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Binding the Narrative Thread

Storytelling and the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Edwidge Danticat's Breath, Eyes, Memory

> As women writers, does language become our mother? We create ourselves through language, so it would seem.
>
> —Michelle Cliff (*Ms Magazine*)

> "We are all mothers,/and we have that fire within us,/of powerful women/whose spirits are so angry/we can laugh beauty into life and still make you taste/the salt tears of our knowledge...
>
> —Abena P.A. Busia, from "Liberation," *Testimonies of Exile* (1990)

Edwidge Danticat's first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), a bildungsroman set in Haiti and the United States, is a searing and beautifully told story of the impact of unspeakable violence on the mother-daughter relationship. In its interrogation of the legacy of rape and violation, the text explores the ways in which patriarchal violence is internalized and perpetuated by women from one generation to the next. The novel reveals the transformative potential of narrative and storytelling among four generations of Haitian women—artists and storytellers who carry and shape cultural traditions.

The novel is narrated in the first-person voice of Sophie Caco, a daughter, mother, and artist.[1] Sophie ruptures the Freudian paradigm of the mother as silent and self-effacing, and embodies the figure of the mother-artist.[2] Psychoanalytic theory teaches us that to tell a story is not only to remember it but to imagine it differently, creating the possibility for the writing of new scripts. In telling her story, Sophie learns to define the boundaries between herself and her mother, Martine—boundaries which have blurred as Sophie internalizes Martine's fear and self-hatred, the twin legacies of her mother's rape. The mother-daughter enmeshment is symbolized by the figure of the *Marassas,* the

twins of *vodou,* whom Martine invokes to describe their relationship.

Sophie's creativity is represented on several textual levels. She is the speaking subject who claims her place among "the brave women of Haiti, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, daughters, and friends," to whom the novel is dedicated, a dedication which establishes a multi-generational community of Haitian women that transcends biological ties. Her voice shapes the text; she embodies "the doubled female voice of woman-poet-author and woman-speaking subject."[3] Her Mother's Day verse to her Tante Atie announces her as a poet: "My mother is a daffodil, limber and strong as one. My mother is a daffodil,/but in the wind, iron strong" (29). This poem, while clearly the hand of a child, evokes Sophie's gift for metaphor.

Sophie's text frames interpolated stories told by the other Caco women. This framing technique signifies the continuing role of the oral tradition in literary texts of the African diaspora. As a polyphonic text, the narrative gathers the voices of a scattered people and emblematizes a thematics of community and collectivity. The stories themselves, which are told by Martine, Grandma Ife, and Tante Atie, mirror the themes of sexual violence, violation, familial obligation, and the search for autonomy that resonate in the larger first-person narrative. As Myriam Chancy observes, in cultures where the oral tradition is the primary locus of collective consciousness, stories told from one generation to the next not only transfer wisdom but are a mechanism of survival: "Language, song, and stories have been the means by which enslaved peoples have maintained a sense of culture as they have been denied access to their roots" (74). Storytelling thus performs both cultural and maternal functions, recreating ties to Africa, the lost motherland, and strengthening the bond between mothers and daughters.

Sophie is a mother-artist whose text nurtures storytelling. Through the framing device, she situates herself at the critical juncture of both the literary and oral traditions. My reading of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* examines how Sophie gradually comes to understand the intertextualities between the framed tales and her own story, and how the narrative art of telling a story empowers her to rewrite the script of the mother-daughter relationship. In so doing, she transforms it from a relationship dominated by recrimination, loss, and violation to one marked by reconciliation, hope, and freedom.

Two of the embedded stories in the text are told by Sophie and inscribe the themes of sexual violence and violation that emanate from her mother's rape. As her mother's daughter, Sophie inherits this legacy. Martine, who was raped at the age of sixteen by a *Macoute,* one of Duvalier's secret police, suffers a breakdown after Sophie's birth and flees to the United States, leaving Sophie in the care of Atie, Martine's older sister. When Sophie is 12, Martine asks Atie to send Sophie to New York to join her. As Sophie approaches womanhood, Martine, who continues to suffer from trauma, renews a detested ritual from her own girlhood: she begins to "test" Sophie by inserting her finger inside her daughter to determine whether she has had sexual intercourse. Ostensibly,

Martine might have discontinued the practice, since she despised it. However, Sophie's developing womanhood triggers a post-traumatic stress response, and she finds herself doing to her daughter what was done to her.

