

# At the Intersection of Trauma and Testimonio: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

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The terms “trauma” and *testimonio* (or “testimony”) have been linked so often in literary studies as to seem inextricably connected, suggesting that literature of “trauma” and *testimonio* narratives are one and the same.<sup>1</sup> And to some degree this classification overlap makes sense, for *testimonio* as a genre can surely be said to arise out of conditions of social and cultural trauma and to testify to these. Nonetheless, in this essay I am concerned with attending to some of the pressing and unreconciled tensions between literature of historical trauma and *testimonio* literature, at least as these have been critically construed. Prominent *testimonio* scholar John Beverley has insisted upon the “moral and political urgency” (40) of *testimonio*, which “always”, in his view, “signifies the need for a general social change” (41) in which readers are being asked to participate (37). As Ariel Dorfman has put it, *testimonios* must be understood as “texts that present themselves as instruments to drastically influence the social flow of events” (154). Kimberley Nance, likewise, asserts that “As part of a social project, *testimonio* is... [a matter] of *speaking of one’s suffering in such a way that readers will be induced to act against the injustice of it*” (90; emphasis in original). “*Testimonio’s* speakers”, Nance points out, “declare emphatically that their projects neither end with the production of the text nor even with its enthusiastic reception. Instead, they describe the texts as intermediate steps in a process directed toward producing change in the lifeworld” (14).<sup>2</sup> Other scholars, too, have been recently quite concerned with the power (or failure) of life narratives in general to move readers to action and to generate social change – whether or not they explicitly invoke the *testimonio* genre. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith write that “Published life narratives have contributed directly and indirectly to campaigns for human rights... through acts of speaking out that shift attention to systemic causes of violation” (28). James Dawes, in a discussion of what he calls human rights fiction, asks, “What is the line that separates those who are merely moved from those who are moved to act? When does the story become real enough to change you?” (7).

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While literature of historical trauma and *testimonio* fiction share many things in common (among them a concern with bearing witness to atrocities, an effort to represent the voices of the subaltern, and an emphasis on the collective and representative function of testimony), their ethical and temporal orientations are different. One, as the word “historical” surely signals, is oriented toward the past; the other is oriented toward the present (influencing readers to act in an urgent cause) and the future (the creation of change). It is in this crucial temporal distinction that trauma and *testimonio* (at least of the kind which scholars such as Nance, Dorfman, and Beverley address) diverge. In a discussion that is helpful for understanding the ethical implications of historical trauma, Lázaro Lima defines what he calls “narrative rememory” (such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*) as “a counterhistorical re-presentation of past events in need of national reevaluation” (166). This ethical thrust (which Nance might call “forensic”) is different, I suggest, from that of a *testimonio* that is aimed at specific *current* events that are in need not only of national and international “reevaluation” but of urgent *action*. It is worth attending to these distinctions, even while we acknowledge commonalities in terms of counter-hegemonic writing or more generalized concerns with social justice and human rights.

I argue here that Edwidge Danticat’s 1998 novel *The Farming of Bones* is an exemplary case study for foregrounding the inherent tensions between fiction that narrates historical trauma and what Linda Craft has called the testimonial novel (fiction sharing fundamental characteristics with non-fictional *testimonios*), even while it also attests to the strong convergences between these two critical classifications. In many ways, Danticat’s novel of the massacre of ethnic Haitians in the Dominican Republic in 1937, under dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, is best understood as primarily a narrative of profound collective trauma, directed towards other historical and fictional narratives (such as Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* or Rita Dove’s poem “Parsley”) of the contemporary period which elide national responsibility precisely through an exclusive focus on then-dictator Trujillo as the singular source of trauma. However, as I will propose at the conclusion, Danticat’s novel also suggests intriguing ways in which literature of historical trauma might come to serve a more direct (Nance might say, a more “deliberative”) *testimonio* function.

