claire of the Sea Light* progresses, the chapters repeatedly circle back in time, and in their multiplication, further complicate the connections between the characters. *Claire of the Sea Light* is framed by its eponymous character, Claire Limyè Lanmè Faustin's, seventh birthday: the opening chapter begins on the shores of Ville Rose at dawn, and the closing chapter, "Claire de Lune," circles back to the same beach that night. The focalization of the novel shifts from Claire to her widowed fisherman father, Nozias; then to the fabric vendor, Madame Gaëlle, who has committed to someday taking Claire as a *restavek*.¹⁰ The novel then zeroes in on Bernard, a young radio news writer who was inadvertently involved in the shooting death of Gaëlle's husband, who Gaëlle orders to be murdered, unaware that he is the lover of Max Ardin Jr., the son of her former lover; and then there is Flore, the woman Max raped and impregnated immediately before being sent to Miami to live with his mother. The intricate latticework of *Claire of the Sea Light*'s overall design describes everything that transpires in the seven years prior to when "Claire of the Sea Light" begins and moves almost exclusively in reverse chronology.

Danticat's refusal to move the text forward without first going back upends linear paradigms of time and rejects any narrative expectation to move in sequential and chronological configurations. The textual crisscrossing and chiasmic references integral to the overall design of the novel increasingly reveal the connections that most tragically

¹⁰ A *restavek* is a child in Haiti who is sent by his/her parent(s) to work for a host household as a domestic servant because the parents lack the resources required to support the child. Madame Gaëlle, who lost her daughter in a tragic accident, seems unwilling to perpetuate this practice in quite the same manner, however (more so, the text leads readers to believe, as an adoption).

entangle these characters together only to readers. This narrative act of withholding peppers the novel with moments of intense irony and tension as it builds back up toward the night of Claire's seventh birthday—where the first chapter leaves off with Claire's sudden disappearance. Danticat holds readers in suspense over the entire course of the novel, refusing to divulge Claire's whereabouts to readers until "Claire de Lune." In this way, even the form of the novel, much like this rogue wave that appears in the initial passage, is a prolonged moment without forward movement.

Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* opens with a spectacular show of aquatic violence: just as quickly as the "wall of water" rises "from the depths of the ocean, a giant blue-green tongue, trying, it seemed, to lick a pink sky," it cracks back down to the surface, pummeling a small fishing boat and swallowing its lone passenger (a local fisherman). Danticat's personification of this rogue wave—i.e., its "blue-green tongue"—underscores the importance of communicating with the sea of memory and highlights that the past itself is something "current," alive, and capable of gesturing toward an awareness of multi-generational time. By arranging *Claire of the Sea Light* in a tidal pattern, Danticat situates that this notion of returning to the sea as history can produce an equalizing effect.

Narratives such as *Claire of the Sea Light*, where the past emerges as a sea of memory, call for a cessation of movement across expansive oceanic space. This aquatic state of stasis places subjects in the "heavy waters" of history, not by traversing over its

surface, but through immersion in its depths (DeLoughrey 703).¹¹ Foregrounding the role of the sea in *Claire of the Sea Light* excavates conceptual avenues for thinking about time in ways that are divorced from Western models of passive and empty space. Danticat's text asks readers to hold close the prevalence given to the sea both in how it characterizes the sea as history and how it explores water's inherent potential to "circulate" an awareness of the past through the present.

