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# A Woman's Voice and Identity: Narrative Métissage as a Solution to Voicelessness in American Literature

Kali Lauren Oldacre  
*Gardner-Webb University*

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A Woman's Voice and Identity: Narrative Métissage as a Solution to Voicelessness in  
American Literature

by

Kali Lauren Oldacre

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Gardner-Webb University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English

Boiling Springs, N.C.

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## Chapter One—Introduction

“If ‘difference’ is what makes culture visible to observers, then the emphasis on difference has the merit of underscoring specificities that would be muted and ignored otherwise.”

Françoise Lionnet, “Logique Métisses” (1995)

“I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.”

Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (1977)

One attribute unique to the human experience and yet unifying for humanity is the ability to speak, to have a voice representative of who we are and recognizable by its quality. Voice, the ability to verbalize the longings and wishes of the heart, is intricately tied to our understanding of human identity. It is an identifying feature of our Self and our identity as both a human and an individual. Our voice is uniquely our own, and therefore, when it is taken, silenced, or ignored, our identity cannot be clearly represented or expressed; we are not clearly representing our Self. Voice is intricately connected not only to what we verbalize, but also the written word. In literature, authors have the responsibility and opportunity to not only share their own voice in a very permanent way, but often to serve as a representative voice for a greater community at large. When writers tell their story, they are sharing the experience of the characters they have created, as well as parts of themselves. The ability to shape a story is unique to the human experience, and it is what allows us to create a unique sense of who we are. Some writers, in particular, truly see their writing as an extension of themselves, and sometimes it becomes nearly impossible to separate the lives of these authors from the stories they

tell. Especially when these are fictional stories being told, writers have the difficulty of telling a story that is not “reality.” However, when the characters, settings, and conflicts are reminiscent of the struggles and victories of the author and his or her cultural and historical context, a reader can begin to identify more fully with the story they are telling. It is clear for many writers that their history, their culture, and their past experiences compel them to tell their unique stories. I assert that it is this very act of storytelling that creates a sense of who we are as human beings, and that writers have the unique capability of recording these stories for those other than themselves.

Kate Chopin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Edwidge Danticat are three such writers who allow the stories they write to serve as an extension of themselves. Although these women, on the surface, are very different American writers writing their narratives at very different times in history, their commonality comes in their ability to communicate the stories of their protagonists, who in unique ways, experience life a little bit like the respective author. This commonality is further exposed with their desire to create a voice through what they write for a population often historically ignored or silenced – women. Not only are they telling the specific stories of people who look and think and act like them and those they have known, but these authors’ works are highlighting an important voice that has often been missing throughout American literature. It is evident that these authors and their novels, *The Awakening* (1899), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and *The Dew Breaker* (2004) respectively, show the power of voice and silence in American literature and the very clear ways that this voice, or lack of it, expresses a person’s, and protagonist’s, Self and identity.

Chopin, Hurston, and Danticat each represent a unique time in American history, and thus their writing, their voice, is representative of a group larger than themselves. Elaine Showalter considers women's literature in this way in "American Questions" a chapter from her book *Sister's Choice*, "I wanted to avoid the idea that women's writing had a universal sameness that might be biological or psychological. Rather... women's writing had to be seen historically, in its specific national contexts" (2). Each author is characteristic of their historical moment, and it is their differences that help define American women's literature. Kate Chopin's protagonist, Edna, in *The Awakening* represents women at the turn of the twentieth century struggling to self-identify in a male dominated society. Although Edna is ultimately unsuccessful in her ability to create a complex identity, Chopin uses her death and failure to assert the necessity of a multifaceted voice. Zora Neale Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* continues to represent women in her time still seeking to be recognized as a valuable and independent individual in human society following the literature of freedom of the 1920s and the Depression of the 1930s, but adds an additional layer as she also seeks to represent her culture as an African- American woman. Although often associated with the tradition, Hurston is writing long after the Harlem Renaissance, and literature during this time that did not operate as a more serious cultural representation was often rejected or ignored. Hurston's work comes to fruition during this time causing many to question the role an African-American woman writer should have. Finally, Ka in Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* represents more modern women, particularly Haitians and Haitian-Americans, struggling to establish their identity as "hyphenated" Americans (Haitian-American etc.). Danticat's voice enters the scene historically at a time when the cultural

look and face of American society is shifting and changing to truthfully represent its constituents. Writing is long past being relegated to white men, and Danticat is representative of Americans with a diverse background. Danticat continues to speak to the difficulties of a dual culture both in men and women alike, and ultimately will point to the great necessity of a complicated identity and the possibilities of it for those like her protagonist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Each woman serves as an accurate representative of her time, and their works, considered together, demonstrates the ways that women's roles in society and in literature has evolved and grown. A progression through these authors, and a close inspection of their respective works, shows the early restrictions for women in general in America, and then shows the ways those restrictions are conflated to prejudices against or reactions to multi-cultural women born in America and eventually to all women with a mixed heritage living in America. This thesis asserts that as time has passed, there has been an advancement in the ability to form a complex identity for women in American society, as is asserted by the combination of these three works.

An examination of these three novels together highlights the ways historically that women have struggled to self-identify when they have not met the standard expectations of society. In pairing these works together, one can see the ways that the passage of time and the increased freedoms for women has led to the ability to tell a story that goes against mainstream conceptions, certainly as it pertains to diverse women in America today. Françoise Lionnet, writing about postcolonial Caribbean cultures in *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1989) discusses a term, *métissage*, referencing the capability of creating a whole identity out of multiple cultures. History, especially in written form, has often clouded understanding of cultures created

out of a mixing of various root cultures, particularly Caribbean cultures, as well as melting pot nations like America. Lionnet writes, “contemporary women writers especially have been interested in reappropriating the past so as to transform our understanding of ourselves” (5). Lionnet’s work supports the assertion that one does not have to meet the traditional expectations of any society, in order to have a complete identity. While Lionnet’s work focuses primarily on understanding the role of those from varied cultures in society, one can take these ideas even further to consider the ways in which we are all a patchwork of fragmented pieces that establish our Self. As human beings, much of our identity does come from our past—family, culture, and heritage. When these understandings become distorted, or worse, when no voice from these influences has been allowed, confusion and frustration results for individuals seeking to understand their own Self. This thesis is not meant to establish the foundation that an identity can be whole and be made up of varied backgrounds, but that it is the stories that we tell, the experiences we share that allow us to create a beautiful tapestry, an idea henceforth referred to as *narrative métissage*, or storytelling as a way of putting varied, often fragmented, pieces together to create a clear voice of identity and representation of Self. Although Lionnet takes a close look at several Caribbean writers in particular, as will be demonstrated in this thesis, the concepts of identity that are established with her words can also be applicable to these American women writers. Narrative métissage is essential to understanding American literature, as it continues to allow for and create a space for unconventional literature and those who have not historically met the expectations of “cookie-cutter” society and art. Narrative métissage allows a reader to



begin to see himself or herself in a greater framework that has space to continue expanding.

In order to best understand the progression identified among the three novels analyzed and the role of narrative métissage, one will need to better understand the term of origin. Lionnet discusses the term métissage as “a cloth made of two fibers” or a “third cultural entity... new and independent even though rooted in the preceding elements” (14-15). Like a tapestry made of many beautiful threads to complete an entire picture, so do these many facets of cultural history create whole identities. This was of considering métissage also excludes any moral or prejudicial judgments and points to the capabilities of such an individual. While Lionnet’s term applies more specifically to a cultural middle ground for those representing multiple races or cultures, and a whole, yet multifaceted identity, this thesis will refer to the middle ground created in the narration of such stories. She states elsewhere in *Logique Metisses*, “The...subject thus becomes quite adept at braiding all the traditions at its disposal, using the fragments that constitute it in order to participate more fully in a dynamic process of transformation” (5). It is this concept of “braiding” that will extend the term métissage to assert the ways a writer’s voice and storytelling can also help to establish a complete yet complicated understanding of Self.

A close look at *The Awakening*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *The Dew Breaker* lead to the creation of the term narrative métissage. This term and its ramifications and possibilities will be closely explored in an analysis of these three works both individually and together. This thesis connecting these three works themselves, as these very different writers are pieced together, seeks to add to the greater conversation

regarding both voice and a woman's role in literature which itself is narrative métissage. Many solutions to silence in literature have been attempted and considered, yet it is this assertion of narrative métissage as a reading strategy that allows the reader to understand the powerful necessity of a realistic voice, even if it does not meet typical expectations. Voicelessness continues to be a prevalent concept in literature for periphery figures, and these three writers through the use of narrative métissage demonstrate the ways that these liminal figures must use it as a solution to voicelessness both in culture and in American women's literature. Ultimately these three women writing on the periphery of society establish a voice in their works that cannot be denied and lay the foundation for writers who will continue to tell the stories of those in need of a complicated sense of Self. A person's voice is fundamental to establishing a truthful identity, and these three works reveal the ways in which their authors voice this truth.

## Chapter Two – Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

“...self-discovery is a constant search and exploration of a new awakening, a new vision, and a new self.”

Mikaela McConnell, “A Lost Sense of Self by Ignoring Other in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin” (2014)

Kate Chopin, a southern writer, was a woman writing ahead of her time when she wrote *The Awakening* in 1899. Originally titled *A Solitary Soul*, Kate Chopin’s novel depicts the life of Edna Pontellier, a wife and mother, whose awakening and recognition of her own voicelessness, begins a personal quest for identity and self-awareness. While the novel did not reach great popularity at its publication, it was rediscovered in the 1950s due to its depiction of oppression and restriction of voice and identity that many women faced at the turn of the century and were examining again at this juncture in history. Kate Chopin creates a protagonist who is moving beyond the domestic marriage plots of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but not quite ready for the fight for independence often found in female literary heroes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rachel DuPlessis (1985) states her argument this way in the first chapter of her work, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, “As a gendered subject in the nineteenth century, she [Edna] has barely any realistic options in work or vocation, so her heroism lies in self-mastery, defining herself as a free agent” (14). Chopin will attempt to give Edna this freedom that comes with a full understanding of Self, even allowing her moments of success as a “liberated” woman, but she eventually instead will show that Edna Pontellier, as a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman, does not and cannot yet maintain her own sense of voice and personal identity. Chopin uses narrative métissage to tell Edna’s story pointing toward the whole and complete, yet complicated identity she could establish; however, Edna is not ready to embrace this understanding of Self.

Ma Yuanxi's definition of self-discovery highlighted above from Mikaela McConnell's article, "A Lost Sense of Self by Ignoring Other in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin" (2014), sets the tone for an exploration of *The Awakening*, portraying Edna Pontellier as a woman who is constantly in search of her best and most honest Self. Chopin's seminal work is an introduction to female voice in American literature, accurately depicting the plight of many American women struggling to create a space in society for an identity to exist outside of, or in addition to, wife and mother. However, Chopin's text interrogates the possibilities of "what women could do, and who they could be, in the face of such restrictions" (Ramos 147). Chopin is beginning to imagine a notion that will allow for "new visions of ourselves, new concepts, that allow us to think *otherwise*, to bypass the ancient symmetries and dichotomies..." ("Autobiographical Voices" 6). Françoise Lionnet's concept and practice of *métissage*, referencing the mixing of two cultures again comes to mind considering again the "cloth made of two fibers" as the reader ponders what is necessary for Edna's success ("Autobiographical Voices" 14-15). Here Chopin is laying the foundation for a narrative *métissage* that helps to create a multifaceted identity through the use of the narrative as a way to put fragmented pieces of Self together as a complex whole. It will become increasingly clear throughout the novel that Edna is not quite ready to assert herself as this type of multipart figure, but Chopin paves the way for other writers to begin to think about voice and identity apart from binaries or dichotomies, or closed categories of acceptance.

