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## **Inherited Reproduction of Violence and Trauma in 1990's Literary Immigrant Families: An Exploration of Lucy; Breath, Eyes, Memory; and Drown**

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Inherited Reproduction of Violence and Trauma in 1990's Literary Immigrant Families: An  
Exploration of *Lucy; Breath, Eyes, Memory; and Drown*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in  
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by  
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*“When I am a child, my childhood is a luxury my family cannot afford. Their dignity is not spared, so my innocence is not spared. They are humiliated and traumatized daily, so I become a nurse to their trauma. I am told too much, so I know too much, so I am wise beyond my years.*

*When I am six, my mother tells me that when she found out she was pregnant with me at age nineteen, she “tried to kill the baby.” She says “the baby,” as if it isn’t me she’s talking about; as if I am not the expensive, scandalous daughter who forced my way into her world despite the abortion-inducing herbal teas she drank and her frantic leaps off of small buildings.*

*When I am sixteen, my father calls me on the phone to, inevitably, weep. He says, “Living in this country, I have learned not to hope for things. Only you are my hope. Only you.”*

- Lenelle Moïse, “the children of immigrants”

**Abstract:**

Among literary families with histories of abuse specifically, we can observe a certain inheritability of violence through generations; the violence faced by a parent is reproduced onto the child as a coping mechanism, inflicting trauma onto the child and perpetuating a cycle in which the offspring similarly reproduces violence. Within immigrant family units specifically, these violent cycles become entwined with the borders which physically separate family members from each other, an under-explored phenomenon in mainstream literary criticism. Through *Lucy; Breath, Eyes, Memory;* and *Drown*, three immigrant novels from the Caribbean region grappling with the implications of family separation, this thesis explores the mechanisms by which immigrant families pass along and cope with intergenerational violence and trauma.

**1. Introduction**

Extensive literature across academic disciplines explores concepts of inheritability in families; in philosophy, we see Kierkegaard introduce the idea of “hereditary sin,” evaluating the relationship between human error and the original sin of our earliest ancestors, Adam and Eve (Kierkegaard 25). In George Elliot’s literature, we see physical heirlooms inherited as manifestations of inherited emotions (Osborne 468). Among literary families with histories of abuse specifically, we can observe a certain inheritability of violence through generations; the violence faced by a parent is reproduced onto the child as a coping mechanism, inflicting trauma onto the child and perpetuating a cycle in which the offspring similarly reproduces violence. We can observe this as a classic motif in literature: in *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff’s abuse from parental-esque figures manifests into his own violence and abusive traits passed onto his son, while it is Cathy Linton who breaks the further perpetuation of abuse. In psychological studies,

we see inherited violent tendencies described as a product of “social learning theory” (Grusec 776), in which children learn how to act among others by watching the adults around them.

Inherited violent tendencies and inherited trauma are distinctly different concepts, and yet they are inextricably linked; both are a form of social reproduction, in which traits are passed through generations not via genetics, but via family interactions. McNall describes this phenomenon of shared intergenerational trauma as “inherited narratives,” in which stories passed on to children are so “compelling” that they do not feel like stories, but rather a shared memory (McNall 1). Balaev writes that intergenerational trauma theory “conflates loss and absence and collapses boundaries between the individual and the group,” emphasizing the difference between individual trauma and “historical absence,” referring to a “historically documented loss” in one’s ancestry (Balaev 152). Yet, when past violence experienced by a parent becomes reproduced as new violence onto the child, these “inherited narratives” and “historic absences” become not only “compelling,” but authentically real, individual traumas.

Within immigrant family units specifically, these violent cycles become entwined with the political boundaries which physically separate family members from each other, thus exacerbating the emotional separation that can come with intergenerational violence. Limited existing literature explores how violence and trauma are inherited specifically within the context of the immigrant experience; existing academic work on these themes in literature tends to focus on more Eurocentric novels, such as *Wuthering Heights*. The experiences of non-white immigrants to Westernized countries, who often find themselves “othered” in new communities, are distinctly different than the experiences commonly referenced in mainstream literary academia. In cycles of violence involving immigrant families, the traditional roles of “perpetrator” and “victim” can become blurred; it becomes more difficult to view parents

enacting violence onto their children as perpetrators when they themselves are objects of state-sanctioned and sociopolitical violence.

This blurring of lines between perpetrator and victim begs the question, who “owns” the perpetrated violence? And how is this violence, and the trauma that accompanies it, passed through generations, specifically within the context of separated immigrant families who are often “othered”? To “own” violence, in this case, implies having the means to recognize, or to take responsibility for one’s place within the chain of violence. The ability to own violence is complicated; it is influenced by gender identity and construction, philosophy and religion, as well as one’s means, or “agency resources” -- economic and educational capital, as well as living space and access to necessary life resources. For example, through therapy, we see Sophie in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* take ownership for her stake in reproduced violence and break her family’s cycle; this is because she could afford therapy and was surrounded by people who were accepting of therapy. In *Drown*, Yunion and his father do not have this same access.

Through *Lucy*; *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; and *Drown*, three immigrant novels from the Caribbean region grappling with the implications of family separation, this thesis explores the mechanisms by which immigrant families pass along and cope with intergenerational violence and trauma, either through remembrance or repression.

These three selected novels share a common regional background and familial intergenerationality of trauma and violence which can eventually be traced back to male figures. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Lucy* both contain omnipresent maternal figures: original birth mothers from whom the protagonists are distanced by both physical separation and repressed trauma, whose trauma hangs over the protagonists as if their own. Kincaid’s *Lucy* features Lucy, a young woman from the West Indies who becomes an au pair for an American family to escape

the domineering influence of her toxic maternal relationship; Lucy's mother has faced violence at the fault of Lucy's father, which influences this. Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* features Sophie, the daughter of Martine and Martine's rapist, whose virginity Martine "tests" nightly once Sophie leaves Haiti to live with her in the United States; Martine was sexually assaulted as a teenager by a man whose face she never saw. Diaz's *Drown* completes the selection with an omnipresent, abusive father figure, whose presence hangs over Yunior's life whether or not they are physically separated by borders.

### 1.1 Epigraph

The epigraph of this thesis is an excerpt from "the children of immigrants" by Lenelle Moïse. I selected this poem as a framework for reading the selected texts; Moïse concisely explores the themes of immigrant intergenerational trauma present across the novels in a way that can be applied to all three texts.

Moïse described her childlike innocence as unspared by the sociopolitically violent experiences of her parents, casting herself as "a nurse to their trauma" (Moïse, lines 34-35). When Moïse describes herself as the "expensive, scandalous daughter who forced my way into [my mother's] world despite the abortion-inducing herbal teas" (Moïse, lines 38-39), Moïse is a character in her mother's trauma, making it a shared, intergenerational experience. Moïse's mother's trauma, the struggle to raise an unplanned child while facing assimilation pressures in a new and hostile country, becomes Moïse's own trauma, as it colors her mere existence.

This poem closely mirrors the cycle of violence and intergenerational trauma in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*:

"When I was pregnant with you, Manman made me drink all kinds of herbs, vervain, quinine, and verbena, baby poisons. I tried beating my stomach with wooden spoons. I

tried to destroy you, but you wouldn't go away... You were going to kill me before I killed you" (Danticat 193) -Martine to Sophie

As the product of Martine's sexual assault, Sophie serves as a constant reminder of past trauma. Martine's "beating" of her own pregnant stomach is an attempt to rid herself of past trauma, much like Moïse's mother's attempt to induce abortion with "herbal teas she drank and her frantic leaps off of small buildings" (Moïse, line 39). Yet, this attempt to "beat" out the past is simultaneously a reproduction of violence by attempting to "destroy" Sophie. Sophie's existence is inescapably linked to Martine's sexual trauma, making Martine's assault Sophie's own "inherited narrative," which becomes a lived narrative of trauma with Martine's "testing."

Moïse additionally broaches the notion of agent relationships in immigrant families, which is present in varying ways across all three selected texts. Moïse reiterates that she grows up fast because of her father's hopes for her future- his words, "Only you are my hope. Only you" (Moïse, line 41) conclude the poem. Moïse is presented as a reproduction of her father, his agent who will be able to do what he could not within the new country, challenging his resignation "not to hope for things" (Moïse, line 41). In *Lucy*, Lucy immigrates to escape her mother's vision for her life; she desires the educational experiences made available to her brothers, which her mother has never had herself or encouraged. In this way, she is inverting the agent relationship. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Martine guilt's Sophie over her budding feelings for men, comparing the two of them to "inseparable lovers" known as the *Marasas* (Danticat 83). In *Drown*, we see Yuniors desire to not be like his father even as he replicates his father's behavior.

Moïse also weaves seamlessly into her poem the pressure many immigrants feel to speak for all immigrants. As she types a family friend's resume, she labels herself "a bridge, a cultural interpreter, a spokesperson" (Moïse, lines 19-20), the one who is always asked to speak at

conference panels but never to socialize. What Moïse illustrates in “the children of immigrants,” Mukherjee describes as the “historical sense,” a duty which many immigrant authors feel to represent the experiences of all people immigrating from their home country (Mukherjee 682).

Danticat broaches this idea in a letter to Sophie included in some editions of *Breath, Eyes,*

*Memory:*

“You are being asked, I have been told, to represent every girl child, every woman from this land that you and I love to [sic] much... Of course, not all Haitian mothers are like your mother. Not all Haitian daughters are tested, as you have been” (Danticat 242).

This idea of questioning the “historical sense” Mukherjee describes is particularly relevant in this thesis; immigrant literary narratives cannot be so broadly generalized as to apply to all immigrants, fictional or real. Yet, the work of this thesis is not to generalize a facet of the immigrant experience, but rather to explore three literary immigrant families possessing cycles of reproduced violence and trauma. Lucy and Sophie cannot “represent every girl child,” nor should they be asked to. But the way they and their mothers experience violence and trauma is more complicated than a Eurocentric, non-immigrant model can capture, and deserves its own academic space.

