

Beteckning: \_\_\_\_\_



**Akademi för Utbildning och Ekonomi  
Avdelning för humaniora**

# Mothers and Daughters between Two Cultures in Short Fiction by Edwidge Danticat

*Kristine Abrahamsson  
Mars 2011*

Examensarbetet/ uppsats/ 15 poäng/ C-nivå  
Engelska

**Engelska C  
Supervisor: Dr. Elizabeth Kella  
Examiner: Dr. Alan Shima**

## **Table of Contents**

1.1 Introduction	3
1.2 Background	4
2.1 Analysis of “New York Day Women”	7
2.2 Analysis of “Caroline’s Wedding”	11
3. Conclusion	20

## 1.1 Introduction

In this essay I examine the Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat's<sup>1</sup> representation of mother and daughter relationships between two cultures in two of the stories in her short story collection *Krik? Krak!* Her stories focus on problems with immigration, gender and history, and they concern mother-daughter relationships. Characteristic of Danticat's stories is the focus on women and their search for identity.<sup>2</sup> The mothers and daughters in the two stories I have chosen to examine are immigrants from Haiti of the first or second generation and have lived in the United States for several years.

*Krik? Krak!* focuses on women, their struggles and motherhood. In the last two stories of *Krik? Krak!*, "Caroline's Wedding" and "New York Day Women" the mother's and daughter's relationships are influenced by the situation of being caught in the middle of two cultures, a situation that is problematic both for the first and second generation. While reading these stories I found that the rifts between the mothers and daughters are profound, and that the gap between the mothers and daughters were widened by the differences between Haitian and American culture and by the complexity of the political relationship between the countries.

In "New York Day Women" a Haitian-American daughter follows her Haitian mother from a distance as she makes her way through New York City. The daughter discovers that her mother has her own secret life and she describes what she experiences as she reflects over who her mother is. The mother's voice also appears, however, in form of a dialogue, or as I read it, as the daughter remembering her mother's words. By seeing how the daughter responds and reacts to her mother's whereabouts, the character of the daughter is also revealed. The reader comes to see how the mother and daughter are different from each other, and the gap between the Haitian community and the American community is revealed.

"Caroline's Wedding" also has a mother-daughter relationship in focus, and in this story the narrator is the oldest daughter. The mother, Ma, has two daughters, Grace, the oldest, who was born on Haiti and raised there during her first years, and Caroline, who

---

<sup>1</sup> The Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1969 and raised there until she was twelve when she moved to the United States to live with her parents in Brooklyn, New York, where she still lives. Her first writings were published two years later. Danticat holds a degree in French literature from Barnard College and an MFA from Brown University. *Krik? Krak!* became a National Book Award Finalist in 1995. The author is still very committed to Haiti and returns to Haiti in every book.

Karlee, "Edwidge Danticat". Emory, 9 December 2004. <<http://www.english.emory>>

<sup>2</sup>Carlisle, "Edwidge Danticat". *Athena*, 23 November 2004. <<http://athena.english.vt.edu/>>

was born in America and thus became an American at birth. Grace receives her American citizenship in the course of the story, and Caroline is preparing for her wedding with a man that her mother does not entirely approve of because he is not a Haitian boy. The mother raises her daughters according to Haitian cultural traditions and this creates problems within the family as the daughters feel they are a part of American society as well. Especially Caroline identifies with other Americans, more so than Grace and thus her relationship with her mother is more complicated.

My aim is to examine the mother-daughter relationships in “New York Day Women” and “Caroline’s Wedding” and how these relationships are related to the experience of being caught between two different cultures. The short stories exemplify Haitian and American customs, as well as mother-daughter situations. How do these different cultures influence the relationships between the mothers and daughters? What influence do the mothers and daughters have on each other? Do these questions differ amongst the two stories or does the author develop the plot as well as the characters in similar ways? To better understand the relationships between these mothers and daughters, it is necessary to learn more about the past and recent history between the countries.

## **1.2 Background**

Haitian history is filled with conflicts that arise from when it was colonised and the colonial past still affects the people on Haiti, as well as people who have left the country. Haiti was exploited to bring wealth to the colonisers. It was the richest colony in the West Indies, with an ideal climate for producing sugar, coffee, tobacco, and cotton; this is why it became interesting to the countries in the Western world (Barry 1997:6).

The problems on Haiti have primarily been political, the rich people controlled the important parts of the Haitian economy, and Haiti became a state where its people were controlled and robbed of their possessions by elite. The people in power gave their own children the best education, and so the gap between the rich minority and the very poor majority was secured. The “mulatto elite” ruled the country without any social security plan or health care programme for the ordinary people to benefit from (Gardell 1999:6). These harsh conditions caused by the unsteady political environment lead to emigration by large parts of the populations. The number of emigrants steadily increased through the 20th century and approximately 2 million people have left Haiti. Today, most of them live in New York, Miami, and Boston (5).