The form of Danticat's 1996 short-story cycle *Krik? Krak!* echoes the cascading pattern of waves and deftly moves from an attempted journey of refugees fleeing the Duvalier regime to the naturalization of the narrator of the concluding story. These nine intertextual and cross-referential stories structurally and thematically chart the course of the immigrant journey across the "destabilizing" and "heavily polluted" waters of the Atlantic (DeLoughrey 704). The precarity and horror that constitutes the first story, "Children of the Sea," finds its opposite in the security and stability granted to the narrator of the final section through her certificate of U.S. citizenship. The language of diaspora is employed as an organizing concept in this collection as much it is the subject of it: "Children of the Sea," chronicles the treacherous oceanic voyage of those fleeing Haiti through an epistolary structure that relies on an imaginary exchange of letters between two unnamed lovers. He is a budding revolutionary and former radio journalist writing from his sinking boat, while she remains in Haiti. He records the daily horrors and humiliations that accompany living on a small boat with more than two-dozen

¹¹ See also: DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity." *PMLA*, vol.125, no. 3, May 2010, pp. 703–712.

people; she describes the harsh realities of staying in Haiti: “at night i can’t sleep. i count the bullets in the dark...did you really get out?” (KK 8). He writes of water coming into the boat; she writes of a neighbor who went to the morgue to collect her son and returned with his head only, while the “macoutes by the house,” laughed at her and “asked if that was her dinner” (KK 7).¹² Even as despair soaks their prose, they find recourse in writing as they are forced to confront their ongoing respective realities of terror. Their resistance and resilience take shape in the presence of these lines on the page; though they both sense the other will never see the letters they are writing to each other, they both continue to write to one another anyway. Though these stories are often bleak and emotionally exhaustive, they are never one-dimensional; instead, they generate the sense that the conditions described are neither inevitable nor inherent.

Danticat’s “Children of the Sea” is decidedly not a colonial “island adventure story,” in which the sea is merely a space to be passed over in favor of constructions of anticipated island landfall. Danticat, conversely, makes the sea terrifyingly—and menacingly—present. Opening the collection *at sea* takes up the work of decentering terracentric narratives and replaces them with terraqueous ones in order to cultivate an intimacy between the human subjects of the past and those of the present. In the man’s final letter, he contemplates his fate on the quickly sinking boat:

I go to them now as though it was always meant to be, as though the very day that
my mother birthed me, she had chosen me to live life eternal, among the children

¹² The Tanton Macoutes, or in the Haitian Creole, *Tonton Makout*, were a paramilitary force created by “Papa Doc” Duvalier to suppress—with force, with fear, with any means necessary—political opposition to his regime.

of the deep blue sea, those who have escaped the chains of slavery to form a world beneath the heavens and the blood-drenched earth where you live. Perhaps I was chosen from the beginning of time to live there with Agwé at the bottom of the sea. (KK 27-28)¹³

Danticat collapses the temporal distance between the lives of slaves lost to the bottom of the ocean and those of modern refugees through the narrative of an oceanic afterlife in “Children of the Sea.” Danticat takes up these traumas simultaneously and, by figuring the shared ocean both contemporary refugees and their enslaved ancestors were forced to traverse, contracts the differences and distances between them. Danticat closes this distance between the lost lives of the transoceanic subjects to the ocean floor by using language that deliberately invokes what she identifies as crucial aspects of Haiti’s culture and history; she explicitly mentions for instance, Agwé, the spirit of the sea, and the “chains of slavery” (KK 27). Danticat places the ocean at the center of this story in order to gather these accumulated erasures together and render linear, or terracentric, versions of time deficient—and “tidalectic” time poignantly generative. “Children of the Sea” cautions readers that understanding the plight of present day refugees fleeing Haiti may be more acutely understood when the violent history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is held alongside it. Thus, “Children of the Sea,” gestures toward registers of the word “waste” that describe not just material pollutants, as *Claire of the Sea Light* conveys, but

¹³ Agwé, in Vodou, and especially in Haiti, is a spirit who rules over the sea, fish, and aquatic plants, as well as the patron spirit of fishermen and sailors.

also suggests that the ocean is where bodies deemed, “excess,” or “superfluous” have been/are being “wasted,” as well.

