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"Under this ocean / we hold hands":
An Archipelagic Ecocritical Reading
of Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*

Sofia Cavalcanti

In his book, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Gaston Bachelard famously claimed that "The true eye of the earth is water" (2006, 31). The planetary waters are invaluable biological, historical, and evolutionary sources that tell the story of human and nonhuman habitation of this planet. Being home to nearly 90% of the Earth's biosphere, the oceanic systems, collectively called the World Ocean, have structured our historical, political, and personal lives for centuries. One of the most eloquent demonstrations of the material and emotional connection between humans and the ocean is the fact that the oceanic waters bear the most evident signs of the anthropogenic changes that characterize the current geological era. Processes such as ocean warming, acidification, and deoxygenation and practices such as deep-sea mining, overfishing, and disposal of toxic waste constitute the tangible evidence that the ocean is at the center of today's environmental and social crisis. Indeed, as ecofeminist scholar Astrida Neimanis contends (2017), the utilitarian attitude that humans show towards the various bodies of water populating our planet, which is at the root of the massive degradation that aqueous life has been experiencing on many levels, is the expression of a detrimental social imaginary that sees water as a resource to be exploited rather than an autonomous entity that ensures our survival and wellbeing. The connection between the health of global waters and humans' perception of reality suggests that greater ocean awareness could spark change on both ideological and practical levels. In other words, if, on the one hand, the sea serves as the mirror of anthropocentric and individualistic practices, on the other, it may be seen as a source of solutions for climate change mitigation and the promotion of sustainable ocean economy. This idea of the ocean as a crucial player in the global battle against climate change is at the core of an initiative promoted by the United Nations, which in 2021 launched a campaign called "The Ocean Decade" aimed at increasing ocean literacy and opening up new perspectives on the values of the

ocean in relation to human wellbeing and sustainable development. Maintaining that any hope for change is socially and culturally situated (“The Ocean Decade” website, online), the UN claims that a comprehensive understanding of the oceanic system, including both its physical and its social and cultural dimensions, might induce a large-scale human behavior change towards water. The focus of this initiative, spanning from 2021 through 2030, is a deeper exploration of ocean science, encompassing not only natural sciences, but also social sciences and the humanities.

Considering the need of a literal and imaginative reengagement with the sea and following the “oceanic turn” (DeLoughrey 2017, 32) in the humanities, this contribution aims to expand the discourse within the emergent field of the Blue Humanities through a gendered ecocritical reading of the contemporary water-based novel *Claire of the Sea Light* (Danticat 2013), in which the aquatic realm and women are deeply intertwined and reciprocally empowered. By focusing on a specific facet of modern aquatic fiction, that is, female archipelagic literature, this chapter seeks to address questions such as: how can new water narratives help us comprehend the oceanic values? How do their representations raise intersecting issues of environmental and social justice and ethics? How can they help deconstruct patriarchal, anthropocentric, and colonialist/imperialist practices? With their unique perspective from, about, and within the ecologically and culturally complex space of the archipelago, women writers from islandic regions address environmental issues as deeply intertwined with social and historical injustices, as well as gender inequalities. Authors from both the Atlantic Ocean, such as Jamaica Kincaid, Tiphany Yanique, and Monique Roffey, and the Pacific Ocean, such as Keri Hulme and Merlinda Bobis, challenge the background role typically given to water (and more particularly the ocean) by foregrounding it as an actant, to use Bruno Latour’s term,¹ that tells stories of discrimination, exploitation, and forced migration. This chapter, focused on the 2013 novel by Haitian-American award-winning author Edwidge Danticat, will deal with the water imaginary emerging from the Atlantic context. As part of the modern Haitian *diaspora*,² Danticat’s work delves into the ex-

periences of Haitians both at home and abroad, thoughtfully examining how they endure and survive the trauma of persistent ecological disasters, political instability, financial hardships, and social injustices. As an archipelagic author, Danticat foregrounds the insular landscapes of the Global South, specifically focusing on tropes such as the sea, the beach, and the environmental concerns associated with these vulnerable regions. Haiti, in particular, is the main setting of her writings that denounce the indelible signs of centuries of colonialism and slavery both on the environmental and the social level.

