

Writing Disaster Trauma, Memory, and History in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

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Article abstract

This essay deals with the question of trauma in Haitian writing, and specifically with Edwidge Danticat's novel *The Farming of Bones*. Drawing on a wide range of theorists, and undertaking a close reading of the novel, the essay suggests that the Haitian experience of trauma is different in many ways to that of other Caribbean islands. In particular, it is argued that the fragmented experience of Haitian history cannot be easily recuperated into contemporary celebratory theories of Caribbean hybridity and creolization, and must be understood within its own context and on its own terms.

WRITING DISASTER

Trauma, Memory, and History in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

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To keep our silence, that is what, unbeknown to us, we all seek to do in writing (Blanchot 1980: 187).

History has its dimension of the unexplorable, at the edge of which we wander, our eyes wide open (Glissant 1989: 66).

It almost goes without saying that trauma is an inescapable aspect of Haitian and Caribbean historical experience. The memory of slavery's brutal uprooting and its enduring after-effects remains to be lulled, domesticated, and made sense of. The great works of Caribbean writing have almost without exception addressed the historical legacies of the traumatizing, forced displacement of slavery. In Caribbean poetry, for instance, images of rupture and splitting have expressed both the violence of New World history and its legacy of spatiotemporal nothingness, as in Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*: "Islands scars of the water/Islands evidence of wounds/Islands crumbs/Islands unformed" (1983: 75). Similarly, individual and collective memory have been characterized by lacks, lacunae and traumatized absences: "So much blood in my memory! In my memory are lagoons. They are covered with death's heads... My memory is encircled with blood. My memory has a belt of corpses!" (59). The most influential contemporary figure engaged in rewriting Caribbean historical narrative is Édouard Glissant who describes the experience of history there as a "struggle without witnesses, the inability to create even an unconscious chronology, a result of the erasing of memory in all of us. For history is not only absence for us, it is vertigo. This time that was never ours, we must now possess" (Glissant 1989: 161). The experience of trauma is at the heart of Glissant's project, and of Caribbean experience in general, as he suggests in his rhetorical questioning.

Would it be ridiculous to consider our lived history as a steadily advancing neurosis? To see the Slave Trade as a traumatic shock, our relocation (in the new land) as a repressive phase, slavery as the period of latency... our everyday fantasies as symptoms, and even our horror of "returning to those things of the past" as a possible manifestation of the neurotic's fear of his past? (65-66)

Glissant is in fact largely echoing many of the ideas central to Césaire's *Negritude*, and indeed to Fanon's critique of the colonized psyche, in that all three figures identify the slave trade as an initial "traumatic shock" that continues to manifest itself in postslavery, postcolonial Caribbean societies. In Haiti, broader Caribbean dilemmas and traumas tend to be magnified and multiplied. History inspires, torments, returns, swirls, and traumatizes endlessly in Haiti, invading the private sphere in a way that echoes to some extent Bhabha's theorization of the "unhomely"; his argument that "the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions," and that "in that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorientating" (Bhabha 1994: 9). Although Bhabha considers at length history's invasion of the private world, he pays less attention to the counter movement, that is, to how disoriented lives and "unhomeliness" invade history, so that history itself becomes a *fragmented* narrative of disparate, exiled existences. Edwidge Danticat's 1998 novel, *The Farming of Bones* seems to illustrate this invasion of history by the everyday, by the unhomely lives of Haitian exiles working in the Dominican Republic. It moreover presents a compelling narrative of the experience of history and trauma in Haiti.

Postindependence Haitian history has accumulated its own store of traumatizing memories so that in contrast to Glissant, Césaire and other Antillean authors, contemporary Haitian writers rarely refer to slavery in their narratives of historical trauma. One of these new sources of troubled memory is the 1937 massacre of Haitian migrant workers living in the Dominican Republic. Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* revisits the time, place, and events of the 1937 massacre, and initiates a kind of textual dialogue with *Compère Général Soleil*, Jacques-Stephen Alexis' 1955 novel of Haitian cane-cutters' migration and subsequent massacre in the Dominican Republic. In the "Acknowledgements" section of her novel she expresses her debt "To Jacques-Stephen Alexis, for *Compère*

Général Soleil. Onè. Always” (1998: 312). In interview, Danticat discusses the relationship between her novel and Alexis’ previous work.