This story represents aquatic stasis to a devastating conclusion. That the passengers are motionless, except for the movement of the waves beneath them, suggests an ontological shift between the experience of natural time and space and a collapse between the “patrolling of African bodies in the Middle Passage and the interdiction by the United States of Haitian refugees at sea” (DeLoughrey 709). Elizabeth DeLoughrey asserts that this “symbolic legacy” described by Danticat here is a by-product of American maritime expansion and that Danticat, by configuring refugee and fugitive bodies at sea, demonstrates “how waste is a constitutive by-product of modernity and national-border making” in what would otherwise be a fluid space (708). But what does it mean to consider, as Zygmunt Bauman does, refugees as the waste products of globalization (66)? The refugees on board this boat are implicated, involuntarily, in the civilization of “excess,” and “waste” that Bauman argues constitutes modernity.¹⁴ The bodies of the refugees on this boat are inextricably linked to, and in fact, a direct result of, U.S.-sponsored state terrorism in Haiti; that is, in 1981, the Pentagon offered the regime the refugees in “Children of the Sea” were fleeing \$300 million in military sales and a further \$199 million in training (Scott 81). Upwards of 3,000 refugees fled Haiti and sought asylum in the United States; most were detained for a year before being forcibly

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman argues modernity is constituted by the boundaries “erected in an enormous surveillance industry dedicated to policing the borders between citizens and refugees” (97). He characterizes our “liquid modernity,” as DeLoughrey also quotes, “as a civilization of excess, redundancy, waste and waste disposal,” one that produces human refugees as “the waste products of globalization” (Bauman 66; DeLoughrey 704). DeLoughrey takes up Bauman’s definition of modernity in her essay, “Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity,” particularly as she identifies its vital contributions to interpreting “historical and contemporary representations of Atlantic modernity waste, understood as a material residue of the past” (704).

repatriated (Scott 81). The U.S., in essence, had the audacity to turn away migrants who were a direct consequence of America's political and economic hegemony in Haiti.¹⁵ It is in reading "Children of the Sea" toward the water—where neo/colonial power structures, patterns of consumption, and underdevelopment all meet—that this history, though cloaked in a watery guise, can be salvaged. Danticat uses water in all of its meanings as a means of signaling how we may bear in mind both postcolonial and ecocritical concerns in order to more fully address contemporary conflicts over the environmental cost of economic globalization.

¹⁵ The U.S., in exchange for supporting the Duvalier regimes, received significant control of four of the five main Haitian exports: sugar, bauxite, sisal, and light manufactures (Scott 83). To that end, between 1970-1976, the U.S. installed "230 new industrial plants," as investors eagerly exploited the cheap labor created through this environmental dispossession and political repression (Scott 80).

Wading through the Waste:

an Ecocritical Approach to *Claire of the Sea Light*

Claire of the Sea Light excavates the connections between ocean pollution, dwindling marine life, deforestation, and how these crises affect the rural population in Haiti. Illustrating the relationship between pollution, poverty, and the environment is perhaps the novel's primary concern. One of the main characters in the novel, Gaëlle, describes how her husband, Laurent, of relative wealth, often held meetings in their fabric shop with the peasants who lived up- and down-river from them, "warning them that the rivers were swelling in response to the lack of trees, the land erosion, the dying topsoil" (*CSL* 52). The peasants, dependent on cutting down the wood they need for charcoal, are largely unresponsive to Laurent's pleas. The town and villagers' immediate needs supersede their ability to be concerned about the sustainability of their precarious environmental practices: "Help us find something to replace the wood for charcoal and we will stop," they tell him, "If I have to kill a tree child to save my child," they'd reply, "I'll do it, sou de chèz" (*CSL* 52). This conversation between Laurent and the villagers underscores how Laurent's position of relative privilege affords him a broader scope through which he discerns the interrelatedness of deforestation and the mudslides whereas the villagers are living in conditions so dire they can afford only to meet their most basic needs. And when concomitantly blighted by political instability, corruption, and a lack of infrastructure, using the land to make a living, for these villagers, emerges as one of the few available ways to support themselves and their families. Danticat, Laurent, and Nixon all seem to be plagued by a similar question: How can we represent

these environmental emergencies, created by design and long in the making, for what they are?

