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Bearing Witness: De/Cultivating Violence in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

In *The Farming of Bones* Edwidge Danticat approximates the biblical conflict between the Ephraimites and Gileadites to shed light on the historic tensions between the twin-islands, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.[1] The epigraph in which she quotes Judges 12:4-6 sets the stage for the ensuing conflict, that of ethnic and linguistic difference. Ephraimites who attempted to cross the Jordan River back to their home territory were put to a test by the Gileadites, to pronounce "shibboleth", a Hebrew word that literally translates as the part of a plant containing grains, such as an ear of corn.[2] Unable to correctly pronounce the word as a result of a phonetic difference in their language that lacked the "sh" sound, the Ephraimites were put to death. The massacre left forty-two thousand Ephraimites dead. This phonetic variance served as reinforcement to the distinguishing feature of ethnic difference, a fact that Danticat reiterates by readily admitting that language "was definitely a differentiating factor … that has been used to tell people apart".[3] Along these lines, language is posited as the marker of one's identity, one's passport, so to speak, to being and belonging. Paralleling the biblical narrative, Haitians who were unable to pronounce the "r" in the Spanish word "perejil" that translates as parsley were put to death. This "linguistic" cum ethnic cleansing was carried out by the despotic Dominican dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina. In 1937 Trujillo ordered the mass murders of approximately thirty-thousand Haitian citizens living near the border between the two countries. This manifest violence is articulated in Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*.

Even though the novel recounts the massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic in 1937, the present enduring conflict between the two nation-states in many ways frighteningly mirrors the past. As Haitians continue to cross the border to find gainful employment, they are met with ridicule and disdain that ultimately escalate into acts of violence. Ginger Thompson's *New York Times* article, "Immigrant Laborers from Haiti are Paid with Abuse in the Dominican Republic", chronicles the "Dominican Republic's systematic abuse of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent".[4] Shedding light on this systematic violence, the article substantiates that despite their legal guest worker status, Haitians continue to experience mass expulsion and are "rarely given a fair opportunity to challenge their expulsion during these wholesale sweeps".[5] The widespread violence is so rampant that Thompson equates it to lynching. Furthermore, illuminating government complicity in these raids, Thompson expresses

[1] Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998). Hereafter references in the text as *FB*.

[2] "Shibboleth" in Hebrew also means a stream. Both definitions are germane to this discussion. Similar to the slaying of the Ephraimites, the massacre of Haitians took place at a stream/river. The grains of the plant are equivalent to the leaves of the parsley plants that Haitians are forced to swallow. <http://www.balashon.com/2010/01/shibolet.html >, 10 May 2010.

[3] Renee H. Shea, "The Hunger to Tell: Edwidge Danticat and the *Farming of Bones*", *MaComère,* 2 (1999), 17.

[4] Ginger Thompson, "Immigrant Laborers from Haiti are Paid with Abuse in the Dominican Republic", *New York Times*, 20 November 2005.

[5] Ibid.

that despite promises by successive Dominican governments to provide Haitians with basic protection, Haitians continue to be the subjects of violence, exploitation, and racial discrimination. Offering a poignant analysis of the plight of Haitians, Peter Grill unapologetically calls their exploitation "modern day slavery", underscoring that the "workers have been recruited under circumstances ranging from dishonest to coercive", and that they are "brought into the Dominican Republic with knowledge, and in some cases, support of the government and military".[6] Lending validity to this argument, Danticat demonstrates that the United States' support facilitated the Dominican government's continued discrimination of Haitians: "Right now there are American military on the border between the countries, training Dominican soldiers to stop Haitian migrants from crossing over".[7] This racial profiling of Haitians necessitates Danticat's fierce interrogation of U.S policy: "Why aren't Haitians soldiers also being trained to stop drug flow from across the border".[8] The continued mass expulsion of Haitians from the Dominican Republic serves as a reminder of the 1937 massacre, as Danticat is quick to point out that the massacre remains part of the Dominican and Haitian consciousness. According to Danticat, Trujillo's "policies and antagonism to Haiti went on and on" during his protracted dictatorship and the subsequent (mirrored) leadership of his vice president, leaving an indelible imprint on the minds and imaginations of Haitians.[9]

A narrative of incomprehensible ethnic hatred and violence and unbearable loss is put alongside the narrative of unfaltering love between the novel's female protagonist, Amabelle Desir, and her lover, Sebastien Onius. In spite of the interdependency and interconnectedness between the "twin-islands" to which the tale within the tale (double narrative) alludes, unspeakable violence prevails. The numerous absences and deaths that enter the first pages of the novel presage the ensuing genocide. While *The Farming of Bones* chronicles the slaughter of Haitians, underscoring their continued vulnerability as they navigate the border, it equally testifies to the strength and resilience of a people.

