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## The Art of Death: Grief and Loss in Edwidge Danticat's Untwine

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In this essay, I want to share some ideas on Edwidge Danticat's young adult novel *Untwine* (2005) on grief and mourning through the use of the traditional stages of grief articulated as a five-stage process by the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying* (1969) and, to a lesser extent, that of the writer C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* (1961) who so acutely reflected on grief in that text. Reading Danticat alongside Lewis enables us to see that Danticat embraces a sense of the ceaseless presence of death. While many young adult novels seek to solve or resolve problems of culture, family, and identity, Danticat's work reflects a perspective on the ongoing presence of loss. The story in *Untwine* revolves around a car accident that claims the life of one identical twin sister, Isabelle Boyer. My reading of the novel takes Giselle, the surviving twin in the novel, as a character who works at articulating how suffering is met, processed, and managed through the visual arts. The works of art are used by Giselle to perform the stages of grief in light of Kübler-Ross's theorization of that five-stage process. This book is not a rubric but rather offers accounts of the different ways that people experience dying and its anxieties. In this way, Kübler-Ross's text demonstrates how the death of Giselle's sister, Isabelle, allows Giselle to consider how mourning can become a way to cope with rather than overcome grief.

It is almost impossible to read *Untwine* without thinking about Danticat's *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story* (2017). Indeed, Danticat references Kübler-Ross early in that text in her assessment of how one moves through different emotions many times through these five stages in any given hour or day. By engaging the most famous roadmap to the grieving process, Danticat offers a distinctly Haitian response for the five stages of grief that refutes any resolution that suggests that one emerges from these stages as full, restored, and healed. Acceptance, the final stage of Kübler-Ross's process, becomes the way that Danticat fully expresses her own

Haitian diasporic sensibilities in *Untwine*. In fact, in *The Art of Death* even as she continues to read C.S. Lewis, Danticat writes that “Terror should have been part of Kübler-Ross’s grief cycle...” (150).

Again, in *The Art of Death*, Danticat states: “Writers will never stop writing them [stories], because, alone or en masse, people will continue to die, and though it happens every day, when it hits close to home, we will always be caught off guard. We will always be amazed that it’s touched our lives as well” (65). Danticat’s body of work has never shied away from the business of death. Death is a constant companion for this author. Those figures—both real and fictional—are its most important subjects. Danticat’s sentences pull us out of our own lives and into that of her characters. As C.S. Lewis wrote: “It’s hard to have patience with people who say, ‘There is no death’ or ‘Death doesn’t matter.’ There is death. And whatever matters. And whatever happens has consequences, and it and they are irrevocable and irreversible” (15). There is a kind of synergy between Danticat and C.S. Lewis in their individual texts composed decades apart in which one can discern quite clearly that death does indeed matter. It has a materiality to it and it is a complication. *Untwine* is about harm—that is, it is about loss and grief—and how to manage both when life must continue, a life that is now in a different state than it was previously. Not malformed but differently arranged, almost foreign or estranged, irrevocable and irreversible. But how does life endure when a world is turned upside down and the stability of sameness, a kind of resemblance or even regularity, is forever removed?

The opening sentence of Danticat’s *Untwine* does this work of drawing us into the world of Giselle and the narrative through an interior monologue. The novel does not allow us to linger overly long on a build up to the accident that claims the life of Isabelle Boyer. The opening

paragraph immediately makes it known to the reader that this is a catastrophic moment for the entire family:

I remember what was playing when the car slammed into us. It was Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. Like most pieces of classical music I've ever heard, it started out pretty slow, then sped up, then peaked, then slowed down again. My sister, Isabelle, asked Dad to put her orchestra practice CD in his SUV's new, super-fancy, twelve-disk player. Isabelle unbuckled her seat belt, leaned over, and handed the CD to Dad from the backseat. Isabelle wanted to hear the music as the 'Maestro' had intended it, she said, before she and her friends butchered it at Morrison High's spring orchestra concert. (3)

