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Edwidge Danticat as Literary Archeologist

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> "A couple of months ago, Mrs. Ruiz's only son had tried to hijack a plane in Havana to go to Miami. He was shot and killed by the airplane's pilot."

This quotation from Edwidge Danticat's short story "Caroline's Wedding" in her collection of works *Krik? Krak!* (1996) is a striking example of the way in which the author communicates painful elements of Haitian and U.S. minority cultural history and experience, particularly when it comes to issues of migration and attempted border crossings with deadly conclusions. From the 1950s to the early 2000s, there were hundreds of incidents of Cubans risking death, injury or imprisonment to leave their homeland and travel to the United States by hijacking an aircraft. The reference illustrates Danticat's seemingly effortless ability to educate her readers in a subtle yet impactful manner, using haunting depictions of not just the Haitian protagonists of the story but other Caribbean immigrants in the United States. Each of the stories in the collection paints a portrait of the political unrest that has plagued Haiti. By looking at history and politics through the perspectives of a variety of different characters, Danticats gives us personal views of the effects of genocide, loss, poverty and displacement during the nation's Duvalier regimes. In *The Farming of Bones* (1998), Danticat goes back in time to the now notorious 1937 genocide of thirty thousand Haitians by the Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo to render the voices of the silenced and murdered, again through the use of the fictional technique of perspectivism. Although in some ways, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), is a bildungsroman, i.e., the story of a young person's education and development, in this book, her first, Danticat also examines the perspectives of the marginalized in her focus on the practice of manually examining young Haitian women to see if they are virgins. Overall, in these three works of fiction, Danticat gives a voice to those whose voices have not been heard and depicts scenes of Haitian life that have not often been represented in American literature. In doing so, she "excavates" these scenes and voices in an attempt to lend agency to those who have been swallowed up in the crevices of history. It's not arbitrary, in fact, that one of her books is called *The Farming of Bones* as it is bones, among other fragments, that Danticat is metaphorically exposing and writing about so that the experiences of the bodies the bones belong to are not forgotten.

The literary immortalization of those physically lost is also an integral part of "Children of the Sea." In the story, which appears in *Krik?, Krak!*, two simultaneous accounts provide a glimpse into both what it was like aboard a ship of refugees bound for Miami and the deadly consequences of remaining in the country. "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" depicts the brutal realities of the 1937 massacre of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic while "Between the Pool and the Gardenias" offers a foray into gender roles at the time and the way in which mental illness manifests as a result of trauma.

In "Mapping Cultural Spaces in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak*! And Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*," Angelia Poon discusses the way in which the writer gives a voice to the voiceless, mainly women, and thus rewrites pre-existing history. "The oppositional feminist politics of 'writing back' in *Krik? Krak!* may be located in its representation of Haitian women and in its attempts to remember and carve out space for them in a country where they have been consistently written out of 'History,'" Poon notes. "Their absence is all the more conspicuous given the predominance in official Haitian history and public political life of such towering male figures as the revolutionary leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and the destructive Duvalier father-and-son team in this century." (138)

Further discussions of Danticat as a literary archeologist can be found in “(Dis)Locations of Oppression: Redemptive Forces in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*” by Susana Vega-González, who writes “... Danticat adheres to what Toni Morrison terms ‘literary archeology,’ a narrative strategy by which the writer excavates the historical past to rescue individual histories from oppression and oblivion.” (47) This idea of literary archeology likely emerged through the work of literary critics influenced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault and his explorations of the foundations and developments of normativity in culture. While archeology allows for the putting together of a historical narrative or time period through the close inspection of uncovered fragments and physical remains, literary archeology unearths previously unknown information through the careful inspection of the past and allows readers to perceive the events in a new and enriched way. The term is particularly vital when it comes to unearthing narratives that often go untold or have been previously told through a narrow lens – as the unveiling allows for reconstruction of what has previously been put forth.

“Nineteen Thirty-Seven” touches on a number of harrowing portions of Haitian history, most notably the Parsley Massacre. The gruesome event occurred during the reign of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo along the border dividing the island of Hispaniola between the two nations. Though largely focused on the bond between a mother and daughter, a key element of the story is the effect of what occurred on Oct. 2, 1937, when Trujillo ordered his military to execute Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent. This was at a time when, according to a 1935 census, fifty thousand Haitians were residing in the Dominican Republic.

The attack takes its name from the practices that Dominicans used to distinguish a Dominican from a Haitian. The person in question would be commanded to pronounce “perejil,” the Spanish word for parsley. This was considered enough to determine the difference between a Spanish-speaker and a French Creole-speaker and lead to the execution of the latter on the spot.

The brutal event, which lasted between five and eight days, was made to appear as though it was a spontaneous uprising of Dominican farmers against Haitian cattle thieves. As Roberto Strongman points out in "Reading through the Bloody Borderlands of Hispaniola: Fictionalizing the 1937 Massacre of Haitian Sugarcane Workers in the Dominican Republic," Danticat has worked to unmask the country's painful past, particularly when it comes to delving into women's experiences.

"The newspaper reports, which due to government censorship appeared two full months after the incident, placed the blame on isolated groups of Dominican vigilantes even though it was widely rumored at the time that the murders were orchestrated and masterminded by Trujillo as part of his 'Dominicanization program' in border villages," Strongman writes. "The insufficiency in the representation of Haitian women in history is addressed in the work of the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, who has captured an important amount of critical attention within literary and academic circles in the United States." (21)

Trujillo never publicly acknowledged his involvement in the murders. Yet following his execution in 1961, the true motivations behind the crimes began to come to light. Following extensive research conducted by historians and investigators, the estimated numbers of victims rose to the aforementioned number of thirty thousand. Not only did it take over two decades before the truth was uncovered, but the stories of those who perished have also remained largely untold. The mass graves in which they were brutally discarded were never unearthed, furthering their invisibility and blurring and erasing their stories.

