

Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies 42.2
September 2016: 85-104
DOI: 10.6240/concentric.lit.2016.42.2.06

Empathizing with the Rights of Others: Reading Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother* and Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* as Humanitarian Narratives

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Abstract

This paper addresses the underrepresentation of autobiographical texts in studies of narrative empathy by drawing attention to the humanitarian narrative as an apt example of this conjunction, given its reliance on the work of empathetic identification. I propose a reading of Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother* (1997) and Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007) as humanitarian narratives which, through their appeals to empathy, ask readers to recognize their fundamental sameness and shared vulnerability with the distant others at the center of the texts, and also seek to expose and redress their deprivation of individual rights. The pairing of these texts offers opportunities to scrutinize the complex workings of empathetic identification by looking at, for example, how certain narrative representational choices, themes or techniques potentially favor or block its construction, as well as how the relational dynamics specific to familial memoirs impinge upon their capacity to elicit empathetic responses in readers. Both authors exploit the richness and generic undefinability of autobiography, with its double referential and anti-mimetic impulse to generate empathy, combining the impact of the personal story with the effects of narrative techniques ranging from characterization and transportation to repetition or the epiphany.

Keywords

humanitarian narrative, human rights, empathy, family memoir, precariousness, vulnerability,
Danticat, Kincaid

In a recent article, scholar Leah Anderst tackles the issue of how discussions of narrative empathy have tended to concentrate on fictional works to the detriment of other kinds of texts, persuasively arguing that “nonfiction narrative, and autobiographical narrative specifically, has just as much potential for creating empathetic responses and for arousing strong emotions in readers as do novels and short stories” (273).¹ Anderst reminds us that writers of fiction and autobiography deploy similar techniques, and she takes issue with Suzanne Keen’s idea, in *Empathy and the Novel*, that the referential nature of autobiography may work against empathetic engagement by prompting doubt about the story’s truthfulness or demanding an undesired commitment from readers. In contrast, following Paul John Eakin in *Touching the World*, Anderst claims that it is precisely the reference to an external reality that “makes [it] matter to autobiographers and their readers” (273). Thus, when a reader consciously chooses an autobiographical text, she is very likely to be ready, and probably willing, to confront its intimate bond with the outside world. It is interesting to note that, in her study of the link between novel reading and the cultivation of habits of empathy during the 18th century, historian Lynn Hunt focuses on an unmediated type of fictional narrative, the epistolary novel, praising its ability to foreground “the characters’ perspectives as expressed in their letters,” creating “a heightened sense of identification, as if the character were real, not fictional” (42). This lends support to Anderst’s insight that the mimetic impulse should not necessarily hinder an empathetic response in readers. It could be argued that, with regard to its potential to elicit empathy, the autobiographical text may even benefit from its generic defiance as a “self-defining mode of self-referential expression, neither fictive nor non-fictive, not even a mixture of the two,” to quote Louis Renza (22). One of my aims in the discussion that follows is to show how, particularly in the hands of accomplished fiction writers, autobiographical texts incorporate the best of these two worlds: the craftiness of fiction with its power to induce certain responses in readers, as well as the testimonial value of biographical fact.²

¹ Narrative empathy is defined as “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing or imagining narratives of another situation and condition” (Keen, “Narrative Empathy”).

² Throughout this paper I will be using the terms “autobiography” and “memoir” interchangeably. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain that they are used so “in contemporary parlance,” although some distinctions can be established between them. The latter “refers generally to life writing that takes a segment of a life, not its entirety, and focus[es] on interconnected experiences,” thereby placing the subject in a social context and drawing attention to the lives of others (274). This specificity is in agreement with the texts under discussion.

This paper addresses the underrepresentation of autobiographical texts in studies of narrative empathy by drawing attention to the humanitarian narrative as an apt example of this conjunction, given its reliance on the work of empathetic identification. The term “humanitarian narrative” is used to describe narratives of suffering which seek to “mobilize empathy for distant others” as an important part of their agenda (Wilson and Brown 2). I rely on Lynn Hunt’s definition of empathy as the ability to recognize that “others feel and think as we do, that our inner feelings are alike in some *fundamental* fashion,” and agree with her perception that it is precisely the failure to acknowledge this basic likeness among individuals that has historically led to inequalities and violations of rights (29, emphasis added). I understand the humanitarian narrative as a narrative of precariousness, one that makes visible a primordial attribute of this human sameness and a basic premise of all human life—namely, what Judith Butler has identified as “precariousness.” For Butler, life is by definition “injurable . . . it can be lost, destroyed, or systematically neglected to the point of death” (*Frames* 13), particularly when certain supports are lacking, such as “food, shelter, work, medical care, education, protection against injury and oppression” (20). Hence our dependence on social networks, ranging from family to governments, to recognize “a common human vulnerability” in us (*Precarious Life* 31) and provide the protection we need to sustain our life.

