

## Breaking Silences around Postcolonial Sexual Violence: The Urgent Activist Role of Contemporary Haitian American Women's Fiction

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### Abstract

This article offers an analysis of three fictional narratives within a literary trend whereby, since the 1990s and early twenty-first century, some contemporary Haitian American female authors have been writing about the consequences of rape culture within the Haitian/Haitian American community. Particularly, the intention of these writers is to denounce and break the silences imposed on a form of gender-based violence overwhelmingly present in a tradition where women's bodies have always been regarded as territories of (post)colonial conquest. Through a comparative close reading of Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), Jaira Placide's *Fresh Girl* (2002) and Roxane Gay's *An Untamed State* (2014), the article aims to examine these novels' dissolving of traditional taboos around rape by means of an explicit portrayal of the sexual violence suffered by their female protagonists at the hands of other Haitian (American) characters and the traumatic consequences resulting from such vicious acts. The article concludes by demonstrating that, in contrast to the Haitian novel that influenced these narratives in their extremely realistic representation of the rape scene and its aftermath—Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Amour, colère, folie* (1968)—Danticat's, Placide's and Gay's heroines are depicted as survivors capable of recuperating their bodies and subjectivity by sharing their traumatic stories with others, including the implied reader.

**Keywords:** Haitian American literature, rape fiction, repressed trauma, sexual violence, postcolonial violence, silenced voices.

## Rompiendo silencios en torno a la violencia sexual postcolonial: El urgente papel activista de la ficción contemporánea de mujeres haitiano-americanas

### Resumen

Este artículo ofrece un análisis de tres narrativas ficcionales dentro de una tendencia literaria a través de la cual, desde los años noventa y principios del siglo XXI, algunas autoras contemporáneas haitiano-americanas han estado escribiendo sobre las consecuencias de la cultura haitiana de la violación en la comunidad haitiana/haitiano-americana. Concretamente, la intención de estas autoras es denunciar y romper los silencios impuestos sobre una forma de violencia de género sobrecogedoramente presente en una tradición en la que los cuerpos de las mujeres siempre se han considerado territorios de conquista (post)colonial. A través de una lectura detallada comparativa de *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) por Edwidge Danticat, *Fresh Girl* (2002) por Jaira Placide y *An Untamed State* (2014) de Roxane Gay, el artículo busca examinar la forma en que estas novelas anulan tabúes tradicionales en torno a la violación por medio de un retrato explícito de la violencia sexual sufrida por sus protagonistas a manos de otros personajes haitiano(-americanos) y de las consecuencias traumáticas resultantes de actos tan despiadados. El artículo concluye demostrando que, a diferencia de la novela haitiana que inspiró la representación extremadamente realista que hacen estas novelas de la escena de la violación y sus secuelas—*Amour, colère, folie* (1968) de Marie Vieux-Chauvet—las heroínas de Danticat, Placide y Gay aparecen representadas como supervivientes capaces de recuperar sus cuerpos y subjetividad compartiendo su historia traumática con otros, incluyendo al lector implícito.

**Palabras clave:** literatura haitiano-americana, ficción de la violación, trauma reprimido, violencia sexual, violencia postcolonial, voces silenciadas.

## 1. Introduction

In the Caribbean, violence has always played a significant role even after colonisation because, as Ghanaian literary critic Ato Quayson holds, in the postcolony “the violence constituted [...] by the colonial order [became] endemic [...] and produce[d] a series of persistently violent and political and social disjunctures” (192) which still linger today. For Cuban writer and essayist Antonio Benítez-Rojo, the plantation system “was the most violent and centralized economy known to history” (302) and such violence, as Frantz Fanon explains in *The Wretched of the Earth*, did not end after colonisation. Rather, it adopted new forms, including the fight of the colonised against each other, a sort of internal violence inherited from the white settlers and masters (15). Particularly, the gender-based violence suffered by Caribbean black women during the colonial era—especially in the form of rape—was inherited by the emancipated Caribbean black man who, following the patriarchal order imposed by white settlers, wanted to show his alleged ownership on their closest subordinate subjects: their fellow women. This happened because, as Achille Mbembe holds in his seminal book *On the Postcolony*,

[d]uring the colonial era and its aftermath, phallic domination has been all the more strategic in power relationships, not only because it is based on [...] subjective foundations of masculinity and femininity but also because it [...] derives in large measure from [...] the individual male’s ability to demonstrate his virility at the expense of a woman and to obtain its validation from the subjugated woman herself. (13)

Unfortunately, this patriarchal ideology continues nowadays in the public and private spheres of Caribbean nation-states like Haiti, a country where sexual violence is rampant, yet normally unprosecuted and hidden (Suárez 111; Duramy 36; Jean-Charles 62-63).

In *Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginary*, Haitian American scholar in Black feminist literature Régine M. Jean-Charles argues that violence has been acknowledged as an integral theme in the literature of the former French colonies in the Caribbean (55). In the case of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Haiti, slavery as well as its abolition were all entrenched in violence, so much

that the brutality of these historical experiences has been transmitted and inherited generation after generation (55). Thus, as this scholar puts it, the “ubiquitous and virtually omnipresent” violence in the Caribbean ex-colonies is explained by the historical violent traumas of slavery and colonialism still lingering in these areas (55). Nevertheless, whereas the historical and cultural reasons why violence is such a prevalent theme in the Caribbean archipelago are to a great extent known and discussed by thinkers and researchers such as Fanon and Benítez-Rojo, less attention has been devoted to the gender violence suffered by Afro-Caribbean women and the literature they produce to expose and condemn this ongoing social evil.