I read *Compère Général Soleil* before I wrote *The Farming of Bones*. I was very struck by the character of Claire Heureuse, extremely so. I was tempted to reread the book while I was writing *Farming*, but I resisted because I didn’t want anything to slip in without my knowing it. But I see Amabelle in some way as taking up where Claire Heureuse left off. She is a kind of female Hilarion. She’s a worker, a laborer, like he was, but my focus in *Farming* was more on the testimonial aspect of the events. I didn’t want to lose track of the person who is having the experiences. The larger story already exists in history. I also wanted to reduce the massacre to one person, through whose eyes we can experience it (Interview with author, December 2002).

In other words, this is an example of Danticat personalizing the political, and of her politicizing the personal: the testimony is a means of validating personal experience and of exploring the effects of the massacre on individual lives.

The intertextual links between *Compère Général Soleil* and *The Farming of Bones* serve to underline the fact that Danticat (and, by extension, Haitian literature) is still seeking, through writing, to understand and rehabilitate the trauma of the 1937 massacre. As Danticat’s revisitation of the memory of the 1937 massacre shows, this episode has become a significant new source of trauma for the Haitian collective psyche. Danticat signals the importance of the massacre in her earlier short story “Nineteen thirty-seven,” in *Krik? Krak!* In this story, the narrator, and a whole secret society of women are haunted by the memory of the massacre. Collectively, the women identify themselves as “children of that place... We come from that long trail of blood” (44). *The Farming of Bones* is a continuation of “that long trail of blood,” that unfinished, traumatizing past. In this article, my fundamental aim is to examine how Danticat’s novel presents the effects of trauma on the individual and the community, how she identifies what is destroyed by trauma and also indicates the new structures and sensibilities that emerge from the traumatic or posttraumatic condition.

In her influential work on trauma, Cathy Caruth defines it as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events” in which “the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1996: 11). Similarly, Jeannie Suk argues that “trauma seems at

first to offer a paradoxical model in which a powerfully unusual event is at once inaccessible to the person who ‘experienced’ it, and yet all too available in nightmare, hallucination, and unwanted repetition... The event evades direct reference and knowledge, and yet provides constant torment” (Suk 2001: 75). Both Suk and Caruth therefore stress the indirect or delayed ways in which trauma affects individuals. In her contributions to Trauma Theory, Judith Herman has challenged the Freudian notion that (sexual) trauma is produced from unfulfilled fantasy, and has argued that the source of trauma lies not in repressed feelings and fantasies but in actual events. Like Caruth and Suk, Herman argues that the common reaction to atrocities “is to banish them from consciousness,” for “certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*” (Herman 1992: 1).¹ According to Herman, traumatic events cause “profound and lasting changes in physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory,” so that the individual “may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion” (34, 47). The aftermath of the traumatic event, Herman says, finds individuals “caught between the extremes of amnesia or of reliving the trauma, between floods of intense, overwhelming feeling and arid states of no feeling at all” (37). The effects on memory are therefore profound: the “natural” desire to forget is constantly countered by the spontaneous, troubling re-emergence of memories through involuntary flashbacks and nightmares.

In his discussion of Jewish cultural and linguistic alienation in colonial Algeria, Derrida suggests some of the unexpected effects of trauma on individuals and groups. Alienation and marginalization created, he says, a “disintegrated” Jewish community in Algeria, to which the typical reaction was to “erase... or at the very least attenuate it, compensate for it, to deny it also.” Whether this desire is fulfilled or not, he says, “the trauma will have taken place, with its undetermined effects, destructuring and structuring at the same time” (Derrida 1996: 92). Derrida identifies here the apparently “natural” urges to obliterate, attenuate, make up for, or deny the memory of the traumatizing event. While his ideas might seem to indicate that there is a universal, common experience of trauma, Derrida also insists that the effects of trauma are

1. Herman argues that, “rather than acknowledge the exploitive nature of women’s real experiences,” Freud “insisted that women imagined and longed for the abusive sexual encounters of which they complained” (1992: 19).

indefinite, that it impacts in uncertain, unforeseeable ways, and that even as it pulls things apart, it also reconfigures lives, relationships, and cultures. In Danticat's novel, too, the often paradoxical pulls and effects of traumatized memory are felt and explored insistently through the presentation of the experiences of the Haitian exiles returning from the Dominican Republic, where the massacre took place.

