Créolization in a Caribbean Landscape:
Representations of Deteriorating Landscapes and Internal Exile in Edwidge Danticat’s Claire of the Sea Light

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Introduction

To read Haitian born American writer Edwidge Danticat’s novel *Claire of the Sea Light* is to witness a Caribbean space deteriorated by environmental and social corruption. The landscape, central to the cultural history of the Caribbean, is no longer able to provide stability for its people. The polluted sea is short of a supply of fish, and the fishermen can no longer make a living. The mountains, barren of trees exploited for their charcoal, cause the land to erode. The flooding rivers uproot the vegetation causing mudslides that demolish homes. Moreover, the novel’s urban spaces of Ville Rose and Cité Pendue are portrayed as places of violence and social corruption. Rape, murder, and corruption dominate the former; poverty and gang violence occur in the latter. These corrupt and deteriorating landscapes force the novel’s characters into internal exile. Although victimized by the deteriorating landscapes, these characters are also partly to blame for their own internal exile. They are, in fact, a contributing factor to both the environmental and social corruption that changes the landscape.

Caribbean writer and theorist Edouard Glissant discusses the connection between the landscape and the community when he states, “my landscape changes in me; it is probable that it changes with me” (145). Similarly, in the novel, both the people and the environment are changed by each other. The fishermen leave the sea, the peasants leave the mountains, and rising rivers destroy homes. These changes can be compared to Glissant’s theory that the history of the Caribbean is made from a “traumatic shock” in the landscape (65). These shocks make for an ever-changing landscape and history and he states, “Our landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history” (Glissant 11). Similarly, the stories of Danticat’s characters
are ever-changing and although their lives are filled with tragedy, they find new beginnings. Stanka Radović points out that Glissant “imagines another world, also new, but stained by the newness of a forced creation: a violent, chaotic, and creative cosmogony of the Caribbean slave” (477). In other words, the arrival of the slaves to the Caribbean was, according to Glissant, the beginning of Caribbean history. In the novel a freak wave kills a fisherman; mudslides demolish homes; and torrential rains and heat waves decimate populations of indigenous frogs. This situation, although new because of the current environmental pollution and corruption, is at the same time a common pattern in Caribbean history; it is ever changing, unpredictable and chaotic.

Danticat’s previous works have provoked readings on the theme of the Haitian diaspora and the search for identity through a return to the homeland, yet no research has been done on Claire of the Sea Light, or the effects of the deteriorating landscape on its people. Rather, the topic of landscape in her other works has been addressed from the perspective of the diaspora or exile and the return to the homeland. Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw claims that Danticat is a diasporic writer depicting characters “trapped in the landscape of memory” (79). Similarly Dash argues, “Danticat’s characters are condemned to crossing and recrossing from one country to another, between the past and the present, dream and reality, without ever finding satisfactory answers” (Dash 40). Both Dash and Walcott-Hackshaw point out Danticat’s use of the trope of flowers as symbols and relate it to rootedness as described by Glissant's theories of the Rhizome. He contends that people’s roots in the Caribbean history spread out rather than go down deep. Yet, these readings are a reflection still on the diaspora and their return to a homeland. Susan Stanford-Friedman refers to Danticat’s first novel, Breath, Eyes,
Memory, as being an example of “reverse migration” (20) because its main character returns to Haiti to resolve her identity. Ultimately, Dash points out that Danticat’s fictions “give the placeless subject a voice as witness to the unspoken and unspeakable horrors of recent Haitian history” (41). These unspeakable horrors are not only that the landscape has changed, but also that Haitians have played a role in the deterioration of the landscape that causes them internal exile.

As Marika Presiuozo points out, Danticat addresses the history of Haiti in her works, for example, the historical massacre of cane cutters in 1937, as well as the “Haitian anti-colonial modernity” (152) represented by the slave revolution of 1791. In other works she returns to “traumas of colonialism, dictatorship and historical marginalisation” (Presiuozo 153). As regards more recent history, Carol Davies points out that the after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, “the fault lines are numerous — they are economic, social, political and geographic” (29). The landscape and the environment were literally changing at the time Danticat wrote the novel, and Davies argues that it is important to think of the relation between the changing landscape and its impact.

Unlike her other novels, the imaginary landscapes in Claire of the Sea Light create internal exile for the people who have remained in Haiti. Salman Rushdie points out that writers who are “exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back . . .” (Rushdie 10). He claims that these writers want to “restore the past” (Rushdie 10). In order to restore the past writers use memory, but memory is not trustworthy, therefore, the writer imagines homelands. Hence, this study of the novel fills a gap in the available research because as Presiuozo points out, there is a need for academic research “to honour the contribution of literary imagination in
envisioning links between the way in which places are ‘imagined’, represented and lived” (146). Danticat imagines a coastal town that attempts to show how people who have stayed in Haiti live and survive in a deteriorating landscape.

Situating Claire of the Sea Light in a socially and environmentally deteriorating landscape, in which its inhabitants are dislocated, internally exiled, and faced with making decisions, the novel examines the experience of marginalization in one’s own country. Alienation in this case can be explained as “exclusion . . . from the community within which she or he lives, even within his/her own country” (Paul Tabori qtd. in Marie Arndt 110). As mentioned previously, Glissant asserts that since the Caribbean people’s history is connected to their landscape, this alienation is problematic. For example, Nozias, the father of the protagonist Claire, must leave the sea to find a better life and his daughter must be given away to Gaëlle the rich fabric storeowner. Moreover, Gaëlle, who has lost her family and her home, must accept that the past is lost. Finally, Max Ardin Jr. is exiled from Haiti because of his shameful act of raping the maid in his home. Danticat therefore adheres to what Glissant terms “the transfer . . . of a population to another place where they change into something different, into a new set of possibilities” (Glissant 14). This process of change is termed Créolization.