Notwithstanding the lack of scholarly work, in the last years a few academics have researched the fiction of some Afro-Caribbean female authors who expose and denounce the perennial problem of gender-based violence in the West Indies. As modern languages scholar Chantal Kalisa argues, throughout the history of the ex-Francophone colonies in the Caribbean and Africa, literature has offered women authors a medium whereby “they attempt to resolve the tension between historical or external forms of violence associated with colonialism and postcolonial conditions and internal forms of violence that result from unfair cultural, social, and political rules based on gender” (3). Hence, as this scholar maintains, these literary artists “are particularly interested in lifting taboos over traditionally silenced discourses about domestic and intimate violence” against their fellow women (3). In order to do so, they often examine the effects of rape, sexual violence, and physical and psychological abuses on their female characters “explicitly” (4), with a lot of detail, without taboos. In this respect, Jean-Charles sees the study of the straightforward or explicit literary portrayal of female rape and its aftermath as a crucial tool for the disclosure of the all too often silenced physical and psychosocial consequences of this sort of aggressions (10). This is what the stories analysed by Kalisa and Jean-Charles do, inasmuch as these narratives, following a responsible depiction of the raped protagonists as women who become “subject[s] *through* rape rather than merely [individuals] subjected to [their] violation” (Rajan 77), concomitantly trace strategies of survival and increase public awareness and consciousness about violence against women.

Although Kalisa and Jean-Charles refer to authors of the French ex-colonies in Africa and the Caribbean, the focus of this article is only on Haiti, a country whose political life and contemporary writing, as happens with other Caribbean islands “is inseparable from its relation with the United States” (Fernández Jimenez, “Decolonial” 28) due to the US’ ongoing hegemony on “the peripheral areas” of “the American hemisphere” that it has exerted through distinct projects of neocolonial influence and development (Fernández Jiménez, “Primitivist” 2). In fact, as literary scholar Katharine Capshaw Smith argues, the US has become a province in the so-called “Haitian Tenth Department” (83), that is, “the floating homeland, the ideological one” which joins “all Haitians living [abroad]” (Danticat, *Creating* 49), due to the numerous migratory movements by plane or boat to the “Land of Liberty” motivated not only by its geographical proximity. As Michel Laguerre argues, many Haitians migrate to the US on account of a sustained crisis in their home country resulting, among other reasons, from “kleptocratic dictatorial regimes” and later on democratic but corrupt governments, “an economy dependent on offshore industry and remittances” and “an incremental process of Americanization” (21) which has led Haitians to seek the American Dream.

The aim of this article is thus to offer an analysis of three fictional narratives within a literary trend whereby, since the late 1990s and first two decades of the new millennium, some female writers of the Haitian diaspora in the US like Edwidge Danticat, Jaira Placide and Roxane Gay have been writing about rape culture within the Haitian or Haitian American community. What these authors have in common is their purpose to denounce and break the silence historically imposed on the gender-based and sexual violence suffered by their fellow women. Hence, this article seeks to establish a dialogic relationship between Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), Placide’s *Fresh Girl* (2002) and Gay’s *An Untamed State* (2014) which evidences the existence of a literary trend among contemporary Haitian American female writers characterised by its breaking of traditional taboos around female rape in Haiti and the diaspora and by its denunciation of the overwhelming presence of such violence in the Haitian and Haitian American culture since colonial times. In addition, the article attempts to show how, by means of these works, Danticat, Placide and Gay offer an example of self-empowerment and resistance through resilient heroines capable

of recovering their bodies and subjectivity by sharing their traumatic stories with others.

## 2. From Colonial to Postcolonial Sexual Violence in Haiti

A common expression in Haiti is “le viol est comme le bonjour,” because rape is widely and regularly committed in the country (Duramy 38). Scholars like Lucía M. Suárez have confirmed that in the Haitian nation-state “rape is rampant yet hidden” because “aggressors often go unpunished, live among their victims with impunity, and boast of their actions” (75). Although a few solidarity groups and associations have been offering help to raped women for years<sup>1</sup>, the injury of sexual violence is exacerbated by the Haitian society’s and institutions’ neglect of this endemic plight (75). This happens as a result of Haiti’s culture of denial and shame around rape and the insufficient legal attention aimed at implementing any kind of effective change in the social conduct of the male Haitian population vis-a-vis gender relations and rape culture (75). Despite the country’s criminalisation of rape in 2005, it is still extremely difficult to prosecute sexual violence in Haiti on account of this culture of impunity, the fear of reprisal (Suárez 64), the social stigma attached to rape and the fact that sexual aggressions are systemic and even structural due to their relation to Haiti’s harrowing social and gender inequalities (James 40, 50, 52; Duramy 18, 34-38). Likewise, the overwhelming presence of sexual violence is based on the fact that in Haiti women’s bodies have traditionally been regarded as “territories of colonial conquest” both by *blancs* (whites) and Haitian locals (Jean-Charles 27).

