

**Assertion of Cultural Identity: Slavery, Male Violence, and the Liberating Role of Artistic Expression in Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory***

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**Abstract**

This essay aims to examine how Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* reflect the imbalances, inequalities and violence caused by European colonialism. Through a mix of fiction and reality, the authors bring to the forefront some of the most pressing problems of the postcolonial era, such as subjugation, rape, racism, and male violence perpetrated upon Black women. In these two works there is, unquestionably, a search for assertion of identity and for liberation of women. Shange and Danticat deconstruct historical facts, repudiate the heroic narrative of Western civilization aiming to promote a society where there are no barriers between the white and black races.

Keywords: Colonialism, slavery, violence, assertion, liberation.

**Resumo**

Este ensaio pretende analisar de que modo as obras *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, de Ntozake Shange e *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, de Edwidge Danticat refletem os desequilíbrios, as desigualdades e a violência causados pelo colonialismo europeu. Através de uma mescla de ficção e realidade, as autoras trazem para a vanguarda alguns dos problemas mais prementes da época pós colonial, como seja a subjugação, a violação, o racismo, e a violência masculina perpetradas sobre a mulher negra. Há nas duas obras, inquestionavelmente, uma procura de afirmação da identidade e da libertação da mulher. Shange e Danticat desconstróem factos históricos, repudiam narrativas heróicas da civilização ocidental com o intuito de promover uma sociedade onde não haja barreiras entre as raças negra e branca.

Palavras-chave: Colonialismo, escravatura, violência, afirmação, libertação.

**Introduction**

The African American writer Ntozake Shange, author of *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982) and the Haitian American Edwidge Danticat, author of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) are Black women voices who want to assert a Black cultural identity, reclaim Black people's place in the world, and revise colonial history.

In these two novels there are many themes and layers of knowledge that are common, and also permeate many other novels by Black American women writers,

which began to appear mainly after the 1960s, in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. With it, Black people started gaining a very strong political consciousness, fighting for their rights, finding their own roots, claiming their identity, and rejecting the European models. These are the yearnings that Black artists, painters and writers have and convey in their works of art. Black writers, women in particular, feel they have a particular “mission,” a duty to transmit to future generations the rich legacy that they have inherited from their ancestors, and to which they have access. They simply want that the history of their people will not be erased without leaving any vestiges, as was the case with so many indigenous tribes that vanished in the Americas forever.

In the aforementioned novels there are issues in common, like relationships, family love, sisterhood, and traditions, yet, the parallel that I will make between both will take into account the way both authors try to assert their cultural identity, i.e., Black American culture, by depicting slavery and the search for freedom through spirituality, the experience of male violence, and the liberating role of artistic expression. Both Shange and Danticat are Black feminist authors who explore Black women’s fragility, the obstacles they face in a patriarchal, racist, and sexist society, and approach their victimization with the aim of exemplifying their struggles for freedom, giving them a voice against a cruel world that has oppressed and silenced them. They are highly committed to give voice to those less fortunate who had no chance, many of them, to learn how to read, who were subdued, maltreated, totally dehumanized because they had to live in places much worse than the fringes, as was the case of millions of slaves who were forced to leave Africa.

Despite having a different origin, background, education and belonging to different generations, both writers reflect on colonialism, are engaged in reconstructing history and memories and want to give visibility to certain areas of knowledge that were consciously made invisible by the white supremacy. They are particularly sensitive to the suffering, injustice, and terrible deprivation of rights that Black people suffered, therefore they are critical towards the imbalance created in their lives by British colonialism and imperialism. I think it is relevant to draw this parallel between the two novels as it enriches the way we look at the history of the Americas and the African diaspora. This kind of literature changes the way we perceive the world, but, above all,

awakens our consciousness, and we may awaken others, just as Shange and Danticat have done.

### **Slavery and the Search for Freedom through Spirituality**

Although we are in a fictional world, when we read *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, there is no doubt that these narratives have a historicized plot. Throughout them, we have many references to slavery and to historical figures, like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, in the first, and Jean Claude Duvalier, in the second.

