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## "I Felt All the Pangs of Exile": Trauma and the Fight for Human Rights in the Memoirs of Nabokov, Soyinka, and Danticat

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*Georgia State University*

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“I FELT ALL THE PANGS OF EXILE”: TRAUMA AND THE FIGHT FOR HUMAN  
RIGHTS IN THE MEMOIRS OF NABOKOV, SOYINKA, AND DANTICAT

by

LAUREN MARLATT

Under the Direction of Tanya Caldwell, PhD

ABSTRACT

Subjectivity in memoir allows room for the manipulation of identity and the reflection of how one's identity has been manipulated. When breaches of human dignity occur, the discourse of trauma becomes an integral part of one's identity. How then does socioeconomic background integrate with the traumatized self? Looking at the *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov as an example of a male, upper-class, immigrant memoir in relation to immigrant memoirs of different socioeconomic classes, like Wole Soyinka's *You Must Set Forth at Dawn: A Memoir* and Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*, the implicit and explicit expressions of trauma within each author's narrative and the emphasis of certain content, like grammatical and narrative structure, tone and transitions often correlate to each author's background. As classes continue to divide, this analysis begins a conversation of how socioeconomic ideals become ingrained in the writer's positioning of self, though the human rights narrative remains universal.

INDEX WORDS: Trauma memoir, Socioeconomic status, Human dignity, Immigrant memoir, Privilege, Human rights

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LAUREN MARLATT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2019

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2019

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by

LAUREN MARLATT

Committee Chair: Christopher Kocela

Committee: Tanya Caldwell

Jay Rajiva

Randy Malamud

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this work to my family, Michael, Barbara, Christopher, and Kristen Marlatt, and my boyfriend, Ryan Badger, all of whom loyally listened, encouraged, and brainstormed with me throughout the past year. I couldn't have done it without you all.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Critical Context

Inside every person is a continually evolving sense of self. Because of this, Life Studies has established itself as a literary genre of many disciplines. It encompasses the life stories of self and other, balancing the lines of literary narration and a portrayal of the subjective truth. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson offer another way to approach this complicated genre, stating that it might best be viewed “as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present” (1). This engagement with the past relies on psychology, sociology, and in the case of my analysis, trauma studies. One form of self unique to the masses is the émigré. An émigré is “an emigrant of any nationality, especially [through] political exile” (*OED*). While émigrés collectively share the experience of large-scale political turmoil, their experiences are still very pointedly shaped by their individual journeys. Looking at socioeconomic backgrounds and author-established privilege as an influencing factor in the depiction of each author’s personal trauma of political exile in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak Memory* (1966) Wole Soyinka’s *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006) and Edwidge Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying* (2007) highlights the diverse strategies similar calls for action in the establishment of human rights.

Through the analysis and construction of the émigré self, scholars like Stuart Hall, Aija Sokova, Kali Tal, and Nima Naghibi help to dispel the mysteries of diaspora, collective identity, and nostalgia for one’s childhood homeland, and show how those elements play a large role in what Smith and Watson elucidate as the Narrating I’s presentation of the Narrated I, attempting to “get outside of” one’s self (6). There is a crucial dichotomy between the self presented between the pages of a text and the self who experienced the events recorded. For the émigré

self, this dichotomy extends even further because of what one has lost and is unable to return to – influencing memory with intense feelings of diaspora. Stuart Hall in particular emphasizes that “[p]ractices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write-- the positions of *enunciation*” (222). These positions of enunciation emphasize another layer in the lens of what Smith and Watson define as the “Ideological and Historical/Real I” (72, 76). In the particular experience of political exile, this trauma traverses past the individual self and becomes a proclamation to the collective community as the author feels that he or she has lost his or her former identity and has been relegated to obscurity among the masses also experiencing similar persecution. In this proclamation, specifically through memoir, a human rights narrative can emerge as an attempt to end the repetitive cycle of the trauma of an entire community.

What is the significance of human rights then through the discourse of trauma, specifically as elements like status and gender are considered? In this analysis of different portrayals of traumatic experience, the emphasis of implicit and explicit expressions of trauma within the construction of each author’s narrative and the emphasis of certain content like grammatical structure and narrative structure, gaps, silences and transitions within the narrative arguably relates directly to the author’s background. As classes, genders, and races continue to divide, this sort of analysis looks at how those factors become ingrained in the structure of the writer. Even with their different backgrounds, the writers still express similar messages of traumatic migration and the call for an equal human standard across the globe.

All three memoirs in my study focus on the specific trauma of political exile, more broadly noted as the trauma of the act of leaving. In Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* she uses Freud’s theories to study the act of leaving and the anxieties that it produces. For the Freud’s theory of trauma in general, this is a pivotal distinction. Caruth clarifies by stating “The

trauma of the accident, its very unconsciousness, is borne by an act of departure. It is a departure that, in the full force of its historicity, remains at the same time in some sense absolutely opaque, both to the one who leaves and to the theoretician, linked to the sufferer in his attempt to bring the experience to light” (*Trauma* 23). Therefore, as it pertains to political exile, the author’s recounting of the physical departure from home also acts as an attempt to recount the departure of self through the endurance of that experience.

One way to reflect on the forced departure of self is a human rights narrative. Catherine Malabou coins the term “destructive plasticity” defining “plasticity [as] the form of alterity when no transcendence, flight or escape is left” (11). This provides a relevant framework from which to work when the trauma of being forced from home, family and self, is forced upon each author in my study. The establishment of their sense of self is thus arguably completed with the validation that they have become the other. This acknowledgement of role reversal is life-changing and necessitates the creation of empathy and honest discourse for human rights that can be built through a trauma narrative.

Western trauma theories, developed by scholars and psychologists like Judith Herman, Bessel Van der Kolk, and Cathy Caruth, emphasize the unspeakability of trauma; analyze with equal effort what is not said alongside what is said; and use the physical construction of a text to determine unconscious lapses in memory processing of traumatic memory. Dominick LaCapra develops the term “empathic unsettlement,” basically delineating the barrier trauma poses towards “unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility” (41-42). Being unsettled by a human being’s experience devoid of dignity is a fundamental step in any victim’s ability to spur on change. LaCapra’s discussion on historical objectivity versus subjectivity also adds to the conversation of autobiographical

choices in tone, diction, and structure. Lack of empathy as representation of fact, and vice versa, attempts to create a binary that trauma in no way fits. He addresses this paradox, coining the term, “sustained ironic distance,” and writing that “[s]uch an objectifying strategy... can lead to an either/or conception of the relation between empathy and critical analysis” (39). Ultimately, LaCapra helps clarify how to implement empathy towards the human condition with the idea of “heteropathic identification,” in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one’s own” (40). Caruth and LaCapra offer important ideologies for my analysis, Caruth in the author-as-victim’s symptoms of traumatic memory, and LaCapra in victim-as-author, writing for change and acknowledgement within the campaign for human rights. These theories have also set the foundation for the of other trauma theories, like those of psychologist Richard McNally and theorist, Joshua Pederson, who try to emphasize contrasting elements to Caruth's unspeakability and loss of memory and instead focus on the text, not the gaps, the enhancement of traumatic memory, and the temporal, physical, or ontological altering of these enhanced memories (Pederson 338-339).

Last, with the goal of a call to action through the political exile memoir, philosopher Gérard Genette’s additions to structuralism and narrative discourse, specifically the shifts in tone and what they reveal about the writer’s ability to process what they are saying, offer a bridge between structuralism and trauma theory. How one elucidates their story, at which points they are able— or want to— emphasize something, and at which points they gloss over or distance themselves from material is important when looking at authors of particularly traumatic experiences. His work also opens a discussion for a socioeconomic analysis of writers of trauma. Are there consistent examples of difference in what writers of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds choose to focus on and how do those differences affect the overall impact of each

message? By implementing Genette's narrative ideology, specifically the difference in distance between *telling* and *showing* narratives (163), we may begin a conversation of how people from different backgrounds process and portray trauma for their best-suited purposes. Through this lens, I look at the transition between positionings of self and also examine non-traumatic and traumatic discourse through all forms of fragmentation— structurally and grammatically. I am using the term “fragmentation” in its dictionary definition as an unfinished thought and as a Caruthian term to encompass a traumatic flashback that is “a history that literally *has no place*, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood” (*Trauma* 153). Cathy Caruth's views on what cannot be fully processed parallel with Genette's basic concept of show versus tell.

Because trauma has so many facets, and because there is no wrong way to be traumatized, many scholars have avoided applying parameters around any traumatized group. But this careful avoidance relegates many interesting dynamics of the formation of traumatized response to the background. For my study, socioeconomic status is something I believe has an impact on how a victim chooses to construct his or her story. As Nabokov, Soyinka, and Danticat formulate very different human rights narratives, they also portray varying experiences of human dignity, and thus in their own ways, create empathy for their plights and the plights of those who can no longer speak for themselves.

## **1.2 Introduction to the Texts**

Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation of a Memory* is a memoir of one of the most privileged and elite families in Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution. Published in 1951, this reverie encompasses the Russian rule of Lenin and Stalin and leads its audience straight into World War II. Nabokov was the accomplished writer of texts like *Lolita* (1953) and *Pale Fire* (1962) and an avid

contributor to the field of lepidoptery. *Speak, Memory* is a complex recounting of about forty years of Nabokov's life, spanning his childhood in Russia, his exile in Europe, the birth of his child, and ending with his imminent, and permanent, migration to the United States. As is common in most autobiographies, this one is written as a deeply reflexive account, filled with implicit reflections and a focus on the expansion and evolution of consciousness. Nabokov is highly educated, speaks and translates multiple languages, and presents himself as a linguistic artist. Nevertheless, the construction of his story stands out in two ways: his development of characters is framed as justifications for the worthwhileness of their lives, and he often relegates his subject's true tragedy to fit inside a parenthetical.

Extensive scholarship on *Speak, Memory* focuses on theme, structure, and content. Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir's *Borderlines* examines Nabokov's incorporation of photography throughout his memoir. Macaela Maftei frames her argument with the works of Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman and analyzes several autobiographies, including *Speak, Memory*, to prove that memoir's main objective is the idea of forestalling death. Leland de la Durantaye plays with the idea that Nabokov is purposefully fragmented in his prose, justifying this fragmentation as a way to better represent his overall theme of "the limits of life and the nature of the world" (168). All of these avenues of scholarship deepen the ideology of Nabokov's narrative, but many of them explicitly refrain from viewing Nabokov's memoir as a trauma narrative. Russell Kilbourn argues that Nabokov uses memory through "art" or through the memory of inanimate objects to gain redemption for things like his exile and loss of identity. My own research looks to extend Kilbourn's argument by focusing on the structural construction of the portraits of his family and friends— not just inanimate objects— to highlight not only the lingering effects of Nabokov's trauma, but also emphasize his demand of bringing dignity to the lives of his deceased loved

ones. Therefore, using their lives as an example of injustice, he creates a call to action against dictatorships that resulted in the loss of human compassion and empathy.

Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian-American English professor and writer, also memorializes her loved ones but with a special emphasis on the Haitian community. She is known for novels such as *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, *Krik? Krak!*, *The Farming of Bones*, and *The Dew Breaker*. She writes the memoir *Brother, I'm Dying* as a tribute to the memoir her uncle had always planned to write, but never got the chance to complete. Danticat develops three stories— her own, her father's, and her uncle's. As a child, her parents left her in the care of her aunt and uncle in a poverty-stricken Haiti. She discusses the hardship of not knowing if she will ever see her parents again while also laying the groundwork for the economic and political unease that was manifesting in that time. Her biographies of her father and her uncle though are at the foreground as she emphasizes the eulogy-like tributes to the most important men in her life. While her father chose to leave Haiti with his wife in order to make a better life for his family in America, her uncle chose to dedicate his life to the Haitian community. This dedication came at a cost, as her uncle housed and cared for several family members, hosted many political rallies and meetings in his home, and eventually was forced out of the country in order to avoid being executed by local gangs. Danticat establishes her family's history as one of struggle and hard work in order to gain what they wanted. She highlights her hardworking father as an honest and diligent New York taxi driver and her uncle as a persevering pastor of a community that had very little. In contrast to Nabokov, Danticat's family was not wealthy and did not have a legacy before Edwidge herself decided to write her memoir. She is able to emphasize how a system can fail the common man and educate her readers on the ugly truth of the immigration system in the United States. Through focused and deliberate observation, Danticat creates a human rights narrative

that begs for reform while still focusing purely on the individual stories of her father and uncle. Though her story is of an individual, she makes it explicitly understood that her uncle's tragic end is in no way an isolated event, thus she sacrificially allows her family history to endure the burden of a collective history of political exile immigrants from Haiti.

Scholarship on Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* highlights her use of perpetually alternating perspective and narrative and how that works to portray a collective voice of Haiti while also establishing empathy for her individual characters. Veronica Austen performs an extensive analysis of voice and tone, while Maria Bellamy, by contrast, analyzes Danticat's use of silence and gaps as a way to portray trauma. As *Brother, I'm Dying* is such an obvious call for human rights that scholars like Wendy Knepper and Nicole Waller have looked extensively into the call for justice that Danticat makes, focusing on the ethics of writing for justice, the ethics of the system in which she denounces, and the paradox of Danticat's specific situation, where she is enduring the loss of her father and uncle as she is pregnant. Knepper in particular notes the many identities Danticat must construct when "[b]lending memoir and Creole storytelling traditions together with investigative reporting about injustice and criminality" (192). All of these articles show how trauma is portrayed individually among the collective. Danticat has shown that she can be the voice for the common man and woman; that she is not writing from the perspective of a privileged American, but through her family, has real insight into the seemingly unavoidable injustice so many Haitians have experienced and are still experiencing.

In the last memoir I consider, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, Wole Soyinka is a professor, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and political activist against the brutal dictatorships in his native Nigeria. Having written three previous memoirs, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981), *Isara: A Voyage Around Essay* (1990), and *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years—a Memoir: 1946-1965*



(1994), Soyinka uses this memoir to offer the unique perspective of first-hand involvement and experience inside some of the most brutal and corrupt regimes in Nigeria. Extremely well-respected as a voice for his people, Soyinka attempts to take on the burden of responsibility for fixing Nigeria's seemingly unfixable government. His memoir illustrates the trauma and heartache of a collective nation, depicts Soyinka's perspective of several different military regimes he has lived through, establishes Nigerian history, and most importantly, intricately guides his audience through the lead-up to his inevitable exile and return to his country. Throughout his text, he discusses Nigerian culture in contrast to the many other cultures he interacts with, iterating the process of recovery and aftershocks from the destruction of the colonial empire. Soyinka presents himself as a literary soldier for human rights and though he is held in the highest esteem, he comes from the background of a third world country and intertwines the influences of that upbringing within his Western education and interactions on a global scale.

Although there has been little scholarship focused solely on Soyinka's *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* aside from several notable reviews,<sup>1</sup> his collection of memoirs has been used extensively in conversation with African Diaspora, African politics, and the formation of Panafricanism. Several scholars, like Celucien Joseph, have focused on Soyinka's construction of religion, culture, and politics and his "response to violence and terror fueled by religious imperialism, fanaticism, and religious conviction" (19). Joseph highlights how Soyinka uses two essential worldviews as a response: "African indigenous humanism and African traditional religion and spirituality" (19). Alain Ricard contributes to Joseph's conversation by analyzing

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Ivor Agyeman-Duah's "You Must Set Forth at Dawn: A Memoir Wole Soyinka", "Dining With Devils" by Fatin Abbas, and Tony Thomas's "Wole Soyinka on Nigeria" as examples.

Soyinka's ideas on democracy, calling them "an ambition, or rather a Utopian dream to be achieved" (158). He also accentuates something I will be expanding on, Soyinka's courage and outrage, and how each fuels the other. Soyinka works hard to establish an ideology of nationalism that he can stand behind and as Ricard develops Soyinka's evolution in that regard, Anne Whitehead takes on the controversy of applying Western nations trauma theory to non-Western nations. She uses Allan Young's theories on trauma as a temporal and cultural construct that does not apply to all areas of the world or extend to all histories in time. But with this groundwork, she tries to justify why authors like Wole Soyinka provide relevant work to be analyzed through trauma theory that she argues can be "both responsive to and reflective of the concerns of non-western commonalities" in postcolonial literature (15). As I am using the same philosophy, Whitehead's work provides an insight into the importance of cognizance for authors like Soyinka and Danticat as I apply Western theory to individual and collective examples of trauma in non-Western communities.

### **1.3 Analysis of Memoir Introductions**

While these three memoirs span many years, ages, political and military regimes, and distances, they hold within them the common pursuit for justice and reflection on tragedy, both personal and collective. Portrayed in different ways, all three memoirs rely on the tradition of their homelands to help guide them through incomprehensible situations. By considering these three authors together, we see that global and temporal distance does not alter the human ability to process or withstand trauma and these memoirs portray the common human condition of falling into intimate despair but also resounding resiliency. Two of the three memoirs begin with formal introductions, establishing the mental state of the authors and reflecting on certain ideologies that will guide the reader through the rest of their texts. Edwidge Danticat strays from

this format by starting her narration from the very first page. The end of her first chapter can be looked at as a justification for her writings, however, and her choice to exclude a formal introduction works to shift the focus from herself as a memoirist to her more prominent focus of storytelling.

I write these things now, some as I witnessed them and today remember them, others from official documents, as well as the borrowed recollections of family members. But the gist of them was told to me over the years, in part by my uncle Joseph, in part by my father. Some were told offhand, quickly. Others, in greater detail. What I learned from my father and uncle, I learned out of sequence and in fragments. This is an attempt at cohesiveness, and at recreating a few wondrous and terrible months when their lives and mine intersected in startling ways, forcing me to look forward and back at the same time.

I am writing this only because they can't. (25-26)

Through this introduction, Danticat identifies from the beginning that this is not just her story, but also the story of men in her life who no longer have the chance to speak on their own behalf. Written to memorialize her family rather than herself denotes an interesting distinction from the other two authors in my study. While my other authors choose to construct themselves through academia and philosophy, Danticat chooses to portray the tangible and literal history of her family. Nearly every scholar of Danticat recognizes that she is forced to take on the role of several different narrators as she moves between first-hand experience, documented information, and the accumulated hearsay of her different family members. As her introduction clarifies the many voices she is taking on, it also helps to establish her human rights initiative as she attempts to be a voice for the many that have experienced the same injustice that her family has.

Nabokov's introduction, on the other hand, works hard not only to establish his viewpoints as an individual, but also to claim his space and sense of self in history. He positions himself in the discussion of psychology, for instance, by using his Foreword to reference some of his "vicious snaps" made towards Freud throughout his memoir (15). Ironically enough, though Nabokov makes a point to openly oppose Freud's theories on psychoanalysis, the introduction to his memoir is relatively aligned with Freud's theories on the trauma of death and the trauma of survival. In Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, she reminds us that Freud has very clear opinions on the origin of trauma stemming from the shock that is unequivocally unique to both life and death:

At the beginning of the drive... is not the traumatic imposition of death but rather the traumatic 'awakening' to life. Life itself, Freud says, is an awakening out of a 'death' for which there was no preparation. The origin of the drive is thus precisely the experience of having passed beyond death without knowing it. And it is in the attempt to master this awakening to life that the drive ultimately defines its historical structure: failing to return to the moment of its own act of living, the drive departs into the future of a human history. (67)

Parallel to Freud's ideas above, Nabokov opens his memoir with: "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for (at some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour)" (1). While he depicts the initial abyss as calm and peaceful, straying from Freud's idea of initial trauma, he does not admit to following this mainstream ideology. He asserts an anxiety of both "eternities of darkness" from the first sentence of his memoir, specifically in calculating the

exact number of heartbeats an hour one has until they return back to darkness. This introduction establishes that, like Freud, Nabokov views the emergence of life as a traumatic experience, one that ultimately melds into the eminent anxiety of the trauma of death. In this idea, Nabokov establishes the context for his memoir, because though it is a memoir of his own experience, he dedicates it largely to the inquisition of what makes a life worthwhile, the actions, experiences, or memories that one is able to leave behind for someone like him to later record. Therefore, in one statement, Nabokov has established that his memoir is based not on narrative, like Danticat's, but rather on ideology. This distinction between the two authors correlates directly with their socioeconomic upbringings. What Danticat relies on, her physical family, and what Nabokov relies on, philosophy and academia, is pivotal to each writer's process of healing and documenting their traumas. How his ideology has evolved is shown through his experiences. Why he focuses on the lives and deaths of those around him validates that he has lived a life full of traumatic departures— physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

Like Nabokov, Wole Soyinka uses dramatic imagery and deep internal angst as he begins his story. Set on an airplane returning to the country that exiled him so that he can help bury the body of his best friend, Soyinka reflects:

Outside myself at moments like this, heading home, I hesitate a moment to check if it is truly a living me. Perhaps I am just a disembodied self usurping my body, strapped into a business-class seat in the plane, being borne to my designated burial ground— the cactus patch on the grounds of my home in Abeokuta, a mere hour's escape by the road from the raucous heart of Lagos. Perhaps I am not really within the cabin of the plane at all but lying in a coffin with the luggage, disguised as an innocent box to fool the superstitious,

while my ghost persists in occupying a seat whose contours have grown familiar through five years of restless exile. (1)

There are several similarities to Nabokov's memoir. Both authors introduce anxiety about both birth and death, and both use the element of time to help formulate their quest of established ideology. Soyinka's moment of reflection results in the suspension of his own body, leading to the tactile imagery that his sense of self has split between the physical and the emotional.

Unlike Nabokov, he opens his story through an obviously traumatic lens. He does not feel that he can be in the present, he wonders if he himself has died, and he hints at obvious torment over his situation for the past five years. While Nabokov contrives a vagueness that does not specify an experience between the gaps of birth and death, Soyinka begins his story very pointedly— on a specific trip back to Nigeria that he remembers for a very specific reason. Soyinka's intermingling of the literal, like Danticat, and the psychological, like Nabokov, mediates the two extremes of socioeconomic upbringing as Soyinka balances academic prowess with a third-world upbringing.

There is a luxury of self-absorption to both men's introductions that is absent in Danticat. While Nabokov and Soyinka marinate in their own beliefs and feelings, Danticat establishes how her life intertwines with the lives of the men for whom which she will be speaking. Her lack of ideology shifts the focus off of herself and instead makes a statement from the very beginning that she is writing as representation for her family, but also for the other men and women that have been through similar trials. While Nabokov is philosophical, Soyinka is psychological, and Danticat is literal.