Beginning in the early 1990s, Danticat made these stories real, painting a harrowing portrait of the true violent nature of the massacre and the mounting casualties it led to. In "1937," three women who endured the massacre and the ways in which it impacted their lives are at the forefront. The protagonist Josephine recalls crossing the river with her mother and the woman's almost otherworldly leap to safety. "We came from the bottom of that river where the blood never stops flowing, where my mother's dive towards life–her swim among those bodies slaughtered in flight–gave life gave her those wings of flames. The river was the place where it had all begun." (28) She describes her mother in the surreal image of wings that help her fly across the water. The mother's ascension from the blood-soaked water is described in a way that shows both how trauma is inscribed on the body but also how a body can gain a certain measure of power through survival of the trauma. Thus, the blood of the murdered shines like a transformative fire on the mother's body and her ability to escape the massacre seems to make her seem very powerful, so powerful that both her daughter and the narrator ascribe "wings of flame" to her.

"Then the story came back to me as my mother had often told it," the narrator reflects. "On that day so long ago, in the year nineteen hundred and thirty-seven, in the Massacre River, my mother did fly. Weighted down by my body inside hers, she leaped from Dominican soil into the water, and out again on the Haitian side of the river. She glowed red when she came out, blood clinging to her skin, which at that moment looked as though it were in flames." (37)

Strongman notes that the description of "those wings of flame" is emblematic of the author's profound ability to embed history within the reader's consciousness uniquely and effectively. "Though this final passage explains them as figures of speech and are not intended to signify a real flight of fire, the image loses none of its importance, for Danticat's fantastic description of this event functions as a form of memorializing, even mythologizing, what occurred." (34) The hyperreal event is less significant than what it symbolizes. That moment is examined by Josephine as she visits her mother in prison after she is put away for practicing witchcraft that is believed to have killed her neighbor's infant baby. Josephine's mother is stripped of her humanity and identity, her motivations drastically misunderstood by those who have enforced her confinement and those who fear her as a dangerous force. Danticat's work illustrates her side of the story and the impact her imprisonment has on her daughter. It also serves as a means of documenting the experience lived by thousands of women, who were subjected to the same prejudices and denied a voice and their freedom. It is the narration of the event as a record and evidence of her experience that is the most valuable element of the story. "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" also depicts President François Duvalier's strict enforcement of Haitian Vodou, a mixture of Catholicism and beliefs dating back to Africans, who were the major ethnic group in the French slave-holding colony of Saint Domingue before it became Haiti. The Indigenous African beliefs are still practiced today in the West African country of Benin, formerly known as Dahomey.

As is well documented, it was a Vodoun ceremony that initiated the Haitian revolution. Josephine's mother is in jail because it is believed she is responsible for the death of her friend's baby. She is branded a Lougarou or witch, a mythical creature that can fly – an accusation that implies she is a threat to society and resulted in prosecution. Josephine's mother is beaten and sentenced to life in prison.

"All of these women were here for the same reason," Josephine shares. "They were said to have been seen at night rising from the ground like birds on fire. A loved one, a friend, or a neighbor had accused them of causing the death of a child. A few other people agreeing with these stories was all that was needed to have them arrested. And sometimes even killed." (21)

Danticat's illustrations can be viewed as a means of bestowing power on women who have been stripped of it. They are allowed to transcend space and time. They replicate through doubling into a spirit or animal counterpart, their beings lifting from their weighted down human forms. Touching on the concept of flight allows for the breaking away of the literal and figurative shackles of enslavement. The concept of the flying African is also at play, something that has long been explored in black folklore and colonial narratives, with one of the most striking explorations found in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977). In the novel, the author depicts the epistemological beliefs created within slave communities of flying as a spiritual gift that allows slaves to transcend their circumstances.

This mistreatment of women that Danticat describes and critiques in *Krik? Krak!* is a significant aspect of the country's history and culture, as Haitian feminist scholar Carolle Charles points out in "Gender and Politics in Contemporary Haiti: The Duvalierist State, and D. Frances reinterprets in "Fictions of Feminine Citizenship**:** Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean. Ahead of Duvalier's government "patriarchal cultural codes defined the limits of state violence, which understood women, children, and old people as 'political innocents,' and, in their status as dependents, women were exempted from state violence," Francis notes. "The Duvalierist state, however, ushered in a shift in the reigning paternalistic construction of women as 'political innocents' to women as 'enemies of the state.' Under this administration, when women voiced their political opinions in support of women's rights or the opposition party, they were defined as 'subversive, unpatriotic and unnatural.' As such, they were deserving of punishment, which often took the form of sexual torture." (77) Thus, we can see that the worthy women in “1937,” far from being criminals, are threatening to the paternalist dictatorship precisely because of the strength and agency that has allowed them to escape other abuses. It’s thus supremely ironic that the mother in “1937” shows her power in liberating herself from the bloody river where so many of her countrymen were murdered by Trujillo’s soldiers only to be finally and definitively abused, tortured and killed by her own people.