It becomes evident then, that rape against Haitian women is not a twenty-first-century issue but a historical one yet to be resolved. As history has demonstrated, the colonial founding of Haiti was inextricably linked to the rape of the African female slaves and their daughters (Jean-Charles 58; Duramy 19). With the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and the subsequent independence of the country, Haitians overturned the colonial yoke and the vicious and racist masters. However, one of the central founding myths about the genesis of Haiti’s peoples was the story of the rape of Sor or Sister Rose, a black woman who literally gives birth to the Haitian nation after being sexually forced by a French master or a fellow black slave (Jean-Charles 26). Whatever the actual background

of the rapist, this legend which suggests that “the origin of everyone [in Haiti] is common” (Dayan 48) seems to point to the heroic, resilient and altruistic nature of the Haitian people. Their ancestors—the rebellious *maroons* (runaway slaves living in the woods) and the *affranchis* (free mulattoes) who joined together in their pursuit of liberty during the revolution (Trouillot, *Haiti*, 37)—like Sister Rose in the legend, sacrificed themselves for the common good. Additionally, but no less importantly, the story of Sister Rose links the history of Haiti with rape, a form of violence which “operates as a national symbol” (Jean-Charles 30) inasmuch as this national myth is consolidated around the violation of a woman (58). Thus, this legend of courage and martyrdom which could be considered as the “primal scene” (58) of sexual violence in independent Haiti arguably gave rise to a rape metaphor in the Haitian imaginary connecting gender-based violence, especially sexual violence with the postcolonial development of the country.

Over a century after Haiti’s independence, the collective trauma of sexual violence was re-enacted during the US occupation of the country (1915-1934), when many Haitian women were raped by the American marines and also the Cacos, the Haitian forces supposedly assembled to protect the nation from the foreign occupants (Frances 77; Jean-Charles 63–64). The local violence exerted by the latter group and, decades later, the sexual aggressions used as a punishment for political dissidence by the Tonton Macoutes, the paramilitary forces at the service of the Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986), as well as the Zenglendos, the forces of the military junta who overthrew president Jean Bertrand Aristide in 1991 (Jean-Charles 64-66; James 63, 69-70), demonstrate how rape in Haiti became a white settlers’ legacy throughout history.

Furthermore, the rapid increase in the number of Haitian gangs during Aristide’s last years in office and especially after his second and definitive exile in 2004 was accompanied by a dramatic rise in the number of sexual aggressions in the country (Jean-Charles 67; Duramy 27). These rape figures became more shocking in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, when many of the unprivileged women and children living in the massive displacement camps turned into victims of sexual abuse by locals and even foreign cooperants and UN peace-keeping troops (Jean-Charles 67-69; Sheller 129-131). Thus, it could be argued that colonialism, “slavery, a warlike past, economic deprivation, and political

instability have laid foundations for gender-based violence” in Haiti (Duramy 15)<sup>2</sup>. Such violence, as legal scholar Benedetta Duramy notes, not only is widely employed as a tool of terror and oppression in this Caribbean country but it is also “systematically perpetrated throughout the country across social and economic lines” due to a patriarchal culture that leads to gender inequality and the subordination of women both in the private and the public sphere (99).

In light of the scarce social recognition of rape as a problem and the lack of institutional measures for stopping this type of violence in Haitian society, Suárez sees Haitian and Haitian American women’s literature as “a powerful alternative venue for the disclosure of violence” that can raise awareness not only in the Haitian population but also in readers around the world (119). After all, as Haitian American writer and literary critic Myriam Chancy proposes in *Framing Silence*, these women’s literature should always “be read as literature of revolution” which searches “for an irrevocable alteration of the status quo” (6).

### 3. A Legacy of Haitian Female Literary Activism

Haitian exile writer Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *Amour, colère, folie* (1968) / *Love, Anger, Madness* (2009) is probably the most influential literary figuration and representation of rape in Haiti (Jean-Charles 14)<sup>3</sup>, for, as I will argue later it paved the way for subsequent Haitian and Haitian American female authors eager to denounce the ongoing issue of unpunished gender-based/sexual violence in their country and in the diaspora<sup>4</sup>. This work is a trilogy of three novellas that offers a portrayal of Haiti under the repressive regime of the Duvalier dictatorship. Interestingly, Vieux-Chauvet “deliberately disturbs the culture of silence” (Jean-Charles 59) that surrounds rape in this Caribbean country, for not only does the trilogy revolve around the lives of several female characters that are subject to sexual violence, it also encodes a recognition of the fact that gender violence is overwhelmingly present in the public and private sphere of Haitian locals and diasporic subjects. Particularly significant in this respect is the second novella, *Anger*, which depicts in full detail the rape of a Haitian young woman and its aftermath.

*Anger* revolves around a Haitian family who has to deal with the illegal deprivation of their lands and the similarly criminal deprivation



of their daughter's body and mind through rape. During the dictatorial regime of an unnamed leader that different critics have linked to François Duvalier (Dayan 122; Kalisa 164; Jean-Charles 72), the lands of a bourgeois family, the Normils, are occupied and gradually taken away from their owners by "men in black uniforms" (Vieux-Chauvet 167) who represent the Tonton Macoutes. The only way in which this family can recover the land that their ancestors had "sweated to acquire" (169) is by paying a large sum of money to a lawyer who works for a Macoute leader referred to as "the Gorilla" (208) due to his ape-like features. This bribe or ransom for the Normil family's land must be delivered by the only daughter of the family, Rose, and although the paterfamilias, Louis, and Rose herself are suspicious of what is to come (204), they understand that this is the only chance the family has to recover their stolen property and eventually accept the deal. Hence, Rose carries the money on the arranged day, yet she is forced to have sex with the Gorilla and become his sex slave for an entire month. In this sense, Rose turns into a victim of sexual violence with a family that proves unable to help her or talk to her about her harrowing experience due to their feelings of fear and shame. Thus, as Jean-Charles argues, the repeated violation and torture of Rose's body for thirty days of sexual coercion is contextualised in the novel "in terms of the system of terror and the culture of fear that reigned under Duvalier" that Vieux-Chauvet wanted to expose with the trilogy, but it also serves as a "critique of a pre-existing culture of silence and patriarchal values that obscures, ignores and even reinforces violence against women" in Haiti (71).