We are yanked immediately into the world of chaos and death with a soundtrack from the world of classical music and fairytale, Igor Stravinsky's 1910 orchestral work for the ballet, *The Firebird*.<sup>1</sup> In "The Sound of Separation: The Stravinskian Resonances of Edwidge Danticat's *Untwine*," Paula Weinman (in this issue) describes Stravinsky's composition as "a musically unruly, unsettling composition" as a way of also thinking about Giselle's "unruly, reiterative, and sometimes quite stubbornly circular grief." The very movement of the music is significant as it depicts a process that is partially mirrored and that looks very similar to the way this accident unfolded: "Like most pieces of classical music I've ever heard, it started out pretty slow, then sped up, then peaked, then slowed down again" (5). Furthermore, Giselle describes the accident through process and movement: "At first it seemed like a mirage, some type of optical illusion, like when water distorts light and the light gets misdirected. Suddenly the traffic began moving forward, then a red minivan sped up, crossed the middle lane, and slammed into the back door,

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<sup>1</sup> The ballet is dissimilar from the classical fairy tale where the firebird is the object of a difficult quest with a hero who must search for this elusive prize and win the heart of a beautiful woman.

on Isabelle's side" (5). The chilling moment of the accident is very much like Stravinsky's music: halting, increasingly rapid with an extended heightening, and then another stop or break. Weinman analyzes how Danticat's references to Stravinsky are not only musical but literary and how Danticat uses music in the service of grief both of which "...often evade[s] our articulation, our meaning-making, and our previously-held understandings about the meaning of loss."

We can perhaps even understand how the flow of Stravinsky's piece might give a momentary narrative balance to the turmoil of the accident. For Giselle, the car accident is something illusory, an optical phenomenon, a misshaping or deformation of light followed by a peak - the crossing of the middle lane, and then the sudden rapid slowness of the minivan hitting the car. This shadow or mirage is part of Giselle's experience in both the car and, later, in a different sense, in the hospital room. There, she sees dim outlines, opaque shapes, and bright lights from her frozen place in bed. Her misery is thus compounded by her inability to utter a word, move her toes, or make any gesture that suggests an awareness of her suffering. Immediately after the accident, Giselle thinks: "Then there was an eerie silence, pierced by sirens, then honks and beeps, like birds chirping, but unfamiliar birds, or just one, a golden firebird, flowing at a distance, tempting you to touch it, knowing you never could" (8). The quiet hovers until it is disrupted by Stravinsky's firebird who breaks the silence that the accident had caused.

The firebird taunts Giselle because—like the fairytale—it requires a difficult and fraught journey through an emotional and physical landscape that is both intimate and remote. The intimacy is entangled with the feelings that she has for her sister while the distance is how she must now navigate those feelings as they are transformed into memory. One could also make the point that Danticat narrates through analogies to different art forms – here music, later visual art.

As Weinman points out, Danticat also stages death at the beginning of the novel rather than the ending. Grief, Danticat seems to suggest here, re-organizes our sense of time: the past, present, and future are shuffled about in ways that feel uncanny and unnatural.

*A Grief Observed*, in a different mode, also resists an easy pathway out of grief by using the literary as a way to explore how grief decenters the ways in which we understand life. C.S. Lewis's words also resonate with how Danticat has conceived her novel. I also want to suggest that in a reading of *A Grief Observed* that there is an overlap between the articulation of bereavement between his text and that of Kübler-Ross. These ideas are about a theorization of loss through the dual gestures of Lewis's own personal reflections on the 1960 death of his wife alongside that of the traditional stages of bereavement outlined as a five-stage progression by Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying*. According to Kübler-Ross, these stages are denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Giselle, the protagonist of *Untwine*, processes her loss by providing five examples of artwork that correspond to the five stages of grief that Kübler-Ross described. Her articulation of this loss is a complex structural method that takes the reader through eclectic works of art that range from Frida Kahlo to Alison Saar. This is art that offers revisionist perspectives on grief. They show the reader how Danticat envisions the multi-stage process of coping with loss.

Giselle's selection and categorization according to her own aesthetic inclinations offer a discursive imaginary for her grief and how she might also work through it as a practice that takes the visual as a discovery and a coming to terms with the reality of death. This practice is unconventional yet scrupulous in its creative choices. For example, Giselle invokes Edvard Munch's *The Scream* as a model for anger and *Riding with Death* by Jean-Michel Basquiat as a template for acceptance.

