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**The Adolescent Grotesque:
Transgressing Boundaries of Female Sexuality in
Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John***

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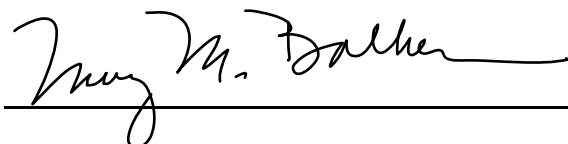
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Approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Mary M. Balkun", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Mary Balkun, Thesis Advisor

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Simone A. James Alexander", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Simone A. James Alexander, Second Reader

Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering (if she hasn't lost her wind). She doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic" of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she is thinking; she signifies it with her body.

Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

Adolescence is a transitory time in human development, characterized by internal and external bodily changes. Edwidge Danticat and Jamaica Kincaid employ the first-person narrative style in their respective debut novels, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Annie John*, to amplify the female adolescent voice and provide unmitigated access to the female adolescent experience. During adolescence, the female body is in sexual flux – steadily losing its amorphousness as puberty runs its course. The adolescent female body peregrinates the biological threshold that distinguishes males from females. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the grotesque body as “a body in the act of becoming” (317), which is the task the female body begins during adolescence – becoming – and continues until death. It is the conspicuous and ceaseless nature of female sexual development, through cyclical body changes – growing breasts and widening hips, the onset of menses, and a decades-long oscillation of hormone levels – that creates a grotesque perception of the adolescent female body. It is the inherent otherness of the female body that makes this eternal becoming a grotesque spectacle.

Both Danticat and Kincaid employ grotesque imagery to scream, as opposed to speak, on behalf of the female body. Of primary importance are pivotal scenes within both novels where adolescent female protagonists adulterate the boundaries between body and material, between dream and reality, in revolt against gender norms and what Hélène Cixous would classify as

“phallogocentric” ideals of female sexual purity. In both *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Annie John*, three generations of women are represented to provide an evolutionary perspective that clearly depicts a past, present, and future attitude towards female sexuality and gender fluidity. In this study, I intend to examine Danticat’s and Kincaid’s unique employment of the literary grotesque in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Annie John* as a mechanism of resistance against the cultural traditions that marginalize the female body as “other,” making it grotesque. I will explore the ways in which the protagonists reclaim their adolescent bodies, thereby recapturing and celebrating the beauty of the, albeit grotesque, fluidity of feminine space.

Danticat and Kincaid are both transnational migrants who came to the U.S. from the Caribbean, and in both cases their transnational experiences influenced the portrayals of their female adolescent protagonists. In her introduction to *The Butterfly’s Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States*, Danticat shares her personal experience as what is known as a “Diaspora” or, in Haiti, a Haitian native who is living in another country either by will or because of exile. As with the symbolic “woman,” Danticat has struggled to both embrace and redefine her experience as a *Diaspora*, a term that, in Danticat’s experience, is often used to minimize or distinguish “otherness” within Haitian culture. Danticat recalls a conversation with a friend where she attempts to decode her experience as a transnational, and arguably grotesque, world citizen. She states:

My country...is one of uncertainty. When I say ‘my country’ to some Haitians, they think of the United States. When I say ‘my country’ to some Americans, they think of Haiti. My country, I felt was something that was then being called the tenth department. Haiti has nine geographic departments and the tenth was the

floating homeland, the ideological one, which joined all Haitians living in the *dyaspora*. (5)

At the risk of over-analyzing a connection between author and text, it is arguable that Sophie Caco's reclaiming of body and land in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* are symbolic representations of Danticat's desire to reconcile and reclaim her transnational identity.

Alternately, Kincaid's writing style has been classified by scholars as that which "resist[s] all canons" (Bloom, vii) and "experiments with 'decolonizing' styles and discursive formations that 'refuse a Western linear modality'" (Ferguson, 2). In other words, Kincaid is a grotesque author. Her writing does not follow literary norms; in fact, according to Moira Ferguson's introduction to *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body*, the harsh rendering of the mother-daughter dynamic in her novels has "constantly unsettled reviewers" (1). Kincaid has been candid in disclosing that her personal relationship with her own mother was strained, and Ferguson states that Kincaid "also volunteers that personal experience shapes the protagonists of her texts" (1). In a 1994 interview led by Ferguson, Kincaid differentiates her cultural experience from that of African-Americans, explaining that her cultural identity lacks the sense of permanence and totality that she has witnessed with many African-Americans. Kincaid states:

American black people seem to feel – almost – that being black is a predestination in some way...Because they are a minority, they are more concerned with their identity being extinct, whereas we don't feel that way. Everybody is black...we don't think white people are permanent. We don't feel permanent, either, but that feeling of "there will always be white people sitting on top of black people" – we don't have. (164)

Kincaid's experience as a transnational migrant, coupled with her feeling of cultural impermanence, or fluidity, manifest themselves as grotesque representations in her writing.

The grotesque is neither one thing nor the other. The enforced cultural homogeneity of patriarchal society creates the grotesque and makes it both discernible and horrifying. Shun-Liang Chao's *Rethinking the Concept of the Grotesque* discusses how the grotesque functions in patrilineal societies, beginning with a citation of Rushkin's characterization of the "ludicrous" (2) and "fearful" (2), elements that compose grotesque representations in art and literature. According to Chao, the grotesque departs from the "solace of structural/hermeneutic totality" (17) and thereby "(re)awakens our awareness of the chaotic nature of the real human condition" (17). Within this context, the grotesque exists in opposition to patriarchal norms and ideals and, thus, phallic stability. Chao also conjures violent imagery in the assertion that the grotesque "paradoxically... wage[s] war on totality... by estranging us from the illusion of totality that we have internalized since the [Lacanian] 'mirror phase' onwards" (17). In the war against totality, patriarchy, and the phallus, the most horrifying threat is the (grotesque) adolescent female, who is in the process of becoming that which bleeds, yet lives on.

