

MATEUSZ DUDEK<sup>1</sup>

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Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5580-6760>

# Identity and transnationalism: Narrating the Haitian-American home in selected works by Edwidge Danticat

**Abstract.** In contemporary discourses, the lives of migrants are often marginalised and silenced. For this reason, bringing the theme of migrants' identities to the foreground in literary research appears to be increasingly important. This article discusses the experiences of Haitian immigrants to the US as narrated by the Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat. I explore the theme of making a transnational home in her novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and short stories from the collection *Everything Inside* (2019). The analysis is based on a combination of two theories: Steven Vertovec's theory of transnationalism and Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative identity, which enable interpreting intergenerational identity changes, certain methods of cultural reproduction, and "little" cultural cross-connectedness of "family and household" (Vertovec 2009: 3-18) in the context of personal identity understood as formed through narratives. This article focuses on the transition from a Haitian home to an American one as an important part of identity-formation processes. It also views a migrant's journey as still incomplete after coming to the US and requiring "emplotting" (De Fina 2003: 17) its fragmented events into stories. The article attempts to demonstrate intangible ways of creating a transnational home and domestic methods of narrating and negotiating one's cultural identity in Danticat's fiction. I claim that Danticat's works narrate personal experiences to generate a "refigured" understanding of time and transnational ties within the family sphere.

**Keywords:** transnationalism, home, identity, Haiti, storytelling, trauma.

## Introduction

For decades now, many Haitians, mostly women, have been leaving Haiti and migrating to the United States in the hope of improving their families' financial situation. This article discusses the transnational identities and homes of Haitian-American

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1 Address for correspondence: Szkoła Nauk o Języku i Literaturze, Adam Mickiewicz University, Collegium Heliodori Świącicki, ul. Grunwaldzka 6, Poznań, Poland. Email: [matdud2@amu.edu.pl](mailto:matdud2@amu.edu.pl)

immigrants as narrated in a novel and two short stories by Edwidge Danticat. The first is the writer's debut: *Breath, Eyes Memory*, published in 1994. The book has been very successful and sparked noticeable interest from reviewers and critics. In 1998, it became one of the Oprah's Book Club selections (2019/20 Winner & Finalists, *The Official Website of The Story Prize*). The other two works analysed in the article come from a collection of short stories and, at the same time, Danticat's latest work, published in 2019, entitled *Everything Inside*, which, in 2020, won the author her second National Book Critics Circle Award and her second Story Prize. The aim of the present article is to interpret the selected works as depicting transnational identities. In addition, the paper considers narrating one's home as inseparable from telling a story about their identity. Danticat's works, her novels and short stories alike, allow the reader to get insight into the world of Haitian-American transnational homes, which constitute a living testimony of women's stories of identity struggles and negotiations. It appears that Danticat's perspective transforms her protagonists' personal experiences and attempts to grasp the complex reality of living in a Haitian-American home.

Edwidge Danticat, born in 1969 in Port-au-Prince in Haiti, emigrated from her country of origin to join her parents, who had gone to America earlier to settle down. During her school years, she was discriminated against by other children because of a hate campaign depicting Haitians as infected with Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) (Garcia-Navarro 2018). In spite of difficulties, she graduated from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Her first collection of short stories (published in 1995) entitled *Krik? Krak!* became a finalist of the National Book Award for Fiction in the year of publication. Moreover, in 2018, Danticat was awarded the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature. She remains a prolific writer and essayist. What is more, she occasionally publishes children's picture books and novels for young adults. She is also a regular contributor to *The New Yorker*.

Most frequently, Danticat writes about first- and second-generation immigrants and refugees who left Haiti between the late 1950s and early 1990s. It might seem to be a fairly broad time scope. The migration waves from Haiti to America were caused by the terroristic methods of Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, whose regime lasted from 1957 to 1986 (Laguerre 2005: 830). The dictators reinforced their rule by organising a private militia of volunteers called "the *cagoulers* or the *tonton-makout*" (Polyné 2010: 183). Fanatically faithful to the ruler, those militants terrorised the whole population by tortures, abductions, and blackmail (The Tonton Macoutes 2010). In her writings, Danticat tries to reflect upon the difficult experiences and struggles of the families who were forced to move their homes because of financial and/or political reasons, making their way to America, "the other side of the waters" (Danticat 2008: 146), as economic migrants and/or refugees.