Regarding the silencing of rape in the country, it is worth mentioning that in *Anger* the consequences of the occupation of the land and Rose's rape are always viewed in relation to the Normils and their acquaintances, for all of them give their own depictions and (mis)judgments of Rose throughout different chapters since her first private encounter with the Gorilla. In so doing, as Jean-Charles notes, Vieux-Chauvet "mirrors societal reactions to survivors of sexual violence" at the time but also today (72). The opinions which stand out the most are Paul's, who repeatedly judges Rose's decision, criticises her appearance which he equates with that of a "whore" (Vieux-Chauvet 239), and even plans how to avenge the dishonour of his virginal sister: "She is taboo. Thanks to the Gorilla. An off-limits whore. I will kill him" (242). Paul is worried about how the loss of virginity before marriage negatively affects his sister's and by extension

his family's social reputation as a consequence of the (patriarchal) societal norms in Haiti. Rose becomes "taboo" because she is ostracised by those out of the family who avoid any contact with what they consider a loose woman. For Paul, the only way to counter this damage is by murdering the person who has tarnished his sister and the family name forever.

Nonetheless, in the novella's last chapter, Rose seems to respond to all the gazes and judgements by the other characters, for she recounts her own story through her own perspective. Following Jean-Charles, the fact that this moment of narrative and personal empowerment in the form of an interior monologue arrives at the end of the novella, could respond to Vieux-Chauvet's intention to highlight the public and family silence around rape as well as to show readers Rose's "ability to speak for herself despite the cacophony of other voices" (73). This latter reading, as Jean-Charles puts it, "undermines the idea of a silent survivor who does not understand, reflect on, or speak what happens to her" (73), a literary move which enables readers to learn about the details of the sexual violence suffered by Rose from her own stream of consciousness:

The lawyer had spoken to me beforehand and I knew what to expect. I began taking off my clothes and once I was half-naked, the man in the uniform pulled me sharply by the arm to drag me behind the screen. "You're not going to struggle [...] [b]ecause if you do, you'll be sorry." [...] I refused to obey, so he threw me on the sofa. [...] He leaned over me for a moment, moaning slowly, his breath short, oppressed. [...] He was dripping with sweat and I felt defiled. He rammed himself into me in one rough terrible thrust, and immediately groaned with pleasure. I bit my fist in pain and disgust.

[...]

I could see his reflection in every mirror, unsightly and frightening. What's it to me? I would have brought dishonor on myself only if I enjoyed it as he did, but *he slept with a corpse*. [...] A month will go by quickly. *I won't tell a soul*, I'll do whatever he wants. He's made me bleed five times and I haven't cried out. [...] His awful hands on my body! Inside my body, shamelessly probing my flesh.

What do I care! *I am dead*" (Vieux-Chauvet 254-256, emphasis added).

Although Rose has been regarded by some critics as a martyr because of her initial willingness to offer herself in exchange for her family's land (Dayan 122), if particular attention is paid to the narration and representation of her rape in the above and later passages in the novel, the idea of martyrdom vanishes (Jean-Charles 74). As becomes evident in the quotation, there is no consent, for Rose is reluctant to obey and be penetrated, at least until she has to repress her emotions, her fear, her disgust, and act as if she were dead. In any case, although after those traumatic thirty days as a sexual slave Rose dies, her resistance and will to struggle is rendered in the novella through the recovery of her voice—even if it is her inner voice—after having been silenced not only by her perpetrator but also by the patriarchal culture influencing her family. This narrative and ethical choice arguably granted Vieux-Chauvet's contemporary readers with an innovative and necessary image in Haitian culture of the raped Haitian woman not as a martyr for the family or the nation as a whole, but as a victim and survivor, as a resilient individual who is able to gain self-empowerment after her ordeal and recover her voice.

Likewise, this novella shows that Rose is a woman turned into a pawn within a male contest for power and manliness who strives to survive and go on living despite her tragic end. This image of the resilient and self-empowered survivor of sexual violence who, after being used and sexually abused by Haitian perpetrators rather than white ones, is capable of telling her own story is arguably inherited by later Haitian female writers in the US diaspora such as Edwidge Danticat, Jaira Placide and Roxane Gay.

#### 4. Rape Denunciation in Haitian American Women's Fiction at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

Among the acclaimed works penned by Edwidge Danticat, the Haitian American author "considered by some the national writer of Haiti" today (Fernández Jiménez, "Decolonial" 28), *Eyes, Breath, Memory* is the novel which most clearly and extensively deals with the topic of sexual abuse and rape. This Bildungsroman revolves around

Sophie Caco, the young daughter of Martine Caco, a woman who was raped at the age of sixteen by a Tonton Macoute whom she came across in the cane fields, significantly, the traditional *lieu* of labour and sexual violations in colonial Caribbean, which, as the novel suggests, lingers as a space of violence. Martine eventually flees Haiti so as to escape her traumatic memories of the event but the child born of the rape, Sophie, makes it impossible for Martine to repress her trauma entirely, especially when the girl rejoins her mother in the US after being raised in Haiti by Martine's sister for twelve years. Recurrent flashbacks and nightmares of the rape scene haunt Martine throughout the novel, yet she struggles in isolation, not telling anyone about her Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) condition and also becoming "disconnected from reality" (Suárez 114) regardless of her efforts to live a new life in another country. As Martine constantly repeats, she cannot escape her past because "[t]here are ghosts [...] still very painful for [her]" (Danticat, *Breath* 78).