### Testimony as Bearing Witness

At the most obvious and familiar level, testimony (which is, after all, the literal translation of the Spanish word *testimonio*) suggests a legal context; it has to do with bearing witness to events, as John Beverley has pointed out (32). Both *testimonio* and the literature of historical trauma rely upon a “truth effect” (Beverley 33), meant to reinforce in the reader the confidence that the traumatic events being recounted are “real” or factual; in this sense, testimonial function in a novel is the concern with reproducing this truth effect even within fiction. As I will argue at the end of this paper, however, the truth effects of trauma literature should productively be distinguished from those effects that spring from the “presentness” of *testimonio*, as well as of what I would call *testimonio* fiction.

Literature of historical trauma, like *testimonio*, is notable for its documentary impulse – its effort to enclose within its fictional narrative concrete references to “real” historical conditions. The concern with truth effect frequently takes the form of a reproduction of the very *act* of “witnessing” within the fictional narrative itself. In *The Farming of Bones*, this strong impulse is most markedly seen in an exchange of eyewitness accounts of the massacre by the victims and survivors themselves, as they talk in a makeshift clinic in Haiti:

‘It was Monday, the last two days in September’, a man began, as though giving an account to a justice of the peace. ‘I went to the fields in the early morning. When I came home at noontime, the Guardia was in my house. . . .’ . . .

‘Only a few paces from me’, shouted a woman, ‘they had them tied in ropes and Don José, who has known me my whole life, went at them with his machete, first my son, then my father, then my sister.’ . . .

‘I was there in Santiago’, a voice shouted . . . , ‘when they shut seven hundred souls into a courtyard behind two government houses. They made them lie facedown in the red dirt and shot them in the back of the head with rifles.’ . . . ‘I was there’, echoed a young woman . . . ‘when they forced more than two hundred off the pier in Monte Cristi.’ (209-10)

The documentary impulse is evident in the compulsive desire of each speaker to ground his or her testimony in verifiable facts of time, place, as well as

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quantifiable numbers and types of deaths: “It was Monday, the last two days of September”, “early morning”, “noontime”, “Santiago”, “Monte Cristi”, “seven hundred” shot “with rifles”, “two hundred” drowned. The weight of the passage is cumulative; no one person’s story takes precedence, but rather the fragments weave together as strands of a larger communal testimony. Within this collective narrative, potential gaps or even impossibilities in the “factuality” of the story are glossed over for the sake of its *telling*, its putting into narrative form the community’s trauma. Thus no one asks, for example, how one survivor could have witnessed seven hundred lying face down and being shot with rifles, at close enough range to estimate a count of seven hundred or to know that they were shot *with rifles*, without having been shot himself. Instead, the presumed *authority* of eyewitness is verbally insisted upon and compulsively repeated: “*I was there*”.

### **Testimony, Synecdoche and the Speech of the Subaltern**

The collective nature of the documentary impulse is prominent in much literature of historical trauma, as it is also in *testimonio*. Indeed, chief among the striking similarities and overlaps of these two literary modes is the synecdochic modality – the need that one story stand not just for itself, but rather for a larger collective recounting of trauma, as the famous opening of Rigoberta Menchu’s paradigmatic *testimonio* suggests: “I’d like to stress that it’s not only *my* life, it’s also the testimony of my people... My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans” (1). In *The Farming of Bones*, the ethnically Haitian narrator Amabelle also understands her story as intimately connected with the larger collective story; shortly after the exchange between massacre survivors recounted earlier, she tells how “I looked for my face in the tin ceiling above me... With everyone lying face up and with their bodies so close together, I couldn’t tell which face was mine” (217). If bodies, as Amy Novak comments, can serve as testament to trauma (103-4), then their identification with each other in this scene suggests how much the history of the massacre will need to be understood as collective.