## Steven Vertovec's transnationalism and Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity

This article places the interpretation of Danticat's works within two interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks. The combination of transnationalism (as described by Steven Vertovec) and narrative identity theory proposed by Paul Ricoeur in his monumental three-volume work entitled *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1985, 1988) provides a non-obvious perspective that allows us to look at both cultural aspects of identity formation and re-production in the contemporary world, and the self as formed through the symbolic structures of narration. Such observations are possible because analysing depictions of material culture, symbols and customs can be connected with interpreting how the specific ways in which these cultural practices are narrated could construct a certain vision of one's identity.

The perspective of transnationalism suggests that diasporas are and have always been communities that experience the dynamics of living in a world where national borders do not constitute absolute boundaries. Economic, political, cultural, but also family and household ties have been made stronger and, as it seems, have become more visible as happening across countries and continents (Vertovec 2009: 3-4). In light of this definition, it comes as no surprise that the transnational "exemplary community" is the diaspora, whose members' identities are formed "in-between" the place "back home" and "the new home" (2009: 4). The present analysis tends to focus primarily on the "little" transnationalisms of "family and household" and the formation of local "everyday networks" (2009: 12, 18) as bringing the global and the national to the local or domestic spheres and causing one to negotiate their identity not within a large and imaginary space of nationhood but among one's relatives and friends.

For Danticat and many other diasporic writers in North America, one of the most important themes concerning transnational ties is the near impossibility of arriving at "fixity" when it comes to transcultural "transformations of identity", which tend to be theorised around such notions as "syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation, and hybridity" (Vertovec 2009: 7-8). In addition, it is crucial to notice that the problem of performative fluidity of identity is very often associated with the practices and cultural production of young generations. Cultural studies researchers focus heavily on the problem of the transnationalism of "second generation" immigrants. Vertovec, in his article entitled "Transnationalism and Identity", acknowledges the issue by asking:

[H]ow exclusive is transnationalism to the first generation of migrants? Will the so-called 'second generation' [...] also maintain [...] ties of some kind [...] with homelands and with co-ethnic members around the world? (Vertovec 2001: 577)

The ways in which Danticat represents hybrid cultural phenomena and the identity positions of young members of the Haitian diaspora in America may tell us how the perspective on what a home is and how a home is created changes from generation to generation. Transnational homes and identities of the parents' generation can be juxtaposed with the usually more syncretic and non-discriminatory transnationalism of the children. While the transnationalism of the parents might be theorised as focused on reproducing their country of origin's culture in the new space, the transnational identities of the second generation are likely to tolerate and even embrace constant changes and multinational ties that are not limited to the relation between their homeland and their "new country". Vertovec suggests that the cultural "bricolage" and "syncretism" of young people may pose a threat to the traditional, largely two-dimensional transnationalism of immigrant parents. In Danticat's works, cultural practices, customs, and culture-based family habits are represented as having a direct impact on family and domestic relations. The particular ways in which those practices are revised in the course of generational shifts may constitute a substantial part of Danticat's narratives of home.

It appears that Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity and his explication of the process of narrative "emplotment", as well as his other remarks on the subject of narrative understanding are valuable points that prove useful while analysing works of diasporic literature. The term "emplotment" was first used by Hayden White in his famous *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) and then reapplied by other scholars such as Anna De Fina (2003) and Donald Polkinghorne (1988). White coined the term to explain that absolute objectivity in historical writings is impossible because even the form in which a writer arranges and "tells" facts can affect the way they are perceived by the reader (White 1973: 12-13, 56-57, 142, 276). Ricoeur derives the term and develops it from the Aristotelian idea of *muthos* (emplotment), which he understands as "the active sense of organizing the events into a system" of a story (Ricoeur 1984: 31-33). Ricoeur emphasises the fact that Aristotle's paradigm of the plot is based on the composition of the tragedy and its symbolic *holos*: "completeness [and] wholeness", which contribute to the creation of narrative "concordance" that favours logical intelligibility (1984: 38-39).