## **2. Lucy**

*“...I asked my mother why she had named me Lucy. The first time I asked, she made no reply, pretending that she had not heard me. I asked again, and this time under her breath, she said, “I named you after Satan himself. Lucy, short for Lucifer. What a botheration from the moment you were conceived” (Kincaid 172).*

## 2.1 Text Overview

*Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid follows Lucy's experience as a young immigrant from the West Indies to the United States in the 1960s -- while Lucy does not specify where within the West Indies she is from, some literary critics theorize that she is from Antigua (Yost 143). At age nineteen, Lucy leaves her home with her parents and male siblings to au pair for a white, American family in New York. This family is made up of Mariah, the stay at home mother who views Lucy as a new child, Lewis, the father and cheating husband, and four young daughters. Lucy's rebellious best friend Peggy and boyfriend Paul round out the important supporting characters of the novel.

Lucy possesses significant anger throughout the novel: anger towards her mother, anger towards colonialism, and anger towards patriarchal systems that discourage girls from seeking an education. While we know for most of the novel that Lucy has left the West Indies out of anger towards her mother, who verbally abuses her, we only learn towards the end of the novel the root cause of this anger -- that Lucy's parents have prioritized the education of their sons over Lucy.

Over the course of the novel, interspersed vignettes convey the complexity of Lucy's mother's background. Lucy's father was a serial cheater, with children by multiple women. These other women on multiple occasions attempted to beat and murder Lucy's mother. The information we are given about Lucy's mother is limited and one-sided, suggesting that Lucy is attempting to repress her influence. This repression is crucial to understanding how Lucy handles the violence and trauma that has been reproduced onto her by her mother; Lucy appears to be actively repressing her mother's own trauma and its influence in her life, with her refusal to open her mother's letters as the physical manifestation of this.

Lucy's dynamic with Mariah has its own complications, as she takes a mother-like figure in Lucy's life -- Lucy admits, "The times that I loved Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother. The times that I did not love Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother" (Kincaid 488). Mariah's attempts to support Lucy at times hint at underlying colonialism, such as when she assumes that Lucy would like to know what daffodils and other North American flowers look like, whereas Lucy sees these plants as symbols of "conquered and conquests" (Kincaid 243). Both Mariah and Lucy's mother are portrayed as maternal figures who in some way would like to mold, or "conquer," Lucy in their own image. In this vein, Lucy eventually rejects both of them; she first moves out of her home in the West Indies, and at the end of the novel, moves out of Mariah's apartment.

## *2.2 Initial Exploration of Maternal Dynamic*

Lucy maintains a complex relationship with her mother, simultaneously feeling deep intimacy with her - "I was not like my mother—I was my mother" (Kincaid 770) - while also refusing to open or respond to her letters, "not even break[ing] the seal on the envelope" (Kincaid 651). Their relationship has clearly ruptured before Lucy immigrates to the United States, but Lucy does not immediately state what explicitly has caused the rift. This is made explicit later in the novel.

Lucy appears to not view her mother as an independent or autonomous figure, first demonstrated in this anecdote of a monkey attack:

"She did not like the way the monkey stared at her, and so she picked up a stone and threw it at the monkey... One day when she threw the stone, the monkey caught it and threw it back. When the stone struck my mother, the blood poured out of her as if she were not a human being but a goblet with no bottom to it. Everyone thought that she might not stop bleeding until she died, and then that it was a miracle she survived, though the truth lay in her own mother's skill at dealing with such events" (Kincaid 452).

Lucy believes that her mother's survival of this attack was a "miracle" and a testament to "[Lucy's mother's] own mother's skill" rather than her own. Lucy's grandmother is mentioned only one other time in the text when Lucy, early in her time in the United States, misses the "pink mullet and green figs cooked in coconut milk" (Kincaid 49) her grandmother prepares. In contrast, Lucy's memories of her mother are marred by resentment- "I no longer liked even the way she spoke" (Kincaid 175). Further, the depiction of Lucy's mother as "not a human being" but rather a thing lucky to have survived further strips her of any agency or victory in survival.

This view of Lucy's mother as dependent on others is reiterated through Lucy's perception of her parents' relationship. Lucy explains her parent's age gap as a symptom of convenience rather than a conscious decision of love; in Lucy's father, her mother had "someone who would leave her alone yet not cause her to lose face in front of other women" while her father saw her mother as "someone who would take care of him in his dotage" (Kincaid 694). Lucy seems to view this prioritization of convenience as misguided, stating, "this was not a situation I hoped to take as an example" (Kincaid 694). The one concession we get from Lucy is an admission that her mother's priorities are different from her own- "my mother had thought very hard not so much about happiness as about her own peace of mind" (Kincaid 693). Contextualized within Lucy's mother's history of abuse and trauma, "peace of mind" evokes a sense of desire for safety and security, something more primal and urgent than happiness.

Lucy's deepest resentment towards her mother appears to be rooted in their differing priorities, specifically her refusal to accept Lucy as an intelligent being worthy of education and admiration:

"I am not like my mother. She and I are not alike. She should not have married my father. She should not have had children. She should not have thrown away her intelligence. She should not have paid so little attention to mine... I am not like her at all" (Kincaid 1073).

This suggestion that her mother refused to support Lucy's education is hinted at earlier in the novel, such as when Mariah accepts Lucy's desire to be friends with Peggy, despite her distaste for their friendship. Lucy states that "this was a way in which Mariah was superior to my mother, for my mother would never come to see that perhaps my needs were more important than her wishes" (Kincaid 539). With the context gained later in the novel, we learn that the "wishes" Lucy refers to are to obtain an education.

Lucy sees her mother as not only denying her an education but denying herself the possibilities her own life may have held. Lucy does not mind her father claiming that her brothers "would go to university in England and study to become a doctor or lawyer or someone who would occupy an important and influential position in society" (Kincaid 1133), implying she will not by omission. However, Lucy understands the "agent" dynamic between mother and daughter, stating she "at the time, even thought of us as identical." Lucy's pain is not only in her withheld opportunities, but in that "there was no accompanying scenario in which she saw me, her only identical offspring, in a remotely similar situation" (Kincaid 1133).

In this way, Lucy sees herself as her mother's agent, her only "identical offspring," linked in experience as Caribbean women despite being separated by borders. Lucy almost seems more offended on behalf of her mother than of herself, distraught that her mother would not believe in someone who she not only viewed as identical but knew "as well as she knew herself." While Lucy's mother appears to be willing for Lucy to obtain the education that would allow her to wear a "nurse's uniform," Lucy describes this as the uniform made not of cloth but "made of circumstances" (Kincaid 792). These circumstances, the circumstances of limited education for women, appear to be a major source of strain for Lucy and her mother; the uniform "made of

circumstances” represents the systems of female oppression that Lucy perceives her mother has not fought hard enough against.

And yet, the limited nature of Lucy’s narrative does not leave room for her mother to explain her intentions; it is possible that her mother simply cannot imagine anything for Lucy other than what is visible within her world, so all she can hope is for Lucy to have the moments of “peace of mind” (Kincaid 696) which she has unsuccessfully sought for herself. This is still a significant improvement from what Lucy’s mother has experienced; Lucy’s mother has lived continually on guard for attacks from other women who have children with Lucy’s father. For Lucy to be a nurse, this would imply financial independence, something that could provide “peace of mind” by decreasing her reliance on toxic men.

This is not the only scenario in which Lucy believes her mother has denied her of knowledge; when Lucy gets her first menstrual period, her mother does not reveal to her the true biological meaning of the experience:

“Without telling me exactly how I might miss a menstrual cycle, my mother had shown me which herbs to pick and boil, and what time of day to drink the potion they produced, to bring on a reluctant period (Kincaid 593).

In this passage, Lucy’s mother is teaching her how to perform a self-abortion with a concoction of herbs, without speaking aloud that sexual intercourse and pregnancy are the true reasons a woman might have a “reluctant period.” While this passage is evidence of withheld knowledge, what is left unsaid reveals more about Lucy and her mother’s relationship; Lucy’s mother’s knowledge of self-performed abortion suggests that this is something she has attempted, demonstrating that Lucy’s relationship with her mother is clouded by the unspoken secret that she was an unwanted pregnancy. This is hinted at in snippets of conversation, in which Lucy’s mother calls Lucy “a botheration from the moment you were conceived” and asks “Why do you

torment me so?” (Kincaid 1324). By giving Lucy the tools to induce an abortion, her mother may be attempting to grant Lucy the bodily autonomy that will be necessary to have “peace of mind” in the world they live in.

Yet, these refusals of knowledge have led Lucy to turn emotionally from her mother, as evidenced by her refusal to continue to seek advice from her. Lucy admits that if she should ever get pregnant, she would have difficulty asking her mother for the herbal recipe, claiming that “these particular herbs would let her know exactly what I had been up to, and I had always thought I would rather die than let her see me in such a vulnerable position—unmarried and with child” (Kincaid 597). Lucy sees all that her mother has experienced only in relation to how it affects her, while readers have the emotional distance to consider the circumstances that constrain her mother. Lucy’s limited perspective implies that she is attempting to actively repress her mother’s influences, but the amount she writes about her mother demonstrates this is an influence she cannot entirely escape; Lucy cannot deny that their traumas are entwined.

### *2.3 Lucy’s Mother’s Trauma*

Lucy’s father has impregnated many women and has “perhaps thirty children” (Kincaid 690). Most of the women have attacked each other while leaving him “without so much as a singed hair on his head” (Kincaid 398). After living with a woman for a long period and having three children with her, he leaves the woman to live and have children with Lucy’s mother. As a result, the original woman on multiple occasions has tried to kill Lucy and her mother. This is revealing of the female ownership of male violence in Lucy’s community; Lucy has brothers, whom we learn exist late in the novel. Yet, the original woman blames the indiscretion of Lucy’s father on Lucy and her mother. In absence of Lucy’s father’s ability to “own” his position in the

chain of violence, the women around him perpetuate the emotional violence they have experienced, placing blame on the other women around them rather than see their pain as part of a chain that connects back to Lucy's father.

