Re: Article 4468 Submission (Article Title: “Empathetic Engagment in Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying*”)

Dear Ariel,

I would like to thank the peer reviewers for their detailed and helpful suggestions regarding my article. This letter outlines how I have addressed their concerns.

1. Reader’s Report 1 suggested that my focus on “manag[ing] sites for empathetic engagement” was rather buried in the essay. Although the reader suggested I didn’t outline that framework until the end of the article, I, in fact, thought that I had outlined it in the paragraph that stated my argument (page 4 onto the top of page 5 in the original manuscript) right before the asterixed break on page 5. Regardless of this difference in opinion, what this report clued me into was the rather wandering nature of my initial introduction section. This reader perhaps missed what I was considering my statement of argument precisely because I wandered too much leading up to that paragraph. So, what I hope I’ve done is streamline that opening section. The paragraph that I’m considering as my statement of argument still occurs on pages 3-4 (so a bit late), but I’m hoping I’ve done a better job of drawing the reader’s focus to it.
2. In response to both reports’ suggestion that the theory was overwhelming the reading of Danticat’s text, I’ve done the following:
   1. condensed the paragraph on grief (page 6 of original draft). The article didn’t need as much overview of recent discussions.[[1]](#endnote-1)
   2. omitted a paragraph introducing Butler’s community focus (page 7 of original draft). This paragraph seemed to postpone the focus on Danticat and yet not offer all that much to the discussion.[[2]](#endnote-2)
3. Despite Report 1’s suggestion that the discussion of Berlant’s compassion is perhaps not needed and a similar citing of the discussion of LaCapra/Landsberg as one of the parts where the theory perhaps overwhelms, I’ve left that section in. I feel that it is needed in order for me to show why the sites of empathetic engagement need managing. To me this discussion shows that constructing empathy involves a need to balance the need to respect difference (LaCapra/Landsberg) with a possible tendency of seeing oneself as too different from someone else, and thereby not subject to the same threats (Berlant). Hence, without this part of the discussion, I’m not sure if it will be clear why empathetic engagement needs managing in the first place.

Although not specifically requested, upon re-reading the article, I felt that I could also better explain what I meant by managing the complexities of empathy/compassion. In the paragraph that begins “All told, if provoking . . . “ (page 7), I have added two sentences that I hope better explain how I’m depicting the dilemma Danticat faces. [[3]](#endnote-3)

1. Report 1 rightly questions the effectiveness of my discussion of the *60 Minutes* story regarding Joseph Dantica, but I feel that that aspect of the article is still vital. In order to address the reviewer’s concern I have done the following:
   1. I’ve revised my claim that on-line commentary speaks to the feelings of “the majority of viewers” and instead offered a more exact argument that the story did not prove persuasive to “many viewers.”
   2. I have added an acknowledgement in note 5 that those with negative responses may be more likely to take the time to offer online commentary.

I have not, however, addressed the reader’s concern that Edwidge Danticat did not have control over the segment. That is true, but my point in this section wasn’t that Danticat was soliciting empathy (the reader is right that Danticat doesn’t really have control over that since she doesn’t have control over what of her interview will be broadcast). Rather, my point was that one would expect that the visible signs of Danticat’s grief may solicit empathy (whether or not she had that intention), and yet her grief had little effect on many. Just let me know if you see a way that I can make that point clearer.

1. I’m not sure if I will have succeeded to the extent Report 1 will like, but I have eschewed a few theory-based quotations, either deciding the idea expressed was repetitive anyhow or choosing to paraphrase. I have, however, kept much of the discussion of Butler in despite warnings from both readers that it may overwhelm the focus on Danticat. I appreciate that both readers have expressed a desire for the reading of Danticat’s text to be more at the forefront, but I’ve found it hard to sacrifice the discussion of Butler. My sense is that that material does contribute something to scholarly discussions of Butler’s work (I don’t think a consideration of her inconsistent valuing of individuality in *Precarious Lives* and *Frames of War* has yet been published) and that it also establishes the difficult post-9/11 terrain that Danticat’s memoir must navigate.

In order to address the readers’ concerns though, what I’ve attempted to do, besides excising some of the quoted material, is to bring the Danticat focus into the discussion of Butler, so that the two foci are better integrated. For instance, on page nine, I offered the following interjection into the Butler discussion: “Given the growing doubt that an individual’s story can motivate change, how can Danticat’s humanizing of her uncle through life writing have an impact?” With drawing the focus back to Danticat, albeit briefly, I hope that the purpose and relevance of the Butler discussion has become clearer. Let me know if you see more integration needing to happen.

1. I’m not sure how to address Report 2’s questioning of the possible slipperiness of my use of “narrativize” and “fictionalize” on page 13 (that section now appears on pages 11-12; it’s the part about Rigoberta Menchu). I agree that representing reality involves narrativizing that reality, and narrativizing, of course, involves fictionalizing because of the vagaries of memory, the limits of expression, etc. Nevertheless, I was trying to distinguish between Danticat’s attempt to narrate in a way that is true to the facts (at least as so far known) vs. Menchu’s choice not to adhere to the facts. I’m calling Menchu’s testimony fictionalized because her claims of having been present for certain events were proven false, so to me, she’s not just narrativizing reality, she is fictionalizing her representation. I know the slope between the two terms is tricky; if you have a suggestion for how I should better handle the terminology there, I’d be happy to hear it.