The mishandling of women’s experiences and the way in which beliefs in mysticism posed a threat factors into “Between the Pool and the Gardenias,” in which a woman grappling with mistreatment from her womanizing husband and her inability to carry a child to term hallucinates that a decomposing infant is alive and cares for it. The erosion of her mental state further captures the neglect that women in need of care endured. By the story’s conclusion, the Dominican man she was once intimate with catches her with the corpse and alerts the authorities. It is inferred that she is set to suffer the same fate as Josephine’s mother. As Myriam Chancy portrays in “Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women,” the author’s work is a means of giving women from the region a platform that they have previously been denied. "Traditionally," Chancy argues, "Haitian women have been subsumed under an overtly male-identified national identity. What Haitian women writers demonstrate is that the project of recovering Haitian women's lives must begin with the re-composition of history and nationality.” (31).

The reign of Duvalier in Haiti beginning in 1957 also plays a major role in Danticat’s stories. “Children of the Sea” takes place at the start of his time in office and showcases the grim nature of daily life in the region under his rule. This comes to light through a series of letters written by two young lovers for one another but that they know they will likely never exchange. The young man is traveling on a boat bound for Miami, packed with 36 migrants while the woman remains back home, facing the grisly effects of Duvalier's policies and strict military intervention by the unit known as the Militia of National Security Volunteers and also referred to as the Tonton Macoute (after a Haitian Creole bogeyman). It is estimated that by the end of his tenure in 1971, he was behind the deaths of roughly thirty thousand people.

Through these exchanges, we are taken on the journey on which ~~so~~ many refugees embarked while fleeing their homeland from the harsh conditions to the uncertainty of what their future held. The passengers are hungry, thirsty and worn down – all of them knowing that their lives may be cut short at any moment. The letters are a means of providing historical documentation of the experiences of those who found themselves stateless as they set sail in a desperate attempt to free themselves from a dangerous regime.

The woman's words in "Children of the Sea" also offer a commentary on censorship in the country, as she informs her lover that her father has demanded she destroy tapes of his controversial radio show, in which he is critical of authority. She also reveals that the members of his youth federation group have vanished. Schools are closed and many are too crippled with fear to leave their homes. Yet the threat is unavoidable as soldiers frequently invade residences and beat up those suspected of being against the government or associating with those who harbor such views. "I am cramped inside all day. They've closed the schools since the army took over," the young woman reveals. "I thank god you got out when you did," her note continues. "All the other youth federations have disappeared. no one has heard from them." (4).

The woman back in Port-au-Prince also writes of officers storming homes and not only committing rape but forcing the unthinkable act of sex between family members under the threat of death. Rape was a major weapon of war under the Duvalier regime, yet few reports captured the shockingly sinister aspects of the tactics soldiers employed. "If they come into a house and there is a son and a mother there, they hold a gun to their heads," the woman writes. "They make the son sleep with his mother. If it is a daughter and a father, they do the same thing."

In "Silences Too Horrific to Disturb: Writing Sexual Histories in Edwidge Danticat's 'Breath, Eyes, Memory,'" Donette A. Francis focus on Danticat's exposure of assault and rape in Haiti's history, citing her 1994 novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as another work in which she conveys such harsh realities. Francis writes, "If dominant narrative forms have failed to tell Haitian women's stories of sexual violations, then, for Danticat, the novel serves as an appropriate space from which to write sexual histories. Unlike old-style political history that chronicles the victories of great men and legitimizes their point of view as the nation's official memory, Danticat centers poor, peasant, migrant, laboring women to inscribe their 'unofficial' memories in the historical narrative of the Haitian nation-state." (78)

In Breath, Eyes, Memory~~,~~ Danticat also illustrates the experiences of women oppressed by cultural norms surrounding their sexuality. It explores the fragile connection between the narrator Sophie and her mother, who gave birth to her as a result of rape. The fact that they are bonded by trauma puts a significant strain on their relationship. It is through the premise that the effects of rape are highlighted with particular attention paid to the emotional and physical toll it takes and the way in which victims of sexual violence are forever altered by their experiences. Furthermore, it sheds light on the emphasis placed on women's "virtue" in Haitian culture and the way in which virginity is deemed of high importance. Sophie is subjected to invasive virginity tests that ultimately inflict a degree of torment resembling her mother's assault. "Haitian men, they insist that their women are virgins and have their 10 fingers," Sophie's aunt says after Sophie is tested, explaining to her the virtues of virginity and the reasons for testing. This practice has been deemed invasive and violating to such a degree that in recent years, United Nations officials listed Haiti among the countries they launched campaigns in to call attention to the practice as a violation of human rights.

In her 1997 historical fiction novel *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat centers the entire story on the Parsley massacre through the eyes of Amabelle – a young Haitian woman living in the Dominican Republic in the 1930s. Danticat was inspired to tell the story after visiting the site of the tragedy and realizing those utilizing the area for domestic work were unaware of its unsettling history. Her intention with the book was for it to serve as a memorial to the thousands of victims.

A major aspect of *The Farming of Bones* is the sharing of stories and experiences by characters who partook in the communal trauma of the massacre as a means of ensuring their recollections don't fade. This strategy also helps allay their fears of one day being unable to identify the names of the loved ones who perished. It is clear Danticat has a similar will to preserve her culture and country's history. She herself was born in Port-au-Prince in 1969, with her parents emigrating to New York when she was four and as she writes about in *Brother I'm Dying* (2007), was raised by relatives in her homeland until she could join them at the age of twelve, where she lived in a predominantly Haitian neighborhood in Brooklyn. Her connection to each story and characters is palpable – with stories set in her homeland and NY providing equally compelling details. Considering herself a "citizen-artist," the author has devoted herself to bearing witness – even if it's through the craft of fiction. "We live in heartbreaking times, which make fictional stories, to my mind, even as I write them, feel small and useless, but when I look back at stories I have written during previously difficult times, I am happy I wrote them," she told the *Brooklyn Review* in 2018. "Whether they address directly what is happening or not, it feels like I am bearing witness. I guess this is what I will continue to do, with my pen, and with my feet, and with my time and whatever other ways I can be helpful." (n.p.)

