

Wensy

Professor Natalie Catusus

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Boat People: The Personal Experience and The Collective

Manual for a Desperate Crossing by Maria Irene Fornes, and “Children of the Sea” by Edwidge Danticat, both depict the experiences of boat people from the Caribbean islands, Cuba and Haiti respectively. However, both texts take a unique approach in describing the experience of these refugees fleeing by boat primarily due to the diverging forms in which they present their content. In the case of *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*, the form used is the play; and in the case of “Children of the Sea,” it is the epistolary novel. These differences in form and other creative choices both authors utilize allows for *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* to focus on the direct journey, encapsulating the collective experience of those fleeing, while allowing “Children of the Sea” to focus more so on the personal and emotional side of the journey. Placed together, both show two important aspects of the boat people experience; the collective and the personal.

Prior to discussing how form alters the authors focus regarding the boat people experience, it is important to analyze the overlap *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* and “Children of the Sea” share when describing these journeys. Three similarities in their depictions that stand out are how they describe the vast sea, the hunger and thirst boat people experience, and the damages to the raft; all of which allow the reader to visualize the difficulties of the journey and understand the magnitude of problems boat people grapple with. In “Children of the Sea,” the male speaker describes the sea as endless and talks of how “there are no borderlines on the sea. The whole thing looks like one” (Danticat, 6). This is very similar to how it is described

in *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* since Balsero 1 says, “There are moments at sea when you can’t tell if you see the sky or the sea” (Fornes, 135). This depiction of the sea as endless provides a visual aid for readers to see how daunting it must be to be on a boat where the journey feels as endless as the sea around them.

Hunger and thirst are also seen in both *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* and “Children of the Sea.” In “Children of the Sea,” the male narrator notes that others on the boat are complaining of the birth of Celianne’s baby because the “child will just be another pair of hungry lips” (Danticat, 18). This distress caused by the lack of food and water is also seen in *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* when the chorus talks of how everyone is feeble “from exhaustion, hunger and thirst,” and how there is “water all around and yet none to drink” (Fornes, 116). This reality of constant hunger and thirst further allows the reader to visualize the discomfort experienced by boat people especially when coupled with the endless sea.

Lastly, both texts describe the damages incurred on the raft whether it be self-inflicted or from an external source like the ocean. In “Children of the Sea,” the narrator writes of how water began flowing inside the boat in Celianne’s sleeping space and described the crack as one that “if it gets any bigger, it will split the boat in two” (Danticat, 10). Similarly, in *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*, one of the tires keeping the makeshift raft afloat pops after encountering a storm, causing Balsero 3 and Chorus to panic as they say, “It blows up! We’re Sinking!” (Fornes, 107). Both of these examples allow the reader to see how merciless the water can be and how in an instant one can go from being afloat to almost drowning due to the unpredictable nature of the ocean and weakness of the raft.

Due to the difficulties of the journey and circumstances for leaving, boat people also tend to have higher rates of mental illness. According to the study, “Mental Health in Mariel Cubans and Haitian Boat People,” William Eaton hypothesized that “immigrant populations have higher rates of mental disorder than native-born individuals” (Eaton, 1396). Taken from a sample of Cuban and Haitian Boat people from the 1980s, the overall prevalence of depression and anxiety in Cuban boat people was 7.5% and 6.4% respectively. Likewise, the prevalence of depression and anxiety in Haitian boat people was 4% and 6.4%, all of which were higher than the rates detailed in a general population survey at the time (Eaton, 1404-1405).

Returning back to focus, as stated in the introduction, *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* is written as a play, whereas “Children of the Sea” is written in epistolary form. Both of these genres limit their respective authors in certain ways, hence why *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* emphasizes the collective experience, while “Children of the Sea” emphasizes the personal experience. Originally supposed to be an opera and tribute to the Cuban Rafter Crisis, *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* has been acted out in various ways deviating from its original form. Due to this, the way the play will be analyzed will be through the written script and not any particular rendition. Fornes’ use of form in the play script allows her to capture the collective experience because for her capturing the collective experience was her goal all along. In order to do this, “Fornes and others interviewed more than two dozen balseros” to get a better sense of the shared journey (Cummings, 175). This desire to capture the collective experience is also seen in her use of anonymous names like Balsero 1 or Balsera A for characters in the play, which shows how “Fornes did not create individual characters with specific narratives” (Cummings, 176). From the first word of the title, “Manual,” to the ways Fornes employs the use of the

chorus, all of these characteristics and more allow Fornes to emphasize the collective experience of boat people.

On the contrary, in “Motifs in Epistolary Fiction: Analysis of a Narrative Sub-genre,” Ronald C. Rosbottom describes the epistolary novel as a letter novel that along with the memoir was “the dominant fictional narrative of the 18th century” (279). Rosbottom presents 5 motifs that he finds prevalent in most epistolary style writing. Three motifs of particular interest are: “absence,” which explains that the writer must be separated from the receiver in some sort of way; “time,” which refers to the lack of continuity of time; and “reflexivity,” which refers to the first person narration characteristic of letters (280). Through these limitations imposed on Edwidge Danticat by the genre, one can see that these restrictions force the male speaker in “Children of the Sea” to update another being on his personal life, explaining why the focus of the boat people experience is quite personal in this case.