By providing an ecocritical reading of the novel through the lens of archipelagic thinking, this chapter will argue that Danticat’s water-centered book, combining both environmental concerns and feminist inquiries, suggests an alternative to dominant imaginaries of water (and women) as an exchangeable and instrumentalizable resource. In Danticat’s archipelagic literary imaginary, the hybrid terrestrial and aquatic environment characterizing the island of Haiti is a storied space where women develop an ethic of care, relation, and compassion that might positively influence the relationship between humans and more-than-human aquatic entities.

1. *Recentering the ocean*

Within the ocean science, the interest in the Great Waters is not new. Rachel Carson’s *The Sea Around Us* (1951), which posits the sea as the core of human history, Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* (1995), which reads the sea as the site of human crimes but also a place of healing and redemption, and Philip Steinberg’s *Social Construction of the Ocean* (2001), which examines the political, economic, and legal side of the ocean, are some of the leading ocean-focused critiques that have explored the material-cultural influence of this body of water on human existence. However, as the environmentalist Carl Safina claims, our modern engagement with the sea is not sufficiently respectful of the element that “makes our planet alive and habitable” (2008, 23). On a cultural level, an imaginative reengagement with the sea is required in order to have a clearer view of its impact on our lives, politics, and cultures. By promoting a “sea

¹ According to Latour and the “Actor-Network Theory” (ANT), which he forwarded together with Micheal Callon and John Law, agency is not an exclusive property of humans. Material entities are also sources of action and capable of creating meanings, performances, and relations. For a thorough treatise on ANT, see *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Latour 2005).

² “Diaspora” is a Haitian Creole term with a historical, ecological, and geographical meaning. It simultaneously refers to the scattering of Africans during the Atlantic slave trade, the ecological displacement of Haitians from the island, and the community of ex-

iled and immigrant Haitians scattered throughout the globe. In Haitian journalist Jean Dominique’s words, “*diaspora* are people with their feet planted in both worlds” (Danticat 2010, 51), a statement that suggests the double-belongingness that defines the identity of hundreds of thousands of Haitians who have experienced the instability of home and place due to the complexity of their national past.

ethic" (ibid.)—in addition to the "land-ethic" advocated by the father of wildlife ecology and modern conservation Aldo Leopold—Safina seeks to expand our idea of community by including what is "below the high-tide line" (ibid.). A similar call for deeper ocean awareness comes from literary ecology, a field which, according to Sidney Dobrin, is suffering from an "ocean deficit" (2021, 8). Dobrin, together with other scholars working in critical ocean studies such as Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2017), claims that although the ocean covers around 70% of the Earth's surface and plays a vital role in regulating the global climate system, it has been largely overlooked in many discussions about the Anthropocene. As DeLoughrey explains,

the fluidity of the sea poses a challenge to the ability to render it into embodied and fixed place, so authors and artists necessarily employ certain localizing figures such as the boat (or ship), the shore (or beach), and the body, human or otherwise (2019, 135).

Due to its ungraspable depth, both in literal and figurative terms, the ocean has been a difficult object of study, especially because of the humans' innate tendency to understand reality through an anthropomorphic land-based logic. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, however, cultural studies have undergone an "oceanic turn" (DeLoughrey 2017, 32), marked by growing critical focus on the materiality of water and its symbolic and emotional connections to the human realm. This shift reflects scholars' efforts to rethink instrumentalizing narratives around waterscapes by offering alternative perspectives on how to approach and understand aquatic matter. Within the framework of this turn to the ocean, the emergent critical paradigm of the Blue Humanities represents a counter-challenge to the traditionally "green" focus of ecocriticism. By emphasizing how humans interact with more-than-human aquatic beings and systems, and how these in turn shape human bodies and histories, the Blue Humanities shift the focus away from land as the primary reference point in understanding human existence. Through their studies on the inextricable relationship between humans and water in all its forms, environmental critics such as John Gillis (2013), Serpil Oppermann (2023), and Steve Mentz (2024) have crafted new vocabulary and critical modes that shed new light on the material and sociocultural role of the sea.