In addition to the ways that Edna serves as a larger representative for women of her time, a close examination of the text also reveals Edna's very personal struggles, and the ways she is silenced as a reaction or response to the men in her life, particularly her

husband. Patricia S. Yaeger in her article, “A Language Which Nobody Understood: Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*” refers to Edna’s struggles in terms of her lack of voice, or “as language [she]...seeks but does not possess,” referencing an internal struggle taking place throughout the work (197). Edna will attempt to step outside of the “social conventions” or “script” for the role of a woman, but at the outset of her awakening, she is under the ideological assumption that this identity is easily attainable. Throughout the novel, Edna does begin to find her voice and attempts to use it as a representation of her own identity, but unfortunately the novel’s ending in silence causes the reader to look closely at the reasons for this failure of voice and Chopin’s intentions for this decision.

Edna begins her awakening of the soul while at Grand Isle on vacation near the sea. The “voice” of the sea is first introduced to Edna and the reader as Chopin describes it this way, “The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (12). This sound of the sea’s voice will become a motif for the novel as Chopin references it throughout the work at pivotal moments of Edna’s awakening. While the ocean’s voice is strong and clear, it drowns out Edna’s voice. As Edna spends time at Grand Isle, the reader begins to see the first signs of this stirring within her, as well as a foreshadowing of what her new pursuit of voice will ultimately cost her in the end. Chopin writes of her illumination, “A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly with her, —the light which showing the way, forbids it” (12). Edna is coming to a realization that there is the possibility of there being more to who she is than whom she has been, and she is beginning to recognize, “her position in the universe as a human being” (12). As she spends time away from her New Orleans

home and the routine of her life, the sea is not only the physical setting for many of Edna's soul-searching moments, but also is used symbolically as the catalyst for the emotion she is feeling.

Edna's sense of awakening grows as she clearly distinguishes the ways in which she has become isolated in her own life up to this point. Edna considers her wakening this way, "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (7). The reader is led to believe that before this moment, Edna existed in her world wholly content with the life that she had been living. However, now at Grand Isle and this moment in her life, she comes to understand more of what she might be missing, as she experiences freedom and meets characters who have found a way to establish their identity beyond simple expectations. She realizes that she has been overlooking the possibilities for a life that is her own. An overwhelming sense of despair envelops her, but she is unable to clearly verbalize these yearnings yet as any sort of voice. The hopelessness she feels is clear in the ways that Chopin dictate's Edna's thoughts for the reader, but not yet her words. At this point, the reader is also introduced to Leonce Pontellier and comes to understand that he is not a particularly bad husband, yet Edna is beginning to sense that their relationship is holding her back from what she could be beyond, or in addition to, wife and mother. Leonce has been the prevailing voice in Edna's story, and she is recognizing that she does have a voice of her own that sounds very different from the voice her husband has attempted to give her. As Edna explores these new ideas further, she begins to comprehend the fact that her identity has solely been wife and mother, and that she is not even particularly good in these roles. She has lived a type of, "dual life—that outward

existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” up to this point doing what is expected of her, and she is now considering the possibility of outwardly questioning and establishing her own voice and identity (Chopin 13). From an early age, Edna has learned to play a role and has outwardly played it well, but she is questioning whether this position has ever been whom she truly is. Chopin, at this point in the novel, communicates to her readers Edna’s realization that she no longer wishes to play this silent role. Edna, before this moment, has not been able to reconcile her role as wife and mother with a woman who is vocal and able to speak up for herself. She has not been free to be herself in this role, and thus she has remained voiceless, as she searches for her identity. With this revelation, Chopin is sharing with her readers the very essential part of human identity that is expressed in a voice accurate to Self.

Chopin’s narrative also asserts through Edna that a sense of Self and voice cannot be established in isolation. Chopin, in attempting to tell Edna’s story, highlights the fundamental concept of narrative *métissage*, which is telling your real and true story. Edna is not yet ready to convey this. As the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly evident to the reader, that in order for Edna to try to truthfully identify herself, she must exist fully in the presence of and interaction with other people; her story must include other characters. McConnell supports this concept stating, “self-discovery involves awakening and negotiating the boundaries of self as it relates to others and the world” (41). Human beings are in constant relation and interaction with one another. As people relate to each other, McConnell refers to it as the “other” people beginning to formulate their own identity in response to others. As one engages in this fundamental human act,

one begins to more truthfully see him or herself in light of connections to and differences from those around him or her.

Robert Lebrun is one such character in Edna's life. As she meets Robert on Grande Isle and spends time with him, she begins to recognize a new side of herself that emerges due to his flirtation and conversation with her. Edna's relationship with Robert Lebrun plays an important role in Edna's tentative development of Self and identity. As Chopin sets the stage at Grand Isle for the narrative to unfold, it is clear that while Leonce is not an abusive husband, he is also not a loving one. She has lived somewhat in isolation with Leonce, and as Robert attempts to know her, she learns more about herself. In fact, the first few pages of the novel identify Edna much more as Leonce's property, and there does not seem to be a mutual respect or friendship involved in their marriage. This lack of admiration will lead to Edna developing a friendship and relationship with Robert while at Grand Isle. Where Edna has been silent in her relationship with her husband, keeping her from recognizing her own voice and identity, Robert encourages her instead to speak. Chopin writes, "Robert talked a good deal about himself. He was very young, and did not know any better. Mrs. Pontellier talked a little about herself for the same reason" (5). Both Robert and Edna are free with their words with one another, and it is in these moments Edna's desires for freedom, for purpose, and for a right sense of Self, although still somewhat immature and selfish, become most clear to the reader.

In Robert's presence, she speaks in detail of her childhood in Mississippi and Kentucky. Where Edna has felt repression in her home with Leonce in New Orleans, she speaks all the more of the great freedom present in reminiscences of her childhood. Robert's conversations with Edna become so necessary to Edna's development of



identity that he begins to voice her personality for her. In fact, it is Robert himself who gives meaning to her learning to swim, an act of individualism and freedom: “it is Robert Lebrun who speaks for her, who frames and articulates the meaning of her adventure” (Yaeger 201). However, as Edna begins to fall in love with Robert, readers are less sure of his intentions toward Edna and her awakening feelings. Initially in the novel, he is described as fickle and flirty: “Since the age of fifteen, which was eleven years before, Robert each summer at Grand Isle had constituted himself the devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel” (10). The reader is led to believe that Robert is simply going back to old habits when Edna comes to Grand Isle, while Edna’s goals are much more intentional as she is creating a new sense of Self in response to her newfound voice and conversations with Robert. As Edna speaks, she is establishing an honest sense of identity and Self that has been absent in her life up to this point. Edna never learned to be herself in her marriage with Leonce, and she is beginning to see the difference now with Robert. Again, her revelations up to this point are still not done in isolation, but in response to her interactions with both of these men in her life, neither of whom is pointing her toward a successful, complex identity and voice.

Chopin highlights the lack of voice and conversation that has existed in the Pontellier marriage throughout the novel. In fact, Chopin makes it clear from the outset that Edna does not find value in conversation with her husband, and often instead asserts what little control she has by choosing silence as a response. Leonce ponders this fact: “He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued little his conversation” (Chopin 6). There is a sense here that the two have little in common, but

also that there is little respect that exists between them. Neither Leonce nor Edna shares their stories with one another; therefore, Edna is not using narrative *métissage* to better understand who she is. This idea is fleshed out more fully as the reader becomes aware of Leonce's opinions of Edna's role as mother to their young sons, Raoul and Etienne. Leonce wants her to be and act a certain way, and while Edna uses her silence as a defiance of his authority, he denotes it as a flaw in her fundamental role as wife and mother. He does not offer a space for Edna's honest voice to exist because he cannot fathom this type of voice for the mother of his children. There is no compromise or principles of *métissage* at work in his relations with his wife. The text states, "He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children" (6). Whether or not Edna truly neglects her children is left doubtful and unclear, but Leonce's opinion of her job as wife and mother remains consistent throughout the novel; he only sees her function as wife and mother. Edna's response in this matter is consistently silence, as she cries alone after her husband's unkindness in this scene. She does not attempt to voice either her defense of her actions or her concerns for the way that Leonce incorrectly views her. She is left in her silence to consider her identity. In response to Edna's feelings of anguish and confusion regarding her Self, Chopin proceeds to establish two female characters who function as antithetical options of roles for females living in Edna's time—the "mother-woman" and the free soul of the "artist."

The "mother-woman" is encapsulated in the character of Adele Ratignolle, and she is described as a bird, "fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imagined threatened their precious brood" (8). Chopin goes on to add, "They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed

it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individual and grow wings as ministering angels” (8). This woman would have been the epitome of the expected, ideal wife of the turn of the century. Edna quickly realizes that this identity is one that she should claim, but cannot. She is not a “natural” wife and mother like Adele. Throughout the novel, Adele, despite her differences from Edna, attempts to provide Edna with wisdom and counsel, but it is evident through their conversations that despite her kindness to Edna, Adele’s identity is wrapped up in being a wife and mother, an identity that Edna is no longer content to maintain successfully. Yaeger states, “Though Madame Ratignolle is sympathetic and offers Edna both physical solace and a sympathetic ear, open conversation between them is rare; they speak different languages” (215). While Adele has found a voice for herself as wife and mother, this “language” or “voice” will not be one that Edna can speak. Adele’s identity is evidenced by how she uses her voice and what she speaks of most often— “her condition” as a pregnant woman (Chopin 9). Some would view Adele’s role as its own kind of domestic prison; however, “...she does not seem unaware of herself. She seems both to know the limitations of her role and to embrace that role, nonetheless” (Ramos 155). Chopin presents Adele’s existence as a viable option for a young woman who cherishes and finds value in her position as wife and mother. While Edna at first idolizes Adele and her marriage, she comes to realize that the life Adele leads is not one she could ever sustain as she looks closely at the Ratignolle marriage in comparison with her own. There is no mutual love or admiration for the Pontelliers; however, Chopin declares of Mr. and Mrs. Ratignolle, “If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their [Ratignolles] union” (47). This peaceful bliss is not the definition of the

Pontellier marriage. As Edna becomes more aware of the world around her by interacting with others, she recognizes the ways in which she is unlike Adele and seeks out another model for her self-identity in Mademoiselle Reisz.

Mademoiselle Reisz represents “the independent artist” and the antithesis to Adele’s characterization as “mother-woman.” Historically, women like Edna, seemed to have very limited options for a role in society. Adele’s function would have been expected and approved of, as she lovingly cares for her husband and children. Mademoiselle Reisz, on the other hand, would not so much have been accepted, but tolerated, as she has chosen to go her own way. She is described as, “a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (Chopin 22). Women like Reisz, during the time in which the novel was written, would have found themselves on the periphery of society. They would not have been accepted in prominent social circles, but would have been endured for their artistic tastes. While Reisz is not known to have many friendly acquaintances in the novel, she is acknowledged for her creative talents as an artist, particularly as a pianist. She is able to maintain an honest sense of Self, but her community does not welcome her for it. The two women meet at Grande Isle, and Edna is continually drawn to Mademoiselle Reisz who will serve as a role model figure for Edna throughout the novel as Edna attempts to clarify her own voice. Just as she endeavors to emulate Adele early on in the novel, she again seeks to duplicate another’s identity as she tries to become the solitary artist like Mademoiselle Reisz. However, Edna will come to accept that she does not have the voice of an artist, “[t]he soul that dares and defies” either, due to her desires for love and

companionship (Chopin 53). While both Reisz and Ratignolle are women who have learned to narrate their story truthfully, Chopin reminds the reader that these decisions are not always easy.