The problematic relationship between Haiti and America comes from America's involvement in Haitian affairs. In 1915 Americans settled on Haiti; one reason was that the Americans thought that the German people were involved in Haitian politics. So the involvement from America's part came from suspicion and fright, and the suspicion increased after the outbreak of the First World War. In the 1950s the unemployment rate on Haiti increased and has continued to increase since then, while the standard of living has decreased. In the 1970s Haiti was one of the poorest countries in the world, and the low salaries attracted businesses to Haiti, for example, from the US. Haitian people finished products that later were exported back to the US (Gardell 1999:4). This involvement from America has been greatly criticised by Haitians (28).

Peter Barry writes that the colonial view is still present today, in the form of discrimination of immigrants (Barry 1997:207). Alex Stepick argues that Haitians have been negatively stereotyped in America, more than other migrants in modern time, much due to the huge differences between the two cultures (Stepick 2003:116). In her story, Danticat focuses on problems with discrimination, language and double identity. In both "Caroline's Wedding" and "New York Day Women" the author addresses the difficulties that the mothers character experiences as first generation immigrants, as well as the dilemmas the daughter characters experiences as the generation of immigrants raised in "the new country" but brought up according to old traditions. The mothers and daughters are stuck between the two cultures. The differences between the cultures could make them a target of discrimination, which can make it hard when assimilating into American society.

Several critics have addressed the situation of being in between two countries. Rocio G. Davis specifically deals with the stories in *Krik? Krak!*, and his essay contains a discussion of the mother-daughter relationships. Another critic, Carole Boyce Davies, writes about Caribbean women and immigration, while Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo often recalls her own experiences and John McLeod discusses migration in the light of being in-between two communities.

McLeod stresses that migration alters how migrants think about their home and host countries. The host country, viewed from the miserable conditions in the native country, seems dreamlike and becomes an illusion for the migrants, because when they get there it cannot live up to their expectations. When viewed from the native country, it seemed a place of opportunity and promise. In a similar way, the old country becomes illusory when

viewed from the poverty of the new host country. The old country could be a refuge from the miserable conditions in the host country, and a voyage home could show this place to be imaginary. Just as the host country became an illusion, the homeland becomes an illusion. Their native country tends to become the imaginary place they have built up in their mind (McLeod 2000:209).

McLeod also discusses the concept of “home” and stresses that this concept often has an important function in our lives. It gives us a sense of our place in the world and tells us where we belong and is associated with shelter and security, although the truth could be somewhat different. What McLeod is interested in, is “what happens to the idea of home for migrants” who left their homeland and live far away (210). He refers to Salman Rushdie who argues that at some point in our lives, we all leave home and feel a sense of loss for doing so, but this feeling is intensified if you also leave your country and even may lose the use of your language. Rushdie claims that what you remember only are partial memories, and that a sense of displacement always remains.

McLeod argues that it is inevitable that migrants gain a displaced position and also that they as migrants automatically become involved in the process of setting up home in a new land. “This can also add to the ways in which the concept of home is disturbed” (211), McLeod means that migrants tend to arrive in new countries with baggage, physical belongings but also beliefs, traditions, behaviours, customs and values. This might lead to migrants not being accepted by their new community but being labelled as strange. Migrants often become “ghettoised and excluded from feeling they belong to the new country, and suffered their cultural practices to be mocked and discriminated against” (208). The dominant race and ethnicity may function to exclude people from being recognised as a part of that nation. Migrants may live in new countries, but can be “deemed not to belong there and disqualified from thinking of the new land as their home”. Instead they are alienated (212). McLeod continues to argue that both migrants and their children are deemed to occupy these feelings of being in-between nations, not belonging to either place.

McLeod asks the question how young migrants, or people who came to their new country as small children deal with the issue of home. He argues that “not all of those who live in a diaspora, or share an emotional connection to the old country, have experienced migration” (207) He continues to state that children born by migrants may “automatically qualify for a passport” but their identity might be tied to the past (207). Migrants who have

memories from a distant place have a certain degree of interior knowledge, but to the children of migrants the interior knowledge is unavailable and their reflections about these places are differently constructed. Although they have no memories from it, their country of origin might still have influence over their lives.

This essay will try to show how the cultural differences affect the mothers and daughters in “Caroline’s Wedding” and “New York Day Women”. The ideas of the critics presented above will be central to the analysis. First I will examine how the mother and daughter relationship is presented in “New York Day Women” and then in “Caroline’s Wedding”.

