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**Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning and History:  
Danticat's Insights into the Past**

Susana Vega-González

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## **Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning and History: Danticat's Insights into the Past**

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### **Abstract**

Memory has undoubtedly played a crucial role in the postmodern literary discourse. The dismantling of a monolithic, static and unquestioned history has given place to the predominance of a revisionary narrative impulse to “historicize the event of the dehistoricized” in Homi Bhabha’s terms. Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat joins the number of contemporary authors who are determined to uncover and recover the forgotten and manipulated histories of the dead. Taking the Massacre River dividing Haiti and the Dominican Republic as a site of memory as well as a site of mourning, Danticat writes *The Farming of Bones* (1998) as a tribute to those nameless and faceless who died victims of the abuses of power and racial persecution, providing them with names and voices against silence and oblivion. It is my aim to

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analyze the dimension of the use of memory in Danticat's novel, especially in relation to the workings of history. Issues of power and racial oppression will be especially relevant in this analysis.

All writers are concerned with memory, since all writing is a remembrance of things past; all writers draw on the past, mine it as a quarry. Memory is especially important to anyone who cares about change, for forgetting dooms us to repetition.

Gayle Greene, "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory"

In so far as it is 'forgotten,' the 'past'...is homologized with death. The fountain Lethe, 'forgetfulness,' is a necessary part of the realm of Death. The dead are those who have lost their memories.

Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*

**S**ince writing is an act of remembrance, when the past has been especially marginalized and marked by oppressive forces, then the literary discourse turns into a source of restoration and regeneration. Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat joins the number of contemporary authors who are determined to uncover and recover the forgotten and manipulated histories of the dead through memory and narrative. Taking the Massacre River dividing Haiti and

the Dominican Republic as a site of memory as well as a site of mourning, Danticat writes *The Farming of Bones* (1998) as a tribute to those nameless and faceless who died victims of the abuses of power and racial persecution, providing them with names and voices against silence and oblivion. As she argued in an interview (Charters, 1998: 42), the 1937 Massacre is not as well-known in the United States as it is in Haiti, so she endeavoured to pass on that story to younger people, like her brothers, who didn't know about it at all, as "It's a part of our history, as Haitians, but it's also a part of the history of the world". The absence of proper burial places or markers for the victims of the Massacre acts as a catalyst for Danticat to narrate her story. As she stands on the banks of the river in one of her visits to Haiti, she "felt like [she] was standing on top of a huge mass grave, and just couldn't see the bodies. That's the first time I remember thinking, 'Nature has no memory'... and that's why we have to have memory" (Charters, 1998: 42). This is precisely the purpose of sites of memory: "to stop time, to block the work of forgetting...to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial" (Nora, 1994: 295-296). Indeed the process of recovery from past traumas calls for the activation of "spiritual memory" since retrieval and physical possession are not possible (Holloway, 1992: 20). As Toni Morrison (1987:



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119) puts it, using precisely the river metaphor to convey the idea of memory,

Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory--what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "flooding".

Memory and sites of memory are especially relevant in the works of ethnic writers, as they represent the possibility of creating a counter narrative and a counter history as an alternative to a historiographic discourse dominated by the white man. The postmodern de-centralization of history provokes the foregrounding of a dialogic historiography with multiple histories whose actors and narrators are those previously silenced and marginalized from historical records. In this context of "postmodernist refocusing on historicity" (Hutcheon, 1988: 16), memory and its sites acquire great importance since "the quest for memory is the search for one's history" as Pierre Nora (1994: 289) argues. If sites of memory result from the interaction between memory and history, as Nora (1994: 295) contends, the historical event of the 1937 Massacre is inscribed in the collective memory of the Haitian people as a referential symbolic site where issues of race, identity,

power and oppression intersect. It is the aim of Danticat to act as an archeologist in the process of retrieval that Toni Morrison (1987: 112) terms “literary archeology”, which implies a literary exploration and reconstruction of things past out of some information given by events together with the workings of imagination and memory. The protagonist of *The Farming of Bones* revisits the past through memory and dreams, with a constant pendulum-like movement between past and present, which disrupts linear, conventional narratives and allows for the multiplicity of voices and perspectives (Singh, 1994: 18). The combination of memory and the imagination inherent in the narrative act reveals itself as an apt means of historical revision. The “counter culture of the imagination” (Tiffin, 1988: 173) together with the counter culture of memory rely heavily on the oral tradition, to which Danticat herself feels indebted, since the story in *The Farming of Bones* among others “came out of listening to those female family conversations, which Paule Marshall so wisely calls ‘kitchen poetry’” (review of *The Farming of Bones*).