Chopin makes it obvious that neither Adele Ratignolle nor Mademoiselle Reisz can serve as an example for Edna's search for her voice; she must create her own self-identity. Peter Ramos asserts that while neither characterization is a viable option for Edna, she also does not attempt to try to *create* a space for herself, a complex identity. Her inability to transform is ultimately her downfall in the novel (Ramos 148). His ideas resonate with those of Lionnet, which support the necessity for narrative métissage. For métissage to be successful, a willingness to change must occur as a person attempts to create a new cultural space for their mixed heritages. This motivation is necessary for the process of narrative métissage as well, and Edna does not "use the fragments" of identity offered to her to "participate fully in a dynamic process of transformation" ("Logique Métisses" 5). She could work to find a space for a voice like hers, but she does not really even attempt to do so. Both Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz face difficulties, as women at the turn of the century, but both women are able to establish a voice and identity that is both available to them and fit the needs of their personal selves. This affirms the historical role of women as "marginalized people: by owning, and taking responsibility for, what social roles were available, and then by modifying, over time and in greater numbers, their boundaries" (Ramos 147-148). Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz take what is given to them and seek to improve upon it. Kate Chopin uses Edna's failure to acknowledge what she must do to demonstrate to a larger community of women readers what is required of them—to use the concept of métissage to find a space for an

identity that is acceptable while using a voice that is still their own. The cultural understanding of métissage allows for “complex identities and interrelated, if not overlapping, spaces,” such as the identities found by the other two prominent women in the novel (“Logique Métisses 7). Both are accurate representatives of their time, showing the possibility of successful métissage. For narrative métissage to be effective for Edna, she must be willing to accept the roles she can and create a space for an identity and voice that is her own. The novel “asserts that there is only a limited set of available social roles for a woman like Edna, it implicitly reminds the reader... that the content of these roles—as well as their flexibility— is by no means completely circumscribed” (Ramos 151). While Edna has resigned herself to the possibilities of one of these two limited identities, Chopin posits, through Edna’s disappointing inability to adapt, that there might be another way for a woman at the turn of the century to have a voice and identity that is her own.

After encountering both women at Grand Isle, Edna returns to her home on Esplanade Street, seeking to put action to the awakening that has been begun for her emotionally. The beach setting differs greatly from Edna’s life in New Orleans, and once she returns there, Edna’s awakening begun at Grand Isle is most evident in contrast with the repression she now feels in her own home, viewing it as another manifestation of her imprisonment and restriction of identity. While Edna does seek a respite in the city from her oppressive home, by moving to the “pigeon-house,” in the end, Edna will have to return to Grand Isle to fully escape the oppression of the life she has built in New Orleans. She reflects on her summer, and while she has not yet established who she will become, “she could only realize that she herself—her present self—was in some way

different from the other self” (Chopin 34). She is no longer simply the happily dutiful wife, nor is she content to be the woman that she has been. She begins to make changes to her routines. While Edna could certainly create a voice and identity that allows her to both continue her role as wife and mother and instigate a movement toward an honest sense of Self, she does not seek this identity. She wants to completely remove herself from her old life and those activities that have made up her former Self, and thus will ultimately be unsuccessful. She starts small with her desire to go out on certain days of the week, when her previous “duty” has been to be at home, and progresses to her decision “to do as she liked and to feel as she liked” resulting in her ultimate move to the “pigeon house” to gain a sense of “freedom and independence” (Chopin 44 & 66). However, even though Edna is establishing herself as an individual, she has not asserted her voice clearly as she has not communicated any of her decisions clearly to her husband. Her silence in these moments points once again to the restrictions she is still placed under, and the ways that she is also holding herself back. She is not willing to fully give up the life that she has known. She has “resolved never again to belong to another than herself,” and yet she is not her own authority either (Chopin 66).

In many ways, Edna is still seeking to be “the artist,” wanting freedom and independence, not recognizing that this is not an identity she truly wants or who she really is. She attempts to mimic Mademoiselle Reisz— “she leaves her husband, seems free from a certain amount of childcare, and eventually, earns money from her artwork,” yet there seems to be no honesty in her identity (Ramos 149). This dishonesty of Self is made most clear by her interactions with Mademoiselle Reisz as Reisz describes the necessities of the artist: “to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul... [t]he

brave soul... [t]he soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 53). Although Edna herself has not come to this understanding, Reisz acknowledges that this cannot be Edna’s soul. She has been defiant; however, she has not truly cut all ties to her old life, nor embraced a complicated sense of her Self that includes her previous roles. Ramos speaks of Reisz’s advice, “For all of the older woman’s attempts to get Edna to recognize the necessity of will and action in forming a meaningful identity... Edna stubbornly refrains from actively choosing and dedicating herself to any single social role” (156). Reisz tells her clearly what will be expected of her should she choose this path, but Edna seems unwilling to hear her advice accurately.

Chopin appears to be conveying the same message as Mademoiselle Reisz throughout the text as she states early in the novel, “But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!” (12). The journey toward a clear sense of voice for a woman like Edna is difficult, and these words seem to foreshadow Edna’s lack of voice and a sense of Self that will ultimately lead to her death. There does seem to be some progression in Edna’s voice as she establishes her own home, and even her own relationship with Alcee, a man who serves as a catalyst for her sexual awakening; however, again the reader receives the impression that this is only another “dual life.” She spends time with Alcee, a man known for his sexual relationships with women, and even describes her encounters with him as happy and carefree as she desires to experience true companionship, yet he does not help her to establish a self-identity. If anything, he only further serves to cloud her self-understanding. At the forefront of her quest of self-discovery is her “desire for



relationship, the desire to understand, and the desire to be known,” and these desires are in the way of her self-identity (McConnell 42). She is attempting to establish who she is in light of her relationship with a man like Alcee. Unfortunately, she has the right idea, but he is the wrong man to accurately reflect a sense of Self for Edna. As is witnessed with Robert, Alcee also attempts to define and voice Edna’s identity. She is not recognizing the adaptability required to assert a true identity. McConnell states, “because people are constantly changing as a result of constantly being in relationships with others” a sense of Self will consistently be evolving in order to remain true to one’s own voice (43). Edna is conflating her desire for love, companionship, and freedom with a sense of clear identity. While these elements could be part of her voice, she has not first sought to figure out who she is on her own. As Ramos states, “her desire to live outside of all socially constructed identities cannot be realized, precisely because such an existence, even if achievable, cannot be sustained” (150). She can “pretend” this independence and freedom all she wants, but she is not yet really willing to give up her status as wife or mother and truly be free to change and become who she so badly wishes to be. If she were, she would be able to confront her husband with her decisions. She does not know how to use *métissage* to create a space to be both wife and mother and also free.

As Robert Lebrun comes back into Edna’s life near the end of the narrative, a sense of her voice seems to ring most clear, but again it cannot be sustained for the duration. Edna discusses her feelings for Robert with Mademoiselle Reisz, and as she declares her love for him, her voice is clear, honest, and strong, and the reader begins to believe that she will experience true happiness. When Reisz asks her why she loves him,

she responds, “Why? Because his hair is brown and grows away from his temples; because he opens and shuts his eyes, and his nose is a little out of drawing; because he has two lips and a square chin, and a little finger which he can’t straighten from having played baseball too energetically in his youth. Because— ” (68). Mademoiselle Reisz responds simply to this monologue: “Because you do, in short” (68). Edna asserts her very real and true feelings for Robert displaying a genuine sense of voice and honest understanding of her love for Robert. This passage is one of the longest sustained monologues for Edna in the novel; she has not spoken in such detail of anyone, even her sometimes lover, Alcee. However, Edna has allowed her love for Robert to cloud her understanding of self-identity. She has wholeheartedly pursued a romantic love for Robert, hoping it will define her, and she has forgotten herself somewhere in the process. This loss will be felt most completely as he chooses to reject her love in the last pages of the novel. Yaeger writes, “the pivotal event... is not Edna’s suicide, nor her break with her husband, but her openness to Robert Lebrun’s stories, her vulnerability to the romantic speech of the other which has, by the end of the novel, become her speech as well” (206). She allows Robert’s voice to speak for her, and loses her own voice in the process.

Mademoiselle Reisz also intuits a lack of self-understanding in Edna as a lack of courage. She states, “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (69). Mademoiselle Reisz is a self-identified woman who has learned to fly against the expectations for women of her time. Reisz knows her own voice clearly, but she has chosen a lonely existence. She is not hopeful that Edna

can maintain an identity like her own, as she knows that it is not who Edna is. Edna has found true love and some sense of freedom, but these are not honest reflections of her complete voice and identity. She is unwilling to work to create a complex identity. Reisz, in her wisdom and freedom, understands that even her own existence is still flawed; she is not loved and accepted by her community. Edna's desires become increasingly clear: "what Edna longs for is not so much freedom... as meaning" which she has come to associate with another's love (Ramos 152). Edna has gained freedom and autonomy, and it is not all she needs. Yaeger declares, "Edna Pontellier falls in love with Robert Lebrun precisely *because* this possibility is inscribed within her, because adulterous desire is covertly regarded in her society as a path for woman's misconduct" (198). Edna's "desires" are consistently unclear. She certainly wants to pursue Robert, yet her actions seem to be more about defying her husband and her way of life, than truly pursuing her own identity. She "acts out" as a way to express her discontent with her life choices. She does love Robert, and his unwillingness to love her back highlights her false sense of identity. She does not truly want to establish her self-identity; she just wants the freedom to be selfish. Instead of focusing on her own identity and voice, she has become so wrapped up in an elusive pursuit of love that she cannot contain her sense of Self. As Edna attempts to kindle a relationship with Robert, she desires and struggles to establish "the courageous soul," in choosing to love him, but ultimately it is Robert who, in spite of his love for Edna, recognizes that even his love will not be enough to sustain Edna's sense of Self, and they cannot be together. All along Edna has been pursuing a self-identity that just does not seem to exist.

The final pages of the text are often contentiously read as either a brave moment of freedom, or the ultimate coward's defeat; however, as one takes a close look at the ending, it can be seen as Edna's return to the silence that has characterized her throughout the novel and that she is destined to maintain. DuPlessis writes, "Death comes for a female character when she has a jumbled, distorted, inappropriate relation to the 'social script' or plot design to contain her legally, economically, and sexually" (15). Edna has given herself bodily to Alcee, and her heart to Robert, but she returns to Grand Isle, the site of her first moments of awakening, and there is hope that maybe she is returning to a place where she first experienced a glimpse of Self. But, it is quickly clear, that she is not there to find a renewed sense of purpose, but is resigning herself to the fate that is hers. Yaegar states, "and the novel ends as it has begun, with a medley of distinct and disconnected voices" (216). Edna has attempted to assert a voice that is her own; however, the dissonant voices of Leonce, Alcee, and Robert and the overwhelming voice of the sea drown out her own. She has failed to understand the tenets of narrative métissage, and Chopin has not created a middle space for a complex identity for her protagonist. Edna has allowed the love of one man to derail her progress toward finding herself, and she is no longer willing to be possessed by anyone—husbands, sons, or lovers; "she is her own to dispose of" and in this moment she is asserting her right to choice in her life (DuPlessis 17). She instead succumbs again to the voice of the sea, as Chopin repeats the lines from earlier in the novel, "The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (94). Edna is voiceless, she has nothing left to cause her soul to speak out, and so she is seduced by the voice of the waves, becoming the "bird with a broken wing"

surrendering to the waves (Chopin 95). Edna's process of awakening is first thrilling and exciting, but ultimately it will be a process that overwhelms her to the point of her death (McConnell 41). This defeat is echoed by her learning to swim in the novel, as she is excited about the freedom that comes from learning to swim, but will eventually be overcome by it (Chopin 12).

