

Textual Pleasures and Violent Memories in Edwidge Danticat Farming of the Bones

Patrick Sylvain¹

Abstract

This paper analyzes circular narratives and emotional intensities of Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* that are woven through her structured portrayals of an ordinary Haitian as an individual and as part of a collective group. Through intimate thoughts and dreams Danticat takes her readers through textual pleasures in light of social hatred and violence that work to induce deep-seated primal fear and evoke long-buried memories of massacre in many of its characters. Danticat's circular narrative in *The Farming of Bones* is not autobiographical, but rather dialogic. It is a conversation with the past through a mosaic of memories that is multivocal, multigenerational and consisting of multiple genres. At Massacre River, she fuses literature with oraliture in order to dialogue with remnants of the past; memories of the dead are relocated and reconstructed to overcome the boundaries between those who experienced the massacre, those who did not, and those who were never aware of it. In this paper, Danticat's *Farming of Bones* is analyzed and critiqued within a multidisciplinary discourse as it provides a rich and particular racial and military archive to the 1937 massacre.

Historical Snapshot of the 1937 Massacre

The political waves of fascism post WWI and at the height of colonial rule throughout the world, ushered in Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, who grew up as a poor Dominican in the San Cristobal region. The fourth of eleven children born to a second-generation Haitian mother and a Spanish father, Trujillo grew up like most Dominicans: aspiring to be aristocratic and white. Eventually, he would learn to despise and stamp out all traces of the non-white element of his lineage.

¹ Brown University, Center Language Studies, 2 Hamilton Rd. Somerville, MA. 02144, USA.

Since he was neither white nor wealthy, he assured his access through the exclusive social clubs via his imposing military stature, and through his second marriage with a woman who not only possessed wealth, but also inhabited the aristocratic milieu.

Not surprisingly, when he became President, he formed his own social clubs. His desire to efface his upbringing by forging and erecting desirable identities namely white, Christian and aristocratic, President Trujillo became the epitome of dictatorial despotism, megalomania and racial hygienist as he erected himself to power. His acquired whiteness and power became transgressively pathological.

His rapid accession to the rank of captain in 1922, under the elite's despised American occupation (1916-1924) to General Chief of Staff in 1928, Trujillo courted the aristocratic elite in order to be accepted as a member of the "first families." His obsession with the white race and the aristocracy made him even more obsessive as president especially as the cult of personality among the intellectuals and political classes grew to the point of glorifying and aggrandizing his stature as a national edifice. Consequently, on "August 16 of each of the following year, Trujillo and the nation reenacted August 16, 1930, with parades, speeches, ceremonies, and other festivities to please Trujillo's penchant for flattery. Greedy for adulation, Trujillo made sure that his name was all over the country" (Peguero, 2004: 71). An egomaniac and a ruthless political and military tactician, Trujillo created a political environment in which he presented himself as a patrimonial father, and was nationally venerated as a savior. Consequently, after he had consolidated power in 1930, "Trujillo further stressed the supremacy of subjective intimidation. Psychological power became psychological terror, institutionalized by the state as a mechanism of control. People were to stop thinking and just obey in order to survive" (2004: 57). In a sense, Trujillo became the perfect interface for the preservation of Western interests through his calculated ascension to power that provided him an historical role for a particular advancement of Dominican nationalism that straddled on anti-Haitian policies. His empowerment also privileged economic concessions to the oligarchy, to which he became a fierce and feared member.

The re-imagining of the Haitian other as the constant cultural and physical threat to the integrity of the nation became the parlance of politicians who openly promoted a phobia through racist discourse toward Haitians and the material impairment performed to counter that threat occurred during the hyper racially conscious presidency of Trujillo, who after “the 1937 massacre, the regime’s main ideological strategy was to foster anti-Haitian nationalism, which had remained dormant given Trujillo’s good relations with Vincent. First, the strategy involved the creation of a myth to justify the horrendous 1937 massacre.

And second, Trujillo encouraged the development of a nationalist, anti-Haitian state ideology, designed to establish a clear and permanent separation between Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the minds of the Dominican people and thus build loyalty to his regime” (Sagás, 2000: 47). Dominican Nationalism and ideological strategy is ingrained in the consciousness of the nation and is seen as the antithesis of blackness or Haitianity, for the later is a fully explosive otherness in Trujillo’s re-conceptualized Dominican Republic, one that which is allowed to temporarily exist on the marginal margins of society. As Howard David accurately observes, “Haitians exist as an internal colony, marginalized individuals in a society that demands their labor, but refuses to accept their presence beyond that as units of labor. Haitian settlements in the sugar fields are effectively ethnic ghettos, segregated physically and socially from Dominican society” (2001, 30). In that context, Haitians as the marginalized and utilitarian-subjugated other could never be treated as individuals with rights and agencies, but as dispensable subjects.