Despite its universality, Butler claims, precariousness is not evenly distributed across the globe, but certain populations are rendered more vulnerable than others due to the absence or scarcity of life sustaining conditions. Two such societies serve as the setting for the texts under discussion in this paper: Antigua, in Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother* (1997), and Haiti, in Edwidge Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying* (2007). These two Caribbean island nations continue to grapple with colonial legacies involving fragile states, dysfunctional governments, poverty, or chronic human flight, and are an example of places where individual rights have historically been deemed secondary to national liberation (Moyn 118-19). I approach these texts as humanitarian narratives which, through their appeals to empathy, ask readers to recognize their shared vulnerability with the characters, and also seek to expose and redress the uneven distribution of precariousness affecting their homelands. Importantly, the pairing of these texts offers opportunities to scrutinize the complex workings of empathetic identification by looking at, for example, how certain narrative elements, representations, or techniques potentially favor or block its construction, as well as how the relational dynamics specific to some types of autobiographical narratives impinge upon their capacity to elicit empathetic responses in readers.

Indeed, there is a long-standing tradition of using autobiography as an instrument to move the readers' feelings towards the victims of humanitarian crises or human rights abuses, as is explained in works such as Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2004) or in Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown's *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy* (2001). Yet the study of narrative empathy, the ways and extent to which it is induced in readers, is not a central concern in this scholarship but is engaged in broad terms. Smith and Schaffer, for example, emphasize the affective side of storytelling and its "potential for change" (7). "Affect," they argue, "lends intensity and amplification to responses . . . Sensations, such as embodied pain, shame, distress, anguish, humiliation, anger, rage, fear and terror, can . . . provide avenues for empathy across circuits of difference" (6). This has been demonstrated by texts such as Henri Dunant's *A Memory of Solferino* (1859), which was instrumental in the creation of the Red Cross, or the testimonio *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1983), which directed world attention to the plight of the Quiche people (28-29). Similarly, Thomas Laqueur explains that underpinning these narratives lies an appeal to the readers' sense of a shared humanity with the distant other, understood both biologically ("their bodies . . . suffer just as ours suffer") and ethically ("[they] not just feel pain but feel wrongs," for they are "embedded in exactly the sort of nexus of social relations as those of their readers") (42).³ Although different kinds of narratives may qualify as humanitarian for Laqueur—anti-slavery texts, the realist novel, pictures, autopsies—his examples are all characteristically grounded in the referential world.

Despite having similar backgrounds as US-based authors of Caribbean descent, the pairing of Kincaid and Danticat may appear unusual. As a matter of fact, Keen juxtaposes these authors to illustrate her view that, while "narrative empathy has been a core element of postcolonial . . . fiction in English" ("Human" 347), not all postcolonial writers aim to provoke affective responses in readers, some opting for a more intellectual appeal. Keen sees, in Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* and *Krik? Krak!* (1996), texts that potentially induce readerly empathy, although she clearly avoids oversimplifying her position by citing controversial or antipathetic characters in Danticat's other novels, such as the torturer at the center of *The Dew Breaker* (2004). Kincaid's fiction, in contrast, does not generally

³ With regard to the term "humanitarian," it must be clarified that although humanitarianism and human rights have distinct origins and aims, the relief of suffering and the promotion of individual rights, respectively (Wilson and Brown 10), today, as Samuel Moyn explains, they have become "fused enterprises, with the former incorporating the latter and the latter justified in terms of the former" (221).

facilitate emotional engagement or fusion with the characters. In Keen's words, it "rebuffs easy connections and invites disgust and dismay, pursuing antipathetic representational goals in gorgeous prose," as evinced in novels such as *The Autobiography of My Mother: A Novel* (1996) and *Mr. Potter: A Novel* (2002) (354). It is worth noting that Kincaid's work has been further assessed in relation to empathy in an article by Carolyn Pedwell, who, in her analysis of *Small Place* (1998), another piece of nonfiction, identifies the author's use of "alternative empathies," with connections to emotions such as "anger and shame" rather than more positive ones such as care or compassion. Pedwell defines Kincaid's method here as "confrontational empathy" (20), as her narrator takes the perspective of a stereotypical tourist visiting the island. Kincaid shows a good understanding of the tourist's needs and preoccupations, while at the same time underlines her lack of empathy with the island's problems and her inability to acknowledge her own complicity with them, which would potentially ruin her visit (20-21). In contrast, *My Brother*, Kincaid's memoir of her younger brother's illness and death, stands out, as a contemporary reviewer observed, as "more expansive than her fiction and at times more moving" because the author amplifies the range of her emotions "beyond rage" (Kerr) to include grief, compassion and empathy, as my discussion will try to show. Therefore, despite the distinctiveness of Kincaid's and Danticat's writing as a whole, there are valuable similarities, as well as some revealing departures, between their memoirs with regard to their familial/relational dynamics, humanitarian implications and representational choices.