Asked why trauma figures so prominently in her works, Danticat relates it to her own childhood experiences in Duvalierist Haiti and, like Caruth and Herman, suggests that traumatic memories resurface endlessly. Danticat moreover says that writing is her means of accessing these repressed memories.

I think a lot of creative work springs out of some place deeper in us, a place that maybe even the writer does not have access to until he or she begins writing. I grew up under a dictatorship. Maybe that's a bigger scar than even I realized when I was a child, or even now. Maybe I'll understand it finally when I am an old woman. I saw a lot of people go away, a lot of people arrested, a lot of people "disappeared." I thought when I was younger that I was "used to it." It seemed like a sad, but kind of normal part of life. I thought it was like that everywhere, but maybe I was shell shocked by all this. Maybe I was traumatized and that trauma is now surfacing in this way (Interview with author, January 2003).

Danticat further suggests that exile offers a space, almost a haven in which these memories can begin to be re-evaluated.

Exile offers contrasts to these memories. We're told that's why we left in the end, to escape these horrible tortures and disappearances, to keep them from happening to us. So removed from them, one has the chance to look back and examine them over and over in some way or other, either simply in one's mind as flashbacks or if one can create, some kind of creative work (Interview with author, January 2003).

In Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, the narrator Amabelle, a young Haitian maid forced to flee her post in a wealthy Dominican household, displays the classic signs of a traumatized sensibility, not least of which is her deep, many-layered sense of guilt. Even before the massacre, the orphaned Amabelle is haunted by the memories of her parents' death (they drowned in the Massacre River), and her guilt as a survivor. Asleep or awake, she exists in a detached state, as she says: "It's either be in a nightmare or be nowhere at all. Or otherwise simply float inside these remembrances, grieving for who I was, and even more for what I've

become" (2). Amabelle's account of her immediate reaction to her parents' deaths is narrated in dispassionate language, as if she were a disinterested observer of herself: she recounts mechanically how she walks to the sands to throw herself into the water, how the "current reaches up and licks my feet. I toss the pots in and watch them bob along the swell of the water," how she is pulled out by two river boys, whose faces "seem blurred and faraway through the falling rain" (52). In its detachment from the events and the emotions of the traumatic incident, Amabelle's narration recalls Herman's idea that trauma causes deep, enduring changes in physiological arousal, and that the traumatized subject exists at times in "arid states of no feeling at all." Another of Amabelle's recurrent nightmares further reinforces the sense of split subjectivity, of detachment from her previous self. She dreams of a "sugar woman," a folkloric figure, who appears "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." The image of the sugar woman is infused with childlike elements, especially in the way she "locks arms with the air, pretends to kiss someone much taller than herself." The woman is in part a product of the initial, historical traumas of slavery, as becomes clear when she says that the muzzle she wears was "given to me a long time ago... so I'd not eat the sugarcane." The sugar lady figure, moreover, seems to be a kind of reflection of Amabelle, as is suggested when, during the dream, Amabelle asks why the woman is there and she replies: "Told you before... I am the sugar woman. You, my eternity." The links between Amabelle and the sugar woman are further suggested when Amabelle demands "Is your face underneath this?" and then remarks that the voice that comes out of her mouth surprises her as "it is the voice of the orphaned child at the stream, *the child who from then on would only talk to strange faces*" (132-133, emphasis added). The radical rupture of Amabelle's traumatized sensibility is mirrored in the figure of the sugar woman in that both have been altered, forced to hide their "real faces" from the world, made to exist in a suspended, childlike or orphaned state, detached from others and from themselves. Also, when the sugar woman says that Amabelle is her "eternity," there is a clear suggestion that the historical suffering that she represents has not ended, but continues to manifest itself in deracinated, alienated figures like Amabelle.