Background and Setting of the Novel

Danticat’s circular narrative centers around the experiences of Amabelle Desir, a young Haitian woman who, as a child, lost her parents when they drowned while traversing the border to shop for pots in the Dominican Republic. Found by Don Ignacio (Papi) and his daughter, Señora Valencia, Amabelle was taken in as a maid at their residence, in a town called Alegria (happiness). It is the 1930’s. Amabelle, a child of a simple peasant family, who acquired knowledge of herbal medicine and midwifery, develops a romantic relationship with a sugarcane cutter, a *Bracero* named Sebastien Onius. Through her relationship with Sebastien we discover their respective difficult histories and consequently their trouble with expressing emotions.

Amabelle's position as a maid and sometimes companion to Señora Valencia allows her to gain adequate knowledge of the Señora's ways of thinking, and she is at times, able to even complete her thoughts. Amabelle is roughly the same age as Señora Valencia, and although she is her maid, she is also, albeit privately, her best confidant.

In order to further materialize the bond between the two women, Danticat essentializes Amabelle's role by placing her in the cadre of the protectorate of life, she is the person who delivers Señora Valencia's twin babies when the family doctor, Dr. Javier, fails to arrive in time for the delivery.

Interestingly, the placement of Amabelle as a maid situates her at the center of discourse between the masters of the house and the visitors who frequent them. Amabelle is also a bridge to the outside world, the world of the *Batey* where Haitian cane cutters are relegated. And having a relationship with a cane cutter becomes the ideal juncture or position for knowledge. She is the interface in the same way that house-slaves were during the Western Colonial era or any other racially segregated period of history. The maid or servant, being in a position approximate to power, acted as the interface between the two culturally and socially opposed worlds. This dualist utilitarian technique of using Amabelle as maid and a secretly skilled midwife, places the literature squarely as a mirror of that society, and also follows what Wellek & Warren describe in *Theory of Literature*, "the common approach to the relations of literature and society is the study of works of literature as social documents, as assumed pictures of social reality" (1984: 102). The social reality of many post-colonial societies is that the maid is a quintessential member of that household; at times she possesses more skills than many are led to believe.

When Dr. Javier discovers that Amabelle has a practical and transferable skill, he insists without providing a rational explanation, that Amabelle should return to Haiti in order to help her people. Here, Dr. Javier's language becomes a code and Amabelle, not having the temporal knowledge that the reader has, fails at seizing the judicious hint that Dr. Javier provided. This novel is as much about the lives that perished during the 1937 massacre as it is about the use of a particular language that resulted in that massacre. Thus, the indirect language, the subtext of Dr. Javier's true intention, was not understood by Amabelle, not because she was a maid, but because Allegria was her new home and Sebastien Onius was at center of her existence. In a sense, Dr. Javier's coded language escaped her in ways that Señora Valencia's did not.

Language as the carrier of content, whether through voice or the body, is embroidered through Danticat's narrative. Thus, her literary "work of art is not a simple object but rather a highly complex organization of a stratified character with multiple meanings and relationships" (Wellek & Warren, 1984: 27).

In *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat places Amabelle in a relatively fluid and yet dichotomous situation where she inhabits the dualities of comfort and discomfort, poverty and relative economic ease, love and hate, and is finally a perpetual witness to both life and death.

Interestingly, the quaint house where she works and resides is located on the top of a hill, flanking a mammoth cane field where hundreds of Haitian itinerant cane cutters live in the most humiliating conditions and die in the same manner. As agricultural seasons rotate between planting and harvesting, and are entirely tended by black Haitian hands, so too does birth and death. The children born at the house where a black maid delivered Señora Valencia and Senor Pico's twins, is the same place where the preferred child, a lighter skinned male named Rafael (in honor of the General), died a few days after birth. Even through Danticat's practical use of tropical elements to describe tonality of skin, a hierarchy of complexion is established through those descriptors. "Like Señora Valencia, her son was coconut-cream colored, his cheeks and forehead the blush pink of water lilies" (2001: 9). Whereas, the girl, the smaller of the twins, the one born with a caul-like spider web covering her face is described as having a skin color that "was a deep bronze, between the colors of tan brazil nut shells and black salsify" for which the mother accused as being a "chameleon" and categorically made the claim to Amabelle that "[s]he's taken your color from the mere sight of your face" (2001: 11). Here, as a subtext, the politics of proximity through a form of by proxy racial contamination, becomes a domino-like effect, a spillage, is implied. That is, the mere sight of the undesired other can affect one's genetic make-up, thus the hint of a racial contagion is already in motion. The subtextual duel for life that took place in the womb can be read as a conscious metaphor that the author employs to indicate that the topographical space shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic is similar to that of the womb shared by Rafael and Rosalinda. And Rosalinda being dark, frail, female and the least favorite of the twins who survived becomes indicative of Haiti's survival, the least favorite of the countries.

