VOICING A LOST HISTORY THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY
IN HISPANIOLA’S DIASPORIC LITERATURE

Melissa Dee Birkhofer

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2007

Approved by:

Dr. María DeGuzmán
Dr. Tanya Shields
Dr. Rebecka Fisher
ABSTRACT

MELISSA D. BIRKHOFER: Voicing a Lost History through Photography in Hispaniola’s Diasporic Literature
(Under the direction of María DeGuzmán)

In this project, I examine the ways in which references to photographs in Hispaniola’s diasporic literature create a space from which to recoup a history that has been long silenced both on the island and within migrant communities abroad. The photographs mentioned in the works I address do not appear as photographs alongside the text, but rather as descriptions in the text. I address two diasporic writers from Hispaniola whose works include textual descriptions of photographs: Junot Díaz, born in the Dominican Republic who currently resides in New York and Edwidge Danticat, born in Haiti who currently resides in Miami.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A big thank you to the Worleys for coming to the rescue more than once during this project and to Daddy Dean for saving the entire project – most literally. Thanks to the Manleys for their excellent shuttling of books, PDFs, and other needed items internationally without complaint. Thanks Grace and Gavin for being wonderful excuses for a needed respite. Thanks to all of my English 12 Service-Learning students who offered to be my eyes and ears in Davis Library while abroad, especially Amy Brazaski who did some quick and keen researching for me. Thanks to Maggi and Fernando for visiting me and keeping me in check in the final moments of this project and for running the best Bed and Breakfast in Durham. Thanks to Anabel and Jürgen for all of your support and excellent mentoring over the years. Thanks a bunch to Masha and Luke for taking one for the team (again).

Thank you to my committee members, Drs. María DeGuzmán, Tanya Shields, and Rebecka Fisher for being and so graciously accommodating the whole year, from start to finish.

Last but not least, thanks to P for not taking the recycles out and for reading/putting up with so many drafts, revisions, discussion sessions, mood swings, frustration naps, and caffeine attacks. ’In k’aatech.

April 2007     Mérida Yucatán México
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INTRODUCTION

This project forges deep connections between Junot Diaz’s first published collection of stories, *Drown*, in particular the story “Aguantando,” with Edwidge Danticat’s “The Book of the Dead” the first story in her latest work, *The Dew Breaker*. The deep connections between these stories I identify as ways of reading contemporary Caribbean diaspora short story. I will develop a model of reading these two stories that gives voice to the multiple layers of histories of Hispaniola. Using a term identified by José David Saldívar, a renowned Chicano border studies scholar, as “unfinished” history I will show how this “unfinished” history is created through diasporic Caribbean literature. If it seems disingenuous to use a term born from Chicano studies as a jumping off point, it is important to note that Hispaniola studies has done much with U.S.-Mexico border theory. In fact, as April Shemak suggests,

> there are, however, many similarities between this border [the US/Mexican geo-political border] and the Dominican/Haitian border, including the often unsanctioned migration of laborers from one nation to the other (Mexican to the US, Haitians to the Dominican Republic), the exploration of those migrants’ labor, and their precarious position on the margins of the nation – often serving as the scapegoats for national anxieties (85-6).

Additionally, my comparison of Diaz’s and Danticat’s texts using what I call a “layered histories model” will be analyzed from the perspective of photography. Both stories use photography and moments of “photographic absence” and I will use
this perspective through which to examine the layered histories model. It is through this model that a new layer of history and meaning will be added to that which already exists, giving voice to an otherwise silenced story/history.

Although we use language in order to describe, discuss, and understand photographs, the photograph itself precedes language. The photograph does not need language to exist; we need language to describe its existence. This mute photograph speaks volumes that we, the onlookers, express in language. What is more in these stories, the photographs do not exist per se, but are described in moments of photographic absence in which a character gives a textual description of the photograph he or she is regarding. In this way, the (non)existent photographs in these stories act as a site for voicing to occur, but do not give voice in and of themselves. The voice is the narrator or character in the story giving the photograph language by explaining the contents of the photograph to the reader. Although this may seem like a paradox, voicing silenced histories in these two works occurs through (silent) photographs that are described in moments of photographic absence in the texts. These new voices, “typically reflect the socio-political issues that make up the region by engaging with the voices of the oppressed and, in doing so, challenge and transform conventional colonial constructions of history” (Shemak 83). This work offers up a way of teasing out oppressed voices and pointing to the often incongruent power structures associated with who gets to tell “history.” The stories I will examine in this project, “contest the notion of history … recognizing that it represents one [and only one] discourse through which we come to know the past” (Ink 788).
This one discourse is incomplete, but can be read in accordance with other histories, such as the ones brought forth by Díaz and Danticat.

Multiple histories become known through the unique use of photography in “Aguantando” and “The Book of the Dead.” These multiple histories include the “official” histories and documentation of the island, the “familial” histories in the stories, and the “unfinished” histories that are still being made. I argue that the “unfinished” histories are postmodern in their creation because they add another layer to the histories of the island all the while commenting on the ways in which “histories” are created and accepted. In this way, I echo Myriam J. A. Chancy when she explains,

to state here that Danticat’s text is one of a number of texts by Caribbean women writers intent on fashioning not a new state but one under construction is to suggest not that such narratives seek to replace an old regime of consciousness with a new one that is simply inverted or feminist, but that they see themselves as actively participating in a critique of history, of present-day culture, while offering plausible alternatives to the static constructions of nation, metropolis, dominant vs. subordinate powers and identity as each has been historically determined within the Caribbean contexts of their stories (5).

With this postmodern perspective in mind, I prove in this project that another layer of history becomes known when these texts are analyzed using the “layered histories model.”

Before turning to the layered histories model, however, it is essential first to understand the similarities and differences between the short story and photography, including the unique use of photography in these stories that I call “photographic absence.” In the first chapter I will identify the problems of categorizing the Caribbean and suggest how these problems carry over into Caribbean and Caribbean
diaspora narratives with special regard to *Drown* and *The Dew Breaker*. In chapter two, I will analyze Díaz’s “Aguantando” and Danticat’s “The Book of the Dead” in relation to photography and explain what points of the texts illuminate moments of “photographic absence.” Finally, in chapter 3, using the moments of “photographic absence” discussed in the previous chapter, I will propose a model by which the “unfinished histories” of the island are uncovered.
Categorizing the Caribbean is a problematic endeavor. Not only do scholars, historians, and Caribbean peoples disagree on what is the geographical Caribbean and what is not, the dynamic region is categorized by language, race, island nations, economic factors, and world market determiners. The borders and boundaries of the Caribbean do not draw a neat line around an archipelago; for many the Caribbean includes places in Central and South America as well as sites in other countries in which the diaspora comprises a contingent of the population, places such as New York, Quebec, and Miami, for example.

Although Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s metaphoric assertion in *La isla que se repite* that the Atlantic Ocean was “el parto doloroso del Caribe, su vagina distendida entre ganchos continentales”\(^1\) reduces the female body to childbirth and motherhood\(^2\), he explains the Caribbean region well when he describes it as, “un meta-archipiélago... y como tal tiene la virtud de carecer de límites y de centro”\(^3\) (19; 18). Likewise, Edouard Glissant does not limit the Caribbean region; instead, he

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\(^1\) “the painfully delivered child of the Caribbean whose vagina was stretched between continental clamps.”

\(^2\) For an in-depth analysis of Benítez-Rojo’s assertion of the Caribbean region and the implications it has for feminism and women see the introduction to Kelli Lyon Johnson’s *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map*.

\(^3\) “a cultural meta-archipelago with neither a boundary nor a center.”
states that the Caribbean is “an open sea. It does not impose one culture, it radiates diversity” (261).

Examining this diversity in more detail, Karla Heusner explains in the Belizean newspaper, The Reporter on December 9, 2001 in an article entitled “Color, Culture and the Census,” the problems that arise from categorization,

I feel sorry for those poor census takers trying to categorize people. Imagine the interview: ‘I would say I am Mestizo. Well, no I don’t speak Spanish and my mom was Creole, but my last name is Spanish so I am a mestizo. I think. Although I did have a grandpa from PG who people said was “Coolie.” But my Grandma was Maya, on my father’s side. My mother’s mother was, eh, from somewhere in Mexico, or was it Guatemala? Maybe it was Guatemala, or Honduras, Livingston I think, yes Livingston. My wife? She’s… uhm Creole, very clear. She has green, green eyes, and straight hair. I think her Pa, or her Grandpa, was a white man. Put her down as Creole. The children? Hmm, well my son is clear like his mom…” (Heusner 110).

Although she is specifically describing the multi-layered ethnicities of her native Belize, Heusner raises a fundamental question regarding the parameters that are used to define a person. The object being defined can only be assigned existing definitions and parameters that are available at the time. Categories force people, objects, and events into definitions that do not appropriately describe them because categories do not allow for a range of characteristics or a spectrum of degrees.