In *The Art of Death*, Danticat observes that:

We write about the dead to make sense of our losses, to become less haunted, to turn ghosts into words, to transform an absence into language. Death is an unparalleled experience, so we look to death narratives, and to the people in our lives who are dying, for some previously unknown insights, which we hope they will pass on to us in some way. (29)

Alternatively, in the four slender chapters of *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis bares his soul to the reader by processing the death of his wife from cancer as “an absence into language.” In the text—rather, a journal—he gives voice to his bereavement without attempting to explain it away. “Aren’t all these notes the senseless writhings of man who won’t accept the fact that there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it?” (33). As a genuine observation, he attends to the emotions that one is left with or that one is forced to gather to oneself during the process of mourning. He is overwhelmed by the force that grief thrusts onto the survivor. Yet, in the same manner, one could say that his text is a disputation with loss. It is a difficulty that Lewis highlights in his text. How does one continue to live and act when one’s other half is gone?

Edwidge Danticat tells us in *The Art of Death*: “Opening sentences yank us out of our lives and into other lives. They also carefully set the stage for what’s to come. They are our first opportunity to meet a writer, or character, and decide whether or not we want to spend the next few hours or days with them” (64). In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis’s text also does this same pulling. It takes the reader outside of herself and into a discursive world that is now built around how one makes sense of loss. Meeting Lewis as a writer transports us to another space in which grief is the anchor for his journaling of his wife’s death. His book is meditative in that it thinks through grief in ways that suggest a never-ending process of adjustment of the self to the loss of

love and the familiarity of a vital presence. This fundamental hole that has been created in Lewis's life is one that he writes is spread over everything (11). "Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery's shadow or reflection: the fact that you don't merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief" (9-10). Lewis's opening sentence in *A Grief Observed*, one that "yanks" the reader into another life, evokes Giselle's days spent in the hospital bed, in which she attempts to be receptive to the information that she is taking in while remaining confused about the exact state of things. Lewis writes in *A Grief Observed*:

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness. I keep on swallowing.

At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. Or perhaps, hard to take it in. It is so uninteresting. (3)

This condition of being concussed, having a concussion, is the stunning, damaging, and shattering effect from a blow to the self, the mind's ability to perceive and then respond. One can imagine that this jolt or agitation is the same fear and unnamed grief that Giselle feels as she lies in the hospital bed in a semi-conscious state. Yet she can only keep swallowing the facts of her new life experience, living each day in grief but without the benefit of speech or even the ability to tell those around her who she really is, her true identity.

Danticat's novel also considers many of the same emotions that Lewis articulates in his text. While he is writing about death and grief, Danticat's text is concerned with *how* to write about death and grief. However, both texts articulate the ways in which death and its narration

are an inevitable part of the living that we all must do. These “senseless writhings” are not merely that of a bereft man but one who is also chronicling how death affects the self. Like Lewis, Danticat uses writing as a way to manage her feelings about mourning. “Writing has been the primary way I have tried to make sense of my losses, including deaths. I have been writing about death for as long as I have been writing” (6). Both authors use writing as an effort to accept the inexorable experience of death. The “how” is the difference between the two. Lewis has composed a journal that tells the reader how he responds to and reflects on the death of his wife as both physical and spiritual events that are grounded in his faith and the questioning of that faith. Danticat does that same work in her fiction and non-fiction through texts that are attuned to the many ways in which death and grief inflect every life and moves with that life through its journey.

The life that Giselle and her family led before the accident can never be regained. It has become memorial; it is now unachievable. The silence and the noise as well as the visual dimension in this novel are noteworthy because they bring disparate things together: slowness followed by frantic speed; the sounds of the sirens; the blares of other cars and then the strange quiet; Giselle’s unwilling silence; the voices of her family and the hospital staff around her; and light and dark. Every sense is activated in Giselle and becomes even more so as Danticat uses art in order to enlarge Giselle’s sensory experience: “There are moments during the ambulance ride—which I am prolonging here, too—moments when I’m not even there, when I can’t even hear the sirens or feel the hard board beneath my body. These are brief moments of silence, like they demand at assemblies, or after something horrible has happened” (10). The desire to prolong, extend, feel, and hear are all imbricated in the sensate experience of living on and telling the story after something horrible has happened. Is loss about an over-abundance of

sensation rather than a lack of it? Can a person be overpowered by the complete heaviness of grief?