Glissant conceptualizes Caribbean space and history with the theory of Créolization. Seen as a process, Créolization is “the transfer . . . of a population to another place where they change into something different, into a new set of possibilities” (Glissant 14). He states, “this land . . . dead . . . in its essence, is reborn with another intention” (Dash, The Other America 7.) Reading the novel through the lens of Créolization examines the novel’s representation of spaces as symbols of the exile’s reconciliation and acceptance
of change, and ultimate rejection of internal exile. As Hein Viljoen has suggested, it is “a way out of the old dividing structures of the past as well as out of the impasse of being caught on the threshold between past and present” (3). Therefore, the Caribbean is its own place, created in a new space, “where opposites meet and where new blends take place” (Viljoen 3). In the novel, new blends are possible across classes when the protagonists Claire Limyè Lamnè and Gaëlle Laurent the rich fabric storeowner accept each other. The process of Créolization is epitomized by the language and structure of the novel and is manifested in the symbolization of the landscape. This symbolization of the landscape is what Glissant refers to as metalanguage. The landscape presents a language and a structure in which to better understand the history of the Caribbean.

The fragmented structure of the novel reflects the concept that Caribbean is made up of shocks subsequently put back together in the process of Créolization. Glissant believes that the writers of the Americas see history in the landscape “implode . . . in clumps” (145), but in order to express themselves must put them back together. Likewise, Derek Walcott theorizes that the Caribbean is a “shipwreck of fragments” (70), but that the fragments that make a whole, is ultimately about survival (Walcott 75). Bharati Mukherjee points out that, this fragmented style of narration is common to immigrant writers suggesting the shattered and fragmented lives suffered by the exile. She argues that Danticat is a writer of “literature of the New Arrival” which “enters on the nuanced process of rehousement after the trauma of forced or voluntary unhousishment” (683). This literature, she claims, tells the stories of people with broken lives that live in “obscure history” (683). Danticat reassemble the lives of her characters and makes Haitian history apparent since the novel is related from the point-of-view of multiple characters,
spanning a space of ten years and the chapters which are stories unto themselves, merge to make a whole. In addition to the fragmented structure, Danticat also uses a metaphorical language to describe the landscape and its effect on the people.

Glissant argues that the history of the Caribbean is obscure, but can be found in the landscape, and for writers of the Americas, is a “shaping force” in literature, which he calls “the language of landscape” (145). He claims that “landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character” (Glissant 105). In other words, the landscape is more than setting or background, its connection with community and the formation of history is vital, and it is a character in the process of change. Therefore a closer look at the textual, metaphorical and symbolic, as well as structural devices employed by Danticat create more understanding of the condition of the Caribbean spaces and the way people live in these spaces. The imaginary places that create internal exile for the people who live and move in them perform a central role within the novel. Therefore this essay will argue that Danticat’s illumination of the deterioration of a Caribbean landscape creates internal exile in the characters, yet through the process of Créolization creates new possibilities.

**Deteriorating Landscape and Internal Exile**

The deteriorated landscapes in *Claire of the Sea Light* represent the violent and fragmented history of the Caribbean and cause the characters to experience internal exile. In the novel the rural landscapes such as the polluted sea, the barren mountains, the burned forest, flooding rivers and eroding hillsides, leads to the displacement of people. In the urban landscapes, corruption and murder are dominating factors. Although this
deterioration is due in part to environmental pollution and corruption caused by people, it also mirrors the violence of Caribbean history. Glissant hypothesizes that Caribbean history has its beginning in the slave trade in the form of “ruptures . . . [that] came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces” (Glissant 62). He argues that these shocks break the continuum. In other words changes do not happen gradually, but rather suddenly resulting in a lack of a “collective consciousness” (Glissant 62). Therefore, for Glissant, history is cumulative, rather than linear. These painful shocks in the novel cause what Maria Helena Lima points out is common for Danticat’s characters to experience; there is “no possibility of return” (131). The land is ever-changing and Benítez-Rojo refers to the “Caribbean as being always in motion, forever in a state of flux, not a fixed ground by an open field of signifiers” (qtd in Dash, Other America, 8). Therefore nothing is static or stable for the land and its people. This unstable landscape is “centered on the displacement of communities, the relocation of peoples, on the individuals driven across languages, frontiers, cultures” (Glissant xxxix). Danticat visits this history that “is spread out beneath this surface, from the mountains to the sea, from north to south, from forest to the beaches” (Glissant 11). She stages encounters between the characters’ past and present and to show how a separation from these landscapes causes internal exile that is partly self inflicted.

In the novel, the sea is depicted as an untrustworthy and chaotic space that threatens the characters with death and no return. Glissant refers to slaves who died on the passage from Africa, and writes that, “the salt of the sea claimed them” (11). This is as Susan Vega- Gonzalez points out “the historical legacy of slavery of . . . African ancestors . . . who perished through the middle passage” (54). As Elvira Pulitano argues, the sea space
in Danticat’s fiction is both a part of the landscape and the history of the island, which continues to “haunt and fascinate its people” (2). Being claimed by the sea is a motif in the novel that haunts the characters. The wives of fishermen throw salt over their shoulders to ensure their men returned from sea. When Claire is born Nozias imagines “dropping her in the sea” (Danticat, Claire 17) as a way to rid himself of the memory of his dead wife. Even Bernard, Max Junior’s friend, who is a strong swimmer, is afraid of the sea taking him. The motif of the sea taking lives represents Glissant’s theory, that it is “a powerful trope for reconfiguring spatio-temporal complexity of the Caribbean region even as it is a powerful site of historical violence” (Pulitano 11). The sea, therefore, is a space that connects the past to the present. Historically the sea is a reminder of the African diaspora, the slaves lost during the Middle Passage and Haiti’s recent history of fleeing dictatorship. The so-called “Haitian boat people” made the treacherous journey to the United States to escape political prosecution, only to die at sea. An important historical incident occurred during a voyage to the United States to look for a better life when a woman threw herself and her dead baby in the sea. Danticat explains, “they sank to the bottom of an ocean which already holds millions of souls from the middle passage the holocaust of the slave trade that is our legacy. (“We Are Ugly”). The sea, therefore, is an important part in Caribbean history.

These references to the historical past of the Caribbean are represented at the start of the novel by the death of a fisherman in “a freak wave” (Danticat, Claire 3), that leaves the fisherman’s wife, who is both deaf and suffering from elephantiasis, without any source of income. The fisherman “whom the sea had taken” (Danticat, Claire 238) is a symbol of Caribbean culture as he is one of the millions who have died crossing the sea
from the time of slavery to more modern times of immigration to the United States. Danticat explains, “The past is full of examples when our foremothers and forefathers showed such deep trust in the sea that they would jump off slave ships and let the waves embrace them. They too believed that the sea was the beginning and the end of all things” (“We Are Ugly”). The sea, then, is a character in the process of change, and is a metaphor for the chaos that results in the loss of lives, loss of livelihood, and loss of place historic to the Caribbean.