The first interpolated story told by Sophie is a tale which simultaneously encodes the psychic pain she experiences from the testing and her anguish at being the daughter of her mother's rape. The story is about a woman who could not stop bleeding and who bled all the time—from her arms, her face, her chest—so much that her clothing was soaked in blood. Tired of the constant bleeding, she consults the *vodou* goddess Erzulie, who asks the woman what life form she would like to become. The woman wishes to be a butterfly. Erzulie transforms the woman into a butterfly, and she never bleeds again (8). Sophie recites this story as she reaches for her mother's pestle, with which she ruptures her own hymen in order to put an end to the hated testing.[4] On the one hand, Sophie is the woman who could not stop bleeding, since she nearly bleeds to death after she jams the pestle inside her. At the same time, the story is also about Martine, since Martine is also the woman who cannot stop bleeding, who still suffers from the rape with nightmares, self-loathing, and fear. The story reveals the extent to which Sophie is psychologically enmeshed with Martine. In wounding herself with the pestle, Sophie punishes Martine. She enacts a kind of self-rape so that Martine cannot continue to test her; just as Martine's testing was ended by the rape.

The other interpolated story told by Sophie is also a story of female bloodying thematically related to the ritual testing. Shortly after the incident with the pestle, Sophie marries her lover, Joseph. Their union results in the birth of a baby, Brigitte. A few months later, Sophie takes her baby and flees to Haiti, a flight that mirrors, in reverse, Martine's flight to the U.S. following Sophie's birth. The embedded tale she tells is about a rich man who marries a poor black girl. For their wedding night, he buys the whitest sheets he can find but the girl does not bleed from their coupling. So the man takes a knife and cuts the girl between the legs so that he can defend his honor and hang a bloody sheet in the courtyard the next day. The young bride does not stop bleeding from her wound, and she dies (155).[5]

This story enacts Sophie's outrage and sorrow at the testing she has experienced at the hand of her mother. While Sophie values Haitian culture and tradition, she is highly critical of the ritual of testing, which she sees as a tool of the patriarchy. According to custom, a man is not required to remain married if he discovers his wife has had intercourse prior to marriage; he may return the bride to her parents like a piece of damaged goods. "If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me," Grandma Ife says to Sophie in an attempt to justify the testing (156). But Sophie rejects the testing, which she experiences as a physical and psychological violation.

With the story of the bloody sheets, Sophie reshapes the patriarchal text. When she tells this story, she is neither active participant nor passive witness.

Rather, she establishes a critical distance by giving the story a conclusion that ends in a young woman's death, an ending which says that the sacrificial costs of verifying female purity are too high. She reinforces this theme in a conversation with her grandmother, saying, "I hated the tests.... It is the most horrible thing that ever happened to me. When my husband is with me now, it gives me such nightmares that I have to bite my tongue to do it again" (156). Sophie's cautionary tale about the bloody sheets is juxtaposed against her refusal to die like the young girl in the story. Like the *cacos* whose name she bears, she is a survivor and a rebel (the *cacos* were slaves who resisted the French during Haiti's struggle for independence).

The longest interpolated story in the text is told by Sophie's Grandma Ife. Ife is the ancestor, venerated and powerful. Through her name, she is connected to Africa and the "motherline" of culture.[6] Ife, a town in southwestern Nigeria, was the first Yoruba state. According to Yoruba legend, Ife is the site of humankind's genesis, the place at which land was created from the flooding waters. Grandma Ife, therefore, is the mother of mother-artists, the origin of creativity. She is described as a wise woman, a seer, and a healer. Ife's authority emanates from the oral tradition; she is unable to read.[7] She has access to power through her gifted storytelling. The villagers call her "tale master" and are mesmerized by her performances. Ife's role as storyteller also establishes a powerful connection to Sophie, since as narrator, Sophie is also a storyteller and tale master.