The traces of modernization and their consequences are also at the root of Claire's father, Nozias's, predicament. The trash-ridden sea and the dwindling availability of fish in *Claire of the Sea Light* are starkly contrasted with Nozias's memories of a distant past, where the shores were free of plastic and the schools of fish were plentiful. Nozias, in the first chapter, notes that his source of livelihood, "lapèch, fishing" was no longer as profitable as it had once been: "It was no longer like in the old days, when he and his friends would put a net in the water for an hour or so, then pull it out full of big, mature fish" (CSL 9). The temporal language employed in these lines ("now" vs "the old days") starkly contrasts the conditions of fishing in "the old days," in which the marine ecosystem was self-sufficient and plentiful. Nozias laments that he now has to leave his nets in for far longer, only to pull far fewer and far smaller fish:

Now they had to leave nets in for half a day or longer, and they would pull fish out of the sea so small that in the old days they would have been thrown back. But now you had to do with what you got; even if you knew in your gut it was wrong, for example, to keep baby conch shells or lobsters full of eggs, you had no choice but to do it. You could no longer afford to fish in season, to let the sea replenish itself. You had to go out nearly every day...even as the seabed was disappearing, and the sea grass that used to nourish the fish was buried under silt and trash. (CSL 9)

The passage here exemplifies the dire circumstances of Haiti's environmental crisis through an attention to drastic changes of the living conditions of Nozias and his fellow fishermen. Danticat's descriptions of the material elements in this passage sharpen the magnitude of Nozias's circumstances: i.e., the "baby conch shells," "lobsters full of eggs," "sea grass," "silt," "trash" (*CSL* 9). Nozias, just as the villagers have no choice but to continue cutting down the trees, is similarly ensnared: he is forced to keep everything he catches, even though he knows it means it will only exacerbate the conditions he is already being forced to confront.

By emphasizing the disparity between the resource-rich "old days" and Nozias's current conditions, Danticat tacitly gestures toward a Haiti untainted by the specter of globalization. For instance, in the period of "before," it was not just the size, quality, and quantity of fish caught that were different; even the temporal scales required of this kind of labor have drastically altered (under an hour versus half a day). Danticat layers the environmental (the sea) with the economic ("fishing was no longer profitable") in these lines, a move indicative of her broader strategy throughout *Claire of the Sea Light* (9). Danticat also highlights here the vicious—and violent—cycle of poverty in which resource extraction results in resource scarcity that propagates precarious environmental conditions that then, in turn, exacerbate already abysmal levels of poverty.¹⁶

¹⁶ Many, if not most, Haitians are subject to extreme levels of poverty. Violence, poverty, and environmental degradation have destroyed so many landscapes and structures that Haiti has become virtually "unrecognizable within two generations" (Marxen 142). The combination of these forces—essentially the inheritance of Haiti's colonial past—has prevented the accumulation of wealth and inheritance of property for the majority of Haitians. Moreover, basic human services like plumbing, electricity, schooling, healthcare, and potable water are inaccessible to over half the population.

Danticat utilizes the sea in *Claire of the Sea Light* to highlight the need for incorporating fundamental environmental questions when trying to tackle contemporary conflicts over uneven economic practices. Nozias's reflections on the sea here can thus be read as a critique of how a previously healthy water and ecosystem in his village have been deposed by incoming tides of globalized capital that have commodified water outright. The conversion of healthy watercourses and ocean ecosystems into profit often obliterates the real material foundations of wealth and well-being. The disregard for the consequences of these processes on the surrounding natural environment—and for the people who are forced to live under the oligarchs, dictators, and military regimes that cooperate with the skewed terms of resource extraction the U.S. and Europe pay them to support—works doubly to the benefit of those nations and comes at the direct expense of the people and the environment in which this kind of political and environmental dispossession occurs (Nixon 70). It is in this way that *Claire of the Sea Light* functions as a canary in the mine; a *cri d'alarme* that converts these long emergencies created by nameless actors into an arresting narrative with broader political aims.