This process of conceptualizing took place as well with the new invention of the Daguerreotype. Since the invention was something new, the descriptions of the Daguerreotype used an existing vocabulary. Initially it was compared not to painting but to editing, “photography was defined as writing with light and could similarly be regarded as a system on notation and editing, it was not yet viewed as a ‘sister’ art as painting often was” (Rabb xxxv). At the outset
photography seemed to have little in common with literature. “Literature was older, firmly established, and more comprehensive; the photograph, despite its readier appeal to people of all ages, nationalities, and backgrounds, and despite its infinite documentary and imaginative possibilities, did not contest its superiority” (Rabb xxxv). Intellectuals at the time tended to view the new technology with hope and trepidation. Few fully embraced it like Poe but rather had suspicions of it as in the case of Balzac. Balzac “could not rid himself of a certain uneasiness about the Daguerreotype process” (Rabb 8). Balzac explains his suspicions with photography that “every time someone had his photograph taken, one of the spectral layers was removed from the body and transferred to the photograph. Repeated exposures entailed an unavoidable loss of subsequent ghostly layers, that is, the very essence of life” (Rabb 8). Although Balzac’s suspicions of photography were most likely sincere, Balzac himself, sat for at least one Daguerreotype (Rabb 8). If each photograph took away a layer of the essence of life, this essence was injected into the photograph. The photograph, portraying a layer of the essence of life, which used to reside in the human being, now consisted of part of the human, who is now less of a human. These layers, according to Balzac, were either housed in the person or stolen in the process of photography and placed in the photograph. It is this “either or” dilemma, a binary methodology, that photography and the short story dismiss as imbalanced and not representative of the complicated processes of the two concepts. Ascribing to the binary as a model of understanding creates a border, an “in or out” an “us and them.”
PROBLEMS OF BINARY DEFINITION

Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/ La Frontera* sets up a model of border thinking that moves beyond the binary “in or out” scenario. Her border area consists of a third space that is neither Mexico nor the United States but a space in which “the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merge to form a third country –a border culture” (3). This third space is an important one because, as Kelli Lyon Johnson points out, one “problem with border theories is that borders, even in multiple numbers are binary, dividing Same from Different. We are on one side; They are on the Other. Borders keep people in as well as out; they enact enclosure” (xii-xiii). As short story theorists have pointed out, the short story and the novel exist in one of these binary relationships that creates a border, and in turn, an unequal relationship.

Because the stories in *Drown* and *The Dew Breaker* inform and influence one another in a way such that characters reappear and develop between and across stories, these works blur the line between the short story and the novel. Mary Louise Pratt discusses the problem of genre definition in her article, “The Short Story: The Long and Short of It,” stating that we use the novel to define the short story, but we do not use the short story to define the novel. Pratt explains that this happens for two reasons: 1) that the novel is understood as historically the “more prestigious” of the two and 2) that the short story is defined in terms of length, which directly implies a relationship with another form (96). The collections discussed here, however, are novel-like because the stories are part of a whole, but that is not to say that each story
is not complete in and of itself. As Valerie Shaw describes short story collections, “individually, each story might be self-contained and limited in representational power, but when accumulated these ‘illustrations’ could make up a comprehensive survey, comparable to the inclusive though wandering vision afforded by a camera obscura” (12). In defining and categorizing the various [known] genres such as the short story and the novel, there is no “in-between” or third space, as Anzaldúa and Johnson posit above. There are two and only two categories available; the work is either a short story or a novel creating a binary relationship.

Feminist theorists have posited that in a binary relationship, one entity has more power than the other. Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first feminists to take issue with the binary structure in The Second Sex. In this groundbreaking work she explains how this mode of thinking places women secondary to men, in that men are the norm, the ‘A’ and women are ‘not men’ or ‘not A’. For example, she states that the binary perpetuates women’s oppression because, “[n]o subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defending himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One” (Beauvoir xviii). Therefore, by ascribing to the binary as a valid measurement or theory, women are placed as ‘Other,’ or, secondary to men. Since the binary implies an unequal power relationship, feminists argue against this construct as a way of understanding/knowing because it implies an oppressed subject. Consequently, since the short story has been defined in relation to the novel, the short story is the ‘Other’ and the novel is the ‘One.’
This identification, according to Pratt, is a “system-oriented structural approach” that is founded on defining genres based on characteristics the genre has (or lacks) in relation to other genres (93). Pratt argues that this approach is not complete; we need other ways in which to ascribe meaning that are not only “points of contrast with other genres” (93). As a result, Díaz and Danticat respond to Pratt’s call to create “literary genres [that] form a system rather than a roster” in the act of writing their works (111). They both subvert strict genre definitions and draw attention to the misleading categorization in genre studies.

Both of the works examined here are difficult to define within the parameters that currently exist. Both works consist of short-er stories that can be read separately and understood as complete pieces of literary production. Additionally, both works can be read straight through with each story adding another layer to the larger whole(s) of the works. Critics and scholars alike force these works into categories that simply do not properly explain the work in its entirety. One reviewer, J. Bowers, from the Baltimore City Paper (April 7, 2004) states that The Dew Breaker, “told in time-jumping chapters that nonlinear readers might mistake for short stories, the novel loosely follows the life of the title character, a Haitian immigrant living in Brooklyn with his wife, daughter, and the memory of his former career as a member of the Tonton Macoutes” (Bower http://www.citypaper.com/arts/print_review.asp?id=3526). This reviewer believes she or he has two options, the work is either a novel or a short story. The work is not described as a mix of characteristics of both the short story and the novel because that is not an available category with which to classify literature. To describe The Dew Breaker or Drown as a collection of short stories
denies the fact that the stories add up to a larger story and to call it a novel negates the snapshot-like sections of the larger work. It becomes abundantly clear after studying the works, that they challenge the current categorization and theoretical frameworks available to them. Works such as these are forced into a category, usually a struggle between short story and novel that does not adequately exemplify them and does not allow for multiple categories or permit levels of definition.

This problem of categorization, as Karla Heusner and Mary Louise Pratt explain, transcends beyond genre categorization of literary works into people’s lives. This problem of static categorization has larger consequences than a debate on whether or not Danticat and Díaz write novels or short stories. The problem of available categories in order to understand the world, literature, and people can have (and has had) much larger ramifications as Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes in his pioneering work, *Silencing the Past: The Power and Production of History*. 
THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

Categorizing and defining objects or events can lead to streamlined approaches of study, but doing so also pigeonholes objects, people, and events into “possible” categories. Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past*, explains how events are defined and described as they unfold, even as they are perceived as impossible. Taking the Haitian Revolution as his example, Trouillot explains how Europeans did not believe the revolution was taking place even though they were present and had access to information, which proved otherwise. He explains the problem of categories thusly,

[the Haitian Revolution thus entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened. Official debates and publications of the times, including the long list of pamphlets on Saint-Domingue published in France from 1790 to 1804, reveal the incapacity of most contemporaries to understand the ongoing revolution on its own terms. They could read the news only with their ready-made categories, and these categories were incompatible with the idea of a slave revolution (Trouillot 73).]

Because the idea of a successful slave revolution was unthinkable at the time, and because it did not have a definable category of thought, people refused to believe the revolution was taking place.

Letters sent between Europe and Saint-Domingue assured family members that the colony was secure even when other reports from the island proved otherwise (Trouillot 72). Trouillot quotes French colonist La Barre in a letter to his wife in which he explains, “‘There is no movement among our Negroes. … They don’t even think of it. They are very tranquil and obedient. A revolt among them is impossible’” (72). When the revolution did occur, Europeans made excuses for how the unthinkable could have happened, including blaming slave owners for helping and
initiating the early rebellions (72). The revolution was not caused by slaves, but by, “outside agitators. It was the unforeseen consequence of various conspiracies connived by non-slaves. Every party chose its favorite enemy as the most likely conspirator behind the slave uprising. Royalist, British, mulatto, or Republican conspirators were seen or heard everywhere by dubious and interested witnesses. Conservative colonists and anti-slavery republicans accused each other of being the brains behind the revolt” (92). It was certain in Europe that that uneducated black slaves could not possibly organize and defeat colonial forces. Instead of realizing what was actually occurring at the time, colonists created an alternate version of history that fit into the categories of possible events at the time. Because the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable to the Europeans at the time it occurred, it was rewritten even as it happened and still today is part of the silenced history of the Caribbean. As Trouillot continues, “[w]hen reality does not coincide with deeply held beliefs, human beings tend to phrase interpretations that force reality within the scope of these beliefs. They devise formulas to repress the unthinkable and to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse” (72). These “devised formulas” are created until more formulas are needed and what remains are more and more formulas and categories. The problem of categorizing does not go away by creating more categories with which to choose to define an object. Each time a new category is created, that category necessarily includes certain aspects and excludes others. Categories failed to define correctly, however, the new technology of the Daguerreotype.
In 1839 when the daguerreotype was first introduced, writers including Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman praised the new art form and embraced it. This new art, “writing with light,” brought life-like representations of the wonders of the world into the home and created keepsakes to remember those who had passed on (Rabb xxxv). Poe, one of the daguerreotype’s staunchest fans, hailed the invention as one of the most important of the time and “understood its mechanical origins and processes far better than most authors did, writing two pieces on improvements in the medium” (Rabb 4). In “The Daguerreotype” published in 1840, Poe decries that “the instrument itself must undoubtedly be regarded as the most important and perhaps the most extraordinary triumph of modern science” because of its accuracy and mysterious qualities (Rabb 5). For Poe, the Daguerreotype touched on something that painting and the other arts had not, a verisimilitude of representation in which he found a “magical beauty” (Rabb 3). While photography as an art progressed, the relationship between photography and literature grew stronger.

