



Found in Translation or Edwige Danticat's Voyage of Recovery Edwige Danticat : se re/trouver en traduction

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Article abstract

This paper explores the writing of Haitian writer Edwige Danticat from a perspective of (im)migration and translation which is different from that elaborated by Eva Hoffman in *Lost in Translation*. By contrasting the traumas suffered by both authors and the way they deal with it, different conclusions can be reached concerning the theory of self they propose. Hoffman is resigned to translate herself in order to fit into the American context but never gets over the loss of her Polish self. Danticat, who realizes upon her arrival in New York that she was already a translated being, delves into the Haitian collective past for the creation of fictional characters who find in the translation of their selves the strength to live in two languages and two cultures without abandoning their personal and collective past.

Found in Translation or Edwige Danticat's Voyage of Recovery

Anne Malena

I grew up in a lumpen apartment in Cracow, squeezed into three rudimentary rooms with four other people, surrounded by squabbles, dark political rumblings, memories of war-time suffering, and daily struggle for existence. And yet, when it came time to leave, I, too, felt I was being pushed out of the happy, safe enclosures of Eden. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 5)

I think, with migration, when we come to a new country, we all come with fragments. When you leave, you take what you can — you take some pictures, you take your stories, you take your memories, and the rest you feel like you can get better, and more of, in the other place. You can get better apples, you can get better bananas. But your memories, you can't get better memories. They just stay. (Edwige Danticat, 2000, p. 114)

Migration can lead to trauma or stem from it. In either case it involves a translation of the migrant self both literally and figuratively. For Eva Hoffman, a Jewish adolescent emigrating from Poland in 1959 at the age of thirteen, it meant having to learn English and translating herself into North American culture, an experience she lived as loss, of her homeland and of the possibility of growing into her original self.¹ For Edwige Danticat, a Creole adolescent emigrating from Haiti in 1981 at the age of twelve, it also meant having to learn English and translating herself into North American culture, but she embraced the experience willingly although her fictional writing is haunted by images of past

¹ For a discussion of Hoffman's trauma and the schizophrenic nature of her self, see Ingram, 1996.

traumas. Two different generations, two different contexts, two different experiences and yet, their comparison reveals how strikingly similar they are since both are dealing with the trauma of migration and the necessity for self-translation.²

As my title suggests, the dialogue I am attempting to establish between these two writers leads to an interrogation of the conclusion reached by Hoffman, and expressed in her own title, of being lost in translation. For her, immigrating against her will to North America meant having to let go of Polish entirely in order to acquire English and eventually assimilate into American culture. The wound inflicted by migration is deeply personal and, as the passage put in epigraph illustrates, supersedes the collective tragedy of being Jewish in Poland at that time. For Danticat, the experience of coming to the United States was not as traumatic in and of itself because she was joining family and friends already there but, as her books reveal, it precipitated a re-evaluation of her people's past and a recovery of stories as well as history. The wounds she uncovers are old wounds. In both cases, the healing process is initiated through writing. Thus, Hoffman and Danticat are not diametrically opposed to each other but, as we shall see, the different strategies they adopt as migrants go a long way in revealing how complex the experience of migration is and how serious its psychological consequences. Using the notion of trauma as a heuristic device, I will examine what can be gained in translation in spite of the accepted notion that something is always lost.

For the purpose of this study, I borrow my definition of trauma from Cathy Caruth who draws an interesting link between trauma and history. For her the pathology of trauma consists "solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception. The event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it: to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event" (Caruth, 1995, pp. 4-5). As Freud noted, traumatized people have recurrent dreams and flashbacks

² As Alfred Arteaga points out in his introduction to *An Other Tongue*, a collection of essays dealing with various linguistic borderlands, it is because these essays share "similar concerns and similar passions and senses of outrage, [...that] their similarity is like metaphor (to use a simile for a metaphor) in that the worth of the perceived similarity rests on the recognition of difference" (Arteaga, 1994, p. 5). It is in this spirit that I read Hoffman and Danticat against each other, that is not to oppose them but to grasp how theoretically productive their difference can be.

of the event which are surprising in their literality. From this Caruth concludes that trauma is “not so much a symptom of the unconscious as it is a symptom of history. The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (Caruth, 1995, p. 5). The significance of this definition for migration becomes clear when one considers that:

[t]he historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only *in connection with another place, and in another time*. (Caruth, 1995, p. 8; my emphasis)

If migration, therefore, is itself the traumatic event, as was the case for Hoffman, it will take many years before it can be experienced and understood; if, on the other hand, migration does not appear traumatic, as was the case for Danticat, it can function as the catalyst for the historical experience of another trauma because it ruptures the linearity of an individual's life and opens another space into it. For Hoffman, writing *Lost in Translation* years after being torn away from Poland was a way to deal “with the vicissitudes of coming into English”, as she notes in a recent essay entitled “P.S.” where she discusses how “[t]he trajectory of the ‘lost’ Polish remained much less clearly traced, simply because it remained less clear” (Hoffman, 2003, p. 49). The trauma was the loss of the native land and language, and it is only through a long process of writing about it in English — a period of fourteen years separates the book *Lost in Translation* from the postscript — that it can be overcome. For Danticat, fiction writing and the English language provide her with the alternate place and time needed to work through the connection she feels to personal traumas of female Haitian experience, such as daughters being separated from their mothers, and collective traumas of Haitian history, such as Haitians persecuted at home and in the Dominican Republic. Hoffman speaks of “being without language” when she first arrives in North America (Hoffman, 2003, p. 49); while Danticat chooses to write in English, she feels no need to let go of her native French and Creole but uses them, as well as Spanish, to mark her language of adoption with their Caribbean accents.