Being aware of the limitations of such a basic understanding of emplotment, Ricoeur develops it further. The French philosopher sees human perception and one's understanding of their self as personal attributes that need to be imagined within the temporal dimension. Time in turn has to be narrated in order to be understood and processed by the human mind (1984: 52). In other words, "a prefigured time" or the practical life of a person in time becomes the basis for a plot (1984: 54; 57), in which lived experience is "configured" by the operations of emplotment and ordering (1984: 65). Finally, human perception refers the understanding created in a narrative representation back to "the

time of action and of suffering” (1984: 70-74). This might mean that often incongruous events of one’s life can be mediated through a plot of a story in order to become a more intelligible narrative that a person “can take up and hold as constitutive of his personal identity” (1984: 74).

In the “Conclusions” to the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur states that time has to be narrated in order to be understood (1988: 241). In Ricoeur’s view, a product of the “interweaving” of the historical and fictional perceptions of time “is the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific [narrative] identity” seen through emplotted time (1988: 245-246). As Hannah Arendt points out, to get to know the identity of a person, it is not sufficient to ask the question about “what” someone is. It is necessary to ask “who” a person is, and this “we can know only by knowing the story of which he [a person] is himself the hero –his biography, in other words” (Arendt 2018: 186). Having this in mind, Ricoeur explains that individuals and communities may see their identities as internally continual and integral over time thanks to emplotting time and events into a body of cultural stories and symbols (Ricoeur: 1988: 247). However, the philosopher moves away from the Aristotelian definition of emplotment when he admits that “narrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity” (1988: 248). According to Ricoeur’s analysis, narrative identity may change due to a multiplicity of possible emplotments and interpretations of one event. Ricoeur also seems to believe that a person is endowed with the task of re-examining their inner narrative self in order to construct a sense of “self-constancy” which exists as the continuous action of telling and re-telling one’s narrative (1988: 249).

## Breath, Eyes, Memory

In her literary debut, Edwidge Danticat creates a painfully dramatic story about the changing notion of home, difficulties in the relationship between a mother and her daughter, and the intergenerational trauma of sexual abuse. In spite of the complexity of the issues raised in the novel, its narrator, Sophie Caco, manages to emplot her life in such a way that she seems to find a new form of transnationalism for herself. She is born in Haiti and goes to the United States as a young girl to reunite with her mother, of whom she has no or very little memory. On the one hand, one might call her a first-generation immigrant since she has her own connection with her country of origin, she speaks Haitian Creole as her first language, and her identity appears to be rooted in her aunt Atie’s and her grandmother Ifé’s traditions. Due to being brought up by her aunt, she enjoys a special relationship with “Tante Atie”, who becomes a mother figure for young Sophie. On the other hand, due to her mother’s prior emigration to America, Sophie seems to be able to examine her Haitian heritage more critically than her mother, Martine. Because of this, the protagonist might also be viewed as a second-generation immigrant, who distances herself from her parent’s attitudes and beliefs.

Sophie's first perception of home is predominantly based on her imaginary vision of Haiti as the homeland of her childhood. The first five chapters of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* present a "home" that becomes an abandoned girl's story in which Tante Atie substitutes for her mother. One might say that they convey Sophie's image of her Haitian homeland as seen through the eyes of a child who willingly absorbs Haitian traditions and regional customs, such as organising potluck village gatherings or receiving blessings before a journey from the eldest member of a family. However, one must not forget that the childlike perspective is a fictional, novelistic construction. The reader may get insight into Sophie's Haiti but it remains a recreated Haiti, which serves the narrator as a significant point of reference. The protagonist's narrative identity is inextricably linked with her story of "childhood homeland". When Sophie as a child dreams about reuniting with her mother she experiences unpleasant nightmares, in which Martine "chases" and kidnaps her only to be entrapped with her in a photograph (Danticat 1998: 8). Later in the novel, the older Sophie escapes her mother's American home to become free to marry Joseph and to revisit Haiti with a new understanding of her homeland's culture.