Among the various aquatic living and nonliving beings studied by the Blue Humanities, both within salt water and fresh water environments, ocean and islands deserve special attention for their unique physical and symbolic qualities. Being two of the most significant spatial constellations

of the Anthropocene, the two fundamental components of an archipelago embody the layering of geology and human history. Like the tidal rhythm of the ocean creates islands, the flows of maritime trade and transoceanic diaspora generate histories of subjugation, exploitation, and forced displacement. Shaped by both natural and cultural forces, the archipelago is "natureculture" (Latour 1993; Haraway 2003), that is, a place where the material and the metaphorical intersect and constitute a highly distinctive locality. This geographical and conceptual formation that "rises in the midst of in-betweenness" (Seighworth and Gregg 2010, 1) and exists thanks to material and abstract cross-currents and relations serves as a helpful tool to transcend the myth of island isolation and question cartographic hierarchies. Considered in its materiality, the archipelago is the epitome of relationality, being an assemblage of islands in constant dialogue with each other. Thought of as a metaphor, the archipelago might function as a heuristic that challenges the idea that sameness and harmony should be the norm in the representation of geography and cultural spaces. As Glissant proposed through the model of "submarine roots" (1999, 67), discontinuity and multiplicity are an alternative way to understanding relations and identities. As the scholar explains, transversality is key to a new idea of identity, an identity that is

floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches. We, thereby, live, we have the good fortune of living, this shared process of cultural mutation, this convergence that frees us from uniformity (ibid.).

On an ontological level, the archipelagic paradigm suggests that the spatial and conceptual hierarchy of land-locked center and aquatic periphery, sustained by continental cultures, can be challenged and mobility and exchanges might be valued as crucial elements that define an identity. Ecologically speaking, the relational model instantiated by archipelagos positions them on the frontline of the effects of an increasingly fragile planet. The vulnerability of island regions to environmental devastation, coupled with recent insights into global ecological interconnectedness, positions archipelagic formations as key sites for interdisciplinary exploration, offering valuable perspectives on sustainable ways of thinking and living in today's world. Given this chapter's focus on the environmental imagination emerging from the Caribbean archipelago—specifically, women's contextualization within Haiti's terraqueous locale—an ecocritical approach will be integrated with an archipelagic-ecological heuristic as well as gender insights.

2. Archipelagic ecocriticism through a gender lens

The micro and macro analysis of the archipelago—as a geographical formation and a conceptual construction—is the object of archipelagic ecocriticism. This emergent critical framework (Marland 2022), based on the relational way of understanding and inhabiting the world, offers new perspectives on the human place within the planetary archipelago. As precarious environments originating from the encounter between land and water and enduring ongoing climatic and ecological challenges, islands might be understood as metonyms of our planet, fractally reflecting the disruptions experienced on a global level. Therefore, as Pete Hay has observed (2013), perspectives from small islands—where adaptability and resourcefulness are essential for survival—could inspire alternative ways of thinking and acting on a larger scale. The stories from archipelagos, which are encompassed within the category of “archipelagic literature” (Smith 2013, 6), may be understood as a contemporary form of nature writing that, while retaining a distinctive sense of place, remains “progressive and open” (ibid., 8) to global connections. When narratives from coastlines, seas, and islands intersect with long-lasting ecocritical questions concerning how humans and nonhumans are conceptualized within these topographies, an archipelagic ecocritical practice arises. The agency and animacy of the islands’ ecologies as well as their “co-emerging interrelationship” (Marland 2022, 75) with humans, prompt configurations of meaning whose interpretation is at the core of the archipelagic critical approach. This mode of reading, promoting an inclusive focus on human and nonhuman beings as well as an intersectional perspective on the environmental crisis and its local and global impacts, serves as a powerful analytical tool with significant gender implications.

Applying an archipelagic approach as a tool for an environmental critical analysis means challenging the traditional gynomorphism of water discourse that has dominated Western thought. As Stephan Helmreich explains (2017), throughout history, the sea has been gendered as feminine, a perspective evident in Judaeo-Christian thought, Enlightenment philosophy, and the epistemology of natural science. As opposed to the male orderly rationality, “the ocean has been motherly amnion, fluid matrix, seductive siren, and unruly tide” (ibid., 29). Critics such as Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Luce Irigaray (1985) have acknowledged the sea as a material formation shaped by a rhetoric of gender. Conceptually, the ocean represents a void to be filled, conquered, and mastered by a masculine force. According to an imperialist imaginary, its allegedly forgotten

