



Article

Caring for *Everything Inside*: Migrant Trauma and Danticat's Narrative *Bigidi*

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Abstract: In this essay, I argue that Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, in short stories from her most recent collection, *Everything Inside* (2019), challenges toxic forms of representation by attending to the imaginative potential of Haitian migrant experience within moments of collective trauma. This challenge, I suggest, is based on *bigidi*, a Creole expression denoting permanent imbalance that is once philosophy, dance practice, musical aesthetic, and cultural tradition. The principle of being off-balance without falling, central to how *bigidi* finds expression in Guadeloupean *swaré-lé-woz* and other forms of Caribbean dance, interweaves rhythm, music, and bodily movement with a community-oriented site of cultural expression. By saturating the narrative and readerly spaces of *Everything Inside* with uniquely Caribbean elements of improvisation, audience interaction, and performance, Danticat foregrounds moments of shared intimacy and vulnerability between Haitians, disrupting the representational trauma circuit of migrant death.

Keywords: Caribbean literature; trauma; Danticat; Haiti; diaspora; dance; *bigidi*

1. Introduction

In July 2022, at least seventeen Haitian migrants perished when their boat capsized just off the coast of the Bahamas. “The boat’s occupants”, according to Bahamian authorities, “were thought to be ‘irregular Haitian migrants,’ part of a ‘suspected human-smuggling operation’” (Pietsch 2022). This tragedy was by no means the first of its kind: in February 2019, over twenty-eight Haitian migrants perished in a similar fashion at roughly the same place relative to the Bahamas. Moreover, the July 2022 drowning occurred barely a year after a video surfaced of border officers in Texas appearing to whip Haitian immigrants in an attempt to drive them over the U.S.–Mexico border (Rose 2022). Though the nine-month investigation into the incident uncovered no evidence of whipping, Rose (2022) notes that at least one agent was determined to have used “language denigrating a migrant’s national origin and also getting too close to a migrant child with his horse”. The latter case revealed a familiar pattern: systemic abuse and trauma followed by promises to investigate, a weak acknowledgment of culpability coming months after the incident, and no substantive, structural change to prevent such disasters from happening again.

All three instances of migrant violence were the indirect outcome of the U.S. government’s attempt to curtail all forms of immigration from Black and Brown countries. Haitian lives are reduced to abstract, dehumanizing descriptors (“irregular”), their abuse hidden by equally abstract descriptions of actions, such as a border agent merely moving too close to a child on horseback. Detailed and vivid accounts of the pain of these instances of systemic violence toward Haitian migrants are absent. Though journalists publish these images, stories, and videos in a laudable attempt to draw public attention to migrant suffering, they also inadvertently present migrant experience in a way that foregrounds their suffering and overlooks any other dimension of their lives. These words and images, in which migrants are usually dead (either corpses or absent, implied corpses) or anonymously suffering, reduce migrant experience to the brutal conditions that oppress or kill them while also intensifying the trauma of those who survive.



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In this essay, I argue that Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, in short stories from her most recent collection, *Everything Inside* (2019), challenges these toxic forms of representation by attending to the imaginative potential of Haitian migrant experience *within* moments of collective trauma. This challenge, I suggest, is based on *bigidi*, a Creole expression denoting permanent imbalance that is once philosophy, dance practice, musical aesthetic, and cultural tradition. The principle of being off-balance without falling, central to how *bigidi* finds expression in Guadeloupean *swaré-lé-woz* and other forms of Caribbean dance, interweaves rhythm, music, and bodily movement with a community-oriented site of cultural expression. By saturating the narrative and readerly spaces of *Everything Inside* with uniquely Caribbean elements of improvisation, audience interaction, and performance, Danticat foregrounds moments of shared intimacy and vulnerability between Haitians, disrupting the representational trauma circuit of migrant death. Ultimately, the shape and focus of *Everything Inside* illustrate how “fleeing and homing—read metaphorically as disavowal and embrace—translate into musical aesthetics, or, vice versa, how the sounds and silences of music reveal complex and open-ended processes of positioning articulated across the abyss of slavery, colonialism, and their aftermaths” (Camal 2019, p. 117).

As a concept, *bigidi* is “central to the syncopated steps of a Guadeloupean *léwoz*, a popular rhythm of the *gwo-ka* dance and percussion tradition” (Sahakian 2017, p. 100). *Bigidi* also forms part of an everyday proverb in Guadeloupe, *bigidi pa tonbé*, “when times are tough, let yourself be off balance, but do not fall” (Sahakian 2017, p. 100). The dancer, following the beat of the drummer, “repeatedly loses his or her balance but never touches the floor” (Sahakian 2017, p. 100). Choreographer and dancer Lénablou¹, in *Techni’ka*, characterizes *bigidi* as “resistance and resilience,” a feeling that involves a continuous process of self-loss and self-discovery (Blou 2005, p. 33). Founder of the *Centre de Danse et d’Études Chorégraphiques* (Center for Dance and Choreographic Studies) in Pointe-à-Pitre (Chaville 2017), Lénablou makes *bigidi* one of the central principles of what she has magisterially defined as the collaborative space of Caribbean dance, in which “the degree of improvisation, invention, and interplay involved in many Caribbean musical and performance genres amplifies dimensions of identification and relationality among musicians, dancers, singers, and spectators” (Huntington 2009, p. 41).