By 1918, critics, writers, and photographers alike began noticing the “cross-fertilization” occurring between literature and photography (Rabb xli). Walker Evans notes that photography “seems to be the most literatry of the graphic arts. It will have
– on occasion and in effect – qualities of eloquence, wit, grace, and economy, style, of course; structure and coherence; paradox and play and oxymoron. If photography tends to be literary, conversely certain writers are noticeably photographic from time to time – for instance James, and Joyce, and particularly, Nabokov” (Rabb xlii). Whereas authors such as James, Joyce, and Nabokov have “photographic” passages in their works, the short story and photography share other qualities.

Short stories and photographs are both “snapshots” of something larger, that is, there is always something “outside the frame.” Both the photograph and short story are complete, but they are also indicative of something outside themselves. Photographs are, as Susan Sontag describes, “a slice of time,” one moment that reminds us of larger, longer events (On Photography 17). Julio Cortázar explains the similarities between the photograph and a short story as an exploding outward beyond the frame in “Algunos aspectos del cuento,”

en una fotografía o en un cuento de gran calidad se produce inversamente, es decir, que el fotógrafo o el cuentista se ven precisados a escoger y limitar una imagen o un acaecimiento que sean significativos, que no solamente valgan por sí mismos, sino que sean capaces de actuar en el espectador o en el lector como una especie de apertura, de fermento que proyecta la inteligencia y la sensibilidad hacia algo que va mucho más allá de la anécdota visual o literaria contenidas en la foto o en el cuento (406).4

Cortázar “insists that, like the photograph, the short story is a paradoxical form which cuts off a fragment of reality in such a way that the fragment acts like an

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4 “A high quality photograph or story proceeds inversely; that is, the photographer or the story writer finds himself obliged to choose and delimit an image or an event which must be meaningful, which is meaningful not only in itself, but rather is capable of acting on the viewer or the reader as a kind of opening, an impetus which projects the intelligence and the sensibility toward something which goes well beyond the visual or literary anecdote contained in the photograph or the story” (May 247).
explosion that opens up a more ample reality” (May xvii). Likewise, Valerie Shaw explains,

the short story belongs more, and more lastingly, with photography--in particular with snapshot photography, which dates from the same period as the modern short story--than with film. Because the short story often depicts one phase of a process or action, the complete time-structure and experience of duration offered by film can be telescoped into a single striking image in which drama is inherent. If the photographic image is defined as a self-sufficient illumination which does not require the help of ‘plot’ or ‘story’ to give it meaning, then it is possible to say that the creation of images which do not need to be elaborated or explained, but which do expand in the reader’s mind, is the storyteller’s method of achieving a comparable effect. The simple appeal of the snapshot is its seeming casualness (Shaw 14-15).

Just as Shaw mentions, the similarities of the short story and the photograph are not meant to “merge the boundaries of photography and short-storywriting, but to indicate that a sense of similarities and differences between words and visual images is part of the experience, and a good deal of pleasure, or reading modern short stories. Among writers there is a strong inclination to make compression an opportunity to push language to a limit where it begins to shed its literary qualities and seek non-verbal ways of communicating meaning” (Shaw 15). The short story, as Shaw states, “has not been assigned any definite roles in accounts of modernism, which invariably focus almost exclusively on poetry and the novel. The short story suffers particular disadvantage; it is not readily associated with a developing tradition represented by literary figures about whose major stature there is wide agreement” (Shaw 18). Photography on the other hand is experiencing a boom that seems unprecedented in the arts. Anyone can take a photograph and almost every household owns or has access to a camera.
Similarities between the short story and the photograph are also discussed in the introduction to a collection entitled, *Snapshots of Belize: An Anthology of Short Fiction*. There are no photographs in the stories; the stories are the snapshots. Michael D. Phillips, the editor, notes at the end of his introduction that, “this collection of short fiction presents small portraits, snapshots if you will, of the life and culture of this country. In its totality this anthology represents some of the finest writing ever published in Belize and together these individual snapshots make up an important page in the colorful photo album of Belizean life both past and present” (introductory pages unnumbered). Likewise, neither Junot Díaz’s “Aguantando” nor Edwidge Danticat’s “The Book of the Dead” includes photographs; the stories are the snapshots, evidence of a larger (missing) photo album of a silenced history.

This is not to say that the photograph and short story only share similar characteristics. Jane Rabb points out in both *Literature and Photography* and *Short Story and Photography* that few artists were both short story writers and avid photographers. While they share some similar qualities in their respective arts are just that, different arts. The short story, perfected and popularized in the U.S. by Edgar Allan Poe, a Daguerreotype enthusiast, “argued that [the short story] was a unique narrative form” because it included a “technique of compression and intensity” (May xv; xvii).

The compression and intensity of the stories to be analyzed in this project stem from the use of photography in the stories.
PHOTOGRAPHIC ABSENCE

Photographs as they are described and lacking in both “Aguantando” and “The Book of the Dead,” have at least one thing in common: the photographs referred to in the stories become a site for memory. This memory is usually associated with the darker episodes in Hispaniola’s history, namely, in these works, the aftermath of the Trujillo years when Joaquín Balaguer came to power and U.S. forces occupied the Dominican Republic and the François “Papa Doc” Duvalier regime in Haiti. This memory is translated into a memory of a (suppressed/covered) history. The history of Hispaniola is one of silencing, but it is through the literature of the island and its diaspora that these silences can and do have voice. As Lucía M. Suárez notes in The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory, “If memory can be stolen from the masses by corrupt, powerful leaders, it can be returned to the people through literature” (53). Although the stories discussed here treat photography differently, both stories create an alternate version of history, which can be placed alongside “official history.” In this way, photography in these works is used as a jumping off point from which to explore the silenced history of the island.

Photographs, as opposed to other types of images such as paintings, drawings, television, or film, “do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire” (Sontag On Photography 4). If a photograph is a “piece of the world,” it is a piece that no longer exists. This piece cannot be relived except by recalling a memory or by looking at a photograph. It is this seeming contradiction, the photograph being both a presence and an absence, presence as a person regards it but absence because the photograph is of the past,
which is fundamental to my argument. In the stories I will discuss here there are no actual photographs in the text; the photographs are described in the narratives of the stories. I would like to draw attention to the distinction between actual images of photographs in a short story and the “photographic descriptions” to which I will be referring here. In order to clarify this distinction in my work, I will refer to the photographic descriptions in the stories as passages of “photographic absence.” “Photographic absence” will refer doubly to the absence a photograph triggers in “Aguantando” as well as the lack of photographs in “The Book of the Dead.” The former absence will link the moments of “photographic absence” in the texts to the creation of a suppressed history while the latter will allow other representations to stand in for the missing photographs in much the same way that these stories stand in for the silenced histories on the island.

As Suárez deftly notes, painful memories, such as those remembered by looking at photographs, can open a space in which to remember a painful past (10). These Caribbean diasporic authors use literature as a medium through which to explore this painful past. More often than not, the “official history” of the island does not allow the disenfranchised to voice their loss. Although both works discussed here are works of fiction, they still define literature as a space for remembering a painful history that has been silenced. bell hooks, in an article entitled, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” explains the process of remembering as follows,

The word remember (re-member) evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using the image, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive
memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye (394).