Lucy's father is the origin of much of Lucy's mother's trauma. Because of his infidelity, Lucy's mother is attacked by women and relies on the magic of an obeah woman to feel secure (Kincaid 687). As a final act, he dies not only "leaving [Lucy's] mother a pauper" but also leaving her with debt on his insurance policy (Kincaid 1098). Yet, Lucy's narrative gives him more grace than Lucy's mother. For Lucy's father, we are given room to explore his behavior, as Lucy asks herself "how did this business of not returning the love all these women showered on him get started?"

In contrast, Lucy's mother's trauma is not fully explored in the novel. While we know these murder attempts occur, we are never given significant background information about them. Lucy's mother's personal experiences are presented as Lucy's sporadic side thoughts, spurred by Mariah's actions or a fleeting conversation. When Lucy wonders why she could not share laughs with her mother, she resigns herself to "for a reason not clear to me, it was not allowed" (Kincaid 504), and it is never mentioned again in the novel. This is another indicator that Lucy's perspective as a narrator on her mother's experiences is limited.

Lucy's mother's name is only mentioned once in the novel towards the end, when a visiting neighbor from the West Indies suggests, "You remind me of Miss Annie, you really remind me of your mother" (Kincaid 1065). To this extent, it even feels strange to refer to Lucy's mother as Annie in writing, as that is not how readers of *Lucy* come to know her; to not reveal Lucy's mother's name reads as a deliberate choice to not admit that her mother is a person with her own traumas, or her trauma's existence, which is directly linked to her pregnancy with

Lucy. It suggests that her mother only exists in Lucy's mind in relation to her own struggles. This is one more way Lucy distinguishes herself from her mother as not her agent. By painting her mother as more of a mythical figure in her life than a real presence, made easier by the physical presence of borders, Lucy can disclaim her "inherited narratives" and focus on her own budding narratives. Borders give Lucy the illusion of leaving her mother's trauma behind, while her mother continues to live inside of Lucy, physically represented by piles of unopened letters. To open the letters from her mother, Lucy risks reopening herself to her mother's trauma, viewing her as more "Annie" than "mom."

#### *2.4 Reproduction of Violence Between Mother and Daughter*

Lucy's mother reproduces her own history of violence -- the trauma of being attacked and blamed for her husband's indiscretions -- onto Lucy, yet this reproduction is more emotional than physical. With the exception of the alluded to attempt at self-abortion, Lucy's mother does not attempt to physically reproduce the violence she has faced onto Lucy, but rather berates Lucy with verbal attacks -- "I named you after Satan himself. Lucy, short for Lucifer" (Kincaid 1324) - - and withheld educational support. Yet as Lucy learns to return these verbal attacks to her mother, this emotional violence takes on physical properties. Lucy's exclamation, "I wish you were dead" (Kincaid 794), takes her mother so by surprise that she "got a headache, a bad one, and it caused her to take to her bed. This lasted for days, and at night I would hear sounds in our house that made me sure my mother had died and the undertaker had come to take her body away" (Kincaid 800). This presentation seems almost mythical, like a spell, giving Lucy the same omnipresence over her mother's life that she has over hers.

Similarly, years later in the United States, Lucy's loneliness spurs her to "suffer from violent headaches, exactly like the ones that used to afflict my mother." Lucy admits these headaches "frightened me because I did not know when one would come on, and they frightened me because they reminded me of my mother" (Kincaid 794). Lucy's physical reaction to her loneliness and fear of her mother suggests repression, perhaps repression of affectionate feelings towards her mother, and perhaps also the earlier mentioned repression of traumatizing childhood experiences.

Despite this repression that seems to last for most of the novel, towards the end of the text we observe the closest Lucy comes to processing her emotions. Lucy admits, "I came to hate my mother" (Kincaid 1127) for not supporting her educational aspirations, yet acknowledges "for ten of my twenty years, half of my life, I had been mourning the end of a love affair, perhaps the only true love in my whole life I would ever know" (Kincaid 1147). At this moment, Lucy acknowledges deep grief for what her relationship with her mother could have been yet maintains that their relationship should not continue.

Lucy's mother attempted to protect Lucy from the violence of her father's mistresses, bathing Lucy in water "in which the leaves and flowers of these plants had been boiled; this bath was to protect me from evil spirits sent to me by some of the women who had loved my father and whom he had not loved in return" (Kincaid 1080). This bath is an attempt by Lucy's mother to protect her daughter from the violence of other women, yet the bath is unable to protect Lucy from the true source of trauma- the emotional violence and turbulence of the mother-daughter relationship, rooted in Lucy's mother's reproduction of her own physical trauma into vitriol towards her child. The bath is also reminiscent of the abortifacients Lucy's mother once used in

an attempt to destroy Lucy; the use of herbs in a protective sense evokes a returning to the womb, a version in which Lucy is safe rather than beaten.

## *2.5 Results of Reproduced Violence*

### **2.5.1 Desire for Independence**

Lucy seems to be driven by a desire for independence- independence from her mother, her family's prioritization of her brothers, and eventually from Mariah when she moves into her own apartment. Lucy is repulsed by her mother's words "You can run away, but you cannot escape the fact that I am your mother, my blood runs in you, I carried you for nine months inside me" (Kincaid 769), and strives to escape them. In this pursuit, Lucy eventually claims that she "did not know very well" (Kincaid 132) the person she had become. Yet, Lucy towards the end of the novel takes pleasure in waking up in a new bed that is her own, stating "I had bought it with my own money. The roof over my head was my own-- that is, as long as I could afford to pay the rent for it" (Kincaid 144).

Yet, Lucy's desire for intimacy seems to coexist in conflict with her desire for independence. While standing next to Peggy while looking out the window of their new apartment, Lucy asks. "Was she seeing the same things as we looked out on the same view? Probably not." (Kincaid 154). Lucy's description of being "alone in the world" as "not a small accomplishment" suggests a sense of pride in her independence; simultaneously, Lucy states that this independence does not make her happy, but that happiness seemed to be "too much to ask for" (Kincaid 161). This philosophy represents Lucy's prioritization of independence over happiness and emotional intimacy, and yet, her mindset seems to resemble that of her mother's, who prioritized "peace of mind" (Kincaid 693) over happiness.

This opens the question: what about inherited generational violence has led Lucy to prioritize independence and self-sufficiency over emotional intimacy, and what has led her to view these concepts as mutually exclusive? The answer may be partially hidden in the destruction of Lucy's parents' marriage. Lucy's interpretation of her mother prioritizing "peace of mind" (Kincaid 693) over happiness suggests she views these concepts as mutually exclusive - a subconscious resignation to her mother's values, while she simultaneously attempts to leave her mother's influence in the past.

While we leave Lucy with financial security and something short of happiness, her desire to "love someone so much that I would die from it" (Kincaid 1430) suggests that in her newfound independence, she still has not fully learned how to process childhood trauma surrounding her relationship with her mother. Something is holding Lucy back from loving others, but this is never explicitly put into words in the novel. Rather, we observe through Lucy's descriptions of her mother, of her sexual escapades, of her friendships, that she is unable to fully experience love.

Lucy's inability, or refusal, to fully experience love is most evident through her relationship with her boyfriend, Paul, whom she meets towards the end of the novel. Throughout the novel, we have come to know Lucy as sexually explorative. Upon meeting Paul, Lucy describes the moment as "when people say they fall in love," but clarifies that she did not fall in love with Paul, as this "was not something I longed for" (Kincaid 853). Lucy claims that she "had seen so little of the world that I hardly knew what I really thought of anything," suggesting that she views love as something complex and foreign, which she does not yet possess the language to articulate. In contrast, Lucy views sex as accessible -- while Lucy claims that she

does not want to “settle” the question of being in love with Paul, she does want to “be alone in a room with him and naked” (Kincaid 853).

Lucy’s desire for independence also functions as a ploy to prove her mother and community members wrong. Lucy asks herself when contemplating her upbringing in the West Indies, “Why did someone not think that I would make a good doctor or a good magistrate or a good someone who runs things?” (Kincaid 782). Later, while visiting an art museum with Mariah, Lucy describes herself as “a young woman from the fringes of the world” (Kincaid 812) in comparison to a famous French painter; this interaction reads more like a challenge than an admission of defeat. Lucy notes that artistry seems “to be a position that allowed for irresponsibility, so perhaps it was much better suited to men” (Kincaid 837), in contrast to Lucy as a figure of independence and responsibility.

### **2.5.2 Colonized Attraction**

Lucy finds herself continually attracted to those who repulse her: the white family she au pairs for, particularly Mariah, and the white men she meets in the United States. Lucy cycles between emotional and/or sexual attraction and anger towards the white Americans she interacts with, often possessing both feelings simultaneously. Lucy describes her resentment towards white people as related to her realization that “the origin of my presence on the island [the West Indies]—my ancestral history—was the result of a foul deed” (Kincaid 1174), the foul deed being colonial settlement by the British. Before Lucy has this realization, she attributed her resentment towards white people, specifically the British, to other things: “for being unbeautiful, for not cooking food well, for wearing ugly clothes, for not liking to really dance, and for not liking real music” (Kincaid 1177). Lucy’s realization of the nature of her presence as a “foul deed” occurs when in letters exchanged with her pen pal from a French colonized island, she

realizes their situations are the same, concluding that all white people are in some way, colonizers. We can see Lucy's relationship to her new world as acting out the same contradictory struggles with her mom and home, subconsciously comparing her mother's influence to that of a colonizer.

This history of colonialism additionally influences Lucy's relationship between sex and power. Lucy rants about a white culture that "others" and exoticizes her immigrant experience, yet finds herself drawn to the people who occupy this culture. This results in a sort of inversion of attraction, which manifests itself as sexual with her male partners and familial towards Mariah and her family. And yet, these feelings of attraction are complex; Lucy is attracted to Paul, but resists the idea of commitment or ownership, describing her response to his "possessive" kiss as "unmoved" (Kincaid 156). Lucy feels a maternal bond with Mariah, and yet is filled with anger with Mariah's desire to "rescue" (Kincaid 131) her, stating that her life is "at once something more simple and more complicated" than the American book Mariah gives her on womanhood.