Through the subtext, the author is peeling on and further exposing the layers of contradictions the Dominican society inhabits as a machismo and Eurocentric culture, and as Ernesto Sagas reminds us, "it should come as no surprise that in a mulatto country the beauty standard (and the color of power) is white" (Sagás 2000: 127).

The poignancy and currency of whiteness and power is skillfully demonstrated in this passage: "She has a little charcoal behind the ears, that one," 'Doctor Javier boldly told Señora Valencia as he lifted her daughter from the water.' ... "It must be from her father's family," 'Papi interjected, his fingertips caressing the skin of the sun-scorched white face.' "My daughter was born in the capital of this country. Her mother was of pure Spanish blood. She can trace her family to the Conquistadores, the line of El Almirante, Cristobal Colón.

And I, myself, was born near a seaport in Valencia, Spain" (17-18). In the political culture of identity within the Dominican framework, having charcoal behind the ears as a metaphor for having an African ancestry is a manifestation of racial uneasiness which fuels the anxious drive to deny it by rupturing with the past and subverting the descriptor *Indian* in order to erase the unwanted African noun that names Haitians. Thus, Rosalinda is referred to as an "Indian Princess." The history of the *Taino* is romanticized into an ethnic or racial category that pervades the consciousness of the nation. This neocolonial invasion is non-physical and it encapsulates the Dominican racial consciousness. Racial consciousness is best understood as a malignant structural ideology with a specific subject-target; and Sagás emphasized that race "is but one of the multifaceted aspects of antihaitianismo ideology; other components are nationalism, culture, and history. Antihaitianismo ideology resembles a prism where different prejudices and myths are combined in such a way it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between them. That is precisely the intended effect of antihaitianismo: it is a dominant ideology designed to confuse and mislead. As a result, race is confused with nation: Haitians are black; Dominicans are *indios*. Haitians believe in voodoo; Dominicans are devout Catholics" (Sagás 2000: 126). Racial consciousness in the Dominican Republic, under President Trujillo, is predicated upon the nationalistic desire of its intellectuals to construct an identifiable identity that transcends phenotypical signs, yet inhabits it psychologically through a robust mythology that successfully erected codified racial and cultural types.

The explicit Eurocentricity of the Dominican culture and implied language of violence toward the African other could not be better expressed than when Señora Valencia asks Amabelle whether her daughter would retain her current dark tone. Her question is filled with an anxiety that she immediately interrogates: “[m]y poor love, what if she’s mistaken for one of your people?” (Danticat, 1998: 12) It was within the spatial topography of Hispaniola that a violent dichotomy of somatogenic aesthetics arose and informed the overall politics of the region. On the one hand, the Dominican Republic constructively and sacredly embraces Eurocentric aesthetics and values, while on the other hand, due to the historical realities of slavery, the majority of the Haitian population favors an Afrocentric aesthetic. Furthermore, Haiti’s occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1822 to 1844, combined with the Dominicans’ desire to remain within Spain’s sphere of influence, confirms the country’s vehement opposition to Haiti and to everything she represents. The politics of *Anti-Haitianismo* cultivated by the Trullillo regime is still present to this day and is a part of the politics of visceral fear and hatred.

The essence of fear and hatred for one’s neighbor is best synthesized by Slavoj Žižek who writes: “since a neighbour is, as Freud suspected long ago, primarily a thing, a traumatic intruder, someone whose different way of life (...) disturbs us, throws the balance of our way life off the rails, when it comes too close, this can also give rise to an aggressive reaction aimed at getting rid of this disturbing intruder” (Žižek, 2008:59).

Haitians are objects to be despised and used; they are the reification of evil in the cultural consciousness of the Dominican. The Haitian as something evil is a multidimensional cultural construct that allows Señor Valencia’s appreciation for Amabelle’s midwifery and friendship, but also his disdain for her color. The black body, for centuries, remains a spectacle for disdain.

The author draws the reader in through a concentric narration where each circle of event is connected to another by revealing through a series of contradictory contours that intersects with another subset of contradictions. Danticat’s circular narrative places her protagonists within scripted social milieus. Within each milieu, there is an underpinning fear that navigates the lives of the subaltern Haitians who survive because of love for life and the hope for a better tomorrow despite the reign of unnatural death that grips the island.

In the same house, where a new set of lives timidly began, memories of the dead, specifically the memory of Señora Valencia's mother, was present while Señora Valencia was giving birth to Rosalinda. Coincidentally, the binary between the "civilized" and the "uncivilized", and the binary between life and death tend to rotate around the same axis. Through the novel as a literary and historical landscape, the writer becomes not simply a story teller but an accuser who reveals and reaffirms the oppressed category of the Haitian migrant worker as a subaltern. Through the interplay of the characters at and around the Pico/Valencia's household, Danticat calls for a deep reflection on power relations and the nature of human suffering.