In *testimonio*, as in literature of historical trauma, the synecdochic function is intimately tied to the ability of the narrative account to give voice to the subaltern who are the victims of repression and trauma. Indeed, for Linda Craft, this property of the narrative is the very essence of what she calls “testimonial function” in fictional narratives (185). John Beverley,

similarly, offers that “what is at stake in testimonio is not so much truth *from* or *about* the other as the truth *of* the other. of the other’s sense of what is true and what is false” (7). Various scholars have taken up this line of argument by granting some form of testimonial function to literature of trauma that would appear to tell “the truth *of* the other” by revising and correcting “official” history to tell history from a subaltern point of view – that is, that would appear to capture and represent “the other’s sense of what is true and what is false”. Critics have suggested that narratives which present a non-hegemonic version of history serve this sort of “testimonial function” (see for example Novak 107, Shemak 84, and Irizarry 269). I will return to complicate this understanding of “testimonial function” shortly; for the moment, however, I want to explore just how Danticat’s *Farming of Bones* enacts such a revision of *historical* narrative, attempting to represent “the other’s sense of what is true and what is false”.

Danticat’s novel, I suggest, “corrects” a particular aspect of the Dominican historical narrative, even as it has already been revised by writers such as Julia Alvarez who are most attentive to Trujillo’s violence and repression, along with its resulting trauma. This corrective has to do, in particular, with the representation of Trujillo as a Latin American “caudillo”. As Ignacio López-Calvo explains, caudillos are marked through their deployment of *continuismo*, understood as the manipulation of the legal system to provide “an appearance of legality for those dictatorial regimes that wish to remain in power indefinitely”, as well as by *personalismo* or the cult of personality constructed around these long-ruling dictators. Trujillo was represented in the Dominican Republic as “the chosen one, the messiah who would finally save the Fatherland from chaos, a new Haitian invasion, and economic and political dependency on foreign powers” (López-Calvo 20-21). The combination of *continuismo* and *personalismo* has led to the logical identification of the thirty-one years of Trujillo’s reign as the “Trujillo era” (19).

The potential problem, however, with the narrative emphasis on Trujillo-as-*caudillo* is that it drastically *narrows* responsibility and culpability for the massacre of Haitians. This version of history arguably *still* represses Haitian voices by eliding, or even refusing to acknowledge, a larger Dominican responsibility. And indeed, as Ernesto Sagás points out, “official references to the 1937 massacre were absent” from the historical record in

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the Dominican Republic, both at the time and subsequently; “No documentation with direct references to the massacre –before, during, or after it– has been found in the Dominican archives. It was as if it never happened” (47). There has been no national coming-to-terms with the Haitian massacre. Yet as Sagás argues, “The Trujillo regime and its intellectuals did not invent antihaitianismo; it already was an integral part of Dominican culture” (46). Peter Winn, discussing the construction of a Dominican national identity, explains: “If Haiti was black, African, and Voodooist, then the Dominican Republic would be white, Spanish, and Catholic” (288). A narrative which elaborates upon the functions of antihaitianismo shifts our attention from the repressive personality of the *caudillo* to the collective culpability of average Dominicans, a theme that might well represent “the other’s sense of what is true and what is false” in ways that official Dominican histories (and Alvarez’s novel) might fail to do.

*The Farming of Bones* deals quite directly with the topic of a *collective* Dominican national identity and its role in the Haitian massacre. It is the collective culpability in this particular national construct, and in the national aggression that springs from it, that Danticat evokes in the description of a pivotal scene of violence:

Someone threw a fist-sized rock, which bruised my lip and left cheek. My face hit the ground. Another rock was thrown at Yves...The faces in the crowd were streaming in and out of my vision. A sharp blow to my side nearly stopped my breath... Rolling myself into a ball, I tried to get away from the worst of the kicking horde... My screams slowed them a bit... The air vibrated with a twenty-on-gun salute. People applauded and stomped their feet and sang the Dominican national anthem. (194)

As these beatings occur, Trujillo is only a shadowy presence inside a nearby cathedral from which the crowd is waiting for him to emerge. The scene, that is, deliberately *decenters* Trujillo from the narrative in order to explore the *collective* production of violence (Caminero-Santangelo 233 n.11): “the crowd”, “the kicking horde”, or just “them”, “people”, and an unspecified “someone” – nameless faces who come together to sing the national anthem.