## **2.1 Analysis of “New York Day Women”**

In this story Danticat lets the Haitian-American daughter become the narrator as she introduces us to the life of two very different, working women. The daughter follows her mother around in New York, watching her from a distance she gets to know that her mother too is working. The gap between Haitian life and American life becomes obvious when the reader is revealed the distance amongst the mother and daughter.

The Haitian mother in “New York Day Women” gives her daughter a sense of Haitian culture by telling stories about Haiti and by incorporating habits and ways of living from Haiti into their lives. The daughter does not seem to have any memories of her own from Haiti. According to McLeod, a child born in the new country by migrating parents has its whole notion of the home country constructed through what it is told and observes (McLeod 2000: 207). For the young women in the story, this interior knowledge is unavailable, or she has it just to a small degree. The mother in this story feels obligated to pass on Haitian values to her daughter. Carole Boyce Davies also argues that mothers become very important links between their daughters and Haiti, as cultural transmitters (Davies 1994: 115). Culture is defined as a “shared feature of human groups created and transmitted by them to others (usually their descendents); in short, culture is a shared way of life among a group of people (and includes knowledge, belief, art, moral laws, customs and other capabilities or habits” (Kazdin 2000:393). The mother incorporates the Haitian lifestyle into their lives by telling stories about life in Haiti and by bringing everyday culture into their lives. The daughter recalls her mother making food that is typical Haitian:

“my mother who makes jam with dried grapefruit peel and then puts in cinnamon bark” (Danticat 149). Through these small traditions her daughter gets to know about Haiti.

The mother provides her daughter with positive moral values that she associates with her native country. “Why should we give to Goodwill when there are so many people back home who need clothes? We save our clothes for the relatives in Haiti” (Danticat 149), far away from the native country, the mother still thinks about the relatives back home and how they can help them. The daughter recalls her mother telling her to be unselfish and asking her daughter, “would you get up and give an old lady like me your subway seat?” (146) and the daughter knows that this is the right thing to do. As the daughter follows her, she observes her mother in the hectic New York traffic, patiently waiting for the chaotic traffic situation to clear up. “My mother waits patiently for this dispute to be settled before crossing the street” (146); her mother shows her patience in the hectic New York life. In America, it is the mother who incorporates these values into her daughter; thus the mother becomes the symbol of Haiti to the daughter who does not know Haiti. She represents Haitian values, not only by bringing traditions into the daily life but also through what she says and does, by becoming a role model.

The mother is critical of America’s influence on her daughter, but the criticism goes both ways. The mother’s criticism seems to be justified when her daughter is distancing herself from Haitian culture, and when the daughter recalls her mother saying, “I bet you don’t even give up your seat to a pregnant lady” (146) and the daughter agrees, “My mother is often right about that. Sometimes I get up and give my seat. Other times I don’t” (146) and when she thinks about her mother’s generosity when storing clothes to send to relatives on Haiti, she also shows a different way of thinking than her mother has “I need the place in the garage for an exercise bike” (150). When her mother is making jam, the daughter makes the following remarks, “Then she puts in cinnamon bark that I always think is cockroaches in the jam” (148) showing that in some ways, the daughter does not understand Haitian customs and is criticising her mother to. By writing this, Danticat shows us that the daughter knows what according to her mother and Haitian customs is right, but she has been influenced by the American community as well, which makes her refer to cinnamon bark as cockroaches. The situation that the mother and daughter experiences of being in-between, creates distances between the two different generations.

The mother experiences difficulties in adjusting to American society. Her daughter knows this and describes her mother as a woman “who watches the lottery



drawing every night on channel 11 without ever having played the numbers” (147). Thus, the daughter sees that her mother is surrounded by the American culture, but does not fully take part in it. McLeod argues that migrants who come to a new country have all kinds of baggage, and that this has as a consequence that they become excluded, and do not gain feelings of belonging to the new country (McLeod 2000:212). Certainly, being excluded from a community makes the process of assimilating slower or less possible. But the mother’s difficulty in assimilating into the American community might also be a result of her strong bonds with her old country as N’Zengou-Tayo argues. She also argues that the Haitian community has a grip on the individuals that have left the country, when she writes: “it is as if Haiti lassoed your house with an invisible rope. Outside of your house, you are forced to sink or swim in American waters” (N’Zengou-Tayo 2001:152). The mother in this story takes part in the American community just as much as she needs to, in order not to sink. N’Zengou-Tayo continues to argue that immigrants are forced to assimilate into their new community as a step to self-preservation. This explains why the immigrating mother, at least to some extent, participates in American society, because otherwise she would symbolically drown (152).