While Edna Pontellier is an important figure to consider in light of the strides that she makes to establish her own voice and identity in the face of a society who would rather her be silent, she is also a complicated figure due to the fact that she is mostly unsuccessful in the end at finding a voice that is really hers. Yaegar asserts, "Edna inhabits a world of limited linguistic possibilities, or limited possibilities for interpreting and re-organizing her feelings, and therefore limited possibilities for action" (200). In line with this theory, Edna is in a category of women who cannot be held entirely accountable for their actions, or lack thereof. In a similar manner, Ramos states, "somewhere between the imagination and the conditions of reality exists a space where women of the nineteenth century with ambition, dedication and will might inhabit and sustain a social fiction that would provide at least a modicum of autonomy and selfhood" (153-154). Edna is certainly a product of her time in many ways, but she is also a woman unwilling to do all necessary to form some kind of personal identity, even if it is formed complexly. She lacks the dedication to follow through with the difficult task; this deficiency in addition to her selfishness leads to an unsuccessful understanding of Self. It becomes evident that maybe Edna's most honest Self is one wrapped up in her own wishes and desires that change with the circumstances of her life. In a related approach McConnell writes, "Articulation of one's ideas certainly supports self-discovery; but based

on Edna's final thoughts, her true Self has been developing while in relationship with others and the world" (43). She returns to isolation at the end of the novel, recognizing her lack of courage to speak with a voice that is truly her own and knowing that her interaction with others will only continue to highlight what she lacks.

Through Edna's failures, Chopin reminds readers that even though a true voice requires, "remarkable strength, creativity, discipline, and will" there is a possibility for women to establish a self-defined identity as one will see with both Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Ka in *The Dew Breaker* (Ramos 161). Suzanne Green states in her article "Fear, Freedom, and the Perils of Ethnicity" that for women like Chopin and Hurston, their protagonists "portray [women] as a microcosm of society in which we are to view them not only as individuals, but as symbolic representations of the universal problems that women face" (1). While Edna's failure is representative of her own misgivings, it is also representative of a larger group of women who found themselves in a similar situation, existing between binary identities. As one has seen and will see once again with Janie, "These issues direct their lives and their interactions with their communities" (Green 1). Their ability, or not, to use narrative métissage to establish their sense of voice plays a profound role in their ability to navigate, or in Edna's case—not navigate, the terrain of life.

### Chapter Three—Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

“...voice has prevailed as the primary medium through which African American writers have asserted identity and humanity. Voice announced that visual difference was only skin deep...”

Deborah Clarke, “‘The porch couldn’t talk for looking’: Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (2001)

Zora Neale Hurston, born near the time that Kate Chopin finished *The Awakening*, was not an artist highly recognized in her time. Writing during the 1920s and 1930s, many found her complex understanding of race and gender perplexing. She was a contradiction of sorts that certainly led the way for many African-American women writers to be able to tell their complex stories. She did not necessarily fit the mold for what was expected of a black woman writing her story in her time, and while her literary achievements are celebrated today, they were not always appreciated. Much of what we know of Hurston today comes from Alice Walker’s (and other writers’) interest in Hurston begun in the 1970s. In fact, “the very qualities that made Hurston so admirable to Walker as an emerging young writer, both black and female, made her an anomaly in her own time” (Jordan 105). In line with Jordan’s words, Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* proves to be a perfect example of the use of narrative métissage, storytelling depicted as “a cloth made of two different fibers” as one considers Hurston’s diverse background and experiences (“Autobiographical Voices” 14). Hurston’s own complex worldview allows her to tell a complicated story. In narrating Janie’s story, Hurston uses her own understanding of the world and experiences as a black woman living in the 1930s to piece together Janie’s fragmented story, as well as the stories of those around her, into a whole and complete picture. While this is true of many authors,

writing about what they know, Hurston's writing goes beyond simply telling a story like her own, but she uses narrative métissage to allow Janie's story to be placed in a greater framework for American women writers striving to show the capability of a clear voice established through the expression of one's own story.

William M. Ramsey states in his article, "The Compelling Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" (1994), "At the heart of the text's self-contradictions, at the bedrock of Hurston's personality, was her extraordinary individualism, her self-reliant, at times adversarial, drive toward autonomy" (38). Essentially, she was using narrative métissage to tell a story that did not necessarily meet the expectations of a novel of its time. While there might be contradictions, these are representative of a true narration and voicing of Self. Her independent spirit allowed her to tell a complicated story for Janie, but one that reflected a truth to Janie and to Hurston. In fact, many now celebrate Hurston for her ability to represent the entire experience of being black and a woman in her time, a term Walker identifies as "racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings" (Jordan 105). Jordan's discussion clearly aligns with a central understanding of narrative métissage. One must be able to tell his or her story honestly and clearly without the fear or rejection of being treated as a second-class citizen. Hurston uses narrative métissage in her telling of Janie's story, but she is also narrating an essential piece of the story of black women. Her story is exponentially larger than a fictional account of one young woman, and there are certainly moments when this leads to a conflicting reading of the text. She cannot simply "fit" into the expectations of those around her; she must tell a story that is full and complete and also fragmented. Ramsey writes, "The text is in fact ambivalent, both a



precursor to the modern feminist agenda yet also a reactionary tale embalming Hurston's tender passions for a very traditional male" (38). While Hurston's writing is conflicted, not unlike her own life and narrative, and does give the reader pause to attempt clarity in meaning, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, through the tenets of narrative métissage, expresses the intricate nature of humanity, including race, gender, and a search for a whole identity. Although all writers attempt to construct stories for their protagonists that end up being somewhat reminiscent of themselves or their historical context, those using narrative métissage envision a story that is as honestly representative of the human experience as possible. They recognize their role in telling a greater story.

Janie's story is not unlike Edna's in a few important ways. She experiences domination and control from the men in her life, and like Edna she begins to awaken to the understanding that she does not have to live a life under the subjection of another's desires and wishes. However, their stories are most notably different as they diverge near the end, Janie is depicted as a woman who has allowed herself to love, in a way Edna never could with Robert, and their choices put them on radically different paths. Their love and lack of it prove to be a defining element of their voice. Each story ends in a death that defines identity; however, the varied nature of these stories shows the important disparities between the two—selfishness and selflessness. After recognizing that Robert is lost to her, Edna does not have the personal strength to fashion her Self on her own, and in her selfishness chooses to walk into the sea. However, Janie is the epitome of strength as she prepares to kill Tea Cake: "She threw up the barrel of the rifle in frenzied hope and fear. Hope that he'd see it and run, desperate fear for her life" (Hurston 184). Janie loves her husband and is hopeful for any way out of the situation

besides killing the man that she loves to stop him from hurting her. After she is forced to take his life, she goes on to state, “A minute before she was just a scared human being fighting for its life. Now she was her sacrificing Self with Tea Cake’s head in her lap. She had wanted him to live so much and he was dead” (184). Where Janie was willing to give all she had for her life and the life of the man she loved, Edna was quick to give up on it all. With these two death scenes, one can see the contrast in the way these two women have established their identity in light of the men they love. Both Chopin and Hurston uses narrative *métissage* to piece together the stories of two women who are struggling to self-identify accurately; however, due in large part to the historical moment Janie is living in, she experiences much more success than Edna. She is able to accept the possibilities of a complex voice and identity.

Hurston, in her telling of the story, uses narrative techniques of both flashback and foreshadowing, choosing to begin her novel with the scene that will ultimately end the novel. She narrates the days following Tea Cake’s death, pointing to the most important moment of the story first, although Hurston will require the reader to go back in order to understand the importance of the whole. Ironically, “Janie’s voice is not the one that weaves the magic of the novel. We see her in chapter one telling Pheoby about her life. But, chapter two is taken over by a third-person narrator... Janie and Pheoby return as teller and listener only in the last chapter” (Jordan 114). Her voice is only truly “heard” in these moments. These chapters are “part of the narrative’s frame, occupying primarily the first and final chapters, in which Janie returns to her home after Tea Cake’s tragic death and recounts her experiences to her friend Pheoby Watson, who in turn will relate them to the community” (Ramsey 39). Choosing to tell Janie’s story in this way

causes the reader to immediately feel sympathy for as well as devotion to Janie, and as the novel continues the reader gains a better understanding of the entire picture, putting together the pieces of a complicated whole. Hurston's narrative technique is just one way that Hurston uses narrative *métissage* in her novel. Not until the end of the novel, also represented in the events in chapter one of the novel, does Hurston allow Janie to be "a fully fleshed-out character independent of her role as lover, nor does she create for her a voice that carries her tale" except for in these moments (Jordan 114). Even though Hurston begins Janie's story at the end, the entire story must be pieced together before Janie can exist as a full and complete Self.

The novel begins, "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men" (Hurston 1). These poignant words reflect not only the hopeless nature of dreams for so many that will be typical of the rest of the novel, but also the characteristics of the life of *men*. Hurston quickly presents the contrast for women, establishing a major concern throughout the novel: "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. They then act and do things accordingly" (1). There is something devastating and hopeless for Janie in the interpretation that the only truth that women have is in a dream. However, with these words, it is also evident that Hurston believes in the incredible power women have to create their story, despite the ways that they have been historically silenced, and she will proceed to share one of these stories in Janie. Women in Hurston's time period are beginning to experience a sense of

voice and independence outside of their relationships to men. Hurston's narrative is important because it is not a perfect story with a happy ending, but one that is realistic and complicated and points to the necessity of voice. The novel reminds readers, particularly women, that their voice, even if contrary to society, is necessary. When writers such as Hurston use narrative métissage to tell their stories, they allow women to establish their identity more truthfully and completely.

In the opening scene of the novel, Janie's return to town is narrated against the backdrop of the shame and gossip she experiences from the townspeople "greeting" her. Hurston tells the story in such a way that it is clear she is not just narrating one woman's experience, but instead she is writing a much larger narrative, echoing the historical context of the 1930s in the South. Those waiting to condemn Janie are not just specific people in the story; they represent many others in Hurston's real world with similar aims. Janie is not just one woman returning to her town with a complicated story to tell, she is representing many people who are much more than a race or a gender, instead a multifaceted story waiting to be heard. Hurston writes of the townspeople of Eatonville, "They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of their laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters" (2). Hurston understands the value of words when it comes to defining a person's sense of Self, and instead of trying to ascertain the truth, those who should be giving Janie a chance are instead piecing together fragments of falsities and lies that they are most comfortable conveying as the truth of Janie Killicks Starks Woods. With this understanding is Hurston's ability to communicate the necessity for reality in storytelling, even when it is difficult.

