

The Voice of Trauma: Collective Memory and History in *The Farming of Bones*

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is “always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or a truth that is not otherwise available” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). In *The Farming of Bones*, Edwidge Danticat’s characters carry within them the story of an individual and historical wound. The voice of the survivor of trauma is a voice that struggles to speak the unspeakable. The story of the survivor of a collective trauma is also the story of those who did not survive. In *The Farming of Bones*, the narrator, Amabelle, holds on to the memory of her lover Sebastien, missing after the 1937 massacre of Haitians by Trujillo’s army in the Dominican Republic. It is the unavailable truth of his story and of the massacre that Amabelle attempts to accept and transmit. Amabelle’s obsession with keeping the past in the present reveals her desire to place her individual trauma in the larger context of a collective historical consciousness. Her quest for personal and historical truth reflects Édouard Glissant’s argument in *Caribbean Discourse* that, unlike Western historiography, the representation of marginalized groups’ history must reject the concept of history based on the linear progression of undeniable facts. Glissant explains that Caribbean history is a “past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, (and) is, however, obsessively present” (63). Glissant’s remark points to the importance of linking past and present through the discontinuities of traumatic history. In his reflections on the relationship between history and literature, Glissant argues that “the duty of the writer is to explore this obsession, to show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present” (64). *The Farming of Bones* focuses on a

moment “which has not yet emerged as history” for Danticat’s characters. Told from the perspective of her traumatic memory, the 1937 massacre is Amabelle’s present obsession with the past.

Bessel Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, two leading figures in trauma theory, point out that “Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming events, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language” (176). Glissant’s interpretation of Caribbean history suggests a similar reading of history as fragmented narrative. The traumatic experience of Caribbean countries is “the site of a history characterized by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade” (61-62) producing a historical consciousness marked by silences and discontinuities. By revisiting Haiti’s history through Amabelle’s traumatic memory, Danticat situates *The Farming of Bones* in the spaces of fracture that disrupt the possibility for a chronological account of history. *The Farming of Bones* reconstitutes a history of Haiti and of the 1937 massacre through the struggle for representation and truth of its victims. Danticat’s novel and Amabelle’s testimony confront the incomplete record of official history by giving a voice to the anonymous victims of the massacre and their repressed histories. As Danticat suggests of her own work: “Many of us feel like on some level, we are filling in the gap, especially in some of the historical works, in historical novels, you feel like you’re plugging in a hole” (Lyons and Danticat, 9). This paper explores the question of historical representation through the perspective of trauma and memory. It analyses the treatment of the traumatized victims’ agency in formulating an individual and collective experience. In her narrative, Danticat insists on the importance

of a collective and historical consciousness by representing a bond between her characters and by placing Amabelle at the centre of this web of relationships. This paper focuses on Amabelle's communal identity and her role as conservator of memories. It seeks to demonstrate Amabelle's resistance against national amnesia in her rendering of a collective and multivocal representation of history.

In the opening scene of the main narrative in the novel, Amabelle assists her Dominican mistress, Senora Valencia, in giving birth to twins, a dark skinned girl and a light skinned boy. In this national allegory of the racial origins of the Dominican Republic, Danticat's text challenges Trujillo's anti-Haitian official discourse on race. Since its independence from Haiti in 1844, the Dominican Republic gradually fashioned a myth of national origin in order to repress any trace of African ancestry in the formation of its racial identity. Dominicans imagined a racial tradition of both Indian and Spanish origins to explain their mixed heritage. In *Modernity Disavowed*, Sibylle Fischer defines this renegotiation of history as "the fantasy of the Indian" (153). The Generalissimo Trujillo's racist rhetoric had its roots in this collective phantasm and reached its peak in 1937 in his order to kill all the Haitian cane cutters found within the nation's borders. In *The Farming of Bones*, Valencia's reference to her dark skinned daughter Rosalinda as an Indian princess results from this tradition of constructing a national identity that seeks to eradicate any trace of African ancestry. When the family doctor Javier notices a little charcoal behind the girl's ear, his suggestion that she may be of African descent is rejected by Valencia's father Papi who insists on his family's pure Spanish origins. "Aside from medicine," Doctor Javier's "passions are language and lineage" (20). His

presence represents a threat to Trujillo's official version of Dominican racial history. During the massacre, Doctor Javier is arrested for attempting to help Haitians escape Trujillo's order of genocide. As a historian of race, his ability to trace the African origin of Dominicans is symbolically silenced by Trujillo's official version of history.