Amabelle whose personal narrative of pain and loss is weaved alongside the narrative of Dominican nationalism embodies resilience. As the sole surviving member of her family, having lost her parents to drowning in a hurricane as they attempted to navigate the troubled waters of the infamous Massacre River,[10] Amabelle also witnesses, as she herself barely escapes the slaughter, the mass murders of fellow Haitians, including Sebastien and close friends of both Haitian and Dominican descent. Furthermore, Danticat's politicization of Amabelle's personal story is no mere coincidence for she admits that Amabelle is modeled after the female heroine of journalist Albert Hicks' *Blood in the Street*. Assigned the story in 1937, Hicks narrated the massacre with an immediacy that caught Danticat's attention.[11] Intersecting on several levels – most notably, they both worked as domestic

[6] Peter Grill, "Suffering Modern Day Slavery: Haitians Cane Cutters in Dominican Republic Trapped and Isolated", *Catholic New Times,* 19 March 2006.

[7] Bonnie Lyons, "An Interview with Edwidge Danticat", *Contemporary Literature*, 44.2 (Summer 2003), 183-98, 192-93.

[8] Ibid, 192.

[9] Ibid.

[10] This river, also known as the River of Blood that both separates and unites the two island nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, acquired the name because of the blood shed between the French and Spanish colonizers, who were engaged in a protracted battle for the possession of Hispaniola.

[11] Lyons, "An Interview with Edwidge Danticat", 191.

servants for a Dominican military family – Amabelle's life story departs from Hicks' character in that she not only bears witness to the slaughter, but that she also survives the massacre, living to tell the horrors. Despite Danticat's admission that her novel is as much about women as it is about men, I argue that the centering of this female narrative of pain and suffering (and the attendant resistance and resilience) is symbolic. It not only validates women's role in nation-making and -building, but it also de-centers and disrupts the neat narrative of nationalism.[12] By the same token, the language of nationalism exemplified in the masculinist discourse marginalizes women, scripting them as subalterns and therefore unworthy citizens.

As follows, Trujillo's discriminatory employment of language that functions as his platform for the dissemination of his racist and nationalist politics, results in what Marlene Nourbese Philip refers to as "a foreign anguish".[13] At the same time it creates dissent and distrust among Dominicans and Haitians, this imposition of a "foreign tongue" qualifies as a violent act. As Philip reminds us, "language comes tainted with a certain history of colonialism and imperialism"; hence its evolution from a mother tongue to a father tongue.[14] Along these lines, Trujillo's goal was to impose an imperial colonized (white) language on the Haitians as he sought to whiten his population, ridding the country of its black citizens. To this end, Philip argues that if one is engaged with the project of language then one has to be concerned with power. Calling attention to patriarchal power and paternalistic practices, Philip skillfully likens the tongue (language) to the male organ, the penis. One would be remiss to overlook the image of penetration in this analogy, which is an allusion to rape. Following this line of reasoning, Trujillo performed linguistic rape on the Haitian populace spreading terror and asserting control. This reign of male power manifests further in Philip identifying the tongue as "the principal organ of oppression and exploitation".[15] The following proclamation encapsulates this exploitative and oppressive force: "The word claims and maims and claims again".[16]

Furthermore, Haitians' 'foreignness' is not only defined linguistically but also physiognomically. Human rights groups substantiate this claim. Ascertaining that racism fuels the anti-immigrant sentiment, they determine that since "Haitians tend to have darker skin than Dominicans, [they] are therefore often assumed to hold a lower social status".[17] To reinforce this racist, classist assumption, language is reappropriated, or more pointedly manipulated, to establish belonging and to legitimize one's citizenship. Thus, identitarian politics is used as a tool of discriminate against Haitians.

Assessing the rights and qualification of citizenship, Suad Joseph writes that "one must belong to a nation-state to have a political identity, to have mobility, and to have rights to resources, services, and protection vis-à-vis international relations". She further adds:

[12] Sebastien and Amabelle's personal relationship, characterized by love, commitment, and loyalty, that weathers the storm, starkly contrasts the political upheaval between the nation-states.

[13] Marlene Nourbese Philip, *she tries her tongue: her silence softly breaks* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1993), 56.

[14] Marlene Nourbese Philip, ed., *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1997), 129.

[15] Ibid., 59.

[16] Ibid., 82.

[17] Thompson, "Immigrant Laborers".

> If citizenship in a nation-state has become the venue defining membership in the world community, then the manner in which nation-states define citizenship and structure membership in their political communities becomes crucial for understanding women's positions globally. Citizenship defines identity — who you are, where you belong, where you come from, and how you understand yourself in the world.[18]

[18] Suad Joseph, "Women Between Nation and State in Lebanon", in Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón and Minoo Moallem, eds., *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 162.