When Sophie goes to America, her feeling of displacement is compared to time travel. On the one hand, the girl is aware that she is going to live with her mother in a dilapidated flat located in Brooklyn, New York City, and she "greet[s] the challenge" of a "new life" (Danticat 1998: 49). On the other hand, her immigration to America seems to be incomprehensible for her in terms of the continuity of her life. One might say that her narrative is changed abruptly; she "age[s] in one day, as though she had been through a time machine, rather than an airplane" (1998: 49). It is also useful to note that the first American setting in the novel is Flatbush: the Brooklyn neighbourhood that is also called "Little Haiti". Its diasporic culture and economy are also mentioned by Sophie, who remembers Haiti Express, a postal service shop "packed with Haitians", as a place that "remind[s] [her] of home" (1998: 50). In the United States, Martine makes sure that Sophie receives education and learns English. At the same time, Sophie is sent to a Haitian bilingual school and feels there "as if [she has] never left Haiti" (1998: 66). In consequence, the reader may observe that Martine seems to act as if she was "looking for" a Haitian home in America. In an interview, Danticat herself states that such nostalgia and longing for an unreachable, "abstract" ideal of home might be read as elements specific to immigrant experience (Candelario et al. 2004: 72). Later in the novel, Martine and Sophie move to "a one-family house in a tree-lined neighborhood" (Danticat 1998: 65), which can be a symbol of financial success and hard-earned independence. Here, in the new family space, Sophie meets her future husband and experiences sex trauma inflicted on her by her mother. The supposedly safe domestic sphere full of material references to Haiti becomes the place where Sophie is forced to revise her perspective on Haitian culture and her mother's mode of transnationalism.

However, Sophie is even closer to her Haitian “home” than Martine. When her husband Joseph leaves home for a tour as a musician, Sophie decides to secretly visit her aunt and her grandmother in Haiti, taking her baby daughter Brigitte with her. When Martine joins them, she seems to experience being in Haiti only as a renewal of her trauma of rape. She cannot sleep; she openly says that “[it]’s worse when I am here” (Danticat 1998: 169). Unlike her mother, Sophie is able to go back to her country of origin and develop her relationship with the country and her family in a new way. She does not try to reject her heritage completely, she can still speak the language fluently, and she is eager to create new forms of transnational and intergenerational memory by taking photos of little Brigitte and her great-grandmother (1998: 129). As a result, she seems empowered to confront her first identity, which is based on her memories of Haiti, her relocation to America, and the traumatic experience of being “tested” for virginity by her mother. She openly asks grandmother Ifé about the practice of “testing” teenage daughters’ genital organs to check if they are still virgins. Sophie’s grandmother explains to her that it is a custom every mother is expected to follow to protect their daughters and themselves from being “disgraced” (1998: 156). In a certain way, it appears that Martine’s trauma of rape is transformed in Sophie’s narrative into the recurring event of “testing”. Due to this, Sophie feels that she is linked to the rape in three ways: she is a biological daughter of the *Macoute* that raped a sixteen-year-old Martine, she takes after her father, and she experiences another sexual trauma her mother inflicts on her.

One could argue that the part of Sophie’s narrative identity reshaped by domestic sexual trauma is what paradoxically enables her to see her transnationality within new contexts. The traumatic “testing” may only become mediated through language and “configured” into Sophie’s story when she voices her resentment in front of her grandmother and mother (Danticat 1998: 156-157, 170-171). Sadly, Sophie never reaches full recovery: she is petrified of having sexual intercourse with her husband – she experiences it as an extremely painful duty and develops bulimia as a result (1998: 130; 156; 179). Nevertheless, her realisation that Haitian folk culture includes elements as harmful as “testing” makes her capable of assigning new value judgements to her Haitian origin and traditions. This fact brings her narrative identity closer to the characteristics usually associated with second-generation immigrants and their transnational identity negotiations (Vertovec 2001: 577). Although she actively reproduces her transnational ties with her homeland, she does it in a transformed way, different from her mother’s mode of transnationalism. Martine’s “little transnationalism” consists in making money transfers and sending audio letters taped on cassettes and addressed to illiterate relatives. Other than that, Martine seems to view Haiti itself as a place of trauma and suppression. Even though Sophie’s ties with her homeland grow out of a similar image of transnationalism, she experiences visiting her country of origin as a necessary element of her path to personal liberation. She neither despises nor idealises Haiti as her “true home”.