In both narratives, the autobiographical act is prompted by the death of a family member, which calls the narrator back to revisit her past and her family history. The texts can be classified as family memoirs, an important type of relational autobiography in which, Eakin explains, "the lives of other family members are rendered as either equal in importance to or more important than the life of the reporting self" (85). At the same time, Kincaid's and Danticat's family memoirs are endowed with a humanitarian import, because their loved ones died after having faced inhumane and degrading treatment with human rights ramifications, which each autobiographer unsuccessfully tried to alleviate and redress. Both memoirs center on particularly poignant subjects of suffering: a young AIDS victim, Kincaid's brother, and an old and frail immigration detainee, Danticat's uncle, whose misfortunes are grounded in postcolonial societies where the precariousness of life is aggravated by adverse living conditions. On a symbolic level, both subjects transcend the realm of familial relations and become embodiments of their respective Caribbean nations and their troubled postcolonial

present. Seeking asylum in the US in the aftermath of the second ousting of Aristide and the UN stabilizing mission, Joseph Dantica represents the endemic political instability of Haiti and the helplessness of its people. Devon Drew's condition as a young man dying of AIDS in a run-down hospital is symptomatic of Antigua's post-independence politics, characterized by the corruption of the native ruling elite, their heavy investment in a neocolonial tourism industry and their failure to attend to the basic needs of the common people.

Devon Drew and Joseph Dantica are "proximate other[s]" to the autobiographers (Eakin 86), but geographically and culturally distant others to the reader. Relationality thus opens up two "avenues" for the mobilization of empathy in these texts, to use Smith and Schaffer's term, one connecting the autobiographer with her proximate other, and another one "approximating" the reader to the distant other in the text. A vital part of the work that these autobiographers do in portraying people who are kin to them but strangers to us readers involves, following Richard Rorty's sentimental thesis, "increase[ing] our ability to see the similarities between ourselves [and them] as outweighing the differences" (129). They are thus presented as susceptible to empathy and compassion, as well as meriting love and grief. "Why should I care about a stranger, a person who is not kin to me . . . ?" Rorty wonders; it is "because this is what is like to be in her situation . . . Because *her mother* would grieve for her" (133, emphasis added). If suffering, illness, aging and death are universal experiences that contribute to the creation of fellow-feeling across difference, this is even more so when they take place within the family, that powerful "locus of sentiment" in the humanitarian narrative (Laqueur 37). Readers are encouraged to see Devon and Joseph not as primarily defined by their membership in a stigmatized group, the AIDS sufferer or the asylum seeker, but as distressed human beings who are members of families and communities. Once we are able to see these others as individuals related to us on a fundamental level, Wilson and Brown explain, we may naturally "project" onto them the rights that we as individuals possess, "empathizing" with their "deprivation" of rights (12).

Given that, as Eakin reminds us, "memoirs are as varied as the bond they record," it is important to pay some attention to the specificity of the family dynamics displayed in each memoir. The nature of the link binding each autobiographer and her proximate other is likely to impinge, as we will see, on her own affects and those induced in readers. While Danticat's bond with her family and her uncle Joseph is portrayed as "untroubled," Kincaid's relation with her Antiguan family is of a more "conflicted" nature, to use Eakin's terms (87). The Danticats are presented as a very close-knit family in spite of the distance

separating those who stayed in Haiti from those who settled in the US. This closeness is exemplified by the relationship of her uncle, a second father figure to her because he raised her while her parents couldn't bring her over to the US, and her father, who had always wanted his brother to leave Haiti and join them in safety. The intensity of Danticat's feelings for her uncle is evinced, for instance, in a chapter entitled "One Papa Happy, One Papa Sad," where she remembers her sadness at leaving her uncle and surrogate father for ten years to join her parents in the US: "Even though we had been expecting it, how could I tell him that I didn't want to leave him?" (107). In spite of offering glimpses into her uncle's and her father's pasts against the backdrop of Haiti's turbulent history, the present time frame of the memoir is the year 2004, which witnessed their deaths and the birth of Danticat's daughter. This memoir, which Danticat dedicates to the new generation of her family, serves in part as a tribute to the older generation represented by her two father figures, who lived difficult lives and died in dire circumstances. The deteriorating health of Danticat's father coincides with the deterioration of political life in Haiti after Aristide's second ousting, which caused Joseph to flee his country only to die while in mandatory detention in the US. In contrast to this, early in Kincaid's memoir we are told that she learns about her brother's disease through a friend of her mother, with whom she was not on speaking terms at the time. Kincaid expresses ambivalent feelings towards her Antiguan family, blaming her mother for sending her to the US to work to provide for the family after Devon was born: "I was sent away to help a family disaster that I did not create" (151). She also blames her mother for being unsupportive of her educational and literary aspirations, while at the same time expressing some degree of guilt for devoting herself entirely to her American family, as she suggests when describing the moment in which she received the phone call with the news of Devon's fatal condition: "I was in my house in Vermont, absorbed with the well-being of my children, absorbed with the well-being of my husband, absorbed with the well-being of myself" (7). Kincaid's identification with her brother Devon is complex, stemming more from an eerie parallelism between their lives than from close personal contact or knowledge about each other's lives. "Much of my life," she explains, "was shaped by his arrival in the world . . . he and I were similar . . . we were the more artistic children of the four of us" (Frías 111). Even as his birth caused Kincaid to be unfairly separated from her family, it would paradoxically become her lifeline out of Antigua.