Giselle is in control of her cognitive faculties enough to understand the weight of her loss and to make an attempt to arrange it in a way that makes sense for her. She alternately prolongs it, makes it silent, and creates a cacophony of voices and sensation: metal against metal, a hard board under her back, and toes that desperately try to wiggle their awareness. Giselle must manage this loss while navigating the newness of the world around her now that she has been untwinned or, rather, untwined from Isabelle. This intricate wrapping around, the tangle of Giselle's life with that of her sister, has vanished. Unlike the delicate way in which one unplaits braided hair, the sisters' connection is violently and abruptly pulled apart. In the wake of the accident, Giselle narrates her grief in terms both mundane and ethereal. While she processes the death of her twin sister, she must also manage the details of routine life with friends, family, and her own self. Like the experience of C.S. Lewis, Giselle's life after the accident is also a disputation with loss. She must now manage the reality of her sister's death and its aftermath, and she does so with defiance and with an awareness of self that remains intact even as she psychologically incorporates the death of her twin.

Like Lewis, Giselle wants Isabelle back "as an ingredient in the restoration of [her] past" (41). It is the mistake of their bodies that drives the first half of the novel. It is only in chapter eight that the true identity of the surviving twin is revealed, and that discovery occurs through the recognition of a scar that only Giselle has. Giselle is marked by a wound, something that has left evidence of difference but also of a pain received; there is a perpetual memory of pain etched on the skin. Everyone had believed that it was Giselle who died in the accident and that the body in the hospital bed was that of Isabelle. Giselle's misunderstood body must be visually revived.

Just as Danticat depicts Giselle's physical recuperation throughout the remainder of the novel, Giselle slowly rediscovers her relationships with her extended family, her best friend, Tina, and her love interest, Jean-Michel.

I ask this very real question that Danticat has written so beautifully about – what *is* the art of death? Giselle has already found a way to manage how art and death can be usefully put together as phases of grief. It is her visual acuity that makes such an endeavor possible and even fulfilling in the novel. As her art teacher tries to articulate the five stages of grief for the class late in the novel, Giselle has her own images that she would associate with each stage that Kübler-Ross set forward: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. One can see that this is a wave (an immersive experience) rather than a linear progression from one state to another with a neatly tied knot at the end. There are highs and lows, peaks and valleys, repetitions, and also places that will never be revisited and places in which one resides permanently.

What Kübler-Ross depicts in her book, *On Death and Dying*, is a remarkable series of interviews with people who are dying and know that they are dying. In her own manner, Giselle Boyer converts these stages of grief that Kübler-Ross delineated from the dying to the living. Kübler-Ross explains something very important for Giselle's own interpretation of death. "Denial functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, allows the patient to collect himself and, with time, mobilize other, less radical defenses" (39). One can see that in many ways Giselle is the patient who needs to recuperate from the state of shock while adapting her life and enlisting defenses that help her cope with stress of her new reality.<sup>2</sup> Anger, the second

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<sup>2</sup> In thinking about denial and the dying patient, Kübler-Ross articulates a striking idea that allows us to further understand the relationship between the twins, Giselle and Isabelle. While the author is speaking in a different context, there is much affinity between this sentence and the ways in which Giselle keeps

stage, is a place of rage and resentment. But this anger is forlorn. That hostility and bitterness of this stage is closely aligned with despondency and melancholy. According to Kübler-Ross, Bargaining, the third stage, is almost always an extension of life, an attempt to postpone (83). However, Giselle is beyond that phase and instead imagines a world where her negotiation of loss is presented as a re-articulation of the relationship with her sister. The fourth stage, Depression, is about unresolved grief and shows a distinction between thinking of life and thinking of death (99). And while it is preoccupied with death, it is also about emotional preparation. It is a coping mechanism. There is logic and awareness in this phase. In the final stage, Acceptance, Kübler-Ross states that, "Acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings. It is as if the pain had gone, the struggle is over, and there comes a time for 'the final rest before the long journey'" (113). Acceptance can be an existence without fear and despair (120). This is where Danticat and Kübler-Ross diverge. Within a Haitian framework, death is always present and must be respected and celebrated as an important part of life. For many Haitians and those of the diaspora, there is the understanding that death is as much about the living as it is about the dead. Death is not a momentary interlude in life; it is life. This brief summary of some of the major points in *On Death and Dying* prepares the reader for Giselle's aesthetic management of suffering. There is a reconciliation with grief where the focus is on the visualization of experience, needs, and reactions.