The deteriorating sea causes Nozias to look for work elsewhere. Forced migration to the Dominican Republic is common in Haiti, and in the novel Nozias will leave because “Lapèche, fishing, was no longer as profitable as it had once been” (Danticat Claire 9). Even before his wife Claire died giving birth to their daughter Claire Limyè Lamnè, they were saving their money “for another place away from the sea” (Danticat, Claire 25). This lack of fish is a direct result of environmental pollution. Even the “seabed was disappearing, and the sea grass that used to nourish the fish was buried under silt and trash” (Danticat, Claire 9). This deterioration is a catalyst in Nozias’ decision to give his daughter away every year on her birthday to the lonely, yet wealthy fabric storeowner Gaëlle Lavaud. If Gaëlle accepts his proposition, he will leave to make a better life for himself. Nozias’ forced migration is an example of what Stanford-Friedman labels “‘new migration’” (7). Nozias, as well as other characters in the novel, fit into this category of forced migration: “Diasporics, exiles, refugees, asylum seekers, educated elites, labor migrants, guest workers, those scrambling for a better life: all are viewed as part of a ‘push/pull’ dynamic in an asymmetrical world-system” (Stanford Friedman 7). The “push/pull dynamic” is the pull of the Western world and the push of the lack of
opportunities for people outside the West who do not have opportunities in their homelands. However, it is not only the poor in the novel who are displaced by the shocks in the environment; another group of people displaced by environmental shocks are the wealthy Haitians of Ville Rose who build houses along the river. At one time considered prime property, houses slide down the hills caused by land erosion and uproot homes, people and plants.

Danticat’s use of the image of uprooting depicts the ambiguousness of the landscape. Walcott-Hackshaw examines Danticat’s “landscape of home” (72) and argues: “The place we call home may be a fixed location, offering rooted security . . . or it can be ambiguous, enigmatic, shifting place that destabilizes and promotes feeling of transience” (71). Danticat’s vision of Haiti as home can be seen as ambiguous in that it is not a fixed place. Flash floods along the river uproot indigenous plants as well as people from their homes and replace them with something else. Gaëlle’s home is the only one left near the river since the others were “dragged downstream . . . with entire families in them” (Danticat, Claire 53). The rains kill the indigenous frogs and uproot the wild vetiver grass. Yet these indigenous animals and plants are replaced with something new and more fertile. The torrential rains “[deposit] a tall layer of sandy loam near Gaëlle and Laurent’s house” (Danticat, Claire 47). This new soil fertilizes the cultivated almond orchard. Additionally, the land is devastated further by the burning of trees by the peasants who make their living burning trees for charcoal. They ignore appeals “warning them that the rivers were swelling in response to the lack of trees, the land erosion, the dying topsoil” (Danticat, Claire 53). These shifts in the landscape cause displacement of vegetation, homes and people, which can be compared to the concept of migration.
Papastergiadis points out that a “contemporary understanding of migration is still framed by a universal notion of displacement” (22). Gaëlle, the peasants, the soil and the plants may be displaced, but something else will take over.

When the peasants are displaced from the mountains, new homes for the wealthy Haitians take their place. Mòn Initil, or Useless Mountain, no longer provides a living for the peasants because “the wood was too wet for charcoal and too unsteady for construction” (Danticat, Claire 10). The depiction of the mountain as infertile indicates that Danticat writes against the “décor consentant (the balmy natural setting)” (Glissant xxxvi). The mountains, normally the landscape of the peasants, are rendered useless because of the exploitation of the forest. Glissant states that the forest is “ignored and uninhabited” and subverts the tourist view of the Caribbean as the Garden of Eden, “a zone in which no one seeks permanence” (Glissant xxxvi). Glissant asserts that it is the writer’s role to show what it truly is. Like the shocks in history, Danticat animates the landscape with shocks that create changes. Mòn Initil’s land is scorched and Nozias predicts that eventually Mòn Initil would be called” Palace Mountain Mòn Pale” (Danticat, Claire 234) because rich people are burning it, and flattening it to build mansions. The displacement of the peasants can be seen as a forced internal exile brought about by their own part in the deterioration of the landscape. Similarly, Dash refers to Jacques Roumain’s novel Gouverneurs de la rosée from 1944 as an example of national literature, which depicts a utopian Haiti through which all Haitian literature can be read. This type of Haitian utopia is influenced by modernity and rejects American neo-imperialism and is read as “a retreat into the pastoral” (Dash 33). Even Danticat points out that Haitians who originate from a pastoral landscape and live in a rural landscape
long for the countryside. In an interview Edwidge Danticat talks about the feeling of being exiled in one’s own country. She explains that when people travel on a bus while in the city, and someone asks where they are going they will say, “‘I am going to my country’” (Lyons 186). She explains that older members of families who live in the city feel exiled and express a desire “‘to return to my country’” (Lyons 186). These feelings of internal exile mirror the “the actual exile from Haiti that many Haitians experienced” (Lyons 186). Danticat on the other hand does not show Haiti’s pastoral landscape as somewhere to retreat to, but rather to escape from. This denuded landscape causes the peasants to look for new possibilities in the urban space of Cité Pendue. However, here too they find that they are alienated because of the corruption prevalent in the city.

