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Conflicting Cultural Identity and the Baz Benin in Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*

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ENG 4470: The New Post Colonial Novel, Fall 2015

Nominated by: Dr. Alpana Sharma

Kellianne Rinearson is originally from Seville, Ohio. She is a senior majoring in English with a minor in Political Science. She is active on the WSU Quizbowl team and the *Fogdog Review*.

Kellianne notes:

With this paper, I wanted to explore the connection between the gang in *Claire of the Sea Light* and the mythology terms they were described with within the novel. This led me to discover their conflicting identities.

Dr. Sharma notes:

In this essay, Kellianne argues that we must extend cultural critic Stuart Hall's concept of Caribbean cultural identity in light of the crisis presented by the Haitian gang culture in Danticat's novel. The Baz Benin do not come from a stable cultural history that would allow them a correspondingly stable cultural identity. Hence, they fall through the cracks, belonging neither to the local Haitian community presented in the novel nor to their American gang counterparts after whom they model themselves. What is most outstanding about Kellianne's argument is her linking of the Baz Benin and their drug addiction to Haitian mythological figures such as the zombie and to cultural practices such as Voodoo. All in all, I found the essay to be highly original, well written, and very adept in the use of secondary sources. Considering that Danticat's novel is very recent and still awaits extended study by literary scholars, Kellianne essentially had to create the critical conversation around this text from the ground up, which in itself is no mean achievement.

Conflicting Cultural Identity and the Baz Benin in Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*

Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* follows the lives of Haitian residents of Ville Rose and how their lives interconnect. Structured like waves crashing against the shore then retracting, each chapter of the book surrounds a different character at a different point in time that connects to the known information of the story. The book opens with Claire of the Sea Light's birthday and her subsequent running away from the beach where residents are searching for a lost sailor's body. In several series of flashbacks, the relations between characters are revealed as well as the events that led up to Claire running away. Claire's father Nozias recounts his dreams to become wealthier than his fishing profession allows and his interactions with the fabric vendor Gaelle Lavaud, who is interested in adopting Claire. Gaelle narrates her interaction with Nozias and Claire as well as her marriage to Laurent Lavaud and his death and the birth and death of their daughter Rose. Bernard describes his life from the day that his best friend Max Junior leaves for Miami, his interrogation about Laurent Lavaud's murder, and his involvement with the Baz Benin gang before his own death by thugs who were hired by Max Junior's father, Max Senior. Louise George, the local deejay of the show *Tell Me*, later describes her relationship with Max Senior and her show, which most prominently features Flore, Max Senior's housekeeper. Flore becomes impregnated when she is raped by Max Junior. Claire's perspective is finally revealed as she comes to understand her father's intentions to give her to Madame Lavaud and the events going on in the community before the rogue wave that causes the disappearance of the sailor that began the novel. Throughout the novel, Claire's life is shown to be the common strand of each of the lives of Ville Rose residents. Eventually, the sequence of events is made clearer to reveal just how interconnected the lives of Ville Rose are and how strong their connection is with the sea and with death.

According to cultural critic Stuart Hall, there are two different perspectives on cultural identity: according to the first, cultural identity is defined in terms of unchangeable essence of heritage and shared culture, and according to the second, it is defined by what a person becomes rather than what he or she is born into (Hall 393-394). Within his theory of cultural identity, most cultural identities encompass a mixture of the two types of cultural identity. However, even with these descriptions of two types of cultural identity,

Hall does not address the alternate cultural identities that develop from societies without clear cultural histories. Haiti, for instance, has a slavery-ridden history, which caused the decimation of the native population, replacing them with hundreds of thousands of slaves that were deprived of their native culture in an unfamiliar land. Unlike many former colonies, Haiti's population is completely exported; none of those living on the small island are descended from the original native population. Edwidge Danticat's novel presents this problem, especially when describing the gang culture that develops in the town of Ville Rose.