Although Sophie Caco's home is a conflicted one, it is also a home that experiences reconciliation. Sophie's transnational, narrative identity negotiations happen mainly through her relationship with her mother. The two women form a transnational dyad. While still in Haiti, Sophie receives voice recordings from her mother from America. Then, in the United States, she is the one who sends them to aunt Atie to Haiti. When the girl emigrates, Martine becomes Sophie's only guide through her Haitian family's history as well as the American reality of New York City and the English language. In spite of their close relationship, Martine becomes the one who controls Sophie in an obsessive manner and "tests" her when she meets Joseph. In this way, the woman reproduces the same patriarchal models that have harmed her. The mother and the daughter reconcile only after several years of not speaking to each other when they meet at grandmother Ifé's house in a Haitian village called La Nouvelle Dame Marie, and only when Sophie asks her mother why she "tested" her. The motif of reuniting with one's mother may be a form of referring narrative "configurations" of events from the sphere of her immigration story back to the realm of "practical understanding" (Ricoeur 1984: 55). Thanks to a new, narratively-developed awareness and comprehension of her life's events, Sophie is able to communicate with Martine and make her intertwined Haitian and American homes complete. The reader must also notice that Sophie reconciles with her mother *in Haiti* as if she is able to fully understand her story only after she comes back to her childhood home and experiences. In this way, Sophie may connect her narrative with the practical action of reconciliation with her mother and can make her story more intelligible for herself.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to remember that Ricoeur's "[e]mplotment is never the simple triumph of 'order'" (1984: 73). The narrative identity emerging from Sophie's story appears to be a dialogue or dialectic between narrative order and disruptive suffering. The reader may see the relationship between Sophie and Martine as an example of difficult cultural identity negotiations that happen in a relatively closed domestic sphere. Martine depends on her daughter since Sophie is able to understand her mother's trauma and her post-traumatic stress: she wakes her up from recurring nightmares and symbolically becomes her mother's saviour (Danticat 1998: 81). Due to this, the mother believes that their spirits become inseparable, especially as souls of women who share difficult experiences of sex abuse and immigration. Despite that, Sophie feels that her mother does not understand her struggle with bulimia. When Martine states that her daughter "[has] become very American" one might notice that she sees the illness only as a symptom of the American culture of abundance (1998: 179). The domestic issues and their links to more general cultural phenomena and stereotypes transform the home and the family house into the realm of cultural negotiations of meaning and understanding. Similarly, the family sphere becomes the ground on which the narrative dialectic of trauma and reconciliation, suffering and order, may become a foundation for ethical



criticism and re-evaluation of the Haitian-American home itself. According to Ricoeur, such re-examination of one's original narrative identity is indispensable for an individual to reach a renewed kind of internal continuity (1988: 249). After all, in Danticat's debut novel the transnational home is represented as narratively (re)constructed. The changes it undergoes do not deconstruct the protagonist's narrative identity. Instead, Sophie's self develops to incorporate her transnational domestic sphere as a symbol of cultural and personal re-evaluation and questioning rather than immutable sameness.