In these novels, the feminists Shange and Danticat are true defenders of their culture and critical voices within their societies. They are fully aware that their culture is indebted to other cultures and it is the outcome of the mingling of different peoples. By writing about slavery, they aim at recovering and recognizing the past so as to take a stand on the value of freedom. These writers are concerned with the slave cultures, they feel the need to denounce the imbalance, the inequalities that colonialism provoked, and therefore repudiate the heroic narratives of Western civilization and question the perspectives of a canon which is essentializing and self-centered. Each writer, in her own way, approaches slavery in order to denounce its terrible consequences, and show that the values imposed by Western civilization represented a real threat to and even death of so many displaced, vulnerable, and defenseless Black people as well as indigenous peoples.

Shange, in particular, addresses slavery in an overt way. She gives priority and visibility to this issue, although it is evident that *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* encompasses an array of other relevant themes, like the spirituality expressed by the three sisters, which may evoke the slaves' need to connect to the spiritual world, i.e., a way to escape from their bitter lives. The setting of this novel is the deep South, South Carolina and the Sea Islands, precisely to write history through a different perspective. The author's approach to slavery, her attempt to keep alive the memory and legacy of those who experienced it, as well as its cultural traits in the South is very much evident in the leitmotiv "Like the slaves who were ourselves" or "The South in her," referring to Indigo. She got the name after a plant, like her sisters, Sassafrass and Cypress, but while they refer to long-living and strong plants, hers is also perennial, but with a shorter life. In fact, Indigo is the character who embodies slavery in this narrative:

indigo is representative of the cash crops that enslaved peoples cultivated in coastal areas of the Southeast, like the cultivation of sugar cane is representative in Haiti. The cultivation and production of indigo and sugar cane were among the products that contributed to the economic growth of the British Empire, mainly during the eighteenth century, a source of wealth for the whites, but a source of pain, suffering, and danger for the displaced, exploited and enslaved peoples. As Martin Japtok mentions: "Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* continues this tradition of associating cane with danger. The protagonist's mother is raped in a cane field" (Japtok, 2000: 481). We know the extent to which the aforementioned products are directly connected with slavery and the plantation economy. In fact, both narratives thematize the conquest, colonization, and domination of lands, in an ambivalent dichotomist world, as it was conceived by Europeans.

The first chapter of *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* is dedicated to Indigo, but her presence is felt all through the novel, she permeates it as if the narrator wanted to recover the original "color" soiled by slavery, dye, and "purify" all people through this plant.<sup>1</sup> Indigo is the one who is in perfect tune with the past and intertwines it inextricably with the present, because she is an embodiment of her slave ancestors and all the environments they inhabited, as it is evident in this passage:

Indigo wished the switchblade handles on her violin case were knives. She'd have them all land in his back, but she didn't want to hurt anybody else. The Colored had been hurt enough already.

The Caverns began to moan, not with sorrow but in recognition of Indigo's revelation. The slaves who were ourselves had known terror intimately, confused sunrise with pain, & accepted indifference as kindness. Now they sang out from the walls, pulling Indigo toward them. Indigo ran her hands along the walls, to get the song, get a hold to the voices. Instead her fingers grazed cold, hard metal rings. Chains. Leg irons. The Caverns revealed the plight of her people, but kept on singing. The tighter Indigo held the chains in her hands, the less shame was her familiar (Shange, 1982: 42-43).

As I will comment later on, music played an important role in slaves' lives. Music was the first type of language to open communication with them, the one they

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<sup>1</sup> The indigo plant was cultivated in South Carolina. Indigo was a dye used to give color to textiles produced in England, therefore it was imported from South Carolina for about fifty years during the eighteenth century.

were allowed to preserve in the Americas. Songs were important to lift their spirits, give them hope and strength to endure daily hardships, and communicate through hidden codes.

In my view, it is impossible not to feel touched, moved by and sympathetic to Indigo, in the sense that she shows a historical awareness, and the kind of knowledge and sensitivity not very common in girls her age.