The whole story in Danticat’s novel is dominated by the symbolic and loaded image of the Massacre River, whose name bears the deathly mark of the Spanish killing of 30 French pirate buccaneers back in 1728 (Wucker, 2000: 44). This river

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represents the dividing border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti within the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. Over the years thousands of Haitians crossed that border into the Dominican Republic as sugar cane cutters. In October 1937 the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo ordered the killing of Haitian cane laborers in a massacre known as “The Cutting” (“*El Corte*”) in order to carry out a racial cleansing of Haitians. (note 1) The dead bodies of many of those slain near the border were thrown into the Massacre River, which from then on remained in Haitians’ collective memory as a site of memory as well as a site of mourning. By foregrounding the implications of the Massacre River as a site of memory, Danticat

establishes the value of cultural memory and the very kind of history or historiaography that is not dependent on written analysis or criticism but rather achieves an alternative record of critical discussion through the exercise of memory. Memory becomes a tool to regain and reconstruct not just the past but history itself (Dixon, 1994: 19).

Historical revision is further enhanced by the challenge of the fixity of boundaries and the epistemological parameters traditionally established in the Western culture; thus from the literary discourse of the novel history is transmitted through its own protagonists, represented by the characters, some of

whom speak and act from the world of the dead. The use of dreams and the otherworldly acts as another narrative strategy of transgression that calls into question the validity of binary opposites like fact/fiction, life/death, real/imaginary. The novel opens with the reference to a name, "His name is Sebastien Onius" (Danticat, 1998: 1), who is the protagonist's lover disappeared during the outbreak of the Massacre. Interestingly enough, naming is closely connected to memory, since names represent life and permanence in memory as well as "a crucial act of claiming self and community" (Brooks De Vita, 2000: 15).

When Amabelle was a child, she witnessed her parents' death drowning in the Massacre River while they were all trying to ford it. The memory of their death will haunt Amabelle in the recurring nightmares and dreams interspersed in her narrative: "[Sebastien Onius] comes most nights to put an end to my nightmare, the one I have all the time, of my parents drowning" (Danticat, 1998: 1). Having managed to escape from the Massacre, Amabelle sets out on a journey to look for her beloved Sebastien. Her deep personal loss joins the loss of her parents and also the loss of fellow countrymen and women so that her personal traumatic experience appears intertwined with the communal traumatic experience of the Massacre. This

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three-dimensional loss triggers off Amabelle's quest journey throughout the novel and turns the Massacre River into a site of mourning, which is "a way of remembering dominated by a sense of a break with the past" (Brogan, 1998: 28). Personal and historical loss are embodied in this individual and collective site. The movement from the particularity of Amabelle's personal stories of death to the communality of Haitian laborers' killing signals the revisionist nature of this novel, which provides new perspectives, new ways of creating history, new individualized stories which had been silenced and which now contribute to the making of a new history. In Homi Bhabha's terms (1994: 198), this is a way "to historicize the event of the dehistoricized".

The episode of the Haitian Massacre proves once again that "History is the fruit of power" (Trouillot, 1995: xix), that "History is another kind of fiction", a synthesis of mentions and silences (Trouillot, 1995: 48) sometimes unconscious, some others deliberate and manipulative. In her account of the Massacre in the book *Why The Cocks Fight*, Michele Wucker (2000: 48) reveals Trujillo's attempt to manipulate history:

Trujillos's soldiers used their guns to intimidate but not to kill. For that they used machetes, knives, picks, and shovels so as not to leave bullets in the corpses...[which] would have made it obvious that the murderers were government soldiers...death by machete

can be blamed on peasants...rising up to defend their cattle and lands...