Both Danticat and Kincaid depict bloody battles from the perspectives of their female adolescent protagonists, with the vagina serving as the primary battleground, and with contested ownership of the domestic space serving as the one of the primary sources of conflict. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie breaks her own hymen with a pestle. Danticat makes certain to introduce the pestle and mortar early in the text and establishes a norm for its usage by mentioning it several times within the text prior to Sophie's hymen break. While still in Haiti, for example, Sophie walks through a village with Tante Atie and describes a scene where "a group of women were pounding millet in a large mortar with a pestle" (22), while other women were "roasting

large cassava cakes in flat pans over charcoal pits” (22). Sophie then uses the pestle and mortar to crush spices to make a meal for her mother in an attempt to convince her mother that she would submit to their family’s generations-old ideals of womanhood. After growing tired of pacifying her mother, and unable to suppress her desire for sexual freedom and expression, Sophie uses the pestle to crush her hymen.

In Caribbean cultures, the use of the mortar and pestle predate slavery. In *Congotay! Congotay! A Global History of Caribbean Food*, Candice Goucher discusses how Western classification of gender roles, especially in the domestic space, has marginalized the traditional African-Caribbean family dynamic. According to Goucher:

African-Caribbean women’s gender-specific activities linked their resources and households in ways that confounded and blurred the dichotomies typical of the West...Male and female categories flowed from the kitchen’s activities. Women controlled the critical knowledge about what was safe and what was unsafe, what could cure or kill. Cooking transformed the raw, the inedible, and the poisonous...The meeting of the mortar and pestle mimicked the sex act and...could also reflect the bridging of divides. (164)

The intentional insertion of the pestle into *Breath, Eyes, Memory* – and into Sophie’s vagina – is a battle cry for a reclaiming and redefining of the domestic space. As a young protagonist, Sophie is Danticat’s symbolic representation of the next generation of (Caribbean) women who must answer the charge to continue the battle to reclaim and redefine the female body and use of the domestic space. Sophie’s use of the pestle to break her hymen is a symbolic nullification of patriarchal power. Rather than shifting the pendulum of power from male to female, Sophie’s feminist act redistributes and neutralizes power within a fluid space. By using a phallic tool of

domesticity to crush the hymen, which is a patriarchal symbol of sexual purity, Sophie reclaims her body and ultimately neutralizes the power of the phallus.

Prior to the hymen break, Danticat evokes grotesque imagery of the eternally bleeding woman in Sophie's retelling of the legend of the village woman who could only stop bleeding by transforming herself into a non-human plant or animal of her choosing. Sophie describes a "woman who walked around with blood constantly spurting out of her unbroken skin" (86), and the "blood kept gushing and spouting out of her unbroken skin, sometimes from her arms, sometimes from her legs, sometimes from her face and chest" (86). The woman's skin was never broken, symbolizing both the un-penetrated vagina in general and Sophie's hymen specifically. In recalling the fable, Sophie remembers that the woman bled for "twelve long years" (86), which correlates to the age at which Sophie left Haiti to live with her mother in the United States, as well as the average age of the onset of menses for females. Doctors and specialists, who serve as representations of Western patriarchal institutionalism, were unable to heal the bleeding woman. The woman finally consults Erzulie, the Virgin Mother and symbol of matriarchy, and realizes that she can only stop the bleeding by relinquishing her womanhood. With Erzulie's help, the woman transforms into a butterfly and never bleeds again.

The presence of blood evokes the grotesque in that it puts the internal on external display. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body is an "inexhaustible vessel of death and conception," and the merging of its "outward and inward features" symbolizes the body's ability to merge with "various natural phenomena" and "fill the entire universe" (381). Annie John's bloody battle begins at age twelve when she begins to menstruate. Overwhelmed by the thought of menstruation, Annie faints for the first time in her life after what she describes as having "brought to my mind a clear picture of myself sitting at my desk in my own blood" (52). Annie is

maddened by her menstrual symptoms and her rage is projected upon her mother, who “brushe[s] aside” (51) her complaints of pain and retells in a “half-joking way all about her own experience with the first step in coming of age” (51). Although not the first instance, Annie pretends to be delighted by her mother’s candor. Similar to Sophie, Annie hides her true feelings about her mother’s generations-old perception of womanhood. Simultaneously, Annie begins to take notice her mother’s duality and regards her with distrust. Annie states, “I pretended that this information made us close – as close as in the old days – but to myself I said, ‘What a serpent!’” (51).

Serpent imagery also appears later in the text when, similar to Sophie’s mother, Annie’s mother retells a fable with the intention of getting Annie to admit to playing with marbles (a forbidden pastime for adolescent females in Annie’s culture). In this particular fable, Annie’s mother is the protagonist, and she is carrying a basket of green figs that seem to get heavier and heavier as she continues to walk. When she finally reaches her home and takes the load off her head, “out of it crawl[s] a very long black snake” (68) and she collapses. In another instance, when Annie’s mother tricks her into eating “the much hated breadfruit” (82) for lunch, Annie remembers her mother laughing while standing “half inside the door, half outside” (83) with her body “in the shade of [their] house, but her head. . . in the sun” (83). Her mother is physically standing in a grotesque liminal space, one that is neither inside nor outside, neither dark nor light, but in the process of becoming one or the other. In this scene, Annie recalls that “[w]hen she laughed, her mouth opened to show off big, shiny, sharp white teeth. It was as if my mother had suddenly turned into a crocodile” (83). The serpent and reptilian imagery represent Annie’s grotesque perception of her mother - a woman who constantly, and seemingly arbitrarily, transforms from woman to animal then back again, never quite settling on one thing or the other.