The embedded story told by Ife appears approximately halfway through the text, bisecting the narrative. It is a tale about a lark that gives a young girl gifts of pomegranates. One day, the lark says to the girl that he would like to take her to a beautiful kingdom, far, far away. When the little girl refuses, the lark looks so sad that the girl relents and gets on his back. The lark then tells her that he is going to take her to a king who must have a little girl's heart or he will die. The girl replies that she left her heart at home and must go back to get it. So the bird takes her home and she runs away to her village, while the lark waits forever for her return (124-25).

This story, like the larger narrative which frames it, encodes the conflict between female autonomy and filial obligation and thematizes the dangers of heterosexuality, the rupture to home and family caused by marriage, and the narrowness of choices for women. The only paths available to the young girl are marriage to a man who will eat her heart out or sanctuary at home. The lark, as well as the king, embody the threat of sexual enthrallment; the pomegranate is a symbol of erotic enticement. The girl's ruse is successful—she outwits the king and the bird who would assist in her deflowering—but at tremendous cost—she has lost her freedom, since now she is imprisoned in her home. The story inscribes the parental desire for the daughter to remain in the familial home. Ife has lost one daughter, Martine, to exile in the vast, unknown territories of the U.S.; that daughter's daughter, Sophie, has flown the nest, as well. The story expresses Ife's yearning for the reunion of her scattered flock.

Ironically, Ife is ambivalent about Atie's return home after Martine sends for Sophie. As surrogate mother to Sophie, Atie had won a measure of status and independence. The maternal status given to Atie enables her to move away from Ife and La Nouvelle Dame Marie to the village of Croix-des-Rosets, in order for Sophie to attend school. While most of the villagers in Croix-des-Rosets live in one-room huts or shacks, Sophie and Atie live in a house with a living room *and* a bedroom (11). They are able to afford such luxuries thanks to the money sent home by Martine, who works two jobs in New York. Martine's desire to be reunited with her daughter ruptures the bond between Atie and Sophie and Atie's status as mother.

When Sophie leaves Haiti, Atie returns to Ife and La Nouvelle Dame Marie. As an unmarried woman, she can no longer justify an independent existence. When her social role as mother is no longer available, she reclaims the role of dutiful daughter. Atie belongs to a generation of women who have known themselves only in relation to caring for others:

> According to Tante Atie, each finger had a purpose. It was the way she had been taught to prepare herself to become a woman. Mothering. Boiling. Loving. Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing. Scrubbing. It wasn't her fault, she said. Her ten fingers had been named for her even before she was born. Sometimes, she even wished she had six fingers on each hand so she could have two left for herself. (151)

Although Atie understands the necessity for the mother-daughter reunion while the young Sophie does not, she mourns their impending separation, calling Sophie "my child" (31).

Atie's resumption of life with Ife offers many challenges. In Croix-des-Rosets, Atie would visit with M. Augustin, who once proposed to her. Although M. Augustin married another woman, he and Atie retain warm feelings for each other. When M. Augustin hears the news about Sophie's departure, he takes Atie's hand and presses his cheek to hers. At night, Atie stands at the window and gazes at the Augustins' house long after darkness has fallen. In La Nouvelle Dame Marie, Atie and Ife do not get along. Ife has become accustomed to living alone; she is exasperated by Atie's friendship with Louise, a neighbor. When Sophie returns to Haiti with Brigitte, her infant daughter, after a lapse of seven years, Ife says:

> I don't *like* the way your Tante Atie has been since she came back from Croix-des-Rosets. Ever since she has come back, she and I, we are like milk and lemon, oil and water. She grieves; she drinks *tafia* [rum].... Why did she come back? If she had married there, would she not have stayed? ... I looked after myself all the years she was in Croix-des-Rosets. I look after myself now. (118-19)

While Ife struggles to accept Atie's return home, her reference to marriage implies that she cannot accept Atie's failure to marry. For her part, Atie is lonely and resentful. When Sophie asks her if she misses Croix-des-Rosets, she replies:

> Croix-des-Rosets was painful. Here there is nothing. Nothing at all.... I know old people, they have great knowledge. I have been taught never to contradict our elders. I am the oldest child. My place is here. I am supposed to march at the head of the old woman's coffin. I am supposed to lead her funeral procession. But even if lightning should strike me now, I will say this: I am tired. (136)

