

Motherhood and Haiti

A glimpse into the interconnected roles of Haitian women



Krik? Krak!

Krik? Krak!, written by Edwidge Danticat, is a collection of short stories focusing on the lives of Haitian women affected by the events surrounding the Massacre River, or the Parsley Massacre. The Parsley Massacre took place on the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Enforcers stood on the borders asking people to pronounce the word “parsley” and based on their pronunciation they were distinguished as Haitian or Dominican. This became known as a Haitian genocide, killing over 20,000 people in five days and affecting generations forever.

Each short stories tells the narrative of a different Haitian woman. Some are mothers, daughters or sisters. Others are all of the above. The stories examine these female roles and roles surrounding them. All of the women written about in these stories are interconnected in some way, also mirroring the lifestyle of women in Haiti.

Edwidge Danticat was born in Haiti and experienced some of these images first hand, while the women in her family shared stories about their experiences to her as well. While this short story collection is the fiction genre, there are many pieces that were inspired by true events. The roles examined in these stories are realistic and the impact of the Massacre River is developed within each of these stories.

After reading Krik? Krak!, it became apparent that there are certain images and stereotypes present in the Black community that are important in understanding the content of stories. The power of the stereotypes within the text is key in understanding the motivation behind the imagery upheld by the characters. This newsletter stands as a symbol of freedom that Black women lack within their roles as mothers, as they are bound by the images and stereotypes that have been projected upon them. More importantly is the framework behind these projected images, the factors that help them to still exist and the impact they have on Black family structures, especially mothers and their children.

Questioning the framework

What is the disciplinary mother and what does she stand

What is needed to “survive” in the black community?

How do others examine Haitian familial relationships?

Stereotypes and Images of Haitian Women Within Black Communities

Sacrifice is a typical piece of motherhood that, as a society, is expected. For Black mothers, it is more challenging to identify whether this aspect of motherhood is positive or negative. It is contradictory to what



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most people see as a good mother in the Black community. For black women, “controlling images of the “superstrong Black mother” praises Black women’s resiliency in a society that routinely paints us as bad mother.” While trying to keep up with the strong persona, women are making sacrifices for their children in the Black community on a daily basis, which is one of the reasons men admire them in their motherhood. This provides a challenging dynamic for Black women because they are being forced into two molds that do not mesh well. While trying to provide for their families and putting others’ needs in front of their own, they are expected to remain strong and unharmed.

"For far too many black mothers, the demands of providing for children in intersecting oppressions are sometimes so demanding that they have neither the time nor the patience for **affection**," (Collins, 2000). This can be seen at face value, or seen as a standard for Black mothers to never show their children affection. However, it can be analyzed to mean that they show affection in a less traditional or non-obvious way. Black mothers are striving so hard to work through the intersection of oppressions including race, gender, and sexuality for themselves, but they are also trying to make sense of these intersections for their children and help them move through them, more easily than they themselves may have. Black mothers often interact with their children in colder ways than White mothers might, but the love and affection they feel towards them is not lesser, just different. It is expressed in different ways provided the circumstances.

A **disciplinarian** is “one that enforces or believes in strict discipline,” (Collins, 2000). This definition follows closely with the lack of warm affection shown towards children. The disciplinary method of Black mothers shows the less traditional ways of being an impactful mother. Although this personality of a mother might be seen as harsh or dominating, children in Black communities are taught how to respond to it and it is important to remember the types of support that surround this concept within the community. It is likely that Black mothers will exhibit some disciplinary attitudes because it is so widely practiced in the community. This method of parenting is also not something practiced by every mother, and Collins asserts that it is impossible to stereotype all Black mothers as fitting into this mold. Within the disciplinary methods of Black mothers are many other facets, and this mold is not solitary in its existence. Forging women into this pigeon holed idea of being a disciplinary takes away from her role as a mother.

According to Patricia Hill Collins, “to ensure their daughters’ physical **survival**, mothers must teach them to fit into the sexual politics of Black womanhood,” (Collins, 2000). Black daughters are brought up to expect less in the sense that they work more, knowing they need to support themselves so they must work to a greater education, and expect large responsibilities in all aspects of life. Knowing how to survive is about deviling skills to confront oppressive conditions. Hill Collins says that “emotional strength is essential, but not at the cost of physical survival.” Survival is all about being given the tools and skills to use in order to make it in life. For some, such as Black women, the struggle to survive is a little tougher compared to others. In the text, it states that “U.S. Black mothers are often described as strong disciplinarians and overly protective; yet these same women manage to raise daughters who are self-reliant and assertive.” Survival is the ability to continue

Women-Centered Networks

Another key theme present in the work of Patricia Hill Collins was the idea of the Women-Centered Network. Circles of support that Black women create for themselves, comprised solely of other Black women. Everyone creates these sort of support circles within their lives, however, Black women's circles are women-centered because within these circles, they are better able to make sense of their intersecting oppressions and they are given support while negotiating through them. Even Black men do not understand all of the intersecting oppressions of Black women because men inherently have more power in the larger society in general. Collins discussed many ways that these women-centered networks aid women.