Quite the opposite of Sophie's mother, Annie's mother is able to navigate multiple identities and is much closer to embracing the fluidity of womanhood.

In conjunction with menstrual bleeding, Annie's figurative references to her mother as a serpent and a crocodile, along with the fable involving the snake on her mother's head, evoke the quintessentially grotesque imagery of the Medusa. In one version of the myth related by Marjorie Garber and Nancy Vickers in the introduction to *The Medusa Reader*, Medusa was once a beautiful priestess who was turned into a monster by an enraged Athena, who thought Medusa had seduced Poseidon in one of her sacred temples. It is speculated that Medusa may not have been complicit in the act and may have been raped by Poseidon. According to Garber and Vickers, "Athena transformed Medusa from woman to monster, changing her luxuriant long hair into a tangle of hissing snakes" (2). The Medusa is not quite one thing or the other and her lack of totality horrifies onlookers to the point of turning them into stone. According to myth, Medusa was later beheaded by Perseus and, even after being severed from her body, Medusa's head continued to bleed. Her bleeding head becomes both a source of life, producing offspring such as the Pegasus and Chrysaor, and death, producing poisonous serpents in the Sahara desert. This allusion and imagery relates back to Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body as one that represents both life and death.

Annie's misunderstanding of her mother's fable and misreading her mother as a "serpent" is reminiscent of what Hélène Cixous writes in her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," as a cultural misreading of the Medusa myth. Cixous states of the Medusa, "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (885). Annie used to view her mother as beautiful. She once marveled at her mother's "beautiful long neck, and long plaited hair" and found she had "such a beautiful mouth I could have looked

at it forever” (18). As she moves into adolescence, Annie begins to see her mother through a different, perhaps clouded, lens that aligns with what Cixous refers to as a “phallogocentric” misappropriation of the beauty of the Medusa by associating her with death and horror (885). This clouded lens causes Annie to misread her mother as a distrustful serpent rather than a multidimensional fluid being, similar to the Medusa of myth and Athena’s misreading of Medusa’s relationship; was she a seductress or a victim? It is not until the end of the novel that Annie is able to accept her mother’s fluidity and break free from patriarchal ideals, which functioned to form a wedge between Annie and her mother. The use of her mother’s trunk to store Annie’s belongings for her trip to Belgium symbolizes her acceptance of the fluid feminine space, but also her need to fill that space with her own substance. Annie’s use of her mother’s trunk also alludes to Athena’s use of Medusa’s severed head on her shield to ward off enemies (2).

In both the serpent and the reptilian representations of Annie’s mother, she is laughing. Annie’s misinterpretation of her mother’s laughter is similar to what Cixous describes as the “antinarcissism” that has been made for women within patriarchal cultures (878). Cixous blames men for women’s antinarcissism, stating, “Men have committed the greatest crime against women...they have led them to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven’t got!” (878). Cixous urges women to embrace their fluidity and reject the totality that is espoused by “phallogocentric” ideals. She states, “We’re stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end...” (878). At

the onset of puberty, as she is embarking upon her transformation into womanhood, Annie is unable to escape her previous one-dimensional, marginalized perception of her mother and accept her as a multi-dimensional, fluid being. Instead, she treats her mother's (re)actions with distrust and scorn, which in turn strains their relationship. Until adolescence, Annie's perception of her mother is that of a domestic and asexual being. Now that she is able to see her mother's many faces, however, Annie is unable to comprehend her mother's fluidity, and views her with distrust. Annie mentions the "two faces" (88) that she and her mother wear – one for the world, and one for when they are alone with each other. Annie states:

For my father and the world, we were politeness and kindness and love and laughter. I saw her with my old eyes... There was my mother scrubbing my back as in the old days... making me my favorite dessert... concerned about a small sniffle... But no sooner were we alone, behind the fence, behind the closed door, than everything darkened... and suddenly I had never loved anyone so or hated anyone so. (88)

As an adolescent female, Annie sees her mother through a different lens. The mother she has known from childhood is becoming something different before her eyes.

Both of the above examples of fables that were passed on to Sophie and Annie exemplify how oral tradition, through folklore and storytelling, also contributes to the grotesque representations of the female body. Through Tante Atie's storytelling, Sophie learns that womanhood is characterized by suffering, hard work, and self-sacrifice. When the novel opens, Tante Atie tells Sophie to never complain about school because, when she was a young girl, the only option was to cut sugarcane. The opportunity to earn an education was not a reality for Tante Atie and Martine. Tante Atie says to Sophie, "Your mother and I, when we were children

we had no control over anything. Not even this body” (20) and explains that theirs is a family with “dirt under [their] fingernails” (20). Tante Atie’s describes the sugarcane fields where she worked as a liminal space between life and death, where she and Martine “saw people die. . . from sunstroke every day” (4), including their own father, who died suddenly as he stopped to wipe his forehead. The merging of body and earth is a grotesque scene that Bakhtin would describe as “debasement” (21). Bakhtin asserts that earth is a grotesque element that “devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb), and at the same time [it is] an element of birth, of renascence...” (21). The grotesque imagery continues with Tante Atie’s description of their mother digging into the earth and her father’s body being dropped into the newly dug hole (20). In this way, the earth’s both/and, yet neither/nor, existence makes it ambivalent.