The daughter in this story has grown up in America and has become an American and the American culture is also her culture; therefore she is described as having a different relation to American culture than her mother. The daughter in Danticat’s story seems to have an important job making a career, while the mother’s participation in the American community is restrictive. McLeod argues that both migrants and their children are deemed to feel that they are in between countries. They don’t belong to either place (McLeod 2000:213). In “New York Day Women” the mother has these feelings while her daughter does not seem to purchase them. Boyce-Davies argues that a person is allowed a different engagement with the country where one is born (Davies 1994: 123). Thus, the daughter does not have the same relation to Haiti as her mother, just as the mother does not have the same relation to America as her daughter does.

The daughter views her mother and her mother’s values with ambivalence. On the one hand she knows that her mother’s values are good and right, that this is how she too should behave. The daughter shows that she has understood this when she says, “Tonight on the subway, I will get up and give my seat to a pregnant woman or a lady about Ma’s age” (153). On the other hand, she cannot identify with the Haitian culture, “cinnamon bark that I always think is cockroaches in the jam” (149). Although she has grown up with Haitian

traditions, she has distanced herself from them. Her new country's influence is more obvious.

The daughter's surprise at seeing her mother in new surroundings, and the mother engaging in the American community shows that there is a gap between the mother and daughter. The daughter tells us: "I follow my mother, mesmerized by the many possibilities of her journey" (148) and the fact that she is described following her mother shows us the gap between them. When spying on her mother she notices: "this mother of mine, she stops at another hot dog vendor's and buys a frankfurter that she eats on the street. I never knew she ate frankfurters" (150). With this revealing of the mother's secret life, Danticat lets us know that the daughter character has no idea that her mother was running around, eating frankfurters and taking care of other people's children, thereby she shows the gap between mother and daughter. Danticat uses the working mother to show that she has found a place in the American community. When she is keeping it a secret this suggests that she, in a way, is ashamed of it. Her assimilation is more extensive than her daughter previously thought; "even in a flowered dress, she is lost in a sea of pinstripes and gray suits" (148). Quite stunned she watches her mother melting into her surroundings and maybe also losing herself when taking part in the community. When the daughter watches her mother actively taking part in New York life, she has to re-value her definition of her.

The mother baby-sits and the daughter watches her mother with a child. Seeing her mother with the child awakens different feelings within the daughter. She feels jealous of the child when she describes how "the child's face lights up as she puts in a straw in the can for him. This seems to be a conspiracy just between the two of them" (151). It is difficult for the daughter to see the close relationship her mother has with another child, because she does not have that kind of relationship with her mother herself anymore. Now she has to spy on her mother to get to know her again. Seeing her mother with another child, and noticing the child's closeness to and admiration for her mother reminds the daughter of how she used to view her herself: "When he raises his face to look at my mother; it is as though he is looking at the sky" (151). The daughter recognises love in the child's eyes; she used to look at her mother in the same way. Seeing her mother out in New York City awakens the daughter's admiration and she remembers how she used to look at her, "My mother, who taught herself to read as a little girl in Haiti from the books her

brothers brought home from school” (151). The daughter sees her mother in a different light and gets reminded of her admiration towards her.

As presented above, Danticat’s “New York Day Women” is about a Haitian mother and a Haitian-American daughter who have drifted apart and the story is written from the daughter’s point of view and therefore it is her thoughts and feelings the reader experience and the things told about the mother is what the daughter recalls. The daughter remembers what her mother has taught her and uses her knowledge of Haiti to understand her mother; she recalls her mother’s voice. She also follows her mother to try to understand her and to be closer to her, emotionally as well as physically. When the daughter sees her mother engaging in American life, the daughter shows that she is willing herself to change to understand her mother or to show her respect for her. For example, she is willing to give up her seat on the subway to do so. Because Danticat writes from the daughter’s point of view the reader does not now why the mother is taking part in American society, maybe she too wants to get closer to her daughter, but the reader doesn’t get to know this.

## **2.2 Analysis of “Caroline’s Wedding”**

In the previous section the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship in “New York Day Women” was revealed. In “Caroline’s Wedding” the mother-daughter relationship centres around the youngest daughter’s pending marriage. The narrator is the oldest daughter Grace, who gets in the middle of a conflict between her mother and her sister Caroline over Caroline’s wedding. The difference between Haitian culture and American culture becomes obvious with the conflict of the wedding.