Danticat hails from a working class background. Her parents moved to New York and left her and her brother behind in order to carve out a better life for their children, an achievement that would not be possible had they stayed in their home country. "They could have stayed behind with us and we could have all starved or they could have gone to New York to work so that we could not only have clothes and food and school fees, but also a future," Danticat says in an interview for the book *Edwidge Danticat: A Reader's Guide*. "For a future, for people like us, the malere, the poor, as my uncle liked to say, was not given. It was something to be clawed from the edge of despair with sweat and blood. At least in New York, our parents would be rewarded for their efforts." (15)

In her 2010 collection of essays *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work,* she wrestles with this responsibility. We discover over the course of the book how specific moments from Haiti's timeline have impacted her and receive an education on them in the process. The stories begin with an account of the deaths of Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, two young men who were executed after plotting to overthrow Duvalier in 1964. Their brutal deaths echo throughout the book – and finally are fully described in a passage in which Danticat recounts visiting the site of their killings by firing squads at the national cemetery in Port-au-Prince.

Danticat's work may be set decades ago but it maintains a significant level of relevance. Haiti remains one of the poorest nations in the world, the catastrophic 2010 earthquake – which claimed between one hundred thousand to three hundred thousand lives – contributing to the struggles those residing there face. Additionally, several tragic contemporary incidents echo some of those described in her work. Each year, hundreds attempt to flee Haiti by sea, braving life-threatening conditions. In February 2019, the bodies of 15 migrants from the region were recovered from the waters near the island of West Caicos. The following month, 28 Haitians fleeing their homeland drowned off the coast of Abaco in the Bahamas. In 2013, 30 Haitians attempting to reach Miami drowned after their overloaded boat capsized.

Another grim reality depicted in Danticat's novels that still exists today is the contentious relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Though half a million Haitians reside in the country, they are subjected to extreme prejudice and in 2013, the Dominican government stripped tens of thousands, who were of Haitian descent of their Dominican citizenship. This rendered anyone born between 1929 and 2007 stateless. According to the UNHCR, the number of those affected is as high as one hundred and thirty-three thousand. According to The International Organization for Migration, one hundred and sixty thousand people moved back to Haiti voluntarily between 2015 and 2016. The number of those deported is as high as fifty-four thousand.

Furthermore, many women face the threat of sexual assault. According to the humanitarian aid organization USAID, one in three Haitian women, ages 15 to 49, have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of Haitian men and international aid workers. These incidents largely go unreported due to fear of the social stigma survivors often face. It was not until 2005 that the laws around rape and domestic abuse were updated. Prior to that, they had not been altered since 1835.

It cannot be ignored that Danticat has faced criticism for representing unfavorable aspects of Haitian life, with some going as far as accusing her of lying. She has addressed this by reminding readers that she is a fiction writer and the stories she tells are not representative of everyone who is of Haitian descent. She expands on this in the essay "Walk Straight from Create

Dangerously": "Maligned as we were in the media at the time, as disaster-prone refugees and boat people and AIDS carriers, many of us had become overly sensitive and were eager to censor anyone who did not project a "positive message" of Haiti and Haitians," she wrote of the reaction following the release of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. She added, "And how can one individual–be it me or anyone else–know how nine to ten million other individuals should or would behave?" (184)

Danticat specifically discussed the angry response many had to her illustration of virginity testing, fervently denying this was a part of their culture: "... [T]hough I was not saying that 'testing' happened in every Haitian household, to every Haitian girl, I knew many women and girls who had been 'tested' in that way." (33) Though it is unfair to appoint Danticat as the speaker for her entire community, it may be said that her portraits of fictional characters and premises call attention to underrepresented narratives and historical events. Not only is it vital to the canon of Caribbean literature, but it's also an essential part of understanding a part of the world that has gone largely ignored for far too long. The author is also among a group of Caribbean writers who, beginning in the 1990s, became to rework presentations of previously erased from history, including Julia Alvarez, Margarita Engle and Dolores Prida.

In *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat's narrator Amabelle Désir reflects on her life before and after the event on the Massacre river. She frequently relives the memories of her parents, who she watched drown as a child in the spot. Often, the speaker separates from her voice and tells the story as a removed party, evoking the style of kitchen poets, the tradition in Haiti in which women would congregate while preparing food and share tales. Amabelle resides in the Dominican Republic, as a servant to a family who have adopted her. The Anti-Haitian climate established by Trujillo looms over the entire novel. There is also the echo of the Spanish Civil

War, as Papi connects with his homeland by listening to news of the fighting on the radio – behind him a portrait of the Generalissimo, painted by Señora Valencia. This is yet another way in which the book serves as a literary artifact, providing a glimpse into wartime life under a brutal regime and displays the inescapable presence of the country's brutal dictator and the ways in which he must be revered and admired by the country. It also serves as a commentary on the Dominican Republic's enduring identification with an affinity for Spain.

The immense prejudice faced by those dark enough to look Haitian or mistaken for such is illustrated when Señora Valencia gives birth to twins, with the daughter Rosalinda's skin tone prompting concern. While her son is "coconut-cream colored, his cheeks and forehead the blush of pink water lilies," Rosalinda is "deep bronze, between the colors of tan Brazil nut shells and black salsify." Señora Valencia expresses her concern, asking Amabelle, "Do you think my daughter will always be the color she is now?" (10) Doctor Javier, also notes his dismay while caring for the newborn girl.