Death and burial are also tropes that are evident throughout *Annie John*. Many critics, such as Harold Bloom and Moira Ferguson, have noted that death is an undercurrent of the novel’s plot. The significance of death in *Annie John* is that its representation within the novel challenges the Western notion of death as loss and repositions death as a source of renewal. Throughout her childhood, Annie always experienced death from afar and she had an ambivalent attitude towards it. In the opening lines of the novel she states, “For a short while during the year I was ten, I thought only people I did not know died” (3). It is not until she reaches adolescence and hears her father’s retelling of his experience with his mother’s death that Annie begins to contemplate her own mother’s mortality. She becomes horrified to the point of having nightmares. Hoping that her mother will respond as she had in the “old days,” Annie relays the content of her dreams to her mother. Instead of being greeted with the affection that she expected from her mother, Annie is rebuffed by her mother and “greeted with a turned back and a warning against eating certain kinds of fruit in an unripe state just before going to bed” (44). In a retelling

of the events to her peers at school, Annie creates an alternate narrative of her mother's reaction, where her mother is upset to tears and comforts her with an embrace.

Womanhood itself is metaphorically ludicrous. Its absurdity is one of the underlying causes of Annie's (mis)interpretation of her mother's (re)actions and can be explained by the grotesque nature of the signifier "woman" and, therefore, "womanhood." The etymology of the word "woman" traces its origin to the Old English *wifman*, which translates to "wife-man." Conversely, the etymology of the word "wife" traces its origin to the Old English *wif*, which translates to "woman." Taken literally, this would (quite confusingly) mean that a woman is simply a man who is a wife - and a wife is a woman. By defining "woman" as a comparison to "man," modern language creates what Chao describes as an "improbable metaphor" (12), or a metaphor whose "components are so illogically or unnaturally combined as to de-familiarize familiar objects and throw the mind into a disorienting domain of the literal/figurative, nonsense/sense" (14). In this sense, it is not the image itself (e.g., the Lacanian real, woman) that is grotesque, but the cognitive and/or emotional dissonance that arises as a result of exposure to the image that creates a grotesque condition. From this perspective, it stands to reason that both Annie and Sophie are confused about womanhood and the actions of their mothers/female caretakers.

In both *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Annie John*, the adolescent protagonists are transitioning across the boundary between the literal, or childhood, and the metaphorical, or womanhood, what Chao describes as figurative "substitution" (58). He makes a distinction between simile and metaphor, stating that simile is a true *comparison* of two dissimilar objects, while metaphor is *substitution*. In her act of becoming "woman," the female adolescent is neither "like" nor "as" a woman (58). She is something altogether different. Chao states, "It is the *actual*

transformation of one item into another that gives birth to literal absurdity or actual falsehood [that is ascribed to] metaphor” (58). As demonstrated above, the origin of the word “woman” is anchored in confusion and absurdity. Chao views the grotesque as a “return of the real...which is characterized by physical dismemberment/degradation and resistance to *symbolization*” (48). The allusion to Medusa in *Annie John* and the fable of the bleeding woman in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* both evoke the imagery of dismemberment, or separation from the body. The symbolic reclaiming of the female body that is represented through Annie and Sophie has separation as its foundation.

Another representation of the grotesque that appears in both Danticat’s and Kincaid’s novels is evidenced through characters who transgress the boundaries between dream and reality. As *Breath, Eyes, Memory* opens, Sophie has recently turned twelve and learns that she will be sent from Haiti to New York City to live with her mother, who she has never met. Prior to her migration to New York, Sophie experienced her mother as a gazing fixture – a photograph on Tante Atie’s night table. Of her mother’s photograph, Sophie states, “She saw us when we got up, when we went to sleep, when we laughed, when we got upset at each other. Her expression never changed. Her grin never went away” (8), and Sophie begins to associate this fixity with horror. She relays that, in her dreams, her mother would chase her and “try to squeeze [her] in to the small frame so [she] could be in the picture with her” (8) and that she would “scream and scream until [her] voice gave out” (8). These dual symbols of confinement and silence foreshadow her later experience living with her mother, but they also represent the silent female of patriarchal Haiti. In “Unsilencing Défilés Daughters: Overcoming Silence in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!*,” Sharrón Eve Sarthou discusses the problematic absence of the Haitian female voice in the recording of their history and revolution in the media. Sarthou

documents Danticat's troubled reaction to the "absence of Haitian women's stories" (100) and her use of literature to remedy the "dislocation" (100) of her world, which appears to be "irredeemably broken" (100). Sarthou also cites Beverly Bell's observation that impoverished Haitian women suffer the "routine muffling of their voices" (100) that Danticat seeks to clarify through her writing and, symbolically, through Sophie's dreams and screams.

Alternately, Sophie's horror can be associated with what Chao describes as the *uncanny*, which expands upon Freud's theory. According to Chao, depictions of the grotesque in art are "hybrids of the imaginary and the mimetic, the strange and the familiar, the inside and the outside" (33); the uncanny occurs when "something which we have hitherto regarded as imaginary or superstitious appears before us in reality" (33). For the first time since she can remember, Sophie will be face to face with a person she has only known through a single photograph and family folklore. To further complicate matters, Sophie will be living with this person and under her care, presumably until she reaches adulthood. Additionally, the fear that arises as a result of Sophie's transformation from a (fluid/being) child into a (fixed/object) woman is horrifying. According to Leonard Cassuto, "transformations are horrifying because they violate the understood assumptions that fundamental category divisions are permanent" (2). Considering Cassuto's assertion that "[transformations] create anxiety by undermining" (2) fundamental societal divisions, the thought of transforming from a sexually fluid child to a sexually objectified woman is particularly horrifying for the adolescent female.