While Joseph has continued the discourse on women's citizenship that has consumed many feminist scholars over the past decade, it remains a contested concept. As Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner remind us, women's difference becomes paramount in the discourse of citizenship. However, the stark reality was that many women found themselves excluded from the national discourse despite the rise of nationalism. Their denial first and foremost manifested in the masculinist language used to script the nationalist discourse. It therefore should come as no surprise that Yuval-Davis and Werbner are staunch advocates of this emerging discourse on women's citizenship because it "privileges difference and stresses the dialogical and global dimensions of citizenship".[19] In essence, the denial of women's citizenship manifests in the disavowal of basic human rights. In this regard, by using language as a determining factor in acquiring citizenship, Trujillo installs a gatekeeping mechanism that prevents Haitians from accessing their rights. Addressing the inherent contradiction of women's citizenship, Ronit Lentin argues that "though often symbolising a collectivity's unity, honour and raison d'être, [women] are often excluded from the collective 'we' or the body politic, and in this sense the construction of womanhood has a property of 'otherness'".[20]

[19] Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner, eds., *Women, Citizenship and Difference* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999), 1.

[20] Ronit Lentin, "Constitutionally Excluded: Citizenship and (Some) Irish Women", in ibid.,132 .

The inability to pronounce 'parsley' functions precisely as a symbol of 'otherness', a marker of ethnic difference. As follows, Amabelle is doubly dispossessed. In spite of having lived most of her life in the Dominican Republic she "had no papers to show that [she] belonged either here or in Haiti where [she] was born" (*FB*, 70). This disinheritance caused Amabelle to ponder who "had [her family] house now and if [she] could still claim the land as [her] inheritance" (*FB*, 184). It becomes clear that women's disenfranchisement has dire consequences for successive generations. Addressing how denial of citizen rights – particularly in relation to the lack of or limited education – has impacted negatively on their children, a group of women articulates their frustration.[21] The caustic language they used to express the discrimination they experience is equivalent to the mundane violence they suffer:

> *I pushed* my son out of my body here, in this country … 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 ... To them we are always foreigners, even if our granmèmès'

[21] Haitian children's lack is starkly contrasted with Rosalinda's, Señora Valencia's daughter, life of privilege. Not only does she fulfill her dreams of marrying young, but she is pursuing a medical degree in Santo Domingo, where she resides with her husband.

> granmèmès were born in this country …. This makes it easier for them to *push us out* when they want to. (*FB*, 69; emphasis mine).

By juxtaposing birth, "*I pushed* my son out", with their expulsion, "easier for them to *push us* out", the women call attention to common pain. At the same time, the analogy induces the birth-death cycle. Whereas the former use of "push" captures the birthing process as a new life comes into existence, the latter "push" evokes trauma occasioned by the termination of a life and symptomatic of an induced abortion. The violent expulsion of Haitians from the mother (country) effectively exemplifies the abortive procedure precipitated by Trujillo's unleashing of state terror in the name of national unity.[22]

[22] Mother (country) here refers to the island of Hispaniola before the formation of the sovereign states of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

The same nation-state from which the women demand their autonomy constructs them primarily as mother and wives, heavily dependent on the state first and foremost, and second on their husbands. As the women seek to establish their maternal rights, (state) paternity is denied by the withholding of the birth certificates of their children. As a result, the child is not only rendered illegitimate, but s/he is also undocumented and therefore non-existent to the state. This tenuous nature of citizenship epitomizes the fragile existence of Haitians, a fact that Odette, one of the novel's female characters, reinforces: "We've never lived lives of certainty" (*FB*, 197). By the same token, by insisting that Haitians pronounce "parsley", Trujillo attempts to articulate their non-being.

The articulation of Haitians' non-existence plays out in a scene between Amabelle and Señora Valencia. Amabelle voices the angst she experienced as Señora Valencia mistook her for an impostor. Referring to Señora Valencia's lapse in memory as "rejection" (*FB*, 296), Amabelle remarks: "That she did not recognize me made me feel that I had come back to Alegría and found it had never existed at all. Now it was as if we were doing battle and I knew I must win; she had to recognize me…" (*FB*, 294, 295). The need to be recognized or to be remembered takes on special urgency. It is a known fact that the goal of the 1937 massacre that resulted in the slaughter of thousands of Haitians was to annihilate, to dismember Haitians. For Alegría to have never existed signals not only the denial of the massacre, a denial that exculpates the state, but it also intimates Haitians' insignificance and invisibility. Paradoxically, relying on her memory to convince Señora Valencia that she is not an impersonator, Amabelle recounts the birth of Señora Valencia's twins and references the names of fellow Haitians who also worked for Señora Valencia. All the same, Amabelle quizzically ponders the ease and detached aura that Señora Valencia had assumed: "Was I that much older, stouter? Had my face changed so much? How could she not *know my voice,* which, like hers, might have slowed and become more abrupt with age but *was still my own*?" (*FB*, 295; emphasis

mine). Significantly, the narrative that Amabelle recalls that finally convinced Señora Valencia of her identity is one of self-ownership. Orphaned and homeless after the death of her parents, Amabelle was discovered at the side of the Massacre River by Señor Ignacio, Señora Valencia's father. When he questioned to whom she belonged, she responded: "I belonged to myself" (*FB*, 296). Furthermore, by claiming her own voice, Amabelle rejects the superimposed voice – the mandatory litmus test that required the pronouncing of "parsley" – of the nation-state.