Claire of the Sea Light dislodges conceptual constructions of Haiti as an “island” space that is divorced from the industrial temperate north; conversely, it is precisely these “island spaces,” that have supplied a large quantity of the material sources of the Global North's production. That the town of Ville Rose, topographically, is shaped like a “tropical rose” seems a tactic of this larger aesthetic strategy: Ville Rose has a “flower-shaped perimeter that, from the mountains, looked like the unfurling petals of a massive tropical rose,” where only “five percent” were “wealthy or comfortable. The rest were

poor, some dirt-poor” (CSL 5). Danticat frequently represents the land’s inherent fertility in flower imagery, and signals the exploitation of the land through references to dirt or ash. For instance, in a later chapter in the novel, when Max Jr. has fled his father’s house after being confronted by Flore, Max Sr. is standing on the front porch of his house conversing with his son’s American girlfriend, Jessamine:

“‘What are these flowers?’ she called out.

‘Violets,’ he told her.

‘They grow here?’ she asked...

‘Everything can grow here,’ he replied...(CSL 192)

It is significant that Max Sr. responds to Jessamine by saying that everything *can* grow here, not that everything *does*. This word choice, where “can,” suggests possibility, and “does” embodies something more tangible and concrete, may be read as a nod toward Haiti’s colonial past. Haiti was not always “poor”; in fact, the French colony that became Haiti provided the wealth that fueled the French Empire—and supplied two-thirds of the sugar and three-fourths of the coffee that Europe consumed. Of equal import then is that Danticat situates an American at the center of this exchange, who is surprised that anything of aesthetic beauty can flourish here. Underpinning Jessamine’s comment is the assumption that Haiti is a wasteland; comments such as Jessamine’s, or those that refer to Haiti as the “poorest country on the Western Hemisphere,” pathologize Haiti and separate events there from the reach of global forces.

The Global North has needed Haiti to be poor since it was founded; it has designed its poverty, pushed for its poverty, and has repeatedly tried to profit from its

poverty—and yet, the material roots of Haiti’s instability are obscured. Take, for example, that in the early 1920’s, over sixty percent of Haiti’s land was still covered by forests; by 1945, following the American Occupation, essentially a glorified period of intensified lumber exportation, this number had been reduced to twenty-one percent (Paravisini-Gebert 79). This systemic deforestation of Haiti, and its harrowing consequence—soil erosion—looms large as perhaps the most significant threat to the country’s viability and its population’s resilience in the face of the environmental consequences of slow violence. When the effects of capital strip and colonize the “terrain of remembrance,” transforming lands and waters beyond recognition, as in Nozias’s case, Janine MacLeod argues that this rapid turnover limits the depth of association that these can accumulate and provides “scant material habitat for multi-generational memories” (44). In other words, cultural production and the landscape are always closely bound.

Danticat’s inclusion of the Haitian aphorism, “the sea does not hide dirt,” in the concluding pages of the novel, animates and exemplifies the novel’s overall relationship to the sea and the relationship of the sea to the land. After Max Jr. has been confronted by Flore, and met his illegitimate son, he stands on the beach, contemplating his own suicide and hiding the truths of his past beneath the waves:

People like to say of the sea that lanmè pa kenbe kras, the sea does not hide dirt. It does not keep secrets.... It was as large as it was small... You could scatter both ashes and flowers in it.... You could make love in it and you could surrender to it, and oddly enough, surrendering at sea felt somewhat like surrendering on land....

