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4/20/2016

Forces that affect, shape, condition Haitian American Families

“Pop, can I ask you a question? Tears rolling flowing down Bob’s face... Have you enjoyed your life? Pausing after each word as if to take in its weight and meaning. Have you enjoyed life” (pg. 20). Right from the beginning we learn quite a bit about our Haitian Family. Immediately we are introduced to a life-tolling challenge that faces the Father, He is dying. The question asked by the son, Bob, sets the scene for the rest of the novel. The Father and the Uncle of Edwidge become the main characters surrounding her stories and experience. The novel covers generations of time, measuring in detail the grandfather’s story up to the newest born daughter of the narrator. Yet after all that is told, after the lives that are lived, has it been an enjoyable life? As if to ask, “was everything that happened, everything worked for, everything said worth it?” After hearing her father’s response to this question, the author explains why she decided to record her family’s history.

Edwidge Danticat, author of her own story and that of her family, depicts what life was like growing up in a split world between Haiti and the United States. The exquisite details reveal her world outside of our typical, her norm becomes our desperation. Danticat’s charm and calm narrative tone comfortably invites us, as readers, to become immersed in our very own Haitian Family.

Haitian Families are structured in a very unique way, the Danticat family being no exception. Each member of the family places a great value on maintaining the family unit, no matter what financial situation they might belong to. Money is shared between relatives and it

is not uncommon to have multiple generations or extended relatives living within the same home or proximity of one another. They never neglect someone in need and when money is asked for by a family member, willingly they oblige. Even when geographic locations become spread out, like when Uncle Joseph desperately needed money in Haiti from his brother in the United States to bribe gang members to save his life, money is shared and freely given to one another.

Throughout the course of the novel, multiple different members live in the household of Uncle Joseph and Tante Denise. Marie Micheline, their adopted daughter, was brought into the family after she was abandoned by her own. It was uncommon to move away from your tight knit family. Edwidge's Father at one point was caught off guard by the fact that his daughter wanted to marry a stranger to the family as well as move away to a place there was no family ties. The elderly are respected by younger generations as being full of wisdom and experience. In *Brother I'm Dying*, the grandmother Granme Melina, becomes known for her exotic folklore traditions and stories that she often repeated but always had different meanings every time they were told.

Haitian children are considered gifts from God. Both boys and girls are equal in the eyes of their parents. Entire families are part of raising the children. Edwidge and her brother grew up in a unique circumstance, first their father left for the United States to earn money to send home to them when they were only children, followed by their mother. In the unknown amount of time absent from the each other, the father's brother and wife stepped in to care for the children while they were gone, treating them as if they were there very own. The children learned to protect their family structure and adapt. Making their uncle a second father to

them. Marriage in Haitian culture is strongly valued. Many couples due to expenses get married as a common law. However, with or without legal marriage, a union typically is considered complete and gets the same respect of the community when a man has a house built for his wife and the first child is born. Uncle Joseph and Aunt Tanine Denise are an example of this type of common law marriage; they met, had a varied length courtship, informed their parents, built a home, and had children. Maria Micheline, in contrast secretly hid her pregnancy from her family for seven months. When they found out, Tante Denise instantly ridiculed her and asked to leave the house. It was a disgrace and the parents asked what they had done to deserve such a behavior. She was taken away, someplace far that no one knew about until the baby was born. Maria was occasionally visited by her parents, but always in secret and all other family was prohibited.

Uncle Joseph was a remarkable man. Although he was often surrounded by horrific circumstances he was able to shape his family to the best of his ability. He had a passion for politics following after his own father, but learned for the safety of his family he had to remain passive. He was a priest who owned his own church, a survivor of throat cancer after a length amount of time was able to use a mechanical voice box to speak, a loyal husband, strong willed, and a protector of his family. It becomes evident throughout the book that family life is affected largely due to the country's political standing. The novel depicts decades of historical unrest within the country, highlighting tonton Macoutes. A Macoute was a special operations unit within the Haitian paramilitary force. They were above all citizens and could not be touched. They forced fear into people and treated them horribly, Maria Micheline being one of their victims of abuse.