and free space makes it a resource to be used, rather than a living entity with enactive power. Similarly, colonialism and imperialism have fostered dominative attitudes toward islands and insular regions. Perceived as inherently isolated and backward places, reliant on the protection of a kingdom or a continent to survive, islands symbolize dependency, diversity, and fragmentation, in contrast to the continent, which represents self-sufficiency, homogeneity, and unity. However, if an archipelagic lens is adopted, this discriminating perspective might be reversed. By shifting the focus from passivity and isolation to the exchanges, movements, and generative forces created by terraqueous dialogues among societies, cultures, and histories, islands and the surrounding ocean might be seen as an assemblage, a network defined not by the weaknesses of its single components but by the strength of their unity across boundaries. As a consequence, islands are storied places where cross-cultural exchanges occur, and the ocean serves as a gestational milieu playing a crucial role in determining humans’ wellbeing and development. By moving the traditional ecocritical focus from land to terraqueous spaces and fostering an awareness of diversity and collective potential, archipelagic ecocriticism brings water out of the muted background where it has long been confined. The ontological practice of “decenter[ing] land as the most important referent in the conceptualization of space” (Martínez-San Miguel and Stephens 2020, 21) also has significant ethical implications. A renewed interest in spatial imagination of maritime zones exposes harmful systems of hierarchy and subordination both between humans and between humans and nonhuman entities. On the one hand, critically engaging with bodies of water means undermining the neoliberal masculinist rhetoric of land ownership, thus replacing monolithic “centers of power” (Marland 2020, 236) with fluid patterns of exchanges and mobility. In particular, gender hierarchies, binaries, and networks of power can be revised by recognizing the gestational, transcorporeal, and transformative qualities of water embodiments as essential to existence in the world. On the other hand, adopting a closer focus on materiality can reshape our understanding of human and nonhuman history. The archipelagic environment exemplifies an interconnected and overlapping world, where the material co-constitution of humans and ocean exposes the fundamental fallacy of a human exceptionalist perspective.

Given the relevance of the archipelago as both “distinctive materiality” and a conduit for “a new way of thinking relationally” (Friedman 2020, 437), an archipelagic approach will guide the gendered ecocritical analysis of the novel object of this chapter. By centering on the environ-

mentally traumatized island of Haiti and examining the female characters as archipelagic beings, a close reading of the book reveals the connection between the degradation of water and the vilification of women’s bodies. It also proposes relationality—among both human and more-than-human realms—as a key principle for achieving environmental and social justice.

3. *An archipelagic ecocritical reading of Claire of the Sea Light*

Part of the rich and acclaimed literary output of Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013) is a coral novel deeply rooted in Haitian history and culture. The book, structured around the interconnected stories of various characters navigating class divisions, personal and social vulnerability, gang violence, sexual abuse, familial loss, and migration, reveals the challenges of survival in the fictional seaside town of Ville Rose. All the characters’ stories are connected to the novel’s namesake, Claire, a seven-year-old girl who runs away once her impoverished father, Nozias, a widow fisherman, arranges to give her to a wealthy fabric vendor, M.me Galle, after she has lost her only daughter in a tragic car accident. The story clearly points out the socially and environmentally fragile condition in which Haitian people live. The town where the story is set is “home to eleven thousand people, five per cent of them wealthy or comfortable,” while the rest are “dirty poor” (ibid., 5). In addition to poverty, the town’s residents, regardless of class or status, must contend with environmental degradation and escalating climate changes that impact them both individually and as a community. Belonging to the Caribbean literary tradition, the book has a strong focus on nature. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée Gosson, and George Handley underline (2005), echoing the works by Caribbean intellectuals such as Édouard Glissant, Derek Walcott, and Kamaou Brathwaite, Caribbean cultural productions are typically centered around nature, which serves as an archive of psychic and physical traumas as well as a possible source of resilience and healing. In this respect, they claim that

in the battle against amnesia induced by colonialism’s erasures, the deterritorialization and transplantation of peoples, and even natural disasters, the Caribbean writer often seeks nature as an ally. For this reason, writers have often articulated a poetic relation with land that is consistent with the highest aims of sustainability [...] (ibid., 4).