Throughout the novel, Annie's horror and anxiety manifest themselves through dreams. In many instances, the lines between dream and reality are blurred for both Annie and the reader. Annie recalls, "I had been taught by my mother to take my dreams seriously. My dreams were not unreal representations of something real; my dreams were part of, and the same as, my real

life” (89). In one instance, Annie re-lives in a recurring dream the horror she experienced after losing sight of her mother at the beach one day. She recalls that, unlike what happened in reality, her mother sat on a rock and “never came back, and sometimes my father would join her” (44). Her adolescent anxiety about losing her parents as part of her transition into adulthood is depicted within this dream. Annie later dreams that the Red Girl, who represents her childhood and her innocence, is shipwrecked and Annie rescues her. Perhaps the most vivid and telling dream that Annie describes is one of walking to the sea and drinking the entire ocean. She recalls, “All the water from the sea filled me up, from my toes to my head, and I swelled up very big. But then little cracks began to appear in me and the water started to leak out – first in little seeps...then with a loud roar as I burst open” (111). In reality, the then fifteen-year-old Annie had wet the bed, but the grotesque representation of her horror and anxiety is symbolic of her transformation out of adolescence (neither girl nor water) and into womanhood. The imagery also calls to mind the bleeding woman from Sophie’s fable in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, whose blood would seep out of her unbroken skin.

In one of Annie’s last depicted dream-states, she attempts to wash family photographs and commences to erase pieces of her past. The photos she chooses are as follows: a photo of her as a bridesmaid at her aunt’s wedding; a photo of her father, holding a bat and dressed in a white cricket uniform, and mother; a photo of her in a white Communion dress, “wearing shoes that had a decorative cutout on the sides” (117), which she and her mother quarreled over. She then describes a scene that exemplifies what Broncano would define as the “magical grotesque,” stating:

The photographs as they stood on the table, now began to blow themselves up until they touched the ceiling and then shrink back down, but to a size that I could

not easily see. They did this with a special regularity, keeping beat to a music I was not privy to. Up and down they went, up and down...and when they finally stopped, falling back on the table limp with exhaustion, the smell coming from them was unbearable to me. (119)

What makes this scene a depiction of the magical grotesque is that the dream is being represented as reality. In Annie's retelling of the events, she never admits this was a dream. To her it was real and, according to Broncano, perhaps it *was* real. Broncano quotes Lewis Nordan, who states, "When I look at the world, I can understand what other people are seeing, but I am seeing something else at the same time...It is entirely a matter of *vision*, and that vision can be described as comic, or can be described as grotesque, or otherworldly..." (673). Whether real or imagined, the growing (and shrinking...and dancing) photographs are representations of Annie's anxiety about the instability of her identity.

Unable to withstand the stench of the photographs, Annie proceeds to "bathe" (119) them, to "dust them with talcum powder and then [lay] them down in a corner covered with a blanket, so they could be warm while they slept" (119). When Annie's parents return home, they find the photographs ruined. Annie has not only washed the photographs but she has also obliterated the faces of everyone in the wedding photograph besides herself; she has erased her parents from the waist down, and she has erased her entire self from the Confirmation photograph, with the exception of her shoes. Just as with her other dream, Annie had also wet the bed. The cleansing and erasure of the patriarchal ideals of religion, marriage, and recreation are representations of Annie's plight as she attempts to find her identity in the midst of apparent chaos. In order to define herself anew, she must blot out the existence of all previous notions of reality that she has been conditioned to accept.

An earlier instance of the magical grotesque in *Annie John* is evident shortly after her mother refuses to allow Annie to dress like her any longer. Her mother tells her that she is getting too old for the two of them to wear matching outfits and that it is time she had her “own clothes” (25). As explained above, Annie misreads her mother’s (re)action as a rebuff, when she is only attempting to help Annie establish her own identity. As a result, Annie “felt the earth swept away from under [her]” (25), and she goes on to state, “ I was never able to wear my own dress or see my mother in hers without feeling bitterness and hatred, directed not so much toward my mother as toward, I suppose, life in general” (25). Following this event, Annie views her naked body in the mirror and, like the magical grotesque photographs described above, her hair begins to jut out from her body and her nose begins to spread. Annie states, “[my nose] suddenly spread across my face, almost blotting out my cheeks, taking up my whole face, so that if I didn’t know it I was me standing there...and to think that only so recently my nose had been a small thing” (25), describing a situation where her world has become so distorted that her own image in the mirror has become unrecognizable.

Magical grotesque imagery appears in the portrayal of Martine’s doll in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. The doll represents a grotesque notion of eternal infancy. When juxtaposed against Sophie’s (real) adolescence, like Tante Atie’s photo of Martine, the (inanimate) doll represents a fixture that is trapped, frozen in time. For Martine, the doll is a stand-in for Sophie, which becomes problematic when Martine later realizes that she has missed Sophie’s childhood. Just as Sophie’s only concept of her mother was derived from the photo on Tante Atie’s night table, Martine’s image of Sophie was that of an infant. Sophie’s first experience with Martine’s doll occurs on the night when she arrives in New York, when her mother hauntingly says, “Come...we will show you to your room” (my emphasis, 44). For Martine, the doll has crossed

the threshold from object to being and, as Martine performs her seemingly ritualistic caretaking and grooming of this doll, it becomes grotesque. Sophie describes the scene as follows:

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she unbraided the doll's hair, taking out the ribbons and barrettes that matched the yellow dress. She put them on a night table near the bed...she picked up a small brush and combed the doll's hair into a ponytail...She tied a rubber band around the doll's ponytail, then reached under the bed for a small trunk. She unbuttoned the back of the doll's dress and changed her into a pajama set. (44-45)

During this ritual, both Martine and the doll are fluctuating between fantasy and reality. Sophie's presence thrusts Martine into the real world, where her rituals and norms seem bizarre and the interaction between Sophie and Martine becomes awkward. When Martine invites Sophie to sit on her lap, Sophie wonders if "her thin legs would hold [her] without snapping" (46) and Sophie later rebuffs Martine's offer to unbutton the back of her dress. Unlike in *Annie John*, where the daughter struggles with her mother's misalignment with an ideal, Martine – the mother – is startled by her daughter's incongruence with her ideals of an adolescent female.