For Lénablou, “the collaborative performance” of Caribbean dance “coincides with collective and individual identifications-in-process” (Huntington 2009, p. 41). The *léwoz*, also known as the *swaré-lé-woz*, uses improvisation to generate an effect of “‘*étrangeté et fascination*’ (strangeness and fascination)” (qtd. in Huntington 2009, p. 41). This effect emerges from what Lénablou sees as “the five relational spaces of Caribbean performance”:

... the *vocal* space (in which singers, storytellers, and audience members interact), the *resonant* space (in which the tambouyé drummers communicate through gwoka rhythms and tones), the *corporeal* space (in which the bodies of individual dancers perform and interact in a collective space), the *relational* space (in which the circle of performers and participants connect on conscious, subconscious, physical, and spiritual levels), and the *convivial* space (in which food, drinks, music, movement, emotions, and intensity are shared until the early hours of dawn) (Blou 2005, pp. 21–22). (qtd. in Huntington 2009, p. 41, emphases added)

None of these spaces can be precisely separated from each other except for the purposes of discussion. Even in non-dance situations, vocality, resonance, corporeality, relationality, and conviviality are mixed in different measures, depending on the specific context. Lénablou’s framing of each space, though, instantiates all the physical, gestural, and emotional aspects of performance. Singing, for example, is coterminous with storytelling and audience interaction and signed culturally as a space in which other forms of intimacy, such as food and drink, can also be shared, though Lénablou deliberately makes “culture” a porous term, a decision Huntington sees as a way to challenge the “taxonomic tendencies that encourage us to categorize and simplify, particularly in dealing with cultural phenomena” (Huntington 2009, p. 42). Instead, the cultural ambiguity—or perhaps syncretism—of Caribbean dance makes visible “a space in which a perpetual flow of communication,

collaboration, and negotiation takes precedence over rigid characterizations and static descriptions" (Huntington 2009, p. 42).

Lénablou's conception of dance as a relational space illustrates the unique place of Caribbean dance as a response to colonial violence, particularly its focus on "emotional strength" (Sahakian 2017, p. 100) in the face of adversity. Improvisation forms the core of *bigidi* in Caribbean dance: the ability to lose balance without falling, to survive the experience of systemic violence, and to acknowledge that violence without being entirely defined by it. Improvisation, too, has a special significance in "Haitian ritual music," in which "songs improvised in certain situations pass into the repertoire and are diffused according to the prestige of the *houmfo*, the Vodou temple (Munro 2010, p. 37). The performance is the occasion for improvisation but does not circumscribe it entirely. Instead, performers engage the audience in a relationship that provides a form of self-recognition and self-knowing premised on community. In other words, the improvisation born of this moment of cultural connection has the potential to provide Caribbean people with insight into their own particular subjectivities.

These subjectivities, in the broader arc of Danticat's fiction, have always been shaped by the many moments of collective trauma in recent Haitian history. *The Farming of Bones* (1998), for example, offers a first-person account of the 1937 Parsley Massacre, in which thousands of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic were killed or violently deported to Haiti by the Trujillo regime. Similarly, *The Dew Breaker* (2005) uses the story cycle form to illustrate the complex range of experiences of Haitian-Americans during and after the murderous Duvalier era in Haiti. More recently, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013) builds a narrative of community resilience in the face of poverty and natural disaster around the sudden disappearance of a young girl in the fictional Haitian town of Ville Rose. By framing collective trauma as the continuous present rather than as a singular event safely in the past, Danticat's fiction allows her characters both to bear witness to their own traumas and to resist narratives that seek to reduce them to mute victims of violence.