You could just as easily lie down in the sea as you might in the woods, and simply fall asleep. (*CSL* 199)

The sea and the land are held together here, particularly through the repetition of the phrase, “the sea does not hide dirt,” in both Haitian Creole and English. What dirt might obscure, this phrase indicates, the sea makes clear. What land might hide, the sea reveals. What metropolises pass over as *aqua nullius*, blank space, constitutes the islands. The sea “does not keep secrets.” It will tell its stories; it will surge in a wall of water from the ocean floor to “lick the pink sky” of dawn (*CSL* 3). It has dark depths, and “dazzling glows” that schools of “tiny silver” fish create on the surface under the night sky (*CSL* 33). The sea is deceptive in its size, and wide in its expanse. You can scatter ashes in it, and cast flowers across it: it is a passageway for return in death and a source of life and beauty. The sea, in other words, is a dynamic material repository: it can be as docile as it is volatile, as participatory as it is revelatory. In the final coda of *Claire of the Sea Light*, Danticat offers a narrative invitation to return to the sea.

Conclusion: Ecoglobal Literary Approaches

Though an attention to water has been overlooked in the critical dialogue surrounding Danticat's work, this neglect finds its counterpart in contemporary political conversations about the environment, globalization, history, and social justice. Even as humanity is transforming the global water system, there is a pervasive indifference in regarding how these transformations are *already* affecting geopolitical concerns and international relations. As Lawrence Buell points out, the United States leaves "by far" the largest "ecological footprint" of any nation on earth; but, confusingly, by other standards of measurement, the "national ecological imagination" in the U.S. is self-consciously alert (230). This is inherently problematic as it suggests that the U.S. is both the worst offender of environmental entanglements across the globe and purportedly, also unaware of this fact. Environmental attitudes and behaviors in the U.S., hence, do not find their attendant registers.

Danticat's fiction stands as a testimony to issues of world urgency—but especially, the interrelatedness of political upheaval, colonial legacies, and the environment. The violations of the environmental rights of former colonies in the Global South by the Global North simmer just beneath the surface of Danticat's fiction. For instance, immediately following Max Sr.'s discussion with Jessamine about the African violets, Max Sr. is "horrified," that Jessamine then proceeds to "drop her cigarette ashes, then the cigarette butt itself, on the African violets around the porch...she was using his flowers as an ashtray" (CSL 190). Encompassed in Jessamine's negligence here is both a representation of the cognitive maps of islandness that Elizabeth DeLoughrey

investigates in her work as well as a representation of how these perceptions of “island” spaces (i.e., Haiti as a wasteland, remote, underdeveloped) translates to behavioral practices. Jessamine’s scattering of her cigarette’s ashes (from above) over the African violets (on the ground) represents both spatially and literally the “poison redistribution ethic” the Global North enacted against the Global South (Nixon 2). In the introduction to *Slow Violence*, Nixon cites Lawrence Summers, then president of the World Bank, who wrote in 1991 in a confidential memo that he always thought, ““that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted...Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?”” (qtd. in Nixon 1). What Summers’s comment and Danticat’s prose reveal is that Jessamine is characteristic of broader U.S. practices that use the fertile garden, the land and seascapes, of the Global South as an ashtray for the waste and pollution nations in the Global North are responsible for producing. As the earlier scenes with Nozias—the sea and the villagers—trees both capture, Danticat asserts throughout *Claire of the Sea Light* the devastating material and collective ramifications that this scheme of “off-loading rich-nation toxins” onto the world’s poorest countries has had on Haiti’s people, land, and seascapes (Nixon 2). Moreover, it is in this way that Danticat effectively utilizes the aesthetic form of the novel to achieve broader political, cultural, and environmental aims.

Water’s highly specific materiality reflects its interactions with human bodies and history as well as our relationships to practices of manipulation, exploitation, and pollution. Water is a commons, Vandava Shiva maintains, and when water disappears or competitions over scarce water resources grow, conflicts, displacement, and wars are the

result (4). Defending the rights of water, and the rights of communities to their water commons, has slowly emerged as a crucial source of conflict and protest in the modern era. These conflicts will likely be accelerated as climate change, acidifying oceans, toxic drift, and oceanic “dead zones” persist.¹⁷ Both Shiva and Danticat identify water democracy at the heart of sustainability, justice, and peace.