## 2 CHAPTER 1: LIFE BEFORE EXILE

The majority of all three memoirs is filled with rising action before the imminent fall of political exile. Nabokov and Danticat provide insight into their childhoods while Soyinka paints the political climate and explains Nigerian history that is essential to his story. As stated previously, Nabokov came from an extremely wealthy and privileged Russian family and the majority of Nabokov's story explains his idyllic childhood. He paints long, beautiful scenes of the Nabokov estate rounded out by all the many characters that worked for his father and helped in giving young Vladimir and his brother their private educations. This construction of "nostalgia for a lost childhood... deeply bound up with a nostalgia for a lost (pre-revolutionary) nation or home" (Naghibi 80) is not unique to Nabokov but is a very common tool to belatedly allocate idealism for what is lost after tragedy. Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as "a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values" (80). We see this repeatedly throughout the first half of *Speak, Memory* as Nabokov makes his childhood sound almost magical. From as early as four or five years old, he recalls a small but telling view into his childish mind.

I see myself, for instance, clambering over wet black rocks at the seaside while Miss Norcott, a languid and melancholy governess, who thinks I am following her, strolls away along the curved beach with Sergey, my younger brother. I am wearing a toy bracelet. As I crawl over the rocks, I keep repeating, in a kind of zestful, copious, and deeply gratifying incantation, the English word "childhood," which sounds mysterious and new, and becomes stranger and stranger as it gets mixed up in my small, overstocked, hectic mind, with Robin Hood and Little Red Riding Hood and the brown hoods of old

hunchbacked fairies. There are dimples in the rocks, full of tepid seawater, and my magic muttering accompanies certain spells I am weaving over the tiny sapphire pools. (25-26)

The scene depicts a time of pure exploration of the mind and the self, no worries and no stress. Not only is he worry free, but his mind is actually “overstocked,” too full to be bothered by anything other than the nursery rhymes and fairy tales that he cherishes. Descriptions like these convince the reader that young him embodies childhood in every way. From his governess just ahead, to his toy bracelet, to his literal repetition of the word “childhood,” Nabokov makes it known that this time in his life left nothing to be desired; he was living in luxury to the point that his mental incantations remain a more vivid memory than any physical need. His intricate and seemingly complete construction of his childhood is in direct contrast with Jonathan Foster’s research that describes the specifying of the origin of early childhood events as difficult because “of the relative fragility in childhood of memory for context” (104). “Restorative” nostalgia, then, that seeks to “rebuild the crumbled ruins of an imagined past” can be applied to help Nabokov establish context, however mediated by his own adult needs (Naghibi 80). Nabokov’s past requires rebuilding and memorializing purely because his memory very well may be the last trace that this past ever existed: his governess is gone, his brother dead, and his estate erased.

But scattered amongst his fixation of his ideal childhood are blunt acknowledgements of reality. In Chapter 10 we see one of several examples of fragmentation veering away from the idyllic and perfect childhood that Nabokov once claimed. Inside a rather long and seemingly random tangent of his childhood associations with American Wild West fiction, he embeds an introduction of his worldly and fearless cousin, Yuri. Nabokov describes how they used to act out the westerns and play dangerous but typical childhood games, like lying down on one’s back and seeing how close a swing would come to one’s face as it swung past. But then, in the middle



of the chapter and in the middle of his story, he shifts: “And three years later, as a cavalry officer in Denikin’s army, he [Yuri] was killed fighting the Reds in northern Crimea. I saw him dead in Yalta, the whole front of his skull pushed back by the impact of several bullets, which had hit him like the iron board of a monstrous swing” (200). What is arguably most traumatic about this description is the connection he draws between the childhood swing game that Yuri and he grew up playing and Yuri’s gruesome fate. After a break in the page, he begins again with “I have lately reread *The Headless Horseman* (in a drab edition with no pictures)” (200) and he goes on to explain the plot and his adult relation to it. As the headless horseman evokes Yuri’s demise, Nabokov’s incorporation of the tale makes sense, but the reversion back to fiction, the admission of Yuri’s fate purely to substantiate the incorporation of the western folklore gives a direct example of what Genette describes as narrative mood’s ability to create different distances within the same story as “the narrative can also choose to regulate the information it delivers, not with a sort of screening, but according to the capacities of knowledge” of the participant in the story (162). In alignment with Caruth’s interpretation of Freud, the Western is working as a way for the trauma of losing and seeing Yuri dead to repeat itself in what she calls a “traumatic neurosis” (*UE* 2). The trauma is associated with every part of Nabokov’s life span— the childhood game, the actual event, and the remembrance and association with Wild West fiction that he maintains from here on out. But he most clearly describes his pain in reference to a childhood story, rather than through Yuri’s death itself. As stated previously, Nabokov’s aim in writing his memoir seems to be a desire to grapple with the worthiness of the lives he encountered. His portrayal of Yuri memorializes him as brave and heroic, like the Western cowboys they both idealized. In Yuri’s life, Nabokov has found worth, and his inclusion of Yuri as a worthy subject aligns with Nabokov’s implicit construction of the human dignity narrative.

There is one other man who Nabokov finds truly worthy of the life he lived, and that man is his politically radical father. While Nabokov hints at the assassination of his father from early on in his memoir, his most descriptive anecdote of his father is instead of a *near*-death situation that his father encountered. Similar to his cousin Yuri, Nabokov superimposes his trauma of familial loss onto a separate, nonviolent event. In one of several examples establishing that the Nabokovs' were not an ordinary family, he describes the experience of his father being slandered for his political activism in Russian magazines and learns only through those media outlets that his father had been challenged to a duel (188). He ponders privately whether his father's opponent will use "the blade or the bullet," but he is left solely to his own imagination for any answers. His imagination leaves him with a picture "so repulsive, [that] so vividly did [he] feel the ripeness and nakedness of a madly pulsating heart about to be pierced, that [he] found [himself] hoping for what seemed momentarily a more abstract weapon" (190). This section is important to Nabokov's history because his father's political activism is the primary reason they were to be exiled. It also illuminates the growing practice of emphasizing an event— in this case, the impending duel— that never actually happened, rather than the gruesome assassination that did happen. Only when the duel anecdote ends, can Nabokov describe his reality:

Ten years were to pass before a certain night in 1922, at a public lecture in Berlin, when my father shielded the lecturer (his old friend Milyukov) from the bullets of two Russian Fascists and, while vigorously knocking down one of the assassins, was fatally shot by the other. (193)

As is common in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov plays with the positioning of time. His excerpt above about his father's actual assassination is maintained as a future event "ten years were to pass" rather than a past event from which he is reminiscing. Just like in his introduction, he implicates

the concept of time, and the irony that the release of emotion he expressed at his father's possible death was matched years later by his actual death. He seems to shield himself from the most painful moments of the traumatic situations he finds himself in and replace them with more manageable memories. In this way, Nabokov uses his memoir as a source of healing and a way to "have the courage to direct his attention to the phenomena of his [past]" (Herman 175).

Nabokov does not take this confrontation head on though, but rather mourns his father through a sideways, ultimately fantasized version of the event. In some ways, it is reminiscent of Herman's "fantasy for revenge" where the perpetrator and the victim roles are switched (189), but in Nabokov's case the enactment of the feeling of helplessness by assassination is instead replaced by the enactment of scheduled consent through a proper duel.

Though Nabokov decides against painting a long, vivid description of his father's assassination, he does portray one emotion quite well: anger. Both sarcastically and bluntly, Nabokov inserts quips that show he still harbors anger for what transpired, and he aims this anger mainly at Russia in general. From a distance, Nabokov keeps up with the current Russian publications pertaining to his father's legacy and sarcastically remarks, "[w]ith his keen sense of humor he would have been tremendously tickled by the helpless though vicious hash Soviet lexicographers have made of his opinions and achievements in their rare biographical comments on him" (175). Nabokov feels that fate has had it out for his father, stating that "History seems to have been anxious of depriving him of a full opportunity to reveal his great gifts of statesmanship in a Russian republic of the Western type" (176). And lastly, he hints at why he felt compelled to sever ties with Russia forever by recapping his father's assassination and including that the "sinister ruffian whom, during World War Two, Hitler made administrator of emigre Russian affairs" (177), was the same man that killed his father. The government-

Nabokov relationship was personal, convoluted, and deeply betrayed, leaving Nabokov devoid of any true sense of nationalism.

Also directly betrayed by his country, though in a different way, Soyinka parallels Nabokov as a privileged man in many ways, but their lead up to political exile helps to highlight how Soyinka's privilege is profoundly different from Nabokov's. Instead of reminiscing about his lost childhood, Soyinka instead builds himself as a character of purpose, someone who can and should be involved in the revolt against Nigerian corruption. While Jane Bryce comments on the fact that some scholars equate extreme hubris to Soyinka's depiction of himself as a pivotal influence of Nigerian history(37-38),<sup>2</sup> I am left to wonder if his perhaps inflated involvement is not more closely aligned with Bessel Van der Kolk's exploration of "Taking Action." Van der Kolk explains that a person who has been through overwhelming sensory trauma is better equipped to handle it if they

actively *do* something to deal with a disaster— rescuing loved ones or strangers, transporting people to a hospital, being a part of a medical team, pitching tents or cooking meals— utilize their stress hormones for their proper purpose and therefore are at a much lower risk of becoming traumatized. (219)

Soyinka uses action to combat the trauma he experienced, to help him deal with his stress hormones, with guilt, and with fear by inserting himself as an active part of the recovery of his country. Regardless of the accuracy of his role in the abolishment of dictatorships, his depiction of self as hero fits Van der Kolk's theories on healing from trauma and owning the self.

As Soyinka begins explaining the events that led to his political involvement, he establishes that he was a student of privilege, defining himself as "occupying a mostly sheltered

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to "African Adventurer" by David White and *New Gong* by Adewale Maja-Pearce.

environment” (36), studying in England for college and learning of the corruption and destruction of African colonization from the scholarly minds with whom he interacted. Though he experiences racism first hand in England, unable to fully escape “pointed acts of contempt or rejection,” (36) he is more angered and impassioned by what he learns about his native continent. “[V]irtually only one topic dominated all conversation: colonization and how/why to end it!” (36). Soyinka describes himself and his fellow African peers as budding political activists, angered by what they were hearing, and rearing to complete their studies and begin taking action. Soyinka’s focalization in this instance, and in many other examples throughout his memoir, works to compound what Genette would call, his “internal focalization” with the typically expressionless “external focalization,” of everyone involved in the fight to combat colonization (Genette 189-190). Through this, Soyinka reiterates his voice as a collective rather than individual. However, it is not until Soyinka gets the chance to actually involve himself in the fight that he gains true insight into the Nigerian condition. As stated above, though Soyinka was a native Nigerian, he was educated and successful enough to distance himself from the true third world conditions of his neighbors. When he finally got the chance to join his peers in revolt, to perform a risky rebellion, and ultimately to end up in prison, he and the Nigerian people became levelled. Without Soyinka’s prison sentence, which, granted, was an experience undoubtedly cushioned by his celebrity status, he would not be able to represent the external focalization of the fight against injustice and collective trauma of his nation.