Likewise, in *The Farming of Bones* the manipulation not only history but also language are subject to by dictators like Trujillo is portrayed through a character, Father Romain, who had helped Haitians and who was then imprisoned and tortured. In prison, he had been forced to repeat the dictator's racist discourse, which he still reproduces when he is visited by Amabelle:

On this island, walk too far in either direction and people speak a different language...Our motherland is Spain; theirs is darkest Africa...They once came here only to cut sugarcane, but now there are more of them than there will ever be cane to cut...Our problem is one of dominion...How can a country be ours if we are in smaller numbers than the outsiders?...We, as Dominicans, must have our separate traditions and our own ways of living. If not, in less than three generations, we will all be Haitians...our children and grandchildren will have their blood tainted unless we defend ourselves now... (Danticat, 1998: 260-61).

Trujillo's monolithic binary distinction between "us" -- the insiders, the Dominicans, the "whiter", and "them" -- the outsiders, the Haitians, the dark Africa's descendants, lies at the basis of both colonialism and slavery. It is in such frame of mind that violence and dominion are legitimized by oppressors like

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him; his ideas are implemented in the ethnic cleansing of Haitians. After the Massacre, Trujillo purported not to have been involved in the killing, thus constructing the official side of the story--the official historical record--that was to exculpate him from his horrendous deeds and relegate the other side of the story and history to silence and oblivion. As Michele Wucker (2000: 51) states,

the unctuous dictator insisted that the incident had been exaggerated. It had merely been an uprising of Dominican farmers against Haitians trying to steal their livelihood...Trujillo maintained the fiction that his soldiers could not have done the killing, since the victims died under thrusts of knives and machetes, and everyone knew that the Dominican army used rifles and revolvers in situations where force was necessary.

As a matter of fact, Michele Wucker (2000: 51) concludes that it was Trujillo's obsession with race that was behind the massacre.

Amabelle's dreams are peopled with her dead parents and with the shadows of unknown ancestors who suffered the ravages of slavery and who irrupt into the present, this being indicative of what Pierre Janet (qtd. in Brogan, 1998: 7-8, 79) calls "traumatic memory". According to Janet, this type of memory is characterized by inflexibility and by the mechanic non verbal repetition of the past. Recurring images of her parents drown-

ing haunt Amabelle but she is also “visited” by ancestors in the form of ghosts who talk to her, like the mysterious sugar woman: “I dream of the sugar woman. Again...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 chains on her ankles cymbal a rattled melody...” (Danticat, 1998: 132) or “In my sleep I hear my mother rising, like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her” (Danticat, 1998: 207-08). In her dream of the sugar woman, Amabelle has a conversation with her which starts with the question “Is your face underneath this?” (Danticat, 1998: 132). This and other recurring references to faces reveal the protagonist’s search for the identity of those faceless and nameless like the ancestors condemned to slavery and anonymity and the victims of the Massacre, laborers who worked in such harsh, abusive conditions that the cutting of the sugar cane was known as “the farming of bones”. (note 2) The dehumanization of Haitian cane cutters, which can be considered as “modern-day slaves” (Wucker, 2000: 113), is clearly reminiscent of slavery times: “the cane cutters are animals, says Dominican common wisdom” (Wucker, 2000: 113). The sugar woman’s reassuring words “You, my eternity” (Danticat, 1998: 133) signal the hope for spiritual immortality in the face of physical death and destruction. The passing on of the dead’s forgotten stories,



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giving them a voice in the novel's discourse, is the only hope for eternity and remembrance they may have against racial oppression and historical marginalization. Through memory and dreams Amabelle revisits the past and its ghosts, while Danticat endows them with eternity through literary discourse. As we can read in the novel, "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" (Danticat, 1998: 266).