Cité Pendue is allegorical for the corrupted state of Haiti. As a marginalized community its shocks are manifested in poverty, corruption and pollution. As its name in Creole suggests, “City of Waiting,” is “a temporary perch” (Danticat, Claire 65). It consists of a mixture of peasants generated by displacement from the deteriorated mountains. Therefore, similar to migrant communities around the world, Papastergiadis points out, “the horizon of the migrant’s imaginary is increasingly filled with experiences of itinerancy, ghettoization, and illegality” (20). Therefore, Cité Pendue becomes “a destitute and treacherous extension of Ville Rose. Some people called it the region’s first circle of hell . . . a midlevel slum” (Danticat 64). Danticat paints a picture of a Caribbean landscape that is empty of opportunities for the people who live there. The character Bernard notes while watching children play soccer in the streets: “if not for those people, it would have been impossible for him to imagine that this had ever been the kind of place where people lived” (113). This situation in the novel can be viewed, as Dash
points out, as an example of “the globalization of the peasantry . . . because of the dislocation through the neocolonial US presence and its imperialist designs on the Caribbean” (Dash 35). The poverty depicted in the novel can be explained by the displacement of the peasants who, because of the lack of opportunities to support themselves, are forced to move to an urban setting. The resulting poverty can be seen in the novel as the progressively polluted eight mile road from Ville Rose to Cité Pendue where the sea changes from “green-blue, to brown to ashen black” (Danticat, Claire 108). Additionally, Cité Pendue is a community of inhabitants victimized by a corrupt and unequal social system, without opportunities. Violence rules Cité Pendue in the form of gangs and a corrupt police force. When Laurent Lavaud is murdered outside the radio station, Bernard is arrested for the murder, and is then murdered himself in an act of revenge. As Louise, the talk show host of the popular radio program observes, the police investigation “was like all investigations in Haiti” (125). She means that marginalized people will not receive fair treatment because they are poor. Gangs rule the city with violence, and it is a dangerous place where people “would be better off dead” (Danticat, Claire 82), and they do die, in a scene of murder and revenge. Many of the characters are killed by accidents, murder or suicide, and the place itself is also dead. Whereas Cité Pendue is a blend of different people alienated and marginalized by poverty, corruption and pollution, Ville Rose alienates its people and is only a place for a privileged few.

Ville Rose is an urban landscape, lacking opportunity and symbolic of the corruption of Haiti’s elite society. It alienates its own as “a generation whose hopes had been raised, then dashed over and over again” (Danticat, Claire 187) and “a society where people are always looking for the next person to tear down” (Danticat, Claire 185). Its location
suggests instability and uncertainty, as it is “crammed between a stretch of the most unpredictable waters of the Caribbean Sea and an eroded Haitian mountain range” (Danticat, *Claire* 5). This instability and death of the landscape is also expressed through the undertaker, Albert Vincent, who is inaugurated as the new mayor and instigates jokes about “the town eventually becoming a cemetery so he could get more clients” (Danticat, *Claire* 4). When Gaëlle declares, “Too many people die here” (Danticat, *Claire* 162) she laments the unfair and cruel deaths of her husband, her daughter, and Claire’s mother. There are not many who survive or thrive in this landscape and those who are able to “escape”, may come back, if “only for a little while” (Danticat, *Claire* 92). For example the mayor’s children attend boarding school abroad, and chose to vacation in Europe, and spend “their time mostly hating their country” (Danticat, *Claire* 91). Although Walcott-Hackshaw points out that in Danticat’s previous works the urban places are depicted as the “site of violence where nightmares are created, whereas the Haitian countryside is edenic” (80), in *Claire* both the urban and the rural landscapes are portrayed as violent. This violence is endemic to Ville Rose, and manifests itself in violent acts carried out by the characters subsequently leaving them and their victims exiled from their landscape.

Danticat establishes the violent acts committed by the characters as the cause for internal exile. Rape, murder, and political corruption force the characters to be physically and emotionally alienated from their community. Arndt points out that this internal exile is “when one stays but still does not feel completely part of the home community” (110). Firstly, the night when Max Junior rapes his maid Flore there is a violent storm that “pummeled” (Danticat, *Claire* 171) both Flore and the rosebushes. It cannot go unnoticed that Danticat’s use of the name Flore, meaning flora and fauna in French, symbolizes the
destruction of both the person and the flower, and emphasizes her connection to the landscape. During the rape, Danticat evokes images of the land’s destruction: “the water coming up so fast, with fire ants, which meant that it was coming down from deep inside the mountains and hills, and not the sea” (Danticat 170). Flore imagines the land is flooded and she is stranded. When Flore recounts this traumatic event for Louise during her radio program, she says that it was “a moment that transformed her” (Danticat, Claire 173). This shows that both she and the land were changed. As a result of this rape, both Flore and Max Junior are uprooted like the flowers; Flore is paid off by Max Senior “to disappear, to go away” (Danticat, Claire 173); and Max Junior is exiled to the United States. Secondly, Gaëlle is thrust into a position of loneliness without the husband she grew up with when he is murdered by gangs. When Gaëlle says, “There were too many memories in this town to bind her and make her want to flee at the same time” (Danticat Claire 153) this reflects the alienation she experiences in her own country because she considers the difficult choice to either stay in Haiti and live amongst the sorrow, or to leave to become a part of the diaspora. She cannot leave, but she feels there is nowhere else to go. Finally, the murder of Gaëlle’s husband by the gangs of Cité Pendue and the ensuing murder of Max Junior’s friend Bernard by the secret police are further examples of the corruption of the urban space. In a chain of events brought about by the wars between the gangs of Cité Pendue and the elite of Ville Rose, Bernard’s parents are displaced when their restaurant is burned down, the gang members are killed and their local burned to the ground. Hence, violent acts not only displace some community members, but also shatter them.

As the examples above make clear, Claire of the Sea Light portrays a landscape where
acts of violence, accompanied by environmental deterioration, represent the shocks in the landscape that cause the characters to be exiled. In the rural landscape, the sea alienates the fishermen, the mountains can no longer provide charcoal for the peasants, and the rivers wash homes and vegetation away. In the urban landscape rape, murder and political corruption force the characters into exile or to feel alienated and alone. These shocks in the landscape are not only represented by the natural deterioration and actual corruption, but are also represented through Danticat’s use of language and the structure of the novel to symbolize these changes.

**Language and Structure of the Caribbean Landscape**

The structure and language of the novel reflect the shocks in the landscape and the fragmented lives of the characters. Glissant proposes that the Caribbean writer must rely on “a polyphony of dramatic shocks” (106). In a series of episodes that happen in one day, but are connected by flashbacks to the past, Danticat reveals the characters’ stories and their connections to each other. These views on the characters’ pasts expose the shocks in both their lives as well as in the landscape. Thus, the landscapes require a language to speak about them. Glissant explains that New World writers, of which Danticat is one, who write about imaginary landscapes will create a language to describe this landscape. He claims that the “New World landscape offers the creative imagination a kind metalanguage in which a new grammar of feeling and sensation is externalized” (Glissant xxxv). In other words, it is the writer’s task to translate the landscape. This concept of having a particular language is supported by Edward Said’s argument that the novel is a cultural form, and explicitly that Haiti’s independence from the United States
allowed Haitians to write their own stories. Said states, “stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (*Culture*, xii). Danticat writes Haiti’s history through, as Thomas points out, “images drawn from environment” (36). Therefore, the language and structure by which Danticat explores the Caribbean landscape takes the cultural form that is unbound by a linear process much like its own history of shocks.