However, despite the countless voices against her, and the names they wish to call her, Janie is resting in a story that cannot be influenced by those around her, and she is able to hold her head high. Her silence is intentional and powerful as she approaches; however, she does not remain this way. While Janie could ignore the townspeople altogether, as she approaches, she chooses to speak to them, greeting them, rendering them speechless, demonstrating the powerful role of voice in the novel. Hurston states, “the porch couldn’t talk for looking... But nobody moved, nobody spoke, nobody even thought to swallow spit until after her gate slammed behind her” (2). Here, in the silence, voice becomes a way to convey power and authority. Silence, in this moment, also depicts the ways that Janie is learning to define herself instead of being defined by those around her. Deborah Clarke in her article titled from this line of the novel, “The porch couldn’t talk for looking: Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2001)” states “Clearly, Janie’s achievement of a voice is critical to her journey to self-awareness, but the highly ambivalent presentation of voice in the novel indicates that voice alone is not enough” (599). The townsfolk immediately begin to judge Janie because she has not met the expectations they have for her, labeling her as too old, too good, too pretty, etc., but she does not allow their judgment to define her identity, foreshadowing the complex identity that the rest of the novel will depict. Using narrative métissage, Hurston allows Janie to embrace a complex identity and voice; however, it is clear that her historical moment is not quite ready to allow Janie to be comfortable doing so.

Although the story she would tell of Tea Cake’s death would vindicate her in many ways in the eyes of those who bring judgment, she chooses not to share that story with them; she recognizes that this particular part of her story is essential to her identity,

but not to their understanding of her. It is only in the confidence of her friend Phoeby that she begins to relate the tale, instructing Phoeby to tell them whatever she would like to tell them. She understands that the truth is not necessarily important to these people. They have already condemned Janie, and Janie recognizes that her voice is better used elsewhere. Janie has charted her own path, and she no longer needs the voices and beliefs of others to define her. Hurston's language is precise and intentional as she begins her characterization of Janie in this first chapter, specifically noting instances of voice and silence in her discussion with Phoeby. It is only as Janie begins to feel a desire for "self-revelation" that Hurston writes— "So Janie spoke" (Hurston 7). It is clear that Janie is no longer concerned with the false opinions of those around her. She has begun the process of developing a whole and complete identity in spite of the complexity of her situation. While "the porch" has attempted to identify Janie in one way, her voice is becoming clearer.

Just as the reader is hearing Janie's voice clearly and clarifying the framework for understanding the strong, self-identified woman that she is, the story then returns back to the beginning of Janie's life as she commences telling Phoeby the whole story of what happened after she and Tea Cake left town in chapter two of the novel. Hurston traces the development of Janie's voice and identity, beginning with her grandmother who strongly influences Janie's early development and understanding of her identity as a young, black woman. Jennifer Jordan states in her article, "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" (1988), "Janie struggles to free herself from the expectations of her slave grandmother, who sees marriage as a haven from indiscriminate sexual exploitation... and as a shelter from financial instability" (109). Janie's

grandmother cannot imagine that a loveless, hopeless marriage might be just as damaging to Janie's sense of Self, and instead thinks she is doing the best she can to protect her granddaughter. Various examples from her childhood, such as Janie discovering she is black for the first time as a six year old and allowing herself to be called by so many names that she is referred to as "Alphabet," show that she has no concept of a whole identity and does not yet understand the concepts of *métissage* that will later play a key role in the creation of a complex, yet complete identity (9). Her grandmother, two generations ahead of Janie, also cannot yet understand these possibilities, and instead wishes to marry her granddaughter off immediately when she begins to experience and consider a sense of Self. She is fearful of the identity that Janie is beginning to demonstrate— a sexuality that is also essential to her sense of Self. Her grandmother states, "Ah done been on mah knees to mah Maker many's de time askin' *please*— for Him not to make de burden too heavy for me to bear"— and instead of having an open and honest conversation with Janie, she wants to give Janie a more suitable identity as a married woman (13). She knows that she will not always be around to protect Janie, and she believes that the identity of protected wife that Janie will find in marriage will be the safest identity for her, much like the women of Edna's time period. Nanny states this in her words to Janie: "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see," making it clear that the mule, as halfbreed and laborer, is the identity available to black women of Nanny's generation (14).

As the novel proceeds, it tells of Janie's role as wife as she marries both her first and second husband, who are the keepers of her identity and clarifiers of her sense of Self, playing an influential role in Janie's life. Both Logan Killicks and Jody Starks

“name” her, as “housewife” and “possession,” in effect establishing an identity for her, by speaking for her. It is important to remember that at this point in the novel, Janie is no longer (and not yet) narrating her story. Her voice is almost nonexistent. Sigrid King discusses the role specifically of naming in her article “Naming and Power in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (1990) stating, “Naming has always been an important issue in the Afro-American tradition because of its link to the exercise of power... those who name also control, and those who are named are subjugated” (683). Janie’s grandmother experienced the subjugation of this naming being raised a slave. As a result of being pushed into marriage, Janie’s grandmother thrusts Janie into marriages only to be “unnamed” and unvoiced throughout the years of her time with Killicks and Starks. As she goes to marry Killicks, having no previous relationship with him, she has a desire to love him and has a clear understanding that a marriage relationship should be about the mutual connection. She states, “ Yes, she would love Logan after they were married” and even in the first few months, despite the lack of love from her husband, she continues to try, stating, “Maybe if somebody was to tell me how, Ah could do it” (21, 23). But, ultimately she comes to find that this is not possible, and ironically, her first self-identification as a woman is with the death of a dream. Hurston writes, “She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman” (25). If Killicks has loved Janie, it has been in a way that Janie cannot understand. He has silenced her in the ways that he ignores her and wants to make her the dutiful wife. She comes to recognize that her identity as a woman will exist without love. While she is establishing an identity, it is in response to her interactions with



Killicks, not in any clarity of her own voice. By the time that Joe Starks enters her life, she is no longer looking for love, but an escape.

Joe Starks seems to have the desire to love and adore Janie, declaring, “A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant just special for you” (29). While this is a role that historically belonged to middle class white women, for Janie, with an already confused identity and a voice that is nearly nonexistent, being Joe Starks’ wife, a pretty trophy to view from a distance, seems to be the role she would like to play. The text states, “Janie hurried out of the front gate and turned south. Even if Joe was not there waiting for her, the change was bound to do her good” (32). She hurriedly marries Joe, and it seems at first that she will find the Self that she has been hoping to be, yet it quickly becomes clear that he will silence her voice in a completely new way first evident in her role as “mayor’s wife.” Jordan writes, “Her second marriage to Jody Starks is, at first, not devoid of emotional gratification, but ultimately Jody reduces Janie to an enviable possession that advertises his superior status to less fortunate men” (109). Janie is used as a trinket to serve Joe’s purposes, and there is no mutual love or safety exchanged. In many ways, her status as “possession” is by far the most dangerous loss of identity that she has experienced so far because it is immediately evident that possessions are voiceless. Starks says of her role as mayor’s wife, “but mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’ ... She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (43). His words again point to the concept of naming, relegating Janie to an object instead of a subject. Not only does Starks not value her voice, but he also demands her silence, leaving her to live a very lonely existence. While Janie’s identity has been confused and

convoluted up to this point in her life, her silence is deafening during the early part of her marriage to Joe Starks. Jordan states, “As a possession she is denied any self-defined goals and even the expression of her own opinions” (109). Jody Starks has made it clear that Janie is better seen and not heard, and that as his wife, she will not be allowed any dreams or goals of her own. Hurston writes of Janie’s marriage, “A feeling of coldness and fear took hold of her. She felt far away from things and lonely” (46). In Janie’s silence, Hurston is still using narrative *métissage* to piece together a clear narrative that will continue to point to Janie’s need for a complex identity, separate from societal and patriarchal expectations. Not only has her voice been continually silenced, but she also has limited interactions with friends and family to counter the sense of Self that Joe has convinced her is her own. Her movement toward a whole Self seems bleak at this juncture in the novel; Hurston reminds us that voicelessness is hopeless.

However, Hurston still provides glimpses of what Janie could be. As the couple becomes more settled in their marriage and their duties as mayor and wife, Janie makes attempts to find a voice again. However, as years pass, Joe Starks makes every effort to squelch her establishment of Self. He states, “All you got tuh do is mind me. How come you can’t do lak Ah tell yuh?” clearly showing his expectation of her (71). The text goes on to show the disappearance of Janie even more clearly, exhibiting the steady loss of any sense of identity of her own: “He wanted her submission and he’d keep on fighting until he felt he had it. So gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush” (71). As the years pass, her silence with her husband becomes more and more permanent. However, as she becomes familiar with running the store, working outside of the home, the place where Jody (and many men like him) thought she belonged, she seeks out

opportunities to assert her voice in other ways, eventually chatting with customers at the store: “Janie did what she had never done before, that is, thrust herself into the conversation” (Hurston 75). After too much silence and years of his emotional and verbal abuse, Janie decides she cannot take it any longer and does stand up to Joe, insulting his very manhood. As Sigrid King states, “she starts to use words to fight back at him” (690). Although Janie has not yet established her Self, she is beginning to gain confidence in using her voice. Hurston writes of her outburst at Jody, “Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish” (79). A man’s identity is often characterized by what he “owns,” and his “possession” is no longer serving to further build his manliness. This encounter causes a division in their marriage, and the reader begins to see the possibility of hope for Janie understanding her Self. While her words do not literally kill Jody, his physical death does come shortly after as a middle-aged man. With Joe’s death, Janie experiences a level of freedom and independence that she has not experienced so far, and the reader understands this as a turning point in the novel as Janie begins to move toward a clearer voice, without a husband’s influence. Hurston, here, is reminiscent of Chopin, neither Edna nor Janie can establish their voice in isolation. Narrative *métissage* is only possible through the vocal expression of one’s Self to others.

After many years of being married and now with the loss of her husband, Janie, for the first time, is able to make decisions on her own and purely for herself. King articulates her transformation, “As Janie develops in the novel, she experiences the oppressive power of those who name her, the growing potential of being renamed, and finally the freeing experience of being unnamed” (685). The reader has witnessed Janie’s

first marriage as a teenager, years of marriage to Jody, and the rollercoaster of identity that she has ridden. Up to this point, the novel has been used “to prove the emptiness of the middle-class woman’s isolation and the falseness of her seeming social elevation” (Jordan 112). Janie is now experiencing an independence that she never believed would be possible. Although her husband was important and well liked in town, the townspeople have not had the ability to know Janie. She does not wish to give away this liberty to anyone, but she will quickly hear the voiced expectations of what she should do now as a single woman. With her newfound freedom, Janie considers her options: “She saw no reason to rush at changing things around. She would have the rest of her life to do as she pleased” (89). Janie’s perspective seems clear for the first time in the novel, and she even begins to recognize the ways that she has been led astray most of her life. She is able to admit that “[s]he hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity” (89). She goes on to consider the impact that her grandmother has made on her life, and how the choices she made for Janie out of love have limited her “horizon”, her capacity for dreaming and exploring who she is as an individual (Hurston 89). Until she meets Tea Cake and begins to experience genuine attraction, affection, and eventually love, she does not even consider the possibility of marrying again, as her experience with men has only been one of crushing silence and squelching of any appearance of her own Self. Despite the commentary from others in the community, the same crew who will judge her return at the end of the novel, based on the fact that she is now a widow who has inherited her husband’s property, she is content to do everything on her own. At this point in the novel, as Janie is navigating life on her own for the first time, her voice is most clearly recognized.