This resistance, though, is not achieved in isolation but in a convivial space with other people, indicative, Gladys Francis reminds us, of the connection to historical and collective trauma:

Lénablou studies visible trauma in the "corporeal and rhythmic pattern" of the body in movement. In premising *bigidi* on a deconstructive aesthetic of the dancing body that is always "being broken", she seeks to "seize here and now the most authentic historical traces of colonial violence and enslavement: its memories, resurgences, legacies, and traumas" (Francis 2018). *Bigidi* symbolizes a counter-culture that challenges norms: a destructuring for enslaved African people and their descendants, rooted in their movements and bodily language, their own legitimate grammar. *Bigidi* is thus the site of alterity. It is the notion of a richness located in Caribbean bodily movement that Lénablou employs in this remarkable concept of the *Techni'ka*. (Francis 2018, translation mine)

This type of deconstruction, I suggest, is crucial to understanding the narrative structure of *Everything Inside*, not because Danticat is explicitly referencing *bigidi* in the stories, but because the contours of this collection point to a recognizably pan-Caribbean attentiveness to ambiguity, improvisation, and unexpected bodily and social configurations. In Danticat's stories, as in *bigidi*, collective trauma is neither erased nor presented as a totalizing force, generating a synthesis that "symbolizes the need to remake religion and moral codes in the aftermath of the rupture with the African homeland, the brutality of the slave system, and the prohibition of African religious practices" (Sahakian 2017, p. 100). If the "vital communication between dancer and drummer" in *bigidi* "involves mutual improvisation, syncopation, surprise, frenzy, and silence" (Sahakian 2017, p. 122), *Everything Inside* dramatizes the imbrication of these elements at the level of lived experience for Haitians and Haitian-Americans.

2. Improvisation and Syncopation

How does *bigidi* help us reimagine forms of care in the experience and aftermath of Haitian-American migrant trauma? I use the term “migrant trauma” to highlight difficult movement occasioned by material exigencies, such as displacement, poverty, lack of basic safety, and natural disaster, with the movement itself contested. The troubling example of migrant boats capsizing and killing most of the people on board, mentioned earlier, is one clear instance of trauma for those who survive. It is crucial to make this distinction when discussing migrant trauma since the availability of bodies to care for is, of course, precisely an issue in crossing borders of all kinds. The conditions of movement for impoverished migrants are frequently traumatic, lacking even the basic elements necessary for survival, much less care. Moreover, the extent to which displaced people can retain cultural practices of care and self-healing across distances hinges on the conditions of movement. The conception of care articulated in *Everything Inside* appears in two forms of Haitian experience: one of relative privilege, sometimes explicitly signed by the word diaspora, in which movement between Haiti and the U.S. is more or less unencumbered, and one of privation and hardship, where movement is restricted and which demands a type of improvised, spontaneous response to pain. Danticat’s stories, I suggest, compel readers to attend to and care for migrant trauma rather than the more privileged movement of diaspora.

This definition of care would seem to constitute the opposite of the medical notion of care, in which someone is cared for directly in a hospital or other medical facility, and which, with some irony, forms part of the narrative spine of “Dosas,” the first story in *Everything Inside*. In this story, Elsie loses her job as a live-in caregiver to a Haitian-American patient with renal failure in part because she is obliged to take personal phone calls from her ex-husband, Blaise, who tells her that his current girlfriend (and Elsie’s former friend) Olivia has been kidnapped and held for ransom. This kidnapping, moreover, turns out to be a fraud, which Elsie only discovers after sending her hard-won savings to Blaise. Scarcity arising from capitalist exploitation provides the frame for considering Elsie’s experience: a life characterized by a lack of access to resources, constant exigencies, and demands from the family in Haiti that disrupt the life she is trying to build in the U.S.

“Dosas” deftly differentiates between migrant and diasporic experience through Elsie’s patient Gaspard, whose daughter Mona, a former beauty queen living in New York, eventually fires Elsie after another phone call from Blaise keeps Elsie from noticing that Gaspard has fallen out of his bed. Financial and emotional concerns constrain Elsie at every turn, and the relational—the ambiguous relationship she has with Blaise, the precarious nature of her position as a live-in caregiver—is disempowering: it enmeshes her, keeps her trapped, silent, and short of money. Elsie is forced to live inside, denying spaces of conviviality and connection, making her “efficiency” dwelling as ironic as the connection to Haitian *marasa* (twinned) consciousness found in the story’s title: where a *dosa* (or the masculine *dosu*) is typically the catalyst for the *marasa twa*, a spiritual “movement into the third element to completion” (Pressley-Sanon 2013, pp. 118–19), Elsie glumly reflects that the tripartite, *dosa*-like relationship she once shared with Blaise and Olivia made each of them “untwinned, lonely, alone together” (Danticat 2019, p. 21). Elsie’s reflection provides a useful caution against both cultural essentialism and idealism. She herself has limited opportunities to speak in “Dosas,” Danticat contrasting what she feels comfortable saying with third-person limited focalization on her thoughts. This contrast, too, is part of the migrant experience, revealing the power differential in so many of Elsie’s daily interactions: with her employer, with her conniving ex-husband, and so on. The vocal space, so key to a collaborative experience of Caribbean rhythm, is suppressed.