For example, the idea of the bloodmother and the othermother are key examples of the kinds of things women seek out in women-centered networks. A bloodmother is obviously a biological mother, but an othermother is a woman who may step into a child's life if their bloodmother isn't able to provide them with something they need. Sometimes an othermother raises a child entirely; sometimes an othermother simply watches the child after school until their bloodmother comes home. This is just one way that women-centered networks function, there are countless others.

In the story, *Between the Pool and the Gardenias*, Marie so desperately wants a daughter that she finds a dead baby girl on the streets and, believing that it is alive, takes it home to raise it. In this story, Marie talks about her own mother who has passed away, but who sometimes visits her in her dreams. For example, "There are many nights when I saw some old women leaning over my bed. 'That there is Marie,' my mother would say. 'She is the last one of us left.' Mama introduced me to them, because they had all died before I was born. There was my great grandmother Eveline who was killed by Dominican soldiers at the Massacre River. My grandmother Defile who died with a baldhead in prison, because God had given her wings. My godmother Lili who killed herself in old age because her husband had jumped out of a flying balloon and her grown son had left her to go to Miami," (Danticat, 1995).

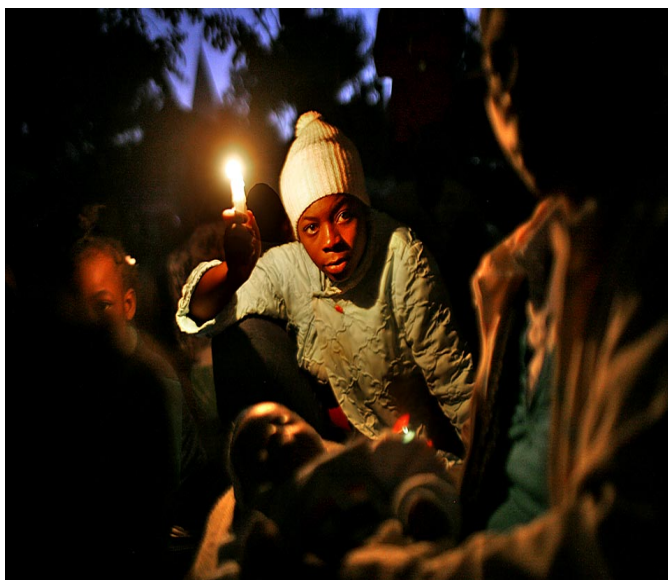
In this case, all of Marie's elder women family members have passed away. However the value placed in the concept of the women-centered networks is clear by the fact that all of Marie's elder women family members come to her in her dreams and introduce themselves. After reading this, it is much easier to understand why Marie wants a daughter so badly. It is clear that she wishes to build her own women-centered network starting with her own daughter.



KRIK? KRAK!

An interconnected web of women-centered networks and the stories within them

“Night Women” is the story of a mother who has a young son. The mother does everything necessary to provide for her child and make sure that he can live a great life, including selling her body. After her young son goes to sleep, this mother becomes a prostitute at night, selling her body to different men in order to supply for her child. In the entire story, the mother tries to suppress her “job” from her son, making sure things are quiet enough that he doesn’t know what mommy is doing while he’s asleep. The woman knows that what she is doing is morally “wrong”, which is why she doesn’t want her son to know that’s her job, but it is a means for survival for her and her son, which is why it has to be done. In the Hill Collins reading, she says that, “Providing a better chance for their children was a dominant theme among black women,” (Collins, 2000). This is very prevalent in “Night Women” because she is able to provide a better chance for her son by being a prostitute. She is sacrificing her own body in order to create a better life and future for her son. This is the epitome of survival.



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“Nineteen Thirty-Seven” is a story about Josephine who visits her mother, Manman, in prison. She carries a Madonna doll around with her, whose purpose is to provide faith to the women. Sometimes, the Madonna cries- the wax inside the doll burns to shed a waxy tear down the doll’s face- and the Madonna is ultimately symbolic of the strength shared between the women involved in the Massacre River. The Madonna is something that the women can put faith in and gain strength from. It stands as a way to pass the strength down through generations, because while Manman is in prison, they both rely on it for strength, and Josephine learns about its purpose and gains strength from her mother through the doll. This emulates the type of “superstrong” women that Collins describes in Black Feminist Thought because despite her circumstances, Josephine is expected to stay strong. Although she is not a mother yet, her mother is practicing the type of strength she expects from her daughter after she inevitably passes away. They use the doll as a means of communication and understanding. Josephine starts to adopt the strength that her mother has used to help her survive her time in prison- an image that is expected for all women to uphold by their mothers and within the community.