Loss of Childhood

Shortly after arriving in Vancouver, Hoffman has a nightmare: "I'm drowning in the ocean while my mother and father swim farther and farther away from me. I know, in this dream, what it is to be cast adrift in incomprehensible space; I know what it is to lose one's mooring." (Hoffman, 1989, p. 104) As her narrative makes clear, the writing process provides Hoffman with the means to understand what she went through as a thirteen-year old being torn away from her homeland: years later, she grasps the meaning of seeing herself in the nightmare cast into incomprehensible space, the subconscious space where trauma hides, the very space which will become home to English and eventual resolution. As time passes, the dreams change as the trauma recedes further and further away:

After a while, I begin to push the images of memory down, away from consciousness, below emotion. Relegated to an internal darkness, they increase the area of darkness within me, and they return in the dark, in my dreams. I dream of Cracow perpetually, winding my way through familiar — unfamiliar streets, looking for a way home. I almost get there, repeatedly; almost, but not quite, and I wake up with the city so close that I can breathe it in. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 116)

Return is impossible, the psychological "way home" is never found and Hoffman ends up losing herself in translation. A brief physical return to Cracow in 1968, "[a]n unfortunate year to choose for going there, a year when most of the Jews remaining in the country were forced to emigrate by a campaign of official and officially stimulated anti-Semitism", makes her realize that "one can't create a real out of a conditional history" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 241). Because of the loss of her Polish childhood, she can only imagine what her Polish adolescence might have been and she starts to understand that:

To some extent, one has to rewrite the past in order to understand it. I have to see Cracow in the dimensions it has to my adult eye in order to perceive that my story has been only a story, that none of its events has been so big or so scary. It is the price of emigration, as of any radical discontinuity, that it makes such reviews and rereadings difficult; being cut off from one part of one's own story is apt to veil it in the haze of nostalgia, which is an ineffectual relationship to the past, and the haze of alienation, which is an ineffectual relationship to the present. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 242)

This formulation of the painful relationship between past and present experienced by the migrant self is central to Hoffman's thought because it leads to the idea of triangulation developed in the book. Slowly and somewhat reluctantly, Hoffman comes to accept that the rupture of immigration has made her into a hybrid being, fully aware of the arbitrariness of her life.³ She describes how she often distances herself mentally from a social scene in which she is a participant and observes it from a "removed, abstract promontory". As she explains it, she enters into a process of perpetual triangulation, "that process by which ancient Greeks tried to extrapolate, from two points of a triangle drawn in the sand, the moon's distance from the earth". Looking at herself and her circumstances "from that other point in the triangle, this is just one arbitrary version of reality... [J]ust an awareness that there is another place — another point at the base of the triangle, which renders this place relative, which locates me within that relativity itself" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 170). In spite of this realization, the postscript written fourteen years later makes clear that her experience of hybridity, of the in-between, continued for a long time to be fraught with anxiety. She sees her bilingual self as the result of a three-step process: first, the loss of Polish, second the acquisition of English, and third the re-emergence of Polish. Borrowing from psychoanalytic concepts, she understands that she was the one who "lost", "displaced", and "abandoned" Polish, rather than "some fateful fiat", in order to "make room within [herself] for English" (Hoffman, 2003, p. 50). Only when "English came to occupy all the strata of thought and self" does she feel it's safe to examine what has happened to her first language and, after many returns to Poland, allow it to re-emerge. She concludes "that both languages that constructed me exist within one structure ... sturdy enough to allow for pliancy and openness" (Hoffman, 2003, p. 54). The essay gives the impression that the author's relentless search for unity has finally led to a hopeful conclusion and that the biggest obstacle has been the acceptance of the possibility to live in two languages.

³ In a very cogent article, Ada Savin argues that Hoffman's "cultural baggage and immigrant experience have endowed her with a permanent capacity to distance herself from the present surroundings". Savin also draws a useful list of the labels Hoffman "ascribes to herself: a 'two-forked, hybrid creature' who has been 'on both sides,' 'an incompletely assimilated immigrant,' 'a sort of resident alien,' 'a partial American'; and to a certain extent she is all these" (Savin, 1994, p. 62).