Later Uncle Joseph was caught in his home town of Bel Air between other government enforcement groups, the MINUSTAH riot police being one of them as well as the Dreads gang members. When Dantica was eventually forced to either escape or accept death, he left nothing behind. They destroyed his church, his home, and everything that was not burned was ransacked and stolen by neighbors. The novel is very historical and is essential for understanding the way Haitian Families are shaped based on their conditions. The government puts the people in poverty, water is scarce, money is almost non existent, and shootings aren't uncommon. Edwidge describes some neighborhoods undergoing war while others are peacefully carrying on with life. During the final hours of Uncle Joseph in his home, he is surrounded by war, with no source of protection. Despite the conditions Haitian family life continued, people went along their business regardless of the turmoil. Even closely associated neighbors or members of the congregation of Uncle Joseph ended up robbing him, demonstrating to me that desperate times were calling for desperate measures. In Bel Air it became a survival of the fittest, every man for himself, either do or die.

Due to ongoing war, burials became an impossible expense for families nonetheless sacred. Cremation is treated as an abomination, as the body is needed to be whole in order to be resurrected. Following the death of uncle Joseph, a remorseful decision had to be made as to where to lay his body. Although dead, he would not receive the respectful burial he deserved in Haiti. Therefore, he could not be buried near his home and belong the side his beloved wife. He was forced out of his country and denied acceptance in America, he died without a place to call home. During his days as being a preacher he paid for many of the expenses of burials within the community. He kept detailed notes on who died, when, the

location, and the condition of the body. Haitian families will go the extra mile for an eloquent burial, dressing and grooming the body at its finest.

The health care system of Haiti plays a role in how it affects Haitian families. Most Haitian families rely heavily on herbal remedies. They stay away from sanitation units as much as possible. Most of time, hospitalization is associated with death. When uncle Joseph is forced on a long journey to an American institution fear consumes him, his family considering the thought he might never return, regardless they are unable to help. He is required to travel to travel to the United States for an operation. Tuberculosis is easily spread among families, Edwidge and her brother being victims themselves of an inactive type. When medications are prescribed, Haitians rarely know of their significance or side effects. They often rely more heavily on voodoo remedies to cure them with God's help.

When traveling to the United States, Haitians had to undergo tedious paperwork, medical examinations and receive clearance. They were allowed only temporary visas, it being more difficult for women than men. The impact on the receiving line of Haitians into America was shocking and unbelievable. Haitian hopes of pursuing a better life in the United States, were far from achievable.

Haitians were treated differently based upon their race and nationality from other emigrants. Edwidge details exact documentation of the arrival of haitians, her uncle being one of them, who claim Asylum. They were treated as prisoners and interrogated on the spot. Their possessions were taken away, in Uncle Joseph's case his medication, and denied communication with their families. Their food was rationed. The little communication from the

Customs and Border Protection was primarily to notify the family either living in the states or Haiti of their whereabouts and nothing more. No more questions were answered and zero information was given. Haitians were sent to Krome. Krome was a detention center primarily housing illegal immigrants, the majority of which traveled over on boat without their papers. It was a prison where Haitians would be held until deportation. Guards were skeptical of treating medical needs denying prisoners their rights and separating them from their families as illustrated by Uncle Joseph and his son Maxo's story.

Based upon the lectures in class, the textbook, and the novel *Brother I'm Dying* many intimate connections can be traced between the forces that affect Haitian Families. The dramatic entwined stories of the Author's life stories offer new insight into our history books and a depth into Haitian American Family culture. The tragedy of the story is the reality of which she calls her own, one that we experience through her words. After all that is said, after the years and experiences have passed by Edwidge leaves us back at the beginning of her story. She leaves us with a glimpse of hope with a new baby and her father's answer which still remain engraved in our memories; "Pop, have you enjoyed your life" Bob asks pausing after each word as if to take in its weight and meaning. "You my children, have not shamed me, I'm proud of that. Yes you can say I have enjoyed my life" (pg 21).