Lucy's frustration towards Mariah grows into a desire to feel separate in experience and identity from the family, demonstrated by Lucy's reaction to Mariah's attempts to find commonalities between the two. When Mariah shares with Lucy that she has "Indian blood" (Kincaid 40), Lucy grows irritated and suggests that Mariah thinks of this as "possession of a trophy" before asking, "How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be vanquished also?" (Kincaid 40-41). Lucy resents Mariah's victim complex, or strong desire to be seen as an "other" despite possessing the privilege of a conqueror. This parallels Lucy's mother's claim that Lucy cannot escape her because "my blood runs in you" (Kincaid 768). Mariah seeks this same blood connection with Lucy in order to overshadow her as a maternal figure.

This growing anger towards Mariah becomes more intertwined with inherited violence as Lucy continues to articulate her love for Mariah. Lucy explains that she loves Mariah when she “reminds [her] of [her] mother” (Kincaid 58), but also does not love Mariah when she “reminds [her] of [her] mother” (Kincaid 58). Lucy’s feelings towards her mother are complex on their own; Lucy has a deep, intimate connection with her mother- “I was not like my mother -- I was my mother” (Kincaid 90)- and yet eludes to cutting off all contact with her mother at the end of the novel, stating, “I would have died if I did nothing; I would have died if I did something” (Kincaid 139).

This influence of Lucy’s inherited family violence is deeply connected to Lucy’s father. Lucy’s father’s promiscuity brings violence to Lucy’s mother and seemingly contributes to Lucy’s built-up anger. Yet, Lucy is drawn to sleep with the man at the camera store because he looked like her father, despite her relationship with Paul, a white man. Lucy is led to a camera store because the people in the photographs reminded her of “people she has known” (Kincaid 115); this interaction demonstrates Lucy’s coexistence of anger and attraction towards people who remind her of her family and prior community, in addition to her simultaneous anger and attraction towards white people.

### **3. *Breath, Eyes, Memory***

*“There is always a place where nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms. Where women like cardinal birds return to look at their own faces in stagnant bodies of water. 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 238).*

### 3.1 Text Overview

*Breath, Eyes, Memory* explores the immigration narrative of the Caco family from Haiti to the United States. Sophie Caco's mother, Martine, immigrated to New York when Sophie was an infant in order to escape the violence of Haiti -- the violence that through sexual assault, created Sophie. Sophie spends most of her early years with her Tante [Aunt] Atie and Grandmè [Grandma] Ifé in Haiti. Throughout the novel, Sophie learns that these women are all part of a long lineage of survivors of "testing," an invasive physical procedure in which a mother tests her daughter's virginity by searching for an intact hymen.

When Sophie turns twelve, Martine sends for her to immigrate to New York and rejoin her. Upon arriving in New York, Sophie meets Martine's boyfriend, Marc, and learns that Martine expects her to work diligently in school and become a doctor. As Sophie lives with Martine, she learns of the rape and observes the impact it has had on her. Every night, Martine has nightmares of the man whose face she never saw, who raped her in a cane field.

As Sophie gets older, she becomes more interested in men; at eighteen, she meets and begins to date Joseph, an older man who lives next door. Once Martine realizes that Sophie is dating, she begins to test Sophie's virginity nightly. The procedure traumatizes Sophie and leads her to impale her hymen with a pestle. When Sophie subsequently fails the next test, Martine kicks her out of the home. Sophie then marries Joseph, moves to Rhode Island with him, has a daughter, and unsuccessfully attempts to regain contact with Martine.

When traumatic flashbacks of testing prevent Sophie from having sex with Joseph, she and her daughter Brigitte leave for Haiti to reconnect with Tante Atie and Grandmè Ifé. Martine comes to Haiti to bring Sophie back to the United States, and the two resume their relationship. Sophie learns that Martine has become pregnant with Marc's child, which has intensified her

nightmares surrounding the rape. Sophie encourages Martine to have the baby, but Martine says she plans to schedule an abortion.

Shortly after Martine tells Lucy she plans to have an abortion, Marc calls Sophie to tell her that her mother has committed suicide. Martine has stabbed herself in the stomach, killing both herself and her unborn child. Sophie travels alone to Haiti with her mother's body to hold her funeral in Haiti. As the ceremony ends, she runs into the cane field where her mother was raped, attacking the stalks; with this action, she finally feels free.

### *3.2 Initial Exploration of Maternal Dynamic- Martine and Sophie as Agents of Each Other*

Sophie's memories of Martine as a young child are limited. Their relationship truly begins when at age twelve, she immigrates to New York to live with her rather than Tante Atie. It is not a sudden move; Atie assures Sophie as a young child that "When she left you with me, she and I, we agreed that it would only be for a while," as Martine was "going to a place she knew nothing about. She did not want to take chances with you" (Danticat 18). After all, as Atie puts it, there were "many good reasons for mothers to abandon their children." Haiti of the 1990s was caught up in violence, specifically the reign of the Macoutes. Martine has left Haiti to not only seek better circumstances for Sophie but to leave a place where she had "no control over anything. Not even this body" (Danticat 19). This immediately paints Martine's immigration as part of a greater narrative of recovery from her sexual assault, one which required initial distance from Sophie, the physical product of this political violence. Similarly, in *Lucy*, we have Lucy's mother who was forced to birth an unwanted child; however, Lucy's mother's pregnancy did not involve political violence or assault, and she lacked the resources and circumstances to leave.

When Sophie joins Martine in New York, Martine desires a closeness with her daughter which goes beyond intimacy and casts the two women as parts of one whole. By suggesting that Sophie has “a chance to become the kind of woman Atie and I have always wanted to be” and that her success “can raise our heads” (Danticat 41), Martine’s language suggests a linkage between all women of the Caco family, as they all are survivors of “testing” and Haitian political violence. This projection is the beginning of Sophie’s evolution as Martine’s incarnation, or agent. Later, when asked if she truly wants to be a doctor, Sophie claims “I had never really dared to dream on my own” (Danticat 69), suggesting that Sophie has internalized the belief that she is an agent of her mother and other female ancestors.

In this vein, Martine casts her own dreams of becoming one of her village’s “first women doctors” (Danticat 40) onto Sophie as her agent. Martine immigrated to the United States to seek opportunity and break away from her memories of the assault, and her associated virginal impurity; while Martine’s nightmares prevent her from overcoming the trauma of the assault (and as we learn later, the trauma of her own “testing”), she can place these dreams in Sophie’s future. Martine’s claim in conversation with Marc that Sophie will not run “wild like those American girls” (Danticat 54), alludes to Sophie passing the virginal “testing,” an opportunity that, albeit stemming from a psychologically and socially violent practice towards women, Martine was robbed of by her assault.

The relationship between Martine and Sophie as agents of each other is further encapsulated by Martine’s comparison of the two to mythical lovers known as the Marasas. As Martine tests Sophie for the first time, she compares the two to “inseparable lovers... the same person, duplicated in two,” telling Sophie that by engaging in premarital sex, she is “giving up a

lifetime with me” (Danticat 83-84). Through this engagement, Sophie comes to view her body as owned, at least partially, by Martine.

Martine’s attempts to sculpt Sophie into her agent are further obfuscated by Sophie’s possession of her father’s features, as Martine claims, “A child out of wedlock always looks like its father” (Danticat 60); while this statement is not genetically true, Sophie’s female relatives do comment that she looks nothing like the other women. Thus Martine’s desire to be linked to Sophie simultaneously links her to the physical, inescapable presence of her rapist, the looming trauma that haunts her nightmares. This physical manifestation of Martine’s abuser into Sophie establishes a jumping point for the reproduction of violence onto Sophie; by “testing” and thus physically violating Sophie, who possesses the rapist’s facial features that were obscured from Martine, Martine holds the illusion of power over her abuser.

The Caco family women have all struggled to control their own bodies through the political violence of the Macoutes and the lineage of “testing,” and there is a certain solidarity in viewing their bodies as linked. While a certain portion of this linkage is dictated by societal prioritization of virginity -- Grandmè Ifé tells Sophie, “If a child dies, you do not die. But if your child is disgraced, you are disgraced.” (Danticat 155) -- to view their bodies as linked is to imply collective ownership. At the very least, it is to imply the ownership of “two fingers” as Tante Atie says, in a society where female bodies are used to serve others:

“According to Tante Atie, each finger had a purpose. It was the way she had been taught to prepare herself to become a woman. Mothering. Boiling. Loving. Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing. Scrubbing. It wasn’t her fault, she said. Her ten fingers had been named for her even before she was born. Sometimes, she even wished she had six fingers on each hand so she could have two left for herself” (Danticat 150).

And yet, the linkage of related female bodies implies a certain threat to the existence of the woman who is reproducing. To “*reproduce*” is quite literally to *produce again*, or “to cause to

exist again or anew” (“Reproduce”). There is always the possibility that the new “product” -- in Martine’s case, a child -- will replace, and thus overthrow the original. This threat underlies much of Martine and Sophie’s relationship, as Martine fears her pregnancy with Sophie will destroy her, telling an older Sophie, “You were going to kill me before I killed you” (Danticat 193).

### *3.3 Violence Faced by Martine*

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Martine is raped at age eighteen by a member of the Macotes, a militaristic arm of the Haitian state. This incident leaves her pregnant with Sophie and reeling from physical and emotional trauma. In moving to New York to escape the everyday reminders of her assault and the continual violence within her hometown, Martine strips herself of her homeland and is thus additionally stripped of her infant daughter, her relationships with close female relatives, and most of all, her mental security.

When pregnant with Sophie, Martine attempts to beat the trauma out of her body, and like Lucy’s mother, attempts to use abortifacients; both are reproductions of the violence they have experienced onto themselves, and by extension, their daughters. Martine drinks “all kinds of herbs, vervain, quinine, and verbena, baby poisons” before “beating my stomach with wooden spoons” (Danticat 190) out of desperation. Sophie survives both, solidifying herself as a physical reminder of Martine’s assault and failed attempts to heal.

