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Fictive Reimaginings: Revisionist Feminist History in Edwidge Danticat's Krik? Krak! and Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies

Epigraph

"Why don't we read about this in history books? …If it were up to me, I'd record other things. Like the time there was a freak hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they should rule. Or the life stories of prostitutes in Bombay. Why don't I know anything about them? Who chooses what we should know or what's important? …Most of what I've learned that's important I've learned on my own, or from my grandmother." – *Dreaming in Cuban*

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Knowledge about Third World people, according to Gayatri Spivak in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, is discursively[1] produced – as incontrovertible truth - to the benefit of western powers. The "power-knowledge nexus"[2] inherent in Western productions of history that skews representations of Third World women must be disrupted, and our reading of them must be decolonized. The One-Third World still upholds a solipsistic, racialized, neocolonial, and masculinized reading of the world that centers the so-called rational, knowing subject; the white man, in contrast to the supposedly unknowing and irrational Third World woman whose presumed knowledge-deficit renders her incapable of understanding and articulating her own history. As Spivak demonstrated in her archival research, colonial legacies have left intact a fragmented and muted Other whose existence provided another excuse for Western expansion. Her analysis clearly evinces this racialized gender project of "white men saving brown women from brown men." Against the backdrop of this subaltern[3] silence, I will demonstrate that a surrogate voice, through "istwa," may make possible a revisionist history that centers the lives of subaltern women of the Global South who are often poorly represented in Western historical accounts.

Using Chandra Mohanty's "decolonized pedagogies" as my theoretical framework, I will conduct a critical analysis and commentary of "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" in *Krik? Krak!* by the Haitian-American author, Edwidge Danticat. Following Mohanty, a decolonial reading praxis "does not entail merely processing, received knowledges (however critically one does this) but also actively transforming knowledges" (201). One must come to "believe in the possibility of a variety of experiences, a variety of ways of understanding the world, a variety of frameworks of operation, without imposing consciously or unconsciously a notion of the norm" (201). In the vein of the literary critic Harold Bloom, former colonies of the British Empire have suffered from a historical "anxiety of influence" whereby their histories become mere derivatives of a master European narrative as opposed to authentic, non-essentialized, and anti-imperialist historical accounts. I agree

[1] As defined by Stuart Hall in *The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power*. It is characterized in this text as the "production of knowledge through language." Discourse here refers to "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about - i.e. a way of representing - a particular kind of knowledge about a topic" (201).

[2] See Mohanty in "Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles."

[3] Subaltern women are those who constitute the lowest strata of a formerly colonized society, i.e. "nonelite or subordinated social groups" (MacLean). While subaltern women are more likely to be from the "Third World" not all Third World women are subaltern.

with Dipesh Chakrabarty's implicit resolution in "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," that in order to resist this mimetic paradigm, former colonial subjects must "arrogate" to themselves an anti-historical and antimodern subjecthood that takes as its defense the "devices of collective memory." I strongly believe that what constitutes these devices includes the istwa penned by Danticat, Lahiri, and other postcolonial writers where the collective memories of Haitian, Indian, and other Global South women inform the narratives of generations of women long gone. These memories may be inherently anti-historical as some may contradict written, colonial-influenced accounts and for that they are invaluable. And so begins the process of decolonization that is grounded in a coming-to-consciousness that centers an intersubjective and heterogeneous womanhood.

Intersubjectivity is a necessary component of decolonized reading and requires that we view Third World women's lives as "meaningful, coherent, and understandable" rather than essentializing them as perpetual victims of "doom and sorrow" (192). Relying on Marnia Lazreg's explanation, Mohanty shares the following in *Feminism Without Borders*:

> It means that their lives like "ours" are structured by economic, political, and cultural factors. It means that these women, like "us," are engaged in the process of adjusting, often shaping, at times resisting and even transforming their environment. It means they have their own individuality; they are "for themselves" instead of being "for us."