The house is the axis around which everything revolves. As the births occurred, Colonel Pico Duarte, the father had to be summoned. Both Papi and Luis, gardener and husband of Juana (the original housekeeper who had been with the family before Señora was born), went to fetch the Colonel at his barrack.

On the way back, Duarte, impatient to see his heir, raced through dark and narrow roads to reach home, and in the process kills a Haitian *Bracero*, Joel, who is pitched into the ravine by the speeding automobile. Despite Papi's insistence that they check on the body, Pico Duarte refuses to listen and proceeds on his course as if Joel was a road kill. In this scene in which a Dominican life takes precedence over a Haitian life, the racial hierarchies that operate within the Dominican Republic are made abundantly clear. The Colonel was already in the clutches of the anti-Haitian campaign that would thoroughly unfurl only a few months after his children were born.

The cycle of opposites persists when days later, "Dona Eva's birthday celebration became Rafi's unofficial wake" (Danticat, 1998: 95). Life and death habitually revolve around the same axis; through Danticat's circular narrative and an efficient tandem chronology of events, the Generalissimo's (Trujillo's) speech that blared through the radio became not only a material symbol, but a concrete call to action when he declared, "You are independent, and yours is the responsibility for carrying out justice... The liberators of the nation did their part and we could not ask more of them. The leaders of today must play their parts also" (97). The speech became a coded call for the immediate operation at the border that Pico had mentioned to his wife.

This form of maniacal power consolidation is yet another facet of the obsessive despot to emotionally assembled his followers on a psycho-ideological tangent, and Jacques Semelin brilliantly writes, “[i]n effect, a truly powerful power, precisely because it feels strong, has no need to perpetrate mass murder: it can just exhibit this power without going to such lengths. (...) If this power happens to be contested, it can then decide to express its power through massacre, to recover its authority. Massacre, then, would be the outward expression of a crisis of the state, from which the latter is seeking to extricate itself... through mass killings” (Semelin, 2007: 225).

In order to further demonstrate culminating effects of the socially constructed power relations and the economies of race, the circular narrative delineated the cycle of opposites into evolving dualities that exist within the confines of the house, where tangible and racially-charged moment are provided. On the one hand, while Senora Valencia as a conciliatory gesture “poured coffee into her best European red orchid-patterned tea set and passed the first cup to Kongo...” a few moments later, became extremely protective of her newborn daughter in Kongo’s close presence.

Yet another racially-charged incident is presented when Colonel Pico “discovered that she had used their imported orchid-patterned tea set, he took the set out to the yard and, launching them against the cement walls of the house latrines, he shattered the cups and saucers, one by one” (Danticat, 1998: 116). If the use of prized materials by Haitians are deserving of such a violent reaction, then the systematic call to defend the country against Haitians would be as shattering. Again, Sagás reminds us that the “development of antihaitianismo into a dominant, state-sponsored ideology, and the parallel fabrication of an official nationhood by the Trujillista state, proved to be useful for Trujillo’s political survival” (Sagás, 2000: 45). Hence, the reverberation of Anti-Haitianismo shattered class to violently propagate as a singular marker within the frames of patriotic nationalism and racial ideology.

Eurocentric Aesthetics, Contradictions and Hatred

The portrayal of Señor Pico Duarte as an ambitious and loyal officer to the Generalissimo is cleverly etched into the circular narrative style by having Señora Valencia passionately explain her husband to Amabelle, as if country, duty and loyalty are embodied in Señor Pico given the fact he was chosen by President Trujillo who represents the father of the country, *La Patria*. Amabelle, as the servant and confidant offers sympathetic comments, while absorbing the details that she eventually shares with Sébastien, the peripheral other.

The tendency for loyalty, self-advancement and extreme identification with the country and the Presidency is revealed when Señora Valencia declares, “[m]y Pico is so full of ambition. He told me that he dreamed since he was a boy of advancing in the army and one day becoming president of this country” (Danticat, 1998: 28). The metaphor of the president as the father of the nation, the ultimate guard of *la patria* reinforces the supreme desire of maintaining a nationalistic political culture and propagates the sacrifice of the self for the patrimony. Undoubtedly, as Ernesto Sagás pointedly writes that the 1937 massacre: “was Trujillo’s draconian way of securing his domains and eliminating what he considered a pernicious influence on the Dominican nation. By physically eliminating the Haitian presence in the borderlands and other parts of the country, Trujillo could begin anew with a ‘blank slate’” (Sagás: 46). This extreme repressive tactic further aggrandized the stature of the leader and snuffed dissent.