The Caribbean authors’ poetic relation with the landscape, mentioned by the environmental scholars above, can also be extended to the water-

scape. As is characteristic of archipelagic literature, the central natural element shaping the novel under analysis is water—a living materiality that continuously interacts with humans, influencing their lives both practically and emotionally.

The book opens with a scene portraying “a freak wave, measuring between ten and twelve feet high” (Danticat 2013, 3) that destroys the boat of a local fisherman, killing him. Described as “a wall of water [rising] from the depths of the ocean, a giant blue-green tongue, trying [...] to lick a pink sky” (ibid.), the devastating wave is an unnatural event for that area. Populated by fishermen who have lived on their activity for generations, that part of the island is now “crammed between a stretch of the most unpredictable waters of the Caribbean Sea and an eroded Haitian mountain range” (ibid., 5). The seascape, with its unpredictability, bears the marks of changing environmental conditions, while the landscape reflects the legacy of colonial exploitation. Within this context of environmental degradation, fishing is “no longer as profitable as it had once been” (ibid., 9). As the external narrator explains,

[i]t was no longer like in the old days, when [fishermen] would put a net in the water for an hour or so, then pull it out full of big, mature fish. Now, they had to leave nets in for half a day or longer, and they would pull fish out of the sea that were so small that in the old days they would have been thrown back (ibid.).

Hence, overfishing becomes the only option for fishermen who “could no longer afford to fish in season, to let the sea replenish itself” (ibid.). As the protagonist’s father bitterly reflects: “You [have] to go out every day, even on Fridays, and even as the seabed was disappearing, and the sea grass that used to nourish the fish was buried under silt and trash” (ibid.). Pollution and overexploitation of marine life are not the only material configurations of a precarious waterscape. Landslides and flash floods also affect the town’s population. In a particular area of Ville Rose, rivers have started to swell, “bringing mudslides down from the hills” and “dragg[ing] [houses] downstream year after year [...], many with entire families inside” (ibid., 52). The narrator, noting that “rivers were swelling in response to the lack of trees, the land erosion, the dying topsoil” (ibid.), points out that the possible causes of these tragic events are related to human-induced alterations of the landscape. Despite the obvious dangers of an overexploited environment, farmers have no choice but to continue their practices, as one of them plainly states: “If I have to kill a tree to save my child [...] I’ll do it.” (ibid.). In the same chapter, entitled “The frogs,” another instance of environmental precarity is reported. An anomalous

number of frogs began dying along brooks and creeks, without apparent reason. The frogs' carcasses gathered along the town's watercourses are described as caught in a "natural-seeming death" (ibid., 43), with their bodies "in crouching positions, as though frozen mid-jump or -crawl" (ibid.). This description suggests a disturbing paradox: the adjective "natural" implies an ordinary, perhaps even expected, occurrence, yet the frogs die abruptly in the midst of their most vital, instinctual movements. Their stillness mid-motion conveys an eerie suspension of life—an interruption of the natural flow of being. The scene underscores a broader theme of environmental destabilization, where life forms are not simply dying but being halted in the midst of their everyday activities, as if time or vitality itself had collapsed. In this light, the frogs' deaths may symbolize the way in which environmental degradation insidiously interrupts the rhythms of daily life, rendering even the most basic acts of survival fatal. Unaccustomed to the unusual heatwave impacting the island and unable to find relief from the scorching temperatures—even in water—the frogs serve as another example of the island's environmental fragility, particularly in relation to its hydrosphere.

Integrating a material analysis of water with a gender perspective reveals a parallel that intensifies the environmental and social urgency of the novel. The degraded bodies of water portrayed throughout the book reflect the detrimental conditions of the women characters' bodies. For example, the protagonist's mother dies during childbirth in her shack, a situation where both her safety and the baby's are clearly at risk. Following the mother's death, the midwife washes both the newborn and the deceased with the same water, a gesture that symbolizes the bond between mother and daughter in the continuous cycle of life. However, it also highlights how both are victims of social and gender neglect. Across class, M.me Gaëlle also experiences the injustice of living an unsafe pregnancy, under the imminent threat of seeing her home washed away. More than six months pregnant, Gaëlle begins to surrender to the reality that water may dissolve—not nurture—her life, both literally and symbolically:

With their house in the middle of a notorious floodplain, near a tributary that joined several brooks, reeks, and rivers, Gaëlle thought that hundreds of rotting frogs might be an obvious catastrophe (ibid.).