Krik? Krak!

An Interconnected Web of Women Cont'd

After reading the short story, *The Missing Peace*, the concepts of Black motherhood became clearer. For example, in *The Missing Peace*, Lamort is raised by her grandmother because her biological mother died while giving birth to her. In the story, Lamort returns home from after a long day and is quickly ushered inside of the house by her grandmother. Her grandmother has a small guest cottage that she often has travelers stay in to make a little extra money. On this particular day, Lamort's grandmother is not pleased that she has been out all day and hurriedly tries to get Lamort in the house by, "Pulling a leaf from my hair, she slapped me on the shoulder and shoved me inside the house," (Danticat, 1995). Next her grandmother helps her bathe by, "scrubb[ing] a handful of mint leaves up and down my back as she ran a comb through my hair," (Danticat, 1995) This whole process Lamort and her grandmother undergo really highlights the lack of traditional affection Patricia Hill Collins was talking about.

Lamort and her grandmother do not seem, on a surface level, to have a very loving, affectionate relationship as seen through the rough touches in the above quotes. However, through reading the rest of the story, it is abundantly clear that Lamort and her grandmother have so much love for each other. Throughout the story the interactions between Lamort and the reporter staying in the cottage exemplify how much respect Lamort has for her grandmother. There are countless things that Lamort says to the reporter that her grandmother has taught her or said to her explicitly. When Lamort cannot read what the reporter hands her she says, "Intelligence is not only in reading and writing," (Danticat, 1995). Lamort's grandmother had said this to her only four pages beforehand. Lamort's repetition of her grandmother's teachings can be seen as a testament to how much she loves and respects her, even if she isn't the most affectionate woman.

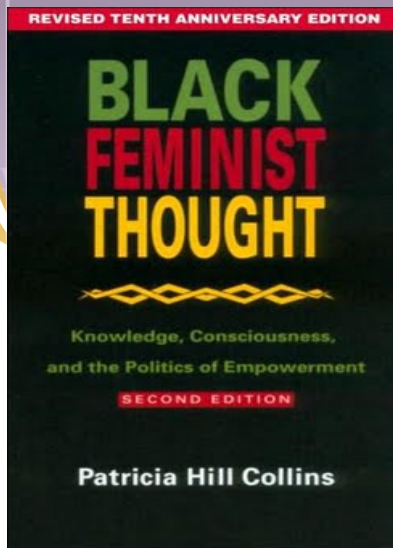
In the story, *Caroline's Wedding*, the idea of the Black mother as a disciplinarian is present. The story features two sisters and their mother living in New York after their father has died. The younger sister, Caroline, is getting married to a man named Eric. However, their mother is very displeased about their union because Eric is not a Haitian man. Throughout most of the story their mother is very distant towards Caroline and even sometimes angry. She makes bone soup every day in order to try and "cure" Caroline of her love for Eric. In this scene the older sister questions her mother about why it is she dislikes Eric so much and attempts to help her change her mind. In this moment, Caroline's mother realizes that she will marry Eric whether or not she approves and she says to the older sister, "'We're not like birds,' she said, her head sinking into the pillow. 'We don't just kick our children out of our nests,'" (Danticat, 1995). Even though throughout the entire story Caroline's mother seems to be punishing her for her choice to marry Eric, she still loves her endlessly and wants nothing more than for her to be happy. To an outsider, such as Eric, this may not be clear due to the way that Caroline's mother treats her. But both daughters are able to see through the actions of their mother and are fully aware of just how much she loves them.



<http://sfbayview.com/2010/on-the-ground-in-port-au-prince/>

“The voices in Krik? Krak!
encapsulate whole lifetimes
of experience. Harsh,
passionate, lyrical.”

–Seattle Times



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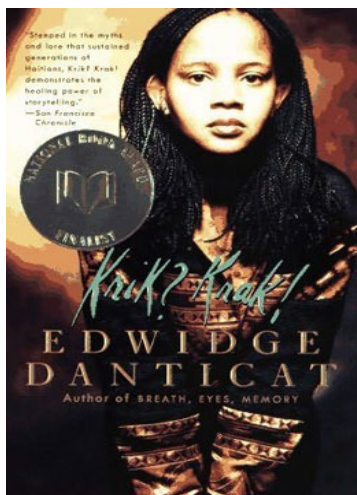
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