The novel comes full circle around the site of memory and mourning that the Massacre River represents. If the beginning is marked by the absent presence of Sebastien Onius and the drowning of Amabelle's parents, the end is similarly dominated by the Massacre River, where the dead lie. Twenty-four years later, Amabelle returns to the river as a culmination of her quest journey. Her mourning culminates with the ritual reenactment of a (traumatic) past. By entering the river at the end of the novel, Amabelle is carrying out not only an act of commemoration of the dead but also a ritual ceremony that exorcises the ghosts of the past. In Brogan's terms (1998: 83), "the past returns until 'you' seize agency and confront that past by organizing a reenactment". What Amabelle is ul-

timately looking for in this final encounter with the river is the permanence of memory: “I...thought that if I came to the river on the right day, at the right hour, the surface of the water might provide the answer: a clearer sense of the moment, a stronger memory. But nature has no memory. And soon, perhaps, neither will I” (Danticat, 1998: 308). Amabelle’s reunion with the river signifies a cathartic act of coming to terms with the past; it is a reenactment of the traumatic past to exorcise it and find peace. This revised reenactment signifies the movement from traumatic memory to “narrative memory” (Brogan, 1998: 9), which entails the reshaping and reordering of the past by adapting it to the present (Brogan, 1998: 79). Narrative memory is closely connected to storytelling since, as Brogan (1998: 79) reminds us, quoting from Janet, “True memory...is essentially ‘the action of telling a story’”. Narrative is thus a necessary element in the revision of the past that Danticat and other contemporary ethnic writers accomplish. Reminiscent of Morrison’s final refrain in *Beloved*, Amabelle’s explicit determination to pass on the story of the massacre signals the movement into narrative memory: “The slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on. All I want to do is find a place to lay it down now and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds, nor remain forever buried beneath the sod” (Danticat, 1998: 266).

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Inside the river Amabelle experiences a kind of spiritual re-birth which is enhanced by images and metaphors of life and renewal as she describes herself as “cradled by the current, paddling like a newborn in a washbasin” (Danticat, 1998: 310). Amabelle’s spiritual re-birth is also enabled by her longed-for meeting with her parents and Sebastien, all resting in the river. And together with them lie the thousands of massacred Haitians. The closing scene is charged with spirituality, since the final reunion with the ancestors and the beloved spirits heralds the dawn of eternity, the communal immortality of those who, like Sebastien, died in the Massacre and are commemorated in the novel. Hence Amabelle’s contention that she “[is] looking for the dawn” (Danticat, 1998: 310). Amabelle’s mourning culminates in her final commemorative ritual of union with the river water, which implies the recovery of the dead.

The Massacre River, we can conclude, stands as a site of memory and mourning in its capacity to activate memory and, as Geneviève Fabre (1994: 10) argues, because it is “a means to confront the troublesome past and the uncertain present”. By conjuring up Sebastien’s name and the tragic experience of the 1937 Massacre, Edwidge Danticat honors the memory of the dead and builds a literary grave--the “safe nest” Amabelle hankers after--for those who even in death suffer

the evils of invisibility: “There were no graves, no markers. If we tried to dance on graves, we would be dancing on air” (Danticat, 1998: 270). There should be some kind of memory in nature, some sign of the bodies that vanished into the transparency of water for future generations to know the true history of their people. Otherwise, narrative and the literary discourse provide the means to prevent the Massacre River from turning into another Lethe of forgetfulness. Like silence, the lack of memory is another kind of death; on the contrary, “(re)membrance is activation in the face of stasis, a restoration of fluidity, translucence, and movement” (Holloway, 1992: 68). With her novel, Danticat demonstrates once again that the voice of memory can certainly rewrite history and that the literary discourse offers writers the opportunity to “rip the veil” (Morrison 1987: 111) from certain facts of history, give voice to the silenced and give life to the dead.

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1. Estimates of Haitian victims in the Massacre range from 25,000 to 30,000 (Arthur, 2002: 13; Wucker, 1998). For other estimates provided by different sources, see Wucker, 2000: 50-51.
2. It is necessary to observe here the negative connotations sugar has in this novel for its direct association with oppression, exploitation--and even death--of a whole community of Haitians. For a similar reading of sugar cane plantations as "landscaped history" where all the mentioned issues and that of economic dependency are at work, see Japtok's article on a short story by Paule Marshall.