To some extent, Kincaid's Antiguan familial life fits into what Eakin describes as the "antirelational life," a way "to escape the bonds of relational identity as an act of self-preservation" (91). In this context, Devon functions as a

sort of “alter ego” for his sister, “the self who didn’t manage to escape the dangerous environment of [her] youth” (92), an association which becomes more intense when Kincaid returns to Antigua to bring a dying Devon the medication he needs to alleviate his AIDS-related illnesses. Indeed, Kincaid’s return to her homeland creates an opportunity for her to try to come to terms with her Antiguan family and her past, the memoir revolving as much around her brother’s ordeal as around her own soul-searching. Upon her return to the US after her first visit, Kincaid meditates on the impact of the family reunion on her, linking Devon’s suffering with “the possibility of redemption of some kind . . . that we . . . would love each other more” (*My Brother* 50). In a telling moment, she struggles to understand the nature of the feelings that have been triggered in her:

Whatever made me talk about him, whatever made me think of him, was not love, just something else, but not love; love being the thing I felt for my family, the one I have now, but not for him, or the people I am from, not love, but a powerful feeling all the same, only not love. My talk was full of pain, it was full of misery, it was full of anger, there was no peace to it, there was much sorrow, but there was no peace to it. How did I feel? I did not know how I felt. I was a combustion of feelings. (51)

The anxious flow of Kincaid’s emotions is reflected in her writing which, in passages like the above, increasingly frequent as the narrative progresses, abounds with repetitive patterns and long sentences combined with parataxis. This style mirrors the author’s efforts to discern the nature of the emotional tie that, though troubled and difficult to define, still binds her to the family and the country that she had left behind in her process of self-invention.

A further difference between Danticat’s and Kincaid’s texts involves the overtness of their humanitarian implications. These are very explicit in the case of Danticat, since *Brother, I’m Dying* can be considered an extension of the writer’s activism. In the past she cooperated with Artists for Democracy and she is currently involved with the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Centre (FIAC), a nonprofit legal assistance organization that helps immigrants and asylum seekers and promotes basic human rights for all immigrants. Her memoir takes to task the current system of US immigrant detention and conditions in detention centers, and she has been outspoken about her interventionist goals. If it were not for the work of human rights activists, she charges in an interview, few people would even be aware of the

existence of detention centers like Krome in Southern Florida (Miller), where her uncle was sent and became fatally ill after requesting asylum in 2004. She sees her memoir as “part of a process of *encouraging change* in the policies that allowed [her] uncle to die the way he did” (Pulitano 46, emphasis added). She further suggests that books like hers should be “used in the training of customs officers and immigration workers,” pointing to the humanizing potential of narrative and the need to cultivate empathy as a professional skill: “If they can only remember that they are dealing with human beings at possibly the worst moment of their lives and not mere numbers of so-called ‘aliens,’ then they could do a better job” (qtd. in Waller 365). That Danticat positions her text as an instrument of humanitarian advocacy is clearly seen in the ethical call embodied in its title, which conveys a sense of urgency and desperation, appealing to the reader’s recognition on the grounds of our shared humanity and interdependency. The author endows the word “brother” with a double meaning, referring both to her father’s brother Joseph, as well as to the Christian notion of the brotherhood of man. The latter sense is reinforced by the biblical epigraphs heading each part of the narrative, the first one of which, taken from Genesis, reads, “This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere you go, say of me, ‘He is my brother’” (Danticat 1). Such references are in keeping with the religiosity professed by Danticat’s uncle and father, but they are also consistent with the way humanitarian rhetoric “echoe[s] the fiercer imperatives of the Old Testament . . . to treat fellow humans as family” (Laqueur 42-43).