In suppressing the vocal space, “Dosas” asks readers to consider how Haitian-American migrants might reactivate their voice and gain a provisional form of agency—to lose balance without falling, as it were. Migrant trauma, in “Dosas”, is analeptic in structure, narrating conditions of pain in a moment after the actual event, a sense of belatedness in recognition or redress, echoing the “too late” of the postcolonial experience in modernity.

I want to be careful to differentiate silence and belated recognition from the absolute silence of first-wave models of traumatic experience, most notably pioneered by Cathy Caruth.² Though the notion of unspeakability still has value in examining literary representations of trauma, migrant trauma follows a different path. Per Joshua Pederson, it is entirely possible to speak of the traumatic migrant experience in positivist terms: to examine what and how the subject feels, what they are capable of recalling about traumatic events that are, in many cases, still ongoing, and of shifting our “focus from gaps in the text to the text itself” (Pederson 2014, p. 338). The conditions of migrant trauma, then, allow access to traumatic events anterior to the moment of recollection rather than a totalizing silence.

Let us examine the correspondence between analeptic traumatic structures and rhythmic and textual delays in the spaces of Caribbean dance. Delay is crucial to rhythm in general and to *bigidi* in particular, a syncopated rhythm with an accent on a different beat, a certain type of resonant delay. Delays affect the corporeal and constitute the corporeal, generating a tension that creates and showcases the relationality of a fulfilled or deep engagement between the audience and performers. Musically, delay anticipates its resolution in the way one withholds, for example, playing a note at a certain place in the bar or the way a singer drags the end of a vocal phrase into the next bar, stretching out the line on the spur of the moment, in response to a particular feeling or mood generated by audience engagement. Musical and rhythmic delays can be mournful or melancholy, reflecting an unwillingness of the speaker to let go of a particular emotion; they can simultaneously be joyous expressions of resilience in the face of adversity, refusing silence or defeat, a way to revitalize “a spiritual link to the African past” while also militating “for socio-political rights and a freedom of expression” (Berrian 2000, p. 231).

Drawing on the work of Edouard Glissant, Jerome Camal identifies a “counterpoetics” in the development and aesthetics of *gwoka modènn* (a complex and atonal subgenre of *gwoka* music), “symptoms of a persistent desire for emancipated language that is faced with a *manque*—lack or absence—that renders impossible the emergence of a collective expression” (Camal 2019, p. 64). We might productively use Camal’s synthesis to consider the role of delay in shaping migrant experience, gesturing to what Glissant sees as the condition of enslaved people brought to another country, “a population that is transformed elsewhere *into another people*” and which is thus caught up in the “constantly shifting and variable processes of creolization” (Glissant 1999, p. 15). I do not, of course, wish to draw a flat equivalence between historical enslavement and contemporary migration. However, the violence of movement in both cases, including the extreme physical toll that Haitian-American migrants face in coming to the U.S., constitutes an eradication of certainty, experience, and mooring. Crucially, for migrants, as for the enslaved, “the methods of existence and survival, both material and spiritual” practice prior to movement have gone missing or are no longer recognizable (Glissant 1999, p. 15). Culture is never wholly portable. The migrant is left, though, with potential alongside the trauma of displacement, a poignance and ambivalence that Glissant sees as inextricable from Caribbean identity, “not only distress but also the opportunity to assert a considerable set of possibilities” (Glissant 1999, p. 16).

Correspondingly, we see a similar mixture of pain and potential in the structural and aesthetic contours of two Caribbean proverbs: *bigidi pa tombé*, which I have already discussed, and “*Débouya pa péché* (Making do with cunning is not a sin)” (Sahakian 2017, p. 100). As Sahakian goes on to note, each proverb contains an acknowledgment of systemic forms of oppression, which oblige particular modes of resistance and response:

Both [proverbs] evoke religious codes in order to bend and adapt them. The first revisits the Christian concept of sin, while the second modifies the quest for balance at the core of African religions. *Débouya* (*making do with cunning*) implies tricking the powerful, exploiting gaps in the dominant system, and doing whatever is necessary to get ahead. (Sahakian 2017, p. 100)

Taking these proverbs together with Glissant’s “spontaneous impulses” (Glissant 1999, p. 15), the inchoate perceptual and emotional responses of Caribbean migrants to their

displacement, we obtain a compelling frame for understanding the dénouement of “Dosas,” which warns against treating *bigidi* or any other element of Caribbean culture as monolithic and universal. Elsie does not have unproblematic access to cultural healing. In fact, her dilemma in the story is shaped partially by her ex-husband Blaise, a singer by trade, whose work she finds superficial and insincere. Here, we encounter an instance of Caribbean performance that does *not* correspond to *bigidi*, that does not invite communal relation through an embodied performance of hardship.