The inclusion of his rebellion and prison sentence is vital in his understanding of the system, regardless of his privileged standpoint. As a trauma in itself, Soyinka shows his sentence was but a mere stepping stone to his actual destination of political exile, and in this experience, he gains not only credibility as a common man, but also insight into what the truly unprivileged

and common men were suffering. This emphasis is what creates Soyinka as a bridge in my analysis between Nabokov and Danticat, as Soyinka represents both places of privilege and shows how the spectrum of socioeconomic privilege dictates different responses and reflections to the trauma surrounding individual and collective trauma. While his prison stay was mediated by his reputation, gaining him access to visitors and nicer facilities than others, he still shows the signs of trauma by what he repressed during his sentence. It is not until he is released that he begins to understand the impact this time had on him.

Soyinka has a tight grip on the direction of his tone throughout his different anecdotes. There are few times where he shows how much pain he has mentally endured in his time as an activist, but episodes such as his release from prison and his brief descriptions of his exile seem to express emotions beyond Soyinka's control. He works hard to emit positivity albeit at times sarcastically, but as he describes his release from his almost two-year prison stint, he is noticeably, and uncharacteristically bitter. The political slogan at the time was "To keep Nigeria one/ Is a task that must be done" (142). As Soyinka awaited his release, he very pointedly crafted an alternative slogan as his first words to his public: "To keep Nigeria one/ Justice must be done" (142). An impactful statement to his people, Soyinka reveals that this was mostly projected and false bravado. He admits that upon returning to the real world he was "thrown off balance," that he rediscovered an emotion stunted by prison, "*fright!*... Only at that moment, when indeed there was no longer a likelihood of being brought to trial for any crime" (143), and that mentally he "began looking over [his] shoulder with a burgeoning paranoia" (144). Reminiscent of Freud's theories of latency, Soyinka's release from prison also resulted in the formation of a "traumatic neurosis" (Caruth *UE* 2). His own description of his inability to fully process his feelings while in jail shows what Caruth calls the striking fact that "the victim of the [shock] was never fully

conscious during the [experience] itself” and that the person left “apparently unharmed”, but only later discovered the true mental after-effects of his experience (*Trauma* 7). Essentially releasing his repressed trauma, Soyinka resembles his old self but sees through the eyes of a transformed self. Catherine Malabou describes this kind of life-altering experience as a “transformation [that] intervenes in place of flight” (10). Living in a fight or flight situation in prison, he was forced to stand in-between. Malabou defines this third option as a “[m]etamorphosis by destruction [that] is not the same as flight; it is rather the form of the impossibility of fleeing. The impossibility of flight where flight presents the only possible solution” (10). In other words, this paradox between the two natural instincts of fight or flight creates “the formation of an identity that flees itself” (11). Thus, Soyinka becomes relegated to a self he does not recognize when he leaves prison, and a self that he must become accustomed to and accept as his new reality.

It was not quite how I had envisaged my induction into normal existence. I was made more acutely aware how deeply that commodity called justice, however qualified, was central to my self-apprehension and ordering of the human community, and it was not a healthy feeling... I was truly obsessed with the need to find a meaning— so compulsive must have been my need for clarity after my prison sojourn. Everything had to make sense. I had to find a logical process, a credible sequitur to what had gone before, a rational cause in any situation that aspired to produce an effect. I worried about this statement as a dog does an unraveling ball of wool, little realizing that I was taking it so personally! (144-145)

Soyinka’s period of physical isolation gives way to his period of psychological isolation; he cannot grasp why this happened, nor justify the behavior of those in power. It is an interesting

look at what Malabou discusses as “being and becoming” (61). He at times uses asyndeton as a rhetorical figure for showing confusion through “suppression of connective terms” (Malabou 61), for instance, in the sentence “to find a logical process, a credible sequitur... a rational cause.” Most importantly, as he reflects back from the distance that time and age has granted him, on what he was and was becoming, we see that “[o]ld age eludes truth, eludes its own truth, its own power of revelation. What it reveals is just as much the *self*, the being identical to itself, as the *other*, the entirely metamorphosized being” (Malabou 54). In relation to Soyinka, he is describing someone he doesn’t identify with and is astounded by his own compulsive behavior, while at the same time fully acknowledging his ‘other’ as his ‘self.’

While he grapples with himself as other, he also must come to terms with his new understanding of his disillusionment with Nigeria. Returning from prison changed his perspective towards justice and opened his eyes to a society that “refused to answer to the name of logic and coherence...[that] did not guarantee the security of the predictable or rational explications of the unexpected” (145). He calls this disillusionment a paradox (146). He had “been released from prison into a paradox— a nation that wallowed in triumphalism yet was under subjugation. It was a society that fed contentedly from a common trough of humiliation but paraded itself as the People of Victory” (146). Soyinka struggles to understand this paradox and to fight for the rights of people he sees as completely disillusioned about their own plight. His release from physical prison made him very sensitive to the psychological prison that he felt many of his people were subjected to.

One of the most difficult sections to read of *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* centers on this psychological humiliation, providing an excellent portrait of uneducated and irrational power. Soyinka himself uses the phrase “dehumanization of the populace” (149) to show that beyond the



physical torture endured, the loss of human dignity makes this way of life cringe-worthy and unbearable to witness. He defends his position of disgust with the government and his sadness at the civil perpetuation of this bloated commandeering of authority (149), with numerous examples of tedious, humiliating and ignorant displays of “discipline” (150). Working his way from high government officials, down to the common man, Soyinka shows how every instance of power, no matter how minute, was held against those of lower positions and exploited. The most heartbreaking example though is a simple anecdote about “any worker arriving late... made to do the ‘frog hop’” (151). He shifts his tense to transgress from general torture to a specific example of any person’s possible day-to-day experience. “The culprit attaches his fingers to his ears, lowers himself on his haunches, and hips in one spot, circles a tree or parked vehicles, or goes up and down the road” (151) while bystanders whip him across his knees or back. Physically, this is practically an irrelevant example of torture compared to other examples he gives, but psychologically Soyinka uses this common form of humiliation to highlight “the real horror” (151). Much deeper than a physical wound is the degradation of the common man humiliated by other common men merely acting to avoid their own punishment. Soyinka works to show that as he left prison, he realized the government had won. They had turned men on each other, to willingly hurt their neighbors through fear. The hardest part for him, and likewise his readers, is “not this act of public torture but the ingratiating ‘Uncle Tom’ smile on the faces of some of the victims” (151). His analysis of the victim’s loss of dignity lands ultimately to this conclusion: “It is all a staged performance in which symbolic roles have been assigned— and without prejudice” (151).

As he perceived his country to be destroying itself, he coined the term “Nigerian killer” which he said is a “factor...[s]imply defined, it is the stressful bane of the mere act of critical

thought within a society where power and control remain the playthings of imbeciles, psychopaths, and predators” (12). Though Soyinka’s depiction of his government and his people may seem harsh, his implementation of shock and anger is one way in which he can try to promote radical change for his community. He is not without justification for this anger either, as he has watched dictator after dictator manipulate and mutilate Nigeria. He paints a scene of seemingly impenetrable sabotage, especially when describing the murder of one potential leader he actually believed in. “Abiola’s death was one of unmatched, lingering cruelty. Robbed of victory, imprisoned and isolated... then, on the eve of his second victory, a victory that was signaled by the death of his jailer and usurper of his mandate, Sani Abacha, to end up—wasted!” (15). Sani Abacha, aside from murdering Soyinka’s beloved leader, became a figure with whom Soyinka was forced to interact on personal and political levels, and he ultimately is the reason Soyinka had to flee the country for his life. His prison sentence, his political activism, and his forced relationship with Sani Abacha can all be summed up by the aphorism ingrained in him by his mother: “*Itirayi ni gbogbo nkan* ‘The trying is all’” (18). This trying came at a cost to Soyinka’s physical and emotional stability and his Caruthian reflection on this time before his political exile concludes as one that he was unable to fully absorb as it was happening.

It took years before I would again acknowledge the right of this rump collection to a place in my existence or move to replenish it. The healing came gradually; ... At the time, however, the void in my private space only augmented the hollowness that beset me whenever I was thrust into the public arena, from which I had become even more viscerally alienated. It left me craving distance, a tactile and sensory severance. I slipped out fusslessly and, into my first— and only— spell of voluntary exile. (159)

In this moment, Soyinka models a lack of imagination within his situation, an inability to visualize a happier or brighter future. Van der Kolk defines this as a “loss of mental flexibility” that “compulsively and constantly pull[s] [people] back into the past, into the last time they felt intense involvement and deep emotions” (17). When Soyinka is “thrust into the public arena,” something he used to do purposefully and presumably with joy, it is because he wanted to be a pivotal part of his community. The disillusionment he is experiencing above is devoid of that desire and is an intense shift away from his previous self.

As Soyinka grapples with paradoxes inside himself and his nation, Danticat explores her own kind of paradox. As a Haitian immigrant with close communication to those still in Haiti, she witnesses, through the lens of her family, the governmental corruption, and much like Soyinka, the civil corruption spurred on by fear. But though she witnesses the paradox of living a normal life amidst chaos, the second paradox she must grapple with is constructing the story of a man who left little behind him in his demise. Her memoir also portrays hers and her father’s life stories, but my extrapolation of *Brother, I’m Dying* is almost exclusively her Uncle Joseph’s story. Therefore, my analysis will revolve around what she knew about him and how his story builds a representation of the trials of Haitian immigration as a whole.

Unlike Nabokov and Soyinka, Danticat’s lead-up to exile focuses on establishing Uncle Joseph’s character as a good, dependable, and respected person in his community. Because his political exile ends in his death from American mistreatment and malpractice, it is important for Danticat to construct Joseph in a way that the immigration officers refused to acknowledge. From as early as 1957, Uncle Joseph had been an avid political activist. His story introduces Papa Doc’s “countrywide militia called the Tonton Macoutes, a battalion of brutal men and women aggressively recruited from the country’s urban and rural poor” that came with an

identification card, a uniform, a .38, and “the privilege of doing whatever they wanted” (51). With this regime in place, Danticat concludes that “[t]hen, as now, leaving often seemed like the only answer, especially if one was sick like my uncle or poor like my father, or desperate, like both” (54). Danticat uses the foundation of a corrupted nation to contrast Uncle Joseph’s compassion and support of his community. When she herself faced insurmountable poverty as a child, she remembers that her aunt and uncle fed her when her mother could not (55). When her parents migrated to the United States, her aunt and uncle took her and her brother in as their own. As a preacher for his local community, Uncle Joseph became a pillar and a tangible example of investing in the Haitian community.

Though he is looked at almost irreverently, Danticat establishes a two-sided man, one who she deeply respects, and one with whom she deeply empathizes. As a voice to his community, he tried to help his congregation come to terms with the harsh realities of their world. In an interesting correlation to Nabokov’s views, we can see that though these people were from vastly different backgrounds, Nabokov and Uncle Joseph both worked to understand how the emergence into life and the departure from life were similar escapes into the dark abyss. Joseph believes, however, that both cases are cause for celebration, that “every day, we are all dying... but if we weep at a death, it’s because we do not understand death. If we saw death as another kind of birth, just as the Gospel exhorts us to, we wouldn’t weep, but rejoice, just as we do at the birth of a child” (73). Through religion, Uncle Joseph promotes an acceptance towards death that is very important to Danticat’s story. Though he is a common man, he uses his faith to acknowledge the consequences of the chaos around him and while he does not meekly accept wrongdoing, there is an important emphasis on the content mindset of what will be, will be, that “every day, we are all dying” that helps Uncle Joseph pacify his community.