The Farming of Bones focuses on the tension between the official records of history and the lives of the anonymous victims of Trujillo. By exploring the 1937 massacre through the testimonies of its survivors, Danticat presents history through the lived experience of ordinary people, establishing a dialectic between historical facts and individual memories. The dialogue created between the different voices of the victims emphasizes the tension between a spoken, multivocal history of trauma and a univocal, unilateral writing of history represented by Papi's notebook. Danticat places Amabelle, an orphan of the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, at the center of the text's exploration of historical trauma. Despite the first sentence of the novel, "His name is Sebastien Onius," Amabelle is the most important character. She is given the difficult if not impossible task of carrying the collective testimony of the massacre. Amabelle and Sebastien's tragic relationship is at the centre of the novel and of Amabelle's memory. Around this space of unity, Danticat creates a larger unity, a web of relationships among characters and among communities. Amabelle is the site of this larger set of connections. She is the cord that links survivors and lost ones, past and present, traumatic experience and testimony. As such, she inhabits the kind of in-betweenness that Homi Bhabha has identified in *The Location of Culture* as "the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal-that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation" in the literature of the marginalized (1-2). Amabelle

inhabits this in-between space; she serves as Danticat's site of participation of silenced victims and of contestation of official truths. In opposition to Trujillo's narrative of exclusion and repression, Danticat presents a narrative of intervention and interaction. Amabelle's in-betweenness informs her "communal selfhood," an identity where the boundaries between self and other, "public and private, the psyche and the social" (Bhabha 13) are reconsidered. Amabelle's in-between position relates each character to the other and to the larger context of history through her testimony of shared memories, dreams and past experiences.

Amabelle's testimony challenges the amnesic impulse of official history by carrying the collective memory of the massacre to the present. Through her testimony, Amabelle provides a space for individual experience and oral transmission of history. She is the vehicle and the filter through whom all testimonies and experiences are rendered. After the massacre, Amabelle witnesses survivors "gathered in a group to talk. Taking turns, they exchanged tales quickly, the haste in their voices sometimes blurring the words, for greater than their desire to be heard was the hunger to tell" (209). Through her observation, Amabelle recognizes the survivor's "imperative need to tell" (Laub, 63), the need to share with other survivors of the same experience. The story of trauma must come out in the form of words and must leave the body.

Though testimony is expressed in the form of shared stories, words alone cannot contain the story of trauma. Amabelle defines this imperative to tell as a kind of "hunger," that is, as a physical need that originates and persists in the scarred body of the survivor. She describes her own body as "simply a map of scars and bruises, a marred

testament” (227). As Amy Novak points out, Amabelle’s body “bears the record of the past” (14). It represents both individual and communal suffering as she carries in her flesh the collective memory of the massacre. Her body symbolizes the individual testimonies that were not given to the justices of the peace in charge of collecting official accounts of the massacre. The image of Amabelle’s body as a map and a testament contains the geographical and historical relationships between the Dominican Republic and Haiti and bears witness to the unspeakable truth of historical trauma. Just as her body speaks without words of the suffering of Haitians, it carries in its marks the oppressive language of the tormentors. It suggests the indelible relation between tormentor and survivor, between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Her body reveals the impossibility of telling the story of a trauma, a story filled with silences, unspeakable truths, collective stories that “bring us to the limits of our understanding” (Caruth, *Trauma* 4). Her disfigured body leaves its victim speechless. It reveals the existence of a story that cannot be told and thus remains unheard. The imprint of the marked body and the silent story it tells suggest a breach in the linearity between past and present. This fissure in the natural progression of individual and collective history points to the unclaimed voice of trauma silenced by historical records. Absent from books, the stories signified by traumatized bodies remain unrecognized and repeatedly disfigured by their absence in official accounts of history.

Amabelle’s body reflects the forgotten trauma of Haitian cane cutters, the targets of Trujillo’s soldiers. Her body becomes a vehicle for the larger history of oppression and modern slavery in Dominican sugarcane fields. The description of her body connects her

to Kongo, the elder in the community of cane cutters. Like Amabelle's, his body is "a map of scars" (62), the result of many years toiling in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic. For the Haitian community of the border town of Alegria, Kongo, ironically, becomes a father figure after the death of his son Joel, accidentally killed by Valencia's husband. By creating a link between Amabelle's traumatized body and Kongo's scars, Danticat insists on viewing Amabelle as the embodiment of the memory of Haitian cane cutters and of the ancestral oppression of slaves in the sugarcane fields of Hispaniola. Amabelle's and Kongo's marked bodies "speak" for those who never returned from the cane fields, who died producing bitter sugar and who never returned to Haiti. In a broader sense, the trauma of the massacre is linked through Kongo and Amabelle to the larger trauma of slavery, a past unrecognized by Dominican official history.