"She has a little charcoal behind the ears, that one," he says. This prompts Señora Valencia's father to shoot down any notion that his side of the family should be responsible, as though it is a deformity. "It must be from her father's family," he retorts. "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 Colon. And I, myself was born near a seaport in Valencia, Spain." Papi then scolds him, accusing him of making a "very impolite assertion." Despite his defensiveness, he later confesses to Amabelle that the baby makes him "anxious." This scenario demonstrates the intense racism of the Dominican society of that time, which has continued into our contemporary period. It is contradictory and even perverse as families like the Valencias, who live on the border with Haiti, are all likely to have Haitian blood. This prejudice also points to a refusal to acknowledge the history of the island of Hispaniola and the Caribbean in general where racial mestizaje is extensive. The twins also signify the island as a whole. It is what gets buried with such refusals that Danticat attempts to excavate in this particular example. She portrays the superiority believed to be held by those of European ancestry and thus a lighter skin tone.

Danticat uses extensive symbolism as a means of conveying Haitian history in the novel, most notably through the parsley. The marked imagery recalls the way in which Trujillo ordered Dominican soldiers to kill suspected Haitians. Reflecting on the mass killings, Amabelle wonders why that word specifically was used as part of the grave undertaking – concluding that it's associated with cleansing and therefore aligns with the grim realities of an ethnic cleansing. "We used parsley for our food, our teas, our baths, to cleanse our insides as well as our outsides. Perhaps the Generalissimo in some larger order was trying to do the same for his country," she says. (203)

While language was used by the Dominican military to determine who is to live or die, it is clear that prejudices against those with darker skin also led to the injuries and deaths of non-Haitians. As Amabelle recovers in a crowded shelter during the slaughter, she notices a "crippled Dominican" who is "black like the nun who came to re-dress his wounds. He'd been mistaken for one of us and had received a machete blow across the back of his neck for it. There were many like him in the room..." Amabelle observes the eerie routine work of priests, nuns and doctors – whose work it is to "collect corpses along the riverbank." (217)

The buried bones of those who were killed no doubt play a role in the title as do the frequent references to dismembered figures and the backbreaking labor of cane cutting. The physical work is linked to the Haitian characters. In "Re-Membering Hispaniola: Edwidge

Danticat's ‘The Farming of Bones’”, April Shemak points out how the act is also connected to the acts of brutality they endure. “... the ‘farming of bones’ connotes the back-breaking agricultural labor of the canfields as well as the slaughter of bodies–a kind of cultivation of death where the machete, the cane cutter’s tool, becomes the modus operandi of the massacre” (57). As Amabelle faces the threat of the militia forces, she is informed of the practice the men, including bayonet-wielding civilians, undertake to kill Haitians, which mirrors an agricultural approach, in which potential victims are denied humanity and viewed as mere reeds. “They tell the civilians where best to strike with the machetes so our heads part more easily from our bodies.” Her lover Sebastien, who works as a cane cutter, endures cuts on his body from the work, with his wounds being described in a similar fashion to the scars borne by those surviving machete attacks. The “stalks have ripped apart most of his skin on his shiny black face, leaving him with crisscrossed trails of furrowed scars.” (14)

Amabelle later describes a group of older women, who survived the attack, noting, “One was missing an ear. Two had lost fingers. One had her right cheekbone cracked in half, the result of a runaway machete in the fields.” (157) Another has “rope burns engraved on her neck.” Bodily injury is also described in testimony by Tibon, who recounts being thrown off a cliff – his flesh bearing the scars of the attack. “I know it too when I strike the water because it is so cold and sharp, the water, more like a machete than water. I have many cuts on my body where the water sliced me, some tears on my ankles, which now cause me to limp.” (158)

Military functions are felt even in the most minute of daily tasks, as Señora Valencia’s husband Pico, a soldier in Trujillo’s army, moves in and out of home life. Immediately upon meeting his newborn son, he names him Rafael after Generalissimo. Also subtly portrayed is the class structure within the Haitian community. “Non-vwayaje Haitians are stable and much better off than the cane cutters. They live in houses made of wood and cement, surrounded by plentiful fruit trees and gardens. Their status can be traced back several generations and they are regarded as "people who had their destinies in hand" (140).

The persistent threat of displacement to Haitians living in the Dominican Republic, regardless of whether or not they hold the proper documentation, looms large over the novel. As mothers take their children to a modest, one-room school, they bemoan the fact that they are treated as the other and less than those of Dominican blood:

"I pushed my son out of my body here, in this country," one woman says. "My mother too pushed me out of her body here. Not me, not my son, not one of us has ever seen the other side of the border. Still they won't put our birth papers in our palms so my son can have knowledge placed into his head by a proper educator in a proper school." Another woman notes, "To them, we are always foreigners." (77) The women discuss the rumors that "anyone not in one of those Yanki cane mills will be sent back to Haiti." Danticat captures the constant duress those of Haitian descent are under, as they must always fear they will be stateless.

The women reference the fear of being without "papers" proving their status, noting that some workers are controlled by plantation owners who hold onto their papers and therefore wield power over them. As Amabelle hears their concerns, she considers what is to become of her, someone without documented proof of where she belongs.