Sassafrass is a weaver, like her hard-working mother, who has to create exquisite fashions for the rich whites and ancient Black families of the island “Her mama had done it, and her mama before that; and making cloth was the only tradition Sassafrass inherited that gave her a sense of womanhood that was rich and sensuous, not tired and stingy” (Shange, 1982: 81). Of course this has a special meaning, Sassafrass’s weaving being a paradigm of how Black slave women preserved cultural traditions alive and also maintained healthy relationships with their spirituality. Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo, “these three sisters exemplify the African philosophy of Sankofa which means ‘return and recover it’” (Taylor, 2009: 6), as they return to their true selves and recover their African spirituality. The same union and spirituality is shown by the three sisters when they follow a ritual, a West African tradition of throwing food and wine to the sea:

wd toss nickels “food & wine in the sea down the coast/ so daddy wd have all he needed to live a good life in the other world.” A little before, Cypress asserts “daddy was a seaman / a ship’s carpenter, he was always goin’ round the world /that what mama said / & he died in the ocean offa Zanzibar /that’s what mama said the ship just caught fire /& went on down to the bottom of the ocean (Shange, 1982: 97).

The fact that Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo’s father died in the sea off the coast of Zanzibar and his body was never recovered reminds us of the millions of slaves who lost their lives when crossing the Atlantic, in the period of the slave trade. As Anissa Janine Wardi mentions, “Shange, like others in the tradition, continues the trope of sea water as ancestrally embodied, consecrated, and divinized, made sacred by those who eternally rest on the ocean floor” (Wardi, 2012: 134).

However, if, on the one hand, Sassafrass and Cypress travel to New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles to pursue freedom, to liberate themselves from the traditional African American cultural prejudices of small communities like theirs, on

the other hand, they are aware that it is fundamental to go back to Charleston, to their roots, to find happiness, in the sense that Arlene Elder conveys: “Shange’s women ultimately return to South, in harmony with each other, with their mother, with their artistry, and, most significantly for their development, with their African and slave forebears” (1992: 99).

Freedom is also a leitmotiv in Danticat’s novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, as it is evident in the following excerpts: “When one merchant dropped her heavy basket, another called out of concern, ‘Oulibéré?’ Are you free from your heavy load?” (1996: 96); “From where she was standing, my grandmother shouted like the women from the market place, ‘Oulibéré?’ Are you free? Tante Atie echoed her cry, her voice quivering with her sobs. ‘Oulibéré?’” (Danticat, 1996: 233), and eventually, when Sophie’s grandmother asks her “‘Oulibéré?’ Are you free, my daughter?” (Danticat, 1996: 234). The last two questions repeated by grandmother Ifé are significant, in the sense that she is totally aware of the cruel pain (testing) she inflicted on Martine, who, in turn, also inflicted on Sophie. At Martine’s funeral, Sophie cannot bear such suffering/trauma any more, therefore she runs to the cane fields, the place that ultimately led her mother to death. Simultaneously, she runs towards the sense of her existence and externalizes her anger and revolt as if she were possessed: “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. [...] My palm was bleeding” (Danticat, 1996: 233).

Since “there is always a place where nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms” (Danticat, 1996: 234), Sophie wants to break the chain of the ignominious tradition of testing and not pass it on to her daughter. This is a very crucial moment in Sophie’s life, when she says “This is enough!” and moves forward, no matter how. Grandmother Ifé asks a rhetorical question, since she knows Sophie’s answer very well, after all. She knows that, from then on, she will not be enslaved by “nightmares” any more.

In fact, at first sight, it seems that the theme of slavery is absent from *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Nonetheless, Danticat, like Shange, is a potent voice for the diaspora, for reconstructing stories, history and memories, as the title of her novel suggests. Appropriating Japtok’s statement, “Sugar and slavery traveled together for nearly four

centuries in the New World” (2000:477), I claim that, the fact that Danticat tackles the theme of the cultivation of sugar cane in Haiti and the innumerable references to the sugar cane fields throughout the novel indicate the author’s concern with approaching this theme:

Whenever she was sad, Tante Atie would talk about the sugar cane fields, where she and my mother practically lived when they were children. They saw people die there from sunstroke every day. Tante Atie said that, one day while they were all working together, her father – my grandfather – stopped to wipe his forehead, leaned forward, and died. My grandmother took the body in her arms and tried to scream the life back into it. They all kept screaming and hollering, as my grandmother’s tears bathed the corpse’s face. Nothing would bring my grandfather back (Danticat, 1996: 4-5).