Amabelle is both witness and victim of the cane field. In search of Sebastien and his sister Mimi at the beginning of the massacre, she crosses the cane field that separates her mistress's house from Sebastien's cabin. In the words of Amabelle: "A scorching foul-smelling heat rose from the ground; the marsh underneath the cane sank with each of my steps. I felt the short cane spears cutting my legs and covered my face with my hand to keep the tall ones out of my eyes. An ant colony marched up my thighs. The more I smacked them away, the more they crept up my back" (160). It is the first instance in the text where Amabelle suffers physical injury. The colony of ants foreshadows the attack of Trujillo's soldiers on Haitian cane cutters. In this ritualized crossing of the field, the text places the trauma of the massacre in the larger history of the oppression of Haitian sugarcane workers in the Dominican Republic. The metaphor of the crossing of the cane field implies that Amabelle's testimony can only serve as collective memory if she

experiences personally the reality of the sugarcane field. As ritual, the crossing of the field makes her an internal witness to and a vehicle of collective testimony.

Through the perspective of trauma and the medium of testimony, Danticat reveals the dissonance between official history and the unheard voices of the victims of the cane fields and of the massacre. *The Farming of Bones* is about the function of personal testimony as an unofficial narrative of history. As is suggested by Amabelle's dedication of her testimony to Metrès Dlo, "In confidence to you, Metrès Dlo, Mother of the Rivers. Amabelle Désir," *The Farming of Bones* is to be read as an oral testimony delivered to the Vaudou deity known in Haitian creole as Metrès Dlo. According to Ousseynou B Traore, "The Mammy Watta myth, in the original West African oral canon and New World version,...has a lyrical core. Mammy Watta is both the giver of life and death and the giver of poetry and music" (80). In Danticat's novel, she is the guardian of the Massacre River, where Amabelle's parents drowned during a hurricane. The Massacre River is also the natural border that separates Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where many Haitians died in their attempt to escape the 1937 massacre. As giver of poetry and music, Metrès Dlo inspires Amabelle and enables her to vocalize her story in the form of an oral testimony. After the massacre, Amabelle and other survivors struggle to have their testimony taken by the justices of the peace: "The group charged the station looking for someone to write their names in a book, and take their story to President Vincent. They wanted a civilian face to concede that what they had witnessed and lived through did truly happen" (236). In Metrès Dlo, Amabelle finds an ideal listener, one who will not judge and silence her. By telling the story of the massacre to a mythical figure, Amabelle carries the memory of the forgotten dead as well as the survivors' testimonies to an

accessible part of Haiti's collective memory. She renders the massacre and its victims mythical and relates them to the realm of cultural memory.

In *The Farming of Bones*, testimony relates to the art of oral storytelling. A testimony is "a performative speech act," "a poetic literary act" (Felman 17, 45). It is both individual and collective, at the intersection between storytelling and the recording of history. *The Farming of Bones* can be read as what Henry Louis Gates characterizes as a "speakerly text...a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition" (181). The orality of the novel is informed by the spontaneous exchange of testimonies between characters. When Amabelle returns to Haiti with Yves, another survivor and companion of Amabelle, she is invited by his mother to share her story: "You don't need the justice of the peace, she said. You don't need a confessor. I, Man Rapadou, I know your tale" (244). In the novel, testimonials are told and heard in a communal setting and addressed to listeners who share a bond with the survivors. As Laub suggests, "For the testimonial process to take place there needs to be a bonding, the intimate presence of an other—in the position of one who hears (70). Amabelle's testimony functions as the shaping of a collective memory as she witnesses stories shared in the intimacy of the community. The representation of a positive listening is Amabelle's and Danticat's rejection of the collective and national amnesia in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Amabelle's memory challenges the tourist guide's affirmation that "Famous men never truly die, it is only those nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air." (280)

Commenting on the writing of *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat remembers: "A lot

of people would say, I know you're writing this book, have you heard about that? People felt collectively invested in the story" ("The Hunger to Tell" 15). In her remark, Danticat affirms the collective aspect in the creation of her novel. Like Danticat, Amabelle listens to the voices outside her individual experience of trauma. The novel becomes a collection of *unauthorized* testimonies without an individual author and without an official audience. Haitians have to confront their traumatic past alone and yet together. They are left to find a way to be recognized by history. They do so by sharing their experiences and creating a collective memory that contradicts the official version put in place by the authorities.