When Giselle visits school for the first time and attends her art history class, the teacher, Mr. Rhys, quickly changes the lesson plan to "grief art" (225). While Giselle does not name any

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her reality intact: "He can talk about his health and illness, his mortality and his immortality as if they were twin brothers permitted to exist side by side, thus facing death and still maintaining hope" (41-2).

of the art that her teacher associates with the five stages of grief, she has her own ideas about how to articulate that grief and offers her own interpretation of each stage through an art piece:

If I were Mr. Rhys, I'd choose a different painting for every grief milestone he's listed. For Denial and Isolation, I'd show Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas (Los Dos Fridas)*, in which Kahlo is holding hands with a mirror image of herself, their two hearts joined by one vein. For Anger, I'd show Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. For Bargaining ("If we'd left fifteen minutes earlier..."), I'd show one of Isabelle's favorite Haitian artists, Louisiane Saint Fleurant's portraits of bubble-headed twins. For Depression, I'd show Alison Saar's *Barefoot*, a life-sized wood sculpture of a woman coiled into a fetal position, weeping as a tree grows from the soles of her feet. And for Acceptance, I'd show Basquiat's *Riding with Death*. (226-227)

Giselle's response to each stage of grief is her own intervention into the teacher's outlining of those stages of grief for the class. Offering her own interpretation, Giselle is activated by the choices that she makes and explores her own experience of loss in ways that are legible to her. Danticat's understanding of grief is exceptional, exploratory, and expansive. In *The Art of Death*, Danticat perhaps warns her readers about the kinds of work that the writer performs around death. "Literature thrives on suffering. What creates tension and conflict in most works of fiction is some type of *useful*, even if initially seemingly senseless, suffering... We put our fictional characters through the wringer so that we might write (tell others) about it" (80). This telling is what Danticat achieves through Giselle's perspective, works of art that are equivalent to the stages of grief as Giselle understands them. The suffering allows Danticat to write the story of death since it cannot write its own story (125). And yet, Danticat, the writer, allows Giselle to tell the story of death through the visual. In *Untwine*, Giselle suffers but, according to Danticat,

there is something *useful* about that grief that can be expressed through works of art. What can art do to help us understand grief? A work of art gives the viewer something tangible that can be observed and examined. It is presence. Art allows the viewer to open an intimate one-sided dialogue with it. I don't suggest that this is a monologue because the pieces of art have, in important ways, their own stories to tell. Art gets to tell a story by its very existence. The viewer interacts with the art as one might with a guide. The works of art that Giselle speaks from are honest, unashamed, and restorative. Danticat uses the world of art in order to provide visual analogues to Kübler-Ross's stages of grief to show us how Giselle processes each of the grief milestones. The loss of Isabelle in *Untwine* transforms "an absence into a language" that tells a story that Giselle narrates through the visual medium.

Giselle names Frida Kahlo's [\*The Two Fridas\*](#) (1939), a double self-portrait, depicting two versions of Kahlo seated side by side with a stormy sky in the background as the Denial and Isolation stage. In this oil painting, the two Fridas are holding hands. There is a difference between the two Fridas in their manner of dress—one is more traditionally dressed in Mexican attire while the other is more European. They both have visible hearts and the heart of one Frida is cut and torn open while the other is whole. The blood drips onto this Frida's dress and she is in danger of bleeding to death. This painting is Frida Kahlo's double vision of herself. One Frida will be a fatality and the other must live on attached by the heart and the arteries to her double. The complexity of *The Two Fridas* is understated. The devastation, tragedy, and mortality that emanate from the canvas is compositionally and imaginatively rich and compelling. It is only at the end of the novel that Kahlo again regains our attention. While in Haiti, Tina gives Giselle a small framed copy of *The Two Fridas*, a gift from Jean Michel. Giselle intuits that she will not be "...the bloodless Frida forever, that one day, my [her] heart will be full of life again" (299).

Giselle sees the stage of Anger as marked by the Norwegian Edvard Munch's [\*The Scream\*](#) (1893). Essentially, *The Scream* is autobiographical: an expressionistic construction based on Munch's actual experience. In his diary in an entry headed "22 January 1892," Munch wrote:

I was walking along a path with two friends – the sun was setting – suddenly the sky turned blood red – I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence – there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city – my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety – and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature.