Later in the novel, Martine finds herself pregnant by her supportive boyfriend, Marc. However, she can only see this reproduction as a repeat of her initial rape-induced pregnancy, describing the fetus as “already fighting me” (Danticat 193). This leads her again to attack herself and the fetus, this time with a knife instead of wooden spoons. When Marc finds her still

alive lying on the floor “in a mountain of sheets,” the violence is as deliberate as it is overwhelming:

“She had prepared this... She stabbed her stomach with an old rusty knife. I counted, and they counted again in the hospital. Seventeen times... She could not carry the baby. She said that to the ambulance people” (Danticat 229).

If the violence is shocking, the act is not unanticipated. She had told Marc that the child would come “at the expense of my sanity” (Danticat 195); it is a “leech,” she insists, “It bites at the inside of my stomach” (Danticat 194). For Martine, Marc is another Macoute, and she yet again assaulted.

### *3.4 Reproduction of Violence from Mother to Daughter*

The first time Martine tests Sophie, Sophie is eighteen and coming home from a late night with Joseph, her then-boyfriend. Following this, Martine begins to physically test Sophie’s virginity “every week to make sure that [she] was still whole” (Danticat 85) and to maintain her female purity. This leads Sophie to liken herself to a doll her mother once had, “which she’d dressed and undressed and even made a whole room for before I came” (Danticat 84), emphasizing the corporeal disconnect she feels post-testing. The likening of her own body to a “doll” illuminates the dehumanization Sophie feels, with her worth reduced to the preservation of her hymen and her mother taking ownership over her bodily autonomy. The description of dressing and making a room for the doll suggests that the doll, if it could feel, should feel gratitude for its ownership by Martine, as she provides for her physical needs -- the implication that Martine is entitled to test Sophie as her primary provider.

Sophie begins to “double” while she is tested, mentally separating herself from her body while imagining “all the pleasant things that I had known” (Danticat 155). Balaev refers to this

type of disassociation as the “temporal gap,” or the gap between self and experience (Balaev 150); Danticat’s labeling of this type of disassociation as “doubling” places greater emphasis on the separation of mind from the physical self. Sophie describes this type of internal separation as not unlike what allows leaders to “murder and rape so many people and still go home to play with their children and make love to their wives” (Danticat 155), a creation of two separate beings. While Sophie is unlike these leaders, as she does not demonstrate violence in the novel, she does use “doubling” as a way to continue her normal daily existence in the face of violent events. Sophie’s likening of her body to a doll fits into her narrative of doubling, as her body when doubling is just that -- an inanimate object which can be “dressed and undressed,” acted upon but not an agent of action.

Despite the physical proximity virginal testing involves, Martine and Sophie grow emotionally distant as they grow closer in the flesh; virginal testing is not an act of intimacy, but of exercising power, as Martine makes clear when she tells Sophie, “There are secrets you cannot keep,” (Danticat 84). Sophie, feeling “alone and lost, like there was no other reason to live,” isolates herself socially from Martine, who “rarely spoke to me since she began the tests” (Danticat 85). She additionally isolates herself from Joseph, demonstrating the physical trauma has leaked into areas of her life beyond her relationship with Martine.

This growing distance from others leads Sophie to compare herself to a mythical woman who was said to walk around with “blood constantly spurting out of her unbroken skin.” The goddess Erzulie advised the woman that “to stop bleeding, she would have to give up her right to be a human being” and choose to become another living being. The woman evaluates which animals are “captive” and which are “free,” and settles on becoming a butterfly (Danticat 86). Similarly to the mythical woman, Sophie must change her body to halt Martine’s testing. By

using a pestle to break her hymen, Sophie has essentially transformed herself into not a virginal woman, but a free butterfly, later describing the experience to Joseph as like “breaking manacles, an act of freedom” (Danticat 128).

### *3.5 Results of Reproduced Violence*

Martine’s virginal testing traumatizes Sophie, causing her to feel immense shame and “humiliation” (Danticat 121) about her body. Parts of her body have literally broken, as Sophie describes her flesh “ripping apart” with “blood slowly dripping” when she punctures her own hymen (Danticat 87). Sophie later reveals to her therapist, “I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband. Sometimes I feel like I should be off somewhere by myself. That is why I am here” (Danticat 122). Sophie is unable to even take pictures of herself, she is “ashamed of the stitches on my stomach [from birth] and the flabs of fat all over my body” (Danticat 127). Sophie develops bulimia, which while she never explores deeply the novel, may be her own attempt at exercising control over her body, specifically its appearance -- this is her response to losing control of her physical self both during testing and during pregnancy.

Sophie additionally develops a fear of sex, explaining to her grandmother that she believes it to be an “evil thing to do.” This creates intimacy problems between Sophie and her husband, Joseph. Sophie describes sexual activity as “painful” and states that she must “bite my tongue” (Danticat 121) in order to get through sex with Joseph, which often gives her nightmares similar to Martine’s, despite the act being consensual at a surface level. Sophie describes their wedding night as “the tearing all over again,” suggesting an association of physical brokenness with the act of sex; in this scene, Joseph is the pestle all over again. Simultaneously, Sophie’s description of sex as a “duty” (Danticat 127) of the wife suggests that Sophie does not believe

she owns what she sees as her broken body. This reinforces the idea of doubling; there is Sophie's soul or spirit, and there is the body she inhabits but does not own; she feels no true connection to the corporeal.

Sophie's deep anxiety surrounding rape and pregnancy leaves her wondering "if my mother's anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something I had 'caught' from living with her" (Danticat 193). After all, like her mother, she entertains "suicidal thoughts" "all through the first year" (Danticat 195) of her marriage to Joseph and wakes up from dreams about "a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl" (Danticat 196) that seem to recreate her mother's rape. Balaev describes this sort of phenomenon as "historical absence" (Balaev 152), or the inheritance of a loss experienced by one's ancestry, but not directly experienced by the individual. Sophie has her own, individual trauma from Martine's testing, and yet she still feels the fear from her mother's rape, an event which created her, but which she has no recollection of.

This sharing in Martine's individual trauma not only frightens Sophie but guilted her over Martine's suicide towards the end of the novel. Regardless of Sophie's lack of fault for the violence against teenage Martine, Sophie feels a shared stake in the sexual assault that resulted in her birth, telling herself, "Your face took her back again" (Danticat 231). Her father's facial features, which Martine was unable to observe during the assault, are the physical manifestation of this guilt.

### 3.6 *Healing*

Sophie maintains a consistent resilience throughout *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as she strives to break the cycle of reproduced violence in her family. This is most evident through her relationship with her infant daughter, Brigitte. When Louise sneaks up behind Sophie and

Brigitte when they first arrive in Haiti, Sophie's bodily response to surprise is exaggerated, as she describes how her "body plunged forward" and "nearly pushed the bottle down [Brigitte's] throat" (Danticat 94). This involuntary response is exaggerated by inherited trauma from Martine; while it was Martine who was raped from behind while living in Haiti, Sophie shares this traumatic memory as if it were her own. Yet as Brigitte cries from Sophie's abrupt reaction, Sophie is able to quickly recollect herself and "rocked Brigitte until she quieted down" (Danticat 95). As Sophie watches her daughter "peacefully" sleeping later that day, Sophie hopes that she will "never become a frightened insomniac like my mother and me" (Danticat 193).

Brigitte is also a physical manifestation of healing; the Caco women have always assumed Sophie's features came from her father, as she does not resemble Martine. This is a strain on Sophie throughout the novel, who fears her face "took [Martine] back again" (Danticat 231) to the assault. Yet, as she presents Brigitte to Grandmé Ifé, Grandmé Ifé exclaims, "Who would have imagined it?...The precious one has your manman's black face. She looks more like Martine's child than yours" (Danticat 100).

The Caco women seem to view each other as agents with a shared familial identity, evidenced by Martine's comparison of herself and Sophie to the *Marasas* and emphasis on referring to each other as "Caco women." Martine uses this language when discussing her lineage's emotions as collective, explaining, "Us Caco women... when we're happy, we're very happy, but when we're sad, the sadness is deep" (Danticat 220). While there is a solidarity in this collectivism and shared ownership over each other's bodies, especially due to the sense the women have had "no control over anything. Not even this body" (Danticat 19), Sophie has to overcome the sense that her mother owns her body. Martine seemingly recognizes this once they reunite in Haiti, as she assures Sophie when they reconnect that "You are different, but that's

okay. I am different too. I want things to be good with us now” (Danticat 181). This individuality eases the pressure on the women, as they no longer owe each other sexual purity in pursuit of shared familial self-worth. In fact, the ability to view themselves as individuals seems to bring Sophie and Martine even closer, as Sophie reflects on their newfound friendship once they return from Haiti:

“I kept thinking of my mother, who now wanted to be my friend. Finally I had her approval. I was okay. I was safe. We were both safe. The past was gone. Even though she had forced it on me, of her sudden will, we were now even more than friends. We were twins, in spirit. Marasas” (Danticat 204).

This friendship between Martine and Sophie, founded on true intimacy rather than forced sharing of “secrets you cannot keep” (Danticat 83), allows Sophie the space to heal from testing and attempt to invite Martine on her healing journey. As Martine discovers her pregnancy with Marc’s child and begins to have flashbacks of her assault, Sophie is able to see firsthand the trauma her mother experienced years ago. In helping Martine through these flashbacks in their newfound friendship, Sophie is able to confront the trauma she has inherited from Martine before her death:

“Finally, as an adult, I had a chance to console my mother again...I was telling her that it was all right. That it was not a demon in her stomach, that it was a child, like I was once a child in her body” (Danticat 202).

Sophie’s therapy and sexual phobia group sessions provide another space of healing where she can directly confront not only her own experiences, but also Martine’s. In one particular phobia group session, Sophie and the other women write the names of their abusers on small pieces of paper and throw them into a fire -- feeling guilty, Sophie writes Martine’s name on the paper. As the women complete this activity, Sophie reads the letter of another woman in the group, Buki, whose grandmother completed her genital mutilation:

“Because of you, I feel like a helpless cripple. I sometimes want to kill myself. All because of what you did to me, a child who could not say no, a child who could not defend herself. It would be easy to hate you, but I can’t because you are part of me. You are me” (Danticat 206).