Although the Baz Benin gang members are culturally Haitian, they cannot claim cultural heritage since none of the residents are "true Haitians"; at the same time, the gang culture that is brought from America gives them the expectation to "become" something beyond their identity at birth yet does not provide them with a healthy means of creating a cultural identity. Danticat reflects the gang members' identity crisis in the use of such mythological terms as "ghosts," "chime," and "chimeras" (Danticat 65), all of which describe creatures that are a hybridization of two worlds. Ghosts in many cultures are seen as figures of the world of the living and the dead; similarly, the word "chimera" suggests a hybridization of identities, much like the mythical Greek monster. A less obvious presence of the dual cultural identity of Ville Rose's gang is their implied role as both *bokor* (sorcerers of dark and light magic in Haitian mythology, notable for creating zombies) and zombie in their supply and use of drugs as well as in their social subservience to the community members of Ville Rose. Although Hall's definitions of cultural identity see it as being derived from cultural history or being forged through personal achievements, I argue that Danticat's crafting of the Baz Benin members with roles as both *bokor* and zombie do not fit within Hall's definitions since they are unable to define their cultural identities as cultural outcasts to the Ville Rose community or to forge their identities as hybrids of American and Haitian gang culture.

In Haitian mythology, the relationship of the *bokor* and their zombie servants is very similar to that of drug dealers and their users both within and outside of *Claire of the Sea Light*. The *bokor* is a sorcerer of both light and darkness. In a sense, the *bokor*'s main role is to create servants, who, like them, do not have a definite identity. In her essay, "Haitian Zombie, Myth, and Modern Identity," Kette Thomas defines the zombification process in three tiers: "the *bokor* or sorcerer, the community, and the remains of what was once

an individual” (5). Essentially, a zombie cannot be created without a sorcerer, a community to allow the sorcerer to perform the ritual, and the remnants of identity a person possesses once they are zombified. These conditions are not unlike those that affect drug users in *Claire of the Sea Light*; for instance, they have to have a provider of drugs, an area conducive to the accessibility of the drugs, and an identity defined by their drug use in order to become fully integrated into the drug culture (Danticat 66). After falling into this loop of drug provider and drug user, the gang members have no chance to create a cultural identity for themselves, having rejected their community’s culture and being unable to define themselves beyond what their drug use and crimes have reduced them to.

From the beginning of their lives, the members of the Baz Benin that become transformed into the drug-induced zombies were unable to develop their cultural identity. “The gang members were . . . for the most part, street children who couldn’t remember having lived in a house, boys whose parents had been murdered or had fallen to some deadly disease, leaving them alone in the world” (Danticat 65). Being young, the boys who would eventually become gang members did not have a support system or connections to the community, making them more vulnerable to losing their cultural identity. Thomas’ definition of zombie as “the altered state of the creature [reflecting] the loss of ‘the essence of one’s individuality’” (Thomas 4) is a more accurate description of these young members of the Baz Benin, who are unable to choose who they become once they become ensnared by the gang’s culture. Bernard sees the evolution of these unattended youth into zombies through drug use: “Watching these boys drift from being mere sellers to casual users of what they liked to call the poud blan, the white man’s powder, watching these boys grow unrecognizable to anyone but one another” (Danticat 66). The source of zombification for the Baz Benin is through their dependence on a powder that originates from a former colonizing power; this fact best follows Elizabeth West’s definition of zombie as “the West’s disjunction of flesh and spirit, especially as the concept of zombie grew out of the Haitian-evolved Petro rites as a metaphor for the slave, a person whose soul/psyche has been stolen,’ thus marking [them] as ‘the living dead’” (6). Had they either embraced the culture of their Ville Rose neighbors or forged a new identity from Western culture, the young men would not have become outsiders in their community, and as a result, slaves to their *bokor* gang leaders.