Danticat also expresses her experience of emigration in terms of loss of her childhood: “My primary feeling the whole first year was one of loss,... [l]oss of my childhood and of the people I left behind, and also of *being* lost. It was like being a baby, learning everything for the first time” (Charters, 1998, p. 42). This loss is less traumatic than Hoffman’s, however, because she landed in a community willing to guide her first steps, a community already characterized by the need for translation, by the to and fro movement of identity negotiation experienced by Haitian immigrants: “It [the community] helped a lot in the transition and I think, even with the adults, that helps — having a transition, having a bridge, people who carry you over while you’re adjusting to the new place” (Danticat, 2000, p. 112). For Danticat, there is no “radical discontinuity” and, as Salman Rushdie has pointed out, emigration implies a transformation of identity which is not entirely negative: “I, too, am a translated man. I have been *borne across*. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion ... that something can also be gained” (Rushdie, 1983, p. 29). The homonymous allusion to the process of being *born* anew is unmistakable and is echoed in Danticat’s formulation of feeling like a small child again. While Hoffman is traumatized by the concrete loss of her Polish childhood, Danticat finds that she has to live a second childhood in the new land. Where are we to find expressions of trauma then? Writing becomes for the young Danticat a way to explore, in Caruth’s terms, the “latency of the event” of emigration and of the tragic circumstances which led to it. As we shall see, one of her characters, Sophie, rejoins a traumatized mother when she immigrates to New York and becomes traumatized herself. Danticat explains: “I wanted to explore the ways that a young girl would become a woman without much modeling, without perfect modeling. I wanted to explore how we become women in the absence of our mothers” (Danticat, 2000, p. 114). Even in the context of the very intimate trauma the novels deals with, Danticat is interested in how the personal is related to the collective and to questions of female relationships, “family traditions and legacies” as well as migration. The fact that Danticat, like Hoffman, chooses to write in English, and does so very successfully, shows a high degree of assimilation into her new life but her choice of fiction over autobiography reveals distancing from personal trauma and the desire to explore the mechanics of trauma in a larger context.

Dealing with Trauma: Translation of the Self

Robert Jay Lifton, well known for his work with survivors of Hiroshima, Vietnam and the Holocaust, says in an interview: “I also think about trauma in a new way that I’ve just begun to write about, in terms of a theory of the self. That is, extreme trauma creates a second self”. For him recovery “cannot really occur until that traumatized self is reintegrated. It’s a form of doubling in the traumatized person” (Lifton, 1995, p. 137). Both Eva Hoffman and Edwige Danticat negotiate this notion of doubleness in their writing in terms of trauma and eventual recovery or the possibility of a successful translation. They differ in how they perceive that second self, however, with Hoffman inventing it more or less consciously in order to cope with her new life and Danticat recognizing its existence immediately upon arriving in New York. The term *recovery* retains its intimate, medical meaning for Hoffman while Danticat, in the way I read it here, uses it in the double sense of gaining back one’s health as well as one’s connection to collective history.

Hoffman becomes conscious of the need to create a second self in a Vancouver classroom when she realizes that her classmates will never be convinced that “Poland is the center of the universe rather than a gray patch of land inhabited by ghosts. It is I who will have to learn how to live with a double vision” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 132). Marianne Hirsch, whose own story of emigration from Rumania resembles Hoffman’s, takes her to task for idealizing her homeland and not recognizing “that in Poland, as a child, she was already divided” (Hirsch, 1994, p.77).⁴ She continues:

I identify neither with Hoffman’s nostalgically Edenic representation of Poland, nor with her utter sense of dispossession later, nor do I share her desperate desire to displace the relativity, the fracturing, the double-consciousness of immigrant experience. For me displacement and bilingualism preceded emigration, they are the conditions into which I was born. Even as a child, in the midst of those first affections so eloquently celebrated in *Lost in Translation*, I was already divided. (Hirsch, 1994, p. 77)

Hirsch, having chosen to remain on the border and to “embrace multiple displacement as a [feminist] strategy both of assimilation and

⁴ For a response to Hirsch which nuances both positions, see Besemeres, 1998, pp. 329-330.

of resistance” (Hirsch, 1994, p. 88), is equally suspicious of Hoffman’s expression of “reconciliation” when she receives her doctorate from Harvard: “I receive the certificate of full Americanization [...] Everything comes together, everything I love, as in the fantasies of my childhood; I am the sum of my parts” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 226). This debate goes beyond the idiosyncratic differences expressed by the two women in narrating their experience: it brings into focus the issue of language and how it is intricately connected to identity.

Hoffman’s search for the reintegration of her immigrant traumatized self is a search for the absorption of English into her inner being on the same emotional footing as Polish.⁵

[T]he problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don’t stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 106)

At first no translation is possible: “Polish is becoming a dead language, the language of the untranslatable past (Hoffman, 1989, pp. 120-121). The process of recovery starts with writing in a diary, not in “the schizophrenic ‘she’” but in “the double, the Siamese-twin ‘you’” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 121). Inventing this new self in writing prepares her for the next stage, the stage of translation which she both recognizes as a necessity and resists for fear of losing herself into it. She first notes that “[y]ou can’t transport human meanings whole from one culture to another any more than you can transliterate a text” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 175). Translation remains impossible as long as English serves to keep that new self at a distance from her “true” self, as it did in the diary. It is much later that, as a professor, she experiences a breakthrough of sorts in her relationship to English: “Words become, as they were in childhood, beautiful things — except this is better, because they’re now crosshatched with a complexity of meaning, with the sonorities of felt, sensuous thought” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 186). As Barbara Gitenstein points out, this moment is rather ironical since the author of the words which dissolve the last barrier of her resistance is T.S. Eliot whose anti-Semitism was evident in his poetry and criticism (Gitenstein, 1997, p. 268). Gitenstein argues that for a Polish Jew, to be able to love Eliot’s poetry can only mean self-negation which confirms “Hoffman’s multiple identities as conflicted and self-negating” (Gitenstein, 1997, p.

⁵ See Lévy (1999) for an analysis of this search.