This is a very helpful foundation for which I have two points of dissension. My first dissenting point lies with the assertion of "coherence" and "understandable." These are words that may be deployed according to a Western standard of coherence which panders to a notion of a normative, essentialized, and homogenous experience of Third World womanhood. That Third World women lead dissonant lives, replete with contradictions and complexities, is a simple truth that is shared by all women. It is on this basis that an intersubjective solidarity with Third World women should be formed. Lazreg's quotation really struck me as an important method of decolonized reading, of recognizing the ways in which the lives of poor and vulnerable women are shaped, however differentially, by "economic, political and cultural factors." Conversely, a decolonial reading should also involve an understanding of these narratives as equally valuable and valid repositories of knowledge and of experiences even though the extent to which they are "like us" may not be immediately apparent.

How might an intersubjective and decolonized reading praxis be realized in the stories under consideration? "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" is crafted in the form of what Danticat terms "istwa" to refer to the interweaving of history and story and is set around the Parsley Massacre of 1937 in the Dominican Republic. "Istwa" is the Haitian French creole translation of "histoire" which may be defined as both history and story.[4] In this short story, narratives about subaltern women are presented as if they actually happened. As a paragon of istwa, it is not a mere figment of Danticat's imagination but a realistic imagining that gives a proxy voice to those previously silenced.

If history retains its respect despite its social constructions and subaltern silences, according to a range of geopolitical biases and imperialist interests, istwa emerges as a potential and promising site of revisionist feminist history. Danticat's socio-historic position, having grown up in Haiti, and having lived in a close-knit Haitian community in New York, is, as Linda Alcoff would say, "epistemically salient." Danticat was born and raised in Haiti just over thirty years after the Parsley Massacre. Her proximity to those who may have experienced and recalled this dark history could explain why "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" and other short stories in *Krik? Krak!* read as visceral imaginings of Third World women's hardships. If we are to consider works of istwa as valid repositories of historical knowledge, as literary historiographies, is it ethical for diasporic and privileged writers like Danticat to make attempts at discursive representation? What authority do they have to write about, and give voice to, the experiences of these subaltern women?

Danticat, as we will also see in the case of Jhumpa Lahiri, occupies that liminal or in-between space of diasporic writers.[5] One can infer that Danticat's is a creolized identity that resists neat categorizations into either Haitian or American. Despite spending most of her life abroad, it is her proximity to older Haitians from the diaspora, and to other Haitians during visits to her native land, of witnessing and perhaps experiencing the effects of generational trauma, that may position her as an ethical and authoritative interlocuter who is well-equipped to create surrogate voices through her characters. This is clearly apparent in the short story, "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" which demonstrates Danticat's istwa in action.

[4] "Istwa" evokes the Créolité of Bernabé and Chamoiseau as a form of resistance to linguistic colonialism and notions of purity. The use of "istwa" to describe these stories is a way of showing how resistance to colonial oppression must begin at the level of language.

[5] See Beghum Shahnaz in "The Trauma of Boori Ma in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Read Durwan': Diaspora Looking Back to Partition."

The title of the story refers to the year in which thousands of Haitians were murdered under the orders of the Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo, in a monstrous act of ethnic cleansing. This massacre is commonly known as the Parsley Massacre[6] or the "kout kout-a" in French creole. While some attribute Trujillo's racist antipathy to his admiration of Hitler, colonialism certainly shaped past and present "Anti-Haitianismo" sentiment. Vestiges of colonialism also inhere very strongly in Danticat's short story and include anti-Vodou sentiment and Catholicism. In my brief stint at scouring sources for historical accounts of this massacre, I encountered a dearth of information that was centered on women and the psycho-social impacts of displacement, loss, and abuse. Most accounts consider the victims as an undifferentiated mass and center prominent male political figures. How were women uniquely impacted by this terrible crime? How did they survive? How did they feel? How did they cope? What was the trajectory of their psychological convalescence? Not only is human emotion an immutable and indispensable component of human experience, it is also an insightful response to the trauma of displacement and gender-based violence throughout history. I am hard-pressed to find another medium that communicates the micro-experiential facets of women's lives – what Urvashi Butalia refers to as the "human dimensions" of history - as vividly and as movingly as fiction.