One of the pivotal experiences in Uncle Joseph's story is losing his voice box. The loss of voice works on many levels in Danticat's memoir as Uncle Joseph's story escalates and his voice is taken from him on almost every level. One of the points of artistry in Danticat's writing is how she mixes emotional accounts of Uncle Joseph that she has collected from her own memory and the memories of her family members with stark and distant government or medical documentation of the events she remembers. In this contrast is where we see that Danticat is representing two stories—the story remembered by those who knew Joseph and the story documented by those who did not. Her narrating shifts have been described as “reproducing the clinical manner in which the authorities dealt with the case of Joseph Dantica (her uncle)” and “a staccato of information” that represents “the emotional exhaustion of the experience” (Austen 31). Though everyone's voice is a distinct part of their identity, Danticat documents that her uncle's was particularly “crisp and distinct: deep and resolute, breathy and jingly when he was angry, steely and muted when he was sad” (34). Danticat memorializes Uncle Joseph's voice in the same way one would in an actual death. Remembering that his voice provided him the ability to preach about love, God's love and love for one another and that “he knew all the verses for love” (35), her father reflects that his brother “would have made a very good politician, but... was a better preacher” (35). In contrast, Uncle Joseph's experience with the American doctors who removed his larynx was very sterile and casual as they told him that he would most likely never be able to speak again. Given little choice and forced to make a decision about his voice surgery without the support of his wife and family, Danticat records that while he was “lying there (with no anesthesia) as the doctor clipped a piece of flesh from the back of his throat, he wished he could go back home and have one final conversation with his wife. He also wanted to preach one last sermon to his congregation, speak on the phone with his son and to my father in

New York” (38). Danticat’s tone is influential in her story when she documents her uncle’s treatment with medical personnel. Her intermittent use of “mimesis” where she transcribes her uncle’s thoughts and words as “direct speech in the manner of drama” (Genette 163), helps establish her performance of sliding narration. Her lack of established distance in her mimesis helps to establish the emotional state of Uncle Joseph, something she very expertly strips away as his story of mistreatment continues.

While Soyinka lives and breathes the repercussions of colonization in Nigeria, Danticat most distinctly calls attention to the unsettling reality of Haitian interaction with the West. Stuart Hall calls this the “*Presence Europeene I*” and he validates the very real frustration Danticat and her family feel, far-extending past just the apathetic medical treatment, but later, the inhumane detainment and treatment of Haitian immigrants in general:

Where Africa was a case of the unspoken, Europe was a case that which is endlessly speaking- and endlessly speaking *us*... In terms of colonialism, underdevelopment, poverty and the racism of colour, the European presence is that which, in visual representation, has positioned the black subject within its dominant regimes of representation. (Hall 232)

Every interaction Uncle Joseph had with the United States came from a moment of desperation and was met with indifference. Danticat’s acclaimed manifestation of distinct and evolving tones in her writing contrasts Uncle Joseph’s genuine sincerity with what she (and many others) have perceived as *Presence Europeene*’s practice of “exclusion, imposition and expropriation” where power is “an extrinsic force” that is “wholly external to [them]” (Hall 232-233). By documenting perception versus reality through tone, Danticat gives voice to the “Other” and actively works against the dominating culture’s history of positioning her people as violent, hostile, and

aggressive, while also acknowledging what Homi Bhaba has called “the ambivalent identifications of the racist world... the ‘otherness’ of the self-inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity” (Hall 233). She does so by crossing sterile documentation with the emotional building of Uncle Joseph’s character that shows how calm and accepting he is of his fate. She emphasizes throughout that he has an innate ability to see the good in people and hope for the best, even when it does not appear that people are going to act in a reciprocal manner. When he is received unfairly, Danticat’s tone shifts to “overtly distanced report[ing]” so she can divert away from “a detailed, narrativized diegetic world to a listing of quoted facts” (Austen 31). We see this when she describes situations that have clearly traumatized not just her uncle, but her too.

When [the paramedics] arrived, they found Uncle Joseph lying on the floor near the front door, barely conscious, clutching his neck, gasping for breath. They tried to put a breathing tube down his throat, but the tumor was blocking his airway. So while racing toward Kings County Hospital, they performed a tracheotomy, drilling a hole in my uncle’s neck to insert a tube there so he could breathe... My uncle had his radical laryngectomy the next day. When he came out, he was never able to use his own voice again. He was fifty-five years old. (41-42)

Clipped, factual, and blunt, Danticat’s representation of Uncle Joseph’s treatment and procedure is cold and foreboding. In this example, there is a clear distinction of empathy and emotion at the beginning through the phrases “barely conscious, clutching his neck, gasping for breath” that connects to the same use of asyndeton in Soyinka’s account after prison. Malabou exerts that this rhetorical figure is frequently used to express “disorder” and “convey a speaker’s confusion” (62) and Danticat uses it to exact a feeling of displacement and misunderstanding of what was

happening in that moment. She smoothly uses one sentence to disconnect from her own emotions and sense of disillusion and enter into the clinical tone so well documented in her scholarship: “When he came out, he was never able to use his own voice again. He was fifty-five years old” (42).

The trauma of losing his voice, along with his career, is just a sliver of the trauma Uncle Joseph is bound to endure as Haiti’s government becomes more and more tumultuous. As political leaders moved in and out of power, demonstrations and protests began to take over the streets of Uncle Joseph’s Bel-Air community. “In retaliation, the army raided and torched houses and killed hundreds of my uncle’s neighbors” (139). Danticat’s account of the Haitian revolt and retaliation explains her uncle’s exile in a different way than Nabokov and Soyinka. She is compelled to show how no one in Haiti was safe, how physically existing there at that time was a precarious threat to one’s life. Like her introduction, her account of the transformation of Bel-Air is very literal. She describes the evolution of Uncle Joseph’s town as now “crammed with oddly shaped unfinished concrete homes. The alleys were gutted and filled with trash” (141). Not only is the town falling apart, but the population is being destroyed every day. A way to try to understand the destruction, and a huge part of Danticat’s inspiration for writing this memoir, is the format that Uncle Joseph chose to preserve the memories of those lost to the senseless violence. “Yet, when he showed me his list of casualties, written in handwriting so tiny he had to help me decipher them, all I could see was Jonas, Gladys, Samuel and the hundreds of men and women who’d died, their mutilated bodies eternally rotting under the boiling sun” (141). In sharing his notes, Danticat witnesses Uncle Joseph’s trauma and respects his desire to remember the people he has lost. Reminiscent of LaCapra’s “empathic unsettlement,” Danticat implicitly becomes a witness to his testimony. His list of names delineates the barrier that trauma poses



towards “unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility” (LaCapra 41-42). In these lapses of implicit emotion, Danticat then rises to something recognizable as “*heteropathic identification*,” in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one’s own” (LaCapra 40). The constant reminder that Uncle Joseph wanted to tell his story acts as Danticat’s foundation of anger and need for justice. As the danger grows and peace seems absolutely impossible, Danticat remembers Uncle Joseph as implicitly calm, steadfast in his mantra that “[m]aybe we’re all dying, one breath at a time” (61).

## 2.1 Socioeconomic Analysis

Uncle Joseph’s inherent calm is vastly different from the other men in my study. In Nabokov’s most vulnerable moments, the descriptions of his cousin and father, he projects guilt and anger for the outcome, either onto himself or onto the world, and this is how his sense of justice is established. Because he is experiencing personal loss, he cultivates an understanding that people must matter, they must stand for something and there must be some purpose for their existence. On the contrary, Uncle Joseph seems to express no blame or guilt but rather, is depicted more like a sheep being herded into his injustice without much chance at a fight. Danticat does not paint her uncle as unintelligent or meek, but rather that he has a different understanding of power and a contentedness in his place in the world, though it is harder and filled with prejudice. The contrast of resistance and weary acceptance indicates a direct correlation to both men’s socioeconomic places in the world. The key difference here is that one is depicted first-hand and one is depicted second-hand, but in this situation, that almost feeds to the exact kind of privilege I’m speaking to. Nabokov has the privilege and power to express himself directly, and to question power and ideology, whereas Uncle Joseph is never granted that

platform. Ultimately, the main difference between Danticat and Nabokov is the full realization and acceptance of life and death and the luxury to pretend life and death are merely theoretical constructs.

These lead-ins to exile present different ways in which to process what is about to happen—the physical and psychological break from each homeland. Nabokov idealizes what he once had and in doing so mourns what he has lost. His experience is much more personal, focused on his family and distinctly separate from the ongoing revolution occurring outside the Nabokov estate. Soyinka and Danticat on the other hand emphasize a build-up that is dependent on the trauma of a nation. For their stories to make sense, it is pivotal that they include the backdrop of the country. This is a distinct difference in perspective based purely on socioeconomic privilege. In no way is Nabokov’s story lessened because of a lack of political involvement, but his choice to focus on the intimate portraits of his family rather than the turmoil of a nation presents a drastically different perspective of trauma from someone who risked his life to save his community, and someone who was left to the mercy of the powerful, and literally stripped of his own voice.

### **3 CHAPTER 2: LIFE IN EXILE**

Everything changes once these writers confront exile. The word exile invokes the topics of geography and distance. Judith Butler looks at how the ideas of being “here versus there” or “here and there” is dependent on “being registered in several ‘elsewheres.’” If ‘here’, ‘there’, and ‘elsewhere’ are all probabilities then the emigre may hope for some possibility of reversibility, but “that reversibility finds its limit in the fact that the body cannot be relieved of its locatedness, its exposure, through its mediated transport” (138). The struggle then, especially for testimonies of exile, is for the writer to recognize the locality of his or her body, yet also register these bodies

elsewhere to attempt to create a global response, stimulate global recognition and form global ethical recognition and connection so as to not lose the reality of the event (Butler 138). This is essentially the task for all pieces of writing, but in a traumatic event as isolating as exile, this becomes one of the more difficult achievements for each author. That difficulty is shown in the diversity of depiction amongst my three authors as they delve into their climactic exiles, finally expanding on fragmented and provocative hints wedged in against their other stories.

In comparing the two authors who experienced it first hand, Nabokov and Soyinka decide upon remarkably different modes of expression. They are similar when they shift to clipped, bitter, and fragmented speech, but Nabokov utilizes his safe place: philosophy and theoretical constructs of time and memory that help him to reflect on his dark days in a much more descriptive manner. He eases into this literary freedom, however, and when he begins the tale of his exile, he is especially vague, and his fragmented admissions are reminiscent of gasps for breath. Those quick gasps provide the fuel, or the oxygen, to proceed with the story, and his stark fragments provide only the barest context for his metaphoric anecdotes. In a passage about receiving a letter from his first love and heartbreak early into his exile, he describes in depth the location in which he was reading the letter: “I looked up at the abrupt Yayla Mountains, covered to their rocky brows with the karakul of the dark Tauric pine; at the maquis-like stretch of evergreen vegetation between mountain and sea; at the translucent pink sky...” and on, and on for several more lines— and then, pauses, and drops seven words, providing an excellent example of Genette's contrast in the shown versus the told or reported: “Suddenly I felt all the pangs of exile” (244). The shown, or the “imitation or narrative representation” that makes something seem “alive” (Genette 163-164), is symbolic, literary, and imaginative; the reported is

simple, blunt, and literal. “I felt all the pangs” does draw on one of our senses, evoking some feeling, but is a far cry from the previous lines of imagery.