269). Although this discovery of the musicality of English does constitute a partial reintegration of Hoffman's lost self into the new one, given her love for music and talent for the piano which were central to her life in Poland,⁶ the seemingly contradictory notion of translation which she finally adopts as the metaphor for the negotiation taking place between the two selves speaks to her acceptance of multiple identities:

I have to translate myself. But if I am to achieve this without becoming assimilated — that is absorbed — by my new world, the translation has to be careful, the turns of the psyche unforced. To mouth certain terms without incorporating their meanings is to risk becoming bowdlerized. A true translation proceeds by the motions of understanding and sympathy; it happens by slow increments, sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 211)

She is expressing here the delicate balance which translation maintains between the inevitable appropriation of the otherness of the source text and the need to respect this otherness. She even puts it in terms reminiscent of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz: "How does one stop reading the exterior signs of a foreign tribe and step into the inwardness, the viscera of their meanings? Every anthropologist understands the difficulty of such a feat; and so does every immigrant" (Hoffman, 1989, p. 209). Geertz, whose work of course dealt tirelessly with this crux of alterity, exerting a profound influence on later generations of anthropologists, has the beginning of an answer. In "Found in Translation: Social History of the Imagination", an article which has partly inspired my title and which plays on the famous poem by James Merrill,⁷ he writes that anthropology is indeed "dedicated to getting straight how the massive fact of cultural and historical particularity comports with the equally massive fact of cross-cultural and cross-historical accessibility — how the deeply different can be deeply known without becoming any less different; the enormously distant enormously close without becoming any less far away" (Geertz,

⁶ See Durczak (1992) and von Bardeleben (1997) about the relationship of music and language.

⁷ From *Divine Comedies*: "Lost, is it, buried? One more missing piece?/But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation/And every bit of us is lost in it/(Or found—I wander through the ruin of S/Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)" (Quoted in Geertz, 1983, p. 50).

1983, p. 48). More simply put, “life is translation, and we are all lost in it” (Geertz, 1983, p. 44).

As Hoffman experienced, migration forces the subject to confront this condition because, from the public setting of cross-cultural exchange — the objective differences between Polish and American cultures —, it moves onto the private and very intimate scene of the inner self — the differences between the Polish self and the American self and their relative distance and closeness. In America, Hoffman’s Polish self is lost because it is perceived as too far away by others and not given a chance to grow. In this perspective translation becomes a cure, “the talking cure a second-language cure” and, remarkably, “a project of translating backward” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 271). English permits her to regain access to the lost self and to retell the story. This movement backward leads her in turn to place her very personal journey through trauma within the context of the fragmented modern world she is now able to see as the surrounding reality. The gap between her two selves can never be closed and it “has also become a chink, a window through which I can observe the diversity of the world [...] Multivalence is no more than the condition of a contemporary awareness, and no more than the contemporary world demands” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 274). The result of her journey of self-integration is a heightened awareness that she is a product of her time and that the divided self she is resigning herself to is partly due to the condition of a changing world.⁸ As we saw in the later essay of “P.S.”, the process of understanding is ongoing.

Danticat’s journey is different because, from the very start, she is aware of having been born into a multivalent world marked by migration and violence. Leaving Haiti is difficult but does not result in the trauma described by Hoffman because Danticat’s inner self is already marked by the collective history of Haitian people: “I grew up between those two spaces [the country and the city], knowing people who, like my uncle, had travelled, who had been here and to the United States, and other people who had never left the place on the hill where they were born. It is a combination of both things which make up the reality of Haiti” (Danticat, 2000, p. 110). The difference from Hoffman

⁸ For further analysis of writing as a way to distance the new self from the old one, see Krupnick (1993). For a discussion of the cure of translation, see Karpinski (1998) and for a comparison between Hoffman’s views of immigration and those of her predecessor Mary Antin, see Kellman (1996).

is important because Danticat's search for reconciliation necessitates both selves growing together, therefore an immediate acceptance of the condition of being translated: "We would just speak Creole in our space. If you wanted to participate in the dialogue of the world and understand what was going on, we were all doing our best to speak English" (Danticat, 2000, p. 114). The argument advanced by Marianne Hirsch, and discussed above, that bilingualism and displacement precede the traumatic event of migration applies to the Haitian context. People who leave Haiti are already divided as are the people who stay. Such is the colonial condition they have inherited. The long and tragic history of violence in the country, often described as the poorest in the Americas, has long generated a collective double-consciousness as illustrated in the following passage from Danticat's first novel:

There were many cases in our history where our ancestors had *doubled*. Following in the *voudou* tradition, most of our presidents were actually one body split in two: part flesh and part shadow. That was the only way they could murder and rape so many people and still go home to play with their children and make love with their wives. (Danticat, 1998, pp. 155-156)

To resist and survive such violence, the victim also has to "double", as does one of Danticat's characters discussed below. Furthermore, most Haitians situate themselves on the bilingual continuum created by the co-existence of the national Creole language and the official French language, and, like Danticat and her family, many Haitians have themselves joined the diaspora for political and economic reasons or have relatives living abroad.