Later, as Sophie and Martine retire to their respective bedrooms, Sophie is unable to sleep and is startled by Martine's nightmares. When morning arrives, Sophie looks at her "red eyes in the mirror while splashing cold water" (49) over her face. Looking in the mirror, Sophie depicts herself as being transformed into something anew. She describes a feeling that, as she looked at her "red eyes in the mirror" (49), "new eyes" (49) looked back at her through the mirror and she felt she had a "new face all-together" (49). She felt different – in a single night, she had aged. The focus on Sophie's face and eyes is grotesque because of the blood and exaggeration.

According to Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque body, the eyes are typically not an area of concern, as "they express an individual...self-sufficient human life, which is not essential to the grotesque" (316) and because they do not represent the symbolic body. In Sophie's case, however, her eyes are exaggerated by their redness because her eyes are blood shot. Both the blood and the exaggeration invoke the Bakhtinian grotesque, with the blood threatening to burst through the confines of an otherwise smooth bodily surface.

While their protagonists are similar in a variety of ways, Danticat and Kincaid take different approaches to the shattering of gender norms in their writing. With Kincaid, the imagery is more symbolic and subtle, with more passive reporting of events rather than physical action. In alignment with the Medusa imagery that is invoked in *Annie John*, the access that Kincaid provides to Annie's consciousness represents a dismemberment of the female body. In order to reclaim and redefine the female body, the "becoming" female must first exist as a conscious being and remove her head, if you will, from her body. Annie's discontent is represented by a metaphoric black ball, "no bigger than a thimble" (85) that felt as if it resided somewhere in her torso. In one scene where she is returning home late from school, Annie describes the unsettling feeling that the thimble brings. She states, "The thimble that weighed worlds spun around and around; as it spun, it bumped up against my chest, my stomach, and whatever it touched felt as if I had been scorched there" (100). The fire inside Annie represents the anxiety she feels about her transition into the otherness of womanhood. In the same scene, she describes feeling "alternately too big and too small" (100), not quite one thing or the other, and certainly not normal. Annie's experience with adolescence is cerebral; she thinks, conceptualizes, and dreams. She reclaims her body through dismemberment, separating her head and consciousness from her objectified body.

Unlike Annie, Sophie's reaction to her transition into womanhood is more external and active. Danticat's violent representations of the grotesque in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* function as a call to action rather than a passive reporting of the shattering of gender norms, challenging the boundaries that constrain female sexuality. When compared to Kincaid's Annie, whose account of her adolescent transition to womanhood is that of prolonged illness and dreaming, the presentation of Sophie's rebellion can be attributed to Danticat's sociopolitical activism and her need to reconcile what she describes as "feeling guilty for my own physical distance from a country I had left at the age of twelve years during a dictatorship that had forced thousands to choose between exile or death" (6). Cassuto describes the concept of "violent rebellion" in *The Inhuman Race* as part of his study of slave rebellions in the American South. He asserts that "violent rebellion... is an attempt by the slave to free himself from a grotesque state of being" (100) and that harm to oneself or others is often an attempt to "grasp one's own humanity" (100). The breaking of Sophie's hymen is symbolic of a violent rebellion against the objectification of her body, which represents the body female. The vagina, the site at which this violent rebellion occurs, becomes a symbolic battleground where Sophie uses a prosthetic phallus – the pestle – to control and reclaim feminine space.

As mentioned earlier, the pestle that Sophie uses is a symbolic phallus, but it also functions in reality as a cooking tool. Bakhtin discusses the role of food/eating as one of the most critical manifestations of the grotesque body, because the moment at which food enters the body, "the body transgresses... its own limits: it swallows, it devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense... [here] man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself" (281). Bakhtin forms a connection between food and labor, stating, "[w]ork triumphed in food. Human labor's encounter with the world and the struggle against it

ended in food, in the swallowing of that which had been wrested from the world” (281).

Considering the mother/worker, child/object, vagina/production site connection, the imagery of the pestle – a food symbol – transgressing and freeing the vagina creates an additional layer of grotesque symbolism.

In another food-related concern, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* Sophie struggles with bulimia. She was diagnosed shortly after her wedding, when she begins to binge and purge. Through a Bakhtinian lens, Sophie’s relationship with food can be interpreted as her inability to swallow and retain her world as it exists. Her body is rejecting her current existence despite her ability to devour it. Although she is no longer an adolescent when her bulimia manifests, Sophie’s eating disorder is connected to a rejection of traditional gender roles. Following an intimate scene with her husband, she holds back tears after he says, “You were very good” (200), then binges on dinner leftovers and purges “all the food out of my body” (200). Her eating disorder thereby represents the antithetical grotesque. Rather than simply taking in the world and devouring it, she purges it, thus negating the resistance that she first practiced by bingeing. Further, by purging she deprives her body, and the body female, of the essential nutrients she requires to survive.