In this swapping of stories, Sophie is able to find strength in the similar experiences of the other women. Buki and Sophie are in many ways alike; both are sexually traumatized by inherited violent traditions. As Buki articulates that to hate her grandmother would be to also hate herself, Sophie is better able to understand Martine’s pain, knowing that “my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too” (Danticat 207). This realization leaves her feeling simultaneously “broken” and “free,” no longer guilty for holding a candle to Martine’s name; Martine’s name becomes more of a placeholder for the chain of violence, a chain which Sophie realizes it is up to her to break:

It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire. It was up to me to make sure that my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares, and never had her name burnt in the flames.” (Danticat 207).

In Sophie’s healing relationship with her mother, there is a continual conflict between remembering and forgetting. Upon arriving in Haiti, when Sophie is asked about how her Creole has remained so perfect, she states “Some people need to forget...I need to remember” (Danticat 93). Later that day, when discussing Sophie’s inability to have sex with her husband, Grandmé Ifé states that “secrets remain secret only if we keep our silence” (Danticat 121). Yet upon returning to the United States, Sophie expresses a desire to her therapist to “forget the hidden things, the conflicts you always want me to deal with. I want to look at [Martine] as someone I am meeting again for the first time” (Danticat 212). This “hidden things” Sophie refers to seem to be Martine’s sexual assault and the larger history of virginal testing; Sophie desires to know Martine beyond these contexts. Considering the Caco women’s understanding of doubling, this

idea is not far-fetched, as Sophie explains to her therapist, “I grew up believing that people could be in two places at once. Meeting for the first time again is not such a hard concept” (Danticat 212).

However, it seems that Sophie does need to confront Martine’s past in order to truly be free. During Martine’s funeral, in a moment of grief, Sophie runs into the Haitian cane fields where Martine was once raped:

“I ran through the field, attacking the cane. I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding...From where she was standing, my grandmother shouted like the women from the market place, ‘*Ou libere?*’ Are you free? Tante Atie echoed her cry, her voice quivering with her sobs. “‘*Ou libere!*’” (Danticat 238).

This scene is a callback to a brief scene from earlier in the novel when Sophie first returns to Haiti. One female merchant yells to another who has dropped her basket, “‘*Ou libere?*’ Are you free from your heavy load?” (Danticat 94). As Sophie beats the cane field where her mother was attacked, she is freeing herself from her load: the inherited cycles of violence and trauma in the Caco family. As the cane strikes Sophie’s shoulder, she yanks it from the ground and bleeds, demonstrating both Sophie’s resilience and the messy nature of recovery.

The red of the blood in Sophie’s hands as she beats the cane field parallels the bright red outfit Sophie selects for Martine to wear as she is buried, suggesting that despite Martine’s death, Sophie has fought through the healing process and regained power for both women. Sophie selects Martine’s bright red pantsuit so that she will “look like a Jezebel, hot-blooded Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped them, and killed them. She was the only woman with that power” (Danticat 232). While it would be presumptuous to assume that Sophie has completed the healing process, her attack of the cane fields and Martine’s funeral mark major turning points in reclaiming power.

#### 4. *Drown*

*“The fact that I am writing to you in English already falsifies what I wanted to tell you. My subject: how to explain to you that I don’t belong to English though I belong nowhere else” -*

*Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Epigraph of Drown*

##### 4.1 Text Overview

*Drown* traces Yuniór’s development from boy to man through a series of fragmented, out of order short stories alongside his family’s immigration narrative from the Dominican Republic to the United States. When Yuniór is a child, his father Ramón leaves his family in the Dominican Republic to immigrate to the United States; on the surface level, he does this to escape the poverty of their neighborhood and eventually earn enough money to bring the entire family to the United States, while on a deeper level, he is also escaping an unhappy marriage. Ramón’s time in the United States is filled with financial, emotional, and physical struggles. Meanwhile, Yuniór spends his early childhood with his mother, his brother Rafa, and his sister Madai. During this period, we read a story about Yuniór and Rafa beating up a boy named Ysrael, whose face had previously undergone significant injury, leading him to wear a mask.

After Ramón eventually brings the rest of the family to the United States -- and in doing so abandoning a new family he has started there -- he becomes physically and emotionally abusive towards Yuniór. As Yuniór grows up, he begins to act out more frequently and deal drugs. Outside of this narrative, we are given three short stories which do not fit neatly into Yuniór’s timeline: One, “Aurora,” is a narrative of Lucero, a drug dealer Yuniór knows who is in a toxic relationship; another, “Edison, New Jersey,” tells the story of a narrator who moves furniture and disapproves of his best friend’s cheating; the third, “Boyfriend,” is narrated by a man who attempts to date his neighbor after she breaks up with her boyfriend. “Edison, New

Jersey” and “Boyfriend” are ambiguous enough that we are not sure whether or not Yunion is narrating them.

Unlike the narratives of Lucy and Sophie in *Lucy* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Yunion’s narrative is nonlinear, involves a present paternal figure, and lacks a true conclusion. While we conclude with Lucy in a new apartment and Sophie at Martine’s funeral, the discontinuous form of Yunion’s narrative does not leave the audience with a specific scene in which they know they have seen Yunion for the last time, making it more difficult to draw conclusions on how he has processed trauma. Of the short stories which are not explicitly narrated by Yunion, two are ambiguous in that they may be told from the point of view of an adult Yunion, or they may not. Further, it is important to note that Yunion’s stories in *Drown* are narrated by an older Yunion reflecting on his past experiences; while his perspective on his father shifts when he is talking about his childhood versus his teenage years, all are told with the sense that time has passed since the story has taken place.

The violence and inherited trauma in Yunion’s narrative is also less easily traceable. In *Lucy*, we see clearly that Lucy’s mother has been abused by other women before emotionally abusing Lucy. In Sophie, we observe a long lineage of Caco women physically testing the virginity of their daughters due to the patriarchal valuing of female sexual purity, with a backdrop of the Macoutes’ political violence. In *Drown*, the farthest back we can trace the cycle of violence is not to an individual person, but to governments and sociopolitical conditions. The agents of violence against Yunion’s father are not named characters but are rather the American immigration system and the poverty of his neighborhood in the Dominican Republic.

One final distinguishing factor separating *Drown* from the other two texts is Yunion’s experience of an individual trauma entirely separate from his parents. Yunion reveals halfway

through the collection that his boyhood friend Beto sexually assaulted him. While he does not explicitly describe the events as an assault, the encounter has clearly traumatized him. While this is only mentioned in one story, with Yuniór's father's abuse being the main focal point of the collection, both forms of violence make a statement about gender and violence. Through his experiences, Yuniór has internalized certain norms about how men process emotions, leading him to take a more repressive approach to addressing his trauma.

#### *4.2 Initial Exploration of Paternal Dynamic*

Yuniór tells the audience early in the collection that he has “lived without a father for the first nine years of my life” (Diaz 69). Once Yuniór's family joins his father, Ramón, in Edison, New Jersey in “Fiesta, 1980,” the two develop a confrontational dynamic, in which Yuniór, who was “always in trouble with my dad” describes “It was like my God-given duty to piss him off, to do everything the way he hated” (Diaz 26-27). Ramón “hits like a motherfucker” (Diaz 98) and “expected your undivided attention when you were getting your ass whupped” (Diaz 26). Yet, Yuniór's feelings towards him evolve from young feelings of affection into older feelings of resentment and anger, which later appear to be resolved through Yuniór's exploration of his father's traumatic immigration journey in “Negocios.” Before they meet, Yuniór imagines his father in “Aguantando” as a gentle but strong man, leaning down to wish him goodnight with “his stubbled face in front of mine, his thumb tracing a circle on my cheek” (Diaz 88). Yuniór's older voice, which narrates the story with some distance of time, has grown more cynical, reflecting on how Ramón shared “a lot of crap about how much he loved us” (Diaz 82) and describes that their love-hate relationship “never seemed strange or contradictory until years later, when he was out of our lives” (Diaz 27).

### *4.3 Violence and Marginalization Faced by Yuniór's Parents Within a Historical Context*

When Diaz published *Drown* in the 1990s, The Dominican Republic was undergoing a period of economic growth, with a decline in poverty rates. Yet, this growth was not visible in rural areas, which were disproportionately more impoverished than other areas of the country (“Dominican Republic,” World Bank Group). Simultaneously, Dominicans became New York’s fastest-growing immigrant group. However, despite moving to a new country to escape impoverished conditions at home, New York Dominicans in the 1990s saw a decrease in per capita income and “worsened the position of Dominicans relative to other groups in the city” (Dugger 1997). It is within this context that adult Yuniór, our narrator for most of *Drown*, reflects on his 1970-80s upbringing. The major surge in immigration to the United States from the Dominican Republic started in the 1960s, rapidly growing into the 1990s (Nwosu). Before 1991, the Dominican Republic had not yet recovered from significant macroeconomic instability (“Dominican Republic,” World Bank Group).

The most significant time period for Yuniór’s parents’ narrative is the 1970s and 1980s. Based on calculations with Yuniór’s age, it seems that Yuniór’s father left the Dominican Republic for the United States in 1972. During this time, the Dominican Republic had just recently finished a civil war, and President Balaguer’s economic policies had significantly expanded the country’s GDP (Riding 1975); yet, massive wealth and income inequality persisted in the 1970s (Bértola & Williamson 1-5). In the 1970s Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic where Yuniór’s family lived, the outskirts of the city housed many lower-income and working-class people (Black 242).

The relative poverty of Yuniór’s family in relation to the rest of Santo Domingo, and the trauma formed from the struggle to provide for a family, likely drove Ramón to New York; In

“Negocios,” his amazement with New York’s “streets unblocked by sewage and the orderliness of the cars and houses” (Diaz 171) suggests that these were not things Yuniór’s family was used to. This is reemphasized by Ramón’s expressed desire to provide his family with a “good life” (Diaz 164) by moving to New York to find a job. His visa processes quickly, something Yuniór describes as “just plain luck” (Diaz 163), and Ramón begins his journey to New York, the “city of jobs” (Diaz 166).