Another element of identity represented through Sophie's narration is the custom of Haitian storytelling. The motif of telling made-up, creative stories is present in many other works by Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* and *Brother, I'm Dying* being only the two most obvious examples. The author also admits that her creativity was nurtured thanks to stories told by her aunts and grandmothers (Candelario et al. 2004: 70). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, it is grandmother Ifé who interprets certain aspects of the world by configuring them into the plots of Haitian fairy tales. The two most important fables told by Sophie's grandmother refer to the transition between being "a girl" and becoming "a woman". After Sophie confronts her about the trauma-inducing practice of "testing" Ifé tells a group of village children a story about a lark that seduces a "pretty little girl" and deceives her to kidnap her and take away her heart (Danticat 1998: 124-125). The direct context of the story suggests that it is a parable referring to the rape on Martine, Sophie's elopement with Joseph, and more generally the belief that a young girl has to protect her virginity and outsmart men who may want to abuse her. The language used in grandmother Ifé's story may also lead to a certain ambiguity. At one point, the storyteller states that "she [the girl] gave in to the bird and let him have his way" (1998: 125). The phrase "let him have his way" may refer to the fact that the girl allowed the bird to take her "to a faraway land" as the animal wished (1998: 125); however, it may also imply a sexual undertone and thus direct the reader's attention to the way certain men may deceive women to exploit them sexually.<sup>2</sup> Another story, described by Martine and aunt Atie as one of "all the unpleasant stories *Manman* [our mother] used to tell us about the stars in the sky", presents a simple plot about a girl who wanted to marry a star, "and then went up there and, as real as her eyes were black, the man she wished for was a monster" (1998: 165). To interpret this tale as conveying only misandry would be to oversimplify the narrative undercurrent present in the entire novel. Grandmother Ifé's stories may carry a frightening suggestion that the woman is punished for her love and sexual desire. Thanks to this undertone, the work addresses the problem of women's supposed responsibility for keeping their "maidenly" bodies "whole" for men in a patriarchal

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2 According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the phrase "have one's way with" is an idiomatic expression that may imply sexual connotations ("have one's way with" *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*).

society (1998: 136-137). It seems possible to suggest that such an emplotment of Haitian women's reality may close their experiences of sexual abuse and male violence in simplistic plots which reproduce feminine identities in the expectation of female deference and disrupt or completely scotch what might become a nuanced, narratively mediated identity: being oneself within a new understanding of time and traumatic events.

## Everything Inside

In Danticat's latest collection, one may find an image of "a home without a house", which is represented in a short story entitled "Hot-Air Balloons". Lucy, the narrator of the story, is a young, first-year student. Her parents come from Haiti. In contrast to Neah, her roommate from a rich, academic family, she has never experienced the stability of having a house. Without a place to live, her parents decided to, or maybe one should say were forced to, become seasonal harvest workers, constantly moving from one place to another, literally "chasing the harvest" in various parts of the United States (Danticat 2019: loc. 1375). For their daughter, this kind of lifestyle meant that she frequently changed and missed school, and could not make long-lasting friendships. On a deeper level, it resulted in the girl entering adulthood without a sense of personal safety or stability. Nevertheless, Lucy has always felt the support and love of her parents. Although they continue working on farms and the young woman is financially independent, they still insist on sending her monthly pocket money.

Danticat contrasts their affection and the loving "home" they create with "a house without a home". Neah, the aforementioned roommate, cannot find inner peace because of her parents' divorce and her father's high educational expectations. The girl, somehow inspired by Lucy, decides to join a charity organisation helping rape victims in Haiti. She goes on a trip as a volunteer and is absolutely overwhelmed by the amount of suffering and poverty she sees there. While Lucy is not mentally ready and does not have the financial opportunities to visit Haiti, Neah can always take advantage of her parents' Trinidadian ties. Despite this, she overlooks her transnational Trinidadian-American relations and decides to embark upon a mission to help Haitian women. Even though she is forced to finish her studies, she does not want to give up voluntary work for people living in the Caribbean region. The contrast between the two characters might stem from the way their personal narratives differ. Although Lucy has never had one physical place that she can call her "home", her narrative identity seems much more unified than Neah's personal story. The latter's narrative implies an impossibility of reaching "a configured time" (Ricoeur 1984: 54) that could re-order her experiences in an integrating and sense-making manner. Neah seems to meander without a sense of definite closure.

The fact that the young students can understand each other *and themselves* only after wording and revealing their stories is also extremely meaningful. When they meet for

the first time after Neah's charity trip, they begin narrating and exchanging their experiences. Through this fragment of "Hot-Air Balloons" Danticat seems to suggest that putting one's life into a story is a kind of coping mechanism. One understands their life in a new way when they compose a narrative that gives events a structure. The narrator of "Hot-Air Balloons" seems to intuitively grasp the idea that the process of answering a question about identity can be seriously hindered without formulating one's story. Furthermore, the transnational "refusal of fixity" (Vertovec 2009: 7) with regard to personal identity or one's desire for home may be seen as a threat or a challenge to the identity-formation process. However, it appears that Danticat's work reinterprets the lack of fixity as an *opportunity* for individuals to re-tell their stories and thus view the events of constantly changing, losing, and regaining their homes and houses as invigorating and, in fact, restorative experiences, which gain their new meaning only when a narrative about them is composed and mediated to another person.