The Dominican Republic has a lengthy history with anti-Haitian sentiment that persists until today. Under Trujillo, Dominicans whose ethnic background was more European – were deemed more valuable. Those of Spanish ancestry were more celebrated than those who descended from those enslaved under the French. It was these beliefs that fueled the dangerous rhetoric behind the 1937 massacre. Those who managed to survive the violence largely endured lives as outcasts, confined to isolated towns in cane fields. In the 1900s and early 2000s, conservative officials branded those of Haitian descent as being "in transit," even if they were Dominican citizens. Babies born to Haitian children were denied birth certificates that would have granted them citizenship and many of those with the proper papers saw them destroyed. They were deemed extranjeros and migrants, despite making up ten percent of the country's population**.**

In 2014 a new law was implemented stating that Dominicans born to undocumented parents between 1929 and 2007 would no longer be citizens; this included their children, grandchildren and beyond. Human rights groups estimate that hundreds of thousands were affected– no longer allowed to work in, vote or enroll in higher education in the country. Colorism and anti-Haitian sentiment prevail today, with hate crimes against the Haitian population being routinely reported.

The Farming of Bones captures the constant state of fear Haitians endure as they anticipate the threat of violence and must frequently be on guard. After Joel is struck and killed by a hit and run driver (who we know to be Papi), Unel warns Amabelle not to walk alone and to remain on alert. "After Joel was killed, we formed a night-watchman brigade. If they come, we'll be prepared for them," Unel says to her as another highly fearful man plots his escape from the region, refusing to stay around as the hostility goes "from talk to bloodshed." (162) The chatter moves from rumors to widespread fear and Doctor Javier warns Amabelle that "soldiers and civilians are killing Haitians." She dismisses his words at first, all too used to being told she is unsafe and believing that she as a sugar cane worker is too valuable to Dominicans to be killed. She is plunged into a state of confusion, unsure who to trust. "I needed to know precisely what was true and what was not. Everything was so strange. What if the doctor too was part of the death plot?"

Hurricane San Zenón of 1930 is also referenced in regard to the painful history of Sebastien, who lost his father in the disaster. The deadly event, one of the most catastrophic on record, struck both Haiti and the Dominican Republic and claimed the lives of between roughly two thousand and eight thousand. "He lost his father and almost everything else," Amabelle shares of Sebastien's past. "This is why he left Haiti. This is why I have him. A sweep of winds that destroyed so many houses and killed so many people brought him to me." (64) Although Sebastien has been marked by the communal trauma of the hurricane, it is partially the sensitivity, soulfulness and hurt in his psyche that attract Amabelle.

The novel has been said to be a retelling of *Compère général Soleil* (1955) by Jacques Stephen Alexis, which centers on the mass killings of Haitian cane cutters residing in the Dominican Republic. With the title a reflection of the backbreaking labor that is working in the sugar cane fields, *The Farming of Bones* provides an alternate window into the common reality, one in which Amabelle must accept the gruesome history her people have endured while confronting the complicity of both sides. The threat of violence looms in the foreground throughout the novel, never truly removed from her life or the lives of those around her, thus a vivid, sometimes heightened version of trauma is presented. In the midst of trying to discern whether or not there is a true threat of violence upon her, Amabelle is forced to confront the fact that her means of coping with past trauma has prevented her from seeing true danger in front of her. "I had been living inside dreams that would not go away, the memories of an orphaned child. When the present itself was truly frightful, I had perhaps purposely chosen not to see it," (29) she recognizes.

When she returns to Haiti, Amabelle is forced to face that she was very much aware of her position back in the Dominican Republic and the immense threats against her. Yet she buried such fears because she knew that if she faced them, she would have no one to turn to. There is a code of silence she adopts, as is true for Yves, who refuses to discuss the massacre. His trauma is so all consuming, he is unable to take in the scent of sugarcane, be exposed to parsley or hear Spanish being spoken. He also has an aversion to rivers.

Though she copes with her grief differently, Amabelle feels connected to Yves and possesses enough awareness to know that the two of them are working to distract themselves from facing their past and what's become of their loved ones. "He and I both had chosen a life of work to console us after the slaughter. We had too many phantoms to crowd those quiet moments when every ghost could appear in its true form and refuse to go away." (102) She is aware that while the supernatural presence of those lost may haunt them, the more pressing threat is if their appearance becomes long lasting. While his inclination is to bury what he's been subjected to, Amabelle is fueled to pass her story on to others. As she shares with Metrès Dlo, the Mistress of the Water, "I dream all the time of returning to give my testimony to the river, the waterfall, the justice of the peace, even to the Generalissimo himself." (105)

Danticat was inspired to construct the history of Massacre River (Rio Masacre), after visiting the location and feeling as though the horrific history of the location was being forgotten. She seemingly communicates this through Amabelle of what has taken place there. "It is perhaps the great discomfort of those trying to silence the world to discover we have voices sealed inside our heads, voices that, with each passing day, grow even louder than the clamor of the world outside," (91) she says. Danticat has discussed her difficulty in retrieving historical accounts of the tragedy from the side of Haitians, noting in the book *Edwidge Danticat: The Haitian*

Diasporic Imaginary by Nadège T. Clitandre, "... I was trying to read it from both sides, the points of view of both Dominicans and Haitians, but it was really hard to find much documentation of the Haitian side." (144) The author then decided her novel would offer the "testimony" she felt was absent from historical accounts, sharing that she "liked the idea of testimony, because I felt that in the research that I was doing, that's what was lacking." (147)

Her excavation of firsthand accounts led her to book *Blood in the Streets: The Life and Rule of Trujillo* (1946) by Albert C. Hicks, which allowed her to unearth the story of a Haitian female servant who was stabbed to death at the hands of the family she served. The real-life figure would serve as the basis for Amabelle. "I knew I wanted to write about someone like that, who was sort of treading… who was working these borders, these social borders, who knew both sides and felt like, somehow, she belonged to both sides but really didn't." It is through the distinct and unprecedented narrative of the character, that she is able to give a voice to women like the murdered servant, who were silenced and largely forgotten. The story also appears in the novel directly when rumors of a woman killed at the dinner table of the home she works in are discussed.