In *Annie John* there are also representations of a troubled relationship with food in Annie’s many refusals to eat. In an early scene, Annie recalls that as a small child, she would refuse to eat beef, “complaining that it involved too much chewing” (32). In those instances, her mother would chew the pieces of meat in her mouth, then feed them to Annie. The beef that Annie is unable to chew is representative of her juvenile inability to process the gendered world that exists around her. As a child, she needed her mother’s help and guidance. As she is now transitioning into womanhood, Annie needs to process the world for herself, but is physically unable to eat after witnessing an intimate moment between her parents where her mother’s

sexuality is on display. Annie states, “my mother’s hand was on the small of my father’s back...it was making a circular motion. But her hand! It was white and bony, as if it had long been dead and had been left out in the elements...It went around and around in the same circular motion, and I looked at it as if I would never see anything else in my life again” (30).

At this early stage of her sexual transition, Annie is unable to comprehend how her mother can exist as a being that is fluidly and simultaneously domestic, disciplinarian, nurturing, and sexual. The emphasis on the circular motion of her hand represents the feminine space and its fluidity. Annie’s fixation upon this scene is representative of her inability to accept her mother as a fluid being, constantly transforming before her eyes, at this point in her adolescent transition. Furthermore, the scene’s emphasis on Annie’s mother’s hand presents a grotesque image of her mother as a body that in the process of dying. Annie’s description of her mother’s hand, which had “long been dead” (30), creates the image of an unfinished being that Bakhtin would describe as “not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries” (27). According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body “is dying and as yet unfinished...stands on the threshold of the grave” (26), yet “is blended with the world, with animals, with objects” (27). This reading of Annie’s mother’s hand also relates back to Annie’s horror over discovering her mother’s mortality.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Annie John*, the protagonists’ mothers perpetuate the objectification of the female body by being overly protective of their daughters’ sexual purity. Sophie’s rebellion is a symbolic indictment of mothers who perpetuate this patriarchal ideal.. For decades, Sophie’s foremothers endured “tests” of sexual purity. Although none of the women recalled the testing as a pleasant experience, they continued to submit to the tests and later, as mothers, they would administer the tests to their daughters. In a conversation with her therapist,

Sophie is able to verbalize her feelings and forgive her foremothers for their complicity through the purity tests:

“Did you ask your grandmother why they test their daughters?” she asked.

“To preserve their honor.”

“Did you express your anger?”

“I tried, but it was very hard to be angry at my grandmother. After all she was only doing something that made her feel like a good mother. My mother, too.”

(207)

In *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*, Simone James Alexander states that the colonized mother is often “unaware of the harm she is causing her daughter and their relationship, and in her effort to protect, she instead institutionalizes her daughter” (46). In Alexander’s view, it is quite understandable that “the daughter rebels against this institutionalization” (46), as it upholds totality and contradicts multidimensionality. Sophie’s hymen break symbolizes the breaking of the family’s generations-old tradition that perpetuated patriarchal ideals.

A similarly misguided perpetuation of the obsession over sexual purity occurs in *Annie John* when Annie’s mother becomes obsessed with curbing Annie’s tomboyish ways and forbids her to play with marbles. Annie’s mother considers the symbolic promiscuity of a young girl who squats while wearing her dress with the boys, playing with balls, and it is a major source of contention between mother and daughter. Perhaps the most hurtful encounter involving “ladylike” behavior between Annie and her mother occurs the afternoon when Annie runs into her former (male) childhood friend Mineu in town. In her retelling of the event, Annie had run into him while taking a different way home from school. As luck would have it, her mother sees

her talking to Mineu and is in a rage when Annie arrives home. After lecturing Annie about “making a spectacle of [herself] in front of four boys” (102), Annie’s mother goes on to repeatedly call her a “slut,” but in patois – a grotesque form of language. Annie recalls that “the word ‘slut’ (in patois) was repeated over and over, until suddenly I felt as if I were drowning in a well but instead of the well being filled with water it was filled with the word ‘slut’” (102), an experience that exacerbates the ever-growing rift that exists between Annie and her mother.

Annie also says she felt as if the word “slut” was pouring through all her facial orifices, “pouring through my eyes, my ears, my nostrils, my mouth” (102). This imagery also aligns with Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque body. According to Bakhtin, “the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world” (26) and “stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body goes out to meet the world” (26). It is also important to note that the word “slut” is spoken in patois, a language born out of the grotesque. Language, specifically word choice and vernacular, is an important component of grotesque representations in literature. Annie’s orificial outpouring of the word is also symbolic of her rejection of her mother’s ideals of sexual purity.

Susana Morris discusses what she terms “respectability politics” in her article “Daughters of this Land: Genealogies of Resistance in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*,” where she recalls Sophie’s reference to the tradition of testing, the “virginity cult,” of the women in her neighborhood. Morris states, “Martine is a direct heir to the respectability politics of the virginity cult, and this circumstance profoundly influences and complicates how she mothers and how she understands the role of family” (77); yet the guiding principles of the virginity cult are embedded in the grotesque. Sophie’s mother “listen[s] to the echo of [her] urine in the toilet” (154) and, the

legend of the missing hymen, as told by Sophie, is laden with grotesque imagery. The legend states:

...there was once an extremely rich man who married a poor black girl. He had chosen her out of hundreds of prettier girls because she was untouched. For the wedding night, he bought the whitest sheets and nightgowns he could possibly find. For himself, he bought a can of thick goat milk in which he planned to sprinkle a drop of her hymen blood to drink. (154)

The legend continues with the man cutting his new wife between her legs because she will not bleed, and her eventually bleeding to death. After her funeral, her husband goes to her gravesite and “[drinks] his blood-spotted goat milk and crie[s] like a child” (155). Blood and milk, as bodily secretions, are grotesque, and the allegorical husband’s ingestion of the milk/blood drink represents the swallowing up of these secretions. He is symbolically devouring the female sexual being by drinking the milk/blood.