The structure of the novel reflects the fragmented lives of the characters as well as the deteriorating landscapes. The structure attempts to unite these fragments. Parallel to the structure of the novel is the radio station’s program entitled “Di Mwen” or Tell Me. Louise George, who hosts the radio show, interviews the people in Ville Rose, and writes a book “a collage á clef” (Danticat, *Claire* 124). This “choral piece” is written while she is isolated in her home due to a mysterious illness that causes her to bleed through her mouth during menstruation. The fragmentation reflects Glissant’s theory that the Caribbean writer does not have the form and structure and technique of the European sonnet that can “shift from neutral to strong moments in the structure of a work” (Glissant 106). Likewise, Claire distrusts the stories taught to her by the Western educated teachers because of the way the stories are ordered: “Things would start out well, but would end up bad, then would be well again” (Danticat, *Claire* 215). This dislike of the structure of the stories suggests that for Caribbean, as well as immigrant writers, the Western structure of the novel is not accessible. What is accessible is a reflection of the Caribbean history and its fragmentation and shocks that bring it together. Thomas suggests that the intricate layering of stories reveal how alienated the characters
are when they are detached from their country’s landscape (30).

Danticat’s translation of the landscape metaphorically and symbolically describes the experience of internal exile and reflects the history of the Caribbean. The continuity of history is represented through images of trees, plants, and flowers illustrate a connectedness to the landscape. Vega-Gonzalez considers Danticat a New World writer who finds meaning in the landscapes and the natural elements that create meaning for “the collective vital experiences of people that have suffered the subjugation of different kinds of oppression” (55). In the novel trees play an important role in the representation of this connectedness to the past. Vega-Gonzalez points out that “In Haiti trees are considered symbols of eternity and the immortal presence of spirit” or as a Haitian saying goes, “Trees live after us, death is not the end” (57). Furthermore, Glissant states, “the language of my landscape is primarily that of the forest, which increasingly burst with life” (Discourse 146). Gaëlle, in a ritualistic act, buries dead frogs under the almond trees in her orchard, “as though she was performing a crucial service that no one else could do” (Danticat, Claire 44). The fertilization of the almond tree is symbolic for her desire to hold onto her past, and deepen her roots in the landscape. However, trees can also be uprooted. The concept of rootedness can be explained with Glissant’s theory of Rhizomes. Figueroa explains, “the notion of rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of totalitarian root. Rhizomatic though is the principle [...] in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the other” (20). This supports the theory that people’s roots in the Caribbean are spread out rather than going deep.
Furthermore, this idea of relationships being extended can be seen in Danticat’s imaginary city of Ville Rose described as having a “flower-shaped perimeter” (Danticat, Claire 5). Its setting is described in botanical terms such as “petals of a massive tropical rose, so the major road connecting the town to the sea became the stem . . . with its many alleys and capillaries being called épines, or thorns” (Danticat, Claire 5). Walcott-Hackshaw, points out that Danticat often uses “botanical symbols” (113) to explore the process of change when vegetation foreign to the land is able to survive in the new soil. In this process “the flowers, the roots, the soil, like the people, are altered in the process” (Walcott-Hackshaw 113). For example Max Senior cultivates plants, and grow African violets in a special soil, “They grow here?” to which Max Sr. replies, “Everything can grow here” (Danticat, Claire 193). The foreign flower can grow there, but in the midst of deforestation, floods, and dying frogs, it is evident that not everything can grow, and that the places, people, nature that are indigenous or native to Haiti are not thriving. Foreign plants survive for example, “the giant bamboo planters . . . which made no sense of Max Jr. either” (Danticat, Claire 97). Jana Evans Braziel points out that Danticat’s use of flowers “are symbols of transplantation, transculturation, transmigration, what Glissant (1997) refers to as the circular nomadism of relations: rhizomes, not roots” (127). Hence, the use of flowers and vegetation emphasizes the ever-changing landscape and how it affects the characters. Another landscape that symbolizes change is the sea.

The sea and water symbolize life and death, as well as beginnings and ends. On one level, the sea is life giving when Claire dreams of her birth, and the “last moment made her think of water” (Danticat, Claire 216). Furthermore, it is said “when zombies ate salt, it brought them back to life” (Danticat, Claire 214). Additionally, fishermen throw “rock
salt on a fire to make sparks, hoping to draw Caleb’s spirit out of the sea” (29). When Max Junior washes up on the sand after a suicide attempt, it is stated that he is “a man from the sea” (238). These images indicate that the sea personified, is the source of life. On another level, the sea represents death and destruction. For example the sea is at fault for the drowning of Msy Caleb the fisherman, “whom the sea had taken” (238). Rogue waves are attributed to the goddess Lasirèn, who “made her presence known by swelling a wave several feet, whenever she craved human company” (Danticat, Claire 221). Even Claire tries to protect her father by singing the song of fisherman to protect him, “You never got back things that fell into the sea” (Danticat, Claire 221). The ambiguity of the sea in the novel can be expressed on the one hand as connected to the motherland, on the other hand being alienated from the homeland. Claire Limyè Lamnè lost her mother/motherland at birth, and lives in uncertainty and ambiguity of being able to remain. As Rushdie points out, immigrants who are severed from their homeland “will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost” (10). Ultimately Claire’s longing for her mother and motherland, and its ambiguity are represented symbolically through her wish to bury her mother at sea (Danticat, Claire 219). The sea is the abyss from where history starts, or a place of rebirth. This idea of birth is illustrated when Claire’s mother swims in the shark-infested sea, and when schools of “tiny silvery fish” swim around her, she is illuminated by the sea in “a dazzling glow . . . as though her patch of sea were being lit from below” (Danticat Claire 34). In defiance of the danger of the sea, she thinks of the name Limyè Lamnè, Sea Light. Suddenly the sea is a place of light and possibility. Walcott argues that artists and writers, even those who are exiled, depict the Caribbean as being a place to be pitied, and states, “it relates to a
misunderstanding of the light and the people on whom the light falls” (76). However, Danticat has literally created images of light that foreshadow the Créolization that takes place in the end of the novel. For example, Max Junior is saved when Gaëlle in her “satin gown glow” and Nozias, “brightened” by its reflection, make a circle “as if they were the sun” (Danticat, Claire 238). The sea gives life and it seems that Danticat is one writer who understands the Caribbean landscape as being one of survival. However, there are some people and landscapes that do not survive.