Ramón’s trip from Miami to New York could be seen as traumatic itself; after taking a bus to Virginia, he travels mostly on foot from Virginia to New York in order to protect “the rent money he had so diligently saved on the advice of many a veteran immigrant” (Diaz 174). Yet perhaps the greatest trauma is Ramón’s fear of deportation “in chains”: “He’d heard plenty of tales about the Northamerican police from other illegals, how they liked to beat you before they turned you over to la migra and how sometimes they just took your money and tossed you out toothless on an abandoned road” (Diaz 175).

Once Ramon settles into New York with his new job and apartment, he becomes financially able to send money home. However, his fears of deportation remain, despite anger towards “the stupidity that had brought him to this freezing hell of a country” where he has “been robbed twice already, his ribs beaten until they were bruised” (Diaz 179). Ramón finds himself stuck between two worlds, each with its own sociopolitical and socioeconomic traumas. Despite this conflict, his short-term safety depends upon securing citizenship, leading him to seek an American wife despite the betrayal this would be to Yuniór’s mother.

Ramón also feels a deep anger towards the jobs “the city imposed on him” (Diaz 179). Many immigrants in New York at the time were forced to take whatever jobs they could find, which were often low-paying and dangerous. Ramon’s best job ends when he injures his back at

work; it is so painful “that he vomited on the concrete floor of the warehouse” (Diaz 200). This incident is a major source of Ramón’s anger. Only one employee helps him get home after the injury, his manager asks him to continue working regardless, and his new wife, Nilda, encourages him to drop the case, as her experience suggests that immigrants tend to lose these types of lawsuits. Through adult Yuniór’s observance of Ramón’s anger through narration, we see Yuniór begin to understand, if not condone, his father’s behavior.

Ramón’s struggles in the United States simultaneously hurt Yuniór’s mother as she grows to rely on Ramón’s mailed income. Over time, however, his replies to her letters, along with the checks finally dry up. In the story “Aguantando,” translated into English to mean “holding on,” we observe how Yuniór’s mother’s continuing hope that Ramón will return leads her to grow depressed and agitated. As Yuniór puts it, she “almost lost her mind” (Diaz 83).

#### *4.4 Reproduction of Violence and Trauma from Parents to Son*

*“The children of immigrants don't get to be children. We lose our innocence watching our parents' backs bend, break. I am an old soul because when I am young, I watch my parents' spirits get slaughtered” (Moïse lines 21-23).*

Before Ramón brings the family together in the United States, we observe Yuniór’s mother, handling her own trauma regarding the dissolution of her marriage, take out her frustration with the family separation on Yuniór. As Yuniór cries for his father, he describes how his mother “tried slapping me quiet” and “locked me in my room where my brother told me to cool it but I shook my head and screamed louder” (Diaz 83). In “Ysrael,” before “Aguantando,” we see that young Yuniór is taught early on that showing emotion is unmasculine and weak; when Yuniór cries after getting kicked off the bus on the way to find and beat Ysrael, Rafa calls

him a “pussy” and asks Yuniór, “Do you think our papi’s crying? Do you think that’s what he’s been doing the past six years?” (Díaz 13).

Once the family is reunited in the United States, marked for the first time in “Fiesta, 1980” when Yuniór is twelve, family tensions do not subside. Yuniór’s parents continue to act physically and emotionally violent towards each other, which Yuniór often finds himself in the middle of, such as when his father takes him along when he goes to visit his mistress. Sitting in the living room waiting to be driven home, Yuniór feels “ashamed, expecting something big and fiery to crash down on our heads” (Díaz 36). At home, Yuniór is often subjected to scenes of domestic violence, in which his mother throws “silverware into wild orbits,” causing Ramón “after a fork pierced him in the cheek” to “move out, just until things cooled down” (Díaz 163). Yuniór’s shame regarding his family dynamic leads him to decide he “never wanted to go anywhere with my family” (Díaz 24) because he had “never once been out with my family when it hadn’t turned to shit” (Díaz 40).

Yuniór’s shame regarding his father’s violence and cheating is so strong that it manifests itself into the physical reaction of vomiting every time he rides in Ramón’s brand-new van, despite having “never had trouble with cars before” (Díaz 27). When Ramón takes this as evidence that Yuniór should not eat before road trips and begins to beat Yuniór for eating before traveling, Yuniór internalizes this violence and takes blame himself, admitting, “I should have reminded [my mother] not to feed me but I wasn’t that sort of son” (Díaz 25).

#### *4.5 Yuniór as a Passive Participant in Violence*

We do not get to see much of Yuniór’s internal thoughts in his childhood stories, despite their being told in the first person. The narration style of “Ysraél” is brisk and simple, as Yuniór gives a play by play of beating a boy named Ysraél, who had long been a point of fascination and

derision among Yuniór and his friends due to his unique facial injuries and mask-wearing. Yuniór once “pegged Ysrael with a rock” (Diaz 14) to impress his friends, although this is the only time in the collection we actually observe Yuniór physically hurt someone. The story, however, primarily focuses on Rafa’s need to expose Ysrael’s face and humiliate him, with Yuniór tagging along as both a supporting character and narrator.

In this description, Yuniór as a narrator appears distant from the action. First, Rafa smashes the bottle over Ysrael, then Yuniór expresses a brief moment of shock, then immediately joins in; there is no reveal of Yuniór evaluating his actions, questioning his motives, or considering intervening. Yuniór describes Rafa saying “Roll him on his back” and obliging, “pushing like crazy” before Rafa rips off Ysrael’s mask (Diaz 18). As we continue reading *Drown*, it becomes clear that this is emblematic of Yuniór’s general approach with violence: distance, but not rejection.

In this passage, what is left unsaid may be the most revealing about Yuniór. While he does not personally hit Ysrael, he is willing to flip Ysrael over to allow Rafa to assault him. Yuniór’s tendency towards violence, however disconnected from it he is, may be his own way of proving his masculinity, and thus his worth, to his absent father. This refusal to intervene when Rafa attacks Ysrael does not appear to be mere fraternal deference; Yuniór’s decision to throw a rock at Ysrael earlier in the story, which appealed to the other young boys around him, suggests Yuniór has a potent desire for both power and acceptance. Yet, Yuniór appears to have at least some awareness that his actions are wrong, or at least extreme; when Rafa gives Ysrael the first blow, Yuniór responds by saying “Holy fucking shit” (Diaz 18) before he joins in.

Additionally, it is possible that Yuniór and Rafa view Ysrael as a mythical embodiment of privilege, and thus respond with anger; Ysrael is described as wearing sandals of “stiff

leather” and “Northamerican” clothing, as well as appearing “fattened on that supergrain the farmers around Ocoa were giving their stock” (Diaz 15), suggesting his higher socioeconomic standing. When Yuniór and Rafa approach Ysraél, he is playing with a kite his father brought back from New York. In contrast, Yuniór and Rafa live in relative poverty; they are not well-fed, nor do they have nice clothing or lots of toys. Yuniór responds to Ysraél with “No shit! Our father’s there too!” (Diaz 16), suggesting a latent anger that his father in New York does not give him the same attention and gifts. Ysraél’s mask others and dehumanizes him, allowing Yuniór and Rafa to take out their subconscious frustrations on wealth inequality without considering the harm they may be causing.

We can see later in the text that Yuniór has continued passive violence into adulthood, as he describes his social crowd picking fights with other bar-goers and harassing women in “Drown” -- “We drink too much, roar at each other and make the skinny bartender move closer to the phone” (Diaz 99). In this sentence, Yuniór is a part of the “we.” Yet, when this conflict becomes more direct, Yuniór recedes out of the “we.” When Alex “puts his head out the window” and shouts “Fuck you!” at onlookers, Yuniór does not describe himself as a part of this (Diaz 102-103). The language in this vignette becomes that of an observer.

#### *4.6 Stories of Drown as Potential Outcomes for Yuniór*

We have four stories in *Drown* which are not explicitly narrated by Yuniór: one is narrated by Ysraél, the masked boy whom Yuniór and Rafa attack; one is narrated by Lucero, a competing drug dealer mentioned offhandedly in *Drown*; the other two are ambiguous, and may be narrated by Yuniór, or an unidentified man. While these stories do not fit as neatly into Yuniór’s character progression as those he narrates, these stories are not random, but fit into the

greater arc of Yuniór's narrative, which Díaz has described as the "tapestry" or "architecture of the collection" (Cowart 192). It appears that three of these narratives, "Aurora," "Edison, New Jersey," and "Boyfriend" may be, in some way, a disconnected adult Yuniór, one who may not yet exist but has internalized his parents' traumas and the lessons from his upbringing.

"Aurora" in particular stands out as an incongruent presence in *Drown*. Ysrael narrating a story does not entirely shock a reader, as he is the namesake of the first short story. However, Lucero is mentioned so offhandedly that his name only occurs twice in the entire text: once halfway through "Aurora," alerting readers for the first time that Yuniór is not the narrator, and once in "Drown," referring to Yuniór's competing drug dealer who sells "shitty dope" (Díaz 93). For Lucero to narrate the third-longest story in the novel implies a deeper connection to Yuniór.

Lucero's narrative appears to highlight possibilities for Yuniór's future, separating from present day Yuniór a more violent, more bitter Yuniór. Lucero's description of his upstairs neighbors' argument as "sweet talk" that "they're yelling because they're in love" (Díaz 52) suggests that this is what Lucero has known love to be, much like how Yuniór has interpreted love to be from his parents. Lucero's relationship with Aurora is hot and cold in a similar way to Yuniór's parents' relationship; when Aurora asks Lucero, "How could anybody hurt a man with eyelashes like this?", he thinks to himself of the time "she once tried to jam a pen in my thigh, but that was the night I punched her chest black-and-blue so I don't think it counts" (Díaz 53). Later, while Aurora describes what a happy life together could look like, Lucero says that in a week he would "hit her and made the blood come out of her ear like a worm but right then, in that apartment, we seemed like we were normal folks" (Díaz 66).