In *Claire of the Sea Light*, the gang members are led by Tiye, who is essentially the main *bokor* of the Baz Benin; he creates zombies out of his associates through drugs and crimes, which separates them from the rest of Ville Rose. Beyond their connections to the drug trade, Danticat provides several scenes that could be interpreted as Voodoo ritual in relation to Tiye and his gang. Many gang members often came into the Doriens' restaurant for a pre-sex ritual where "they'd split squab's throat, then let it bleed into a mixture of Carnation condensed milk and a carbonated malt beverage called Malta" (Danticat 62). This ritual is very much a Haitian ritual with African roots, which is similar to rituals attributed to Voodoo. Later in the chapter, Tiye also leads a chant to stir the gang members to action against Bernard's troubles at the radio station (Danticat 71). Within hours of this chanting, Laurent Lavaud is shot, which draws Bernard into Tiye's gang world: "Tiye had named Bernard as the auteur intellectual, the mastermind, of the crime, the person who had sent him and his men to do the job. Bernard was not allowed to speak. He was only meant to stand there, like a menacing prop" (Danticat 73). The descriptions of Bernard in these scenes seem to suggest that, even without being drawn into the drug world, he has become Tiye's zombie to the community. By the time Bernard is released, he is considered such an outsider that his murder is considered "an eye for an eye. Another bandit has been erased from the face of this earth" (Danticat 83). Although Bernard is not a drug user, he is caught in Baz Benin's crime world and zombified by association, preventing him from being able to create a cultural identity for himself or to humanize the gang members through his radio show as he wanted.

Although Tiye and the gang are very much *bokor* to their own members, they also play a subservient role to the politicians and the wealthy businessmen of Ville Rose. In order to be able to thrive in the community as much as they do in Ville Rose, the Baz Benin have to have support from influential members of the town. As West explains, Haitians see zombies as something to be "shunned [rather] than feared: their lifeless state . . . [a] disconnect from the community and its spirit" (West 5), so if the politicians wanted to, they could easily exile the Baz Benin as outcasts of society. However, these "ambitious business owners as well as local politicians use them to swell the ranks of political demonstrations, gave them guns to shoot when a crisis was needed, and withdrew them when calm was required" (Danticat 65). The gangsters were also used

as assassins (Danticat 186). In other words, to be able to stay in Ville Rose, Tiye and the gang have to do what these politicians and businessmen say, or risk eviction. Bernard realizes this after Tiye's frivolous use of him as a scapegoat is revealed. "One day it might occur to someone, someone angry and powerful, and maniacal—a police chief or a gang leader, or a leader of the nation—that they, and all those who lived near or like them, would be better off dead" (Danticat 80-81). In other words, while Tiye and the Baz Benin have control over their drug-induced zombies, they are themselves controlled by the politicians, without whose patronage they would be shunned. Thus, because of their role as *bokor* and zombies without cultural identities or ties to Ville Rose, the gang's territorial supremacy is completely dependent on the community.

Gangs function in *Claire of the Sea Light* as both master and slave, neither with a definite cultural identity, using drugs and crimes to enslave while they themselves are being used for political purposes with the threat of eviction or death. Although Bernard tries to humanize the gang members and integrate the lost souls of the gangs back into the community (Danticat 68), he becomes just as much an outcast and zombie as the young boys who are drug users. In turn, the Baz Benin are also zombies due to their role as servants to the rich and powerful of Ville Rose. If the gang members had not been ensnared in a life of drugs and crime, they might have been able to reintegrate into Ville Rose and become successful members of the community. This outcome would support Stuart Hall's assertion that a solidified cultural identity helps prevent a sense of "otherness" in a community; characters such as Gaelle and Louise provide a positive example of overcoming a reputation as "the other" in the Ville Rose community. However, Hall does not consider what happens when a person is unable to be defined by either their cultural heritage or their potential, which makes the Baz Benin's function as "the other" in a small village like Ville Rose a product of both their circumstances and their choices. Without the ability to determine their cultural identity, the members of the Baz Benin had no chance to overcome their destructive environment in order to reach their full potential as members of the Ville Rose community.

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