Although the first person narration necessarily foregrounds Amabelle's suffering, she is by no means the only traumatized character

in the novel. Her lover, Sebastien, carries the troubling memory of his father's violent death during a hurricane (34), while the character Kongo grieves over the sudden death of his son, Joël, victim of the Dominican Pico's reckless driving. Kongo in turn reaches out to Señora Valencia, Amabelle's employer, who gives birth to twins, only for the boy to die. The symbolism of the twins' struggle for life is all too evident: Rafael, the light-skinned male child named after Trujillo "tried to strangle" Rosalinda, the darker, weaker girl, who nonetheless prevails and survives as her twin weakens and dies. Danticat thus plays out "in miniature" the color (and gender) conflicts that plague the island of Hispaniola, and suggests that the only means of achieving mutual survival is through accommodation. Rafael's — and by extension Trujillo's — aggression will ultimately harm themselves more than it will their darker, female victims.

If there is one unifying reality that cuts across all barriers of class, language, color, and nationality in the novel, it is therefore the common experience of trauma. The massacre only multiplies the layers of trauma that haunt the Haitians' collective and individual psyches. Whereas Alexis' *Compère Général Soleil* ends at the moment of the exiles' return to Haiti, Danticat's novel explores the aftermath, the psychological and social legacies of the massacre in Haiti, and, in particular, the traumatized memories of the returning exiles. When, for example, Amabelle returns to the Dominican side of the border to meet Father Romain, the Haitian priest in Alegría, she finds him in a state of amnesia. His experiences in a Dominican prison have further traumatized him, and his only words are mechanical echoes — Amabelle says he is "like a badly wound machine" — of Trujillo's nationalist, racist propaganda. Romain pronounces with "aimless determination" that "our homeland is mother Spain; theirs is darkest Africa," and warns that if the two nations are not kept apart, "in less than three generations, we will all be Haitians" (260-261). Father Romain's amnesiac sensibility is the most extreme case of traumatized memory in the novel. Indeed, the trauma has erased almost all trace of his previous consciousness; as his sister remarks, he does have fleeting moments of lucidity, but more often retreats into amnesia, and "forgets all of it, everything, even me" (261).² Romain's case is a clear instance of what Herman sees as the "normal" reaction to atrocities, which is to dispel them from consciousness, and

2. Amabelle meets Father Romain later in the novel, and discovers that he has left the Church, married, and recovered over time (267-272).

never to speak openly of them. For many of the other characters in *The Farming of Bones*, too, the events of the massacre become literally “unspeakable,” too terrible to express in words. Without any family to return to, Amabelle lives with Yves, a former cane worker with whom she fled the Dominican Republic. Although they share the same accommodation, their relationship is in a way stillborn, and never able to develop in any way. They are bound together by the shared memory of the massacre, which is also what keeps them apart. Trauma creates a kind of restlessness, an anxiety about stopping for even an instant, and they both work constantly to escape the “phantoms” that “crowd those quiet moments when every ghost could appear in its true form and refuse to go away” (274). The sterility of Danticat’s Amabelle-Yves couple can be contrasted with Jacques Roumain’s Manuel and Annaïse in *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944), in that Roumain’s lovers bring forth life, and a new flow of water, while Danticat’s couple, in their unique, fruitless copulation, only reinforce the barrenness of their traumatized lives. In place of Roumain’s life-giving water, Danticat’s lovers produce only a “flash flood of tears” (250). Similarly, in Danticat’s novel, as in much contemporary Haitian writing, the Marxist-indigenist enchanted relationship with nature is transformed, and natural forces — the rain, the river, the arid land — are figured as hostile, deathly elements, accomplices to the human agents of devastation.

