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Information Transfer in Haitian Literature:
Edwidge Danticat and the Immigrant Experience

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Abstract

Edwidge Danticat is one of several expatriate Haitian literati who have contributed to literature from the Caribbean diaspora. Moving to Brooklyn at the age of 12, Danticat documented the immigrant experience with her first publication at the age of 14. The act of moving between countries and the translation of her work into multiple languages (including the three familiar to her: Haitian Creole, French, and English) mirror the information transfer process (ITP). The ITP is composed of creation, dissemination, organization, diffusion, utilization, and preservation. This paper examines information transfer as seen through the lens of Haitian immigrant literature.

Creation

Danticat's literary reflections and exploration of her experiences in Haiti and as an immigrant to the United States are acts of creation. Reva Brown (1994) emphasizes the subjectivity of knowledge in that "the values of the knowledge-maker are an integral and inseparable part of knowledge making" (p.153). Knowledge is also grounded in the social context of the knowledge-maker. Danticat's social context being one in upheaval complicated the creation process. Her experiences in Haiti did not always translate to those in the U.S. and thus Danticat developed a comparative perspective, informing and influencing subsequent acts of creation. Among the first of her publications was a newspaper article addressing her immigration experience. This article later inspired *Breath, eyes, memory* (1994), her first novel. A necessary component of creation is a tool to create with. In Danticat's case, this is language. Danticat examines the challenge of being between languages by attempting to recreate conflicted self-expression in her novel. This state of being "between," neither insider nor outsider, provides an additional influence on

the transference of experience into literary text. In turn, Brown addresses, “insider and outsider knowledge” concluding that, “we are both insiders and outsiders, because we simultaneously exist in more than one interrelated social category and these interact to affect our behavior and perspectives” (p.156). According to Brown’s argument for the relativity of truth, Danticat’s texts are one of many classifications of knowledge--the revelation of one truth. Contradictions and tension in knowledge-making then do not obfuscate but enrich.

Dissemination

When experience is synthesized into a body of work, creative or otherwise, it is the act of dissemination that transfers that work into the public domain. Literature (experience synthesized) is disseminated most commonly through the publication of books, “a one-way spreading of information” (Achleitner, p. 144). In other words, Danticat publishes her novels (grounded in the immigrant experience), which are made available through bookstores (virtual and physical), and that personal knowledge is made available to the public.

Additionally, interactivity between created product (book) and user (reader) “provides for a multidirectional flow of information” (Achleitner, p. 144). Thus, reader purchases book, reads it, and begins internalizing, processing, and integrating the knowledge contained within. *Krik? Krak!* (1995) Danticat’s second book, takes its name from a call and response tradition between Haitian storytellers and their audiences. This interactive practice enquires whether or not the audience is ready for the act of dissemination to occur, and other times clarifying the information has been received.

Literary criticism of Danticat's work, appearing in such places as *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*, also disseminates interpretations and theories attached to her primary novels, short stories, and accompanying translations. Besides print text, Danticat's work has been narrated and captured as sound recordings—echoing the tradition of orality in Haiti. Other acts of spreading information include Danticat's personal appearances at literary conferences and readings, where she delivers excerpts from her novels, and communication through visual medium, a result of her collaboration with filmmakers on Haiti-related documentaries. A more recent tool of dissemination is the internet. Library Thing, an online resource for cataloging personal collections of books and sharing them with other users, creates a network of bibliophiles who tag, review, and recommend books to each other. As of the 30th of October, 2007, 1,018 Library Thing users claimed to own 1,414 books by Edwidge Danticat. Of these, the most commonly owned work was *Breath, eyes, memory*, and the average user ranking of Danticat's work was approximately three and three quarters out of five stars. This interactive method of ranking and reviewing books also exemplifies the “multidirectional flow” that occurs when readers are exposed to a new author/new information, with modern technology providing an avenue for further dissemination depending on user interest.

Organization

In order for information to be disseminated, it is often necessary to organize what has been created (knowledge and experience) into a logical system of retrieval. This system is intended to allow the greatest access to the greatest number of people. While systems may intend to be logical this is impossible unless the user has extensive knowledge of the system. The user's prior knowledge, comfort level, and prejudices all influence the success

rate of a search. Attempts to organize all human knowledge, from Melvil Dewey--creator of Dewey Decimal Classification, to Herbert Putnam--developer of the Library of Congress Classifications, have been simultaneously adopted and rejected by society. Libraries ranging in scale from large academic institutions to small private corporations seek utility in organization, while others are quick to point out the inherent biases in these systems. For example, both are US-centric and Dewey's hierarchical structure makes it especially difficult for the adoption of changes and additions to the various branches of knowledge. In her metaphorical approach to "foraging" for information, Jodi Kearns (2003) makes a case for our tendency toward optimizing search techniques and thus our need to re-organize according to the flux of information. "Optimal foraging is an established biological and anthropological theory that plots searching and handling curves on cost and benefits axes to determine their relationship" (p. 123). If organizational structures of information fail, dissemination does not occur, and seekers may give up their search. With the increase of structures like Library Thing, the use of folksonomies, and the rise of tagging (the common man's catalog of search terms), traditional systems may be supplemented or even replaced in some cases as foragers weigh the cost-benefit of navigating these systems and create their own alternatives.