Kincaid’s title, in contrast, suggests a more personal motivation for her memoir. Unlike Danticat, she is not involved in advocacy for social justice, her engagement with the AIDS epidemic being confined to her brother’s death from the disease. The lack of an activist framework, however, should not detract from the timeliness of her narrative. *My Brother* was published at a time when the UN program on AIDS in the developing world was only beginning to be launched (Knight 5), and when there was a need to make the epidemic visible in the Caribbean region, which was second to sub-Saharan Africa in HIV-prevalence but did not draw the same international attention (Davidson 3). In addition, *My Brother* also came to fill a gap in the cultural representation of AIDS, since, as Thomas Couser explains, in the late 1990s patients from marginal groups, representative of the majority of cases, were underrepresented in narrative (170). Sarah Brophy discusses Kincaid’s memoir in her volume on AIDS testimonial writing, highlighting the valuable contribution of texts like hers as “personal documentation of the AIDS epidemic” (10). Through her personal loss, Kincaid frankly exposes

the indignity and the suffering surrounding AIDS in a very vulnerable geographical location during times of ignorance, medical neglect and humanitarian inaction. While Kincaid does not interpellate readers to recognize her brother's humanity and dignity in her text as clearly as Danticat does, underpinning her memoir is her desire to increase Devon's human stature. As she puts it in an interview, "in the society he lived he was nothing, just this sort of poor boy, but I make [my children] call him 'Uncle Devon.' I still say to them 'I can't believe Uncle Devon died'" (Frías 111).

Despite the differences in their familial dynamics and political intent, these memoirs share a potential for eliciting an empathetic feeling of social injustice in readers and, taken together, showcase a number of strategies that facilitate such response. A crucial part of Danticat's agenda in telling the story of her uncle is to undermine negative stereotypes about asylum seekers because, as Caminero-Santangelo explains in her discussion of immigrant testimonies, "the peculiar status of the undocumented as perceived interlopers in the 'nation' creates particular obstacles to the soliciting of readerly empathy" (450). Danticat relies heavily on characterization to humanize and individualize the figure of the asylum seeker and thus make her uncle's story compelling. Since empathy involves "*imagin[ing] the narrative* (the thoughts, feelings, and emotions) of another person," it is important that "the other should be someone of whom I have a *substantial characterization*—not just psychological facts . . . but also other not *obviously* psychological facts" (Goldie 179, emphasis in original). In the same vein, Shaun Gallagher underlines the importance of context: "Empathic reactions are stronger when we understand the personal situation of an individual than if we have abstract, detached, or merely statistical information about the plight of others" (374). Understandingly, the greater part of *Brother, I'm Dying*, with some exceptions like the chapters devoted to Danticat's father and her interactions with him and her family in New York, works towards building a context within which readers can imagine Joseph in all his humanity and embedded in multiple contexts of family, community, nation or history.

The rich texture of Joseph Dantica's enterprising and resilient life unfolds before our eyes as we learn about his early involvement in Haitian politics, how he became a Baptist pastor and built his own church and school, his family life, his trips to the US to visit his brother or how he lost his voice after a radical laryngectomy. Danticat emphasizes those traits of her uncle's personality that distance him from negative perceptions of immigrants. After his operation in New York, she recounts his eagerness to return to Haiti to his church and wife, instead of

waiting to confirm he is in remission (42). In a telling moment of shared perspective, Danticat conveys the depth of his frustration at not being able to deliver sermons as before: “there were times when it was painfully clear how much he missed the full participation his voice allowed him. This would be most obvious to me when he would skip an evening service and sit motionless in the darkest corner of the front gallery and while staring blankly ahead listen to Granmè Melina telling her folktales” (68). As the story develops, it becomes clear that only when his situation becomes unsustainable does Joseph try to leave Haiti. When, during a UN military operation against the local gangs in Bel Air, soldiers shoot from the roof of his church, he is accused of being a traitor by the rebels, who take over his home and church compound and turn it into their headquarters.

In three chapters, “Beating the Darkness,” “Hell,” and “Limbo,” Danticat vividly recreates the last few days of Joseph’s life before fleeing Haiti. Interestingly, in these chapters, which read like narrative fiction, Danticat exercises her craft as a storyteller more intensely than in other parts of her memoir in the hope of immersing readers into her uncle’s ordeal, as he becomes a refugee in his own neighborhood, having to hide and crossdress to save his life. This chapter cluster opens with an evocative description of the sounds of war on a specific date, including a direct address to the reader: “On Sunday, October 24, 2004 . . . Uncle Joseph woke up to the clatter of gunfire. There were blasts from pistols, handguns, automatic weapons, whose thundering rounds sound like rockets . . . During the odd minutes it took to reposition and reload weapons, *you* could hear rocks and bottles crashing on nearby roofs” (170; emphasis added). Vivid descriptions like this have the power to transport readers into the narrated experience by adding a realistic feel to it. Another salient example takes place a few pages down, when the aftermath of the raid is described thus:

As soon as the forces left, the screaming began in earnest. People whose bodies had been pierced and torn by bullets were yelling loudly, calling out for help. Others were wailing about their loved ones. *Amwe, they shot my son. Help, they hurt my daughter. My father’s dying. My baby’s dead . . .* There were so many screams my uncle didn’t know where to turn. *Whom should he try to see first?* He watched people stumble out of their houses, dusty, bloody people. (177; emphasis added)

This passage is particularly poignant, as it underlines the paradox of the toll that the UN intervention takes on civilian lives. There is an attempt to create a certain sense of synchronicity and of standing in the shoes of the character by shifting from indirect discourse and the past tense, “the screaming began,” into direct speech and the present tense, “My father’s dying. My baby’s dead,” and free indirect speech, “Whom should he try to see first?” Danticat is seeking the effects that have been ascribed to narrative transportation, the fact that “transported readers may be less likely to disbelieve or counterargue story claims, and thus their beliefs may be influenced . . . transportation is likely to create strong feelings toward story characters” (Green and Brock 702). Readers are invited to feel with Joseph, believe his story, and find strong grounding for his fear of persecution and death. In addition, the portrayal of violence contributes to the readers’ empathetic identification with Haitians, whom we see as helpless victims of extreme brutality.

“To see someone,” Gallagher explains, “postured and in a particular place, crying or in pain, may be sufficient for a contagious effect, but unless I understand the broader context, I will not be in a position to empathize” (377). Indeed, because by this time in the narrative readers have a good sense of Joseph’s story and probably empathize with him because of his likeability as a character, they are bound to feel indignant at the utterly anti-empathetic treatment that he receives during the asylum application procedure upon his arrival in Miami, where he becomes a detainee instead of being released to his family. Danticat underscores the fact that asylum officials are not trained to perceive an applicant’s humanity but rather identify potential threats to the nation. When Joseph has a seizure during his credible fear of persecution and torture interview, which causes him to vomit and urinate on himself, he is perceived to be “faking” and denied humanitarian parole despite “his age and condition” (233). Readers are not spared the inhumanly gruesome details of the seizure, as for instance how nobody cleans Joseph’s face and voice box, all covered in vomit, until his son arrives, a situation which exacerbates his vulnerability and creates in readers a feeling of empathetic injustice. His condition worsening, Danticat informs us that “according to Krome records he was transported to Miami’s Jackson Memorial Hospital with shackles on his feet” (236). He died the next day. In an effort to give credibility to this part of the story, as it may seem difficult for readers to believe how so much indignity can be inflicted on a single sick and old person, the chapters describing Joseph’s experiences and death in detention are more expository than the ones describing his last days in Haiti, abounding in factual details gathered from official documents—medical records, interview transcripts—that Danticat was able to retrieve after her

uncle's death. In fact, critic Veronica Austen points out that, by resorting to factual information rather than fictionalization, Danticat, the human rights advocate, avoids facing the kind of controversy that Rigoberta Menchú faced when she was accused of fabricating important facts to enhance the testimonial impact of her account (39). Danticat's turn to raw factuality here parallels her uncle's voicelessness and literal disappearance from the narrative as soon as he is subjected to mandatory detention. In a further attempt to give visibility to the condition of Krome detainees and to enhance the persuasiveness of her testimony, in the chapter "No Greater Shame" Danticat gives an eyewitness account of her visit to the center a year before with a FIAC delegation, reporting not only on the poor material conditions she witnessed there, but on the feelings of "shame" and inadequacy experienced by refugees at living the lives of prisoners (213). Painting a rather hopeless picture of the situation in Haiti and offering a humanized portrait of Haitians, Danticat makes clear that human rights fail Haitians both in their homeland and in the US, inviting readers to project onto them the rights that they have as individuals and thus to empathize with their deprivation of rights.

The articulation and creation of empathy in Kincaid's *My Brother* is conditioned, as I anticipated, by the bond linking her to her autobiographical subject, which causes her to problematize, but not undermine, the practice of empathy. Given the little personal knowledge she had of her brother, as she left Antigua when he was only three, and her frequent periods of estrangement from her family, Kincaid is initially unable to provide a solid characterization of Devon as an individual, in marked contrast to Danticat. She instead offers a somehow stereotypical portrait of him as an unemployed Rastafarian infantilized by his mother, with a wasted artistic talent and a carefree lifestyle. Although Kincaid clearly feels for her brother and consequently returns to Antigua to help ease his suffering, she has little grasp of his thoughts, feelings or motivations. Consequently, neither does the reader, a fact likely to preclude a potential empathetic response. It is true, nevertheless, that Kincaid makes readers aware that she wishes she could inhabit Devon's mind and his personal story, expressing her perspective-taking efforts in sentences like: "And I began again to wonder what his life must be like for him" (68), or "Who is he? I kept asking myself. Who is he? How does he feel about himself, what has he ever wanted?" (69-70). In the absence of a stronger sense of identification, Kincaid offers her brother compassion, rather than empathy. This she also conveys to readers, as she witnesses the appalling conditions endured by AIDS victims on the island.