Both Amabelle and Yves choose not to give their testimony to the justices of the peace. Yves chooses silence and solitude. As a survivor, his memory is burdened by feelings of guilt: "For twenty-four years all of my conversations with Yves had been restricted to necessary prattle. Good-morning. Good-night. What goes? Good-bye. The careful words exchanged between people whose mere presence reminds each other of a great betrayal" (270). His testimony to Amabelle takes the form of a confession. Their relationship reads as an allegory for the traumatized community as damaged place of support; "For a while I felt as though he was carrying me . . . then it was me carrying him. After a while it was as though we were both afloat at the same time, joined in a way that we could never be speaking together, or even crying together" (250). For Yves, unlike the other characters, the traumatized community "no longer exists as an effective source of support and an important part of the self has disappeared... "I" continue to exist though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. "You" continue to exist though

distant and hard to relate to. But “we” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body” (Erikson 187). Yves responds to the shock of the event by separating himself from his community. He breaks the links that bind him to the group. His reaction betrays his powerlessness in the face of history. Yves explains his refusal to testify to the justices of the peace: “I know what will happen...You tell the story, and then it’s retold as they wish, written in words you do not understand, in a language that is theirs and not yours” (246). His remark suggests the existence of two conflicting representations of history; Yves’ untold truth and the legitimized testimonies collected by the government. In this impossibility to be the author of his own story, to transmit his truth, Yves chooses silence. His statement emphasizes the difference between official testimony and collective memory.

The collective memory of the community is exemplified through the characters’ personal dreams of historical trauma. Early in the novel the reader learns that many of the characters are haunted by their nightmares. Sebastien’s dreams of crooning pigeons are a displacement for his father’s death in the hurricane that also killed Amabelle’s parents. The characters share their nightmares with one another and in doing so find relief in confessing to one another. They even connect through their dreams; “Yves and Sebastien both mumbled in their sleep all night, as though traveling through the same dream together” (129). Amabelle too is haunted by the dream of her parents’ death. She repeats the traumatic experience of witnessing their drowning over and over in her dreams. As is the case for Yves and Sebastien, the memory of the death of her parents is always relived in the present. Each dream reveals a collective history that “literally has no place, neither

in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood” (Caruth, *Trauma* 153). Amabelle cannot place the memory of her parents in the past and cannot create a place outside of her traumatic memory. She constantly returns to the site of trauma and relives the event in an eternal cycle of repetition.

Her dreams are filled with voices that represent the collective memory of her community. Her repetitive dreams about the sugar woman, a slave figure, trace the present history of Haiti in the original trauma of slavery: “As always, she is dressed in a long, three-tiered ruffled gown inflated like a balloon. Around her face, she wears a shiny silver muzzle, and on her neck there is a collar with a clasped lock dangling from it” (132). The sugar woman returns from the repressed memory of slavery and her presence is a reminder that her story must not be forgotten. She reminds Amabelle “I am the sugar woman. You, my eternity” (133). In another dream, Amabelle hears her mother repeat the words of the sugar woman (“You, my eternity” 208). The link created between Amabelle, her mother and the sugar woman is what Danticat calls a “cord between desperate women” (169). The image of the cord suggests a feminine conception of history rooted in the transgenerational relation between past and present. The link with the ancestor is given in the maternal term of the umbilical cord. While Haiti’s official history focuses on its glorious past represented in the novel by references to Toussaint Louverture and King Henri I, Danticat’s text offers an alternative representation of history informed by communal and familial bonds. While King Henri I’s castle has become a public space for tourists and the corner stone of Haitian national past, the memory of anonymous slaves

reappears in Amabelle's dreams, claiming a place in history and assuring that Amabelle continues its legacy.