When boat people set to the sea, an inevitable hurdle they must overcome is in how they deal with the idea of dying. Because of the two texts differing forms and therefore focus, one can see that in “Children of the Sea,” the way the male speaker handles death is more introspective. This allows the reader to get inside the head of the male narrator since we receive the speaker’s internal musings surrounding death. As the male speaker is writing his second letter to his girlfriend, he mentions, “I am more comfortable now with the idea of dying. Not that I have completely accepted it, but I know that it might happen” (Danticat, 6). The epistolary form of “Children of the Sea” allows for the use of the word “I” to be used heavily since this form emphasizes the communication of one’s inner thoughts and first person narration. Therefore, we are able to see how the narrator feels comfortable with potentially dying while also recognizing that it might not apply to everyone since these are his own personal thoughts.

In contrast, *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*, handles death in a more reactive and extrospective way since death is only handled when the rafters feel directly in danger of dying. This collective reaction is embodied by the chorus, which through the repetition of certain phrases, emphasizes the collective feeling of panic all rafters are experiencing. For example, after the storm hits their raft and a tire pops, Balsero 3 and chorus repeat a number of phrases in two's. One of the phrases that sticks out is when they say, "We're sinking! We're sinking!" (107). In the face of death, Fornes' focus on the collective is rather prominent since instead of seeing how individuals reacted, she opted to use the instinctive reaction of panic presumably running through everyone's mind as they dealt with this occurrence. This ability is very much afforded to her by the play form she uses and allows her to strip down the complexities of everyone's mind, which is not the case in "Children of the Sea."

Furthermore, in *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*, the raft is seen as a mother, whereas in "Children of the Sea," the sea is seen as a mother. This falls right in hand with the personal depiction of the journey seen in "Children of the Sea" because the sea has racial and historical significance to the narrator. In "Children of the Sea," as the narrator is writing his last letter to his girlfriend, he writes, as though in the midst of drowning, that he must now go towards the children of the sea "as though it was always meant to be," which from the calm tone suggests a fate that he is comfortable with (Danticat, 27). This level of comfort in the face of death is supplemented when he says that he feels as though he was chosen to live life eternal "among the children of the deep blue sea," which he characterizes as, "those who have escaped the chains of slavery to form a world beneath[...] the blood-drenched earth where you live" (27). The narrator's depiction of the sea as holding those who have escaped slavery implies a strong racial connection towards those who drowned during presumably the transatlantic slave trade. This

connection towards this group of people allows the narrator to find comfort in the face of death because it allows him to imagine the sea as one that will take care of and free his soul in the way that he feels it did for his African brothers and sisters. Thus, the sea for him holds great significance as a mother because he sees it as a heaven that will provide him a true home unlike the home country he just fled from.

On the contrary, *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*'s use of the raft as a mother falls right in line with its focus on the collective since the raft is the literal vessel that will carry all rafters towards safety. Thus, there is only a collective significance for the raft since it is directly responsible for the rafter's survival. As the group of rafters make a distiller in section 14 of the play, they realize they must cut out pieces of wood from the inside of the raft. As Balsero 4 is stabbing the raft to gather the materials to make the distiller, he says, "How long before she expires her last breath, and collapses, and sinks— holding us, her children, in her wounded belly—to the bottom of the sea" (Fornes, 123). Here, Balsero 4 infuses life into the raft by acting as though it is a living and breathing entity capable of feeling the pain inflicted upon it. He is very much worried over how long the raft will be able to hold the rafters since in the process of creating the distiller, they are destroying the very thing that is keeping them afloat. While Balsero 4 uses imagery and an emotional angle to express how necessary the raft is, the logic for the raft as a mother is devoid of other themes and connections aside from the fact that it is the direct thing preventing them from drowning at sea. This depiction thus emphasizes the collective experience since relying on the raft demonstrates their collective desire for survival.

In conclusion, both *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* and "Children of the Sea" are able to capture the experiences of boat people, albeit slightly differently, due to the limitations that their form and other stylistic choices impose upon them. Whether it be the way that they

approach death or the way they each see a different entity as a mother, it seems to be greatly influenced by the ways in which form impacted both of the texts focus on the matter. While *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* focuses on the collective and “Children of the Sea” focuses on the personal, both of these texts were extremely effective in communicating the boat people experience as seen through their similarities where both captured how dangerous the journey is. Because of their differing focus, placing these works in conversation was prudent because seen together, they are much stronger since each text has what the other lacks. This provides for a more holistic interpretation of the boat people experience since the reader receives the personal experience and the collective one.

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