In a state of awe, Señora Valencia told Amabelle that her husband, Colonel Pico Duarte, “had been given the task of heading a group that would ensure the Generalissimo’s safety at the border” (Danticat: 42). The new border operation, which came to be known as the Haitian Massacre, transpired in the fall of 1937, with most of the atrocities occurring during October of that year, revitalized the nationalistic fervor against the undesired Haitians, a perceived threat to national advancement.

“Fear of a threat perceived to be deadly can make credible an irrational line of thinking that is apparently (and really) setting out to eradicate the said threat. Conversely, the propaganda itself, through repeated transmission of anxiety-producing messages, contributes to increasing fear within a population that is already worried. Propaganda has then the effect of mobilizing the group that is feeling under threat, and of developing hatred within it against the group perceived to be a mortal danger” (Semelin, 2007: 95).

Legitimizing the use of violence against a category declared as subhuman exonerates those who commit these violent acts. In cleansing the Dominican Republic of uncivilized black braceros, who were unable to properly “trill” the “r” in *perejil* or utter the throaty “j”, the nation regains its potential for racial and linguistic purity, thus realigning itself closer to Spain.

The discourse of “purity”, this post-colonial madness, is a filament within the perceived normative aesthetic of the West. It has been creolized in the tropics, but the conservative pseudo-European sentimentalists long for it in order to create an ideal somatic type that never could be, given the hybrid nature of the Caribbean. Thus, in the quest for purity, selective genocide, the ultimate social engineering feat is the preferred tool of the tyrannical state. In her brilliant book on violence, Hannah Arendt, explained that: “the current equation of violence with power rests on government’s being understood as domination of man over man by means of violence” (Arendt, 1969: 52). The Trujillo regime crafted with precision the arts of repression and propaganda that violence through a form of established normalcy of purity became an organic extension of its existence. As Danticat interrogates the past, and reconstructs it through fictive and real characters of the era, a systematic relocation and reconstruction of memory occurs.

The reader, through a newly formulated story, is taken on a temporal and spatial journey where boundaries of life and death are shattered and a new speculative mode takes over: the novel dares to create a new narrative about historical events. Through the novel, Danticat contemplates the weightiness of words in order to establish the proper dimension other words such as *pejeril*, charcoal, river, general, love, purity, blood and border. Simple words like flowers, sugar and coffee, however, take on cultural meanings that echo through history and eventually impact over 30,000 lives. In fact, only a single letter of one word often determined life or death. The simple rolled *R* of the Spanish, which conquered the Eastern side of the island, proved devastating for members of the Western side where the gurgling *R* of the French was beaten into them.

Danticat’s ability to offer textual pleasures while providing a content-rich document that reifies knowledge and the praxis of reflection falls in direct alignment with Wellek and Warren’s theory:

When a work of literature functions successfully, the two ‘notes’ of pleasure and utility should not merely coexist but coalesce. The pleasure of literature, we need to maintain, is not one preference among a long list of possible pleasures but is a ‘higher pleasure’ because pleasure in a higher kind of activity, i.e. non-acquisitive contemplation. And the utility—the seriousness, the instructiveness – of literature is a pleasurable seriousness, i.e. not the seriousness of a duty which

must be done or of a lesson to be learned but an aesthetic seriousness, a seriousness of perception. (1984: 31)

Her objective through the text was to recreate a historical atrocity, more precisely, the slaughter of thousands of poor, itinerant Haitian laborers. Danticat's dialogue with the past is not only historical within a post-colonial framework, but it is also intertextual as the intersecting themes of violence, memory and personal confrontation of history are present. In *The Dew Breaker*, *The Farming of Bones*, *Krik! Krak?*, and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Haitian characters are entrapped in a labyrinth of imposed despair, yet the women are resolute to face their past. In the Farming of Bones, a mosaic of stories is formed through the interwoven narratives of Amabelle and Yves, Sebastien's roommate at Don Carlos' Mill in Allegria.

Through their encounters with survivors and the hundreds whose slaughter they witness, Danticat is able to stitch their voices into a multivocal storyboard about a river that man contaminated through unimaginable acts of cruelty. A river whose function is to carry the flow of water, became the transporter of thousands of bodies. It is that river that Amabelle visited and bathed in. The place where she looked "for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed, where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow" (Danticat: 310). The novel's subdue the systematic repulsion that one might expect to feel, in order to better witness. In a sense, Danticat is decasing or pushing the domain of Haitian suffering, genocide, and hyper-exploitation, into the conscious realm without being didactic.

In order to assess the weight of Danticat's writing, Nick Nesbitt best captures, in essence, the intent of her work and purpose as a writer from a fragmented post-colonial country:

Danticat's writing describes the subjection to guilt of even the most innocent. If her fiction strives to work through and displace the weight of the past, that process is perhaps interminable. The suffering of past generations awaits the appearance of every new one and places upon us demands that exceed our ability to compose and reproduce ethical imperatives from within our own incomplete subjective experience. The totality of the social world, which structures our every thought, action, and feeling, is unavailable as such to our understanding.