Every time unsustainable human activity disrupts the earth’s potential for renewing life’s processes, we disrupt the water cycle and water pathways—and life itself, for some. Many river basins, for instance, have been dramatically transformed through the process of “river training”; some of the world’s largest rivers show a complete or nearly complete loss of perennial discharge to the ocean; this is true of both the Yellow and Nile Rivers (Vorosmarty et al 509). The conversion of healthy watercourses and ocean ecosystems into profit often transforms communities and their waters beyond recognition. Communities like Claire and Nozias’s in Ville Rose—that had previously been perched alongside stretches of fertile land and water resources—will, inevitably, be displaced. We very well may, at this rate, see the world’s first “climate refugees” in our lifetime. The consequences of this systematic re-routing of natural resources and/or abuses of them, especially in ways that disrupt natural water cycles and pathways, are magnified in the re-routing of the communities that surround them. That is, the deterioration of these ecosystems undermines the sustainability of communities and entire societies that previously surrounded these waterways.

¹⁷ According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “dead zones” are low-oxygen or hypoxic areas in the world’s oceans and large lakes that are caused by excessive nutrient pollution from human activities, coupled with other factors that deplete the oxygen required to support most marine life in bottom and near-bottom water.

This “slow violence” against the water commons is seldom acknowledged for the sinister act that it is—not unlike the “poison redistribution” that has devastated the shores of the Caribbean Sea, or the U.S. support of dictators who allowed that pollution and resource extraction to occur. Reading Danticat’s literature, while thinking “ecologically” about Haiti, inescapably points to how globalization has allowed the cognitive maps of colonial discourse surrounding “islands” to continue. Haiti’s land has been relegated again and again to the status of an “island” that functions as a colonial or sociopolitical laboratory of experiment (DeLoughrey 9). In many ways, Haiti’s current environmental and economic plight is a direct result of centuries worth of exploitation, political violence, and systematic oppression. This insidious historical and methodical violence is precisely what Danticat seeks to make visible in her writing—and precisely what the novel form affords her to achieve. While literary evocations of the sea may not, on their own, uncover the multitudinous currents driving the ebb and flow of the tides of “progress,” pollution, and people in transoceanic movement, foregrounding Danticat’s literature in questions of how water is bound into the form of the work alongside explorations of the fraught historical conditions of the present suggest that other relationships to time, the past, water, and to one another may be possible.

In so many ways, the world still operates under the premise that what is lost to the sea stays there; that the ocean never returns what it takes. This notion is part of the same pervasive myth that suggests we need not concern ourselves with environments that are geographically across oceans from us and thus, theoretically, “out of sight,” that is, that the oceans that separate the Global South from the Global North will insulate the Global

North from feeling the adverse affects of climate change. This notion perpetuates the idea that we are not all inhabiting a position of climate vulnerability. We cannot, as Nixon notes, “segregate secure communities from insecure ones long term,” nor can we separate out orderly societies from those abandoned to destitution and “climate chaos” (267). Danticat’s novels dislodge these misconceptions and cognitive links that are missing from this discussion. Moreover, her work underscores the urgency and expediency in which we need to imagine a world more fully held in common. Danticat’s use of specific and regional bodies of water tells us that these are not books meant to exist outside of time and space; these novels are not, in other words, intended to provide a method of escape to readers. Instead, what her novels seek to undertake is an exploration of how water, when written into the form of a novel, helps us to better understand conditions of extreme inequality, uncertainty, instability, and precariousness. Thus, an attention to the sea in Edwidge Danticat’s work makes plain just how deeply connected we all are, how time and space can be understood more fluidly, and how these connections can be more fully realized in a closer consideration of our lived environments. And, perhaps, also that we ignore these sites of connection and material realities at our own peril.

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