This excerpt is, no doubt, a metaphor for the thousands of slaves who arrived in the island from Africa during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and toiled until death, as Walter Johnson affirms:

Elsewhere, particularly in the Caribbean and Brazil, the murderous character of the slaveholding regime ‘the life expectancy of Africans put to work cultivating sugar in the Americas was seven years from the time they stepped ashore) meant that slaveholders depended upon the Atlantic slave trade as a replacement for biological reproduction (2007: 222).

Thus, it is important not to forget the large numbers of Africans who died from disease and the harsh, brutal conditions of labor in the sugar plantations under the French colonial rule, until 1803, like Sophie’s grandfather, or Sophie’s mother, whose “fingers were scarred and sunburned. It was as though she had never stopped working in the cane fields after all” (Danticat, 1996: 42), as the narrator notices right at the moment she meets her mother for the first time, at the airport, in New York. As a matter of fact, Danticat wants to revive the exploitation of slaves, write about the past history of the island, as she knows that it has influenced and determined the present of Haitian people.

Another important aspect that is worth considering is the profound, indelible memories that people keep. Sophie is so rooted in the Haitian environment, that even after having lived in New York for six years, she keeps the memories of her native island vivid, deeply ingrained in her mind:

Inside the train, there were listless faces, people clutching the straps, hanging on. In Haiti, there were only sugar cane railroads that ran from the sugar mill in Port-au-Prince to plantation towns all

over the countryside. Sometimes on the way home, some kids and I would chase the train and try to yank sugar cane sticks from between the wired bars (Danticat, 1996: 77).

There is no better example to show how Danticat's writing is haunted by images of past traumas in her native island of Haiti. What is really important to underline in this passage is the fact that in Sophie's native island, "there were only sugar cane railroads," where trains ran slowly due to the heavy cargo of sugar cane they transported. Therefore, it was very easy for children to chase them and pull sugar canes sticks, probably to chew.

Obviously, these unforgettable experiences and memories, where there is a mixture of joy and distress, contrast with the voyage by train in New York where "listless," anonymous people travel. By focusing on the importance of sugar, the author wants to bring back the history of her people, the time when slaves arrived by tens of thousands in the island for the sugar and coffee production, after 1697, since Haiti belonged to France, and French authorities were mainly interested in its agricultural growth. At that time, Haiti was the Western third part of the island, named Saint-Domingue and its economy revolved around the production of sugar and coffee. In my view, Danticat is probably questioning the reasons why the world's only successful slave rebellion, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1803), after the influence of the French Revolution, did not have a better outcome in her beloved country. How was it possible that an enslaved population who was courageous enough to stand up for their own rights could not be able to surpass the colonial condition they had inherited, and move forward, but that is an unanswered question.

Also, from my point of view, the killing of Dessalines, the coal man, by the Tonton Macouts is another good example of the author's association with past history. Jean-Jackes Dessalines, Haiti's first head of state, defeated the French forces, declared the nation independent and renamed it Haiti, but his despotic rule ended with his assassination by the mulatto elite in 1806. Obviously, there is a parallel between the character's killing and the assassination of Louverture's lieutenant, Dessalines.

History is also subtly present in the reference to Guinea in the story that Tante Atie tells Sophie:

She told me about a group of people in Guinea who carry the sky on their heads. They are the people of Creation. Strong, tall, and mighty people who can bear anything. Their maker, she said,



gives them the sky to carry because they are strong. These people do not know who they are, but if you see a lot of trouble in your life, it is because you were chosen to carry part of the sky on your head (Danticat, 1996: 25).

Like Haiti, Guinea also fought for independence from the French colonial rule in 1958, following the Haitian example. However, by telling this African creation story, TanteAtie is, undoubtedly, trying to explain to Sophie that Guinea is a land of origins for so many descendants of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and that Black people were there, when the breath of life was being breathed into humankind. For this reason, Black people got stronger and have the responsibility to carry the burden of life, "Their Maker, she said, gives them the sky to carry because they are strong" (Danticat, 1996: 25).