The AIDS ward of the hospital is described as a place of isolation and abandonment where patients are left to die:

It was a dirty room He had two metal tables and a chair made of metal and plastic. The metal was rusty and the underside of the furniture was thick with dirt The walls of the room were dirty . . . the blades of the ceiling fan were dirty . . . this was not a good thing for someone who had trouble breathing. He had trouble breathing. (22)

Kincaid's insistence on the suffering of Devon's body throughout the memoir creates a channel for the reader's compassion. Even if AIDS is a condition many readers may find difficult to relate to, the feeling of pain is a universal experience related to our primary vulnerability. The sores in his throat, for example, make eating an excruciating experience for Devon: "he had to make such an effort, it was as if he were lifting tons upon tons of cargo. A look of agony would come into his eyes" (15). The theme of suffering is further underlined by the almost formulaic repetition of variations of the phrase "my brother lay dying" over fifty times in the memoir. The emotive power of Devon's pain is enhanced by his youth, as Kincaid reminds us that most people suffering from the disease in the Caribbean are young, "not too far from being children . . . in a society like the one I am from being a child is one of the definitions of vulnerability and powerlessness" (32). Indeed, Devon's vulnerability is highlighted by an ominous incident that his sister recalls early in her memoir, when he was covered and almost killed by an army of red ants shortly after birth. The physical suffering of AIDS patients is compounded by the social wrongs inflicted on them. Kincaid details the cold treatment that her brother receives from the hospital personnel, although without explaining how it affects him, as when she sees "disappointment and irritation" on a nurse's face at noticing that Devon has gained weight thanks to the medication she brought him (46-47). Medical neglect is not just related to the lack of resources, but to the physical and moral stigma attached to the disease.

However inhumane the situation she describes may appear, Kincaid does not pander to the readers' taste for sentimentality or portray Devon as a perfect target of compassion. The social ostracism that Devon suffers, also involving his friends, does not trigger a critique of social cruelty, but rather a revealing reflection on the conditions in which empathy may thrive. "Had he been in their shoes," she writes referring to Devon's friends, "he might have done the same. [Antiguans] are not an instinctively empathetic people" (42). Kincaid links this perceived lack of empathy

among Antiguan to the postcolonial context, which shapes the range of emotions people may allow themselves to feel: “in a place like Antigua, with its history of subjugation, leaving in its wake humiliation and inferiority; to see someone in straits worse than your own is to feel at first pity for them and soon better than them” (186). While compassion or pity are feasible, spontaneous emotions for Antiguan, the stronger fusion entailed by empathy, Kincaid implies, is less favored. Her personal insight ties in with Pedwell’s perception that “the liberal framing of empathy as universal rarely takes into account the historical circumstances and power structures that make empathy more possible or beneficial for some than others” (19). In certain contexts, it may be more salutary to develop habits of disidentification as a form of protection from anxiety by those who already live distressed lives, and who also have to abide by cultural norms which encourage them to disassociate from stigmatized groups. Empathy, Kincaid rightly seems to suggest, might well be the privilege of the powerful like herself or many of her readers, and an extravagance for those living precarious lives.

And yet even for those readers willing and able to empathize with others, Devon is not presented as a particularly likeable person, the “likeability” (Mitchell 121) and “innocence” (Wilson and Brown 23) of the sufferer having been identified as important determinants in a reader’s affective response. Despite the cultural determinism that Kincaid points to, readers may find him most undeserving when they realize he shows no compassion towards others. Should we see Devon as a victim or as unempathetic himself when, to his sister’s dismay, during a remission period he resumes his habits without letting his female partners know he has the HIV virus? A further obstacle to an affective response may lie in the way that Kincaid chooses not to sanitize her memoir by giving many details of the physical manifestations of the disease on Devon’s body, which some readers may instinctively find repulsive. When asked about the graphic frankness of her memoir, Kincaid has said that she attempted to be truthful about the disease and to express her unconditional love for her brother: “I loved him in every situation. I never averted my eyes from his body” (Frías 129). But for readers, unbound as they are by the tie of fraternal love, the exposure to the crudest physical side of the suffering of distant others requires an effort to stop and see. The humanitarian narrative, Laqueur argues, challenges readers to “transform the longing and desire for beauty into a duty to confront ugliness” (39-40). Kincaid’s narrative, as opposed to Danticat’s, clearly challenges readers with a more difficult subject of suffering, confronting them with their own qualms, prejudice and beliefs about others, while also providing explicit commentary on the workings of empathetic identification.