In addition to feeling ashamed of having an unmarried daughter, Ife disapproves of Atie's friendship with Louise. Louise is teaching Atie to read; she also encourages Atie to register her name in the city archives so that there will be a permanent record that she has lived in the valley. Ife is unconvinced and unimpressed: "if a woman is worth remembering, there is no need to have her name carved in letters," she says (128). Ife's suspiciousness of the registry stems from her strong ties to the oral tradition. She is, after all, the *griot,* the tale master who speaks in "commanding tones." But what she resents even more than Atie's drive toward literacy is the strong erotic tie between the two women. Following the violent murder of a local merchant by the *Macoutes,* Louise and Atie comfort each other in an embrace, their "faces so close that their lips could meet" (138). Ife vents her disapproval and anger on a pig Louise has given Atie as a gift: "That Louise causes trouble.... Everything from her shadow to that pig is trouble," she complains (137). But there is even more cause for Ife's jealousy: not only is Louise Atie's teacher and possibly her lover, she is also her creative mentor and muse. Atie reads Sophie a poem from her notebook that Louise has helped her paraphrase from a book of French poetry, causing Sophie to exclaim, "you're a poet, too" (135). Sophie can now claim artistic kinship to Atie through writing and literature, creating a potential threat to Ife's connection to Sophie through the oral tradition.

The many ruptures in the text—Martine's flight from Haiti to the United States, Sophie's departure to the U.S. to be reunited with her mother, Atie's return to Ife and La Nouvelle Dame Marie, Sophie's return to Haiti after seven years in the States—are set in motion by the original rupture, the rape of Martine. The violation of Martine creates a dispersal of the Caco family, a dispersion that mirrors the original diaspora from Africa. Storytelling among the women not only recreates the original connection to Africa but also binds together the members of a scattered family. Sophie acknowledges the "motherline" of culture when she observes, "... it was neither my mother nor my Tante Atie who had given all the mother-and-daughter motifs to all the stories they told.... It was something that was essentially Haitian. Somehow, early on, our song makers and tale weaves had decided that we were all

daughters of this land" (230).

Nurturing and storytelling, two quintessentially maternal activities, are embodied in Atie. When Sophie tells Brigitte a bedtime story, she remembers the bedtime stories Atie once told her:

> When I was a little girl, Tante Atie had always seen to it that I heard a story, especially when I could not sleep at night.... There was magic in the images that she had made out of the night. She would rock my body on her lap as she told me of fishermen and mermaids bravely falling in love.... (110)

Although Atie does not command the same public authority through her storytelling as does Ife, she provides a strong maternal presence for Sophie. Through her own narrative, Sophie can claim both Ife's authority and Atie's nurturance.

Storytelling both establishes and reproduces the maternal bond. Telling a tale binds mother to daughter and creates cross-generational connections. Telling a child a story is a maternal gesture that provides comfort, security, and emotional sustenance. In addition, the content of a story, particularly a fairy tale, which invokes magic and suspension of disbelief, can help establish trust between mother and child, thereby fostering a child's self-esteem and sense of autonomy. Atie tells magical tales about Sophie's birth in order to protect her from the brutal truth: "One time I asked her how it was that I was born with a mother and no father. She told me the story of a little girl who was born out of the petals of roses, water from the stream, and a chunk of the sky. That little girl, she said was me" (47). Atie's stories focus on stability and attachment and provide Sophie with comfort, security, and strength.

These fanciful tales stand in marked contrast to Martine's story of rape. The psychological damage caused by the rape is inscribed in Martine's tale of the *Marassas,* which Martine tells Sophie as she "tests" her:

> The *Marassas* were two inseparable lovers. They were the same person, duplicated in two. They looked the same, talked the same, walked the same.... When you love someone, you want them to be closer to you than your *Marassa.* Closer than your shadow.... You and I we could be like *Marassas.* (85)

Martine's invocation of the *Marassas*, the twins of *vodou*, signifies her inability to distinguish the boundaries between herself and Sophie and inscribes her fear that Sophie will abandon her for Joseph: "The love between a mother and a daughter is deeper than the sea. You would leave me for an old man [Joseph is about the same age as Martine] who you didn't know the year before" (85). While the trope of the *Marassas* has been analyzed by Veve Clark to describe a way of reading that reaches beyond the master/slave binary, in

Breath, Eyes, Memory, the *Marassas* signify a psychic merging of mother and daughter (see Clark, 1991).