The notion that Black people are imbued with vitality, an unimaginable, incredible power of resistance and strength is present in many writings and is also conveyed by Michael Jackson in one of his songs: "Slavery was a terrible thing, but when Black people in America finally got out from under that crushing system, they were stronger... I admire that kind of strength. People who have it, take a stand and put their blood and soul into what they believe" (Gilroy, 1993: 187).

As referred earlier, it is important to notice and remember that, in both novels, all characters are imbued with a strong sense of spirituality, their main source of inner strength, mainly in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. It permeates the novel from beginning to end.

Trying to surpass the anguish and disillusionment that the broken relationship had caused her, "Sassafrass had tried everything to be a decent Ibejii, a Santera. She desperately wanted to make Ochá. To wear white with her élèkes. To keep the company of the priests and priestesses." (Shange, 1982: 195) Also Sophie needs the help of a Santeria priestess to heal the pain caused by her mother's testing: "My therapist was a gorgeous black woman who was an initiated Santeria priestess" (Danticat, 1996: 206). Sassafrass and Sophie practise Santeria, an Afro-Caribbean religion which was brought to the New World by slaves, an explicit way of showing their close connection to the traditions of the African world of their ancestors. Like so many members of their communities, they practice this religion of the African diaspora

widespread throughout the Caribbean, the United States and many regions of South America.

In *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* the three sisters' spirituality is depicted in various forms. They try to maintain a healthy relationship to the spirits, so as to feel emotionally and physically balanced: "When her father died, Indigo had decided it was the spirit of things that mattered. The humans, come and go. Aunt Haydee said spirits couldn't be gone, or the planet would fall apart" (Shange, 1982: 5-6); "Don't touch the altar for the Orishas" (Shange, 1982: 92), recommends Cypress to any visitor to her home. After all, the connection with any sort of religion was a form of escape for slaves, a way of seeking solace for their daily suffering and loneliness; another one was music, but I will talk about the liberating role of music later.

As it has already been mentioned, Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo throw food and wine into the sea, so that their daddy would have a good life in the other world. Also, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, "Tante Atie walked between the wooden crosses, collecting the bamboo skeletons of fallen kites. She stepped around the plots where empty jars, conch shells, and marbles served as grave markers" (Danticat, 1996: 149). The custom of burying the dead with objects from everyday life was, and it still is, a tradition, a custom that is maintained in many Afro-Caribbean cultures, and was preserved by African-American slave culture. Therefore I infer that giving food to the dead is part of the same tradition, and both writers feel the urge to focus on the breaking of the binary between life and death as a way to contest a Western dominant tradition.

All in all, Shange and Danticat are reconceiving, rewriting, recovering history. They are committed to writing new texts on the past, on issues which the whites wanted to destroy or make invisible. They envisage new paths for Black people, since they have never accepted the fact that Blacks and whites are not considered one race just as José Martí advocated, in his Manifesto "Our America", in 1891 "There can be no racial animosity because there are no races [...] The soul, equal and eternal, emanates from bodies of different shapes and colors. Whoever foments and spreads antagonism and hate between the races, sins against humanity" (Martí, 1891: 6).

By rewriting the history of the Americas from the perspective of the colonized, Shange and Danticat exhort readers to cast a new look on this history because they are

aware that: "Colonization is not satisfied with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it"(Hall, 1990: 393).

### **Male Violence**

Fully aware of the imbalance of power between male and female, Shange and Danticat dedicate their narratives to women: "*Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* is dedicated to all women in struggle" (Shange, 1982: vii) and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* "to the brave women of Haiti, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, daughters, and friends, on this shore and other shores. We have stumbled but we will not fall" (Danticat, 1996: v). So, from the outset, we must remember that these narratives are feminist texts that revolve around families of women, whose fathers are absent, one having died and the other being unknown and a rejected figure of aggression.

In both novels it is easy to perceive a critical posture in relation to male chauvinism, sexism, sexual oppression and male violence, although some male characters, like Joseph (Sophie's husband), or Marc (Martine's partner), in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and Leroy (Cypress's partner), in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, do not fit into this group of male characters who perpetuate negative sexist prejudices or violence. Despite the differences among these three men, they serve as counterpoints to Mitch or the "Tonton Macouts."