In addition, as a result of her rape trauma Martine becomes anorexic and looks older, without vitality as the descriptions of the autodiegetic narrator of the story, Sophie, show when she refers to her mother's "long and hollow" face, "her long spindly legs" as well as the "dark circles under her eyes" and the "lines of wrinkles [that] tightened her expression" (42). Besides, as the novel reveals, the traumatic event transforms Martine into a mother who exerts violence against her own daughter. Although Martine justifies her behaviour as necessary for her daughter's own good, her physical aggressions—as readers learn from Sophie herself—take the form of a rape, for Martine violates Sophie through the custom of the virginity test, an abuse which Martine had suffered many years earlier at the hands of her mother. Not surprisingly, such a practice results in Sophie's own difficulty with her self-esteem, her body and her sexuality for years. After all, the testing made her feel "alone and lost, like there was no longer any reason for [her] to live" (87). In this sense, it could be argued that *Eyes, Breath, Memory* reveals a continuum of sexual violence which extends from the public (the state) to the private sphere (family)<sup>5</sup>.

Additionally, their respective violations lead both mother and daughter to commit self-violence. Martine's destruction of her own body is replicated by Sophie's post-traumatic bulimia years later. Likewise,

as the novel shows very graphically, Sophie uses a pestle to destroy her hymen in order to fail her mother's tests and thus free herself from such a terrible experience (88). This self-harm could be regarded as a second violation of Sophie, in this case, perpetrated by her traumatised self. Hence, it could be argued that both mother and daughter go through a double experience of sexual violence that both women try to hide and repress for years. However, Sophie's harsh liberation from her pain can also be regarded as an act of resistance and victory over the patriarchal ideology of marriage as the only acceptable site for the expression of women's sexuality embodied by the terrible tradition of the virginity test.

Interestingly, Suárez has compared Sophie's silence during the testing to Martine's reluctance to talk about the rape in her own life (118) which prevents Sophie to "piece together [her] mother's entire story" (Danticat, *Breath* 61) for twelve years. Yet contrary to Martine, who experiences her trauma in isolation and eventually kills herself, Sophie seeks therapeutical and communal help and is eventually able to heal and to turn a traumatic memory into a narrative of her trauma, a necessary task to accomplish post-traumatic healing (Brison 45). Thanks to therapy, the community and the return to the place in Haiti where her family's suffering started, the cane fields, Sophie ends up liberating herself from her family and individual trauma, as her words—"Ou libéré! (I am free)"—(Danticat, *Breath* 233)—at the end of the novel suggest.

In Jaira Placide's *Fresh Girl*, the protagonist of this young adult Bildungsroman about the Haitian diaspora in the US is Mardi Desravines, a fourteen-year-old girl born to Haitian American parents but raised in Haiti who struggles with the repressed trauma of the rape she suffered at the age of twelve following the 1991 coup against President Aristide. Like Vieux-Chauvet and Danticat, Placide "sets her character's violation in a moment of ubiquitous political instability when the rape of women was rampant and used as a weapon of political terror" (Jean-Charles 87). Specifically, throughout most of the novel Mardi remains silent about her rape experience at the hands of a Zenglendo. Nobody in her family, including the relatives who took refuge in the States with her, knows about it. In fact, Mardi is represented as a troubled adolescent who misbehaves at home in Brooklyn, suffers from haunting nightmares and performs self-mutilating acts to wipe out her traumatic memories of the violent event. These actions can be read as clear PTSD symptoms

resulting from Mardi's sexual assault in Haiti. Thus, as will be shown hereafter, Placide's novel offers a large exploration of Mardi's responses to her repressed trauma until she is able to speak up and start healing.

The narrative opens with Mardi lying on the bathroom floor in the middle of the night because her nightmares of the rape have awakened her:

It's two o'clock in the morning. I'm tired but I don't want to go back to sleep. What if I dream about the soldiers again? What if I dream about Ike [a racist bully that physically abuses her] at school? What if I wake up dead? I get up and wash my hands. I scrub and scrub with the Brillo pad. The backs of my hands hurt, but I feel better. (Placide 1)

As this first passage advances, throughout the novel Mardi continuously appears trying to calm herself so that her family does not discover her secret, but she finds that the only way to control her psychic pain is by inflicting violence on herself, this time with a scouring pad. For this reason, when she feels most uneasy about her past, she sleeps on a bed of rocks she brought from Haiti, and in other chapters she bruises, cuts, stabs and even burns herself.

Despite this non-verbalisation of her trauma, through the present-tense first-person narration used by Mardi throughout most of the novel, especially when referring to themes like sexuality, Haiti and her past, Mardi leaves traces and hints of her traumatic experience in her motherland. Consider the following passage where Mardi recalls the days spent in the Haitian wilderness as she and her sister were trying to escape the junta soldiers hunting for their dissident uncle until both girls could safely join their émigré parents in Brooklyn:

I don't want to remember too much, but these things are like sleeping hiccups in my head. I know the track got two flat tires from the bullets. Everyone got out running and screaming. Serina and I [...] had to spend two days hiding in the woods and cornfields. One morning I went to look for water and I got lost. The cornstalks were tall and yellow like my dress.... When I got back, Serina was crying because she didn't know where I was. Soon after,

another truck full of people rescued us and took us to the airport. (25-26)

Here, a very significant gap of information reproduces a moment of silence or of conscious ellipsis in Mardi's account whereby the girl avoids telling the implied reader about what happened to her when she and her sister had to hide from the Zenglendos in the countryside.