As time passes, Amabelle’s memories of her parents gradually dissolve until all she remembers, she says, “were the last few moments spent with them by the river,” while the rest of her past, “blended together like the ingredients in a too-long-simmered stew: reveries and dreams, wishes, fantasies” (245). The memories of the massacre, however, remain vivid, and seem impossible to dispel. Whereas Yves finds some solace in his work, Amabelle is ever restless, unable to forget, and unsure of her life to come, for she cannot “trust time or money” to make her forget (246). Although Amabelle wishes to forget the traumatic past, she also feels a deep counter instinct to *testify*, or to speak the unspeakable.³ Yves largely succeeds in keeping the past at

3. Beverly Bell’s *Walking on Fire* presents a series of “real” testimonies from Haitian women. In her short foreword to the book, Danticat remarks on the importance of testimony in a traumatized country such as Haiti: “These testimonials are instructive and cathartic, for a nation that due to a series of continuous struggles has never really had time to pause and grieve any single tragedy for long” (Bell 2001: x).

bay through work, but she — like Ollivier's Brigitte in *Passages* — must testify, reveal, and record the suffering she and the others experienced. When Catholic priests offer to listen to and “mark down testimonials of the slaughter” (246), the public reaction is so great that the priests soon tire of listening, and Amabelle's testimonial remains without an addressee (254).

Behind the imperative to testify lies a deeper need to (re)discover identity. Troubled memory and the everyday reality of trauma accentuate the alienating effects of exile so that the returning Haitians in a real sense are strangers, almost “other” to those who have remained in Haiti. The undisclosed, denied, attenuated memory and the unspoken testimony are internal markers of a radical feeling of unhomeliness. As the episode with the priests shows, there exists a great, almost overwhelming need to make public the private, inner, traumatized world of the returning exiles. The episode also indicates, however, the problems of locating an *addressee*; the priests seem to fear the “infection” of their own realities by these “terrible stories” and draw back quickly from the traumatized and traumatizing abyss towards which the testimonies seemed to be drawing them. In doing this, the priests effectively maintain the otherness of the traumatized exiles, and confine their trauma, their testimonies, to the private sphere; the unspeakable, it seems, must remain unspoken. This Church-imposed silencing of “terrible stories” echoes what Foucault says of Classical European attitudes towards the “inhuman,” in particular his argument that “all those forms of evil that border on unreason must be thrust into secrecy. Classicism felt a shame in the presence of the inhuman that the Renaissance had never experienced... Confinement hid away unreason, and betrayed the shame it aroused” (Foucault 1997: 64, 65). In the novel, it is the testimonies and memories rather than the traumatized people themselves that must remain confined and hidden away. Moreover, in maintaining the otherness of the testimonies and the experiences they speak of, the priests also perpetuate and exacerbate the problems of identification that the returning exiles feel. The exiles find themselves nominally and physically in their “homeland,” but psychologically they inhabit a completely different space, as Haiti is unable to accommodate their experience. With no one to address their testimonies to — apart from themselves — they form, without being conscious of it, a subgroup of the wider Haitian population, so that, in a very real way, they remain in exile, despite apparently being “at home.” Once again, this situation

reflects Derrida's description of the marginalized, traumatized Jewish group in Algeria, particularly in his formulation of their troubled sense of place and belonging.

Where *did we find ourselves* then? Where could we find ourselves? With whom could we still *identify* to affirm our own identity and tell our own story? Firstly, to whom could we tell it? We had to make ourselves up, we had to be able to *invent ourselves* without any model or assured addressee (1996: 95-96, Derrida's emphasis).

Without any "assured addressee," without any comforting sense of home or of belonging, Amabelle's desire to testify, or to (re)invent herself persists, as it must, and is linked with a need to physically return to the Dominican Republic. The conflicting desires to forget and to remember create a deeply felt tension in Amabelle that in turn leads to the paradox that the place of exile and trauma, Alegría, is at once strikingly real and inescapable, but also unreal and lost. The place of exile represents a kind of lost "authenticity" to which Amabelle feels compelled to return and, as such, reflects what Blanchot says about the importance of the desert in the post-exilic memory of the Hebrews. To Blanchot, the desert is a "place without place... to which one must always return as to that moment of nudity and uprooting that is at the origin of just, righteous existence." Moreover, as Blanchot says, the exile's voice, "needs the desert to cry out and... endlessly reawaken in us the terror, the togetherness, and the memory of the desert" (Blanchot 1959: 119).