Nabokov’s exile eventually led him into his college years at Cambridge and here he is able to open up and express an isolation and weariness of his peers and his environment. As he becomes accustomed to his new identity of “emigre,” he faces what Judith Butler has coined “up againstness” when “populations liv[e] in conditions of unwilling adjacency, the result of forced emigration” (134). Ironically, Nabokov is not only isolated from his English peers, but because of his father’s political allegiances and his upbringing, he finds himself unable to identify and connect with his Russian peers. He finds some community, however simple, in the shared feelings that were “so obvious and familiar a thing that it would have fallen flat and seemed almost improper if put into words” (261). This description shows that any kinship he felt with other Russian emigres was in no way an adequate replacement for the familial community from his childhood. Amongst the Russian emigres, he realized that many of the student’s “patriotism and politics boiled down to a snarling resentment which was directed more against Keneski than against Lenin and which proceeded solely from material discomforts and losses” (261). As Nabokov expands on this disappointment, he alludes to the fact that his father’s political background has shed a light for him on Lenin, the Russian government, and the ideas of socialism in general, that his peers have not been as educated on. When speaking of his English peers who are “considered to be cultured and subtle, and humane... but who would lapse into the most astonishing drivel when Russia was being discussed” (261), there is a similar discontent and boredom, showing Nabokov’s ultimate dissociation and detachment from those years of his life.

None of his peers understand the full extent of Lenin's "torture-house, the blood-bespattered walls" (262) like Nabokov does, and as subtly as he expresses this disappointment, it is also one of the most historical accounts he offers in his entire memoir. He discusses that his family was forced to flee, that they lived in several houses and sustained themselves off the family jewels (253), but his allegiance to the cause and his passion against the inhumanity of Lenin's reign are muted until his memories emerge of interacting with these peers. Once forced to be in the collective, Nabokov makes a clear divide, an allegiance he feels is backed by common sense and Western ideas on democracy. Most frustrating for Nabokov in his political engagements with the English students is that "[they] never realized that had [they] and any other foreign idealists been Russians in Russia, ... they would have been destroyed by Lenin's regime as naturally as rabbits are by ferrets and farmers" (262-263). This section presents a dichotomy that LaCapra speaks to when discussing traumatic historical events. Quoted from Frank Ankersmit, he highlights that "[s]aying *true* things about the past is easy... but saying the *right* things about the past is difficult" (10). This period of time for Nabokov seems to have held nothing but disillusionment. Those that hadn't been immersed in Lenin's regime gave him "pained surprise or polite sneers" and those that did agree with him, "did so from such crude reactionary motivation that [he] was only embarrassed by their despicable support" (264). LaCapra would call this section, obviously inundated with personal perspective, a way of "referring to events and broader narrative, interpretive or explanatory endeavors" (11). Nabokov, through his individual perspective, invokes the atmosphere of an entire displaced, yet diverse, community. He ultimately reverts back to a reflexive state that attempts to work through and to find meaning in what he refers to as "esoteric days, under dismal skies" (268). He calls Cambridge "the constant awareness one had of an untrammelled time" and that ultimately, it was

what “supplied not only the casual frame, but also the very colors and inner rhythms for [his] very special Russian thoughts” (269). Nabokov’s exile never ended, though it eventually became more of a choice. After college, Russia saw a new brutal leader in Stalin, and Nabokov began a new life identifying as an émigré and a talented, but no longer wealthy, writer. His college years stand out to Nabokov, however, as some of his darkest days and he concludes his thoughts on that time with a memory of returning to Cambridge years later:

As I strolled under those sung trees, I tried to put myself into the same ecstatically reminiscent mood in regard to my student years as during those years I had experienced in regard to my boyhood, but all I could evoke were fragmented little pictures. (272)

His self-identified fragmentation speaks to the distinct segments he has created in his life. The recall that Nabokov offers correlates with Greenberg and Van der Kolk’s conclusions about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), in that often, victims feel “frank disassociation, in which large realms of experience or aspects of one’s identity are disowned” (Caruth *Trauma* 152). As he works through no longer being a “Nabokov” but rather a Russian émigré, his identity shifts, most uncomfortably in college, and he leaves behind, or disassociates with each passing self. Contradictorily, though, is his inability to shed his first identity, and the basis for his memoir is that however far removed from his childhood he becomes, that will always be his most ideal identity.

Nabokov ends his description of exile on an ultimately positive note— it taught him about himself and others and broadened his horizons. But a distinct difference between him and Soyinka is that he never returns to his homeland. It is forever left in his memory and though he takes many memories and many distinctly Russian attributes with him, he is content to never physically restore his past. Soyinka, on the other hand, does and this may be one reason for their

difference in depiction. It may also stem from the fact that Soyinka offers the unique perspective of being individually singled out by the Nigerian government as a dangerous person who would be killed if spotted. Under Sani Abacha's dictatorship, "[t]he thought of real death— not the remediable conceit now of exile as a mimic death— became an insistent, strident companion" (23). Soyinka labors over the time leading up to his impending exile as a suffocating experience under constant police supervision, censorship from the press, and an overhanging weariness of the inevitable exile he knows is coming (367-78). Very reminiscent to his disillusionment post-prison sentence, he sets the political environment:

Civil society was knuckling under. There never is a shortage of willing collaborators within civil society, and the roll of recruits lengthened by the day. The prospect of a slave plantation, more than a hundred million at the last census, subject to the whim of one man stared me in the face. It was time to revitalize public sensitivity to what was happening, where it was all headed, and incite its will toward self-recovery. Wearily, I acknowledged that it was time for some drastic initiative. (377)

Soyinka bears the weight of his country and it exhausts him. He consistently describes the time right before he left as a state of denial, unwilling and lethargic to leave his home once again. Balancing out-of-body, vague, and distant emotions with extremely vivid descriptions, Soyinka formulates a literary account of the many motions associated with sadness. Ultimately Soyinka battles the feeling of "bitter defeat," staring ahead of him "into a template of infinite sadness" and reflecting on his vow that "no tyrant would ever again chase him beyond the bounds of his nation," that "even when the choice is willingly made, exile sinks into one as a palpable space of bereavement. At that moment, I believe I died a little" (387). Once he finally submits to his exile he describes it as "that vivid state of suspended animation, exile" (23) and that he was "[o]nce

again... being placed on hold, and it was clear that this was going to be a long hold” (348). But juxtaposed against his vague sense of disembodiment are very real excerpts of extreme remembering, calling attention to how Caruth and Pederson can be used together to create a more complete account of the true shocks of trauma: “I distinctly felt the crunch of cold cinders between my teeth”, “we had parted company from dense, overhanging foliage”, “the clouds also parted to bare the landing of all subterfuge in a wash of moonlight, as if to ensure that this place of leave-taking would be deeply etched on my mind” (387). Pederson warns against the reliance on traumatic amnesia and goes so far as to say that dependence on this idea within trauma theory steals agency from the survivor (338). In Soyinka’s case above, he clearly gains agency from being able to explicitly recall and reconstruct his memories of departure. As his sense of agency builds, so do his descriptions. Focusing on his senses, Soyinka seems to have adopted an almost transcendental self-awareness of his journey as it was actively being “deeply sketched” into his mind.

As a man who thrived on the collective spirit of political activism, he left his country very singularly. Even Nabokov, though a prominent Russian name, was amongst the masses (and his family) in exile. Learning from afar that his home had “been smashed up on the pretext of seeking the opposition radio” and wondering if he would be able to find his beloved belongings “lying amid a heap of smashed furniture” (377) added to Soyinka’s weariness and I would argue, was a contributing factor to his disembodiment during his time away. He was left to feel as if the entire country had turned on him and that factor is implicated in Soyinka’s reflections that at times turn to what Herman has recognized as “the survivor's initial account of the event [being] repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless” (175). A common stylistic tool throughout his memoir is his sense of not actually being in his body and his feeling of suspended animation and double



identity. His main coping mechanism when in exile is to create a mental safe haven, fantasized as his beloved cactus patch in his home in Nigeria. This is similar to Nabokov's use of the superimposed Western story books that he correlated with his later mutilated cousin Yuri. In placing their pain onto inanimate objects, they are able to gain distance and feel removed from a pain that is actually inescapable. Soyinka's cactus patch, which represents Soyinka's good memories of Nigeria, becomes his idealized fantasy and he speaks to a constant paradox as his "mission in exile became even more personalized— to exploit every second of [his] living hours toward the retrieval of [his] cactus patch, but [to be] purged definitively of the possibility of a tyrant's triumphalist tread" (31). As he travelled through several countries in his exile, seeking support from political leaders and never giving up the battle against the corrupt Nigerian regime, he relied heavily upon this cactus patch, finding peace in moments of turmoil and viewing those moments "as if it were some kind of message from the distant coast of a continent where my cactus patch was eternally lodged and from within which my obsessive mission acquired its enigmatic endorsement" (458). Ricard calls Soyinka's use of "the energy of syncretism as well as the cognitive distance of satire" (160) pivotal components to his creativity, but even more than creativity and imagery, Soyinka's reversion to the cactus patch shows itself to be sentimental and nostalgic, but to also provide a source of distance. By compartmentalizing his positive memories onto the cactus patch, he can now remember Nigeria on his own manageable terms.

In comparison with the calm and affluent exit of Nabokov, and the well-planned and politically-spurred exit of Soyinka, Danticat establishes a scene of utter chaos, misinformation, and miscommunication. She essentially constructs the perspective of the "Smiling Uncle Tom" that Soyinka so dishearteningly describes about his country. He had the privilege to view that scenario from the outside, but Danticat has the task of depicting how and why the common

citizen is forced to turn on their neighbors and friends and leave them stranded for dead. Kali Tal comments on the different reactions available “in a social system that supports systematic oppression and persecution of particular minority groups” by stating that there are three common responses: capitulation, resistance through legal, moral or ethical structures, and the use of passive resistance or nonviolence, or relocation to a less hostile environment. Danticat implements each one of through different anecdotes in Uncle Joseph’s exile to the United States. A good example of how little information the Bel Air townspeople were given, and how they chose to respond through passive resistance and nonviolence, can be seen in their tradition to “beat the darkness” (172), performed by banging pots and pans as protest of peace against the soldiers and the gang members. Though they know their lives could be taken at any moment, they don’t know if it will be by the soldiers or the gang members, and in the midst of the chaos, the only thing they can be certain of is that shots will be fired first, and questions asked later, if at all. With so little information and a distrust for which side they should be aligned with, the community develops their “beat the darkness” tactics as a way to draw attention and create a cohesive voice for themselves amidst the much louder voice of the corrupt and powerful. This is different from Nabokov and Soyinka, both of whom had influence enough to either be completely shielded from the direct witnessing of the massacres or to be involved in the fight with full knowledge of the situation. All three authors, however different, glean perspective of their fellow people and ultimately conclude with similar ideas. For Danticat, her conclusions stem from her uncle’s astute assessment of what power in a powerless country really is: “[T]hey were part of a constant pull and release... in Creole called ‘*mòde soufle*,’ where those who are most able to obliterate you are also the only ones offering some illusion of shelter and protection, a shred of hope— even if false— for possible restoration” (204). Danticat’s epiphany derives

different results, however, than the other authors because the disillusionment, disappointment, or disassociation seen by Nabokov and Soyinka is much less life-threatening than the implications of Danticat's realization. Hers indicates direct harm and a true helplessness at the hand of the only ones who have the ability to help people like her uncle.