In slave narratives, the sexual abuse of slave women was a recurrent topic. Although *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is not a slave narrative, Danticat also chooses this theme in order to share personal and collective traumas of many Haitian women who had to undergo the most horrible acts of humiliation, like Sophie's mother, proving that the practice did not cease with abolition. Since rape and sexual abuse were also part of the colonial condition, many women were hurt physically and psychologically. And here is a paradox: in a world dominated by men who attributed an extreme importance to virginity, female purity, and dignity, chauvinist men did not respect vulnerable Black women, deprived them of their most precious virtue, considered them objects to be used and abused, whenever they felt like.

It is important, however, to bear in mind that Danticat is historicizing traumas that left indelible marks on thousands of Haitian women, due to the brutal and corrupt

Duvalier's regime, who reigned in Haiti from 1957 to 1986. As a matter of fact, there is a parallel between slavery's repression and this regime's repression. Under both regimes people were deprived of any rights and dehumanized. Executions and massacres occurred and people vanished without leaving track. The brutal Duvalier government reinforced its power through military manipulation and a private police force, the "Tonton Macouts." As Robin M. Respaut asserts, "Crucial to their kleptocracy was a rural militia called the 'Tonton Macouts', who killed, beat, and raped throughout the nation, in order to ensure people's obedience through fear and terror" (2007: 42).

In order to assert its domination, the state followed a repressive policy against women and to carry out its ambitions implemented "state feminism," a corruption of the very concept of feminism. Thus, the state chose a woman as commander-in-chief of the "Tonton Macouts", who helped to perpetuate repression, terror and violence, but, this time, female against female. As a consequence of Duvalier's repression, 500,000 Haitians migrated to the United States, and more than a half were women, who fled persecution, or wished to heal their traumas, like Martine.

Now we are in a better position to understand the violence narrated in the following passage, a consequence of Haiti's political scheme of women suppression and terror:

But the Macouts, they did not hide. When they entered a house, they asked to be fed, demanded the woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom. Then all you heard was screams until it was her daughter's turn. If a mother refused, they would make her sleep with her son and brother or even her own father (Danticat, 1996: 139).

It is no wonder, then, that *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, set in the 1970s, depicts the lives of Haitian women struggling in a postcolonial society, which inflicts on them unimaginable suffering, and their traumas, sequels, and painful memories. Martine's rape is, then, a synecdoche for the innumerable haunted women, political victims of Duvalier's regime. Yet, in spite of the fact that "the black, colonized female, therefore, is subject to 'double oppression or exclusion' by the combination of her race and her gender" (Respaut, 2007: 40), mothers also victimize their own daughters, i.e., Martine is a victim of the colonial system, which "violates" the colonized woman, but she, in turn, "violates" her own daughter, Sophie. Having been tested by her mother, Martine

is not strong enough to reject the Haitian tradition of testing for virginal purity, as she explains to Sophie:

'I did it,' she said, 'because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater excuse. I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day (Danticat, 1996: 170).

Unable to perpetuate the same damage to her daughter, Brigitte, Sophie breaks this cycle of violation and violence, as it has already been explained before.

When Martine tells Sophie about the rape, she finally understands how devastating this abuse has been for her "But it happened like this. A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body. I was still a young girl then, just barely older than you" (Danticat, 1996: 61). Then, Sophie asserts "It took me twelve years to piece together my mother's entire story. By then, it was already too late" (Danticat, 1996: 61). This explains the unbearable pain that so many women had to bear, some committing suicide, like Martine.

In Shange's novel, had not Indigo moved faster out of Mr. Lucas' Pharmacy, she could have been a victim of this sexual predator. Mitch, Sassafrass' drug-addicted partner, accepts her weavings, which glorify male "heroes," like Marcus Garvey and Malcom X, but does not want an erotic hanging representing Josephine Baker, as "it wasn't proper for a new Afrikan woman to make things of such sexual nature" (Shange, 1982: 69). He demeans Sassafrass publicly, in front of his friends, boasting that he owns her sexuality, i.e., she is objectified:

I brought y'all a copy of my new book, *Ebony Cunt ...* I autographed it special, Mitch; see here..." for Sassafrass ... / I know yours is good. Sassafrass' face nearly hit the floor. She glanced at Mitch to see where he was at, and he was enjoying his clout with the fellas, because he announced: 'Sassafrass got some of the best pussy west of the Rockies, man, and I don't care who knows it, 'cause it's mine!'