Later in the novel Mardi recognises not having told her family about what happened with the armed man who sexually abused her in the fields, a recurrent image in her dreams at night (77). More clues can be found in Mardi's speech when her uncle Perri unexpectedly appears in Brooklyn. Despite their good relationship back in Haiti, Mardi's forced exile and especially her traumatic experience in the Haitian fields drives her to develop feelings of hatred against Uncle Perri, whom she internally blames for appearing "too late" (89) and for everything that has happened to her since she was forced to leave Haiti, including the bullying and racism she suffers in the US.

Besides these two examples, the novel offers more clues that can be deciphered through a close reading or, using Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's terminology, a "cryptonymic" (*Wolf* 19) or "decrypting" (33) reading of Mardi's speech<sup>6</sup>. Precisely these hints enable readers to understand that something very dark and violent happened to Mardi before leaving Haiti, a trauma, or what Abraham and Torok call "phantom" (*Shell* 140), which Mardi tries to repress or hide in her inner "crypt" (*Shell* 140) but which keeps on returning to haunt her through flashbacks and nightmares, especially after her uncle's arrival. Yet, although "[c]rypts engender silence," one way or another, gaps, unspeakable secrets and concealed pain or shame "continue to affect and disrupt the lives of those involved in them" (Schwab 49). This is what happens to Mardi, who provides readers with the most evident clues about her rape towards the middle of the novel, in two particular episodes. Firstly, when her school bully, Ike, corners Mardi in private and lets her know about his attraction to her:

"Hey island guuurl, you looking pretty tonight," he says.  
But with each step [...] his smile fades.  
My knees shake. I back up against a rack of coats, fighting  
the need to pee on myself. No, I'm not going to. I won't!

[...]

I'm scared.

[...]

I remember Haiti.

I remember the cornfields.

I remember there was no one around and how thirsty

I was.

I remember what happened there.

I remember not saying anything. (Placide 148-149)

Mardi is horrified at Ike's physical closeness not only because in the past he had abused her physically and verbally due to her Haitian origins, but also because, as readers will learn later on, his words and gestures, and especially his invasion of Mardi's private space, remind the girl of the soldier who raped her in the fields. Despite her efforts to forget, as the anaphora present in her speech denotes, this disturbing episode re-enacts her repressed trauma.

The second most evident clue offered by the novel can be found in the episode when the girl learns about sexually-transmitted diseases and becomes concerned about having contracted one before leaving Haiti; here Mardi actually considers taking a test, but because she would need to tell the adults first, she forgets about it quickly (158). Certainly, this is a self-imposed silence that yet again highlights the shameful nature that rape has for contemporary Haitian families even those living broad. Significantly enough, it is through written words that Mardi, who is eventually reconciled with Uncle Perri, eventually lets him and his sister (Aunt Widza) know about her sexual abuse in Haiti when she spells the word "VIOLATE" while playing Scrabble. Perri's reaction is to urge Mardi to speak up "what is hidden in [her]" (169), an enquiry to which Mardi responds by telling her two relatives about her decision to look for water in the Haitian cornfields and her encounter with the man who raped her there:

A man with a rifle is leaning against a tree to my far left. He winks at me. [...] Then the cornfield man tells me to lie down. I lie down [...]. Cornfield Man smiles at me. His breath stinks. [...] He lifts my dress and sticks his rifle in my panties [...]. Cornfield Man kisses me on my forehead. It's cold on the inside where he pushes his rifle in. [...] Then he



pulls the trigger. I jump. He laughs. I'm not dead. I wish I were. He pulls the trigger again and again, laughing harder each time. He unbuckles his pants and hugs me. Now the rifle is gone and I feel something different. It hurts just as much, but Cornfield Man enjoys himself. (172-173)

As the above passage shows, Mardi's account in present tense—a token of how, as psychiatrist Dori Laub puts it, the memories of extreme trauma “cannot always be related as past events, but break though the coordinates of time and place with which we commonly organize experience” (Greenspan et al. 199)—can be read as a long flashback through which the girl relives the traumatic event she had been repressing and hiding from her family all along. Here Mardi makes reference to the soldier raping her not only with his sexual organ but also with his weapon, a phallic object full of masculine symbolism which provides the perpetrator with a sense of manliness, power and authority over the young girl he is abusing.

Fortunately, Mardi self-empowerment to speak up her trauma in front of her uncle and aunt leads her to tell the rest of her family who, at this point, understand the erratic and “fresh” behaviour of the girl since her arrival in the US and encourage her not to feel that there is something “bad in [her]” (176-177). Such an important lesson helps Mardi understand that she is not a contaminated girl as she had thought ever since her rape, but someone who needs help and who must be resilient in order not to allow her harrowing experience and by extension her victimiser to change her. Thus, it could be argued that, on a first reading, *Fresh Girl* renders a female protagonist who struggles to disclose what happened to her and verbalise it as rape. This serves Placide to criticise the culturally and self-imposed silence and shame around rape Haitian (American) girls and women have to deal with even within the family. In this sense, like Vieux-Chauvet and Danticat, this author also reveals readers how the continuum of violence extends from the public to the private sphere. Nonetheless, Placide undermines that silence culture around sexual violence by allowing Mardi to speak up her trauma, to create a narrative memory of the rape with great detail when she explains her sexual assault to her uncle and aunt, and later on to the rest of her family who, together with a group of therapists, help the girl gradually recover from her psychic wound.