Danticat’s use of the trope of trees symbolizes internal exile, or rootlessness. Maria Helena Lima points out that the Antillean can be seen “as the prototype of the modern or postmodern New World nomad” (131). Throughout the novel the characters seem to be searching for belonging to a place. When Claire and Gaëlle look down “on a piece of driftwood being placed in her father’s friend’s sputtering fire” (33) it can be seen as symbolic of the fact that Claire will no longer be uncertain of her future. Another example of trees as symbols is the powerful exposé of the ambiguity and isolation the returnee feels in the homeland is the return of the prodigal son, Max Junior. Danticat places him in the home of his father who is holding a party in celebration of his return. Max stands “on the lowest step of the old rosewood staircase” (Danticat, Claire 83). Rosewood, not indigenous to Haiti is over exploited and endangered in Malaysia, yet it is given new life in this privileged Haitian home.

The language and structure of the novel reflect the deterioration of the landscape and the subsequent internal exile that the characters experience. The symbolization of the landscape such as the trees, the frogs and the sea, is a language with which to understand the connectedness that the Caribbean people have to the landscape and their history. The
ever-changing and violent landscape, at one time a place for people to live in, forces the residents to change. However, the task of altering a way of life is met with resistance by some characters, and it is often difficult for them to leave behind the past. Holding onto the past is what Glissant argues, is the “obsessive presence of the past” (62).

The Obsessively Present Past

A striking feature of the novel is the character’s longing to recover a past that is manifested in the landscape. The longing to belong to a place and to be rooted to that place, causes the characters to experience internal exile because they do not accept the present. This desire to hold onto a past can be seen as what Dash argues is Haiti’s rejection of American neo-imperialism, and is seen as unique. This uniqueness was attached to the land in order to create a “territorial identity” (Dash 33). This identity was not penetrated by modernity but rather sought to attach itself to “indigenous values” (Dash 33). In the novel this uniqueness, likewise, manifests itself in an attachment to the landscape and its past. Rushdie argues that the exiled is “chasing ghosts” and that the exile’s “vision is fragmentary” (11). According to Glissant the Caribbean does not have a collective memory of the past because its history started with slavery. Therefore an ancestral past is unknown and it is up to the writer to create. This fragmented past as depicted in the landscape is, as Glissant points out “obsessively present” (63). Caribbean history is a series of events that the people were subjected to, and although these events are not theirs’, they remain present in their lives. What Glissant is saying is that the past is irrelevant for the Caribbean, and it is futile to attempt to make what has happened to the Caribbean in the past a part of the present, it is more important to look to the future.
The writer must, as he puts it, “dig deep” (Glissant 64) in order to remember the beginning. Danticat’s characters do dig deep, but not deep enough.

Gaëlle has a “long history in the town” (Danticat, Claire 23), and “she liked her ghosts nearby” (160). Although many have left Ville Rose, “[she] could not be dyspora” (160), which shows her obsession over these landmarks from the past. She is obsessed with repairing the lighthouse “that refused to rot” and also “took drives in the past” to the Abitasyon Pauline. Likewise Claire senses ghosts and it is “as if someone else were there with her” (Danticat 220). This desire to hold onto the past is similar to Glissant’s idea that Haiti could be the “new Motherland” because of its “historical memory” (265). This historical memory, however, must be collective, for Dash points out “Haitian space as liminal and borderless, as marginal locales that have become relational crossroads” (“Displacement” 41). In this respect, relational crossroads are where the characters must leave behind a past, and join together. This future where painful memories are blended together is what Glissant calls a collective memory. He argues that if “we want to show solidarity in its suffering, we have to learn to remember together” (Thomas 33). Hence, the collective memory is in conflict with the obsessive presence of the past because living in the past is associated with the individual, not the collective. As Beverley Ormerod points out Glissant believes history “lies dormant in the landscape” (364). It is the memories of the Middle passage (slave ships), the cane fields (indentured slavery), and the maroons (in Haiti they are the Dokos, the original peoples) in the mountains that are dormant. Danticat awakens these memories that have been dormant by creating characters who struggle with belonging in their own homeland.
The past, manifested through Gaëlle’s desire to connect with these landmarks, however keeps her apart from what Glissant proposes is a collective memory. Anthére lighthouse is a place where Gaëlle finds her history. Built by her grandfather, a founder of Ville Rose, it is dilapidated and useless, yet she wants to restore it. Consequently, this possessiveness and single mindedness make her lonely and isolated. The concern with her past is in opposition to Créolization and what Glissant calls Relational identity (Thomas 33). Relational identity implies that everyone is related to one another. According to Glissant “the very notion of single-rooted identity” is like a “national wall” (Thomas 33) excluding all others. Gaëlle does not see herself related to others because of her class and her background. Therefore the lighthouse that “refused to rot” (Danticat, Claire 150), is a place from the past that Gaëlle obsesses over. Although it is no longer in use, and is replaced by “fancy neighborhood’s lights” (Danticat, Claire 150) her desire to “equip[] it with modern gadgets” (Danticat, Claire 150) is an act of holding onto her particular past. Yet the deaths of her husband and her daughter leave her, she explains, like a zombie. References to death and zombification, which in Haiti implies being alive yet dead, underscore the issue of the past which lays heavily upon her, preventing her from living in the present. Rushdie argues that for the exile the “present . . . is foreign” whereas “the past is home albeit a lost home in a lost city in the midst of a lost time” (9). When Gaëlle attempts to maintain this connection with the past, as well as her position as a descendent of the founders of Ville Rose, by her desire to repair the lighthouse, her sadness at not being able to maintain the past is evident. Karen Fog Olwig, in her examination of family land on Caribbean islands, suggests that if the land is sold then one loses citizenship in the Caribbean. For Gaëlle, the loss of land connected to her history is
“[f]rom a historical point of view . . . associated with alienation, discontinuity, and homelessness” (450). It seems that she fights against the loss of these cultural monuments in order to remain connected to her history. Another monument that depicts the loss of a historical past is Abitasyon Pauline, a castle built by Napoleon Bonaparte for his sister Pauline. Here Gaëlle and her husband Laurent take a “drive in the past” (Danticat, Claire 47). Yet the abbey is overtaken and overgrown with tubbers (Créole for tubers), cows, goats and children (Danticat, Claire 48), indicating that the present replaces the past. Thomas points out that Glissant argues for the goal of a collective memory, whereby “memories can be openly heard and joined together” (33). Therefore, the failure to let go of the past, and to hold on to the individual memory connected to the landscape, is depicted as denial where change is required.