From the moment they meet, Tea Cake encourages Janie's humanity and identity in a way that no one else has before, and her voice remains. She states, "Jody useter tell me Ah never would learn. It wuz too heavy fuh mah brains," demonstrating how little her knowledge and thoughts had been acknowledged prior to meeting Tea Cake (96). As their romance continues, Janie's voice continues to move toward clarity and freedom. She is experiencing what it is to be truly loved and appreciated, and she flourishes under Tea Cake's kindness towards her, making it clear that a sense of love correlates to one's own self-worth. Janie experiences doubt regarding their relationship, and the baggage that she brings to their relationship, and she even struggles to trust how he feels, but she is able to vocalize these concerns. She says to him, "Ah just didn't want you doin' nothin' outa politeness" (109). Under Tea Cake's reassurances, she responds by committing fully to her relationship and choosing to marry Tea Cake and sell the store. Despite the difficulties that the two encounter on their travels, Janie seems to have finally become comfortable with who she is and in her own skin. Hurston writes, "He drifted off into sleep and Janie looked down on him and felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (128). Janie is beginning to experience a movement toward Self out of her ability to vocalize her true thoughts and feelings; however, it is evident that Janie's identity has been established in light of her love for Tea Cake, and it is "self-crushing" in many ways.

As Hurston continues to narrate Janie and Tea Cake's experiences and life together, particularly as they move from Eatonville to their peaceful life on Lake Okechobee, the reader witnesses an honest depiction of Self, not always perfect, but sincere. However, as the novel moves toward the resolution, Hurston also makes it clear

how fragile and delicate a balance this can be. Their relationship is far from perfect, and they both allow their insecurities to result in negative reactions. Tea Cake's response is physical, reminding the reader once again that while Janie is more herself, she is still defined by the man in her life: "Before the week was over he had whipped Janie... Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss" (Hurston 147). While love exists between the two, there is still part of Tea Cake that wants Janie to be and act in certain ways that he can define and physically coerce. Here, Hurston is reminding the reader that while she is telling Janie's very specific story, Janie is also representative of many women of her time in need of truthfully expressing themselves. In the resolution of the novel, their relationship is put to a final test when a rabid dog bites Tea Cake as he is rescuing Janie during the hurricane. She must sacrifice Tea Cake, but in the process, she figures out who she is.

With the death of Tea Cake, Janie's movement toward Self becomes complete. While it can be argued that she makes her own choice in choosing Jody or Tea Cake, it is possible that these decisions are made out of necessity, escape, or excitement. Jordan states, "She never learns to shape her destiny by making her own choices" (111). Tea Cake does free her to begin making some of these choices, but in her marriage to him, she is still dependent on him for her happiness, her well-being, her safety, and security. She even gives him credit for establishing her identity, "You come 'long and made somethin' outa me. So Ah'm thankful fuh anything we come through together" (167). There is no question that Hurston has narrated their marriage as one of love, but it is equally obvious that there is no perfection in that love, and Janie must establish her voice

on her own. Janie has experienced happiness and joy in her life with Tea Cake, and with his death, she now has the choice to retreat or to move forward. She can put together the pieces of her fragmented past to form a complicated Self, or she can curl up in defeat. Jordan writes, “The reversal created by Tea Cake’s illness and death provides Janie with the opportunity for self-direction and control over her life” (112). The moment when she must kill the man she loves is the first moment that she chooses Self over others in her life. She shoots Tea Cake to protect herself; it is an act where she must choose her own life over his. There is nothing simple about this choice: it is a heart wrenching decision, brought about by a series of events outside of her control. This moment will be a defining one in Janie’s life, yet it is just one element of a complicated story that will eventually move her toward an understanding of a whole and complete Self.

While her story is unique, with it, Hurston reminds her readers that Janie’s story is not only about race or gender, even though these play a vital role in Hurston’s storytelling, but about being human and the complex identity that each person forms out of their interactions with the world around him or her. Jordan writes, “Janie Killicks Starks Woods never perceives herself as an independent, intrinsically fulfilled human being. Nor does she form the strong female and racial bonds that black feminists have deemed necessary in their definition of an ideologically correct literature” (115). This understanding is certainly a characterization of Janie until Tea Cake’s death; however, it is clear that the final chapter of the novel offers hope for Janie’s future. Within the pages of the text, she is not yet completely successful in using narrative *métissage* to establish her Self; however, Hurston gives an accurate picture of the restrictions of the historical time periods, while also giving the reader faith in Janie’s possibilities in the future.

#### Chapter Four—Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*

*“Sympathy...has the ability to transcend difference by enabling the reader to identify emotionally with characters or events.”*

Ifeona Fulani, “Caribbean Women Writers and the Politics of Style: A Case for Literary Anancyism” (2005)

Edwidge Danticat continues a trend in American women’s literature of seeking a voice and identity for her female protagonist. However, *The Dew Breaker*, published in 2004, tells a different story than that of Edna or Janie’s. While a focus of both Chopin and Hurston’s narratives are the romantic relationships each woman has with the men in their life and their responses to them, Ka’s story in *The Dew Breaker*, deals primarily with her interactions with another man in her life, her father. Ka, who was born and raised in America, has grown up with parents who escaped to America from Haiti during turbulent years under a dictatorship in Haiti. As an only child, she has been the focus of their marriage, and yet she will discover how little she knows of her parents’ history. This shift alone demonstrates the progression in American women’s literature that allows a story for women outside of a marriage relationship. Although the techniques of narrative métissage can be seen in the two novels previously addressed, Danticat is writing in a historical moment where the concepts of narrative métissage will be the most applicable and apparent. Chopin and Hurston used their storytelling to begin to piece together a more complete understanding of women’s identities in their historical moments; however, Danticat will be the most successful in this endeavor, as her characters and those she represents will be able to live out these complex yet whole identities most effectively. Ka will struggle with the truth of her father’s past, but Danticat points to a sense of healing that will occur for Ka and others dealing with tragic



histories, that were not fully realized in either Edna or Janie. She pieces together the aims of writers like Chopin, hoping to move women out of an understanding of themselves in the midst of a paternalistic society, and Hurston, who advanced these aims, and added to it the lack of possibility for black women like Janie seeking to create an identity of their own that may not look like middle class white culture. With Danticat's novel, the reader becomes aware of a narrative métissage that creates an understanding of Self for Ka that exists outside of any romantic relationships with a man, as well as a complex, yet complete understanding of her "hyphenated" identity as a Haitian-American.

Danticat is an important Haitian-American writer, sharing the stories of those like her, establishing a sense of identity and community for Haitian-Americans out of a shattered and often traumatic past. Her writing aims to continue the work of other Caribbean writers seeking to find a voice and identity for those needing to create a complex identity, as Caribbean women. While many characteristics have historically served to define women's Caribbean literature, one important criterion traditionally comes out of a loss or absence of the female voice. Many Caribbean writers have sought to define this voicelessness, and it has been categorized in many different ways. Carole Boyce Davies' and Elaine Savory Fido's definition of voicelessness from *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990) is among one of the first to include varied understandings of the concept, noting that women's voices have been absent from the greater conversation as political unrest and governmental corruption has plagued areas in the Caribbean. Not only do they point out that women are simply too often missing from the discussion, but that women's voices have not always been heard clearly

even when they are voiced. They insist, “For it is often not that women do not speak but that they have not been heard or that there has been selective listening” (Davies and Fido 3). As is true for early American literature, this “selective listening” has typically come from the paternalistic traditions in society, limiting a woman’s opinion. From this understanding, the term voicelessness has morphed and adapted as theorists have considered Caribbean history, but its heralding of the necessity for women to speak up despite any societal or cultural restrictions and limitations has remained a consistent driving force for Caribbean women’s literature, continuing with the work of this most current writer, Edwidge Danticat. Danticat, with her novel, *The Dew Breaker*, not only speaks for Haitian-American women, but all who seek to create a whole yet often complicated identity and Self. It is most evident in Danticat’s writing that narrative métissage is present in analysis as she attempts to weave varied and often incongruous pieces together to form a beautiful tapestry.

Through an examination of Edwidge Danticat and particularly her novel, *The Dew Breaker* (2004), one can see the ways in which voice and silence have played an important role in the stories she writes. Danticat seems to align with Caribbean scholarship noting the historical silence of Caribbean women, and values the role of a woman’s voice in her work. Additionally, by giving her protagonist a hyphenated identity in America, her novel through narrative métissage ties to the greater story of voice and silence in American women’s literature. This particular novel, *The Dew Breaker*, highlights the unique quality of Danticat’s storytelling and how she chooses to tell the stories of the people of Haiti in a way that causes her reader to almost immediately empathize with the plights of her characters. Even people unlike Danticat

who read Danticat's books can relate to her ability to put together brokenness in order to see a picture more completely. Ifeona Fulani quotes Miriam Chancy about Danticat in her article, "Caribbean Women Writers and the Politics of Style: A Case for Literary Anancyism", (2005) stating "Danticat's work has 'opened a path for the inclusion of Haitian realities in the American imagination'" (76). It is evident that while Danticat's work certainly expresses the realities of Haitian culture, she is also extending her ideas to American society and today's realities of diverse cultural meshing that is directly in line with an understanding of the goals of narrative métissage as a reading strategy.

Using her narrative strategy of telling isolated pieces in order to complete an entire story, Danticat reminds her readers of the necessity to share one's voice and how intricately voice is tied to identity and humanity, as Americans, Haitians, or Haitian-Americans. It would be impossible not to see the connections to Caribbean writer, Lionnet, and her root term of métissage in considering Danticat. One must again consider the definition of the cultural term: the "primary meaning refers to cloth made of two different fibers" and an "...unconscious goal of creating a third cultural entity" which allows for those of multiple cultures to find a place of "transculturation" to house their hyphenated identity and voice ("The Politics and Aesthetics of Métissage" 14-15). There is no doubt in looking at Danticat and her writing that her goal for many who share experiences with her and her protagonists is "transculturation." She desires for those made up of fragmented pieces to see themselves as a whole individual. So therefore, in considering her narration, it is evident that Danticat uses a form of narrative métissage in her storytelling to re-count the narratives of Haitians, Americans, and Haitian-Americans like her. Fulani echoes these fundamental goals of Danticat's writing, "a dual intention;

first, to restore these histories to the memory of the community, and second to assuage the pain that has never been acknowledged by the community and therefore never addressed” (77). Danticat’s reasons for writing and sharing stories go far beyond just an entertainment value. Without a doubt, there is a societal and cultural emphasis exceeding the benefits of writing an inspirational story, and this is where her story fits into the grand narrative for American women’s literature.