Having said all this though, if the problem was more rooted in my one particular use of “narrativize” in “Importantly, to reiterate, it is only in certain circumstances that Danticat demonstrates this unwillingness to narrativize her family’s experiences; [. . .]” then I agree there was a problem there and I have since altered “narrativize” to a focus on “focalization” (see page 12).

1. Reader 2 mentioned his/her attention lapsing during the section where I was outlining the facts regarding US treatment of Haitian immigrants, while Reader 1 also mentioned my need to assert more control over those facts. Since I do feel those facts are vital to the article (mostly because no one has yet offered a sense of that social context for Joseph Dantica’s experiences), I have, thanks to the suggestions of a historian colleague, hopefully improved the writing style of that section to make it a bit more interesting.
2. I’m not sure that I’ve fully addressed the editors’ summary which indicated that I needed to expand the discussion of Danticat’s text. I have, however, tried to address Report 2’s specific suggestion that my declaration of Dantica’s return as an “interiorized character” wasn’t enough. I’ve added a small bit in about this return equalling a form of resurrection.[[4]](#endnote-4)

If you still think that the discussion there needs to be expanded, I could do some work with a later scene that Danticat includes – a story of her uncle’s most haunting experience as a child; it too appears shortly after his death is narrated – but my sense is that the article is more streamlined towards the concluding arguments without anything added. I’m hoping that with the other revisions, the balance of the article between theory and close reading is now working better anyhow.

1. Although Report 2’s suggestions to incorporate scholarship on ethics and alterity and to include discussion of Bakhtin’s dialogic are great ideas, I have not pursued these paths. Since the theory parts already have been said to possibly overwhelm the article, I decided that I couldn’t add in more theory. . . or at least I couldn’t conceive a way that would allow me to do so and still keep the article well-enough focussed.
2. Report 2 noted that affective citizenship (pg. 5, now pg. 4) should maybe stand between speech marks. I wasn’t sure about that, so I’ve left it as is. I have, however, left “frames” in speech marks on pg. 3 because I’m using that term in Butler’s specific configuration of it. So, perhaps I’m being inconsistent in my handling of punctuation with theoretical concepts. I’m hoping a copy-editor would be able to make the ruling on whether quotation marks are in fact necessary or not when referring to these terms.
3. Although separate from the requests from the readers, I have added a brief Acknowledgements note.
4. Also, although neither reader has commented about the length of the endnotes, I would be willing to reconsider their extensiveness. As you’ve probably noticed, the notes tell a much larger story about U.S./Haiti relations than I’ve included in the article itself. I think that offering that info is important because no one has published material regarding the social context surrounding the events represented by this text, but if asked, I could consider condensing some of that material. Since neither peer reviewer noted a problem (in fact, one even suggested more notes! (-:), I’ve left them ‘as is’ for this submission

Thank you for the time that *Ariel* has given to this article. I hope the revisions that I have made will help see this article through to an acceptance.

All the best,

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1. Part omitted: Similarly, such critics as Nandini Dhar, Maureen Moynagh, and Heike Härting, in focusing on haunting as a manifestation of mourning and/or melancholia, suggest that these emotions of loss inspire an imperative to seek justice and redress for others. Härting, for instance, noting mourning as interminable (Dhar and Moynagh would suggest mourning to be temporary and melancholy to be the more interminable expression of grief), constructs it as a “work process, through which to question the nature and constitution of social justice” (194). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Part omitted: Arguing that our emotional relationships with others bring to light our own experience of vulnerability, and that that experience of vulnerability can make us more conscious of and empathetic towards the precarity of others, Butler, in *Precarious Life*, locates a means of forging community across difference. As she asserts, our awareness of “the thrall in which our relations with others hold us [. . .] interrupt[s] the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide” (*Precarious* 23). Furthermore, this awareness functions to “challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (*Precarious* 23). In other words, as she writes, “I cannot muster the ‘we’ except by finding the way in which I am tied to ‘you’” (*Precarious* 49). Butler here is arguing for an awareness of self as relational and thereby for a self capable of empathy. (Her argument, as I will eventually explore, does shift somewhat in her later text *Frames of War*.) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Part Added: Danticat must not be perceived as disrespecting the unknowability or her uncle’s experience nor can she allow the audience to feel an unself-conscious intimacy with him. Nevertheless, while preserving a respectful distance from Joseph Dantica’s reality, Danticat must all the while ensure that her audience connects with him, his otherness minimized. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Part Added: As such, because of her manipulation of narrative order so that this flashback appears directly after the narration of her uncle’s death, Edwidge Danticat has allowed her uncle to experience a pseudo-resurrection. This resurrection is literal – he, thanks to the order of these scenes, returns to life. But this resurrection is also more abstract – he returns as an interiorized character; his humanity is restored. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)