Beliefs surrounding dreams and nightmares in Haitian culture are also a major part of *The Farming of Bones.* From the onset, Amabelle recalls how her father warned her that playing with her shadow can give her nightmares and she frequently finds herself drifting between real life and an imaginative state, mainly when she is interacting with Sebastien – who often comes to visit her at night. She refers to figures in her dreams, like the sugar woman, as her shadows.

Shadows play an important role in Amabelle coming to terms with her cultural history. It is largely when she converses with Metrès Dlo, Mistress of the Water, to whom she dedicates the story, the keeper of shadows and histories that she is able to confront her painful past. The

Metrés Dlo serves as an extension of the water imagery that is so prevalent throughout the novel and aligns with moments of anguish. The river carries the stories of those who perished but also serves as a cleansing for her. Like Danticat, Amabelle finds peace in relaying the stories of her ancestors. There is closure to be found in her ability to paint a portrait of the trauma she and others have faced. Reconstructing the event permits her to begin recovering from the demons that plague her memories. She concludes the story by immersing herself in the river where her parents and many more perished. In effect, through her actions and words she constructs a memorial.

"What [Danticat] writes is in no sense a conventional narrative but one that traces the effects of trauma and somehow, at least linguistically, tries to come to terms with those effects, so that they will be inscribed and recalled but perhaps reconfigured in ways that make them not entirely disabling," (30) Jessica Gildersleeve writes in *Elizabeth Bowen and the Writing of Trauma*: *The Ethics of Survival* (2014).

It may be said that Danticat has taken it upon herself to create a representation of Haiti that contradicts the thin portrayals that have existed in the past, particularly by the news media. As Robyn Cope points out, in "'We Are Your Neighbors': Edwidge Danticat's New Narrative for Haiti," the essay "Another Country" *in* '*Create Dangerously'* illustrates Danticat's frustration with the thin portrayals of her place of birth as a peculiar state with a reality unlike other more fortunate neighboring countries. She points out starling comments made by news commentators during Hurricane Katrina, in which they noted that the conditions brought on by the disaster were something you'd never fathom as being possible in the U.S. but rather Haiti, remarking, "If you turned the sound down on your television, if you didn't know where you were, you might think it was Haiti" and "[t]hese things happened in Haiti, but not here."

“However, literature, unlike CNN, lends honorary citizenship to a writer or to a reader. Fiction, expounds Danticat in “Create Dangerously,” has the power to universalize terror, hope, or resistance, erasing temporal and geographical borders between widely disparate contexts,” Cope writes.

Danticat’s presentation of history isn’t simply a retelling of events filled with geographical descriptions, it’s a way to breathe humanity into people and events that have previously been dismissed. Yet while her work inadvertently has this effect, the author has dismissed the notion that she is tasked with humanizing an often discounted group. Cope points out that through her work, readers are not asked to see Haitians more humanely, but rather become more humane themselves and therefore see Haitians as neighbors. “In this subtle but significant distinction, Haitian humanity is an unassailable given; the reader's humaneness is not,” Cope explains. (100)

Author Evelyne Trouillot places Danticat on the “right side of history,” putting forth the idea that she is devoted to presenting social truth and a lens of openness when it comes to exploring the “other.” Much of this is done through the presentation of Voudoun tradition in a manner that is accessible. Amabelle’s parents are herb healers who passed on their practices to her. Voudoun is commonly associated with Haitian peasants and serves as a powerful element of folk religion. While it is used for healing and spiritual connection, under Trujillo Voudoun has often been dismissed as a folk religion filled with superstition taken on by the poor and associated with death and the devil. Yet as Donna Weir-Soley points out in “Voudoun Symbolism in *The Farming of Bones*,” “Although Haitians are universally deemed powerless by virtue of abject poverty, political instability and corruption, they are far from spiritually impotent.” (7) She adds that “underestimating the power and resilience of Haitian folk culture may have been Trujillo's mistake." (7) Danticat doesn't overtly discuss Voudoun but instead weaves elements of it into the novel. Its references are coded rather than explicit.

As Weir-Soley adds, "by refusing to announce the presence of Voudoun as part and parcel of Haitian folk philosophy Danticat implicitly removes the stigma of a pervasive and inherent 'evil' that, for some readers, would provide a justifiable defense for the spilling of Haitian blood in the 1937 massacre" (171). One of the ways it is subtly introduced is during the novel's opening in regard to the birth of Señora Valencia's twins, when the concept of the marassa is introduced. Marassa centers on the belief that twins possess a shared supernatural ability. With Rosalinda born with Rafael's umbilical cord around her neck, she is deemed "cursed." It is believed that Rafael was attempting to strangle Rosalind and in turn, his early death may be considered an act of vengeance on her part. The two may be seen as representative of Haiti and the Dominican Republic respectively.

The death of Kongo's son Joel at the hands of Pico occurs in tandem with the birth of the twins and is steeped in mystery. A mask maker, Joel was a part of ritual life and his face is eventually made into a mask for Amabelle at the hands of his father to keep in remembrance of him. This showcases a preservation and protectiveness of the dead common in Voudoun. Later, as Amabelle and Sebastien flee the Dominican Republic, Kongo etches a V onto the floor in cornmeal (a common Voudoun practice) to symbolize two diverging paths – on in which they remain in the country and the other which sees them navigating the terrain back into their homeland.