Danticat, among a growing number of émigré novelists choosing to write in English or other languages of adoption, explores this condition of double-consciousness in her writing. Unlike Hoffman, who rarely borrows from Polish and never allows her native tongue to disrupt the flow of chastened English, Danticat plays with borrowings from Creole, French and Spanish. Her choice of narrative fiction of course permits more creative manipulation and a deeper transformation of her adopted language, revealing at the same time the need to let the memory of displacement and loss show through. In a book of short stories (*Krik? Krak!*, 1991) and two novels (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*, 1994 and *The Farming of Bones*, 1998), Danticat explores the process of integration of the traumatized self, teasing out the emotions associated with what she calls the "surrendering" to new surroundings:

I think it's probably more tragically painful to people who were independent linguistically, independent in other ways, to come to a new country and suddenly to be led places. It's scary all around. People say immigration infantilizes people. (Danticat, 2000, p. 111)

The short story "Caroline's Wedding" portrays an immigrant family in New York whose first child, Grace, is designated as the "misery baby" because she was born in Haiti and whose second child, Caroline, born in New York, represents the dream of the promised land. Caroline, however, was born without a left forearm and suffers from phantom limb pain for which she is temporarily prescribed a prosthetic arm. When she tries to explain to her mother that the doctor felt it was only natural that, with the pressure of her upcoming wedding, she should feel amputated, the mother answers: "In that case, we all have phantom pain" (Danticat, 1996, p. 199). In the context of immigration, the image of the missing limb and the pain it causes can be interpreted as the cost of moving into a new world. What is lost remains part of the self and the metaphor suggests a different concept of translation from Hoffman's. Although the latter's formulation of *Teşknota* is similar when she first arrives in Canada, the phantom pain precedes the process of translation and, as we have seen, will be cured by it:

Nostalgia is of course a source of poetry, and a form of fidelity. It is also a species of melancholia, which used to be thought of as an illness. As I walk the streets of Vancouver, I am pregnant with the images of Poland, pregnant and sick. *Teşknota* throws a film over everything around me, and directs my vision inward. The largest presence within me is the welling up of absence, of what I have lost. This pregnancy is also a phantom pain. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 115)

As Douglas Robinson explains in his analogy of translation as a prosthetic device designed to compensate for the loss of the original, the new version can only "feel real, native, strong enough to 'walk on' or live through, when a proprioceptive phantom is incorporated into it" (Robinson, 1997, p. 119). For the translator, this means appropriating the text in a positive way, making it come alive through the infusion of "some nexus of experience". For the immigrant, the prosthetic device of translation fits only if both worlds are kept alive and enter in a certain harmony with each other, negotiating the balance between the pain of loss and the promise of the future. For Caroline and her mother, this is not an easy fit and each of them is experiencing proprioceptive unease because New York and Haiti do not fit well together: their phantom pain is similar since Caroline has never known

Haiti and her mother was cut off from it. Grace, who is also the narrator, is the only one, having lived in both worlds, who can suggest a solution as she does at the conclusion of the story when, playing “the game of questions” with her mother, she yields and lets her ask the first question: “She thought about it for a long time while stirring the bones in our soup. ‘Why is it that when you lose something, it is always in the last place you look for it?’ she asked finally. Because of course [answers Grace], once you remember, you always stop looking” (Danticat, 1996, p. 216). Thus you will only come to accept the loss once you integrate it into the new self.

In her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat delves deeper into the pain of coming of age between cultures by focusing on the most intimate of traumas, that of the violation of a young girl’s sexual being by her own mother through the practice of *testing* virginity. The narrator, Sophie, was born in Haiti of the rape of her mother who fled to New York, leaving the newborn with her aunt and grandmother. After Sophie joins her mother at the age of twelve, she spends six years studying hard to learn English and living a very sheltered life. When she falls in love with her next door neighbour Joseph, a jazz musician from New Orleans, her mother starts *testing* her. Sophie practices “doubling” while submitting to the searching maternal fingers but eventually puts an end to the ordeal by deflowering herself with a pestle, hurting herself so badly that sex will always be painful for her; she flees her mother’s house, marries Joseph and gives birth to a daughter, determined never to submit her to the practice.

This story line stages the vicious cycle of abuse suffered by each generation of Haitian women and how it might be broken by migration. The repetition with a difference of the image of rape — the actual rape in Haiti, the *testing*, the self-deflowering — is also a useful and clever way to explore the links between the public and private spheres: first, the trauma experienced by Sophie’s mother is linked to the political context of Haiti since she most likely was raped by one of Duvalier’s sinister *Tonton Macoute*; second, Sophie’s trauma is linked to the generally accepted cultural practice of *testing*. As Laura Brown notes, arguing for a feminist analysis of rape, trauma is not necessarily something unusual and infrequent but often part of normal human experience: “Feminist analysis also asks us to understand how the constant presence and threat of trauma in the lives of girls and women of all colors, men of color in the United States, lesbian and gay people,

people in poverty, and people with disabilities has shaped our society, a continuing background noise rather than an unusual event” (Brown, 1995, pp. 102-103). This argument is compelling when applied to the context created for Danticat’s novel because it illuminates the intricate links which exist between trauma, culture and migration.