As the memoir reaches its close after Devon's death, Kincaid invites readers to see her brother in a different light and with a new depth as she is able to progress from compassion towards empathy in her emotional journey. During a book signing in Chicago after Devon's death, Kincaid meets someone from Antigua who informs her that her brother was gay and had been forced to live a double life. This revelation triggers, though belatedly, what I see as an empathetic epiphany in Kincaid, a state of shared perspective and understanding of Devon's emotional experience in its broader context, which she had been missing throughout her account. It is worth quoting at some length:

A great sadness overcame me . . . he had died without . . . being able to let the world in which he lived know, who he was And his life unfolded before me And in the unfolding were many things . . . the girl . . . who saw him sunning himself on the veranda of the hospital . . . when she saw him so thin in the hospital, so weak, my brother could tell that she had heard the rumours about him . . . and the way she distanced herself from him caused him great pain And the flirting with the nurses in Dr Ramsey's office . . . their scorn was painful to him because in it his secret of not really wanting to seduce them . . . became clear to him . . . and so the doubleness of his life . . . and perhaps he despaired that the walls separating the parts of his life had broken down, and that might have caused him much anxiety, and such a thing, the anxiety when it appeared on his face, would have seemed to me, who knew nothing about his internal reality . . . a suffering I might be able to relieve with medicine I had brought from the prosperous North. (162-64)

The tone of this passage is markedly emotional, the syntax reflecting the flow of Kincaid's agitated mind at work enveloping the reader, as anticipated earlier in this discussion. There is a new emphasis on psychological suffering, on the suffering of wrongs rather than physical pain. Kincaid revisits key moments of Devon's illness from the perspective that this new information affords her, which leads to a more substantial characterization of her brother as an individual. A new narrative and characterization of Devon is offered in which his pain is interpreted as not only physical but as a consequence of fear of his true identity being exposed by the disease. As Kincaid is moved to empathy, the reader's move is facilitated too, for we are encouraged to see Devon in a more empathetic light, as a victim of the social

framework rather than as a perpetrator of his own demise. This is what Eric Leake describes as the work of “a more difficult empathy,” one that makes readers see certain characters “differently, and, by extension to view the existing situation as in need of reform,” referring in particular to the character of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* (175). Devon’s denial of the disease, disregard for the well-being of others and hypermasculinity now appear as socially-induced forms of self-preservation rather than personal flaws. Importantly too, Kincaid develops a stronger identification with her brother as her alter ego and comes to a better understanding of why his memory haunts her: “I shall never forget him because his life is the life I did not have . . . the life that . . . I avoided or escaped” (176). His death could have been hers, had she chosen a different path and stayed in Antigua.

My Brother and *Brother, I’m Dying* attest to the power of the humanitarian narrative to create individualized and humanized portraits of members of stigmatized groups that aim to generate empathetic identification in readers. Despite the gap separating privileged readers from Devon Drew and Joseph Dantica, differences become minimized when shared human vulnerability, in the form of pain, forlornness, rejection, violence, or a general deprivation of individual rights are emphasized. Learning about these characters as people—with ambitions, accomplishments, artistic talents or embeddedness in affective communities like the family—also contributes to the empathetic process. By using the family in their memoirs as a space of sentiment, of love and grief, the authors enhance the affective impact of their stories, creating a double avenue for the circulation of empathy that links each autobiographer with her proximate other and shortens the distance between readers and the distant others in the texts. As narratives of precariousness, these texts invite readers to perceive the existing differences between them and the distant others in the texts not as the result of inherent qualities, but within the framework of global inequalities that render certain groups and locations more vulnerable than others. Kincaid and Danticat succeed in turning their lost ones into grievable subjects whose lives count as lives, their stories of personal loss becoming vehicles of “grievability,” which Butler describes as “a presupposition for the life that matters” (*Frames* 14). The case of Kincaid’s memoir shows that explorations of empathy in relational autobiographies have to take into account the specificity of the relational dynamics at work in the text which, if troubled, may lead to a case of difficult empathy or to a more critical treatment of the articulation of this emotion. Both authors exploit the richness and generic undefinability of autobiography, with its double referential and anti-mimetic impulse, to generate empathy. They combine the impact of the personal story with

the effects of narrative techniques ranging from characterization and transportation to repetition or the epiphany, or by shifting between fictionalization and documental accuracy. I have tried to show that while both memoirs are potentially empathy-inducing, Kincaid's more markedly sheds light on the complexities of this emotion by foregrounding issues of antirelationality and the likeability of the sufferer, as well as by questioning its universality in postcolonial contexts.

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[Received 19 December 2015; accepted 12 April 2016]