*The Dew Breaker* (2004) tells the story of a young Haitian-American woman, Ka, and her struggle for identity after finding out the truth of her family’s past. As the narrative begins, she, as an adult, has just learned the facts of her father’s past as a torturer, a “dew breaker,” in Haiti, establishing a theme of voice and silence that can be traced throughout the novel as Danticat tells the stories of Haiti that are loosely connected to this man. The trauma created by a man whose job is to inflict pain becomes the central focus of the novel, and Ka’s trauma will bookend these stories. In line with this thinking Maria Rice Bellamy writes in “Silence and Speech: Figures of Dislocation and Acculturation in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*” (2013), of how this cyclical nature of pain connected to silence goes beyond Ka stating “Silence similarly encircles Haitian immigrant characters... Circles of silence become traumatic repetitions resulting in stasis, the inability to heal or move forward after the traumas of their violent experiences in Haiti and of the immigration process” (207). While Ka’s father has remained silent about the violence he has inflicted for most of Ka’s life, likewise, his victims have also been voiceless regarding their pain in hopes of experiencing some kind of healing. In reality, the silence of Ka’s father and his victims has only kept them from any restoration. Danticat’s use of narrative métissage, literally voicing the stories of

those who have sought to remain silent to protect themselves, will not only bring about hope and healing and maybe someday forgiveness, but also a better understanding of Self for these victims, for “the dew breaker,” and for Ka.

It is clear that this novel, like Chopin and Hurston’s, highlights the problematic nature of voicelessness by using narrative métissage to tell complex but necessary stories. However, Danticat’s work also specifically allows for a fragmented understanding of Caribbean history, while telling a story of personal identity that is often complexly formed. Danticat’s narrative structure is unique to the other two novels explored as it is told in the form of vignettes that are not directly connected to one another as they are told, nor fully explained by the narrative’s end. The ambiguity that Danticat acknowledges reminds her readers of the ways that aspects of Self remain ambiguous in a process of defining Self truthfully. This collection of disjointed stories is a representation of the ways that a person’s voice is closely tied to his or her identity. As the reader is able to piece together the fragments of the story, more of a whole identity is clarified from what is voiced. As Ka begins to establish her identity honestly, albeit with complexity, her voice can be more clearly heard. Although she has experienced pain at learning the truth about her father, she now has a fuller picture of who she is. She may always feel hurt over the truth, but now that a wall has been demolished between her and her father, she can begin to better understand her history and her Self. Similarly, Sharrón Eve Sarthou discusses the healing nature of Danticat’s work, “Remediation requires people who can transgress... borders and have the ability and the freedom to speak and be heard. ...[T]his text illustrates how silence is wrought and maintained by violence and fear, and sometimes shame” (101). Through narrative métissage, Edwidge Danticat has

removed the fear and shame of silence that has pervaded not only in Ka's family, but also in many Haitian-Americans both in the novel and in Danticat's real world.

In looking specifically at the plot of the novel, this use of narrative métissage becomes apparent. Throughout the novel, the narrative tells of the dew breaker, who remains nameless throughout the narrative as just another way Danticat displays lack of voice or identity, functioning as a silencer of those speaking out against the dictatorship in Haiti. The text describes his role, stating, "He hadn't been a famous 'dew breaker,' or torturer, anyway, just one of hundreds who had done their jobs so well that their victims were never able to speak of them again" (77). This man is representative of a large group of others who also encouraged silence and thus a lack of Self and identity throughout Haiti. While the accounts of the story are fictional, they are based on the truths of historical Haiti under brutal dictators, and thus able to speak for many who had similar tragic experiences. The titular description of this man's job establishes Danticat's theme of voice and silence prevalent throughout the work, and the consideration of the ways that the past of Haiti has rendered its people voiceless. Judith Misrahi-Barak supports this line of thinking in her article, "'My Mouth Is the Keeper of Both Speech And Silence...,' Or The Vocalisation of Silence in Carribean Short Stories by Edwidge Danticat" (2015), stating, the "...silencing imposed through torture by the Haitian *tonton macoutes* during the dictatorship [of General Trujillo]" points to "history as the great silencer" (3). "The dew breaker" is representative of those in Haiti who historically and culturally have sought to silence any who wish to voice truth.

This man was one among many working for those in power in Haiti to remove the voice of its people. Thus, ironically, while Danticat tells the story of the dew breaker's

daughter, Ka, giving her a voice, she also tells the heartbreaking truth of the ways that this woman's father silenced people and others like him, giving voice to situations that had also historically been silenced. The dew breaker's role is to render his victims voiceless. He chooses to tell his story, "this pendulum between regret and forgiveness," to his daughter when he recognizes that her image of him is based on lies, and that understanding is affecting her own version of Self (Danticat 242). Ka's idolization of her father has been built on misconceptions of her father as a victim in Haiti who bravely escaped that difficult life to avoid the government's brutality. Through his confession, her father is attempting to help Ka construct some sense of her Self by helping her to better understand who she is now in light of what she knows of her father. He knows his admissions will cause pain for his daughter, as they have for him, but he wants to allow her to create a clear image of his Self. Thus, he also is using narrative métissage by telling his stories when he would rather remain silent. Elaine Savory in "Ex/Isle: Separation, Memory, and Desire in Caribbean Women's Writing" (1998) supports this understanding of his thinking as she writes of the Caribbean person's need for "examining the past, working through memory and the desire for reconciliation of old and new versions of the self" (Savory 172). In dealing with a traumatic historical past, it is important to find one's Self by looking closely at the true elements of the story. Here, again narrative métissage is prevalent as Ka goes on a journey to understand who her father is and who she is now in light of the truth of the past. Ka's identity now must be formed in light of the truth, and narrative métissage allows a place for her to create this space, through the use of his voice in narrating the true story of his past. Danticat's storytelling as narrative métissage will allow a patchwork understanding of identity— "a

cloth made of two different fibers” — instigating Ka’s journey of constructing identity based on who she has been and who she is now (“The Politics and Aesthetics of Mètissage” 14). Her journey will not be easy, but necessary to better understanding her Self.

The first story “The Book of the Dead” itself begins in the midst of things with Ka on a trip with her father. After he is discovered as missing, Ka attempts to construct a sense of who she is for the police officers, voicing it in ways she understands. She states, “I was born in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and I have never even been to my parents’ birthplace. Still I answer ‘Haiti’ because it is one more thing I’ve always longed to have in common with my parents” (3-4). Ka clearly identifies as Haitian, yet she has never even been to this place, nor will she ever go to this place that she claims as part of her Self. This heritage is part of her identity because of her parents, and yet it is not a part of her Self that she accurately understands. Like Danticat herself, Ka is American, and Haitian-American, and simply Haitian, and she has learned to voice her identity in this complexity (Fulani 75). As Ka goes on to explain that she is actually from New York, the reader discovers the reason for her trip with her father—to deliver her sculpture. She tells the officer, “ ‘I am an artist, a sculptor.’ I’m really not an artist, not in the way I’d like to be. I’m more of an obsessive wood-carver with a single subject thus far— my father” (4). Again, the reader recognizes the complexity of Ka’s voice and identity as she identifies as an artist, yet an artist with only one work. Danticat conveys the understanding that sculpting is one way that Ka has chosen to convey her “voice”, her identity, but with the subject of her sculpture, the reader also understands the deep appreciation that Ka has for her father and how conflicted and betrayed she now will feel



with the truth of his past. Her voice, her art, has been wrapped up in a misguided belief about whom her father really is. With these first few introductions, Danticat establishes two identities and two voices for her narrator—the actual and the desired, who she is and who she would like to be—neither of which is accurate. Unknowingly, Ka has built an existence based on the silence of her family, and now, in this reality, she will have to establish who she truly is. As the story continues, the author attempts to weave these two to form a complex identity for Ka.

The narrative continues quickly with the location of her father and preparation of the reader for the truth Ka's father must now tell her. His departure is instigated by this sculpture of himself. He understands that it is an idolized version of him that she creates out of pity, believing him to have been a prisoner in Haiti. As he now attempts to tell his story, the reader is aware of his own struggle for voice: "Like me, my father tends to be silent a moment too long during an important conversation and then say too much when less should be said" (18). In his false identity since leaving his life as a dew breaker, he has not learned to balance an accurate communication of voice. Both Ka and her father communicate much in their silence, often unsure of their voices, and the dew breaker has let his silence speak for far too long. Maria Rice Bellamy states of the role of silence, "Silence proliferates in this text, beginning with the silencing of the dew breaker's victims and continuing to the silence surrounding his violent past as he builds a new life in the United States" (207). The ironic result of his life of silencing others has been a lifetime of silence for himself. Though the presence of silence, Danticat is using narrative *métissage* to highlight the important role of telling the stories of the past, even if they cause pain. Her father's explanation of his role as a dew breaker will begin to

clarify his existence as well as Ka's. He tells his daughter with a few simple, yet truthful words, "I don't deserve a statue... You see, Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the prey" (20). Everything that Ka believes to be true of her father and of herself is suddenly now a lie, and she struggles to build an "overlapping space" for the man she has come to know and who he was before her existence, and as a result, who she has been and will become (Lionnet 7). She needs more of his narrative to fill in the blanks and to provide answers to so many questions. Through Ka's questioning of how this loving father she knows can also be a violent torturer, Danticat is giving voice to the fragmented results of a culture and family with a tragic past. Here, narrative *métissage* provides that voice does not have to be perfect or painless, in fact, if this is what is true, it is what is necessary to creating an accurate and whole sense of Self.

The text goes on to demonstrate the difficulty of voice after so much silence. Ka states, "He's silent again. I don't want to prod him, feed him any cues, urge him to speak, but finally I get tired of the silence and feel I have no choice" (20). As never before, Ka needs his voice. She pushes her father to speak, and as he begins to fill in the details of his work, his ominous scar, and his escape to America, Ka chooses not to interrupt her father, knowing that as he now speaks, he is establishing the truth, his actual identity. This is an element of narrative *métissage*; Ka's father is not solely good or bad, but her understanding of him represents some "third cultural entity...new and independent...though rooted in the preceding elements" (Lionnet 15). While his story is not literally creating a new "cultural" entity as is represented in *métissage*, the storytelling is allowing for an understanding of her father based on what she has always known of him and the truth he is now revealing. He is a complex figure—fully owning to

the truths of his past, but still the father that she knows. As the reader witnesses the results of his confession throughout the work, Danticat uses narrative métissage to allow this blending of stories to function as a healing agent both for this specific relationship and for others struggling with the truth of Haiti's history. Ka can begin to make sense of the complicated figure that is her father. The reader has hope that eventually Ka's healing will come in this true yet difficult understanding of her father.

While her father might feel some relief in speaking the truth, as the narrative continues, Ka now feels the burden of it and as she phones her mother to tell her that her father has been found, she must now consider her mother, Anne's, silence in light of her father's. While the text thus far has revolved around Ka's relationship with her father, the reader begins to understand that Ka's mother also plays a key role in the silence of the past, as she has been complicit in Ka's father's silence. The two escaped to America together; therefore, she must know the truth. Ka says of her mother, "She'd kept to herself even more than he had, like someone who was nurturing a great pain that she could never speak about" (22). While Ka knows that her mother has kept silent regarding her father's previous role as dew breaker, she does not yet know all the pain that her mother has kept silent. Ka's mother's silence has encouraged a confusion of identity for her daughter, torn between the lies and truths of her parents. Ka's mother remains silent, even after the truth is revealed, leaving her daughter to establish her own voice. In light of this, Ka struggles to reestablish her voice and identity. In working through his words and her mother's silence, Ka states, "I wish I could give my father whatever he'd been seeking in telling me his secret. But my father, if anyone could, must have already understood that confessions do not lighten the heart of the living" (33). Danticat reminds

the reader of the incredible pain associated with sharing the stories of her culture, but the necessity to share them anyway. Often voicelessness would be easier, but speaking up, sharing even the tragic parts of history and identity, is more valuable. While the novel is framed with Ka's learning of the truth, it also tells the stories of many others affected by men like Ka's father, and through their revelations a complete story can be better understood.