After Rafael's mysterious death, Kongo warns Señora Valencia to keep a close eye on her daughter so that she is not subjected to the same fate. During the exchange, he evokes the superstitious beliefs surrounding death held by many within peasant Voudoun culture. It can also be seen as him expressing the threat of the "sending of the dead," in which he perhaps has sent the spirit of his dead son to obtain vengeance. "It is a reversal in which Kongo asserts the upper hand," Weir-Soley adds. Rafi's death stands out as particularly mysterious, and Kongo's warning seems a veiled threat laden with symbolic significance" (180).

The deaths of Amabelle's parents also aligns with Voudoun history, as the event is recounted with a sense that spiritual forces were at work during the tragedy. The weather that causes their demise in the river is personified, the intense rain and water currents overtaking them. This accounts for her disconnect from her spirituality. Yet when she returns to Alegria, it is clear she has worked towards some form of healing, as she recounts her story to Metrès Dlo. Her ability to relive the narrative she's endured is a sign of her ability to face her experiences. She lies in the river, where her parents and fellow countrymen perished and does so with emotional defiance. Her back is submerged in a ritualistic manner – cleansed and healed as she lies naked. "The water was warm for October, warm and shallow, so shallow that I could lie on my back in it with my shoulders only half submerged, the current floating over me in a less than gentle caress, the pebbles in the riverbed scouring my back" (200).

The final image signifies a hopefulness for both Amabelle and for the country overall. She is a "newborn" who is "looking for the dawn." Her reconciliation with the past, enables her to grow and move forward. The author is sending the message that despite all that Haiti has endured, there is much to be restored and the ability to thrive lies in the resilience of its people.

As a commemoration of a massacre that is seldom included in discussions of human rights atrocities, the novel inscribes the massacre of the Haitians, attempting to bring it the same recognition given the genocides in in Armenia, Cambodia, Rwanda and during the Holocaust. Furthermore, no one in Trujillo's government or army were ever brought to justice for their actions. In recent years, the work of activists such as the late Dominican-born Sonia Pierre, who is of Haitian descent, put forth the idea that the event should be discussed more and even recognized during its anniversary. In 2011, Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez worked to organize a gathering of artists, human rights workers and those from both sides for a movement known as Border of Lights, which aimed to develop ways to facilitate discussions on the event and heal relations between the two nations.

The importance of Danticat's work as a historical reference has even greater significance when it is taken into account the limited representations of Haitian life from those other than outsiders that were available prior to her novels. Many literary overviews of the country were penned by the white military men who occupied the region and viewed it through a western lens. During the U.S. occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934, several works of literature were produced that depict Haitians as primitive flesh consumers who are unruly and are in need of being kept in order by white authority figures. In *The Magic Island* (1929) William Seabrook renders the nation a sight of voodoo tourism.

As Mary A. Renda discusses in *Taking Haiti : Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (2001), even a large portion of journalistic representations at the time portrayed the nation as being unruly and in need of U.S. intervention, indulging in what she refers to as a "paternalist narrative." "Writing in support of the occupation, some journalists made plain that the intervention was a necessary response to the violence of the Haitian mob that was said to have butchered Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam and paraded his head about Port-au-Prince on a staff." Haitians were deemed uncivilized while the military occupation was put forth as a "moral imperative." (140)

Only a few writers managed to challenge this, W.E.B. Du Bois and Lovett Fort-Whiteman among them with their works *Crisis* and *Messenger* respectively. Zora Neale Hurston's 1938 work *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* is perhaps one of the most well-known examples of an intricate exploration of Haitian life, offering a rich portrayal of life from within the country's borders. She notes, "The person in easy circumstances cannot appreciate the sufferings of the poor." (95) In the guide, Hurston illustrates her personal experience in the region as a participant rather than observer. Her authentic foray into the ceremonies, customs and superstitions offers an alluring portrait rather than an outsider's take on the culture. In one of the most impactful sections, she explores the origins of the zombie, demystifying the figure in a humane and accessible manner and delving into where the concept derived from.

Texts from the likes of Hurston and Danticat prove to be crucial even in today's climate with the routine othering of Haitians coming to the forefront as President Donald Trump enacting policies to deport hundreds of thousands of Haitian refugees and reportedly branding them as being one of what he deems a "s--thole country," according to a 2018 story first published by the *Washington Post*. The comments were addressed by U.N. human rights office spokesman Robert Colville, who deemed them "shocking and shameful" and "racist." The President also is reported as asking, "Why do we need more Haitians, take them out."

Haiti Ambassador to the U.S. Paul G. Altidor called the comment "regrettable" and based on "clichés and stereotypes rather than actual fact." He also noted the statement broke on the eighth anniversary of the catastrophic 2010 earthquake, which left over 200,000 people dead. Trump's alarming assessment came just a year after the *New York Times* quoted him as saying Haitians "all have AIDS." The remark was addressed by Danticat in her 2017 *New Yorker* piece

“Trump Reopens An Old Wound for Haitians,” in which she delves into the immense prejudice that grew towards those from the country at the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and early 1990s.

“President Trump’s alleged remarks have taken many of us back to a time when such attitudes were commonplace”(page) Danticat writes. “They are also particularly disturbing in the context of his larger anti-immigrant program. As Haitian-community advocates are trying to rally support in Congress and elsewhere to find a permanent solution for T.P.S. recipients and their families, we are reminded of a time when all H.I.V.-positive immigrants were banned from entering the United States, and H.I.V.-positive Haitians were detained, in deplorable conditions, at Guantánamo Bay.” As she further elaborates, Trump’s comments have the potential to ensure that the dangerous rhetoric when it came to Haitians that prevailed in previous decades had the potential to be reignited as previous prejudices were reintroduced to a new generation. The prevailing of damaging beliefs towards those who inhabit the country further cements why it needs authentic narratives that highlight the country’s rich culture and inhabitants.

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