In this passage, the traditional symbolism of water as a life-giving and purifying element is subverted. Typically associated with fertility, birth, and continuity—especially through the metaphor of amniotic fluid—water here becomes a harbinger of decay and destruction. The image of rot-

ting frogs piling up near the pregnant Gaëlle's home casts water not as a cradle of life but as a vehicle of death. The natural cycle, thus, appears inverted: what should sustain life instead threatens to consume it. Gaëlle's vulnerability mirrors that of the landscape around her, reinforcing the entanglement between women's and ecological life's precarity.

The degradation of women's bodies reaches its peak in the chapter centered on Flore, a young servant who is raped by her employer's son under the pretense of the right of the Lord.³ The abuse takes place during a night of an unusually violent hailstorm, when the noise of the wind and rain discourage the woman from screaming or seeking for help. The violence of the weather outside of the house reflects the violence perpetrated inside. When the rapist leaves the room and Flore instinctively walks into the storm-drenched courtyard, the boundary between her violated body and the turbulent landscape dissolves. The water pouring from the sky seems to engulf and merge with her, as if the elements themselves absorb and mirror her trauma:

She walked out into the courtyard rose garden, next to the pool, raising her face to the sky. The wind rattled her, her body soaked. [...] The rain kept on falling with a persistence that made it seem it would last forever (ibid., 169).

In this moment, Flore and the storm become indistinguishable, each marked by violence, vulnerability, and excess. The rain, overwhelming and relentless, is not cleansing but suffocating, emblematic of a trauma that penetrates both the body and the world around her. Even as she retreats under her blankets, she remains haunted:

She could still feel the danger brewing both inside and outside the house, the scorched smell of lightning cracking open the surrounding palms and the echoes of swelling waves meeting the seashore (ibid.).

Here, the sensory overload—the smell of lightning, the sound of crashing waves, the splintering of trees—extends the violation into the environment itself. Flore finds no refuge in nature; instead, the external world becomes an extension of her internal devastation. This blurring of inside and outside, self and storm, draws attention to the ecological dimensions of trauma, that is, how violence against women's body

³ The colonial practice of the "droit du seigneur," dating back to the French presence in Haiti, gives the foreign lord the right to have sexual intercourse with a local virgin. This form of abuse shows how rape was at the center of the French imperialist strategy.

reverberates through and is reflected by the natural world, which no longer serves as a source of comfort or stability, but as a participant in human suffering.

The materiality of water, manifested as the unpredictable ocean, a cleansing bath, a flooding river, or a devastating hailstorm, intertwines with the female bodies in a bond of shared injustice, degradation, and neglect. On a figurative side, however, the women in Danticat’s novel act (and react) as archipelagic beings in the face of the hardships that they are forced to endure. Apparently separated by class, age, social status, and personal background, they are fundamentally linked by a subterranean connection that is progressively unveiled throughout the story. Evoking the image created by Jamaican poet Jean “Binta” Breeze in the line “under this ocean/we hold hands” (1992, 77), the Haitian women portrayed by Danticat are linked in a net of reciprocal support and care. They illustrate that “unity is submarine” (Brathwaite 1974, 64) and that the most potent examples of resilience emerge when individual entities come together to form collectives. A case in point is represented by the kind-hearted act that M.me Gaelle performs by nursing newly born Claire. Her maternal gesture transcends individual generosity, symbolizing women’s collective, gendered commitment to “look after each other” (Danticat 2013, 54). By breastfeeding motherless Claire, M.me Gaelle ensures the proliferation of life beyond heteronormative reproductivity, just like water does. A similar intimate link with the properties of water is epitomized by Flore through her defiance of societal constraints. She combats the injustices of her world by opening a beauty parlor, a business that challenges the fate imposed on her as an economically disadvantaged and sexually abused woman. Practically, she asserts her independence by providing for herself and her son through her own skills, while metaphorically, she disrupts cycles of violence and isolation by fostering beauty, care, and support networks for women. Her rebellion also takes a vocal form, as she publicly denounces past sexual violence on a radio program, echoing water’s ability to elude containment and limits. After recalling the painful moments of the rape, the difficulties of raising an illegitimate child on her own, and the emotional trauma she had to process, she proudly claims: “I am still here” (ibid., 178), showing her refusal to be silenced, intimidated, or tamed. Finally, considering the protagonist Claire and her inner evolution, she can be seen as embodying the archipelagic model of relation that Danticat’s novel promotes. Initially portrayed as a young woman whose fate is shaped by others, Claire attempts to reclaim agency through a self-im-