Sophie’s mother is forced into migration and will ultimately be unable to overcome the trauma of her rape since, having become pregnant by her lover, also a Haitian émigré, she kills herself. For her, migration had been contrived from the start and only literal translation is possible as the message on her answering machine attests to: “*S’il vous plaît, laissez-moi un message*. Please leave me a message. Impeccable French and English [notes Sophie], both painfully mastered, so that her voice would never betray the fact that she grew up without a father, that her mother was merely a peasant, that she was *from the hills*” (Danticat, 1998, p. 223). As one of the walking wounded, she moves from her Creole self to her French self to her English self, remaining forever unable to integrate one into the other, and forever resisting possible self-transformation from these translations. From the start, Sophie is different. Her displacement from Haiti, while painful, is not what will cause her trauma in spite of the fact that, at first, when she speaks English, the words “[sound] like rocks falling in a stream” (Danticat, 1998, p. 66). Later on, when she is heard speaking English in Haiti, this impression is “sent back” to her when she is described as using “*cling-clang* talk [which] sounds like glass breaking” (Danticat, 1998, p. 162). These images of water and glass are not altogether displeasing even if they convey a sense of what Antoine Berman termed the “violence of *métissage*” to describe translation: the stream/glass of the old self is disrupted/broken by the new rocks being thrown into it but the result is that the new language does not erase the old one. There is, therefore, no linguistic trauma or it pales in comparison with the psychic and physical trauma suffered by the protagonist.

Sophie, like Danticat, “grew up believing that people could be in two places at once” (Danticat, 1998, p. 208). When she first arrives in New York and looks at herself in the mirror, she immediately grasps the significance of this double belonging:

New eyes seemed to be looking back at me. A new face all together. Someone who had aged in one day, as though she had been through a time machine, rather than an airplane. Welcome to New York, this

face seemed to be saying. Accept your new life. I greeted the challenge, like one greets a new day. As my mother's daughter and Tante Atie's child. (Danticat, 1998, p. 49)

The “you”, which Hoffman used in her diary to distance her Polish self from her emerging American self, is immediately recognized by Sophie in her own reflection, having already undergone a sort of pre-lingual translation. The stage is set for her to learn English and continue a process of translation already in motion in Haiti and tending toward self-integration. Memory will thus play a much greater role in her recovery than it did for Hoffman.

Recovering the Past

As mentioned in the passage I have placed in epigraph to this paper, memories are a vital part of the fragments the immigrant brings into the new country. For Danticat they are not the stuff of nostalgia, as they were for Hoffman, but the link connecting the self to a collective identity. Through remembering, “as a limb remembering the body”, the immigrant reassembles the fragments of the old life and fits them into the new one. In her writing, individual Haitian immigrants work through the tension which exists between memory and history: they may feel lost in their new surroundings but, through the recollection of their collective past, they have the hope of reversing the movement of migration and “find” themselves in translation.

In spite of the fact that the past often appears untranslatable, Danticat strives to recover it in her writing as illustrated by *The Farming of Bones* based on a particularly dark chapter of Haitian history. As Geertz (1993) would have it, the author seeks precisely to find the obscured past in translation, to bring it closer and make it more familiar although it remains far away and largely unknown. Since Haitian history bears the stamp of migration and diaspora, and the period depicted in the novel is no exception, Danticat suggests that a Haitian migrant identity operates “out of a *culture-lacune*”, as formulated by Myriam Chancy, a Haitian poet and critic who has resided in Port-au-Prince, Québec City, Winnipeg, Halifax and several US cities. Chancy uses a notion of absence/presence to refer to the revolutionary dimension of Creole culture expressing itself through its absence and its silencing: “I have survived annihilation, both cultural and personal, by clinging to the vestiges of creole that lie dormant in

my mind and by preserving a sense of self in an area of my consciousness that seems untranslatable” (Chancy, 1997, p. 16).

The Farming of Bones confronts this seemingly untranslatable consciousness by exploring and contrasting both sides of the divide created by the opposition between translation and non-translation.⁹ The novel tears off the scab of a collective Haitian wound and deals with the massacre of Haitians ordered in 1937 by the dictator of the Dominican Republic, General Trujillo. According to the stories circulating about him, Trujillo uses “perejil”, the Spanish word for parsley, as an excuse for ethnic cleansing once he realizes that Creolophone Haitians cannot roll Spanish *r*'s or pronounce the *jota*. This Caribbean “Shibboleth” (see Derrida, 1987) provides Danticat with a narrative thread to explore the significance of having one's own alterity turned against the self and one's life dependent upon the illusion of perfect equivalence. The Haitians are caught within the web of power relations governing the target culture and forced to overcome the impossibility of translation in order to survive while Trujillo does not even consider the possibility of translation because, in order to condemn Haitians for their likeness to Dominicans, he must find the mark of an absolute difference.

In reality many Haitians had established themselves in the Dominican Republic for generations and some were integrated into the middle class. The narrator calls them the *non-vwayajè* in Creole, the non-travellers, to distinguish them from the migrant cane workers. The society, therefore, is a blend of cultures, shaped by constant negotiations between differences and people often speak a mix of “Kreyól and Spanish, the tangled language of those who always stuttered as they spoke, caught as they were on the narrow ridge between two nearly native tongues” (Danticat, 1999, p. 69). The bond between Haitians is one of cultural memory, perhaps common birth places, food, carnival, songs, stories, etc. The only Dominican character portrayed as being in tune with their ways is Doctor Javier who also speaks “Kreyól like a Haitian, with only a slight Dominican cadence” (Danticat, 1999, p. 79). Amabelle, the protagonist, taken in as a young girl by a Dominican family after her parents drowned in the Massacre River marking the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, attempts to understand and sympathize with the human passions