In “Caroline’s Wedding” the parents have told stories to their daughters about conditions on Haiti – the conditions that forced them to leave – and as a grown woman their daughter Grace reflects: “These were our bedtime stories. Tales that haunted our parents and made them laugh at the same time. We never understood them until we were fully grown and they became our sole inheritance” (180). The functions of storytelling are many. The parents have a need to tell these stories to heal from past experience, as Rocio G Davis suggests (Davis 2001:65), but the most important function is that the daughters get to know Haiti through these stories. In *Krik? Krak!* Danticat quotes from Sal Scalora who shows us why storytelling is important: “We tell the stories so the young ones know

what came before them. They ask Krik? We say Krak! Our stories are kept in our hearts”.<sup>3</sup> In telling these stories the parents pass on the story told, but primarily they teach their children the tradition of storytelling. Rushdie’s opinion is that migrants tend to glorify their country of origin, but Danticat presents the storytelling and the stories told by the parents in a realistic way. The parents are portrayed as being very frank with their daughters when telling them about Haiti. They do not try to glorify Haiti, but seem honest.

Similar to the daughter in “New York Day Women”, the American born daughter Caroline does not know Haiti except through what she has been told by her parents, and Grace left the country when she was too young to have more than vague memories from it. McLeod argues that there is a difference in being a migrant and being born in a new country of migrants. According to McLeod, children born in the new country by migrating parents have “memories” constructed by what they are told (McLeod 2000:201). Caroline has knowledge about Haiti that has been constructed by stories and by her parents’ memories. As a person who has never been on Haiti, she has not got interior knowledge. Thus, this is why she has a greater distance to Haitian culture than her parents do and sister has. Her sister Grace has only vague memories from Haiti but although she has not been there since she was a small child a large part of her identity seems to be tied to the past.

The mother in this story, similar to the mother in “New York Day Women”, has taken it upon herself to pass the values of Haiti on to her daughters. Carole Boyce Davies’ opinion is that the migrant mother becomes especially important as a connection between her daughters and the Haitian culture (Davies 1994:115). In “Caroline’s Wedding” this is the case for, at least, the oldest daughter who is interested in Haitian culture. Rocio G. Davis suggests that the mothers play major roles in their daughters’ lives and growth and argues that they remain important connections between the daughters and the Haitian culture throughout their whole lives (Davis 2001:78). The mothers become cultural transmitters, Boyce-Davies argues (Davies 1994:115). In the story we can see examples of this when Ma wants to take her daughters to Mass, or when she tells them stories about how it was on Haiti. The oldest daughter asks her mother if she can put another bone into the bone-soup and the mother says; “It’s your soup too” (215), meaning that memories and traditions from Haiti are her daughters’ as well as hers.

---

<sup>3</sup>Quotation from Sal Scalora’s “White Darkness/Black Dreamings” *Haiti: Feeling the Spirit* is taken from the epigraph in *Krik? Krak!*

When keeping Haitian tradition in the United States, Ma remembers her Haitian legacy and avoids becoming a part of the colonising power America. According to Peter Barry, immigrants from Haiti to America may gain this double role as the coloniser and the colonised, because they now live in “the country that was the country of its colonisers” (Barry 1995:197). According to McLeod, the old country becomes an idealised place because of the distance and the old country can also be a refuge from the miserable conditions in the host country (McLeod 2000:209). This could also be a reason why the mother holds on to the Haitian traditions.

In America the Haitian mother finds her maternal role to be very different than it was on Haiti. For example, the mother in “Caroline’s Wedding” is upset because she is not asked about her daughter’s marriage and Danticat describes her influence over her daughters as being limited. The reader learns that Ma knows her role as a mother has changed when she reflects: “‘In Haiti, you own your children and they find it natural,’ she would say. ‘They know their duties to the family and they act accordingly. In America, no one owns anything and certainly not another person’” (215). The mother finds that her influence over her daughters has been curtailed in America. Davis discusses the mother’s limited role and argues that “the mother has had to learn to deal with daughters whose way of life is American” (Davis 2001:78). The mother does not entirely approve of her daughter marrying a Bahamian but she does not act to stop the marriage. Instead she would like to be asked about the marriage, much like she would have been on Haiti.

Ma wanted Eric to officially come and ask her permission to marry her daughter. She wanted him to bring his family to our house and have his father ask her blessing. She wanted him to kiss up to her, escort her around, buy her gifts, and shower her with compliments. Ma wanted a full-blown church wedding. She wanted Eric to be Haitian. (Danticat 169)

The mother is hurt because of the lack of understanding for her emotions and tries to give her daughter some hints of how she feels. These difficulties that the mother has in coming to terms with her daughter marrying also come from the fact that her daughter’s fiancé is not Haitian. Ma knows that this would never have happened on Haiti and knows that traditions have been broken. This difficulty in accepting her daughter’s husband shows the gap between the Haitian and the American culture.