posed exile. Significantly, her flight carries her as far from the sea—and, symbolically, from her community and origin—as possible:

She ran through the alley that snaked between the shacks, up to the coco de mer palms at the entrance of a path that led to the lighthouse. Her sandals became entangled in some ylang-ylang creepers that bordered the trail where sandstones turned to hill gravel, then mountain rock. [...] [A]t last, the trail curved and made an incline up toward Anthère Hill (ibid., 230).

This upward movement, away from the shoreline and into the mountains, mirrors her desire to escape the relational entanglements of her family and community in order to assert autonomy. However, the novel ultimately reframes this isolation as avoidance, suggesting that true self-assertion is not achieved through detachment but through an embrace of interconnectedness and responsibility. Claire’s arc culminates in a realization that belonging and identity emerge not from separation, but from recognizing oneself as part of a wider ecological and social web. This reflects the archipelagic principle Danticat promotes: although islands (and individuals) may appear self-contained, their survival depends on dynamic, reciprocal relations with others. In this light, Claire’s journey becomes an allegory of relational ethics—of moving from self-protection to cohabitation, from fear to interdependence. This is exemplified in the novel’s closing episode, which portrays Claire as a figure deeply shaped by archipelagic relationality. When the sea returns the body of Flora’s rapist, Max Junior, Claire is confronted with a pivotal decision: continue her escape into isolation or reenter the tangled web of communal life. Her choice to return and “see [her fellow villagers] take turns breathing into this man, breathing him back to life” (ibid., 238) marks a powerful act of witnessing and engagement. Rather than retreating into invisibility, Claire chooses presence—placing herself in relation to both the harm that has been done and the community that must reckon with it. This act does not imply forgiveness or complicity, but rather illustrates the ethical power of showing up and participating in the life of the collective, even when that life is fractured by violence. The villagers’ attempt to resuscitate Max Junior also functions as a metaphor for the possibility of transforming unjust systems—not by erasing the past, but by facing it together. In this way, Danticat forwards a vision in which cycles of harm are not merely escaped, but confronted through communal responsibility and solidarity.

The provided archipelagic ecocritical reading of *Claire of the Sea Light*, focused on the material-discursive analysis of water, has demonstrated that the degraded conditions of the aquatic living and nonliving

entities mirror the abused women’s bodies. This circuit of environmental and social injustice can be broken by women who, acting as archipelagic beings, are linked by submarine roots and connected in relationships of mutual sustenance, compassion, and care.

Conclusion

The material-semiotic interpretation of Danticat’s novel has revealed that the individual, the community, and the environment are inextricably linked. The author’s ecological vision of relation, emblemized by the ocean, suggests that water is a physical and cultural repository of multiple forms of injustice, on the one hand, but also a regenerative space prompting relational modes of identity, on the other. From a material perspective, the ocean is a physical entity that bears the signs of past traumas, as exemplified by the fragile environment of Ville Rose, but also the element that forces heroines to come to terms with their fragmented selves and develop different forms of empowerment. On a figurative level, the oceanic environment is a site of narrativity, where cultural practices, individual histories, and social and gender relations are revised and rewritten thanks to the strong bonds among an inspiring circle of women.

By depicting close intimacy and reciprocal influence between humans and water—an element that surrounds our planet and permeates our bodies—Danticat’s work promotes a change in the traditional water-related social imaginary based on utilitarian and exploitative models. *Claire of the Sea Light* illustrates how the aquatic realm is a dynamic, storied space that fosters ideas for change, inspires resilience, and opens up possibilities for reimagining how we coexist with water worlds. And women could play a pivotal role in this transformation.

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III. Practices