Claire’s flight to the mountains to escape adoption by Gaëlle and to live as a Maroon represents her connection to the past. Walcott-Hackshaw says a return to mountains has “restorative power” (80) and that there is “a link between freedom and location” (80). Danticat addresses the past primarily through the loss of connection with the landscape and the presence of ghosts that inhabit the landscape. The mountains, the sea, and the trees function as what Pulitano calls a “Caribbean cultural memory . . . embedded in the environment” (4). Embedded in the environment of the novel are ghosts that connect Claire to the past. She imagines that she will live “like the fugitives . . . les marons — she would hide inside what was left of Mòn Initil” (234). Bonnie points out that “for Glissant the Maroon represents the ultimate symbol of resistance to the injustices of the plantation system” (28). Like the slaves, Claire attempts to revolt against what she believes to be a separation from her motherland. She recalls the story learned in school about fearing the
mountains because of the ghosts that live there, but she does not fear that “the bones of [her] ancestors . . . still litter the ground of Mòn Initil, and their ghosts still haunt it trees” (Danticat, *Claire* 217). While others are afraid, Claire embraces the past and senses it in the landscape itself. Likewise she feels a presence that comes from the sea or a stirring of a tree branch. (Danticat, *Claire* 237). These images of ghosts are connections to her lost mother, and thus, symbolically the motherland. Furthermore, Claire’s wanderings in the marketplace are a good case in point here.

The portrayal of Claire and her dead mother as being "like two drops of water" (Danticat, *Claire*, 219) suggests Claire's connection to the spirit world. Claire’s obsession with the song “the wann dance” for the dead fishermen, with its words “you never got back things that fell into the sea” (Danticat, *Claire* 221) supports the claim that the sea takes life away and that the dead from the Middle Passage remain at the bottom of the sea. It could be argued that Claire is a symbol for the historical past: “To most people, Claire Limyè Lanmè was a revenant, [Créole for revenant] a child who entered the world just as her mother was leaving it” (16). It is the belief that such children are close to the other world, and that they are always chasing shadows. Claire does chase shadows and when she says, she feels at fault for the death of her mother she says she feels like “someone who had shown up uninvited somewhere, as if she shouldn’t have come” (Danticat 221). This shows that not only does she live like a ghost but that she feels exiled from her own landscape. Said points out that the exiled writer tries to capture the homeland, because exile is “a condition of terminal loss” (Said 137). Claire’s terminal loss seems to be connected to Danticat’s suggestive writing that the an exile will spend time, as Rushdie points out, chasing ghosts from the past.
For Claire the past is present in the mountains, the trees and the sea, and there is a continuous flow of history. As Walcott argues, there is more to the landscape than what the eye of the outsider or tourist sees. He claims that the Antilles is “an effort in memory” (82). It seems that Danticat, by connecting her characters to the past makes an effort to remember the Caribbean history. In his essay “Imaginary Homelands” Rushdie points out that writers who are “exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt” (Rushdie 10). His claim that these writers, like himself, want to “restore the past” (Rushdie 10). However when Claire reaches the “scorched” (Danticat, Claire 236) land she sees her father and Madame Gaëlle pull Max Junior from the sea “like a dying fish” (Danticat, Claire 238) and she hears people calling “to wake this man from the sea” (Danticat, Claire 238), the image of a dead man coming to life in the sea conjures both a ritual baptism and the theory that the sea gives life, and Claire makes her descent to return home.

In conclusion, both Gaëlle and Claire are connected to the past through the landscape. Their connections keep them bound to the past inhibiting them from envisioning a new future. Gaëlle’ connection to a lost colonial past and Claire’s to ghosts, prevent them both from seeing a collective future. However, like the shocks in the landscape, these two characters experience shocks that literally illuminate a path towards a future for them both. Walcott has said of the history of the Caribbean that it is the “sunlight through the fog” (82) and these ideas of sunlight, and illumination can be seen in the symbolic lighting of paths to a future where a new community is formed.
Créolization: A Return to the Sea

Walcott states, “the Caribbean Sea, whose smell is the smell of refreshing possibility as well as survival” (75). The three main characters discussed in this essay come together at the sea as in the process of Créolization. Martin Denis-Constant explains that Créolization is not confined to the Caribbean, but is a process happening all over the world, and “out of the diverse, new diversities are generated” (Denis-Constant 77). Furthermore, Olwig points out that the Caribbean “was created in a long process of social, economic, and cultural interrelationships” (436). Therefore, the process of Créolization will also cross economic and class boundaries, and include various types of trauma. Gaëlle, Claire, and Max Junior are united in an act of survival and new beginnings by the sea. These three people from different cultural and economic backgrounds are brought together which illustrates that “the World is contracting, making itself anew, and the Caribbean is in ideal situation to allow this contact of cultures” (Glissant qtd. in Forsdick 956). The characters share a longing to belong to place, but are permanently displaced from their places of origin; Claire from the sea; Gaëlle from her home and historical landmarks; Max Junior from his community.