The ways in which these stories use photography and “photographic absence” “call us back” to remember a painful past, one shared by Haitians and Dominicans, in order to “offer a new way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds” (394). In the stories to be discussed here, Yunior in “Aguantando” must create a memory around a photograph, and Ka in “The Book of the Dead” learns her memory is a lie.
“AGUANTANDO” AND THE CREATION OF MEMORY

Although Junot Díaz has published stories in various venues, Drown is his first published collection. Drown describes the formative years of the protagonist, Yunior, who is born in the Dominican Republic and moves to the U.S. at the age of nine. While a child in Santo Domingo, Yunior does not know his father, who has abandoned the family and lives in the U.S. Yunior has no actual memory of his father, but has photographs from which to construct a memory. The opening pages of “Aguantando” begin, “I lived without a father for the first nine years of my life. He was in the States, working, and the only way I knew him was through the photographs my moms kept in a plastic sandwich bag under her bed” (69). The fourth story in Díaz’s collection, “Aguantando,” maps the creation of memory of Yunior’s father, whom he knows only through photographs.

“Aguantando” opens by explaining that Yunior’s father is gone and all Yunior has to remember him by are photographs that his mother protects from the elements. Yunior explains, “You know the sort of photograph I’m talking about. Scalloped edges, mostly brown in color. On the back my mom’s cramped handwriting – the date, his name, even the street, one over from our house. He was dressed in his Guardia uniform, his tan cap at an angle on his shaved head, an unlit Constitución squeezed between his lips. His dark unsmiling eyes were my own” (69-70). This description of a photograph Yunior often regards is what I am identifying as “photographic absence,” that is, a textual description of a photograph that both reminds Yunior of his father while simultaneously reminding him he is absent from his life.
Annette Kuhn addresses the ways in which photography can inform a memory of a specific person in her article, “Remembrance: The Child I Never Was.” She describes some of her own family photographs and the stories that the onlooker may or may not know from regarding the photographs. She explains, “memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in an intertext of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image” (397). The problem, then, for Yunior is that he lacks an intertext. He must rely on the history of himself regarding the photos and not of the context around the photos. Yunior admits, “when I thought of Papi I thought of one shot specifically. Taken days before the U.S. invasion: 1965. I wasn’t even alive then” (Díaz 69). The photographs have come to represent memory so that when he thinks of his father, he thinks of a photograph because “the details of time and place are not in the picture: these are supplied from elsewhere” in Yunior’s case, from himself and others around him (Kuhn 395). Yunior is not privy to the “back-story” or the “intertext;” he does not have the history or memory that goes along with the photographs of his father. In fact, when a strange man arrives at his home, he believes it might be his father, but he must ask the family, “Was that somebody we know” (Díaz 79)? He is unsure if he is able to recognize his father based on the few photographs he has seen of him.

Yunior explains later in “Aguantando” how he creates his father from experiences in his own life: his father, “was a cloud of cigar smoke, the traces of which could still be found on the uniforms he’d left behind. He was pieces of my friends’ fathers, of the domino players on the corner, pieces of Mami and Abuelo” (Díaz 70). Since Yunior can’t know the person, he can only put together fragments
and clues of what his father might be like. These fragments and clues come from aspects of Yunior’s life, a life he does remember. In this way, Yunior’s created context includes aspects from his own life in order to create a memory he is lacking.

Consequently, he does not like to spend the summers with relatives and be away from home, “I never wanted to be away from family. Intuitively, I knew how easily distances could harden and become permanent” (Díaz 75). Yunior seems afraid of becoming a “photographic absence,” in his family’s memory. He remarks how his older brother Rafa liked to get away from Santo Domingo and meet children his own age in the campo, but Yunior’s preoccupation with photographs of his absent father seems to influence his desire to stay home with the family. He wishes to stay home so that neither he nor his family becomes “photographically absent:” crystallized, stagnant memories that replace the real, fluid person. He has understood this process as a painful one, one he does not want to have to repeat.
“THE BOOK OF THE DEAD” AND THE FABRICATION OF MEMORY

This oscillation between fluidity and crystallization seems to be at the heart of both Díaz’s and Danticat’s works. Danticat’s latest publication, The Dew Breaker, was preceded by several works one of which is a collection of short stories entitled Krik? Krak! The title of this work is significant because it depicts the way in which stories are told orally in Haitian tradition. Krik? Krak! is a call and response that begins a story. One of two narrators in a story entitled “Children of the Sea” in Krik? Krak! explains, “we spent most of yesterday telling stories. Someone says, Krik? You answer Krak! And they say, I have many stories to tell you, and then they go on and tell these stories to you, but mostly to themselves” (Krik? Krak! 14). In this way the stories in the collection Krik? Krak! are part of a larger conversation that continues and is changeable. The stories, although published in written form as static entities, draw attention to themselves as fluid, mutable ones that have many variations. Many of the stories in both works Krik? Krak! and The Dew Breaker depict painful events, including the opening story in The Dew Breaker, “The Book of the Dead.”

In this story, the protagonist, Ka, a Haitian American in her 20s or 30s living with her parents in Brooklyn, finds out a secret her father has been hiding from her. Ka has grown up in a home of virtually no family photographs. She has no physical memory of Haiti, where her parents lived to adulthood, something Ka wonders about but has never asked her parents for clarification. Driving with her father from New York to Tampa to deliver one of Ka’s sculptures to its buyer, she learns that her father, whom she thought had been imprisoned for a time in Haiti, was not captured, but was a prison guard and torturer. This realization for Ka, though painful to come to terms...
with, explains some of the guarded behavior her father has shown over the years, especially with regard to photographs of himself. Ka remembers that her father, “never liked having his picture taken. We only had a few of him at home, some awkward shots at my different school graduations, with him standing between my mother and me, his hand covering his scar” (The Dew Breaker 5). Ka’s father has always been sensitive about the scar on his face and has used the scar as an excuse to refuse having pictures taken of him.

Ka describes the scar on her father’s face as a “blunt, ropelike scar that runs from my father’s right cheek down to the corner of his mouth” (The Dew Breaker 5). Her father told her that a prison guard had inflicted the wound on his face when he was a prisoner, but when she finds out that her father was a guard and torturer, she asks about the scar. Her father explains, “It was one of the prisoners inside the prison who cut my face in this way” he continues, “This man who cut my face, I shot and killed him, like I killed many people” (The Dew Breaker 21-2). The scar for Ka’s father, then, is not only a disfigurement, but also a symbol and physical reminder of his former life. In looking at a photo of himself, he must look at the scar and remember a past of which he is ashamed. Thus, the scar acts as “evidence” in much the same way as a photograph; it reminds the onlooker of a past of which he does not want to be reminded. Additionally, the scar is a physical/visual signifier of the past as compared to the photograph, a scar of light that produces a physical/visual signifier of the past.

Her father’s sudden confession surfaces because Ka has carved a sculpture of him as she imagined him in prison, kneeling as a prisoner, and he cannot bear to look
at the representation of a lie. Ka has created her own family photo album, her art, from the stories she has been told by her family. She knows the story of her father being brutalized in Haiti and has carved a statue to make up for the lack of photographs of her family. However, as Jean-Luc Nancy notes, the sculpture that Ka creates differs in some important ways from photographs, such as the ones Yunior regards of his father. Nancy explains that a sculpture is not an imitation of the real, like a photograph, but rather, “that which asserts its presence only through itself, a pure presence in a certain sense, a massive presence that amounts to its being-there” (30-1). The statue is not a copy of the real but is a new real because it exists as itself whereas the photograph is a window into the past, the former real. Since Ka is missing photographs of her family’s past, she carves statues as a means to create another type of artifact or “evidence” of the past about which she has been told. In this way, Ka tries to make up for the “photographic absences” in her life, the lacking photographs of her parents’ pasts. When Ka hears the truth from her father, she is unsure of her memories of him. Her past has been re-written and she must re-member memories. While Yunior must create a memory he does not have, Ka must erase a memory and re-member her father’s past.

Ka’s father confesses his past to his daughter on a park bench and then tells her that he has thrown her statue into the pond in front of them. With the statue ruined, they have nothing to take to the buyer, the whole reason for the trip to Tampa. The buyer, “Gabrielle Fonteneau, a Haitian American woman about [Ka’s] age, [is] the star of a popular television series and an avid art collector” (The Dew Breaker 7). Gabrielle and her parents also Haitian Americans, contrast with Ka and her parents.
Ka, born in the U.S. has never been to Haiti, something she has wondered about, but now realizes her parents could not return to Haiti safely. Upon arriving in Tampa at the Fonteneau’s residence, Gabrielle’s father explains that he, his wife, and daughter, “go back every year” (The Dew Breaker 29). The Fonteneau’s relationship to Haiti is alive and exists in the present whereas Ka’s relationship to Haiti is distant and static. In fact, she realizes at the Fonteneau home that she does not know which town her parents are from. Mr. Fonteneau “asks my father where he is from in Haiti, and my father lies. In the past, I thought he always said he was from a different province each time because he’d really lived in those places, but I realize now that he says this to reduce the possibility of anyone identifying him” (The Dew Breaker 28). Another way for her father to be identified is by a photograph. “Even though thirty-seven years and a thinning head of widow-peaked salt-and-pepper hair shield him from the threat of immediate recognition,” the scar on his face would certainly identify him (The Dew Breaker 28).