Ascertaining her autonomy, Amabelle clearly recognizes the distinction between physical and material possessions: "Nearly everything I had was something Señora Valencia *had once owned and no longer wanted*. Everything except Sebastien" (*FB*, 45; emphasis added). Notwithstanding, this distinction is blurred, even violated by the nation-state as Haitians are considered propertied possession. Along these lines, Sebastien is in essence state property, claimed by the nation's cane mills that occasioned his symbolic death, and subsequently through physical death as he becomes one of many victims of the massacre. This blurring of the physical and material is rendered most palpable by Señora Valencia's acquisition of a newly-constructed luxury home and a surrogate helper, Sylvie, who Amabelle surmises "must have been just a child when the señora borrowed her from the slaughter" (*FB*, 304). Sylvie's presence both reinforces the Haitian subject as propertied possession and accentuates Haitians' expendability; and particularly Amabelle's. Their parallel history validates this observation: "With a distant gaze, Sylvie stood devotedly at [Señora Valencia's] side. And in Sylvie's eyes was a longing I knew very well, from the memory of it as it was once carved into my younger face" (*FB*, 306).

Another example where the material is accorded more value than the physical manifests in the luxury home that Señora Valencia inhabits that reinforces Haitians' asphyxiation engendered by the swallowing of parsley. The site on which the luxury homes are built doubled as tombs for many Haitians whose life ended in the very stream/waterfall that now distinguishes the homes as waterfront property. This expensive real estate investment brings to mind the commodification of Haitians. In a similar manner, the conflation of the homes and tombs blurs the distinction between life and death, calling attention to the death-like existence of Haitians.

The estrangement between Amabelle and Señora Valencia is not only politically charged, but it has also manifested bodily. Assessing Señora Valencia's and her divergent paths, Amabelle recounts: "She looked down at her hands. They were spotless, perfect and soft looking. I too looked down at my own hands, cut and scarred with scissors and needle marks" (*FB*, 296). Interestingly, Amabelle, a survivor of the massacre, does not reference the unspeakable violence engendered by the slaughter of Haitians,

but instead focuses on female to female oppression as another form of violence. Unquestionably, the scars and cuts left by scissors and needle marks were not imprinted on Amabelle's hands by the massacre. Rather, they were the result of the domestic services she performed for Señora Valencia. Appropriating the domestic space, often constructed as free from patriarchal mandates, as violent, Amabelle engages in subversion cum violation of her own that challenges the nation-state's violation of Haitian subjects. The message here is that the domestic and the political are strange bedfellows, a fact aptly exemplified by the union of Señora Valencia and her husband, Señor Pico.[23] This coalition in turn widens the gulf of separation between Amabelle (and by default other Haitians) and Señora Valencia:

> All the time I had known her, we had always been dangling between being strangers and being friends. Now we were neither strangers nor friends. We were like two people passing each other on the street, exchanging a lengthy meaningless greeting. And at last I wanted it to end (*FB*, 300).

Furthermore, Señora Valencia's and Amabelle's difference is magnified tenfold in their varied responses to the massacre. While Señora Valencia refers to the genocide as El Corte, as it had become known in the Dominican Republic, Amabelle is quick to notice the unemotional ease and detachment with which she pronounced the words. Countering this inadequate allusion to the heinous crimes committed, Amabelle renders her own testimony of the massacre: "[O]n *our side* of the river many called it a kout kouto, a stabbing, like a single knife wound" (*FB*, 299; emphasis mine). Michele Wucker argues that El Corte, the cutting, alludes "to the machetes the Dominican soldiers used so they could say the carnage was the work of the peasants defending themselves, and also suggested to the Haitians' work of harvesting sugar cane".[24] Operating within the framework of linguistic difference, I would like to offer an alternative interpretation of the disparate accounts of the massacre. El Corte, the cutting, alludes to the act, diminishing the heinous crimes committed, and furthermore minimizing blame of the nation-state. In other words, the use of El Corte is "language-destroying" to borrow Elaine Scarry's coinage.[25] In the given scenario, the language employed serves to neutralize the violence as it silences the victims'voice. By the same token, Amabelle's return to Alegría, a misnomer notwithstanding, is not occasioned by happiness as the town's title intimates. By contrast, "kout kouto" encapsulates both the instrument of torture – "kouto a" is translated as knife – and the wounding, thereby offering a verbal/visual manifestation of the violent acts, while simultaneously rendering visible the object, the instrument of torture. By employing a language of their own to lend voice to the genocide, Haitians effectively register their defiance and resistance to "Dominicization".