They all laughed raucously, except Sassafrass was glaring from her inmost marrow and wishing there was some way to get rid of male crassness once and for all time. She called herself being kind to Mitch, because he liked his friends, while she began discreetly leaving the room (Shange, 1982: 76-77).

Mitch's lack of respect leads her to stay in a relationship that mocks and degrades her womanhood, yet, "she needed Mitch because Mitch was all she loved in herself"

(Shange, 1982: 88), which may mean that he was fundamental to her, he was part of her identity. At that time, she found it difficult to define herself independently of him, but, eventually, after a process of growth and spiritual help, she manages to get emotional stability without him.

Mitch's verbal abuse quickly turns into physical violence:

He was grinning and quiet, and with all the force he had and all his exquisite grace, he struck her across the face with the tube. Then he laughed out loud, and moved the tube to his mouth; made deep wispy sounds like beer-bottle tooters, then he hit her again, still laughing.

Sassafrass was stunned. She did not move, she didn't speak. Mitch tossed the tube in the air and it curled up like the toy snakes kids have at circuses; Sassafrass ran to pick it up, and Mitch shoved her to the side. Once he had the tube in his hands again, he twirled it – and he struck again, again and again (Shange, 1982: 87).

His violent aggression brings a bad memory back to her mind, when her daddy beat her mama “Daddy, let go a mama! Daddy let go!’ That’s all she shouted, as she watched her mama being pulled down the stairs toward the front door, her hair in the grip of his fists” (Shange, 1982: 88).

By focusing on male violence, Shange, in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, aims at empowering women and encouraging them to love themselves and challenge their oppressors. She intends to empower women in order that they may take their destiny in their hands and responsibility for their own lives, she aims at a cultural awakening, since women have been marginalized and victimized by oppression and violence.

Engaged in fighting against racism, injustice, and discrimination both writers want to “awaken” oppressed people, but mainly Black women, to raise their voices whenever necessary.

### **The Liberating Role of Artistic Expression**

Shange and Danticat are influenced by the Black Arts movement and the Black Power concept in the sense that they feel it is their “primary duty to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people” (Neal, 1968: 29). They re-evaluate Western aesthetics and have in mind that “the motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of

looking at the world” (Neal, 1968: 30), as it is evident in this passage: “Sassafrass believed it was absolutely necessary to take Black arts out of the white man’s hands; to take Black people out of the white man’s hands” (Shange, 1982: 68). As Sherley Anne Williams sees it, it was this movement “that provided the pride and perspective necessary to pierce the myths and lies [...] and filled us also with the authority to tell it as we felt it.”(1993: 248). Nevertheless, I claim that Shange and Danticat do not totally share Larry Neal’s radical ideas, although they feel the urge to deconstruct the white dominant thinking that does not see the other side, that of the colonized. And it is quite obvious that both writers put the canon into question.

In both *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the arts weaving, cooking, poetry, dancing, but particularly music, play an important liberating role. Music is inextricably intertwined with slavery, as religion also is, like the threads are interwoven in a tapestry. Both represented liberation and escape from the daily oppression and brutalization to which slaves were subjected to. As Paul Gilroy states “art, particularly in the form of music and dance, was offered to slaves as a substitute for the formal political freedoms they were denied under the plantation regime” (1993: 56).

Joseph, Danticat’s character, “liked to play slave songs, Negro spirituals, both on his saxophone and his piano, slowing them down or speeding them up at different tempos” (Danticat, 1996: 73). The same is true of Mitch, Shange’s character, “NOTHING BUT THENOR SAX SOLOS EVER CAME OUT of that house (Shange, 1982: 67). These characters are, thus, an embodiment of past slave cultures, in spite of being very different from each other and in the relations they have with their counterparts. While Mitch is a self-centered sexist, chauvinist Black male artist who demeans and denigrates his partner, Sassafrass, Joseph, Sophie’s husband, is a patient passionate lover, who aspires to a stable, balanced relationship. In several occasions, he demonstrates his affection, “‘If our skins touch,’ he said, ‘I won’t be able to resist you,’” and “Joseph rocked me in his arms while we listened to the cooing sounds Brigitte made in her sleep” (Danticat, 1996: 197). But, above all, he patiently waits that Sophie may overcome the past traumas without recriminating her.