Because Martine does not experience herself as separate from Sophie, she dissociates herself from the pain and humiliation she inflicts during the testing. Although Martine later acknowledges that she hated the testing, she is unable to prevent herself from punishing Sophie for the rape. For Martine, the rape and testing are inseparable. In an effort to apologize to Sophie, she says: "I did it [the testing] because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater excuse. I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related.... The testing and the rape. I live both every day" (170).

Just as the *Marassas* serve as mirror images, as doubles, the trope of doubling also emblematizes the psychic merging that takes place between mother and daughter. While Nancy Chodorow has documented the difficulties surrounding separation in the mother-daughter relationship, Jessica Benjamin notes, "The mother cannot (and should not) be a mirror; she must not merely reflect back what the child asserts; she must embody something of the not-me; she must be an independent other who responds in her different way" (24). Benjamin's theory imagines a mother whose independent center exists outside her child. Unfortunately, this is not the case in the novel, since. Martine cannot distinguish the difference between her self and her daughter. Sophie internalizes the self-hatred Martine projects onto her and wonders whether she and Martine are indeed *Marassas,* twins:

> Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother's anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something that I had "caught" from living with her. Her nightmares had somehow become my own, so much so that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we hadn't both spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl. (193)

Sophie's internalization of her mother's self-hatred creates a painful sense of isolation and fragmentation. As a coping mechanism, she learns to "double," to split off from herself. Alice Miller describes this splitting defense as the child's attempt to escape annihilation. When she makes love with her husband, Joseph, Sophie doubles: "I was lying there on that bed and my clothes were being peeled off my body, but really I was somewhere else.... I was lying in bed with my mother. I was holding her and fighting off that man, keeping those images out of her head" (200). Sophie becomes mother to Martine, consoling her mother for her pain.

While the rape is the pivotal event of the novel, it has occurred some 12 years prior to the time the plot begins. Although the rape is not represented directly, it shapes the consciousness of the Caco women. The story of the rape is told and retold in varying detail. Atie tells it to Sophie as a fairy tale, the *conte* of the little girl born from rose petals and a chunk of sky. Martine fills in some

of the horrifying particulars shortly after she and Sophie are reunited in New York: "The details are too much.... But it happened like this. A man grabbed me from the side of the road, and pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body. I was still a young girl then, just barely older than you... I did not know this man. I never saw his face. He had it covered when he did this to me" (61). Ultimately, Sophie completes the retelling:

> My father might have been a *Macoute*. He was a stranger who, when my mother was sixteen years old, grabbed her on her way back from school. He dragged her into the cane fields, and pinned her down on the ground. He had a black bandanna over his face so she never saw anything but his hair, which was the color of eggplants. He kept pounding her until she was too stunned to make a sound. When it was done, he made her keep her face in the dirt, threatening to shoot her if she looked up. For months she was afraid that he would creep out of the night and kill her in her sleep. She was terrified that he would come and tear out the child growing inside her. At night, she tore her sheets and bit off pieces of her own flesh when she had nightmares. (139)

The narration of this story functions in various ways. In telling the truth of what happened to her mother, Sophie claims the rape as her heritage and names it in ways that her mother cannot. At the same time, she acknowledges the tremendous pain her mother has suffered. In so doing, she can begin the slow, difficult process of separating as her mother's *Marassa*; of recognizing that not she, but a nameless, faceless man, was the cause of Martine's suffering. Unlike Sophie, Martine cannot free herself from the story of the rape. When Martine discovers that she has become pregnant, this time by Marc, a man she knows and cares for, the memory of the rape becomes overwhelming and in a blind terror she stabs herself in the belly. She is the woman who cannot stop bleeding, the woman whom Erzulie transforms into a butterfly. Martine can be free only in death.