Knowledge of what we might be and of the world's failure to correspond with its concept, cannot arise from comparison with any preexisting universal; Danticat's writing implies that any ethical imperative must itself arise from our reflection upon experience" (Nesbitt, 2003: 206).

What is the ethical imperative of the Western World vis-à-vis their former subjective colonies that are imploding with post-colonial malaise? When a writer from the post-colonial world writes in order to disclose the past, such disclosure should not be an element of surprise or of discomfort; rather, it should be embraced in order to understand the weight of the colonial madness imposed upon the subjugated through various methods by the former colonies. Ignorance cannot be blissful when "the 'committed' writer knows that words are action" (Sartre, 1988: 37). And systematic actions from the distant past have a tendency to reverberate through history with a boomerang effect, such that even current social, cultural and economical ills being analyzed by the descendants of the original actors cannot fathom the causal lineage.

The post-colonial ills exposed by the writer, in this case, Danticat, "gives society a *guilty conscience*; [s]he is thereby in a state of perpetual antagonism toward the conservative which are maintaining the balance [s]he tends to upset" (1988: 81). On the point of antagonism, I would partially disagree with Sartre, that writing, in a sense does not have to be outwardly antagonistic in the usual didactic manner, and that this is where style and tone are important and Edwidge Danticat's prosaic style of balancing textual pleasures with content driven force is the perfect method of dialoguing with the past and inviting her readers through an intense emotional journey that sustains interest. Would the antagonism be from those who would prefer to silence the past? Then, I would agree with Sartre. It is also understood that conservatism means a preservation of the status quo, and a conservative readership, or status quo cannot be easily swayed. Thus, any insightful knowledge that would contradict their status would be antagonistic.

Non-Being, Reshaping of Memory and Social Engineering

Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* is a kaleidoscope of human emotions and social connectivity that is constructed to allow the reader access to post-colonial modes of thought and politics of race on the divided island of Hispanola.

It was here that modern racial genocide first occurred in the New World, where African slaves were first introduced, and where blacks arose from the chains of slavery to declare the first Black Republic in the world. It is also the place where a former colony occupied another colony that had been rejected by the Spanish crown and later was forced to gain independence from a black nation instead of a colonial power. On this island, the United States occupied two nations and heavily invested in sugar production; this is where a state sponsored racial massacre occurred, and where Haitians are still working as *Braceros* in similar conditions to their ancestors during the colonial period and the time of the 1937 massacre. In a sense, Colonial remnants, particularly racial ideology, remained encrypted in the Dominican national narrative to the point that labor exploitation of sugar cane workers is explained in racialised physical characteristics of the migrant workers as grotesque, instead of a systematized form of exploitation that resembles slavery. It is in this complex background that Danticat interrogates history and brings forth embroidered events through a circular narrative style that essentializes Amabelle as a human agent and an active bearer of memories of suffering and atrocities.

Through this narrative, a full tapestry is created and she threads together the stories and lives of characters eventually consumed by the massacre or as a result of torture. The past haunts Amabelle, but the quintessential need to testify is paramount to her existence, and to the memories of those she loves:

This past is more like flesh than air; our stories testimonials like the ones never heard by the justice of the peace or the Generalissimo himself. His name is Sebastien Onius and his story is like a fish with no tail, a dress with no hem, a drop with no fall, a body in the sunlight with no shadow. His absence is my shadow; his breath my dreams. New dreams seem a waste, needless annoyances, too much to crowd into the tiny space that remains... I wish at last that he was part of the air on this of the river, a tiny morsel breeze that passes through my room in the night. I wish at least that some of the dust of his bones could trail me in the wind. (1998: 281)

Danticat's narrative and confirms the importance of writing and story telling as forms of transnational revival of the human spirit to triumph over genocide, traumatic memories, psychological scars, and emotional displacement. The narrative authenticates the writer's role as an ethical agent committed to action via a direct dialogue with the past.

In that context, one Haitian-American scholar, Myriam J.A. Chancy, is correct when she asserts that: "given the extent to which violence inflicted upon Haitian women goes unnoticed, it is incumbent upon us to make violence discernible" (1997: 170). Amabelle's encounter with dehumanizing violence is so much a part of the circular narrative technique that Danticat uses it in order to loop and stitch her stories into the multivocal concentric circle that eventually would connect the "parsley stuffed mouths" whose voices become encumbered by the weight of the massacre. Danticat's insistence is that those voices be heard:

I once heard an elder say that the dead who have no use for their words leave them as part of their children's inheritance. Proverbs, teeth suckings, obscenities, even grunts and moans once inserted in special places during conversations, all are passed along to the next heir. I hear the weight of the river all the time. It creaks beneath the voices, like a wooden platform under a ton of mountain rocks. The river, it opens up to swallow all who step in it, men, women, and children alike, as if they had bellies full of stones.