⁹ The following analysis is borrowed, in part, from a previous publication where the novel is discussed in more detail. See Malena, 2003.

affecting her host family. Since she is reduced to being a servant, however, and her boss turns out to be the main instrument of the genocide perpetrated against the Haitians, her journey will eventually render her incapable of reconciling differences. She loses her lover and Dr. Javier, as well as many other people, in the massacre and is rescued at the border. Having healed in Haiti from her physical wounds, she returns to the Dominican Republic in an effort to recover from the psychic trauma. Her journey ends in ambiguity when she lies down in the middle of the river, seemingly to die, occupying the very site of the massacre, a space heavily connoted with the violence of both translation and non-translation but the only space she has ever known, the dangerous space of the in-between. The novel ends with her fate undecided but inhabited by the promise of renewed possibilities because “[i]t is perhaps the great discomfort of those trying to silence the world to discover that we have voices sealed inside our heads, voices that with each passing day, grow even louder than the clamor of the world outside” (Danticat, 1999, p. 268). Within the story, Amabelle is not able to testify to the massacre but, as she is the narrator of the novel, the story is told after all, suggesting that even if recovering the past fails to heal the individual it may help the community.

Speaking of a visit to the Dominican Republic in preparation to writing the novel, Danticat notes how struck she was by the “ordinariness of life” happening on the river banks, “people washing clothes,... children bathing,... animals drinking”. Finding it “both sad and comforting that nature has no memory”, she explains: “I think it was what I didn’t find there that most moved me. I had read so much about the Massacre River, going from the first massacre of the colonists in the nineteenth century to this present massacre... So, it was the lack of event there that inspired me, that made me want to recall the past and write about this historical moment” (Danticat, 2000, pp. 107-108). She seems to echo the St. Lucian poet and Nobel Prize laureate Derek Walcott who, musing over the cultural significance of a performance in a Trinidadian village named Felicity of “*Ramleela*, the epic dramatization of the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*”, writes: “The sigh of History meant nothing here..., the sigh of History rises over ruins, not over landscapes, and in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over, apart from the ruins of sugar estates and abandoned forts” (Walcott, 1992).¹⁰

¹⁰ There are no page numbers in this edition.

Walcott's Nietzschean notion of history, which Danticat adopts in her novel, serves a specifically Caribbean process of recovery from the collective trauma of a community born out of the violence of genocide, slavery and colonialism. As Nietzsche had pointed out, "the unhistorical and the historical are equally necessary to the health of an individual, a community, and a system of culture" (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 8). For Walcott, and this is what Danticat seems to have found out in the Dominican Republic, Caribbean history is inscribed in the fragments of its people, of its languages and of its landscape. In this sense "history serves life... The knowledge of the past is desired only for the service of the future and the present, not to weaken the present or undermine a living future" (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 22). As Danticat's novel shows, when individuals carry history within themselves, as scars upon their bodies or in the fragmented languages they speak, they live in the present, the pain and trauma becoming part of who they are and giving them strength to survive and even hope. They translate themselves and their history into life and art.

Kai Erikson notes that trauma "has a social dimension":

[O]ne can speak of traumatized communities as something distinct from assemblies of traumatized persons. Sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body, [...] but even when that does not happen, traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos — a group culture, almost — that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up. (Erikson, 1995, p. 185)

In this perspective *The Farming of Bones* unveils a corner of the Haitian ethos in a poetic process of "excavation and of self-discovery" which serves to restore "our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago" (Walcott, 1992). For Dori Laub, the telling of a traumatic event aims at knowing it, which is the key to survival: "There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" (Laub, 1995, p. 63). Danticat is keenly aware of the need to remember, to recover the past and to narrate it since much of the Haitian collective trauma came from being silenced, as she herself testifies about the Duvalier era: "A lot of us *must* remember. I remember a great deal of silence, people being afraid to say anything. You didn't trust your neighbour because you didn't know who might turn you in for whatever reason" (Danticat, 2000,

p. 112). In a passage which has since become famous, Walcott writes: “Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape” (Walcott, 1992).¹¹ Haitian identity is a broken vase, held together by the loving glue of its culture which also reveals the scars of persecution and of succeeding dictatorships. No nostalgia for a supposedly intact past is possible because the present, and how to survive in it, is what matters. Danticat’s novel delves into this experience and, through the creation of complex characters dealing with personal traumas, shows how each individual struggle and each healing process is closely connected with the collective Haitian tragedy of displacement, stepping back into the historical, political and cultural landscape of Haiti. As Hoffman discusses in “P.S.”, the writer’s immigrant self, having sufficiently grown up, needs to confront and interrogate the source of her memories, however repressed they may be, in order to feel more comfortable in the space of translation she inhabits between the two worlds.

Commenting on the irony of the old Haitian song every visitor hears when getting off the plane in Port-au-Prince (“Beloved Haiti, there’s no place like you. I had to leave you before I could understand you”), Danticat explains: “It’s sort of a restructuring of home and reclaiming, but reclaiming in a different way, humbly, just going as an insider/outsider, stepping one foot in the river, one foot at a time” (Danticat, 2000, p. 119).