When Ma comes to terms with her new role as a mother, she adjusts to the surrounding American community. Boyce Davies argues that the mother who has immigrated is “in some ways successful in adjusting to the American lifestyle, but in other cases she fails reluctantly” (Davies 1994:153). The mother shows that she has absorbed some American traditions when she has bought Caroline a teddy as a wedding gift. The oldest daughter says: “That was nice, the teddy you got for Caroline” and then she continues: “but it doesn’t seem much like your taste” (193). The mother explains: “I can’t live in this country for twenty-five years and not have some of it rub off on me” (193). The mother knows that she, in some ways, is influenced by American society.

Ma, who left Haiti to come to America, is critical of the American community. She seems to think that American culture is immoral compared to Haitian culture and she uses her daughters being partly Americans as an excuse when they do not behave as their mother wants: “Papa’s funeral was no time for us to express our selfish childishness, our *American* rebelliousness” (214). Ma is also described as being critical of Caroline when she makes the following remarks about her daughter “‘you think you are so American,’ Ma said to Caroline. ‘You don’t know what’s good for you. You have no taste buds. A double tragedy’” (160). With these lines Danticat shows some of Ma’s feelings towards America, the American community’s influence on her daughter has not been all good, and the Haitian values have been lost.

Danticat also writes that the mother is grieving for the loss of her daughters’ openness towards Haitian customs. Instead they are described as critical towards them and the mother is critical of the influence America has on her daughters. She feels that this influence in some way restricts them, or cripple them, making them not believing in the Haitian traditions that is so important for the mother. A symbol of this loss of openness is the loss of Caroline’s arm. When newly arrived to the US and pregnant with Caroline, the mother was arrested and put in jail where she was given a shot with a drug to calm her down. The mother is convinced that shot caused Caroline’s condition. The mother feels that her daughters are crippled in the way that they do not only accept the things she tells them, but instead they question them. The mother cooks bone soup that she believes can cure all sorts of illnesses, but her daughters do not believe in these kinds of things, and the mother sees this as a result of her daughters being a part of the American society. Their mother’s attitude towards the American community comes from the difference between her Haitian background and the American. When she criticises the American community, the mother criticises her daughters as well because they are a part of that society.

Despite her criticism, the mother knows the many possibilities awaiting her daughters in America. When Caroline was a young child, her father would say: “Just look at her, our child of the promised land, our New York child, the child who has never known Haiti” (189), knowing that their children have opportunities in America that they would never have on Haiti. On Haiti Caroline’s lost arm would cripple her because the way of living is more physical, with domestic chores. In America it is not even an obstacle, because she can get herself a job where the fact that she has one arm does not need to get in the way of her career, or she can even get a prosthetic arm as she does in the story.

In “Caroline’s Wedding”, the daughters Grace and Caroline have different attitudes towards Haitian culture. Grace was, as mentioned, born on Haiti and raised there during her early years. Boyce-Davies argues that a person is allowed a different “engagement with the homeland and Caribbean cultural community” if born and raised there (Davies 1994:124). Grace feels a closer connection to the Haitian community than her sister does, but Grace also receives her American citizenship during the course of the story and has an outsider’s critical view on the American values that were absorbed by her sister. Grace feels a strong connection to Haiti, but also with her mother. Therefore she participates in the Haitian culture that brings her and her mother closer together. For example, they go to Mass together.

We can see that Grace has memories from Haiti, when her father tells her: “you have memory of walking in a mist of dawn in a banana jungle that no longer exists. You have lived this long in this strange world so far from home, because you have remembered” (177). Grace has some memories from Haiti, and her father thinks that her remembering is very important for her as a part of the Haitian community. Throughout the story we see that Grace knows the importance of her Haitian legacy and also that she participates in Haitian culture. Because she has these memories, she has developed a closer relationship with the Haitian culture. McLeod means that these memories and traditions might keep people from assimilating to the new community where they, despite their efforts, will be viewed as strange (McLeod 2000:208).

Grace feels a strong connection to Haiti. She identifies herself with the following lines taken from a song heard on the radio, “Beloved Haiti, there is no place like you. I had to leave you before I could understand you” (213). Grace feels that she has left something behind in Haiti. She has made Haiti an idealised place, far from reality. As McLeod argues, the home country has become an illusionary place (McLeod 2000:209). It is important for Grace to know Haiti, or else she feels lost. “Because once you remember, you always stop

looking” (216). If Grace did not know Haitian customs, she would feel that something was missing. She asks questions, and the reader can see that she reflects over what she is going to teach her children. “What kind of lullabies will I sing at night? What kinds of legends will my daughter be told? What kinds of charms will I give her to ward off evil?” (216). Thus, she knows the importance of her legacy.