Similarly to Glissant’s first novel, which portrays a “symbolic relationship of mountains, plains, rivers, and sea” (Ormerod 366), Danticat’s work locates the characters at a vantage point that connects them to the landscape. From their vantage point they look down to the sea, and thereafter are joined by symbolic ritual of being immersed in the sea. From her position on the scorched mountain Claire sees her father and Gaëlle pull Max Junior from the sea. Similar to Claire, Gaëlle views the landscape from Anthére Lighthouse which “[from] there, she could see the land, the mountains, the sea”
(Danticat, *Claire* 150). Finally Max Junior’s locus at the Lighthouse enables him to look down to the sea before he makes his trajectory that joins him to Claire and Gaëlle.

Again, Danticat illuminates the way to the sea where the characters will start anew. As Claire ascends the mountain, ignoring calls from her father and Gaëlle, she passes familiar places that are “points of light” calling her home (Danticat, *Claire* 233). The path to the sea is also illuminated for Gaëlle by the lighthouse as a “beacon of light” illuminated with flashlights as people look for Max Junior. Suddenly Gaëlle abandons the thought of mending the lighthouse because “how can you even choose what to mend when so much has already been destroyed. How could she think she asked herself, that she could revive or save anything” (Danticat, *Claire* 152). This can be seen as supporting Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau’s argument that “a single identity [encourages] people to possessively hold on to what it theirs” (Thomas 33). Now, Gaëlle is breaking down the wall and what Thomas calls in relation to Rhizomes the “notion of a single-rooted identity” (qtd in Thomas 33). She realizes that in order to be happy, she will need to accept Claire as her daughter. Finally, when Max sits in the old Anthère lighthouse a supernova explodes above the sea illuminating it as it swirls “into a massive funnel, as if a mid-ocean whirlpool had come near the shore” (Danticat, *Claire* 199). This vision drives him to the sea, where although he thinks he is ending his life, it actually becomes a beginning.

Both Glissant and Walcott propose that life comes from the sea. When Max Junior is saved, Claire starts to run desperately back to the sea. The meeting at the sea can be seen as a point of rebirth as Pulitano points out the immersion of the self into the sea “makes a statement about the possibility of renewal and resilience of life itself” (9). Therefore these
ritual-like return to the sea indicate imminent change. Ormerod points out that the sea “offers the key to the future: by plunging into its waves we may be regenerated in a dawn of fiery revolutionary struggle” (366). The characters’ struggles have been one of a search to belong.

This connection to the sea symbolizes the process of Créolization. Claire’s return is, as Glissant points out, openness as a means of historical healing. This openness is the acceptance of others, and it is as if she is taking leave of what was because “before becoming Madame Gaëlle’s daughter, she had to go home, just one last time” (Danticat, Claire 239). At the beach Gaëlle tells Claire “That revenant [revenant] talk is superstition. Nobody returns” (Danticat, Claire 162). This shows that the past is over; neither ghosts, nor the past will return. The only way forward is collectively. Furthermore, the whirlpool that allows Max Junior to see the seafloor, is as Pulitano points out, symbolic of the Caribbean history of The Middle Passage, and the Caribbean people’s “aquatic origins” (Glissant 12). The relationship between the sea and the beach is what Kamau Braithwaite calls the cyclic movement of water backwards and forwards, which creates an image of history being built in circular and receptive moments rather than linear (qtd in Pulitano 13). For Max Junior this vision is the catalyst for plunging himself into the sea in an act of suicide.

Claire, Gaëlle and Max Junior come together in what can be seen as a symbolic gesture of Créolization. Claire, the daughter of a poor fisherman, and Gaëlle a wealthy and established citizen of Ville Rose unite at the seashore to save Max Junior, the son of the owner of the elite town school for the privileged. This joining and mixing of different classes and cultures is an example of Créolization.
Conclusion

*Claire of the Sea Light* depicts a Caribbean landscape that is ever-changing. Because it is ever-changing, so are its individuals. It is important to consider the connection of landscape and its role in the lives of people. By focusing on the deterioration of these landscapes, which in part is caused by the people, Danticat explores how the characters experience internal exile. It also raises questions about how environmental destruction affects the lives of the Haitians. On the one hand the sea, the mountains and the rivers displace the people. On the other hand, these people also look to these landscapes for their history as well as their future. Glissant’s theories of the history of the Caribbean landscape, as being formed by a series of shocks, and Créolization, the putting together of those fragmented pieces, show that the characters are also able to build new communities and find hope for survival in those communities.

Glissant theorizes that the history of the Caribbean is difficult to trace since it has its origins in the slave trade, when the ships first brought the slaves from Africa. History then, is reborn through the ever-changing landscape and the mixing of different cultures in what Glissant refers to as Créolization. The landscape becomes a metaphor for the cultural history of the Caribbean and the métissage, or Créolization of the people. Through the process of Créolization, the land that is deteriorated is reborn, and creates new possibilities and communities. In the novel, the sea, because of pollution and overfishing, alienates those who had tried to make a living there. The mountains no longer provide a home for the peasants, and force them to live in the corrupt Cité Pendue. Ville Rose is losing its houses due to mudslides, displacing people from their homes, as
well as being a place of lost opportunities. Yet, those that are displaced by this deterioration move to find new possibilities, where some will survive and others will not.

It is also a novel about loss and longing and the desire to belong to a place. Gaëlle, who desperately tries to hold on to her vision of the history of her homeland, accepts the chaos of her life is able to make a new beginning and build a new community with Claire. Claire, similarly, flees to the mountains only to realize that she would build a new life, but that she would take one more look at her home before she moved on. Max Junior, who is alienated from his home country and attempts suicide, is reborn to a new life from the sea when he is saved from death. Therefore, out of the chaos of the decay of a landscape and internal exile, a new community is formed. This new start is reflected in the fact that the history of the Caribbean, which, as Glissant states has a “non-history” becomes a collective memory through Créolization.

The coming together of the characters at the end of the novel is an example of Glissant’s Relational identities. Coming from different backgrounds and experiences they join together to make a whole world. The research of areas such as the history of the Caribbean has shed light on the possibilities of a place to make its own history. Danticat places the setting at the center of her novel in the Caribbean landscape, which tells the story of its people and their history. Therefore, through language and symbolism, the metalanguage that Glissant says is needed because it is the language of the landscape that speaks. Although these people are from different classes and backgrounds in Haiti, their fragmented stories and lives are joined, through her depiction of people being connected not only to each other but also to the landscape.
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