In the short story, we learn about a young woman named Josephine who travels barefoot to visit her mother, Manman, who was accused of being a soucouyant.[7] She reveals that "ever since the morning of her arrest, I had not been able to say anything to her. It was as though I became mute the moment I stepped into the prison yard. Sometimes I wanted to speak, yet I was not able to open my mouth or raise my tongue" (36). Like the Haitians incapable of producing survivalist discourse, by pronouncing "perejil,"[8] Josephine was incapable of producing speech in a setting weighed down by a terrifying political hegemony. Even though she was not able to articulate how she felt to her mother, her

[6] It is so named because the utterance of the word was utilized to distinguish Haitians from "real" Dominicans. Haitians were killed if they were unable to correctly pronounce the Spanish word for parsley, "perejil." This is an example of discursive violence.

[7] Giselle Anatol defines a soucouyant as "a diabolical creature who appears as an old, wrinkled woman, by day but then at night sheds her skin, flies about the community in the form of a ball of fire, and invades houses through open windows and keyholes to drain the blood of her unsuspecting neighbours."

[8] Haitians were killed if they were unable to correctly pronounce the Spanish word for parsley, "perejil." This is an example of discursive violence.

actions of visiting and feeding her are textually discursive. In performing these seemingly menial acts, Josephine and her mother are saying that they are determined to resist death. Midway through the story, Josephine transitions from recounting received knowledge of the past, of former events that involved her mother, to transforming this knowledge into a powerful commentary of resistance. This is a process of conscientization[9]:

> We went to the river many times as I was growing up. Every year my mother would invite a few more women who had also lost their mothers there… We were all daughters of that river, which had taken our mothers from us. Our mothers were the ashes and we were the light. Our mothers were the embers and we were the sparks. Our mothers were the flames and we were the blaze. We came from the bottom of that river where the blood never stops flowing, where my mother's dive toward life - her swim among all those bodies slaughtered in flight - gave her those wings of flames. The river was the place where it had all begun.

It is at this point that the soucouyant takes on a powerfully symbolic role. This is an example of critical consciousness or conscientization because Josephine understands that the survival of these women is a political and existential act of resistance. The murder of Manman's mother on the same night that Josephine was born imbues their resistance with an almost spiritual quality. Manman, heavily pregnant with Josephine, figuratively flew from death and narrowly escaped Trujillo's necropolitical power. The birth of Josephine, who grew up to understand that she is the "light, spark, and blaze," further strengthens this narrative of resistance. Manman's story of resistance is echoed in a real-life account of a Haitian woman named Marlene Larose in Beverley Bells' *Walking on Fire* which was published long after Danticat's collection of realistically imagined women. Like Manman she was threatened with death amid political upheaval, her mother was also murdered, and, after being shot herself, her foetus was in danger of not developing to term. The survival of both Marlene and her baby boy, like that of Manman and Josephine, is awe-inspiring.

Bell's real-life account of Marlene demonstrates the power that undergirds the devices of collective memory and psycho-historical transference. The striking parallels

[9] Following Paulo Freire, it is the process whereby one becomes deeply perceptive and sensitive to the ways that one's life is subordinated by economic, political, cultural, and epistemic hegemonies to the extent that one is primed to resist it. It is a key component in the decolonization of the mind.

between "fictional" and "real" accounts of women's defiance, despite the threat of violence and death, calls to mind the work of Hayden White. In "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," he maintains that "the story told in the narrative is a mimesis of the story lived in some region of historical reality, and insofar as it is an accurate imitation it is to be considered a truthful account thereof" (3). Trujillo's soldiers may have tried to commit genocide, but Josephine's birth in a time of death is a testimony of her refusal to die. The baton of survival is continually passed on to the women's progeny. To contextualize the Parsley Massacre with recorded history, existing accounts feature soldiers killing children and throwing them upon the corpses of their mothers.[10] Danticat's imagined reality, of those who resisted and survived, displaces this flattened characterization of subaltern Haitian women as solely victims.