In Danticat’s work, the mother—who represents both milk and blood—becomes a grotesque figure who exists dually as objectifier and objectified. Sarah Gleeson-White studies the adolescent grotesque in *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*. In her assessment of female sexual development, she asserts that, “[t]he female adolescent is *even more* grotesque than her adult counterpart: not only is she female, but she is in that liminal state between childhood and adulthood...” (my emphasis, 12). The emphasis on “even more” is to focus attention upon Gleeson-White’s inferred position that the adult female is also grotesque, creating an additional layer of complexity for the (transitioning) female adolescent and problematic relationships between mothers and daughters.

In reclaiming her vagina, Sophie is also taking control of her reproductive rights. As an orificial space, and the site of natural childbirth, the vagina is also a grotesque space. Bakhtin states, “the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which lead beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths” (317-8). Viewed from a Marxist perspective, the vagina symbolizes a production site, where mother represents worker and child represents made object. Cassuto examines the link between Marxist theory and the grotesque, explaining that capitalism alienates the worker from its made object, creating a liminal space between the two. In Cassuto’s reading of Marx, the worker maintains “a self-creating connection to the world through making” (18), which aligns with Bakhtin’s description of the unfinished grotesque body, where he states that the grotesque body is “continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (317). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, capitalism is the underlying cause of Martine’s flight from Haiti. Tante Atie tells Sophie, “In this country, there are many good reasons for mothers to abandon their children” (20), which creates the very worker/object alienation that Cassuto problematizes. By taking the pestle to her vagina, Sophie is shattering the physical barrier between herself and her mother (object and worker), while simultaneously reclaiming control of her vagina (the production site).

The grotesque images that appear in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Annie John* bring heightened attention to the adolescent female’s experience as she transforms into a woman and an objectified being. The vagina functions as a character within the narratives and plays a major role in the development of the novel’s plot. Sophie and Annie, and their vaginas, are symbolic of the body female – specifically the Black body female; Sophie is every adolescent female; Annie’s vagina is every vagina. Sophie’s adolescent victory over the ideals of the virginity cult is

what Morris describes as a typical outcome of novels written by African-American and Afro-Caribbean female authors of the time period. Morris states, “in many novels written by Black women in the Caribbean and the United States since the 1970s, it is the daughter who is ultimately able to experience the fruit of resistance” (102). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* it is Tante Atie who plants the seed into Sophie’s mind that she can redefine herself and be a different type of woman because of the opportunity and education she has been afforded. Early in the novel, Tante Atie states, “My father would have never dreamt that we would live in the same kind of house as people like Monsieur and Madame Augustin live in” (20), and she goes on to explain to Sophie that her mother has sacrificed so that she can have a better life. Similarly, Annie is able to experience the fruit of her mother’s resistance in that she is able to leave the island for a better life on the much-coveted mainland in Belgium.

In some ways, Morris believes Sophie is able to “recover from her past and move forward” (102) and that her “partial triumph is an indictment of the enduring legacy of the paradox of respectability, the virginity cult, and the systems they engender and bolster, systems that more often than not alienate and isolate individuals rather than cohering them in families” (102). In other ways, Sophie’s tale concludes with her surviving an ambivalent adolescence, only for she and Martine to become *Marasas*, who are “two inseparable lovers...duplicated in two” (84). In other words, they are mirror images of one another.

A similar scene of mirroring is depicted at the end of *Annie John*, when Annie is boarding the ship to Belgium. As her she bids farewell to her mother, they appear as mirror images of one another. Annie states, “Big tears streamed down her face and it must have been that – for I could not bear to see my mother cry – which started me crying, too...we looked at each other for a long time with smiles on our faces. As if responding to some invisible cue, we

both said, at the very same moment, ‘Well’” (146). Annie’s detachment from her mother is further evidenced in the final scene, where they are waving to each other, Annie on the ship and her mother on the shore, until her mother “became just a dot in the matchbox-size launch swallowed up in the big blue sea” (146). The imagery of her mother being “swallowed up” is a grotesque representation of a symbolic burial of rigid ideals and the (possible) birth of more fluid norms.

Sophie is unable to fully embrace her womanhood or escape the confinement of phallic ideals until the end of the novel when Martine is buried. As the other mourners throw dirt onto her mother’s coffin, Sophie runs into the cane field, presumably where her mother had been raped, presumably the cane field that she could only run past without stopping. Sophie states, “I ran through the field, attacking the cane. I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding” (233). In yet another bloody scene, Sophie violently battles and castrates the symbolic phallus and reclaims the space where her mother’s body was violated. At this moment, her remaining mother figures chant and ask “Ou libere? Are you free?” (233). Bakhtin describes burial as “death inseminating mother earth and making her bear fruit once more” (327). Bakhtin’s depiction of death and burial as catalysts for renewal mirrors Sophie’s grandmother’s assertion that “the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her” (234), suggesting that the act of burying creates room for adolescent daughters to become women.

Considering Danticat and Kincaid as women writers who use the grotesque to inspire discourse concerning female sexuality also necessitates a consideration of the function of this type of writing within the contemporary canon. Danticat and Kincaid exemplify through their

writing that the voice of the body female needs to be acknowledged, validated, and celebrated. As evidenced in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Annie John*, the writing of the female body is an evolutionary process. As adolescent females become women, the boundaries of sexuality must continue to be transgressed. If women continue to write themselves and - with pestle and/or pencil in hand - crush, erase, and rewrite their stories, the otherness that is used to marginalize the female body can be redefined as a symbol of empowerment. By writing of female adolescent experiences, such as those of Sophie and Annie, and celebrating/embracing the fluid nature of womanhood, Danticat and Kincaid work to neutralize patriarchal power and reclaim the grotesque feminine.

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