This scream that issues from the mouth of the man's skull-like head seems to be both bewildered and afraid. The face is almost featureless and flooded with anxiety. It also hints at frustration and an estrangement from his environment. The figure is alone in the foreground with two people in the background who appear to be walking away from him. While Giselle may read this painting as a depiction of anger, it can also be read as a visual representation of anxiety and the distress of solitude. Anger can be read as fear and, in this moment, *The Scream* does present both to the viewer.

Giselle chose one of the most important Haitian folk artists, Louisiane Saint Fleurant's, and her portraits of what Giselle calls [bubbleheaded twins](#) to represent Bargaining. How might this painting be a way that Giselle thinks and talks about carrying on in the absence of her twin? The vibrant use of color, horizontal and vertical lines, a flat perspective, and the trees and the plants that flood the canvas of this piece demonstrates to us how Giselle sees herself and Isabelle represented in a rich collage of brown faces. According to Kübler-Ross, this stage is about coping and the struggle for meaning. Giselle wants life returned to what it was; she wants her

loved one restored and does it through Saint Fleurant's multiple images of twins where she is depicting the *Marassa* (or twin *lwa*) from Vodou. It also suggests how Giselle could thrive within the bountiful world that is lavish with twinned-bodies in an imagined beautiful utopia. The implication for the novel is that while Giselle might be educated in a Eurocentric milieu, she remains connected to her Haitian heritage through Saint Fleurant. This heritage is one that will keep her linked to her sister and to her cultural traditions.

Giselle's return to the past with Saint Fleurant's evocative paintings are again an important signpost for Haitian art and culture in her life. *Marassa* (also spelled *Marasa*) hold a distinctive place in Haitian and Haitian-American cultural and religious traditions. It is noteworthy that Edwidge Danticat wrote a novel about twins, a theme that she has used previously. Danticat employs this idea of twinness in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) as a method of storytelling, a "textual performance" that distracts from the traumatic experience of being "tested" to ensure that virginity has been maintained. In her article, Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo writes that twins are often seen as one spirit in two bodies. In an interview, Danticat explains how she uses the ideas of mother and daughter as twins in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.<sup>3</sup> Although Danticat is explicitly defining a moment between a mother and daughter, it might be productive to think about the *Marassa* bond using Danticat's own words to locate the work that she does in *Untwine*: "...two people are one, but not quite; they might look alike and talk alike but are, in essence, different people" (N'Zengou-Tayo 129). *Untwine* is deeply concerned with twins and the bond between the two. At one point in the novel, Giselle observes that "My sister is dead and I am her ghost" (169). Giselle and Isabelle Boyer are thus part of a mythic understanding of twins

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<sup>3</sup> N'Zengou-Tayo, Marie José. "Rewriting the folklore: Traditional beliefs and popular culture in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak*" in *MaCom'ere: Journal of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars* 3, 2000. pp. 123-40.

that plays an important role in religious practices in Haiti and the diaspora. Although not overtly at play with ideas about the *Marassa* apart from her use of Saint Fleurant's work, Danticat's inclusion of the painting remains central for an understanding of how twinning is part of a Haitian understanding of itself, its customs, and rituals. Giselle observes that one day she might be able to see herself singly, untwinned - a *dosa* (270). Giselle and Isabelle are not quite one but the death of the other leaves a wound in the space that both once occupied. It is this twinning and its loss that opens up the space for Danticat to unsettle a teleological model of grieving in Kübler-Ross's theorization through the use of works of art that engage with Haitian folklore and religious practices.

For Giselle, Depression is Alison Saar's *Barefoot* (2007), a life-size nude figure carved out of wood in a fetal position whose legs are the roots of a tree. The fetal position could be a reminder of the womb that they, Isabelle and Giselle, once shared. The sculpture depicts either a body that has lost its ground or that has been ripped from the stabilizing force of the soil. Without the nourishment of the soil, the roots and the figure will eventually die. This depression—a helplessness, the feeling of being overwhelmed, and prone—is embodied in *Barefoot* where even the ability or desire to stand up is missing, unachievable. The bareness of this sculptural piece captures the melancholy and loneliness that Giselle feels as a single uprooted body.

Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Riding with Death* (1988) depicts Acceptance, the final stage of Kübler-Ross's theory. *Riding with Death* is also a print that Giselle has hanging on her bedroom wall. Basquiat (1960-1988), a Haitian-American artist with Puerto-Rican heritage, had a short but brilliant career. Basquiat's position as a renowned artist allows Giselle to also see herself represented in the world of art and that particular painting produces a way of carrying her

through the world even if “acceptance” is the only way forward. As bell hooks wrote in 1993, “*Riding with Death* haunts my imagination, evoking images of riding and being ridden, as a process of revelatory exorcism. It juxtaposes the paradigm of ritual sacrifice with that of recovery and return.”<sup>4</sup> Thought to be one of his last works, Basquiat created a deconstructed skeletal animal being ridden by a similarly decomposing and indecipherable brown figure who has decided to or is forced to take the journey that this animal is embarking on. The idea of riding with death can also be thought of as a kind of spiritual possession which could be healing and restorative for the one possessed, a vodou reference. Lacking embellishment, a subjective visual vocabulary informs this figurative painting and one can abstract its meanings from the spare depiction of detached bones, two inscrutable faces – one human and one animal, and a small palate of somber colors punctuated by bright white bones. This stage is about recognizing that the loved one is gone and conceding that this new reality is the permanent one. Giselle will live with this death into the future since acceptance, in terms of Haitian spirituality and tradition, is about the necessary presence of death in life. Danticat is expressly revising this traditional articulation of the stages of grief by attaching them to evocative images and Haitian spiritualities. The shift from the shock and fear of denial to bold and unflinching acceptance shows the reader how Giselle is working to immerse herself in the very real existential problems of life and death. bell hooks again observes that:

The work by Basquiat that haunts my imagination, that lingers in my memory, is *Riding with Death* (1988). Evoking images of possession, of riding and being ridden in the Haitian voodoo sense—as a process of exorcism, one that makes revelation, renewal and

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<sup>4</sup> hooks, bell., “From the Archives: Altars of Sacrifice, Re-membering Basquiat,” in *Art in America*, Jun 1, 1993. <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/from-the-archives-altars-of-sacrifice-re-membering-basquiat/>

transformation possible—I feel the subversion of the sense of dread provoked by so much of Basquiat’s work. In its place is the possibility that the black-and-brown figure riding the skeletal white bones is indeed ‘possessed.’...That is why I am most moved by the one Basquiat painting that juxtaposes the paradigm of ritual sacrifice with that of ritual recovery and return.<sup>5</sup>

Giselle is fascinated with Basquiat and even her love interest has the same first name. Giselle, Jean Michel, and Tina chose this painting as their oral presentation for their art history class and now Giselle wonders if she had somehow known she would be riding with death (186). In the same presentation, Tina said “that Basquiat must have known he was going to die young because in that painting he seemed to be so at ease with death. The man riding the skeleton seemed almost like he was on his way to a celebration” (186). Is this perhaps a way of reading *Riding with Death*? As celebratory? A festive occasion? Does death carry with it an ease that allows one to willingly take the journey? Is it a way of engaging Haitian spirituality in ways in which the figure on the horse is not made to be watched and ingested as an exploitation of the black body but rather, to repeat bell hooks, “...as ritual sacrifice with that of ritual recovery and return...”<sup>6</sup>

This eclectic collection of works of art that Giselle organizes for grief both removes them from the world of art by referencing them as a way to visualize the stages of grief but also further embeds them into aesthetic categories by demonstrating their function as tellers of certain types of stories through the visual medium. The heart of this essay was a reassessment of the simplistic maps to recovery Giselle (and others) are forced to learn in school contexts. Danticat’s audacious move in this young adult novel, which was to embrace the perpetual presence of death, is an

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<sup>5</sup> hooks, bell., “From the Archives: Altars of Sacrifice, Re-membling Basquiat”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

unusual deviation from the genre. There is still the idea that books for young people should seek to tidily resolve all issues around identity and crisis. *Untwine* does not push any kind of easy or facile approach to grief or the presence of death and, in fact, embraces death as a component of all life. Thinking about the work of Margaret Atwood in “Negotiating with the Dead,” Danticat tells us in *The Art of Death* that “In other words, even when we are not writing about death, we are still writing about death. After all, death is always the eventual outcome, the final conclusion of every story” (154-5).

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