Following the death of her mother, however, Josephine's "coming to consciousness" reaches its zenith when she finally finds her voice. Previously, when asked "where are you from" by an elderly woman earlier in the story, her response was: "I am from Ville Rose" (34). Her response to this question changes radically post-conscientization. The death of her mother was a catalyzing event which allowed Josephine to represent herself and produce liberatory speech as a subaltern woman of the Third World. This may be pinpointed by her stichomythic dialogue with Jacqueline:

> "Who are you?" I asked her.
> "I am a child of that place, she answered.
> I come from that long trail of blood."
> "Where do you drink when you're thirsty?"
> "I drink the tears from the Madonna's eyes."
> "Who are you?"
> "I am the flame and the spark by which my mother lived."
> "Where do you come from?"
> "I come from the puddle of that river."
> "Speak to me" (44-45).

[10] See Galván in *Latin American Dictators of the 20th Century*.

This exchange is an example of what Michel Foucault terms a "discursive formation" whereby several statements cohere to form a language which creates knowledge about a subject. In a decolonized reading of this narrative, one would recognize that these subaltern women are not essentialized as hapless and silent victims but as resilient survivors who knew their own history and knew how resist death. In the quote above, Jacqueline and Josephine are actually speaking in code about the massacre and about their roles as resisting agents. This code was passed down to Josephine by her mother and it allowed her and Jacqueline to speak about a shared experience unbeknownst to others. As a discursive formation, it is speech that has created a specialized knowledge of agency and resistance in relation to the Haitian women's suffering. It is a coded language that can be used as an effective tool to organize and develop coalitions of Haitian women intent on surviving and passing down their knowledge to future generations.

Where Danticat's collection of stories, including "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," make for an intense and emotionally overwrought reading experience, Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories are calibrated by an emotional resonance that simmers on a low but persistent heat. One key difference lies in the spatial and temporal positions of the characters. The Nineteen Thirty-Seven Parsley Massacre becomes the Nineteen Forty-Seven Partition, that "great human convulsion of history" and its aftermath. "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" reckons more directly with state violence and brutality while Lahiri's "A Real Durwan" provides a snapshot of the human dimensions of life after the violence of Partition in India. This life is embodied by the sixty-four-year-old character, Boori Ma, who we might imagine as being close in age to Manman in Danticat's istwa. Lahiri's "in between-ness" or liminality, not having grown up in India but not being a complete outsider, also positions her as an ethical interlocuter, regardless of her intent to represent subaltern women. Her frequent visits to Calcutta in her youth made her painfully aware of the Partition. In an interview titled "Jhumpa Lahiri on Writing, Translation, and Identity" she speaks of the emotional residue of Partition that lingered within her family and their friends, and how this was something that she "took in" and continues to internalize. This residue, of memory and emotion from a past that bleeds into the present, calls to mind those famous words of William Faulkner, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Lahiri and Danticat are not the nightmarish white feminists of leftist discourse who are presuming to give voice to black and brown women of antiquity. Despite their class privilege and intermittent geographic distance, they

share in the history of the women of whom they write. The "past" experiences of the subaltern women are also a present-day reality.