Caroline, on the other hand, was born in America and has not been on Haiti. She does not have this interior knowledge that McLeod discusses, and her reflections are differently constructed, through what she is told about the old country. Thus, she never developed a connection with Haiti as her sister did and seems to be more influenced by the American community than both her mother and sister. This is shown when she does not participate in Haitian traditions, such as going with her mother to Mass. She has a difficult time identifying herself with Haitian culture, and the customs that are important to her mother becomes even more distant to her when she abandons them. Davis argues that “for Caroline the old country’s rules do not determine the obligations, nor her mother’s authority” (Davis 2001:78). Caroline does not know Haiti personally and Haiti becomes a distant place to her, which leads to problems in identifying with her mother.

Caroline was born in America by first generation migrating parents and Danticat describes Caroline as very anxious to fit into her surrounding American community. According to N’Zengou-Tayo, children of migrants grow up torn between their old community that their mothers are influenced by, and the surrounding American community in which they are migrants and that, in turn, has pre-judged them because of their heritage. She is underlining the importance for children of migrants to be accepted by the surrounding community. These children have been brought up in families where home meant the country left by their parents while they sought acceptance from their American friends. This situation leads to children, on the one hand, “gaining their parents’ feeling of exile and assuming their cultural identity” and on the other hand they want to assert new identities gained from growing up in the United States (52). Boyce-Davies argues that children that have been brought up between two communities, become very eager to produce new identities and to avoid being stereotyped into a category where they feel they do not belong (Davies 1994:129). McLeod argues that migrants might be deemed to belong nowhere, not the country of origin or their new country, because they have a different race or wrong ethnic identity (McLeod 2000:212). This might be the reason why Caroline is distancing herself from the old culture, because she wants to fit into the American



community, knowing that she is risking being stereotyped into the category of being a migrant. Similarly, Grace wants to fit in, but she does not distance herself from the old culture. Maybe because she feels that she is a part of both cultures. After their father's funeral the sisters were forced by their mother to wear black clothes: "Caroline and I were both in high school at the time, and we quickly found ways to make wearing black a fashion statement" (170). The sisters were worried that their friends would view them as strange, that their old culture would label them. Instead they found a way to make wearing black clothes become a part of their personality.

As has been seen, the sisters in this story are described as having different feelings towards the Haitian culture. This might depend on Caroline becoming an American at birth while Grace is receiving her citizenship as a grown woman.

Grace is caught in the middle of the conflict between her mother and Caroline, when her mother wants things to be as they were on Haiti, while Caroline thinks that because they live in America, she can marry who ever she wants to without her mother interfering. Grace is a part of both cultures and understands both where her mother comes from, and her sister's feelings. Davis writes that the mother represents Haitian values (Davis 2001:78), while Caroline represents America, and argues that Grace is caught between the old country's rules and tradition and the new country's lifestyle when she gets in the middle of the conflict between her mother and sister.

Ultimately, the daughters decide for themselves what to believe in and what aspects of the Haitian culture to preserve and which not. Ma is making the bone-soup that she believes can cure illnesses. "If she keeps making this soup,' Caroline whispered, 'I will dip my head into the pot and scald myself blind. That will show her that there's no magic in it'" (160). Caroline thinks it is strange that her mother goes to church to mourn people she never met. She says to her sister: "It is not like she knows those people" but gets the response: "Ma says all Haitians know each other" (169). Grace defends her mother because she has gained the same feeling towards Haitians as her mother has.

Even though Caroline seems to be critical of some Haitian traditions, at the same time she and her sister embrace other features of Haitian culture and they choose for themselves which parts of the culture to take in and which to ignore. Although Caroline seems to be more influenced by the American community, she is in fact influenced by both. Caroline and Grace play association games that their mother has taught them. Both Caroline and her sister want to believe in some aspects of the Haitian culture. Their mother has told them

not to wear black clothes, because according to Haitian traditions, this keeps their dead relatives in their lives. The sisters want their dead father to stay with them and be present in their lives; therefore Grace and Caroline continued to wear black clothes long after tradition required.

Even though we no longer wore black outer clothes we continue to wear black underpants as a sign of lingering grief. Another reason Caroline may have continued to wear hers was her hope that Papa would come to her and say that he approved of her: of her life, of her choices, of her husband. (Danticat 172)

Although Caroline questions the Haitian culture, we see that there are some things she wants to believe in.

Boyce Davies argues that the reason why the mother and daughter have difficulties understanding each other is emotional and due to the limited number of common memories. She continues to declare that this gap expresses itself as silence between them. At the same time Boyce Davies argues that the mother and daughter are inevitably connected because of a common history (Davies 1994:154) and Danticat addresses this:

My past was my mother /.../ she spoke to me in a language any female could understand. And I was undeniably that female. Oh it was a laugh for I had spent so much time saying I did not want to be like my mother that I missed the whole story: I was not like my mother. I was my mother. (Danticat 161)

Although there are differences between the mothers and daughters, which come from their lack of understanding each other's cultures, they have a common history and bond as women.