As the actual crisis unravels, perhaps in an even more dramatic exit than Soyinka, Danticat reveals why she has dedicated so much of her book to building credibility and empathy for her uncle. When "about three hundred United Nations soldiers and Haitian riot police" raided his church in the middle of the service looking to "root out the most violent gangs in Bel Air that Sunday morning" (171-1722), they annihilated Joseph's credibility in the community and unknowingly made the town think he had double crossed them. The police stormed the sanctuary, mocked and terrified Uncle Joseph's congregation, and then began shooting citizens from the rooftop (175-176). As a repercussion and another example of how those in power used fear and a deprivation of information to maintain a hold on their communities, all blame for those lost in the shooting was reallocated to Uncle Joseph. Though in the reverse, as Uncle Joseph is now disowned by the marginal and assumed to be in the majority, he enters the irrational, but highly common, treatment of a targeted group, relegating him to be "subject to the same treatment [of the targeted group], whether or not [his] self-definition includes membership in [that] group" (Tal).

'Here's the traitor,' one man said while pointing at him. 'The bastard who let them up on his roof to kill us.'

'You're not going to live here among us anymore,' another man said. 'You've taken money for our blood' (177).

From this point on, Uncle Joseph has essentially died. Plans to “kill [him] and cut [his] head off so that [he] won’t even be recognized at [his] own funeral” (178) led to him fleeing his home where immediately, everyone in the community broke in, vandalized and stole all the contents of his house, destroyed all his papers, his notes that he held onto so dearly, and even simple belongings, like his toothbrush (187). Robbed of his possessions, forced to dress in disguise as a woman, and escape the community in which he had been thoroughly invested, he shows a strength and a resilience that encapsulates the culture Danticat has methodically been building throughout her memoir: “He raised his shoulders and shrugged, which she understood to mean, ‘Oh, well, things are what they are’” (196), reminiscent of his mantra “[m]aybe we’re all dying, one breath at a time” (61). Danticat artistically culminates the character building she has done up until now to highlight a man that fully lived by what he preached and most importantly, had literally no other option except to immigrate, because as Danticat so expertly records, “[Uncle Joseph] could have walked out of Man Jou’s house alone and dropped dead from the shock of seeing the few people who did not want to kill him” (197). Therefore, Danticat successfully establishes that Uncle Joseph must leave. As his only other family resided in the United States, that was logically where he headed. Here, in her explanation of her uncle’s time in the United States immigration process, is where Danticat most clearly veers from my other two authors, as Uncle Joseph is literally stripped of his name, access to his medicine, access to his family, and access to any sense of his prior identity.

### **3.1 Socioeconomic Analysis**

All three accounts of exile center on a common theme: identity. Whether being shifted or completely destroyed, each author falls at various points on the spectrum of self. The adaptation from person of interest to faceless immigrant is handled very uniquely by each author. Nabokov

relies on his distance through reflection, constantly referring to his experience as a reminiscence of his past. However cold and disassociated he relays his story, it is always from the relief of no longer being in that situation. Soyinka, in his own way, also disassociates with that time by taking himself out of his reality, and instead focusing on the one thing he could depend on: his cactus patch. His continual global effort and involvement in the Nigerian revolution from afar also grants him a sense of purpose and distraction even after he has been physically removed from his home. Uncle Joseph's account is obviously told second hand, from compiled interviews, family accounts, and personal interaction. Voiceless, and representing the collective voicelessness of his community, his story shows the crushing effects of the scramble of misplaced power. Most interesting to my analysis on this particular section, however, is the subjectivity of the word privilege. Robert Boyers argues the dangers of a blanket reference to privilege because "[t]he charge of privilege, as leveled even in ostensibly sophisticated critiques, carries with it the presumption that people are readily intelligible, their natures and motives determined by accidents of color or class" (54). While I am apt to proclaim that Uncle Joseph was granted nothing for his reputation, that race and class were indeed implicated in his fate, and that he is an example of how one can lose everything in the blink of an eye, Danticat uses even his level of privilege to highlight how much worse it can get in Haiti. As he gathers what little documentation of himself he can before he leaves for the United States, he goes to the United Nations office to file the loss of his documents and belongings. A conversation he had with one of the officers is a striking reminder that the spectrum of privilege is extremely subjective on time, place, and person. Danticat records that he told the officer "he was leaving the country the next day. He must have realized how arrogant that must have sounded, how privileged, how lucky. There were so many others who were indefinitely trapped in the crossfire between the

police and the UN and the gangs” (203-204). In that quote is where Uncle Joseph’s philosophy can be grounded. Again, consistent with my analysis throughout, Nabokov is granted the use of philosophy, Soyinka implements the psychological, and Danticat is left only in the literal, thankful that he even has a place to go, and cognizant that most of the people he is leaving behind do not. But as the reflections of exile conclude and each of my survivors moves on to their next tasks, Tal makes an important reminder that the word “‘survivor’ is problematic, since every traumatized member of an oppressed community is aware of the potential for repeated victimization. During a period in which there is no safe refuge, the designation of “‘survivor” is always temporary and conditional.” Nabokov writes from an understood safe distance, Soyinka writes from a position that could place him back in the disgraces of Nigerian government, and Danticat writes of someone who will become the representation of repeated victimization.

#### **4 CHAPTER 3: LIFE AFTER EXILE**

The lasting effects of these author’s experience permeates their entire memoirs. For Nabokov and Soyinka there is no chronology, but rather a consistent, yet sporadic, laying of groundwork. Taking different messages, idealizing different aspects, and leaving their experiences as changed men, both authors use their pasts as explanations for their individual ideologies. Nabokov sketches different important people in his life with an anxiety about giving them meaning. Though there are several examples, interspersed throughout his story, the best example of what he continues to struggle with, and what he has made as the focus of his own philosophy, comes from a brief section in Chapter 13. Nabokov faces what he admits he has dreaded, finds difficult to discuss, and initially left out of the first edition of this memoir: his brother Sergey. Aija Sakova defines this struggle of fearful writing as a “way of breaking free from the binds of forgetting and from failures to confront injustice,” further psychologizing that

writers of trauma often view “forgetting [as] a breeding ground for evil; the horrors of the past must be opened up and discussed” (214). Therefore, Nabokov begins, painting Sergey, only ten months younger than him, as an almost complete foil to himself. Nabokov is rowdy, boyish, charming and privileged; Sergey is quiet, sweet, and overlooked. Nabokov acknowledges that even inside a privileged household, there was still a hierarchy in which his personality benefited over his brother’s. What Nabokov insinuates, but never states, is that his brother was gay, something he stumbles upon in a diary page and “in stupid wonder” shows to his tutor and parents, which helps to clear up “certain oddities of behavior on [Sergey’s] part” (258). This is the closest Nabokov comes to creating a metaphoric anecdote so familiar throughout his memoir. The rest of the one-page tribute delegated to Sergey is a chronological summary of their relationship: they both liked tennis, they went to different schools, they ended up both teaching English in different parts of Europe, and though on good terms, he forgot to tell Sergey when he left for America. Sergey then dies on January 10, 1945 from starvation in a concentration camp after being wrongly accused of being a British spy (258). Nabokov, however, ends on this point: “It is one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something— compassion, understanding, no matter what— which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace nor redeem” (258).

Nabokov’s reflection, his sense of loss, and his attempt to understand not just a single event in his brother’s life, but his brother’s life as a whole, shows what Nima Naghibi highlights when she writes that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (80). As Nabokov views his brother’s story from a distance and does not see himself in his brother’s fate,

but rather as one cause of Sergey's "life that hopelessly claims a belated something," he finds himself in an almost impossible construct. He wants the distance to report on his brother's life inside his memoir, but the "unassimilated nature" of Sergey in Nabokov's life makes it so that it is impossible to neatly summarize and complete any whole reflection on Sergey. Therefore, while the insertion of Sergey's one-page story is a fragment of the memoir itself, the one page as its own entity is also a fragment in that no formal, or complete conclusions can be drawn as to the purpose of his life. Nabokov views Sergey as an incomplete that he hopes a belated something, perhaps time, will eventually complete, but that in all the time elapsed already, has yet to illuminate itself to Nabokov.

Finally, in his most minute form of fragmentation, Nabokov inserts throughout many of his sentences the use of parentheticals or dashes to frame the tragic realities of many of the people he discusses in his memoir. Nabokov's ideal self, the self he shows, rather than tells, can be summed up in the mantra he expresses at the end of Chapter 3: "Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (77). As a way to make this impossibility a reality, Nabokov limits the deaths and hardships of several of his friends and family members to the isolation of a parentheses. He speaks of the nostalgia of his home and in parentheses "(that I had not seen since September 1903)" (76), in discussing his family's generational wealth "(within the limpid facets of which, had I been a better crystal-gazer, I might have seen ... a whole period of émigré life for which that ring would pay)," (81) within his long ode to his uncle "(...who is now also dead)" (74) and in reminiscing on his relationship with Sergey, "I would creep up behind him and prod him in the ribs— a miserable memory" (257). Also interesting is that the majority of his parentheticals are used in the first half of his text that is dedicated to his magical childhood and the prestige of the Nabokov family name. While this may be an act of



hiding the traumatic within his ideal, it may also be a testament to what Kali Tal describes as the process of “traumatic events [being] written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention.” To literally de-emphasize the traumatic fates of many of his early and innocent childhood memories, his trauma has been relegated to the side perhaps as a way to work beyond the trauma but still acknowledge its existence.

Though Nabokov has consistently avoided commenting on the public tragedy rampant in Russia, he does at times allow himself to remember what happened outside the Nabokov estate. Reminiscing on why he can’t return home, he describes a small public park and “in one of its linden trees an ear and a finger had been found one day— remnants of a terrorist whose hand had slipped while he was arranging a lethal parcel in his room on the other side of the square” (184). Unsettling as that initial admission is, he quickly escalates the memory of that same park, remembering that “[t]hose same trees...had also seen children shot down at random from the branches into which they had climbed in a vain attempt to escape the mounted gendarmes who were quelling the First Revolution” (184). Distinct here, is his extensive memory. Though Nabokov often deflects, passes over, or fragments his traumas, examples like this show how alive his traumatic memories remain. Like Pederson discusses of Richard McNally’s theories on trauma, it may not be that he writes in fragmented style because he *cannot* remember, but rather that he does not *choose* to remember (334).

Soyinka is more explicit when dissecting his life and where he stands now. While Nabokov implicitly establishes his ideology, vaguely acknowledging his own awareness of the effects of his trauma, Soyinka is immersed inside himself. Like a practice in mindfulness, he feels everything. So aware of his new self is he that his analysis centers on a curious, yet

emphatic discussion of how he is supposed to move forward. He describes this process as an “interrogation” of the “featureless flatness of [his] mind” (5). Even more worrisome for him than featureless flatness, is his overwhelming feeling of absence. “I worry therefore about the absence of feeling, the absence of even a grateful nod to Providence, and seek some reassurance that my senses are not fully dead, that the emotional province of the mind is still functioning” (6). After his exile, he is truly exhausted from his years of “a clandestine existence, of planning, scheming, organizing, bullying, cajoling heads of state, defense of ministers, dissident caucuses within Abacha-contented governments, sessions with military strategists and veterans of guerrilla struggle” (462) The mark of his return and the end of his forty year “crushing, life altering burden” (462). Consistent with his style of self-awareness and meditation, his release of emotions at the end of Sani Abacha’s reign of terror again brought him back to dreams of strolling “through [his] cactus patch” letting “the mood of the people percolate to [him] while it still flowed jubilantly, indifferent to tomorrow’s uncertainties, and be part of their sense of vindication” (462). Even with his relief, he wonders if others are also “caught in that ambiguous zone of deflation that appears to surround such moments” (462). Whereas Nabokov uses his writing to show his anxiety of what happened and what it ultimately meant, Soyinka’s is a pure deflation of anxiety.