[23] In her attempt to compensate Kongo for the loss of his son, who was run over by Señor Pico, Señora Valencia hosted the Haitian cane workers, offering them coffee in her "best European red orchid-patterned tea set". Upon discovering that she had used the imported tea set, Señor Pico "shattered the cups and saucers, one by one" (116).

[24] Michele Wucker, "The River Massacre: The Real and Imagined Border of Hispaniola", <http://haitiforever.com/windowsonhaiti/wucker1.shtml>, 2 May 2010.

[25] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 19.

Señora Valencia's continued defense of her husband, Señor Pico, ascertains her loyalty, but more importantly her complicity with patriarchy. Attempting to provide Amabelle with a valid explanation of her blind allegiance to the dictatorial Trujillo regime, she expresses:

> Amabelle, I live here still. If I denounce this country, I denounce myself. I would have had to leave the country if I'd forsaken my husband. Not that I ever asked questions. Not trusting him would have been like declaring that I was against him (*FB*, 299).

Whereas Señora Valencia allows her husband's actions to go unchecked, Beatriz, Señor Pico's former love interest, fiercely interrogates his patriotism. She explicitly and without inhibition articulates her distrust of him to Señora Valencia: "There is a side to Pico that I never liked. He's always dreamt that one day he would be president of this country, and it seems to me he would move more than mountains to make it so" (*FB*, 150).[26] Even Señor Ignacio appears to have doubts about Señor Pico's patriotism: "[Pico] believes that everything he is doing, he's doing for his country. At least that is what he must tell himself" (*FB*, 138).

Señor Pico on the other hand represents the "violence embodied in militant masculinity". Maja Korac establishes that,

> violence-oriented masculinity becomes the main means of recruiting individuals who are capable of committing insane atrocities because their masculine militant collectivity is the ultimate determinant of good and evil.[27]

As a staunch supporter and purveyor of Trujillo's racist politics, Señor Pico aptly fits this description as he is Trujillo's "right-hand man" so to speak, being assigned the leadership of a "group that would ensure the Generalissimo's safety" and also being in charge of "a new border operation" (*FB*, 42). This "covert" operation resulted in the slaughter of innocent Haitians. Moreover, Korac reminds us that,

> violence-oriented masculinity does not victimize women alone. It implies forms of victimization of men too, from killing to torture and mutilation. Women, instead, are commonly victimized through rape, expulsion and forced migration.[28]

By default, Beatriz's criticism of Señor Pico is a verbal indictment of Señora Valencia, the critical role she played in the massacre of Haitian citizens that is tantamount to betrayal. In other words, her display of "good citizenship" is in keeping with the regime's racist politics, a fact that Korac validates in stating that "a counterbalance to such violent-oriented masculinity is an emotional, committed, supportive but passive femininity".[29] Furthermore, Señora Valencia's refusal to defend the Haitian women in her service not only substantiates her passivity, but it also

[26] Prior to his marriage to Señora Valencia, Señor Pico had requested Beatriz's hand in marriage. She rejected his proposal which is symptomatic of her rejection of his divisive and racist politics and her denunciation of the Trujillo dictatorship. At the same time, she refuses the role of supporting wife.

[27] Maja Korac, "Refugee Women in Serbia: Their Experiences of War, Nationalism and State Building", in Yuval-Davis and Werbner, *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, 194.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

reveals her complicity with patriarchy. Korac explains that this complicit behavior manifests more strongly during the time of conflict: "women who are seen traditionally as caretakers, guardians of their children, men and homes, and hence as pillars of a society in a 'time called peace', represent these roles even more starkly in a time of war".[30] Willfully assuming this submissive position, playing the traditional role of wife and benefactor of her husband, Señora Valencia's role as agent of oppression is crystallized.

[30] Ibid., 195.

Even as she inhabits the role of gatekeeper of patriarchal law and order, Señora Valencia's (brand of) patriotism is subject to fierce scrutiny. This challenge manifests in Man Rapadou's, Sebastien and Amabelle's friend Yves' mother, selfless demonstration of patriotism. Narrating to Amabelle how the Yankis had carried out their own brand of genocide on Haitians, "poison[ing] Yves' father's mind when he was in their prisons", Man Rapadou recounts his betrayal of fellow Haitians to the Yankis. Aware that his betrayal – spying on fellow Haitians for monetary compensation – will have dire consequences, for "many people who were against the Yankis being here were going to die because of his betrayal", Man Rapadou made the ultimate self-sacrifice:

> And so I cooked his favorite foods for him and filled them with flour-fine glass and rat poison. I poisoned him … Greater than my love for this man was love for my country. I could not let him trade us all, sell us to the Yankis (*FB*, 277).

Calling attention to the perceived expendability of Haitian subjects, Man Rapadou's personal sacrifice ironically challenges this perception as she rejects the consumption and commodification of Haitians. Furthermore, her action that was occasioned by love, duty and honor misappropriates the role of women vis-à-vis the family and the state.