The novel proceeds from this point in fragmented pieces, as the reader attempts to construct a narrative from a traumatic event of the past. Danticat leaves the connections between seemingly disjointed vignettes to her reader, yet "the presence of the dew breaker is seen lurking from one story to another" (Misrahi-Barak 5). The reader is then asked to put together the pieces of the story, the lives of other characters established in light of the dew breaker, again showing the role of narrative *métissage*. While the reader is never quite certain of how all the characters fit, one significant character introduced in "Water Child" is Ms. Hinds, a teacher who is literally voiceless, struggling with a powerlessness that she now feels. The text states the hopelessness of her condition: "the dread of being voiceless hitting her anew each day as though it had just happened, when she would awake from her dreams in which she's spoken to find that she had no voice" (66). The author uses Ms. Hinds' actual voicelessness to show the reader the paralyzing fear associated with losing one's voice and identity. This literal picture of voicelessness shows Danticat's readers the ways voice must be established. This idea extends to the debilitating reality of losing the ability to speak out, and the necessity of speaking truth when able. While the reader understands voice in a tangible way with Ms. Hinds, connections are made throughout to the metaphorical silencing that the dew breaker once

inflicted. Although connections are not made directly to Ka and her family in this section, it is evident that Danticat is using its inclusion to primarily speak to the ramifications of voicelessness apparent.

Throughout the novel, murder and death function as the ultimate silencer to remind the reader of voicelessness and loss of identity. One section of the novel, “Night Talkers” deals with a young man named Dany who returns to Haiti to visit his aunt, as he is still grappling with the loss of his parents as a boy, presumably to the dew breaker. The aunt says of death, “There’s a belief that if you kill people, you can take their knowledge, become everything they were” (109). The author’s portrayal of death here shows the way that death seemingly removes any possibility of voice, as the dew breaker was tasked to do. Later in the novel in “The Funeral Singer,” this notion again presents itself with Ka’s mother’s words. Ka remembers, “My mother used to say that we’ll all have three deaths: the one when our breath leaves our bodies to rejoin the air, the one when we are put back in the earth, and the one that will erase us completely and no one will remember us at all” (177). Each of these “deaths” points to a losing of Self, identity, and ultimately voice, respectively. Arguably, Danticat is preventing this third death of voice by writing down and telling the stories of those who would be forgotten. The role of death in removal of voice is felt most clearly as the reader finally learns of the dew breaker’s last murder. Danticat describes the dehumanization attempted by the dew breaker with the arrest and murder of the preacher in the titular section, “The Dew Breaker.” She writes, “With each yank forward, a little bit of him was bruised, peeled away. He felt as though he was shedding skin, shedding voice, shedding sight, shedding everything he’d tried so hard to make himself into” (213). This man is arrested for

speaking out against the Haitian government from his pulpit, for having a voice, and his death is the symbolic “peeling away” and “shedding” of that part of his Self, this loss of voice that ultimately comes with his death. Death creates permanent silence; however Danticat uses narrative métissage in her novel even to the point of narrating what happens in death, in order to allow Ka and those like her to create a complex yet whole identity out of fragmented pieces. Bellamy writes of Danticat’s role, “Danticat enters the silence of death to tell a history that could be known only through imaginative re-creation” (209). Here Danticat fully connects the role of death and that of the dew breaker, as she reminds readers of many similar moments of death and torture that occurred in Haiti’s history. Ironically, here the reader also puts together the pieces of Anne’s story. The preacher was her brother, and she met the dew breaker at the prison searching for her brother. Prior to his death, her brother stabbed the dew breaker in the face, and it is this injury that leads her to believe that the dew breaker is a victim. It is only later that the truth is revealed. His death and the circumstances surrounding it have created a life of silence between Anne and her daughter. Danticat’s use of narrative métissage here attempts to bring to light the horrible loss of many Haitians and Haitian-Americans.

Danticat’s concern with voicelessness and the necessity of narrative métissage continues to the end of the novel, as the reader is privy to the telephone conversation of Ka and her mother as Ka again grapples with the true identity of her father. The text states, “She [Anne] had hoped to close the call by saying something tender and affectionate to her daughter, something like, ‘You are mine and I love you’” (242). Her desire to give her daughter a sense of Self and belonging is most evident here. The reader sees Anne’s strong desire to help her daughter reestablish her voice. She longs to be able

to give her daughter an identity and the confidence to speak. She has been silent most of her daughter's life and wants to let Ka know now who she is. She wishes to say "[a]nything to keep them both talking. But her daughter was already gone, lost, accidentally or purposely, in the hum of the dial tone" (242). The moment is gone, and once again the silence that has characterized the life of this family pervades. As this section of the story is told from Anne's perspective, Danticat does not give the reader Ka's response or reaction in this moment, causing the reader to see the need for voice in order to understand one's Self. Ka is beginning to understand who she really is in light of the truth of her family's past. Danticat does not allow the reader to be privy to all Ka will become, but the reader is left with a hope that in understanding who she is, her voice will remain clear.

Edwidge Danticat helps establish an understanding of Haitian, Haitian-American, and American women's literature that allows for a fragmented understanding of culture and society and an identity articulated with complexity, fully accepting the idea of narrative *métissage*, in light of a traumatic past. Danticat is telling one very specific story, using narrative *métissage* to move one woman toward a complete understanding of Self; however, it would be impossible not to read her story in light of a much greater framework of Haitian and American women's literature. She speaks for Haiti and America's history as she attempts to provide hope and healing for those who have suffered under Haiti's dictatorship and cruelty, and American prejudice and lack of acceptance. Danticat does not wish to just function as a mouthpiece for the injustices of Haiti and America's past. She instead speaks of the very real lives of people who have experienced loss and pain and hurt—both Haitian-Americans and others alike. She

attempts to portray an understanding of Haiti that is truthful and honest in a voice that is uniquely hers. She tells the stories of the past, as they are, without fluff or pretense; however, her ability to communicate a story of a painful history voices these stories in a way that is necessary. As an expert storyteller, in telling these tragic histories, her goal is not to place blame. The reader is given the space and opportunity to identify with the events and stories though many will never experience anything like what she describes.

It is evident that the ideas encapsulated in the term voicelessness have changed and developed over time. Clearly the stories of women are being heard, and the major issues surrounding their lives are being brought to light in their literature. Voice is inseparable from identity and humanity, and as voice grows, through writers such as Chopin, Hurston, and Danticat, identity, however that might look, becomes more clearly defined. A careful look at Edwidge Danticat's writing demonstrates the ability for women like her protagonists to "become quite adept at braiding all the traditions... using fragments that constitute in order to participate fully in a dynamic process of transformation" ("Logique Métisses" 5). Danticat's use of narrative métissage in this novel shows the value of storytelling, voice, and speech to bring together the various bits of belief, expectation, and ultimately truth of one's culture, gender, upbringing, and society to create a complex yet whole sense of Self.



## Chapter Five—Conclusion

*“...for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.”*

Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (1977)

After an examination of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Watching God*, and Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*, this thesis demonstrates that in conjunction these works can serve as representatives of a greater framework for understanding voice and silence, particularly in American women’s literature. In taking a close look at the trends of women in literature throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in American society, these three American authors were chosen to establish the ways that narrative métissage can be used to read their works gaining a better understanding of how a woman’s voice and identity can be complexly formed yet wholly defined. While these three women are representative of different times and different aspects of American culture and society, their correlation here allows one to consider how they are related, and that each of their goals in writing points to a much larger cultural and societal goal. Each of their novels show the importance of storytelling— in voicing often difficult and flawed stories— in creating what can be a complex yet whole and complete identity or sense of Self.

These authors use narrative métissage as a way of telling the stories of those who have existed on the periphery in American society, yet who have been able to put together a complete and also multi-faceted identity, voice, and Self. Kate Chopin uses narrative métissage by giving voice to a woman who otherwise was voiceless, by

allowing Edna to expose the truths of her heart that do not align with historical or societal expectations, and by ultimately exposing her failure to live with her complex and diverse identity by writing a tragic ending for Edna. Writing at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chopin is used to launch the necessity of narrative métissage in establishing a space in American women's literature for women to have a true and accurate voice. Zora Neale Hurston uses narrative métissage in her work in similar ways; however, the structure of her novel is very different. In fact she uses the structure itself to allow Janie's story to be told in a way that points to her voicelessness. Although she is more successful than Edna in establishing a voice and an identity not reliant on society's approval. However in choosing Tea Cake's death over her own, there is a sense that she will live in somewhat isolation from her society. Edwidge Danticat was chosen to represent narrative métissage at its most successful capability. Written at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, telling the story of a young Haitian-American woman, this narrative immediately depicts the ways that Ka is already living with a complex identity. However, as the work progresses, it becomes evident that her story has been built on lies. As Danticat reveals the truth of her family and country's past throughout the novel, she begins to construct a new Self out of the revelations of reality. As is demonstrated in this thesis, each novel stands on its own its ability to use narrative métissage; however, it is the uniqueness of each woman's story and their differences from each other that have exposed the essential qualities of narrative métissage—every story is necessary to tell an accurate story.

The beautiful threads of each writer's words weave together a beautiful tapestry of understanding voice and identity in American literature. As this thesis has progressed through these three works historically, one can see the ways that narrative métissage as a

solution to voicelessness or a convoluted sense of Self has been more successful as time has passed. With the ability and choice that each writer makes to accurately reflect their historical time period, one can quickly see each of their goals to highlight the flaws in societal understandings and expectations. Not only does each writer point to concerns for women and their sense of Self within their historical moment, but they each use their writing to push forward and imagine a future where there will be less restriction and a story might be told to accurately reflect a woman's Self. Chopin, Hurston, and Danticat attempt to chart a new path for women that move them out of the cookie cutter mold that has defined a woman's voice, Self, and artistic capabilities.

Chopin creates a protagonist who begins to see herself outside of the parameters of a paternalistic society, but she uses Edna's death and failure to communicate and act in *The Awakening* to assert the necessity of a multifaceted voice for women living in a society that did not expect women to play any role other than wife or mother. Her society was not at all accepting of the kind of woman that Edna was attempting to become. Thus, her death is necessary to demonstrate her lack of courage as well as the failings of society. However, Janie's death will not be necessary in Hurston's narrative. Some progress has been made in society; however, Janie will not live without the loss of a great part of her happiness. In a sense, a part of her does die with Tea Cake. Hurston continues Chopin's discussion telling a heartbreaking tale of a woman's fight for voice and identity in the face of a community that wishes for her silence or her conformity. Hurston shows her readers that it is possible for an African-American woman to create a sense of voice that is uniquely her own, not resembling any of the communities around her. Unfortunately for Janie, while she is ready to establish a complicated identity, her

community is not. Edwidge Danticat brings this conversation nearest its zenith and continues to speak to the difficulties of a dual culture both in men and women alike, and ultimately will point to the great necessity of a complicated identity and the possibilities of it for those like her protagonist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, Danticat still asserts to her readers that this is not an easy task, and that this identity has been pieced together after a painful look at the past.

In conjunction, these three novels show a progression through the history of American women's literature, demonstrating the successes and failures of voice and silence in their works and the ways in which creating an identity through voice is necessary, even if one must create it complexly. Ultimately, the authors establish a voice in their works that lays the foundation for writers who will continue to tell the stories of those in need of a complicated sense of Self. This thesis asserts that this type of identity and voice can be successfully created through narrative *métissage*.

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