In another story from *Everything Inside* entitled "In the Old Days" the reader encounters a narrative about a diasporic home, which is not a house but a restaurant owned by the narrator's mother. The restaurant introduced at the beginning of the text appears to be a part of a local diasporic community, forming a crucial element in its structure. From the information provided by Nadia, the narrator, the reader might infer that it is situated somewhere in Little Haiti in New York City. The young woman recalls that as a child she used to indulge in observing how other people's lives unfolded before her eyes in the space of the restaurant. She remembers witnessing "baptism parties, First Communion and wedding lunches, graduation dinners, wakes, and funeral repasts" (Danticat 2019: loc. 552), which may be viewed as personal and cultural identity-forming events. From the way she narrates her childhood time in the restaurant, it seems as though she has never experienced or participated in similar formative events with her as the central figure.

Her own personal story is disrupted when she learns that her mother did not inform her father about her existence when she was born. Her narrative identity experiences a major point of revision when she is about to meet her dying father who has always been absent from her life. She regrets that he has never had a chance to significantly influence her identity and "the course of [her life]" (Danticat 2019: loc. 628). When she goes to Miami, her father's wife invites her to a house in which she sees pictures of her father's friend, Pastor Sorel, his wife, and their daughter. In the photos, the pastor's family is always together, celebrating important events from the daughter's life. The "whole" and coherent narrative emerging from the photos is sharply contrasted with Nadia's having only one uncanny image of her father as "that skeletal man lying in the hospital bed" (2019: loc. 698). She never gets to know her parent and she envies his wife that the woman has someone she can grieve for. The fact that the father left Nadia's mother to return to Haiti in the hope of helping to rebuild the country shows the dark

side of transnational narratives and indicates that neglected transnational blood bonds may become a source of personal alienation. When the father's wife refers to traditional Haitian rituals connected with childbirth and death, the narrator realises that she has an opportunity to become a part of her father's last rites. Thus, the composition of the narrative is framed by the family scenes Nadia witnessed as a child in the restaurant and, metaphorically, it comes full circle when she can become a vital part of a family ceremony herself. At the very end, the narrator admits: "I felt [...] as though I was marching at the head of a king's funeral procession, with an entire village in my wake" (Danticat 2019: loc. 785). It appears that her narrative identity has required a major disrupting event to finally reach a point at which the young woman can re-examine her life story and experience a sense of relief.

In addition, the two selected stories from *Everything Inside* seem to depict a specific kind of home that is narrated as an absent homeland. In "Hot-Air Balloons" Lucy and Neah never see their homelands with their own eyes. On the one hand, Neah does not travel to her native Trinidad but decides to visit Lucy's homeland, Haiti. Lucy, on the other hand, is involved in Neah's family problems and discusses the roommate's rebellious behaviour and charity trip with her father. It seems that their private stories gain a wider context when they connect with each other's homes and homelands. Lucy may feel connected with Haiti not only through her parents but also through her friend, who witnessed the dire situation in the country and shared her memories of it with Lucy. Despite that, Haiti remains the absent homeland for the young student, who may imagine it as a place of women's suffering. Furthermore, in Danticat's "In the Old Days" Nadia's story seems more intelligible to her when she finds the strength to see her dying father and connect him with her family life and domestic sphere. In like manner, imagining her own family practices as linked with her Haitian ancestors' funeral customs allows her to feel close to and practically experience her homeland's culture in her life. Thus, even constructing an imagined homeland contributes to the fact that the protagonists of both short stories understand themselves and their identities in a new, reformed way when they create narratives about home and homeland, or the lack of them.