With regard to the photographic differences between the two families, the domestic spaces of the families are set in contrast with one another. Ka lives with her parents in a home with very few family photographs whereas Gabrielle and her parents are introduced, not in Gabrielle’s home in California, but in her parent’s home to compare more easily the differences between the two families and familial spaces. When Ka and her father enter the Fonteneau’s residence, it is immediately described as a home, “which has a cathedral ceiling and walls covered with Haitian paintings with subjects ranging from market scenes and first communions to weddings and wakes. Most remarkable is a life-size portrait of Gabrielle Fonteneau sitting on a
canopy-covered bench” (*The Dew Breaker* 28). This home contains many images of family, familiarity, and Haiti, something Ka’s family home does not do. Ka’s history is silenced and erased on a familial level by the “photographic absences” in her familial space.

When Ka finds out her father’s secret, the lack of photographs begins to make sense along with many other behaviors her parents exhibited including, “why he and my mother have no close friends, why they’ve never had anyone over to the house, why they never speak of any relatives in Haiti or anywhere else, or have never returned there” (*The Dew Breaker* 21). As noted by bell hooks, growing up in a space with family photos on the walls can be a space of empowerment, “because it offered a way to contain memories, to overcome loss, to keep history” (391). This contrasting relationship between the two Haitian American families emphasizes the silencing in Ka’s life through the lack of photographs. The “photographic absence” prompts her to create her own images in art. She creates visual representations, woodcarvings, as a replacement to the missing family photo albums in her home. Ka affects her father by representing him. He is so affected by the statue of himself that he leaves destroys the statue. Michael Taussig explains that the representation of the thing can have an affect on the thing itself, “the magical power of replication, the image affect[s] what it is an image of” (2). Furthermore, Ka’s father is extremely affected because of the way she represents him. In representing him to counter the lack of photographs, she attempts to bridge the disconnect between her life in the U.S and her parents lives in Haiti, a past she has not been privy to until now. Yunior in “Aguantando” tries to
avoid becoming a stagnant entity while Ka’s father attempts to evade being recognized as a fluid person with a secret past.
Susan Sontag remarks that, “photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow” (On Photography 17). Photographs solidify malleable time. Although photographs serve as memory devices, they are artifacts that depict time in a way that cannot be perceived in real life. Time is constant but the photograph freezes the moment, solidifies it. Keeping in mind the idea of “freezing a flow,” it is interesting to note that both stories discussed here depict events in such a way that water is described as a solid form. This oscillation between fluidity and crystallization highlights the importance of moments of “photographic absence” in these stories, which are both descriptions of a character regarding a photograph, a “slice of time,” and the character’s thoughts about the photograph or person depicted in it, a fluid thought process about the frozen moment.

As Yunior tries to avoid becoming a photograph in his family’s memory, the prose employed in “Aguantando” is latent with water imagery. The first mention of water in Drown, is its title, implying death by submersion in water. The title is also a reminder that Hispaniola is an island and that the United States and the Dominican Republic are separated by a body of water in which many have drowned trying to reach the U.S. shore.

The descriptions describe water as simultaneously life giving and extinguishing first, by locating the family’s financial situation, poverty. The story opens by explaining the family lives in poverty, which is conveyed by the fact that the family’s roof leaks, “Since our zinc roof leaked, almost everything we owned was
water-stained: our clothes, Mami’s Bible, her make-up, whatever food we had, Abuelo’s tools, our cheap wooden furniture. It was only because of that plastic bag that any pictures of my father survived” (69). The photographs are protected by a plastic bag, but clothes, make-up, even the family Bible is water stained from being left unprotected. Water is used to cook, to bathe, and to drink, although the drinking water would eventually “turn some of the neighbors wild” (73). Yunior describes what he and his brother usually ate at home. Since the family was poor, “almost everything on our plates was boiled: boiled yucca, boiled platano, boiled guineo” (70). These descriptions of water clearly convey the poverty in which Yunior and his family live; these images also serve to contrast with the images of water as devastating and suffocating.

Violent water, as described in “Aguantando” such as hurricanes and floods, kill people and wash away parts of Santo Domingo. When a couple of boys drown after being pulled out to sea during a hurricane, Yunior’s abuelo remarks, “[y]ou’d think the sea would be sick of us by now” (85). Water also changes the landscape. Yunior notices the flooding in Santo Domingo when he and his family are walking along the Malecón, “the waves were tremendous and some parts of George Washington were flooded and cars were churning through the water slowly” (86). Yunior’s mother tells her sons how their father first introduced himself to her, “Your father asked me if I wanted a cigarette and then gave me the whole pack to show me that he was a big man. I held on to the rail” and Yunior asks “Here?” to which she replies, “Oh no, she said. She turned around and looked out over the traffic. That
part of the city isn’t here anymore” (87). The water’s violence has literally changed the landscape and washed away the former edges of the island.

The waves, storms, and hurricanes devastate the coasts by encroaching farther and farther inland until places no longer exist, such as the example stated above. Because the Dominican Republic is half of an island, this encroaching can take place from all sea sides eventually churning former beaches and coastlines into the sea and penetrating into living quarters and parts of cities. This infringement of the coastline is the type of destruction the plastic bag around the photographs is supposed to protect. Although the photos are “mostly brown in color,” they are not damaged by rainwater as it pounds the island, changing the physical borders of the island (69). Moreover, when Yunior’s mother remarks that the part of the city she remembers is no longer there, the waves erase a memory that can only be reconstructed in the mind as a “photographic absence.” Consequently, photography and memory are the only relics of what the coastline looked like before the storms and hurricanes. Photographs can document in a static sense that which is mutable over time including the changing landscape of the island of Hispaniola.

Furthermore, the waves along the coastline are described with violent modifiers that reflect solid objects rather than liquid ones. For example, waves are depicted thusly, “On the ride to Boca Chica I was always too depressed to notice the ocean, the young boys fishing and selling cocos by the side of the road, the surf exploding into the air like a cloud of shredded silver” (75). Here, not only is the ocean exploding like a bomb, but it is also a metal shredding itself. This action of metal shredding itself, clearly a violent act, describes the ocean not during a hurricane,
but on an otherwise regular summer day. These modifiers and descriptors suggest a mixing of liquid and solid states. This mixing of liquid and solid states echoes the “in between” state of the photograph, which is both a tangible artifact and a piece of life cut out of time. The ocean is described in “Aguantando,” as both liquid and solid, giving it an ambivalent status in the story very much akin to the ambivalent nature of the photograph.

Consequently, the title, *The Dew Breaker*, carries specific significance with regard to movement, liquidity, still, and solid forms. As explained in the title story “The Dew Breaker,” “the president [François “Papa Doc” Duvalier] had named his volunteer militia after the mythic figure of the Tonton Macoute, a bogeyman who abducted naughty children at night and put them in a knapsack” (*The Dew Breaker* 216). The militia was called the Tonton Macoute, or the Dew Breakers, because these men conducted their business at night. They would march into homes and kill the inhabitants, or tie them up, rape the women and girls in the household, and sometimes force the male family members to violate their female siblings or mother. Ka’s father was a Dew Breaker, a Tonton Macoute. Referred to as “dew breakers,” this group’s name evokes an awkward image of breaking something that is not solid. In order to break dew, the liquid must be solidified, frozen, and then shattered. The Tonton Macoute shattered and brutally ended many lives. These victims’ lives and deaths are frozen in time, both by political silencing and by the fact that many of the disappeared during the Tonton Macoute era have never been accounted for. There is no “evidence” of the missing except the memories and stories kept alive by those who remember.
In “The Book of the Dead” Ka creates a statue of her father as she imagines him in prison because she lacks any photographs or “evidence” of her parent’s lives before they moved to the U.S. Her statue, her “evidence” takes the place of non-existent family photographs and in doing so, creates false evidence that her father must destroy. The statue, like the photograph, has a frightening effect on Ka’s father. Just as he refuses to have his picture taken, he cannot allow Ka to create a statue of a false memory. There is a void, an absence in Ka’s memory and so she creates a statue to stand in for what is lacking. The “photographic absence” in “The Book of the Dead” is filled temporarily by Ka’s statues. The statue holds the place where a memory is missing. Likewise, these stories, “Aguantando” and “The Book of the Dead” are placeholders, reminders, and voices that fill up the void of the silenced history of the island. Lucía M. Suárez reiterates, “literature plays an important historical role because the documentation of historical events is imprecise and politicized” (40).
CHAPTER 3
THE LAYERED HISTORIES MODEL:
UNCOVERING SILENCED VOICES IN LITERATURE

These absences can be seen as manifestations of the postmodern tendency towards duality found in many contemporary Caribbean diaspora short story writers such as Junot Díaz, Edwidge Danticat, Julia Alvarez, Ed Vega, Achy Obejas, and Nicholasa Mohr. Characterized by the fact that many of their stories seemingly affirm “Western” traditions of the short story, these authors manipulate these traditions for their own purposes. This self-conscious mode of writing from within a tradition while critiquing that very tradition, as described by Linda Hutcheon, is a defining characteristic of post modernity. For example, Hutcheon states that postmodern architecture, “uses the reappropriated forms of the past to speak to a society from within the values and history of that society, while still questioning it” (12).