Sophie's liberation is negotiated through narrative, through the first-person telling of her journey, and through her understanding of the ways in which it frames the interpolated tales. She is not alone on her quest for healing and freedom. In a gesture of apology for the testing, Ife gives Sophie a statue of Erzulie, saying, "My heart, it weeps like a river for the pain we have caused you" (157). Sophie joins a sexual phobia support group, in which women from other countries, such as Mexico and Ethiopia, share their experiences of violation, rape, and genital mutilation. Ultimately, Sophie learns to recognize that not only is she not responsible for Martine's suffering, but that she cannot save her mother. When Sophie takes Martine's body to Haiti to be buried, she recognizes that, at last, her mother is at peace. Sophie is finally free from the burdens of the past, free to write a new story for herself. Ife's final words to

Sophie are: "There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question, '*Ou libere?*' Are you free, my daughter? . . . Now you know how to answer" (234).

Telling the story creates a space for the writing of another script, one marked by hope for a better future. Sophie vows that she will never test Brigitte, that her daughter will not suffer as she did. Although Sophie's coming-of-age involves a rejection of the role of *Marassa,* she does not reject Martine. On the contrary, she claims her place as her mother's daughter and as a daughter of Haiti:

> I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place where you carry your past like the hair on your head... My mother was as brave as stars at dawn. She too was from this place. My mother was like that woman who could never bleed and then could never stop bleeding, the one who gave in to her pain, to live as a butterfly. Yes, my mother was like me. (234)

Sophie's growth into womanhood involves compassion for her mother as well as forgiveness as she comes to know the ways in which they are alike, yet separate.[8]

As storyteller and mother-artist, Sophie binds the threads of the interpolated stories into the fabric of the larger narrative. This technique establishes her connection to her family, to the brave women of Haiti, and to the oral tradition she has inherited. Sophie is the lark who has flown away and the girl who returns home, but unlike the girl of Ife's embedded story, Sophie is not a prisoner of the past. She understands that she draws strength from her connection Haiti and the traditions that nourished her. A mother and daughter of the land, she will tell a different story to her daughter so that Brigitte will truly know what it is to be free.

[1]For a fuller analysis of the mother as artist, see Gerber (1999).

[2]Freud was unable to imagine the mother as anything other than self-effacing and self-sacrificing. In *The Bonds of Love* (1989), psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin revises Freud's position on mothering and grants the mother an active role in the infant's psychological development. In her theory of intersubjectivity, motherhood is constructed as a position of mutuality, in which the infant actively engages the mother's interest and attention, implying that the mother is more than a receptacle for the infant's needs and demands.

[3]Davies and Fido note, in their introduction to *Out of the Kumbla* , that the autobiographical mode of narration, which predominates in novels by Caribbean women, is particularly suited to the woman's introspective journey (1990: 5).

[4]In reading this scene, it is difficult not to think of Audre Lorde's autobiography, *Zami* (1982), in which Lorde uses her mother's pestle and mortar as erotic instruments. While she grinds spices in the bowl, she thinks of her mother, which produces an array of erotic sensations. While the scenes in the two texts differ—in one the pestle produces pleasure, in the other, pain—they both employ the pestle as a symbol of connection to the mother.

[5]This story provides echoes with a short story by Isak Dinesen, "The Blank Page." In the story, a group of nuns produce a linen so fine it is used for the bridal sheets of royalty. After the wedding night, it is displayed to attest to the virginity of the princess and returned to the convent, where a piece of the stained sheet is framed above a nameplate and hung in a gallery. Gubar says that Dinesen's story illustrates the model of the pen-as-penis writing on the virgin page, a paradigm which inscribes the male as author-subject, the female as text-object (1981: 295).

[6]Wall (1989) uses the term "motherline of culture" to designate a tradition of black women's art. She also cites Susan Willis's coinage of the term motherline.

[7]For the different relation of Afro-American women to literacy and literary production in the United States, see Bassard, 1992.

[8]O'Reilly describes a similar process in Toni Morrison's *Jazz:* "'Violet is able, at last, to understand, know, and name her mother's pain because she has lived it. This realization marks a vital mother-daughter connection.... With identification comes understanding, and from this forgiveness" (1996: 371).

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