Amabelle's dreams are given in fragmented bold print passages that vocalize her silent trauma. Her interior voice and her communal testimony offer a different representation of history from that of history books. The traumatic history of the massacre is structured around two narrative forms: Amabelle's dreams and the memories of Sebastien are narrated in bold print in the present tense; the main linear narrative remembered by Amabelle is told in the past tense. Through such a split structure, Danticat dramatizes the balance between Amabelle's inner life, told in an eternal present, and the exterior events narrated through the reconstruction of her memory. The dissociated narrative structure exemplifies Amabelle's traumatic memory. The bold print fragments resist integration in the main linear narrative. The text appears as a splitting of the narrative, one that allows the gathering of collective voices and one that informs of the inner lives of Amabelle, Sebastien, her parents and the sugar woman. Those fragments remain at the border of the main narrative, touching but not quite entering the main plot. As they express the dissociating effects of trauma on the self, the fragmented memories represent a split voice of individual and historical trauma, posited next to the multiple voices of the collective trauma of the massacre. The narrative structure of the novel, the coexistence of two distinct voices allows for the collective and the individual to be expressed side by side. Amabelle serves as mediation between private and public, past and present, history and silenced memories, "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. 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” (266). In *The Farming of Bones* the voices of trauma refuse to be silenced. Amabelle’s testimony represents a multivocal narrative of their repressed histories.

The central metaphor in the novel is that of the voice. Every character and every memory is associated with a voice; “At times I like it when he (Sebastien) is just a deep echo, one utterance after another filling every crevice of the room, a voice that sounds like it’s never been an infant’s whimper, a boy’s whisper, a young man’s mumble, a voice that speaks as if every word it has ever uttered has always been and will always be for me.” (13). Often the voices are heard through their echo; “The night brought with it a ghostly echo so that each time Tibon spoke it seemed as though you were hearing many people say the same thing at once” (178). The echo of the voice of trauma is the metaphor for the relation between the traumatic past and its reappearance in the present. The echo enacts the repetition of the traumatic experience in its failure to integrate the narrative memory of the massacre. It is “the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth” that the survivor “cannot fully know” (*Unclaimed* 3). The echo constitutes a cycle of repetition and delay, a dissociation from the original voice. It invokes the voice of the wound that trauma survivors struggle to locate and put to rest. It is the delayed expression of a call, a voice that refuses to be silenced, a voice that has no address and whose meaning cannot be grasped. Amabelle hears the echo and answers to the survivors’ “hunger to tell” by an equally visceral desire to listen. The victims’ voices possess Amabelle, who in return needs to own the story

they tell so she can both remember and forget: “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 wind, nor remain for ever beneath the sod” (266).

In search of a type of reconciliation between remembering and forgetting, Amabelle decides to return to the Dominican Republic years after the massacre in order to restore a continuum between her traumatic memories and her present life. Amabelle returns to the home of her employers and meets her old mistress, Senora Valencia who does not recognize her changed appearance: “Now it was as if we were doing battle and I knew I must win; she had to recognize me” (295) Amabelle’s need for recognition from her mistress reads as a metaphor for a claim of acknowledgment of the massacre by the Dominican nation. In the absence of recognition, Amabelle returns to the Massacre River, the place where her parents drowned and where many Haitians died during the massacre. Instead of returning to her Haitian home, she decides to stay by the river, to “lie on my back in it with my shoulders half submerged, the current floating over me in a less than gentle caress, the pebbles in the riverbed scouring my back” (310). She returns to the site of the border, the in-between space of separation and unification, past and present. Her body “half-submerged” in the river, she embraces the position at the “interstice” between the here and there, now and then, recognizing the irresolvable tension between remembering and forgetting. As she herself admits, “A border is a veil not many people can wear” (310).

Amabelle passes on the story of the massacre through both her body and her testimony. Her story is a quest to remember Sebastien and to keep his memory from vanishing “like smoke into the early morning air” (280). As Yves suggestively tells Amabelle about his attempt to find Sebastien and Mimi: “I have already gone and they looked in their books. Their names are not there” (246). Sebastien’s story is symbolic of the individual stories that cannot be found in historical records. The uncertainty of his fate reveals the spaces of discontinuity in the history of the massacre. Amabelle carries the difficult task of creating a collective testimony out of uncertainty and silence: “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 drop with no fall, a body in the sunlight with no shadow” (281). Amabelle’s story is an endless struggle to tell a story that has no end. Her refusal to forget Sebastien and the other victims of the 1937 massacre challenges the national amnesia imposed by official history. The cord that links slaves to victims of the massacre to present day Haitians denies a concept of time that establishes fixed boundaries between past and present. By collecting individual memories of traumatic experiences, Amabelle attempts to break the silences of historical trauma and to construct with individual voices a larger collective story of historical consciousness. Her testimony reveals the need for an imaginative language, one achieved in literature, a collaboration between historical facts, individual memories and interior voices to transmit a history of collective suffering and survival.

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