Within this frame of postmodern reappropriation, short stories being published by the Caribbean diaspora seem to have three common characteristics. In his

5 Linda Hutcheon argues in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, “postmodernism’s most distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale ‘nudging’ commitment to doubleness or duplicity” (1).
6 This is not to say that these characteristics necessarily define a short story or that these are the only common threads of Caribbean diaspora short story. Further, there are many important differences between the texts. However, the scope of this section focuses on these three elements and how they play out in these two stories.
“Chicano Border Narrative as Cultural Critique,” José David Saldívar proposes a model for the interpretation of Chicano border narrative by stating that New World narratives can be classified in three ways, “1) in these new narratives we are given history and the mediating elements through which history is narrated; 2) there is usually in these texts the existence of an inner historian who reads the cultural conversation, records the oral text, interprets it, and writes the history; and 3) there is usually an unfinished history that the inner historian is trying to complete” (179). Similarly, contemporary Caribbean short story writers often give expression to what Saldívar terms “unfinished history,” absent narratives taking shape in the void between official national histories and more localized familial histories. Therefore, what are determined as “national histories” are reappropriated and modified into “unfinished histories” via the “familial histories” portrayed in the stories.

Adapting Saldivar’s ideas, I propose a model through which to read “Aguantando” and “The Book of the Dead” that will provide a roadmap of how these “unfinished histories,” are uncovered. The stories refer to the “official history” be it in the Caribbean or in the diaspora in the texts, yet they tell an/other story, a type of “familial history” that is added and read alongside the “official history.” This “familial history,” the double, is more often than not expressed in the Caribbean. Consequently, in the spaces between the “official history” and the “familial history” these stories uncover a third history, an “unfinished history” that is constantly added to and changing throughout the work. Shawn Michelle Smith explains that “once an archive is complied, it makes a claim on history; it exists as a record of the past. The

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7 Not exclusively, see Julia Alvarez, especially, How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents.
archive is a vehicle of memory, and as it becomes the trace on which an historical record is founded, it makes some people, places, things, ideas, and events visible, while relegating others, through its signifying absences, to invisibility... for they determine in large part what will be collectively remembered and how it will be remembered” (8). These stories from the Caribbean diaspora “resist the erasure” that is attributed to “official history” by talking back⁸ to the national archive and adding elements that are missing (8). The “unfinished history” addressed here highlights the tensions between “official” and “familial” history by creating a new history to highlight those reckoned invisible by the archive at the same time they challenge the archive’s claim to representing history. This model then, identifies the multi-layered “histories” that often appear in Caribbean diaspora short story and recognizes this turn as a postmodern one. This model also serves as a way in which to understand the multi-layered “histories,” namely who has been left out, why, and how to include them in history.

In this project, I am limiting myself to two short story collections, Drown by Junot Díaz and The Dew Breaker by Edwidge Danticat because, unlike the stories of Julia Alvarez for example, these stories employ photographs and moments of photographic absence in order to explore the layers described in this model. Therefore, the two story collections I will analyze provide both a case study for the model I have modified from José David Saldívar, and a specialized examination of the model from a certain perspective, that of photography. The concepts I discuss here, as Linda Hutcheon has mentioned with regard to postmodernism, tend to

⁸ See Debra Castillo’s Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism.
fracture under pressure. The fracture or fissure then creates a “doubleness” to use Hutcheon’s term. This doubleness is both present in concepts of the diaspora, for example the geographic and emotional tensions between birth place and current home, cultural and generational gaps that often play two cultures against each other, racialized fractures, including being typed one race or ethnic group in one place and a different one in another.\textsuperscript{9} Although all of these examples above occur in the stories to be discussed, this doubleness takes an additional course in these two particular story collections with regard to photography. Hutcheon explains the many faceted paradoxes of photography, which, “both records and justifies, yet also imprisons, arrests, and falsifies time; it at once certifies and refuses experience; it is submission to and an assault upon reality” (118). These paradoxes or fracturing into doubleness is what these stories underscore, grate against, and finally embrace through photographic absence as seen through the model of layered histories as I have described.

In this section then, I will discuss first, how these two works can be read and analyzed through the layered histories model. Next, I will describe how these two works specifically use photographic absence as a means through which these levels of “history” are revealed. Finally, I will conclude with an assessment of how these stories’ unfinished histories create a subversive photo album.

\textsuperscript{9} See Julia Alvarez, \textit{Something to Declare}.
“OFFICIAL HISTORY:” THE FIRST LAYER

As noted previously, Michel-Rolph Trouillot explains that the Haitian Revolution, “entered history with the peculiar characteristics of being unthinkable even as it happened. Official debates and publications of the times, including the long list of pamphlets on Saint-Domingue published in France from 1790 to 1804, reveal the incapacity of most contemporaries to understand the ongoing revolution on its own terms” (73). It became “impossible” then, for the Haitian Revolution, by failing to “coincide with deeply held beliefs” to be recorded with less bias in “official” documents. Not until C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*, published in 1938, was there an account of the Revolution and the events leading up to it that took into account the perspectives of the slaves in Haiti. James states,

in August 1791, after two years of the French Revolution and its repercussions in San Domingo, the slaves revolted. The struggle lasted for 12 years. The slaves defeated in turn the local whites and the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, a British expedition of some 60,000 men, and a French expedition of similar size under Bonaparte’s brother-in-law. The defeat of Bonaparte’s expedition in 1803 resulted in the establishment of the Negro state of Haiti which has lasted to this day. The revolt is the only successful slave revolt in history, and the odds it has to overcome is evidence of the magnitude of the interests that were involved (ix).

Contemporary diaspora literature in general and certainly Díaz’s and Danticat’s works specifically aid in the alleviation of these silenced, covered, and forgotten moments that have been left out of what has become the “official” history of the island of Hispaniola. Both texts use what I have referred to as moments of “photographic absence” in a successful attempt to draw attention to the fissures of the “official” history of the island. The photograph that Yunior regards of his father in
his Guardia uniform makes specific reference to “official” Dominican history while Ka’s sculpture of her father depicts the historical setting she believes to be true, her father imprisoned by the infamous Tonton Macoute in Haitian “official” history.

The stories in Drown refer to “official” history numerous times and indeed more than once in “Aguantando.” Not all of these references revolve around a moment of photographic absence. For example, Yunior watches his mother draw a bath and recalls the scars “across her stomach and her back” she has “from the rocket attack she’d survived in 1965” (71). Clearly, this reference to the “official” history of the Dominican Republic is important because it injects the role of a woman into a military campaign and because it has an emotional effect on Yunior who was not born when U.S. forces invaded. This role, though hidden in the “official” histories is also hidden in the story, hidden on Virta’s body, “none of the scars showed when she wore clothes, though if you embraced her you’d feel them hard under your wrist, against the soft part of your palm (71-2). The scars are only noticeable if you get close to her, if you know her history. However, I will keep my focus on one moment in particular, in which Yunior describes or alludes to “official” history through photographs.

The instance I would like to analyze in relation to “official” history in “Aguantando” is the specific reference of a photograph of Yunior’s father wearing a Guardia Uniform. In this section of the story, Yunior describes the photograph he is regarding; embedded in his description of the photograph are some key details of the country’s “official” history. These details are played against other types of histories as they occur throughout the story and the entire collection. The photograph, Yunior tells us, was taken “days before the U.S. invasion: 1965” (69). This information
places the narrative not only in a specific time but also situates it as a national narrative. On April 28, 1965, U.S. military forces invaded the Dominican Republic. In the photograph, Yunior’s father is “dressed in his Guardia uniform, his tan cap at an angle on his shaved head, an unlit Constitución squeezed between his lips” (70). The “Guardia uniform” Yunior refers to is the Guardia Nacional, the National Guard of the Dominican Republic. Yunior is regarding a photograph of his father in the Guardia Nacional just days before the country is occupied by U.S. forces. He regards a photo of his father serving his country while knowing he is now in the U.S., the invading country. The invasion is not only an invasion of U.S. forces in the Dominican Republic, but a symbolic castration of the Dominican father as he is no longer on the island, but in the invading country.