Move! Move some more and then-- move again! And again and again! The sheer physicality of so many years had usurped the norm, overwhelming the rightful claims of spaces of serenity, creativity, the elusive space of resolution, even of contrary things. Was this about to end, and so suddenly? It was difficult to surrender to such an enticing, desperately craved prospect, one that translated simply as-- *going home*. Not a sentimental homecoming but simply *going home where one should never have left* (463).

His sense of exhaustion stems from the fact that, like Uncle Joseph, he had such an investment in his country. Asked to help, asked to leave, asked to lead, willed to die, there is no doubt that Soyinka was a formidable part of Nigeria and that his exile, like Joseph's in no way enhanced Nigerian society. Therefore, he portrays a bitter sweet return.

An interesting intersection between Nabokov and Soyinka is this idea of returning. Soyinka begins his memoir journeying home. He positions his story through the emotional lens of a homecoming. Nabokov conversely ends his memoir as he embarks on a ship to the United States, his new home, thus signifying the official severing of his feelings of Russia as home. But both "homecomings" are a celebration, an accomplishment for each author, and ultimately in this analysis, a depiction of privilege. The element of choice, however convoluted, is present with Nabokov and Soyinka, and absent in Joseph Danticat. Forced to leave and left to die, Edwidge Danticat must instead emphasize a different element than "homecoming," which is why she introduces the absolute opposite: Krome. Uncle Joseph's ultimate destination is a United States detention center called Krome that most Americans have probably never heard of. Danticat dedicates the end of her memoir to a paradoxically heated and distanced accord of what this institution is like. Though part of a marginal group, Danticat possess the dual perspective of true and non-politicized stories from her family that are usually "drowned out by those with the influence and resources to silence them," (Tal) and a less marginalized voice with the power to "band together as a community and retain a measure of control over the representation of their experience" (Tal). She does this through her quest for justice for her uncle. Because her uncle is dead, she relies on interviews with other "campers" and reverts back to her objective, narrating a story for her uncle because he cannot. The fact that he is no longer able to tell his own story becomes even more devastating as Danticat nears the conclusion of his story. Her safety in

objective medical reporting feels like a thin veil that in actuality acknowledges a much bigger fear, “[t]he descent into mourning [that] patients often fear... is insurmountable, that once they allow themselves to start grieving, they will never stop” (Herman 188). Krome marks the end of Uncle Joseph’s story and the start of Edwidge’s. To deny her entry into his story, would be to deny her entire premise, that though he was a strong, respectable man, he was stripped of his privilege to speak for himself and she was forced to take over.

Her interviews with detainees at Krome are reminiscent of “the agonizing reminder of slavery auction blocks, where mouths were pried open to determine worth and state of health” (212). She records that the quality of life there has led some of her interviewees to wish for death, saying that “if I had a bullet, I’d have shot myself already. I am not a criminal” (213). At this point, Danticat reverts to fully to an investigatory tone. All facts, no emotions and because of this, the audience is able to cultivate their own emotions and feel the shock and injustice of this process seep in slowly, rather than be forced into that conclusion by an emotional narrator. After establishing the horrors of Krome, she begins with a transcription between Joseph and a U.S. Customs Officer. Responses like “they burned down my church in Haiti and I fear for my life” were received with “no further explanation or details were requested” (218) time and time again, proving an artistry to Danticat’s writing as a human activist. In her moments of anger, in her reversion to formal and objective tone, she still pointedly displays the interaction. While she could have just moved on to the next question that the officer did ask, she instead draws her audience to what he did not ask.

As she creates a timeline of Uncle Joseph’s experience from arriving in Miami, all the way to his death, she slows down periodically to create a contrast between the robotic movements of the system and the actual repercussions on the human condition. “By then my

uncle was so cold that he wrapped the ... blanket he was given tightly around him as he curled up in a fetal position on a cement bed until 7:15 a.m.” (221). When his son, Maxo, handcuffed in the journey to the detention center, pleaded that his father not be given the same treatment, “[t]he officer agreed... but told Maxo to tell my uncle that if he tried to escape he would be shot (221). Danticat dedicates the last section of her book to a checklist of maltreatment, documenting every (recorded) instance that the system failed her uncle. Asked if any age or health factors should be taken into consideration, “in spite of my uncle’s eighty-one years and his being a survivor of throat cancer, which was obvious from his voice box and tracheotomy” (223) the officer checked “no.” When asked “Does the applicant have a legitimate reason for entering the U.S.?” the officer checked “no.” When asked “Is the applicant’s reason for entry based on an emergency?” the officer checked “no” (223). When asked “Would the applicant be admissible if s/he had a valid passport and/or visa? (My uncle had both.)” the officer checked “yes” (224). With all his information so obviously inaccurate, she then moves on to his medical decline. His blood pressure skyrocketed to the point that he was committed to the medical facility in the prison, and most importantly noted “[h]e and Maxo were separated” (227). As his health declined, so did his sense of dignity. In his one phone call to Danticat, he reported that they took his medicine, “[a]nd my papers, my notepads, they’re gone. Burned” (229). Most heart wrenching in his decline, was when Danticat noticed that “[n]ow even the motorized voice betrayed a hint of shame, the kind of shame whose only reprieve is silence” (230). Noticing his decline in composure swiftly transitioned to his decline in health. Danticat notes that “[r]ecords indicate that my uncle appeared to be having a seizure. His body stiffened. His legs jerked forward. His chair slipped back, pounding the back of his head into the wall. He began to vomit” (232). As he seized, guards took an extended time to arrive because of a “lockdown” (233), medics declared he was

“faking it” (233), and when he finally convulsed and threw up on himself, his son was brought back in, not to help take care of him or clean the vomit off of him, but to translate between him and the guards (234). “‘He can’t speak without his voice box,’ Maxo said. Covered in vomit, the voice box was no longer operable” (235). At this point, Uncle Joseph’s journey to absolute voicelessness is complete. Danticat must use medical records as her only source of information for the decline and death of her uncle.

In contrast to the complete lack of chronology in Nabokov and Soyinka, Danticat centers everything around her strict timeline. At 1 p.m. he was committed, at 1:10 p.m. he signed forms agreeing to tests, at 3:24 p.m. blood and urine samples were taken, at 4:00 p.m. he complained of acute abdominal pain, at 5 p.m. he was transferred to the hospital’s prison area with the admission note “no acute distress, ambulatory. To IV hydrate and reevaluate. Patient closely observed” (238). At 10 p.m., he was given another IV drip, at 1 a.m. and 7 a.m. the next day his vitals were checked (his temperature was low, his heart rate and blood pressure were dangerously high), at 9 a.m. he was given another IV. “Records indicate that he was seen for the first time by a physician at 1:00 p.m., exactly twenty-four hours after he’d been brought to the emergency room” (238-239). She goes on with her report, ending with,

The next note on the chart shows that he was found pulseless and unresponsive by an immigration guard at 8:30 p.m. There is no detailed account of ‘the code’ or the sixteen minutes between the time he was found unresponsive and the time he was pronounced dead, at 8:46 p.m. (239)

Little information and no communication with the family seems shocking, but in reference to Uncle Joseph’s treatment, Knepper posits that “[s]tates of exception suspend existing laws, often resulting in stripping persons of their rights as citizens for protection under the law” (195). This

further confirms not only how Dantica slipped through the cracks, but also the state of precariousness anyone is in when in a “state of exception;” vulnerable to enduring the same maltreatment, and the same stripping of human empathy and human rights.

Uncle Joseph’s end ultimately results in his own “homecoming” like the other authors, but his lands in a perpetual state of turmoil. Unsafe to be buried in Haiti, where gangs are celebrating his death and still calling for his beheading (244), the family decides to bury him in the United States.

My uncle was buried in a cemetery in Queens, New York. His grave sits by an open road, overlooking the streets of Cyprus Hills and the subway tracks above them. During his life, my uncle had clung to his home, determined not to be driven out. He had remained in Bel Air, in part because it was what he knew. But he had also hoped to do some good there. Now he would be exiled finally in death. He would become part of the soil of a country that had not wanted him. (251)

Danticat uses every part of herself and her family to highlight the absurdities of the immigration process and the demoralizing treatment of American detention centers like Krome. This is the artistry of Danticat. She very vividly makes her audience feel what she feels without stating anything except the facts. Her account is pointed and calculated but also an undeniable absurdity to anyone outside of the process.

#### **4.1 Conclusions**

Nabokov emphasizes his ideal, his childhood, and his family legacy as a way to de-emphasize one of the most dramatic situations of his life— his exile. His anecdotes show that he has endured the trauma of losing several family members and friends to war and he does not gain redemption from his exile until he fully accepts the United States as his new home. Brief sections

of his text are telling as he transfers his identity into that of the émigré— he showcases on a very individual level what it feels like to have one’s identity taken from them. His strongest appeals to the establishment of human dignity are through his anecdotes that are bereft of any dignity, his brother, his cousin, and his father. He constructs the lives of those that he feels died without dignity and uses his memoir as a platform from which to rebuild them and give them the respect he feels they deserve but were not granted. Soyinka’s platform as a “humanist, a protagonist of human rights, and a champion of human dignity” (Joseph 5) emphasizes the importance of human life on a national scale. When receiving an award for the International Humanist Award from the British Humanist Association, his presenter, Patricia Rogers, very poignantly summarized Soyinka’s work not only from his memoirs, but his activism in general, noting “In the sharpest possible contrast to the terrorist Boko Haram’s dichotomous disavowal of ‘western education’ as alien to their world, Soyinka has long been the intellectual leader of distinctively African voices within the universal Enlightenment tradition” (Joseph 5). His work to become a global citizen, though still fiercely rooted to his people, and his need to physically do something in the fight for Nigerian equality contrasts Nabokov and differentiates two very privileged men from one another. While both maintained a voice, and were granted respect in most situations, their coping mechanisms for their endured trauma expressed themselves through different outlets; Nabokov through the hope that his memory of his loved ones would establish the worthiness of their lives, and Soyinka through his role as a voice for his people and his willingness to sacrifice his reputation and worldly comforts.

What we know now, however, is that Soyinka’s sacrifice was on a spectrum. When authors like Edwidge Danticat construct stories from the voiceless, the true spectrum of privilege is revealed. Her portrayal of her uncle not only shows the horrors endured by many Haitians in



Haiti, but also the prejudice, apathy, and inhumane treatment of Haitians in the United States immigration system. Her decisive use of facts, attempted omission of subjectivity, and implementation of formal and distanced tone, highlights that her story speaks for itself. As a voice for someone who was stripped of his, she inserts herself as little as possible, trying to grant Uncle Joseph a story as raw and unmanipulated as she can. With this analysis of three very different authors, the fight for human rights should be acknowledged as diverse as the authors who compose them. Nabokov, Soyinka, and Danticat show that even though respective circumstances, privilege, and socioeconomic status differentiate their stories, the universal desire for human dignity results in similarly understood calls for action; to make one feel that their life was worthwhile and that their legacy deserves to live on.

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