Amabelle's attachment to the "desert" of the place(s) of exile is suggested in her recurring dream of "returning to give my testimony to the river, the waterfall, the justice of the peace, even to the Generalissimo himself," and in her vision of Alegría as "a daydream, [with] the village, the people, and Joël" (265). Unable to speak openly about her experiences, her dreams become testimonies in themselves, as they seem to play out the tensions between the real and the unreal aspects of the traumatic memories, and also, as she says, they are "visitations of my words for the absent justice of the peace, for the Generalissimo" (265). Amabelle suggests that the dream and the retention of memory are acts of resistance, that "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). Like in other Haitian texts such as Marie Chauvet's *Amour* or Yanick Lahens' *Dans la maison du père* this is

silence as insubordination, not as subjugation; memory here is a site of inviolable subjectivity. The retreat into the self that trauma brings about is finally an attempt to *repossess* memory. As Amabelle suggests, the traumatized individual feels a deep need, and indeed has the absolute right to possess memory, and then to share it, to testify, as the slaughter is, she says, “the only thing that is mine enough to pass on” (266). To the childless Amabelle, the traumatic memory becomes something to mother, protect, and keep alive — she wants to “find a place to lay it down... a safe nest” for it (266) — but is also a burden to be borne, to be suffered and endured. Amabelle’s testimony is narrated exclusively through the fragmented dream sequences that alternate with the narration of “real” events. It is only, it seems, in the unstructured narratives of dreams that the imagination can transform trauma into testimony. Amabelle is particularly concerned with bearing testimony for her dead lover, Sebastien. Because she is unable to discover how he died, Sebastien remains to her a story without an ending, an unfinished narrative, or as she says, “a body... with no shadow” (281). Her testimony is essentially an attempt to validate his existence, to maintain and valorize the open-endedness and unknowability of his life and death. It is also a bid to rescue his memory from the anonymity that the massacre imposes on its victims. In her dream-testimony she repeats almost litanically the refrain “His name is Sebastien Onius,” for, as she says, “Men with names never truly die. It is only the nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air” (282).

The intermittent, loosely structured dream-testimonies exist alongside the more lucid, structured main narrative. This fragmented style is used to suggest the disrupted memory of the traumatized individual; there is in the novel no one single flowing narrative, but a deliberately disjointed juxtaposition of the traumatizing past and the traumatized present. Danticat’s novel is in these ways an example of what Blanchot calls “the writing of disaster [*l’écriture du désastre*]”, which, he says, is a “discourse [*parole*] of waiting, silent perhaps, but which does not discard silence, but makes silence a statement in itself, which says in silence the statement that is silence. For mortal silence is never silent” (Blanchot 1980: 98). For Blanchot, therefore, the “writing of disaster” is characterized essentially by paradox: it is a silence that is nonetheless a statement, an eloquent voicelessness much like that of Danticat’s narrator, who lives in a kind of cocoon of silences, and yet this “mortal silence,” as Blanchot says, cannot, will not, be quiet. In

maintaining the imposed state of silence of her narrator, Danticat implicitly eschews the more conventional contemporary movement of “coming to voice” in postcolonial women’s writing.⁴ In Danticat’s novel, there is no clearly empowering, literal move out of silence and into “voice” or agency. The testimony takes place in silence, in dreams, in fragmented memories, and the narrator largely remains in her traumatized, voiceless state.