Yunior includes a description of the cigarette, a Constitución, his father is smoking. This Constitution also refers to the “official” history of the island. The constitution is the archetypal “official” document on which to base all the “official” history of a nation. What is more, Yunior’s father is smoking the “constitution,” it is going up in smoke; the “official” history of the country is being erased, changed, is disappearing. This turn sets the stage for the second type of history to be released in the story, the “familial” history, as the “official” history is just that, a photograph of a time and person who does not exist for Yunior and upon which Yunior cannot rely for his well-being. “Familial” history, however, is encapsulated in the very same photograph, the absent father and the dissolution of the family unit. This is Yunior’s reality.
Ka’s reality, however, is somewhat more skewed. Although Yunior does not know his father or where he is, Ka believes she knows her father and where he has been. She has been told all her life that her father was prisoner of the Tonton Macoute and during his time there he was beaten and tortured. There are very few photographs of her father, who does not like to have his picture taken on account of his facial scar. Ka finds this lack of photographs important enough to remark about it more than once in the story stating first, “my father never like having his picture taken. We have only a few of him at home, some awkward shots at my different school graduations, with him standing between my mother and me, his hand covering his scar” (5). This lack of photographs may be what prompts her to sculpt, a way to create her own images from the memories in her head. Although in this section of the story Ka is not describing one photograph, she is describing what her father looks like in the few photographs she has. He is posed in these shots in the same way, covering his scar. She has no “official” documentation of her father in the same way as Yunior; there are no photographs of her father in uniform. However, she uses her art to take the place of the photographs she does not have.

In what I deem a moment of photographic absence, Ka describes her first sculpture as a “three-foot mahogany figure of my father naked, kneeling on a half-foot-square base, his back arched like a curve of a crescent moon, his downcast eyes fixed on his very long fingers and the large palms of his hands. It was hardly revolutionary, rough and not too detailed, minimalist at best, but it was my favorite of all my attempted representations of my father. It was the way I imagined him in prison” (6). This sculpture is supposed to depict the idea or essence of a real event,
Ka’s father Mr. Bienaimé’s time in prison. However, the sculpture not only wrongly portrays Ka’s father, it expressly portrays the men and women he tortured and killed. In this sense, the statue *is* revolutionary, it attempts to erase or at least reconfigure part of the “official” history of the infamous Tонтon Macoute.

The Tонтon Macoute, or Dew Breakers were the personal militia of the François “Papa Doc” Duvalier regime formed in 1959. These militia members made no official salary; they committed crimes including rape and used extortion as a means of monetary compensation. Instead of being tortured by militia members, in the stance that Ka’s statue describes, her father was one of these men, beating others into this position of submission. Therefore, the statue not only does not resemble the “official” history of her father’s past, but suppresses “official” history in a role reversal, a turning around.

Since photographs can and do represent “evidence,” especially photographs such as crime scene photos, hidden cameras, and the like, photographs “have virtually unlimited authority in a modern society” and these images “are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real” (Sontag *On Photography* 153-4). Although it is clear that all photographs are manipulated and can easily be doctored just as much as any other “fact” they are still taken to be “true.” If there is a photograph of it, it must exist. There is no question in Yunior’s mind that his father served in the Guardia, and seemingly enough he did, just as Ka has no doubts about her father’s prison time, except that there is no photograph of him, no “official” documentation of him in the past and he
evades all present attempts at documentation, having his picture taken. Ka must create her own “official” history and she does so through her sculptures. The unfortunate twist to Ka’s re-making of history is that it is a lie. The lack of “official” documentation opens the opportunity for there to be a lie, because the “truth” cannot be proven or uncovered until Ka’s father confesses. Mr. Bienaimé can re-invent his role in the “official” history of Haiti because there are no “official” records such as photographs to prove otherwise.

The “official” histories as referenced in moments of photographic absence, while incomplete, open the door for an/other history, a “familial” history to be placed alongside the “official” history in an effort to include those left out or silenced in the “official” history of the island. This “familial” history again surfaces through moments of photographic absence.
FAMILIAL HISTORY: THE SECOND LAYER

For the sake of clarification, I am envisioning “familial” history to be the history that does not always adhere to documented sources and seeks as its general audience a wider population than that of “official” sources. Therefore familial history may very well veer from documented “fact” and even describe fictions in place of actual events. However, this does not mean that I do not find a deep “truth” in familial histories, indeed, “works of fiction may turn out to be ‘truer’ than historical works – not because of their factual content, which may be a complete fabrication, but rather because of the meanings that they evoke” (San Miguel 5).

The role of the family and family unit in “Aguantando” and “The Book of the Dead” explore familial history revealed in moments of photographic absence. These moments are emotional moments, they hit close to home and the characters feel deeply for those in the photograph (or lacking photographs) because of a type of absence. Barthes refers to this deep emotion stemming from regarding a photograph in Camera Lucida as punctum, “like and arrow pierces” which is contrasted with studium, “a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment” (Barthes 26). Barthes argues that one can feel a “liking” toward many photographs and that this “liking” is characterized as studium (26). The photograph has a certain quality that the onlooker finds attractive. The photograph in this instance is inactive. The onlooker has identified something in the photograph to relate to, to like. This, to Barthes, is the studium. Beyond this liking though is a deeper feeling, a strong emotional connection that occurs with fewer photographs. This strong emotional connection is not projected onto the photograph by the onlooker. Instead, the photograph “pierces” the
onlooker and causes an emotional response. This process is the punctum; “a photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me” (27). This accident that classifies the punctum is caused, not by the onlooker, but by the photograph, “this time it is not I who seek out (as I invest the field of the studium with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene” (26). Using Barthes’s studium and punctum as a way in which to classify the emotional responses to photographs in “Aguantando” and “The Book of the Dead,” I will focus on the descriptions of the family unit (and lack thereof) as familial history in the moments of photographic absence. With regard to “Aguantando” and familial history, the photograph of the father repeatedly regarded by the younger son emphasizes the father’s absence in the family unit and underscores the poverty of the family.

Yunior regards the photographs of his father, at times in an attempt to construct a memory of the father he does not know, at others to remind him of a person he does not remember, and still others in an attempt to bring the absent father closer to home. The “absent father” is not new to the Dominican Republic, nor does it only affect Dominicans. In fact, much of Latin America and the Caribbean have seen the advantages and repercussions of this break-up of the family unit. In Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula, for example, there are Mayan villages such as Xocen, where more than 50 per cent of the men in the town work either in Cancun or the U.S. The town is comprised of women of all ages, boys younger than 14 and older men who cannot work. Although in Yucatan there are visible edifices of the “success” of a family member working away from home, a large, expansive house in an overall poor town, the break-up of the family unit as referenced in “Aguantando” has
disadvantages as well. Not all families are able to reap the rewards of the family member abroad. Yunior’s father has abandoned them and does not send money, leaving the family destitute save for the little money Virta makes at the chocolate factory. As Yunior regards the photograph of his father in the Guardia uniform, he mentions the characteristics of the photograph, the *studium*, “he was dressed in his Guardia uniform, his tan cap at an angle on his shaved head, an unlit Constitución squeezed between his lips.” (70). Immediately after the *studium*, however Yunior is moved by something in the photo, the photo touches him in a specific way when he remarks, “his dark unsmiling eyes were my own” (70). In this moment the photograph has reached out to him and caused him to feel what Barthes describes as *punctum*. There is an emotional attachment to this part of the description of the photographic absence.

The state of the photographs such as the one Yunior regards above is also important to note as it adds to the familial history of the poverty on the island. The photographs Yunior regards have “scalloped edges, mostly brown in color” as they age, but are otherwise protected from the elements by the “plastic sandwich bag” in which Yunior’s mother keeps the photographs (69). The “plastic sandwich bag” protects the photographs from the rain that leaks through the holes in the roof; “it was only because of that plastic bag that any pictures of my father survived” (69). The protection and the state of the photographs themselves serve to make reference to the financial situation of the household. The photographs are not kept in a photo album on a coffee table in a middle income household. The man in the photographs does not financially support those who protect his photographs so diligently.
In “The Book of the Dead” the father is present and helps to support his immediate family, his wife and daughter. However, there is a strain on this family unit as there is on Yunior’s family because of the isolation of the three family members. Interestingly, Ka’s isolation stems from the lack of familial ties beyond her parents, the kind of information one gathers from family photographs. In an effort to create familial memories she carves statues to fill the void and replace the missing photographs her family does not have. bell hooks notes that photography on the walls of a home creates an empowering space in which to live reminding one of familial ties, bonds, and family roots (391). Ka lacks this space of empowerment and attempts to create it in her art. Her sculpture however has unintended consequences. When she regards the statue, she sees a memory in form. She “likes” the statue in the way that Barthes describes the unemotional *studium* of a photograph. Her father however, has a different reaction to the same statue, that of punctum. Regarding a statue of himself wrongly portrayed as the “prey” and not the “hunter” “pierces” him so deeply that he must destroy the statue and confess his past life to his daughter (Danticat 20; Barthes 26). This confession occurs because of Ka’s father’s strong reaction to the artwork, the *punctum*.