A third work that explores breaking taboos around the sexual violence suffered by a woman with Haitian origins is Roxane Gay's *An Untamed State*, a narrative which revolves around the kidnapping of a Haitian American mother, Mireille Duval Jameson, by a gang from the slums of Port-au-Prince in 2008. The leader of this armed group demands Mireille's father—a wealthy self-made Haitian American—a million-dollar ransom that he refuses to pay even though he can afford it. This negative response, together with the postcolonial antagonism between the gang leader and Mireille's progenitor owing to their different ideologies and the former's view of Americanised expats (yet another form of foreign occupation: see Roldán-Sevillano, "Haiti's" 277-284) results in Mireille's torture and gangrape<sup>7</sup>. Predictably, Mireille—a conspicuous victim of these men's rivalry—ends up suffering a clear case of PTSD after her liberation thirteen days later.

In this first-person narrative with scattered interventions of an omniscient narrator which mixes conventions of the thriller, the postmodern fairy-tale revision and the traditional social realist narrative (Roldán-Sevillano, "Roxane" 4-6), Gay also offers a very realistic and detailed portrayal of rape since the very beginning of the novel. The narrative's full detail echoes that used in *Fresh Girl* and *Anger*, for in this case too, readers are provided with a retrospective account of the violent event by the victim-survivor herself:

I scratched and kicked and screamed and spit in his face. [...] He stripped me of my clothing, [...] pulling me up by my hips, forcing my thighs apart with his, forcing himself inside me. [...] With his arm pressed against the back of my neck, forcing my face into the mattress, I tried to breathe, tried to free myself but there was nothing I could do. [...] I looked down at my thighs and saw blood in the dim light. (Gay 79-80)

In addition, as happens to Rose Normil in Vieux-Chauvet's novella, here Mireille's complete disempowerment provoked by the repeated sexual abuses and tortures perpetrated by her captors for almost two weeks makes her sink into a process of traumatic dissociation whereby her mind tries to repress the violence she is enduring as evinced by Mireille's inability to recognise her body as her own (106). Elsewhere, I have discussed Mireille's numerous PTSD symptoms (Roldán-Sevillano,

“Haiti’s” 271-273). Significantly enough, this character’s self-conception as “no one” (Gay 205), as a “dead” (207) individual, echoes the story about Rose Normil, who refers to herself as a “corpse” and a “dead” woman (Vieux-Chauvet 256) while and after being raped by the Gorilla. In addition, Mireille’s account of the traumatic sexual abuse she experiences recalls the stories of Placide’s and Vieux-Chauvet’s protagonists:

*I became no one. I became a woman who wanted to live. That was my fight. [...] [T]he Commander [...] penetrated me with his gun and raised my hips [...]. I endured the pain. My hands were not my hands. My body was not my body.* (Gay 140, emphasis added)

As these words show, like little Mardi, Mireille is raped with a weapon, a symbol of power and masculinity for her victimisers, which later on he replaces with his own sexual organ, and just like Rose, Mireille tries to dissociate herself while she is being violated in order to repress the pain and the trauma so that she can survive such a harrowing experience.

As I argue elsewhere, in Gay’s novel Mireille is depicted as a Haitian *zombi* (Roldán-Sevillano, “Roxane” 73), a figure that has been defined as an undead body or spirit subdued to the command of a sorcerer, the *bokor*, which, as Kaiama L. Glover explains, turns the victim into a “being without essence” (qtd. in Roldán-Sevillano, “Roxane” 73). In Mireille’s reality the leader of the gang who everybody calls “Commander” is the *bokor* and master of her will and she is the *zombi* deprived of subjectivity who must obey the tyrant. These aspects are also present in Vieux-Chauvet’s novella where Rose turns into a *zombi* subdued to the command of another *bokor*, the Gorilla. In this sense, both women are deprived of their bodies and subjectivity by two men asking their families for a ransom (in exchange for land in Vieux-Chauvet’s novella and of a person in *An Untamed State*) who are referred to by their nicknames throughout the two narratives. This aspect shows an evident influence of Vieux-Chauvet in Gay’s text, a cultural legacy which is also observable in the trade of the two heroines by their fathers and their treatment as sex slaves by sinister thugs for a period of time, as well as in the fully detailed rape scenes and subsequent dissociative processes undergone by the two women.

Yet, the main difference between the two texts is that, contrary to Rose's unsuccessful efforts to work through her trauma and survive, Mireille gradually recovers thanks to the love of her American mother-in-law and a series of *marronage* or escapist acts (Roldán-Sevillano, "Roxane" 74), including a failed attempt to run away from the shanty where she is kept by her captors and, following her liberation, her flight from Haiti, where "[t]here would be no [...] trial, no justice" (Gay 234). It is worth noting that Mireille's escapes from several confining or distressing situations during and after her kidnapping exemplify her characterization as a strong and courageous woman. In fact, Mireille is depicted as a clear inheritor of the resistance of her rebellious ancestors, the Haitian *maroons*, who similarly fought for their physical and psychological freedom as well as for the recuperation of their subjectivity by fleeing the plantations and the slaveowners. Nevertheless, although Mireille is able to recover like the heroines of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Fresh Girl*, her healing process is only partially completed until she faces her homeland again and specially until she encounters and physically confronts her victimiser in Miami (Roldán-Sevillano, "Haiti's" 276), a violent face-to-face encounter which makes him run away full of fear (Gay 360). Significantly enough, through this direct confrontation with the *bokor* who had subdued her to his will for months and even years which, in a way, echoes the Haitian enslaved people's confrontation of their colonial oppressors in the revolution, "Mireille proves to be the owner of her body and will again" (Roldán-Sevillano, "Haiti's" 276). This recuperation of her self allows Gay's heroine to become empowered and recount her story to an implied reader an indeterminate time later, a verbal act which represents the last stage of Mireille's journey towards recovery as happens with Danticat's and Placide's protagonists. Unlike them, Mireille is the only protagonist who physically confronts the perpetrator who had subjugated her will and body. In this sense it is as if the genealogical empowerment of the literary heroines that have been analysed here culminated with Gay's novel.