Also, Danticat does not (re)valorize fragmentation in any straightforward, celebratory way, as has been the tendency in much recent postcolonial theory and fiction. Françoise Lionnet, for example, recuperates fragmentation, and sees it as the source of a new energy for positive change, saying that: “The postcolonial subject... becomes quite adept at... using the fragments that constitute it in order to participate fully in a dynamic process of transformation” (Lionnet 1995: 5). This recuperation of cultural and identitary fragmentation fits neatly into the dominant contemporary model of postcolonial, postmodern Caribbean identity as a “free floating, carnivalesque version of plurality, which... constitutes a kind of *abundance*” (Britton 2001: 45). In stark contrast, Danticat’s fragments remain troubling and disjointed, signs of lack rather than abundance, and the narrative of *The Farming of Bones* is far closer to Blanchot’s “writing of disaster” than to any celebratory revision of fragmented Caribbean culture.⁵

Perhaps it is the paradoxical immediacy and prolonged nature of Haitian trauma and fragmentation that set Haiti’s authors apart from other Caribbean writers. Catastrophe, human tragedy, and exilic uprootings return incessantly to Haiti, whereas the French departments of Martinique and Guadeloupe, for example, are relatively calm, stable societies, whose more distant traumatic histories have been to some extent recuperated and reinterpreted by figures such as Césaire, Fanon,

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4. Britton for example notes that, for many postcolonial women authors, “the concept of ‘coming to voice’ remains an influential one, offering as it does a very straightforward conception of agency” (2001: 45).
 5. See also the *Créolité* group’s recuperation of splintered, fragmented identity and culture in *Éloge de la créolité* (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant 1989), and Walcott’s Nobel Speech, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory”; for instance this passage from Walcott’s essay: “the basis of the Antillean experience [is] this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs, and they are not decayed but strong” (1998: 70).

Glissant, and Condé. This is clearly not the case for Danticat and Haiti, whose fragmented writing has altogether different implications. Fragmented narratives such as Danticat's are born out of human catastrophes for, as Blanchot says, "the need for fragmentation is related to disaster" (Blanchot 1980: 99). The "writing of disaster" is not an attempt to arrive at a final understanding, but is a discourse that, again paradoxically, questions itself incessantly without offering any real, recuperative replies, as Blanchot suggests: "Fragmentary writing is in itself the risk. It does not amount to a theory... Interrupted, it pursues itself. Self-questioning, it does not lay claim to the question, but suspends it (without maintaining it) as a non-reply" (Blanchot 1980: 98).

Similarly, in *The Farming of Bones*, the narrator's constant self-questioning does not lead finally to any satisfying resolution but, echoing Blanchot's idea, leaves the questions hanging, suspended in a "non-reply." As Blanchot says in *L'Entretien infini*, "The writing of fragmentation is never unique... It is not written for, nor does it foresee a final unity" (Blanchot 1969: 452). At the end of the novel, Amabelle returns to the Massacre River, the site associated with both of her traumatizing memories: Trujillo's slaughter and her parents' deaths. It is this latter event that preoccupies her at her final visit to the river. Amabelle returns with a long-standing question: as her mother was swept away by the river, she raised her arm, but did that gesture mean that Amabelle should go into the river and die with them, or stand back from the water (308-309)? However, the significance of the gesture remains unknowable, its meaning suspended for all time; despite Amabelle's recurrent questioning, her return to the river brings no reply, no "clearer sense of the moment," and no "stronger memory" (309).

The novel's lack of answers is necessitated by the unknowable nature of Amabelle's questions, and at the same time is also an act of resistance, almost of Glissantian detour in that it avoids direct engagement and recuperative replies that might *make sense* in any straightforward way, and therefore supply an illusory sense of healing or closure. For Danticat, as for Glissant, history has "unexplorable" aspects around the edges of which they "wander" (Glissant 1989: 66). History remains unexplorable, as Amabelle's questions are left unanswered, suspended, and the novel insists on the unknowability of the truth of the traumatizing past. Fragmented narrative is in this way a necessary mode, not just in the *Farming of Bones*, but also perhaps for exiled writing in general. The experience of exile disrupts linear development, confuses spatiotemporal

relationships, and splinters lives into unforeseen directions and unknowable destinies. Thus, the writing of exile is itself essentially a “writing of disaster.” The final inability to recuperate any satisfying meaning in *The Farming of Bones* indicates that the past holds no real memory of wholeness of the self; that the past, like the present, is in truth a disordered series of fragments.