Ka’s tries to create a familial history to fill the void, with the sculptures of how she envisions her parents’ pasts. However, this re-membering turns out to be so painful for her father, that he feels compelled to tell her the truth. After this confession, Ka does not believe she can sculpt again as she has “lost [her] subject, the prisoner father I loved as well as pitied” (31). This incapability on Ka’s part to continue to create what is missing in her familial history, is double sided. Although
she does not think she can sculpt for a long time, she does muse about what she would sculpt when watching her father in their hotel room. She reminisces, “if I were sculpting him at this moment, I would carve a praying mantis, crouching motionless, seeming to pray, while actually waiting to strike” (26). This doubleness brings the two histories “official” and familial together: the official carving she would carve, her father as the “hunter” and the lie that he has told her, the familial story until he confesses, her statue of him as a prisoner.

These two parts of the model show two worlds, one “officially” documented and one on a more specific scale, on a familial level. These two pieces do not coexist without some tension. The familial history serves to fill in some of the voids that the “official” history has, still there is something missing. Barthes describes this extra space as an expansion of the punctum, “however lightning-like it may be, the punctum has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion” he continues, “there is another expansion of the punctum: when paradoxically, while remaining a “detail” it fills the whole picture” (45). As Barthes describes then, the place in which the detail of the photograph causes what he defines as punctum also opens up an/other space that expands outwards. In this model, the other space is the third layer of “histories” that functions in the same theoretical manner as Gloria Anzaldúa’s theoretical borderlands, “the U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta” (3). This third layer in the model I am analyzing is the “unfinished” history. This “unfinished” history is illuminated by what “official” and familial histories leave out, the spaces between the two.
UNFINISHED HISTORY: THE THIRD LAYER

The third layer of history I would like to discuss is the history that is formed out of the voids left by the “official” and familial histories. This history, which Saldívar calls the “unfinished history,” speaks directly to the two layers mentioned above but also expands outward to include those people and events that are not recorded “officially.” This third layer, by drawing attention to shortcomings of the other two layers, “trouble[s] the normative, assumed transparency of authorized institutional knowledge” (Smith 9). In this section I will focus on how “Aguantando” and “The Book of the Dead” uncover this third layer, through photography, that works both as a double-archive and as a critique of the “official” history of the island of Hispaniola. Even though it may seem contradictory that the voicing of these silenced histories comes to light through a mute art, photography, the un-silencing in these stories occurs during moments when the photograph is given language. These moments, moments of photographic absence, give the mute photograph voice by describing the contents and states of the photographs. I view this process as similar to the stories themselves, which give voice to forgotten, silenced, and mute characters and historical moments through the language of the stories.

“Aguantando” tells the “other side” of the migration story. Much of Diaspora literature deals with the problems, awkwardness, and racism associated with the migrants in their new homes, and certainly later stories in Drown discuss these very issues, but Drown also includes stories of Yunior and his families’ lives before they migrate to the U.S. This story begins before they set foot on U.S. soil and records the poverty, the dreams, fears, and realities of the family left behind. Drown does not
map the trials and tribulations of Yunior’s father as he looks for work in the U.S., but focuses on the youngest son, who, like the rest of his family is left without a father figure for many years. This family struggles to stay alive while waiting for the father to fulfill his promises.

These unfulfilled promises are difficult for Virta to cope with as she begins to think her husband is never coming back for them and as they become more and more destitute. She exhibits this frustration when Yunior wants to look at the photographs of his father, and she does not want to show them to him, “I was told that I wanted to see his picture almost everyday…. When she refused to show me the photos I threw myself about like I was on fire” (83). The photograph, for Virta represents false promises, she does not want to pull the photographs out from beneath her bed and allow Yunior to look at them. Yunior, Virta, Rafa, and Abuelo represent the “other side” of the migration story, those who are left only with photographs. It is important to note that later in the collection, the family is reunited with Yunior’s father in the U.S. However, by including stories of waiting for the father to contact them and regarding his photograph everyday, the history is more complete. The history of the family before they migrate to the U.S. gives voice to a part of the migration story that is silenced, left out.

“The Book of the Dead” gets its title from an ancient Egyptian story that Ka’s father used to read to her when she was young. The Egyptian stories and the trips to see the Egyptian mummies at the Brooklyn Museum interested Ka’s father more than her. After his confession Ka’s father remarks that when they would go to the Brooklyn Museum to see the mummies, “all you noticed was how there were pieces
missing from them... You always noticed more what was not there than what was” (19). Ka’s interest in negative space continues into adulthood as she creates statues to replace the lack of photographs of her family’s past. As Ka fills the voids and sculpts a statue of her father as she perceives him in prison, she tells part of the family history incorrectly, and Ka’s father must right her wrong. However, when Ka reflects on what her father has told her she realizes that there may be something between the “hunter” and “prey,” “it was my first inkling that maybe my father was wrong in his own representation of his former life, that maybe his past offered more choices than being either hunter or prey” (24). This passage opens up the spaces between the “official” and familial histories to invite a third, or more layers into the mix. First, this passage suggests that Ka’s father had more options than kill or be killed when he joined the Tonton Macoute, but it also implies that in his choice he was not only a Tonton Macoute at that time but still filled many other roles, son, friend, etc. Ka realizes her father is not one or the other, he is a mix of layers, experiences, and choices. This expansion of his person to include more than just “hunter” or “prey” is another case in which Ka begins to fill the voids in her life.

At the end of the story Ka and her father are driving back to Brooklyn. During the drive, Ka realizes “why he never wanted the person he was, is, permanently documented in any way” (34). He wanted to leave holes in his past and Ka tried to fill them. She creates her statue of him in an effort to fill the void of his secret past. What is more, is that this story is told and the voids are filled through the stories that comprise The Dew Breaker. We get to know Ka’s father, his past, the choices and mistakes he makes through the stories in the collection. The reader
comes to know Mr. Bienaimé through “snapshots” of him at different times of his life and through “snapshots” of people he has touched and hurt. These snapshots, the stories themselves, create the missing photo album that Ka was so insistent on creating through her sculptures. The work, The Dew Breaker is the “unfinished” history. Drown and The Dew Breaker fill the space between the “official” and familial histories and offer up detailed accounts of stories that have slipped between the cracks.

If as bell hooks states, “the camera was the central instrument by which blacks could disprove representations of us created by white folks,” then it is my contention that the moments of photographic absence in these short story collections are the central instrument by which to expand the canon of “official” literature all the while being critical of the canon as a repository for “knowledge.” (391). I see this paradoxical turn, being incorporated into the canon while being skeptical of its abilities as a postmodern turn according to Linda Hutcheon’s work on post modernity. As Christopher Pinney states in the introduction to Photographies Other Histories, “photography’s mimetic doubling becomes a prism through which to consider questions of cultural and self-identity, historical consciousness, and the nature of photographic affirmation and revelation” (2). Certainly this is not the only fruitful analysis of the model I have proposed above. And certainly the model need not be used alongside photography. However, I find it well suited to my analysis here of photographic absence and the new meanings that become present when analyzed through this model. It may seem strange, even paradoxical that these works challenge the canon all the while demanding acceptance into it. However, as I have stated this
doubleness as Hutcheon describes postmodernism “takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or ‘highlight,’ and subvert, or ‘subvert,’ and the mode is therefore a ‘knowing’ and an ironic – or even ‘ironic’ – one” (1).
CONCLUSION

This analysis recovers lost voices from Hispaniola and its diaspora in comparative manners, which, as Lucía Suárez notes in *The Tears of Hispaniola*, comparative analyses of the Dominican Republic and Haiti have been neglected yet fruitful sources for investigation (10). Although Hispaniola is rarely studied comparatively across the border of the Massacre River or in the diaspora, my study shows how these literatures yield new and exciting pathways for investigation. Additionally, my analysis juxtaposes literature and photography, another growing yet underdeveloped avenue for comparative studies and pushes photography studies beyond the physical photograph to include textual descriptions as I articulate.

Through the layered histories model I have been able to delineate the new voices these texts bring to the fore using photographic absence. Díaz and Danticat are not the only authors to discuss the recuperation of these histories and they are not the only ones to do this through moments of photographic absence, which can be found in the works of Achy Obejas and Nicholasa Mohr, for example. Although the two authors addressed here are not the only works that use photographic absence in the ways described above, these two particular texts by Díaz and Danticat speak to each other in a dialogue concerning Hispaniola and the silencing that has taken place on the island and in the U.S. Diaspora.
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