We are left, also, to consider both the structure of the story and its placement in the collection: the first story read, narrated frequently in analepsis, as Elsie struggles first to make sense of the circumstances surrounding Blaise cheating on her with Olivia, and later to reconstruct how Blaise was able to grift her for most of her savings by pretending that Olivia had been kidnapped. These reflections lead Elsie to a bar, where she gets drunk. Later, the bartender Dédé escorts her back to her home, a tiny “one-room efficiency in North Miami” (Danticat 2019, p. 33) with various messages left on the door: “NOTHING INSIDE IS WORTH DYING FOR”, a second message in which the word “nothing” has been scratched out and replaced by “everything”, and “a black-and-white sticker that read YOU LOOT, WE SHOOT” (Danticat 2019, p. 33). From these signs, we obtain a clear view of the structural hardship, privation, and systemic trauma that confront Elsie on a daily basis, as well as the limited moments in which self-recognition and care are possible. Though “Dosas” intimates that Elsie might have sexual intercourse with Dédé, the narrative continually balances the public acknowledgment of hardship that they share with Elsie’s private reflections on her own experience, which do not find voice except in third-person limited narration. Elsie is literally off-balance here, having consumed too much alcohol, but the terms of her putative sexual encounter with Dédé remain in the reader’s imagination, even as Elsie laughs and playfully apologizes because she’s “not usually this weak” (Danticat 2019, p. 38). Withholding the sexual encounter from readers generates a sense of ambiguity and spontaneity, with the story beat syncopated beyond the frame of the story itself. We land on a different beat, with a specific textual and rhythmic emphasis on a form of care available to Elsie at the moment.

The range of disparate positions in *Everything Inside* allows readers to see how class and mobility affect access to care, healing, and forms of cultural connections. “Hot-Air Balloons” contrasts the mobility of Neah, the daughter of an academic family whose experience at Leve, a rape recovery clinic, makes her disillusioned by the tourist facade of Haiti, with the narrator Lucy, the daughter of poor migrant workers, who despises “being reminded that [she is] lucky to not be among those women that groups like Leve were helping” (Danticat 2019, p. 122). In “The Port-au-Prince Marriage Special,” we see the tension between Mélisande, the young woman who contracts AIDS from a tourist at the Port-au-Prince hotel where she and her mother work, and the first-person narrator, who runs the hotel with her husband, Xavier. The title is a reference to the cheap jewelry typically given by tourists to the women they use for sex as a supposed promise of marriage, which carries the promise of escape from a life of poverty. While the narrator offers the facsimile of care and concern, she also reveals that she and Xavier have let Mélisande work in the hotel instead of furthering her education, in part because it is more convenient for them. Mélisande’s sickness, in other words, is a direct outcome of her working for the narrator and Xavier at the hotel. A terse confrontation between the narrator and Mélisande’s mother, Babette, leads to a stinging condemnation of “diaspora,” scornfully and deliberately misspelled as “dyaspora” or mockingly exaggerated as “die-ass-poor-ahs” (Danticat 2019, p. 74), a condemnation that arises from the narrator’s own guilty conscience, rendered as internal monolog but not spoken aloud. Later, the narrator tries to break the news to Mélisande, only to be rebuffed: Mélisande, already aware that the ring the tourist gave her is a fake, refuses to discuss the issue further (Danticat 2019, p. 80). Care, within a limited range of options, takes the form of defiance, as Mélisande resists the narrator’s patronizing and self-serving view of the situation. Mélisande’s death, too, is not presented in the narrative

or foregrounded in the story's dénouement but instead deferred to a future that the story is not interested in visualizing.

3. Surprise

The tension lies in delay, at the end of which we locate a form of care in the unexpected or improvised, leading us to another dimension of *bigidi*: surprise. Consider the extent to which the stories of *Everything Inside* present unexpected or improvised moments that disrupt the characters' own sense of expectations in a given moment. "The Gift," for example, narrates the uneasy distance between Anika, a woman grappling with a recent miscarriage, and Thomas, her ex-lover, who has lost his wife, daughter, and part of his leg in the 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti. The two have met, on the fourth of July, at a Miami restaurant that they used to frequent before the earthquake; Anika has painted a sketch of Thomas's dead wife and daughter, figured as birds, intending to give it to him as a gift. Thomas, though, is unexpectedly triggered by the sounds of celebration, which remind him of his traumatic experience of being buried during the earthquake. Later, at Anika's apartment, he wryly returns her bird sketch, calling it "crazy shit" and saying that he might, at some point in the next few years, ask her instead to paint a realistic picture of his dead family as if they are older, a request for "image enhancement, age progression" (Danticat 2019, p. 105). After she agrees and he leaves, Anika is left with the gift she intended to give to him, as well as the unvoiced pain of her miscarriage, which she was not able to disclose to him earlier. This is an improvised moment in which Anika repurposes her own painting, mentally adding her lost unborn child to Thomas's dead wife and daughter to help her grieve:

She wanted them to look after her child, too. Her child would also never age. Her child would never even be visible to the eye. She wanted all three of them, Qadine, Dina, and her too-early-to-be-named baby, to take in the same reflection of the downtown skyline she was seeing. She wanted them, her angels of history, to collectively admire this liquid city on the bay. (Danticat 2019, pp. 107–8)

Anika's gift fragments into multiple gifts: the realistic portrait she may be asked to paint for Thomas, which also holds out the possibility that "they will still be in each other's lives in two or three years" (Danticat 2019, p. 106), and her own bird sketch, which becomes a gift for her, not for him as she had originally intended. A form of care is thus centered on *Bigidi pa tonbé*. Anika is off-balance throughout the story, continually surprised by the events at the restaurant and later at her apartment; Thomas has to be physically assisted to her apartment, in part because of his triggering at the celebration sounds of the restaurant make it even more difficult for him to walk on his prosthetic leg; and readers are thrown off-balance by the story's conclusion, which lacks any easy and unearned symmetry.

"The Gift" narrates the connection to and distance from Haitian mourning rituals, a connection that signals the cost of movement. Earlier in the story, Anika remembers being invited to a dinner in Miami immediately after the Haitian-American community receives news of the earthquake in Haiti. At the dinner, a singer attempts to unite the shocked crowd in a healing ritual but finds himself "lost nonetheless, flabbergasted, his hands clasped together, his face crumpled" (Danticat 2019, p. 90). The sight of the singer struggling to transcend his grief prompts Anika to long for a ritual that could "instantly heal us" (Danticat 2019, p. 91). In the absence of such a ritual, the assembled group is united only by the lack of information they receive on the earthquake, "no updates, just a stream of expressions of concern and worry" (Danticat 2019, p. 91). Being off-balance without falling is dramatized by the earthquake, an event that, besides destroying lives, literally destabilizes the ground beneath one's feet, but it also finds figurative expression in the uncertainty of the situation. Anika has no more idea of how to approximate the healing of a community than anyone else, yet she gropes for some kind of enmeshment in a community relation. The dinner crowd attempts to unite in ritual, but the resonant space of rhythm and tone, within the framework of *bigidi*, is missing.

The very conditions of Anika's Miami date with Thomas are ambiguous and surprising: both have disclosures, yet both occupy different circumstances that nonetheless share points of connection. Anika's bird sketch does not have the symbolic closure or ritualized healing she hopes it will; the gift is, in fact, rejected by Thomas. What emerges is an unexpected situation that emerges from the complexity of traumatic experience. Nothing in either Anika's or Thomas's situation can be reduced to the kind of instant healing she remembers longing for in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. The wider conditions of immigrant life militate against such closure, in their turn. Anika, in Miami, when the earthquake hits, has no direct, proximate access to the event, nor can she help in any quantifiable sense. The physical distance between Miami and Port-au-Prince keeps her detached from the pain of the earthquake. The story is careful to distinguish between subject positions without flattening out traumatic experiences. Both Anika and Thomas are affluent enough to afford to travel between the two countries, compared to the thousands of ordinary Haitians who died or suffered intense trauma from being buried alive for days. Anika carries the pain of her own, in the form of a miscarriage, but does not attempt to draw an equivalence between her experience, on the one hand, and Thomas's disability and loss of family, on the other. We are not invited to hierarchize pain in the sort of competitive memory model that Michael Rothberg critiques.³ Neither, though, are we allowed to forget that Anika and Thomas are not the same. Haitian ritual surfaces, but the resonant space is once again absent and not idealized.

4. Silence?

Thus far, I have argued that caring for the experiences in *Everything Inside* means understanding how pan-Caribbean aesthetics underpin, shape, and mediate the collection's representation of migrant trauma. To be "care-full" is to enlarge our definition of paying attention to textual specificity: to be careful of generalizing, of assuming white Anglo-American aesthetic standards when reading fiction that partakes of multiple worlds simultaneously. Care is also conviviality (for example, food and drink shared in community spaces), relationality, resonance, vocality, and corporeality. But care also means attending to the *absence* of conviviality and the other spaces of *bigidi*, on the one hand, without neglecting how subjects resist situations that seek to deprive them of fulfillment, safety, health, family, and life, on the other. In this endeavor, the work of care in *Everything Inside* parallels "enslaved Africans' resistance in their successful efforts to create institutions 'on the edges' of the plantation that 'would prove responsive to the needs of everyday life under the limiting conditions that slavery imposed on them'" (Camal 2019, p. 119).

In the final part of this essay, I turn to "Without Inspection," the concluding story in *Everything Inside*, not because its place in the collection dictates its place in my argument but because the story's form and aesthetic offer what I argue is the collection's most radical form of care, one that refuses to dwell in the image of the anonymous migrant worker, dead or the mute subject of violence. In this way, "Without Inspection" builds on the collection's invitation to care for Haitian-American migrant trauma by attending to the imaginative dimensions of lived experience but without losing sight of the larger frame of structural violence.