In the novel this realization occurs both on the personal, family level, and on the collective, national level. For, just as she is unable to recuperate any comforting sense of her familial past, Amabelle discovers a similar emptiness when she evokes Haitian history. For Danticat, as for many Haitian authors, the postindependence history of Haiti is an endlessly troubling burden. Danticat has spoken passionately of how, as the bicentenary of independence passes, the unfulfilled promises of the Revolution continue to be a source of anxiety, frustration, and guilt at all levels of Haitian society.

I think Haitian history is a burden for all of us, all Haitians, because the promise of the revolution and other things we achieved early on have not been met. In many ways, we have failed our forefathers and foremothers badly... How much higher is the literacy rate in Haiti now than it was 200 years ago? How better off are Haitians really?... It is very hard to reconcile being the two most-uttered clichés applied to Haiti, the first black republic and the poorest nation in the western hemisphere. It's very hard for us to explain or justify or... even understand (Interview with author, January 2003).

In *The Farming of Bones*, the most obvious symbol of Haiti's revolutionary past is Henry Christophe's citadel at Cap Haïtien, the historic city where Amabelle was brought up. She frequently invokes memories of the citadel, and often these are fused with more comforting memories of childhood (117), or of feeling “protected” there (227). In these memories of childhood, the citadel functions as a *lieu de mémoire*, or location of memory, where “memory crystallizes and secretes itself” (Nora 1994: 284). Later, however, when Amabelle climbs the road to the citadel, the previously potent *lieu de mémoire* now appears as a decaying, empty tourist attraction, literally and metaphorically fragmented, an unsatisfying, irrecoverable version of its glorious, almost mythical previous state. Amabelle's sense of attachment to the place of her childhood dissolves, as indeed does her desire to belong to anywhere. “I couldn't recognize anymore any place that resembled where our house had been, nor did I want to. Land is something you care about when

you have heirs. All my heirs would be like my ancestors: revenants, shadows, ghosts” (278). The Haitian past, present, and future are thus figured around absences and phantoms. Danticat seems to echo in this regard what Said says about exile, memory, and the experience of time: that because the exile is often concerned, or even consumed with memory, “it is what one remembers of the past and how one remembers it that determine how one sees the future” (Said 2000: xxxv). The workings of the traumatized, postexilic memory and of the particularities of Haitian history create in *The Farming of Bones* a very singular notion of time as a recurring, never ending, never beginning, paradoxically real and unreal presence.

Just as the citadel is divested of its previous historical potency, so the figure of Henry Christophe is presented as a cruel and despotic figure by the tour guide whom Amabelle follows around the citadel (279). This ambivalence towards history echoes Amabelle’s earlier remark that the revolution was “a different time — a different century — and... we had become a different people” (46). The grand narrative of a glorious Haitian history is therefore called into question and is ultimately impotent, unable to offer any lasting, comforting sense of the past in the traumatized present.⁶ Amabelle’s return to the citadel is essentially a return to personal and collective origins; as such it is a journey that is constantly played out in Haitian exiled writing, one more return to the silence of the “empty house” of origin (Houyoux 1992: 428).

Through her narrative, Danticat’s Amabelle constantly seeks to recuperate meaning, to reshape the traumas of the past into a more satisfying, *meaningful* narrative, until she finally arrives at the realization that the idea of a pre-existent plenitude, either on a personal or collective level, is a myth. Here again, her vision reflects Blanchot’s; for both authors, the fragmentation inherent to the writing of disaster effectively dismantles the myth of a previous plenitude, and, through disintegration, paradoxically offers a kind of coherence, “the putting into pieces (tearing apart) of that which has never existed before as a whole” (Blanchot 1980: 99). This is a coherence born *not* out of the dispersal of a system, for there was no pre-existent system, but one paradoxically engendered

6. In interview, Danticat talks of how Haitian critics of her work resent the way she underplays the “glories” of the revolution: “Some thought that I had to write something positive about Haiti, some episode where we triumphed, like the revolution” (Wucker 2000: 42).

by and characterized by incoherence. Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* is ultimately structured as a "putting into pieces" of fragmented personal and collective history, a tearing apart of something that, as the narrator comes to realize, never really existed at all.

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