## 5. Conclusion

As this article has attempted to demonstrate, following the example of Vieux-Chauvet, contemporary Haitian American women writers have been trying to break the silences around sexual violence in their

motherland and the US diaspora by penning narratives where full detail of the rape event and its aftermath is provided by the female protagonists of their stories. Notwithstanding their ordeal, these women are brave enough to keep on going and speak up their traumatic experiences. In so doing they epitomise the historical resistant and resilient nature of the people of Haiti, the first Black Republic to become independent from colonial rule after a twelve-year organised slave rebellion. However, contrary to their most evident literary predecessor, Vieux-Chauvet's trilogy, *Breath, Eyes, Memory, Fresh Girl* and *An Untamed State* show that post-traumatic healing after rape, albeit a difficult process, may be possible for today's Haitian women because they are not eternal victims but fighting survivors like their revolutionary ancestors. For this reason, far from revictimising their heroines, as has been demonstrated, these novels present them as resilient individuals who struggle but gradually return to their lives with more strength. Thus, it can be concluded that by breaking taboos and therefore raising awareness in their global readership, the three narratives expose and denounce the systemic nature of as well as the silence around sexual violence in Haitian culture, a scourge which even reaches Haitian women in the US diaspora. In this sense, it seems apt to claim that Danticat, Placide and Gay use their narratives as a weapon of denunciation and resistance, that is, as activist literature.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, *Solidarité Fanm Ayisyen/SOFA* or *Kay Fanm*.

<sup>2</sup> Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot has related the early period of Haiti's Independence with the political and socio-economic instability that the country has been experiencing until the present day. According to this scholar, along with "the heavy indemnity on the Haitian state" imposed by France in order to compensate the former slave owners and a diplomatic ostracism by the international community due to the racist and imperialist Western ideology at the time which tried to silence the revolution (*Silencing 95*), Haiti was affected by a class and colour conflict between the state and the nation that still lingers today. As this scholar explains, post-independence Haiti was followed by a strife between the interests of the state elites—made up by the light-skinned *affranchis* enjoying freedom before the revolution, their descendants,

the merchant bourgeoisie and other state-dependent urban groups—and the interests of the peasantry—integrated by the majority of black slaves freed with the revolution (*Haiti* 45) to which Trouillot refers as “the nation” (230). These socio-political circumstances, along with a clear external dependence, the stagnation of peasant productivity (80), the growth of what Trouillot calls “urban parasites” (78-79) as well as an economy mainly borne by the taxes paid by a peasantry gradually forced into “abject poverty” (84) became the breeding ground for socio-economic and political upheavals at the beginning of the twentieth century. This agitation served the US as an excuse to occupy Haiti from 1915 to 1934 as it looked for a strategic geopolitical position during the weakening of Europe in the wake of World War I (100). However, a bursting reaction to this foreign presence and its racism and the US troops’ dissolving and replacement of the Haitian army for a militarised police force which efficiently imposed state-sanctioned violence (105-107) paved the way for the Duvalier brutal dictatorship (132-136). Following this totalitarian regime, the subsequent development of the country from 1986 until today has been characterised by a ruling elite that continues to ignore the fundamental socio-economic issues of the country and excluding the vast majority: the urban and rural lower classes (Trouillot, *Haiti* 230; Laguerre 27).

<sup>3</sup> For the analysis of Vieux-Chauvet’s piece, I have resorted to the only English translation of her trilogy published by literary scholars Rose-Myriam Rejouis and Val Vinokur in 2009. This twenty-first century translation of a work in French and *Krèyol* allowed the international community and especially the Haitian diaspora to have access to a Haitian classic that had been out of print for decades as a result of the Duvalier dictatorship’s silencing of dissidence (Vieux-Chauvet xviii). In this respect, it should be noted that given the time elapsed between the publication of the 1968 original (a time of revolutionary fervour in France) and the late 2000s, public reception of the trilogy has varied notably. Whereas the French version, a politically-committed and provocative second-wave feminist book was read clandestinely in Haiti under the Duvaliers’ censorship or passed unnoticed by the French and Francophone-Canadian general public owing to the lack of copies sold before its forced withdrawal, in the new millennium, Rejouis and Vinokur’s translation was welcomed as an illuminating information source about Haiti’s history, society and culture for new generations of hyphenated Haitians and the rest of the world (Spear 13-23).

<sup>4</sup> After the publication of the trilogy, Vieux-Chauvet fled Haiti to avoid prosecution by the Duvalier dictatorship and located her permanent residence in New York, where she died in 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Since the publication of the novel, Martine's and Sophie's traumas have been thoroughly studied by literary scholars such as Lucía M. Suárez and Donette Francis among others.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* Abraham and Torok argue that, notwithstanding individuals' endeavour to repress their traumas, these silenced or secret experiences are inscribed in cryptic forms into their discourse and stories which become traceable both in their silences and in their cryptic language with detours and incoherences.

<sup>7</sup> According to Laura Roldán-Sevillano, the violence that the gang leader exerts against Mireille is the by-product of both Haiti's rape culture and a cultural trauma related to Haiti's "(post)colonial history" which prompts this character "to take revenge against those whom he considers his oppressors" ("Haiti's" 280), that is, the Westernised Haitian upper classes and returnees like Mireille's father (274).

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