It is perhaps the great discomfort of those trying to silence the world to discover that we have voices sealed inside our heads, voices that with each passing day, grow even louder than the clamor of the world outside" (1998: 265-6).

These voices contrast with that of Father Romain, who after he was tortured, became lethargic and mentally fragmented while the Generalissimo's nationalistic speeches looped in his mind. The looping of the Generalissimo's voice becomes symbolic to the efficiency of the torturous techniques utilized by the Dominican military to *dememorize* Haitian sympathizers by using forced mnemonic repression methods that seek to render one incapable of cultivating conscience-forming thoughts, having the free will to oppose oppression and therefore remain blinded by nationalistic patriotism, which has for aim the construction of an ideological unity. Dissimilarly, Amabelle's mind negates Trujillo's vocal echoes and musters a clarity that is sensuously tied to her corpus and dreams. Once back in Haiti, awakened from a long slumber and hearing a group of survivors who talked as they ate, Amabelle noticed "the haste in their voices sometimes blurring the words, for greater than their desire to be heard was the hunger to tell" (Danticat: 209).

Is Amabelle's inheritance via Danticat's textual historicity a part of the weight of the river that we must all bare; or is her inheritance the transmittance of knowledge gained for having survived the massacre and therefore reminding us of the weight of history? The need to tell is as great as the need to know. To know about the existence of those left behind, to interrogate the past by revisiting the scene of the crime and combing through the remnants and fragments of memories. Amabelle's willingness to unvault the undesirable past is as much an act of survival as it is an act of courage. "In any case, when I couldn't find the stream and the waterfall, I decided to test the señora's promise to stay in Alegria, near the graves of her mother and son, bound as we are to the places where our dead are lain" (Danticat, 1998: 290). In a sense, Amabelle was bound to Alegria as señora Valencia was. Alegria is the place where she had encountered pleasure through the love shared with Sebastien Onius, the friendship with the señora and countless of cane-cutters who worked at Don Carlos' mill. Alegria is also the place of deep-seated pain, like many other places in the Dominican Republic where Haitians were subjugated and eventually driven to Trujillo's abattoir.

In order for Amabelle to mentally unclench the past, she had to confront the promises and the pain of Alegria and enter the scene of the crime, her psychological border as it were, in order to salvage her sanity. As she ventures closer to her rendezvous with the past, she notices rope burns mark above the collarbone of the Haitian woman who opened the gate to the señora's house; then, as walks through the corridor toward the parlor, she also notices the family pictures, but she pays special attention to the señora's husband who not only had gotten fatter and older, but whose chest was adorned with more metals. Such adornment, beyond the symbolic marking of military ranks, becomes a site of rewards for the atrocities committed and rewarded by the state as an intimate display of dutiful executions for a nationalistic hegemony. As she proceeds, Amabelle informs us that: "I was beginning to feel glad that I had come, happy that I was going to see the señora again" (292). Navigating through the negative terrain of the past requires a certain level of psychological maneuvering to negotiate with the demons of history as well as reconciling personal fantasies with harsh realities. Amabelle experiences a moment of temporary hope when upon her return to Alegria, realizes that the señora does not recognize her. This lack of recognition makes Amabelle feel that "she had come back to Alegria and found it had never existed at all. But at the same time, without knowing it, [the señora] was giving me hope that perhaps all the people who had said that Mimi and Sebastien were dead, they too might have been mistaken" (294).

In a battle for recognition and acceptance of the now, the revenant-like subjects had to reconcile their memories of the then with the present in order to connect all of the fragments into a relatively comprehensible whole. Thus, the brief return of Amabelle into señora Valencia's life was a form of unacceptable surprise from the irreconcilable past. The past that had consumed thousands of Haitians, including Amabelle, who had been reported dead to the señora. Amabelle's presence forces señora Valencia to enter the psychological terrain imprinted by nationalism in order to navigate and negotiate her own existence as an ideological agent. "If I denounce this country, I denounce myself. I would have had to leave the country if I'd forsaken my husband. Not that I ever asked questions. Not trusting him would have been like declaring that I was against him" (299). Señora Valencia's statement to Amabelle was an emphatic declarative positioning that constituted patriotism, duty, and a bound territoriality as a wife and a mother. Señora Valencia's love for country couldn't transcend the restrictive bounds that the nation's ideological unity required.