I selected this short story because I was intrigued by the probability of Boori Ma being subaltern and whether Lahiri's iteration provided fresh insights into the construct of subalternity. Can subaltern women of the past gain a voice retroactively in istwa such as this? Is subalternity an immutable or shifting identity? How is the category of subalternity constructed? One of the most striking passages from this story, which is also highly relevant to this discussion, may be found at the beginning: "[T]he only thing that appeared three-dimensional about Boori Ma was her voice: brittle with sorrows…" (42). According to the narrator, in addition to chronicling her hardships, Boori Ma also habitually recounted her pre-Partition privileges as a wealthy woman with a family. This is framed around the refrain, "believe me, don't believe me" which she repeats to the tenants of the "flat building" in which she resides. Here we have a dispossessed, poor woman, shorn of kinship, who lives under letterboxes and serves working class families in a dilapidated building of "windows without glass." "What kind of landowner ended up sweeping stairs?" (43) is exactly the kind of question - posed by one of the characters - needed to unpack the construct of subalternity. If one is not born, but rather becomes, subaltern, can a violent political upheaval - like the Partition or the Parsley Massacre - precipitate the creation of the social category of subalternity for which self-representation and speech are disproportionately likely to be contested, flattened, and/or muted? The short answer, one that can fit into the constraints of a short paper, is yes.

It is Boori Ma's contradictions, and the characters' reaction to them, that makes this a compelling and realistic imagining of subaltern women's history. In recounting her past, the "facts" would often take new shape, leading to skepticism and mild annoyance that eventually transformed into full-blown disdain when a robbery was blamed on her alleged negligence and complicity. What makes this utterly fascinating is the fact that Boori Ma's character functions at the level of the symbolic. The contradictions in the retelling of her past, however earnest, represent the way in which history is itself a panoply of "garbled facts" rife with contradictions that may or may not be equally true. Who is Boori Ma really? How can she represent a subaltern woman from the past whose displacement is inordinately painful and traumatic if we cannot pin down an accurate picture about the spectrum of her experiences? After pondering this for some time I realized that it doesn't

really matter. Boori Ma, like Schrödinger's cat, can embody two realities. She is what she says she is and yet she may not be. She may have been the wealthy woman she describes, or the former servant of a wealthy family who misrepresents her past as a way of coping with grief and loss. As the embodiment of competing facts, she demonstrates that there is no single story or true essence that one must arrive at to understand, and thus represent, a person or a historical event. It is impossible to arrive at a pure, unadulterated truth or essence of someone, because it is an illusion. A failure to acknowledge this means that diverse and competing accounts, be it of a person or historical catastrophe, are immediately suspect and disregarded to make way for objective truth. While it may be argued that Boori Ma was silenced by the characters because they did not believe in her professed innocence surrounding the robbery, her character is textually discursive. She unreservedly speaks to the reader. As in our decolonized reading of "Nineteen Thirty-Seven's" Josephine, who resists flattening either/or characterizations, Lahiri's story pushes us to stop looking for the "real" Boori Ma or the "true" backstory in the same tragic way that the characters' rejection of her leads to a second displacement in their search for a *real* durwan.

Boori Ma is a subaltern woman who speaks. As a former colonial subject, she symbolically arrogates to herself the anti-historical subjecthood of Dipesh Chakrabarty's exhortations.[11] The onus is on us to denaturalize categories of experience and subjectivity so that we may better understand the complexities that inhere in her speech. Gayatri Spivak maintained that the subaltern cannot speak and pointed to women who committed sati; women whose voices were superimposed by colonial and patriarchal discourse. As subaltern women, their silence is supposedly immortalized by their death. Conversely, what is to be said of those women who attempted to self-immolate but survived? In "Dead Women Tell No Tales" Ania Loomba encourages feminist historians to "recover the writings of those women who escaped the potential threat of immolation and lived to tell the tale" (309). In the same way, these are istwa of subaltern women who escaped almost certain death and who lived and engaged in discursive performances. Boori Ma survived the tragedy of Partition while Manman and Josephine survived the Parsley Massacre. They reveal that subalternity, rather than being synonymous with absolute victimhood, is a

[11] See Chakrabarty in "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?"

category with the potential for agentic characteristics. These women are speaking. They are subaltern, they resisted death, and they exist.

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