In like manner, Amabelle's plea for the end to injustice is politically charged. Envisioning her personal relationship with Señora Valencia as a battle cry for justice and equality for Haitians irrespective of class, ethnicity, color or creed, Amabelle's fervent appeal impresses upon her readers:

> I will bear anything, carry any load, suffer any shame, walk with my eyes to the ground, if only for the very small chance that one day our fate might come to being somewhat closer and I would be granted for all my years of travail and duty an honestly gained life that in some extremely modest way would begin to resemble hers (*FB,* 306).

As intimated earlier, Amabelle's (Danticat's) appeal to bring to a halt the discriminatory practices against Haitians is representative of a larger contemporary political issue: the routinized and systematic expulsion of Haitians and dark-complected Dominicans from the Dominican Republic.

Parsley, distinguished for its principal domestic usage, is used to promote further marginalization and ultimately expulsion. Along these lines, the

domestic (space) is highly politicized, becoming a battle ground of citizen rights. Pondering on the mysterious use of parsley as a tool of discrimination, Amabelle quizzically muses:

> But parsley? Was it because it was so used, so commonplace, so abundantly at hand that everyone who desired a sprig could find one? We used parsley for our food, our teas, 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 (*FB,* 203).

Paradoxically, the easy access and accessibility to parsley becomes a marker of inaccessibility or unbelonging. By this account, parsley's use as a cleansing agent has been reappropriated, or more pointedly misappropriated as it now functions as a device of ethnic cleansing. Nevertheless, the term undergoes further "linguistic" reappropriation. In this instance however, it is transformed into a tool of resistance and female agency. Another female victim of the massacre, Odette,

> With her parting breath [she] mouthed in Kreyòl 'pèsi,' not calmly and slowly as if she were asking for it at a roadside garden or open market, not questioning as if demanding of the face of Heaven the greater meaning of senseless acts, no effort to say 'perejil' as if pleading for her life (*FB,* ibid.).

Amabelle details Odette's defiance and its impact at length:

> If [the Generalissimo] had heard Odette's 'pèsi' it might have startled him, not the tears and supplications he would have expected, no shriek from unbound fear, but a provocation, a challenge, a dare. To the devil with your world, your grass, your wind, your water, your air, your words. You ask for perejil, I give you more (*FB,* ibid.).

Odette's verbal challenge registers rejection of female domestication cum subordination. By violently resisting pronouncing "perejil", Odette escapes linguistic strangulation. Notably, prior to articulating resistance "she spat up the chest full of water she had collected in the river" (*FB,* 203). Paradoxically, the language that was intended to reinforce Dominican exclusionism is employed subversively to ascertain Haitian nationalism. Rejecting the master tongue, Odette fully engages her mother tongue, Kreyòl. Assessing the linguistic silencing of slaves, Nourbese Philip expresses that the slave master, in an effort to foil slave rebellions and revolutions, insisted (through separation) that slaves did not share a common tongue. As a result, Philip reminds us of the severe consequence of engaging the mother tongue: "Every slave caught speaking his native language shall be severely punished".[31] Initiating a "rebellion", Odette subverts the master (tongue), refusing to be "dumb-tongued", transforming what Philip refers to as "a genealogy of silence" into "a genealogy of

[31] Philip, *she tries her tongue*, 58.

resistance in which [she] speak[s]. In a certain manner".[32] Therefore, her tongue becomes "the offending organ" that resists, defies, and defiles.[33]

In a subversive twist, Kreyòl becomes the language of access and belonging (it is no mere coincidence that Danticat uses the Kreyòl spelling of the word). Dominican sisters, Dolores and Doloritas, express their desire to assimilate through language acquisition. In conversation with Amabelle, Odette, Wilner and Tibon, Dolores in a reconciliatory tone confesses: "We have yet to learn your language" (*FB,* 176). We come to find out that the larger incentive for Kreyòl acquisition is Doloritas' romantic involvement with her Haitian lover, Ilestbien: "We are together six months, me and my man. I told him I would learn Kreyòl for when we visit his family in Haiti" (*FB,* 177). This impending union between Doloritas and Ilestbien that necessitates literal (physical) and linguistic bordercrossings is demonstrative of a need for global citizenship, but more importantly, it is a call for unity between the two people, the two nation-states.[34] This plea for new beginnings was manifested earlier with the birth of a boy-girl set of twins to Señora Valencia. Significantly, the girl, Rosalinda, much smaller in stature and of darker hue; born with a veil over her face and the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck, survives her brother, Rafi – named after the Generalissimo – in spite of his acclaimed strength and pronounced European features. Rafi's death silences the patriarchy, rendering it ineffective and impotent.[35] By the same token, Rosalinda's survival serves as a deterrent to Trujillo's mission to whiten or Europeanize the Dominican state. This linguistic, ethnic, and cultural intermixing, accentuated by the amalgamation of the French words *il est bien* in Ilestbien's name, sets the stage for debunking the myth of racial purity.