## Conclusions

Referring back to Steven Vertovec's doubts about the second generation's ties with their countries of origin, one may suggest that the transnationalism of young immigrant women is more open to "planet-spanning" forms of relations (Vertovec 2009: 3), which are not limited to and, in fact, are more critical towards their homeland's culture. In Danticat's prose, second-generation immigrants experience their diasporic, transnational lives differently than their parents do. However, this transformation does not exclude the possibility of creating a truly diasporic home that cultivates its ties with its homeland. One might rather argue that along with the changes in the transnationalism

of second-generation immigrants, their “homing desire” (Brah 2005: 177, 189, 194) is not lost but also transformed. It becomes more and more inclusive, incorporating other ethnic and national identities and making narrative identity revisions increasingly possible. For younger generations, Haiti does not disappear from the transnational map altogether. Instead, it changes its place, the sources of its importance vary, and it creates new intercultural and intergenerational connections. The image of Haiti as a paragon of home no longer constitutes the only possible point of reference on a microscopic Haitian-American globe. Haiti’s former primacy and centrality as “the home” for the protagonists is diminished due to the aforementioned Vertovec’s idea of “planet-spanning” relations and one’s critical thinking about their origin and domestic culture. Although the bilateral relation between Haitian and American “homes” is still relevant for the new transnational maps, the cultural place of Haiti might be narratively “refigured” to signify one of many homes instead of the only home.

Moreover, Danticat seems to view the transition from a Haitian home to an American one as an important part of identity-formation and self-understanding processes, which inspire “emplotting”. Binding and giving order to fragmented events of an immigrant’s life by storytelling or writing is a literary function that suggests an opportunity for regaining a sense of coherence and belonging. “Emplotting” may also reveal the nature of transnational identities as struggling or unable to reach a narrative closure: a final point of unity and completeness. Altogether, in Danticat’s works, Haitian-American transnationalism may be a cause of disorientation and difficult experiences; nevertheless, it is often represented by the author as a chance, and not as a threat.

All things considered, the present interpretation of Danticat’s works is based on the notion that constructing one’s transnational identity is not a single event but a complex and continuous process. By constructing narratives of identity, the author manages to convey two extremely important messages. Firstly, the identity of Haitian-American women of different generations is neither stable nor homogeneous. Secondly, events happening around a transnational home urgently require interpreting through storytelling. In the selected novel and short stories, a narrative about one’s home becomes nearly synonymous with a story of their identity. Danticat’s writings demonstrate how mediating one’s life through stories, and thus giving the events a new sense of temporality, constitutes the very essence of the personal identity of immigrants.

Finally, due to the fact that the present article discusses works that were written at two distant points in Danticat’s career, one may notice that narratives of young Haitian-American women still remain the author’s primary focus. Moreover, Danticat’s *Everything Inside* seems to slightly move her narrative perspective in the direction where new “emplotments” of personal experiences may bring a “refigured” understanding of events, new significance of the past, and a sense of relief. Neah and Lucy, the main characters of “Hot-Air Balloons”, understand each other better when they begin to share

their stories. Nadia, the narrator of “In the Old Days”, finds symbolic closure when she is invited to actively participate in her father’s funeral even though she practically does not know the man. In Danticat’s recent works, storytelling is a way to find a sense of having a home despite the struggle for narrative resolution, and reaching to the past for formative rituals provides comfort despite weakened transnational and domestic ties.

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**Mateusz Dudek** obtained his MA degree with distinction in 2020 in the field of literary studies at the Department of English, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. He continues his academic education as a doctoral student at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. His research concentrates on analysing the issues of narrative and cultural identity in contemporary diasporic literature written in English. His publications include: “2084. The End of the World. Subjectivity and Power in Boualem Sansal’s Vision of an Islamist Totalitarian Society”, published in a post-conference volume entitled *Faces of Crisis in 20th- and 21st-Century Prose. An Anthology of Criticism* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2020) and “Krik? Krak! and Brother, I’m Dying by Edwidge Danticat: The Transnational Experience of Haitian Refugees”, published in *Archiwum Emigracji* Vol. 28 (Toruń, 2020). He is interested in political philosophy, the theory of transnationalism and diaspora studies, and the works of Edwidge Danticat, Boualem Sansal, and Philip Roth.