While Amabelle submits herself to a transformative embodiment through mourning, witnessing and revisiting of the crime scene with the hope of salvaging a part of the past, Señora Valencia hides behind guilt of the list of the Haitians she had saved, and the zeitgeist of the times. "We lived in a time of massacres. Before Papi died, all he did was listen on his radio to stories of different kinds of...cortes, from all over the world. It is a marvel that some of us are still here, to wait and hope to die a natural death" (300). Furthermore, she simply acknowledges her husband's role in the massacre as "merely following orders". In a sense, she becomes a remnant without having any testimonial responsibility. Agamben writes, in the *Remnants of Auschwitz*, that "if the only one bearing witness to the human is the one whose humanity has been wholly destroyed, this means that the identity between human and inhuman is never perfect and that it is not truly possible to destroy the human, that something always *remains*. *The witness is this remnant*" (2008: 133-34). In that sense, *Farming of Bones*, can be considered as an inventory of different varieties of remnants.

Senora Valencia went through an extraordinary confession but without the full admission of guilt, or at least by proxy, felt guilty about the atrocities that her husband was involved in. The subtext implies the avoidance of genocidal complicity. As for all survivors of traumatic experiences, the survivor must re-harbor the past in order to begin a new journey, a new life. Amabelle had to revisit the old in order to interrogate the past.

Her unsuspecting probing touched depths of buried wounds, grottos of pain that repeatedly interrupted her dreams and the desire to know what had happened to those left behind, especially the loved ones. Telling, venting, or even shouting about the collective trauma is critically tied to survival and the avoidance of madness. Michael Taussig reminds us that “the space of death is crucial to the creation of meaning and consciousness, nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where the culture of terror flourishes” (1984: 467). The culture of terror flourishes not because the society itself is endemically demonic but the amplification of terror and of mob-driven crimes coerces and assimilates the individuals into the group mentality. In addition, Jacques Semelin poignantly reminds us that as “the murdering dynamic amplified, it tended to acquire an unstoppable force of its own” (2007: 223). It was the unstoppable force of ecstatic ethnic cleansing that consumed thousands of Haitians into senseless and nameless death that Amabelle’s tortured and resiliently remnant-self claims that the “slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on.

All I want to do is find a place to lay it down now and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds, nor remain forever buried beneath the sod” (Danticat: 266). The domain of the past, the memory of trauma, becomes a form of treasured heirloom.

The temporal and spatial relocations of the dead in the Haitian culture are essential to the formation of meaning and comfort. Nothing could be worse for the living than to anger the dead. At the same time, it is equally dire to be dragged by death because of its historical weight, its needs for reconciliation with the world of the living. The helplessness of the survivors coupled with the silence of the Haitian state constituted the worst form of impotency that places them in an infinite spectral state. Thus, one of the survivors, evoking memories of the Haitian founding fathers, engages in a dialogue with the past in order to provide comfort. “When Dessalines, Toussaint, Henry, when those men walked the earth, we were a strong nation. Those men would go to war to defend our blood. In all this, our so-called president says nothing, our Papa Vincent –our poet –he says nothing at all to this affront to the children of Dessalines, the children of Toussaint, the children of Henry; he shouts nothing across this river of our blood” (Danticat: 212)

It was Language that was used against them by the Dominican President and it is language that failed them by the Haitian President, a poet. The implication of Danticat's subtext as expressed through the survivor is that language is the beginning and the end. Its circular and constitutive use is found in the perpetration of ethnic and racial genocides, as well as in the reconstruction of a shattered nation. The language of reconciliation is the language of a new beginning. Language then, through the text, represents a transformative tool as David Davies postulates that the "idea here is that fictions provide a better medium than philosophical treatises or sermons if we wish to communicate a moral 'message' to a receiver in a way that will transform her moral beliefs and dispositions" (2007: 166). Since the Haitian President/poet failed at providing words, it was incumbent upon Amabelle to release the plethora of stories that clamored inside her head. It "is here, in the haunting of the present by the past, in which subjects are enchained to their memories, that freedom might be recovered" (Nesbitt, 2003: 212). And it is through Danticat's agency and textual astuteness that Amabelle's narratives became our shared inheritance, our own river.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone Books, 2008.
- Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. Orlando: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, 1969.
- Chancy, J. A. Myriam. *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997.
- Danticat, Edwidge. *The Farming of Bones*. New York: Soho, 1998.
- David, Davies. *Aesthetic & Literature*. London: Continuum Books, 2007.
- Howard, David. *Coloring The Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic*. Oxford: Signal Books, 2001.
- Nesbitt, Nick. *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in the French Caribbean Literature*. Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 2003.
- Sagás, Ernesto. *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic*. Florida: University of Florida, 2000.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *What is Literature?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Semelin, Jaques. *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Taussig, Michael. "Culture of Terror –Space of Death. Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26.3 (Jul., 1984): 467-497.
- Wellek, René and Warren, Austin. *Theory of Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company (A Harvest Book), 1984.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *Violence*. New York: Picador, 2008.