Danticat's works of fiction fall under PS3554 in the Library of Congress Classification (LCC), in turn falling within the range of American literature written by authors born or first published between 1961-2000 (PS3550-3576). In the Multnomah County Public Library System (Oregon), Danticat's creative works are found under FICTION DANTICAT, with specific types of literature divided according to extended Dewey Decimal Classification: y and j Danticat (juvenile fiction), 303.484 B282L 2004 for

inclusion in an anthology of essays from *The Progressive Magazine* entitled *Louder than bombs*, 810.9 B988 2001 for a collection of literature edited by Danticat, *The butterfly's way: voices from the Haitian diaspora [sic] in the United States*, and so on. In a small school library (Cascade School District #5), organization is further simplified by labeling Danticat's literature as F Dan – YA (young adult fiction).

Subject headings are another way of organizing literature. Haitian Americans--Fiction, Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.)--Fiction, and Genocide--Dominican Republic--Fiction are among those assigned to Danticat by *The Sears List of Subject Headings* (which also incorporates LOC terms). Danticat may also be found in index listings of Immigrants--United States, and under subclass PQ in the LOC for works translated in French and PM (Hyperborean, Indian, and artificial languages) for works in Creole.

Diffusion

Diffusion occurs at the moment of enlightenment or understanding. As people communicate with each other, share their thoughts about Danticat's novels, how it moved them, or not, new ideas are exchanged and absorbed, giving way to new revelations about the original idea, or innovation. This "special type of communication" involving innovative ideas and messages is further distinguished by Rogers (2003) who claims, "This newness of the idea in the message content give diffusion its special character. The newness means that some degree of uncertainty is involved in diffusion" (p. 7). Remaining open to uncertainty is key to literary discussion. Whether in the context of a book club, a literary conference, a Comparative Literature class, or a blog, these discussions are successful when all parties involved are open to new interpretations and reactions to Danticat's text.

Further enlightenment may occur when Danticat's own clarifications of her work are considered.

In an interview published in online magazine *The Morning News*, Danticat responds to questions posited by journalist Robert Birnbaum about American attitudes on foreign policy and her own attitudes about her body of work. She explains that after publishing *The Farming of Bones* (1998), she returned to short stories and began one that eventually gave rise to another novel, *The Dew Breaker* (2004), about a father's revelation to his family that he was not a prisoner but a torturer during one of many violent moments in Haitian history. She goes on to explicate the dual meaning of the title, coming from the Creole, "*choukèt laroze*; it really means somebody who breaks or shakes the dew... There is also an expression on the other side, *gouverneurs de la rosée*, people who govern the dew... people of the land who nurture... and try to control their destiny through the land" (Birnbaum, 2004). This information is not explicitly derived from a mere reading of the novel, it occurs during an exchange of innovative information using specific communication channels (face-to-face) imbedded in a particular social context (an interview).

Utilization

Utilization is "[t]he notion of adapting knowledge to the needs of society" (Rich, 1979, p. 15). Thematic elements of Danticat's novels often examine the impact of Haitian regimes (backed by U.S. administration) on the Haitian people. By diffusing these themes it is possible to address the cultural, economic, and social changes needed to resolve the repercussions of oppressive governments. According to Rebecca Skloot (2007) Danticat recently testified before the U.S. Congress' Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security and International Law, the text of

which she posted to *Critical Mass: the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors*. This testimony, coming from the author herself, and based on her newest book, a memoir entitled *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007), exemplifies the utilization of personal knowledge for the betterment of society. As Reva Brown (1994) discusses, there are many classifications of knowledge, or “more than one explanation of human experience and its resulting knowledge” (p. 153). While Danticat’s is only one of many explanations, she emphasizes the power of the phrase “the personal is political” (ascribed to feminist studies) and the potential for this voice to be considered, and more importantly influence, the shaping of policy.

Preservation

Danticat’s literary works are preserved in publishing warehouses on-call for wholesale or individual purchase. Individual novels are preserved in private reader collections and in public and school libraries. Criticism of her work resides primarily in the collections of academic libraries and journals. In addition, for as long as virtual archives and storage devices adapt to changing technologies, Danticat is preserved electronically. An ephemeral sort of preservation also exists in the memories of readers impacted by her work, and in the collective history of the Haitian people, their story of which has been partially captured and distributed to the world in the form of literary expression.

Conclusion

Information transfer occurs with the advent of personal experience expressed as literary knowledge of the immigrant experience as a Haitian-American. Danticat’s primary texts being the original innovation, are the creative result of that experience. This literature is then disseminated through the publication of her texts, organized through varied and

changing systems of organization and diffused through multiple methods of discussion. Physical, virtual and ephemeral preservation of Danticat's expanding body of work ensures the continuation and shaping of Haitian-American studies, and the possibility of utilization, or the influence of literature on societal needs for a perpetually evolving foreign policy.

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