"Boyfriend" and "Edison, New Jersey," placed next to each other in the second half of the collection, similarly seem to outline how Yuniór could evolve into an adult man. In "Edison,

New Jersey,” an unnamed narrator works delivering furniture with his friend, Wayne. Early on, the narrators of “Edison, New Jersey” and “Aurora” seem connected; girlfriends comment on the length of both men’s eyelashes. In “Edison,” we see a narrator who is not particularly violent, but does steal regularly from his job. Yet, we see the narrator believes cheating in a marriage is wrong. When Wayne mentions a woman he wants to have sex with, the narrator asks, “Don’t you have a wife or something?” (Diaz 124). If we fit Yunion into this outcome, this story could be a future in which Yunion learns from his parents’ turbulent relationship -- the violence and his father’s cheating -- and makes the conscious decision not to become like them.

In “Boyfriend” we are given an alternative narrator who appears to have cheated on his ex-girlfriend; the narrator overhears his downstairs neighbor arguing with her boyfriend, concluding that the boyfriend “just needed more space to cheat” (Diaz 111), which reminds him of his relationship with his old girlfriend Loretta. Unlike the narrator of “Edison, New Jersey,” who experiences intense emotions over his serious break-up, the narrator of “Boyfriend” states that he has “heart-leather like walruses got blubber” (Diaz 112). This narrator seems self-aware, admitting that romantically pursuing his neighbor immediately after their breakup “was mighty manipulative of me” (Diaz 115), an approach that is reminiscent of Yunion’s strategic dating advice in “How to Date a Browngirl.”

By separating these narratives of potential Yunion, we are unable to observe as clearly the intermingling of perpetrator and victim as we do in *Lucy* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. While we watch characters such as Lucy’s mother and Martine both receive and perpetrate violence, narrative boundaries mostly separate these two potential sides of Yunion from each other. It is possible that Diaz does this to give Yunion some sense of autonomy over his circumstances; with

three examples of potential futures Yunion could have, it portrays Yunion's life as having possibilities, rather than being purely dictated by his parents' violence and trauma.

## **5. Conclusion: Narratives of Remembrance Versus Repression**

In *Lucy*, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; and *Drown*, we are given three texts that tell of family separation across borders and the trauma that is inherited through generations. In *Lucy*, we have a daughter who has crossed borders to escape the influence of her abusive mother but struggles to truly separate herself from the trauma they share. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, we have a daughter who has been physically violated by her mother, who herself has faced abuse, and struggles through therapy to overcome their shared trauma. In *Drown*, we have a son who is physically and verbally abused by his father once they are reunited in the United States, for whom we are unsure how his narrative ends. These texts all present an urgent choice for the three protagonists: whether to remember or repress their family histories of violence and trauma. This choice impacts the process by which the protagonists begin to heal.

Lucy's narrative is one of repression; Lucy is verbally abused by her mother but does not engage deeply with her mother's own intentions or past experiences which may have shaped her vitriol. Rather, Lucy meets her mother's behavior with incredulity, making normative statements such as, "She should not have thrown away her intelligence" (Kincaid 1074) rather than seeking to understand. By the end of the novel, it seems that Lucy has not attempted to process the pain her mother has caused, but rather has invested her energy into staying afloat -- as Lucy describes this to herself, "I was alone in the world. It was not a small accomplishment... I was not happy, but that seemed too much to ask for" (Kincaid 1407).

Sophie, in contrast, finds healing through remembering and confronting her past. When a man in Haiti asks Sophie how she has maintained her perfect Creole, Sophie replies, “Some people need to forget...I need to remember” (Danticat 93), making a much broader statement about her relationship with her family and culture. Grandmè Ifé, upon learning of Sophie’s trauma related to “testing,” states that “secrets remain secret only if we keep our silence” (Danticat 121). Sophie’s actions of going to therapy, returning to Haiti with Brigitte, rekindling a friendship with her mother, and physically attacking the cane fields all are acts of breaking silence. In questioning Martine about her motivations for “testing” her, Sophie states “I had a greater need to understand, so that I would never repeat it myself” (Danticat 172). Through this acknowledgement of her past trauma, Sophie is able to break the cycle.

Yunior’s narrative falls somewhere in between Lucy’s and Sophie’s and is not as easily distinguishable as a narrative of only “remembrance” or only “repression.” The structure of *Drown*, with a series of out of order short stories, some told by Yunior, some not, is ambiguous; this ambiguity suggests a refusal to confront head-on the ways in which Ramón’s abuse have manifested in Yunior. The inclusion of three short stories which may or may not be narrated by adult Yunior reinforces this idea of refusal, as they suggest that Yunior’s current situation may not be a subject that is open for discussion. However, the subject matter of the stories does indicate some willingness on Yunior’s part to reflect and remember; in “Fiesta, 1980,” Yunior recounts verbal and physical abuse from Ramón surrounding his tendency to vomit, but then explores Ramón’s own traumatic past in “Negocios.” While “Negocios” does not read as a story of forgiveness, it does read as a story of understanding the circumstances that created the Ramón Yunior has come to know.

In remembering and confronting her family's past, Sophie is portrayed as gaining power over her family history -- at Martine's funeral, Grandmè Ifé tells Sophie that they come from a place "where the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her" (Danticat 240). Yet, this does not imply that Sophie's healing is complete, or that healing is ever something that can be fully completed. When Sophie attempts to yell to her mother's spirit from the cane fields after her funeral, she states that "the words would not roll off my tongue" (Danticat 238), implying there is still pain to be processed. In this way, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* does not seem to suggest that healing must happen quickly, but rather that the process is worth pursuing.

The choice by protagonists whether to repress or remember trauma affects the timelines by which they heal. Yet, it does not seem that one of the two should be cast normatively as the most effective method of healing. As Danticat tells Sophie in an open letter, "Not all Haitian daughters are tested, as you have been. I have always taken for granted that this story which is yours, and only yours, would always read as such" (Danticat 242). This letter from Danticat invokes readers not to take Sophie's story as the story of all immigrants; to do so would be a gross generalization of immigrant experiences as one narrative. The differences across these texts are what make them so dynamic in conversation with each other, to explore the wide variety of immigrant experience, while tied together by the common threat of inherited violence and trauma. To apply the same judgment to all three protagonists would be to ignore the vast gaps in their experiences and histories. In Danticat's letter to Sophie, she prays that "that the singularity of your experience be allowed to exist" (Danticat 242). The work of this thesis was to allow these singularities of experience to take up academic space and break outside of Eurocentric models of inherited trauma.

## 6. Afterword: Political Implications of Inherited Violence and Trauma in Immigrant Families

*“Americans are entitled to consider carefully whom they will number among themselves. They would be irresponsible not to consider this carefully—because all of these expensive commitments must be built on a deep agreement that all who live inside the borders of the United States count as ‘ourselves.’”*

*- David Frum, “How Much Immigration is Too Much?” in 2019 for The Atlantic*

In the 1990s, we saw a rapid increase in immigration to the United States, peaking in 1999 before declining in the early 2000s (“Rise, Peak and Decline”). During this period, the United States saw the sharpest increase in immigrants from the Dominican Republic (Duany 169). Simultaneously, the 1990s included the “Latina Boom,” a significant expansion of literature by Latina women getting published in the United States (Morillo 2017). The 1990s was a time of opening in the United States: opening of borders to increased numbers of immigrants, and the opening of the literary canon to diverse, multicultural voices.

During this time, the United States also saw a variety of immigration reform bills passed. Some expanded the definition of who could be American; the Immigration Act of 1990 overturned an English testing requirement included in the Naturalization Act of 1906 and eliminated policies that excluded LGBT immigrants (The Immigration Act of 1990). Yet many were reductive and centered around a notion of who “deserves” to be American. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 expanded felony definitions in an attempt to convict more undocumented immigrants of severe, deportation-worthy crimes (Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996). The American

Competitiveness and Workforce Improvement Act of 1998 increased the number of H-1B visas available, placing a clear priority on immigrants who came with a job already lined up (American Competitiveness and Workforce Improvement Act of 1998).

If we were to read these laws as a narrative, what would they say about who was perceived to be the “ideal immigrant” of the 1990s? And would the characters of *Lucy*; *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; and *Drown* fit this mold?

The legal arc of the 1990s suggests the American concept of an “ideal immigrant” focuses on who has “earned” the right to be here. This immigrant has a clean background free of criminal history and is willing to take any job that is available. In the twenty years since the end of the 1990s, this concept has not significantly changed.

The work of this thesis was to explore the cycles of trauma in literary immigrant families of the 1990s, an era in the United States of significant cultural and policy change. And yet, it feels impossible to read this without considering the context of our current immigration system and political climate. Our country has separated undocumented immigrant children from their parents at the border under a “zero tolerance” policy in order to “secure the border and deter illegal immigration” (Shepardson 2018). Our Department of Homeland Security has implemented a “wealth test” to limit the immigration of those who are “likely to become a public charge” (Narea 2020).

Of our three protagonists, none came from significant financial means. All sought improvement from circumstances in their home countries. At the surface level, their narratives can be viewed as those of violence; but they are also narratives of healing, and of hardship, and of growing.

It is important to note that the origins of the physical and emotional violence in these novels can often be traced back to socioeconomic conditions, conditions that are, at times, a product of the state. The United States is not blameless in the conditions that have left many communities outside of the United States vulnerable. The Macoutes of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* were formed under Haitian dictator François “Papa Doc” Duvalier as a more loyal replacement for the military (Galván 2012). In the mid-1960s, the United States began to ease pressure to democratize on Duvalier, viewing him as a partner in the fight against communism (Alexander 2011). Within the context of our current administration, this history begs the question: when those who flee the situations we have helped create come to our country, will we let them in?

I do not have answers to these questions, but our current political landscape shapes the context within these selected novels exist. As Danticat tells Sophie, it is urgent that the “singularity of your experience be allowed to exist” (Danticat 242), for these singularities reveal the real-world consequences of decisions regarding approaches to immigration.

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