The time of migrant trauma is a discorporation, Danticat tells us in the opening pages of the story, an encounter between forms of time that the story will not let us separate. Arnold, a Haitian-American construction worker, has just fallen from the scaffold of a high building due to a "loosened or broken safety harness" (Danticat 2019, p. 202). This fall, we soon learn, is a killing fall, one that takes place in precisely six and a half seconds as Arnold reckons it, a lethal, high-speed journey of six hundred feet that forms the opening frame of the story. Yet the story expands to fill a space of phenomenal time that ends in the character's death. This death, too, is an aspect of migrant trauma. Just as the defective safety straps on Arnold's harness lead to his fall, so too is their function evidence of a grinding system of slow violence that entraps migrant Haitian-Americans in dangerous, low-paying jobs after a crossing into the U.S. that is itself filled with trauma. In opening

this story, an account of Arnold's life, with his plunge toward certain death, Danticat foregrounds the connection between the experience of Haitian-American trauma and the speaking time of the subject. This story can only be told in the space of a fall and in the dying moments immediately after it: in no other form of public or private discourse can its subject matter become intelligible.

Readers are faced with this paradox of migrant time at key moments of narrative intensity: the story's first line, which tells readers that it takes Arnold "six and a half seconds to fall five hundred feet" (Danticat 2019, p. 201); the first two paragraphs, which establish his deep attachment to his partner Darline and stepson Paris, "who were as much a part of him as his blood ever was" (Danticat 2019, p. 201); and the first three pages, which suture the present moment to the memory of when Arnold first arrived in the U.S. years ago by ship, "ditched in the middle of the sea and told by the captain to swim ashore" (Danticat 2019, p. 202). Arnold's experience of entering the U.S. is a commonplace one, as we see from the media accounts of migrants who either perish on the journey or survive it. In fact, he soon finds out that Darline's first husband perished in almost identical circumstances, trying to swim ashore at this same place (Danticat 2019, p. 207). Arnold's story thus gains its place within a relational fold of cultural experience: no longer just a single migrant worker plummeting to his death, he becomes part of the tapestry of migrant experience that exceeds the representational circuit of public discourse on immigration. His gruesome end in the cement mixer is exactly the type of lurid story that American journalists will cover as a singular tragedy; his fall remains a supremely liminal moment, at once intensely, unbearably public, and ineffably private.

The limited third-person narration moves with Arnold in the arc of his thoughts, which first rest on Paris's kindergarten graduation before moving to Darline, who rescued Arnold when he first washed up on the beach years ago after swimming to shore (Danticat 2019, p. 203). This expulsion marked Arnold's entry into America "without inspection," to use the chillingly impersonal language of detention and immigration he later learns from Darline. However, in the present tense of his fall, Arnold's focalization occupies a quintessentially relational place in the narrative: inextricably bound in chronological, narrative, and phenomenal time to past trauma, intimacy, and conviviality, all of which crystallize in both the phenomenon of his fall and his ability to speak from within it.

By conventional measures, Arnold has been deprived of every possibility of care and healing. Composed of his own internal thoughts that stretch out far beyond the "plausible" span of six and a half seconds of a fall, his story is silent, solitary, cut off from any meaningful cultural engagement with other voices. In fact, the only physical tether to any space beyond his immediate situation is the broken harness that is not only directly responsible for his imminent death but a grotesque commentary on the systemic trauma that it represents. His literal fall, caused by a moment of being off-balance in a faulty harness, will bring no healing, only death for him and grief for his loved ones. However, the sense of Lénablou's "*étrangeté et fascination*" (strangeness and fascination) pervades the text by way of the command it offers to its readers: to hold injustice and collective trauma in abeyance so that a different type of narrative may emerge. This narrative, I would suggest, offers a uniquely Haitian sense of belonging, on the one hand, even as it invites readers to meditate on the conditions of Haitian-American migrant trauma on the other.

Corporeality, in the two forms of time presented in "Without Inspection," becomes a link by which other senses of relational space can emerge. Just as Arnold was thirsty on the day he washed up on the shore and met Darline, so is he thirsty now, as he falls to this death (Danticat 2019, p. 205). However, the substance of "Without Inspection" resides in the poignant acts of self-reflection given to a dying man as he falls to his death in a cement mixer. We find ourselves, in the collection, at the final story, at an end, but also at the beginning of a form of narrative expression that locates an abiding presentness in non-realist representation. Arnold's narration encompasses and recognizes the collective trauma of migration and exploitation that has led to his death, but without being wholly defined

by it. His physical trajectory makes him the exploited subject of a shocking workplace death defined by journalists. The narrative trajectory of his focalization, though, resists that exploitation and refuses to let him diminish into a body caught inside a cement mixer. Such an image, if left to become an abiding representation, risks joining the collection of images of dead or suffering migrants, unvoiced and lifeless, that I spoke of at the beginning of this essay. Such images are frequently weaponized by right-wing and fascist U.S. politicians to stoke racist anti-immigrant fears. Furthermore, the same images add up to a form of continuous secondary trauma for Haitian-Americans, who are forced to see these dehumanizing images recirculated.