Amabelle and Doloritas are united in their suffering, their loss of Haitian men to the massacre. Thus, their common language is that of loss and female oppression. In yet another skillful demonstration of linguistic ingenuity, Danticat envisions loss and oppression as visible markers on female bodies. For example, Haitian women are buried under the identifiable markers of class and ethnic difference: "Among the oldest women, 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. Felice, a young housemaid, had a beet-colored birthmark like a mustache over her lip" (*FB,* 61). This violence that is inscribed upon the female body is revealed in an earlier scene in which Amabelle compares Señora Valencia's spotless hands to her own scarred ones, emphasizing Señora Valencia's charmed life and her own impoverished state. In like fashion, suffering becomes manifest in the Dominican sisters' names, Dolores and Doloritas, meaning pain or sorrow. Dolores intimates that the language of pain is rooted in the motherline wherein suffering and pain precipitated their entrance into the world: "Our mother suffered much when each one

[32] Philip, *A Genealogy*, 13.

[33] Philip, *she tries her tongue*, 58.

[34] Like Amabelle who is on a mission to find Sebastien, Doloritas is searching for Ilestbien, who has perceivably become a victim of the massacre. She relies on the hope embedded in his name that translates as "all is well" in finding him.

[35] Suffice to say that this silence bears the imprint of emasculation. Señor Pico acknowledged his son's presence into the world by inspecting his male organ, by peeking "beneath his diaper to check the boy's testicles".

of us was being born so gave us these grave names we have" (*FB,* 176). At the same time, pain fortifies the mother-daughter bond and the female bond in general. It is an interesting twist of fate that while birth (rights) does not automatically guarantee female subjects citizenship, it paradoxically approximates their preordained subordination in the nation-state.

Whereas Wilner's attempt to expunge the Dominican sisters from their midst so as to avoid persecution arguably stems from legitimate fear, at the same time it calls attention to reverse discrimination and female subjugation. Invoking a politics of national (un)belonging as a means to justify his abandonment of the two sisters, Wilner nonetheless refuses to address them directly: "I will not be roasted like lechón for them. This is their country. Let them find the border themselves. They can go to any village in these mountains, and the people will welcome them" (*FB,* 183). Wilner's declaration that further ruptures the divide between the two nations plays into the politics of fear-mongering, similar to that as espoused by both Dominican and Haitian governments to maintain control over its citizens. Likewise, he engages the masculinist narrative of nationalism for personal gain. Even so, his allegation of unanimity among Dominicans implies that there is no racial, gender, or class division within the nation-state, and therefore women are treated fairly under the law. Wilner is fully aware that birth right does not guarantee an individual full protection under the law; he serves as living testimony to this fact. Effectively, Wilner adopts a gender blind theorization of citizenship wherein Dolores' and Doloritas' exclusion bears the imprint of state expulsion, amounting to denial of citizenship. Finding themselves in a precarious position, their desire for union with Haiti puts them at great odds with the Dominican state, especially considering the 'conspiratorial' nature of their act, treason, their statelessness is illuminated further in their choice of Haiti as a place of refuge. In addition to the political and economic turmoil that has come to define the island, successive Haitian governments have contributed to the instability that continues to plague the island nation and its people. One such injustice manifests in Haitian citizens being sentenced to a life of servitude in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic.[36] Tibon underscores the Haitian government's complicity in their expulsion: "Poor people are sold to work in the cane fields so our own country can be free of them" (*FB,* 178). In this regard, Haitians are doubly orphaned by the host and the home country.

[36] Refer to Peter Grill's newspaper article, "Suffering Modern Day Slavery" in which he discusses the continued exploitation of Haitians.

Orphaned from their once treasured and celebrated past, Haitian citizens have devised a coping mechanism to survive their nation's betrayal. They induce national nostalgia:

> We had respect. When Dessalines, Toussaint, Henry, when those men walked the earth, we were a strong nation. Those men would go to war to defend our

> blood. In all this, our so-called president says nothing, our Papa Vincent – our poet – he says nothing at all to this affront to the children of Dessalines, the children of Toussaint, the children of Henry; he shouts nothing across this river of our blood (*FB,* 212).

Engendering a politics of national unity and solidarity by calling on the "old dead fathers of independence", disenfranchised Haitians acquire a sense of belonging, albeit via memory (*FB,* 212). To echo Danticat, they "can be mausoleums, [they themselves] are the museums, [they] are [their] own testaments".[37]

[37] Shea, "The Hunger to Tell", 12-22, 21.