Conclusion

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie notes: “I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head” (Danticat, 1998, p. 234). As I have tried to show, Danticat’s writing explores this phenomenon through the shaping of stories and characters who deal with past traumas and the pain of displacement. Her connection to the past is different from that of Hoffman’s, for whom, as illustrated by the following passage, the past felt forever lost in translation even though it remained an essential part of her identity:

¹¹ The similarity between Walcott’s formulation and Benjamin’s famous phrase is of course striking. For a more detailed discussion of this rapprochement, see Malena, 2003 and Malena, 2005.

No, I am no patriot, nor was I ever allowed to be. And yet the country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love. It lives within me despite my knowledge of our marginality, and its primitive, unpretty emotions. Is it blind and self-deceptive of me to hold on to its memory? I think it would be blind and self-deceptive not to. All it has given is the world, but that is enough. It has fed my language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind. It has given me the furrows of reality, my first loves. The absoluteness of those loves can never be recaptured: no geometry of the landscape, no haze in the air, will live in us as intensely as the landscapes that we saw as the first, and to which we gave ourselves wholly, without reservations. (Hoffman, 1989, pp. 74-75)

As she explains later, Hoffman cannot express any hope for recovery at that time. Her memories are intensely individual and frozen in time: “The house, the garden, the country you have lost remain forever as you remember them. Nostalgia — that most lyrical of feelings — crystallizes around those images like amber” (Hoffman, 1989, pp. 115). It is only much later that she muses about the possibility of recovering her childhood, although she relegates it to the realm of fiction: “now I could pick up the other part of the interrupted story and grow up in Polish” (Hoffman, 2003, p. 54).

For Danticat, memories also endure but, as they have always already been linked to a community, they do not become crystallized because the possibility exists to return and unfreeze the frame. Her immigrant self is a subject in translation from the beginning, a subject who uses writing not to invent a new self, and bury the old one as Hoffman found she had to do, but to reassemble the cultural fragments she brought into exile. Whereas fragmentation was a new and frightening experience for Hoffman, destroying the simplicity and wholeness of her childhood desires (Hoffman, 1989, pp. 158-159), it was always part of Danticat’s reality, both in Haiti and New York.

Edwige Danticat’s characters teach us that the translation of cultural memory is fraught with danger but necessary to the well-being of the immigrant subject. According to Carole Maier, “it is possible to speak of a ‘translating subject’ as one who works deliberately between cultures, enabled by an understanding of identity as a learned or constructed allegiance rather than an innate condition” (Maier, 1995, p. 31). Basing her discussion on the “linguistics of contact”, where contact is defined by Mary Louise Pratt as “copresence, interaction,

interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (Quoted in Maier, 1995, p. 29), Maier uses the primary requisites of intimacy and inquiry to arrive to a compelling formulation since it carefully negotiates the opacity or incommensurability of the other and the pitfalls of producing too general a theory of identity. Danticat’s writing illustrates how an examination of historical contexts, which delineate a space of cross-cultural translation, from the standpoint of intimacy and inquiry, leads to a consideration of the importance of history in dealing with both personal and collective trauma. Haitian emigrant writers have the possibility to find themselves in translation when they step back into memory. The tragic circumstances experienced by Danticat’s protagonists speak to the difficulties associated with this journey. Constructing a new identity means reassembling cultural fragments in a continuous healing process of the phantom pain caused by immigration. Danticat’s writing illustrates this endeavour and the value of trauma for what can be found in the translation of the past:

This speaking and this listening — a speaking and a listening *from the site of trauma* — does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don’t yet know of our own traumatic pasts. In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves. (Caruth, 1995, p. 11)

The empathy which Danticat feels for the traumas suffered by her historical community reveals to what extent this is true: the departure from the self represented by migration triggers her need to understand her collective past and to confront its tragedy through the creation of characters who, travelling along the path of recovery and self-integration, end up finding themselves in translation.

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ABSTRACT: Found in Translation or Edwige Danticat's Voyage of Recovery — This paper explores the writing of Haitian writer Edwige Danticat from a perspective of (im)migration and translation which is different from that elaborated by Eva Hoffman in *Lost in Translation*. By contrasting the traumas suffered by both authors and the way they deal with it, different conclusions can be reached concerning the theory of self they propose. Hoffman is resigned to translate herself in order to fit into the American context but never gets over the loss of her Polish self. Danticat, who realizes upon her arrival in New York that she was already a translated being, delves into the Haitian collective past for the creation of fictional characters who find in the translation of their selves the strength to live in two languages and two cultures without abandoning their personal and collective past.

RÉSUMÉ : Edwige Danticat : se re/trouver en traduction — Cette étude se penche sur l'écriture de l'écrivaine haïtienne Edwige Danticat dans le cadre de l'(im)migration et de la traduction en la contrastant avec celle d'Eva Hoffman dans *Lost in Translation*. Les traumatismes causés par l'émigration émergent de façon différente chez ces deux auteurs qui doivent négocier la nouvelle identité leur permettant de les surmonter. Hoffman se résigne à se traduire elle-même pour développer son moi américain, mais ne se remet jamais de la perte de son moi polonais. Danticat, en reconnaissant dès son arrivée à New York, qu'elle est déjà un être traduit, creuse dans le passé collectif haïtien afin de créer des personnages de fiction qui trouvent dans la traduction de

leur moi la force de conjuguer deux langues et deux cultures sans nier leur passé personnel et collectif.

Keywords: Haitian Diaspora, immigration, trauma, translation, self.

Mots-clés : Diaspora haïtienne, immigration, traumatisme, le moi.

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