Caroline has great respect for her mother, and genuinely cares for her. She does not want her mother to know that she has sex before marriage because it would break her mother's heart, so she sneaks out at night. When Caroline plans to marry a Bahamian man, her mother feels that she is rebelling against her; this is a consequence of the gap between them that in its turn, creates an even larger gap.

Ma and Caroline are critical of each other's cultures, and with this criticism, the gap between her and her daughters is widened. The critique Caroline has is towards the Haitian

culture and because her mother is Haitian she also gets criticised. The daughters consider themselves to be Haitian-Americans while the mother is Haitian. In “Caroline’s Wedding” we can see that Caroline is more influenced by the American community than her sister and at the same time Caroline’s relationship to her mother is not as close as the relationship between her mother and Grace. Davis suggests that immigration and different attitudes bring about the rift between the mother and daughter (Davis 2001:78). This gap is created by the difference in cultures brought about by migration and is widened when the mother’s and daughters’ different attitudes get in the way of them understanding each other.

### 3 Conclusion

I have argued that Danticat is presenting the difference between American society and Haitian society as leading to a gap between mothers and daughters. The mothers in the two stories have in common that they were born on Haiti and brought with them their traditions to the United States, because their beliefs, traditions and values are very important to them. This is why it becomes important for the mothers that Haitian culture survives in America, and it is the distance from Haiti that makes this mission even more important. Of course the mothers are influenced by American culture, but they always compare it to the Haitian culture, which the mothers feel displaced from and their old country becomes idealised. The mother in “Caroline’s Wedding”, however, seems to know the possibilities her daughters have in America; thus she seems to see things realistically. The Haitian-American daughters, on the other hand, have grown up between two very different cultures and react differently to the situation of being in between two cultures. Caroline in “Caroline’s Wedding” seems to be very influenced by American culture and critical of Haitian culture. The daughter in “New York Day Women” is also very American but reflects over what her mother has told her about Haiti and thinks that she should try to be more like her mother wants her to be. Grace in “Caroline’s Wedding” is the daughter in these stories that is most influenced by Haitian culture, this results in her having a closer relationship with the mother than the other daughters have. I have suggested that Danticat describes Grace as having a close relation to Haiti, because of her having memories from it. If a person feels at home or not in a country depends on a number of different things, if one is born there, how your feelings were for your old country and how you are treated in your new country.

As I see it, many of the scenes in “New York Day Women” could be about normal mother-daughter disputes, depending on differences between generations, but also with the influences from different cultures. In “New York Day Women” the mother and daughter try to overcome the gap between them. In “Caroline’s Wedding” the mother struggles with the changes that is brought on by the youngest daughter’s marriage. She struggles to adjust and to come to terms with the feelings of losing control. Caroline has been born an American citizen and does not have memories from Haiti. She feels that the Haitian culture is forced on her. At the same time the mothers are forced to assimilate, thus the American culture is forced on them. This creates a conflict between the mothers and daughters, and although

this conflict cause troubles for them, driving them apart at times their common history as women and having the same historical background will always bring them together again.

## Bibliography

- Ashcroft, Bill; Griffiths, Garreth & Helen Tiffin. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Barry, Peter. *An Introduction to Post-colonialism*. New York: Manchester: 1997.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Manchester: 1995.
- Boyce Davies, Carol. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migration of the Subject*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Carlisle, "Edwidge Danticat". *Athena*, 23 November, 2004.  
<<http://athena.english.vt.edu/~carlisle/postcolonial/danticat.htm>>
- Danticat, Edwidge. *Krik? Krak!* New York: Soho, 1995.
- Davis, Rocio G. "Oral Narrative as Short Story Cycle: Forging Community in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*" *Melus* 26 (2001): 65-93.
- Gardell, Carl Johan. *Haiti – har demokratin en chans?* Kalmar: Världspolitikens Dagsfrågor 1, 1995.
- Karlee, "Edwidge Danticat". *Emory*, 9 December, 2004.  
<<http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Danticat>>
- Kazdin, Alan E. *Encyclopedia of Psychology*. New York: Oxford, 2000.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. New York: Manchester, 2000.
- N'Zengou-Tayo, Marie-José. "Pan Caribbean Identity in the Writings of Haitian, Cuban and Dominican Writers in America". *Thamyris* 8 (2001): 149-158.
- Stepick, Alex. *This Land Is Our Land: Immigrants and Power in Miami*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.