Furthermore, in response to Wilner's gender blind theorization of citizen rights, Tibon references class dynamic that played a pivotal role in the slaughter of Haitians. Underscoring the inherent stigma of poverty, of belonging to the lower working class, he poignantly asserts: "The ruin of the poor is their poverty. The poor man, *no matter who he is*, is always despised by his neighbors. When you stay too long at a neighbor's house, it's only natural that he become weary of you and hate you" (*FB,* 178; emphasis mine). While the discrimination meted out to Haitians engendered Tibon's pronouncement, he nevertheless accurately surmises that poverty does not discriminate; it is a global phenomenon. In the aforementioned analogy about "stay[ing] too long at a neighbor's house", his use of "house" connotes Haitians' presence, albeit unwelcome, even as it reaffirms their absence, their homelessness. Along similar lines, Tibon demonstrates how homelessness, namely not possessing a sense of self, can create anguish. Recounting a personal childhood narrative, Tibon reveals how he almost killed a Dominican boy: "I see him coming along the road in front of the mill one day and I decide to beat him to make him say that even if he's living in a big house and I'm living in the mill, he's no better than me" (*FB,* 182). Despite the daily scheduled beatings, the Dominican boy refused to give in to Tibon's demands: "He won't say what I want him to say, that we're the same, me and him, flesh like flesh, blood like blood" (*FB,* 182). By directing the violence unto the Dominican body, Tibon destabilizes the Haitian body as the "natural vessel for the pain inflicted by [Trujillo's] authoritarian government".[38] Hence, the guaranteed safety that Trujillo's violent raids on Haitians promised is threatened. By the same token, Tibon's attack of the Dominican boy brings to the forefront the "structural connection between the violence of genocide and the violence of poverty, oppression, and the colonial legacy".[39] Ultimately, Tibon's action is occasioned by his need to engage identity politics that primarily lends itself to acknowledging the common humanity of both Haitians and Dominicans. This acknowledgement in turn allows for equal protection under the law, previously underscored by Amabelle who hopes that one day not only will "[Dominicans and Haitians'] fates come to being somewhat closer",

[38] Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, *Beyond Terror: Gender, Narrative, Human Rights* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 58.

[39] Ibid, 160.

but also that Haitians will be granted "an honestly gained life for all their years of travail and duty" (*FB,* 306).

It is this recognition of a common humanity that results in Tibon candidly voicing his objection to abandoning the Dominican sisters. Furthering this act of solidarity, the Dominican sisters crossing the troubled waters to the other side of the border advances the reconciliation process. In the same breath, it challenges the politics of denial. In analyzing how the "twin" countries choose to memorialize (or forget) their past, Lucía M. Suárez points out that "[I]n contrast to a Haitian tradition of disclosure of misery and violence, the politics of silence – or rather denial – have been dominant in Dominican memory".[40] This politics of denial is challenged by both Amabelle and Doloritas who become living testimony to the widespread violence having lost their men to the massacre. Furthermore, the bordercrossing is equally an acknowledgment of mutual pain that requires individual identification with it in order to relieve national pain and suffering. Nevertheless, this fervent hope for a bright and peaceful future on the island of Haiti is epitomized in Ilestbien's name, where the "ilè" will guarantee necessary safety and freedom not only to Haitians, but will also renew the promise of freedom to "any who set foot on her soil".[41]

Championing the need to begin the healing process, Amabelle reminiscing on her life concludes: "[I]t was all the past. Now we all had to try and find the future" (184). Amabelle's role as midwife is pivotal in ensuring the birth of the future (nation).[42] The final scene with her lying naked on her back in the shallow water of the Massacre River lends itself to renewal and change. Simultaneously, the river doubles as a site of life and death.

By the same token, Amabelle identifies the need to memorialize the past: "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" (*FB,* 266). Karla Holloway eloquently articulates how memorializing the dead or the past can sustain the community: "Even if the story is grief-stricken, the act of memorializing retains a particular aspect of a culture's narrative, and for blacks in the Americas, some notion of racial memory and racial realization is mediated through the veil of death".[43] Silence is tantamount to erasure, to death. Amabelle, on the other hand, knowing the true value of investing in memory and remembering "is concerned especially about providing testimony, of a written record of her ordeal, leaving evidence for posterity".[44] Completing the iconic image of ordained "mother", Amabelle is bestowed the title of Man, as in Man Amabelle, "belonging to an elder" (*FB,* 269).

[40] Lucía M. Suárez, *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 7.

[41] See John Maxwell's "Haiti's Great White Hope? Common Sense" in which he documents that Haiti, in her heyday, was not only instrumental in engineering and supporting global struggles for freedom, but she also granted freedom to any captive that set foot on her soil. *Jamaica Observer* (24 May 2009), <http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/columns/html/20090523T170000-0500_152049_OBS_HAITI_S_GREAT_WHITE_HOPE_.asp>, 2 May 2010.

[42] Amabelle birthed Señora Valencia's twins. Her midwifery talent was most likely inherited from her mother who was a midwife.

[43] Karla F. C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 7.

[44] Renée Larrier, "'Girl by the Shore': Gender and Testimony in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*", *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 7.2 (Fall 2001), 50-62, 51.