Despite Mitch’s flaws, Sassafrass loves him, she is totally devoted and committed to this relationship, since “she felt the doors open and there he was – the cosmic lover

and wonder of wonders to her: Mitch” (Shange, 1982: 69). But “Mitch thought of himself as a god” (Shange, 1982: 69); “Mitch had convinced Sassafrass that everything was an art, so nothing in life could be approached lightly” (Shange, 1982: 73), therefore she makes an appliquéd banner saying “CREATION IS EVERYTHING YOU DO MAKE SOMETHING” (Shange, 1982: 73). In this way, Shange criticizes sexist Black male artists. Her Black and feminist consciousness is embodied in Sassafrass, who struggles for equality, personal freedom and tries to define herself as an artist, a writer, and a weaver.

Harryette Mullen, referring to Alison Mills and Ntozake Shange, states that “In the work of these women writers, a romance with a man who embodies this archetypal inspiration also represents a love of blackness and passionate involvement with black art” (Mullen, 2004: 214). The same is true of Danticat, I presume, although I do not consider that in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* there is a critique of the male-centered Black Arts movement, since Joseph is different from Mitch. Despite being both artists and Black, Joseph’s mindset is far from Mitch’s chauvinist character.

Indigo is Shange’s character who connects past and present, who best shows the role of liberating music for the slaves, as Chrishandra A. Taylor affirms, “She converses through music with slaves whose language was stolen” (2009: 3). The fiddle is her voice, her mind, her spirit, as Shange writes:

Indigo sat in her window, working with her fiddle, telling everybody, the wind & all his brothers, what was on her mind, the turmoil in the spirit realm, the luxuriant realities she meandered in her sleep. Whenever she wanted to pray, she let her fiddle talk. Whenever she was angry here came the fiddle (1982: 28).

The fiddle equals music and is a symbol of freedom, of African identity, of the Black people’s culture that the whites could not steal from slaves:

Them whites what owned slaves took everythin’ was ourselves & didn’t even keep it fo’ they own selves. Just threw it on away, yaheah. Took them drums what they could, but they couldn’t take our feet. Took them languages what we speak. Took off wit our spirits & left us wit they Son. But the fiddle was the talkin’ one. The fiddle becillin’ our gods what left us (Shange, 1982: 22).

It is crucial to remember that slaves were forbidden to play drums because slave owners were afraid of slave rebellions. If slaves could play the drums they would send signals to slaves in other plantations, and could instigate rebellion against slave



owners. Shange's *Cypress* flies to New York in order to experiment art/dancing. Through dancing, this character expresses herself, asserts her identity and connects with the spiritual world – the Orishas.

Both narratives exhort readers not to be dormant minds and induce their critical thinking. To conclude, as it has been shown, there are obvious parallels between Shange's and Danticat's novels, although there are other striking resemblances, which do not come within the scope of this work. As far as the artistic expression is concerned, what is at the core of these Black women narratives is the affirmation that "black is beautiful," and that the different means of artistic expression are the best outlet for liberation.

### **Conclusion**

Shange and Danticat, two voices of the African diaspora in the Americas, are attentive true observers of the history and culture of their native countries, of migration and displacements caused by European colonialism. Writing from the bottom of their hearts, they offer vibrant, vivid descriptions of the experiences full of pain, despair, sorrow and helplessness that affected the lives of previous generations, having left indelible marks.

Both *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* bring to the forefront silenced, hidden historical facts, stories, experiences, and emotions mingled with fiction. The authors raise their voices to repudiate false representations as they have been constructed by the Western civilization, and shed a new light into the shadows of those who were neglected. Both share the notion that it is necessary to focus on Black people, particularly women and minorities, get a perspective of those who live in the interstices, in the third space or in the "in-between," to make sense of their identity against an ethnocentric discourse, centered in the European point of view.

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