The surprise, then, is how Arnold's silence speaks. His story lacks any forum for public expression, except in how his body will be discovered in the cement mixer. His thoughts remain private, and he does not have a single conversation in the present time of the story's narration, since that time is the six seconds of his fall and the seconds immediately afterward when he is dying. After landing in the cement mixer, Arnold sees an airplane "cutting across the blue sky," and when it starts to disappear from his sight, he whispers: "*Rete la, wait, quédate* [stop there, wait, stay]" (Danticat 2019, p. 212). This whispered wish is equally a yearning for "Darline and Paris to stay in his mind," a wish interrupted by the foreman using his assumed name (Ernesto Fernandez) to tell him that "help is on the way" (Danticat 2019, p. 212). Though the interruption is composed entirely of falsity—a co-worker using Arnold's false name to assure him that help is coming, even though his injuries are fatal—we are commanded to stay with Arnold, as the airplane is not able to stay for him. Reading for how this silence speaks is an act of care, one given to readers by the terms of the story itself. The fact of Arnold's death is established at the opening: it is unpreventable, tragic, and brutal. So too, are the circumstances surrounding his grueling and traumatic arrival in America, a process which routinely kills migrants before they reach the shore. But the terms of "Without Inspection" revolve around Arnold's fleeting "half consciousness" (Danticat 2019, p. 212), an account of the depth of feeling, care, possibility, and imagination in his life, a refusal to succumb to the terms of his exploitation and death.

Despite initial appearances, I argue that "Without Inspection" constitutes a type of perception that synthesizes all the elements of *bigidi*. It is an improvised form of narration, born of necessity, not choice; it is off-beat and thus syncopated, arriving not by anonymous media accounts of migrant worker death but through a private form of "half consciousness"; it constitutes a new mode of narration directly tethered to Haitian-American migrant experience, generating readerly surprise by way of its formal implausibility; it provokes a heightened emotional response from its audience; and crucially, it both *illustrates and exceeds* the condition of silence. Through the disruption afforded by its narration, "Without Inspection" embeds convivial speech *within* the silence that suffuses, informs, and leads to Arnold's death, which does not end the story. Instead, after Arnold senses his time "growing shorter" (Danticat 2019, p. 212), he wills himself to become a guardian spirit who will watch over his partner and stepson:

There are loves that outlive lovers. Some version of these words had been his prayer as he fell. Darline would now have two of those. He would also have two: Darline and Paris. He would keep trying to look for them. He would continue to hum along with Darline's song, and keep whispering in Paris's ear. He would also try to guide Darline back to the beach, to look for others like him. (Danticat 2019, p. 219)

Here, Danticat refuses to let Arnold's childhood poverty and adult trauma define his relationship with readers, echoing Valérie Loichot's moving exegesis of artists responding to the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, which, she suggests, constitutes "an attempt to approach the immense scale of the disaster," their aesthetics acting as a "relay to ethics and politics where they fail" (Loichot 2020, p. 104). Migrant trauma, of course, is not a singular disaster on the scale of Hurricane Katrina, but a disaster stretched out over time, marked by a stream of similar events; but like Katrina, this Haitian-American migrant trauma is shaped

by structural and systemic forms of oppression, which *Everything Inside* has spent its entire length attending to while caring for its victims.

Arnold, though, is not defined by victimhood, as the text makes him speak from within the moments of his own death, establishing the spiritual dimension of his presence in future-oriented terms: what he will do to watch over his wife and stepson and how he will help Darline “to look for others like him.” Both the story and the whole collection reframe the Haitian-American migrant experience beyond the dehumanizing parameters of terms: “irregular,” “alien,” and the story title itself. In this way, *Everything Inside* makes care of the ethico-narrative foundation of its storytelling without losing sight of the broader context of migrant trauma.

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Notes

- ¹ The name itself, as Évelyne Chaville notes, is a concatenation of the choreographer’s first and last names, given to her because audiences “decided that her first name did not go without her surname, [and so] the stage name of the famous artist became naturally Lénablou” (Chaville 2017). Even so, Chaville observes the uncanny resonances between the dancer’s surname Blou and the word “blues” in English (Chaville 2017), which touches on the substance and form of blues music.
- ² See *Unclaimed Experience* (Caruth 1996).
- ³ See *Multidirectional Memory* (Rothberg 2009).

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