Violence is more than event-specific in Danticat’s text, and more than person-specific, as well. It has to do with the whole history of the construction of a Dominican nation and the *production* of the “subaltern” as

the Other of that nation. As Beverley writes, the notion of “nation” “rhetorically sutures over the gaps and discontinuities internal to ‘the people’. But it is in those gaps and discontinuities that the force of the subaltern appears” (8). Danticat’s text represents not so much one *caudillo’s* repressive reign of terror but rather the violence enacted upon the “gaps and discontinuities” inhabited by the subaltern Haitian laborers. That is to say, just as *testimonio* must represent the speaker as synecdochic of the subaltern, Trujillo himself becomes merely a synecdochic function of a much longer national and racial violence. Synecdoche, in this sense, becomes the operative figurative mode of *The Farming of Bones*.

The violent force of discourses defining the Dominican nation is visible from the very first pages of the novel. The central narrative opens not with the deaths of the massacre but with a birth of twins, a boy and a girl; while the boy is light-skinned, the daughter is darker, a fact which immediately seems to cause the family some distress. Señora Valencia, the mother of the newborns and the wealthy Dominican woman for whom Amabelle works, tells Amabelle “my daughter favors you” (11), employing a vaguely familial language that would suggest the baby has *inherited* Amabelle’s color; yet she simultaneously worries over her daughter’s appearance precisely because it might someday be read as a misleading “sign” of a false national identity: “what if she is mistaken for one of your people?” (12). Though family has often served as a metaphor for nationhood, the language of familial “favoring” is abruptly severed by the discourse of *separate* peoplehood. Later, Doctor Javier notes of the baby girl that she “has a little charcoal behind the ears, that one” (17) – a comment to which Sra. Valencia’s father Don Ignacio takes offense. Don Ignacio, who is called “Papi” by all in the household including Amabelle, in another illusory evocation of familial connectedness, reads the doctor’s comments as insinuating the trace of genetic “blackness”; he retorts hotly, “You make a very impolite assertion... We don’t want to hear anything more of the kind” (18).

It is precisely such racialized distinctions, the thrust of the plot suggests, that allow Haitian lives to be less valued than Dominican lives. The births of the twins are, in fact, shadowed already by death: Sra. Valencia’s husband, Señor Pico, has run over and killed a Haitian worker, Joël, in his haste to return home to see his newborns. Señor Pico does not stay at the scene of the accident to search for the injured man, who has fallen into

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a ravine. This first killing of the novel, while accidental, already lays the groundwork for the later massacre by revealing the disposableness to the Dominican property-owner of the Haitian worker's life. As the rumors of the larger killing begin, Amabelle comments, "I couldn't understand why... the others would consider [Joel's] death to be a herald of theirs and mine too. Had Señor Pico struck Joel with his automobile deliberately, to clear his side of the island of Haitians?" (126). What Amabelle fails to grasp is precisely the nature in which the one killing is linked to others, *not* by Trujillo's genocidal orders, but by the larger national history of racism in which Haitian life is devalued. It is this national truth to which Danticat's novel testifies; Trujillo was *always* just one manifestation of a larger cultural trauma.

### Trauma and the Failure of Subaltern Speech

In 1983, African-American writer Rita Dove published her poem, "Parsley", a literary rendering of the Haitian massacre that precedes the publication of the novels by Alvarez and Danticat by more than a decade. Helen Vendler has written, "The poem... summons up both the exhausted workers (in a quasi-villanelle) and the demented Trujillo (in a quasi-sestina)" (161). As Vendler's comments imply, Trujillo, the demented murderer, once again accounts for the entire causal explanation for the massacre. I would like to focus here not on the poem's form but on its imagined historical narrative:

...the general thinks  
of his mother, how she died in the fall  
.....  
He sees his mother's smile...  
...He hears  
the Haitians sing without R's  
.....  
his mother was no stupid woman; she  
could roll an R like a queen. Even  
a parrot can roll an R!

Dove's poem dramatizes a much commented on aspect of the Haitian mas-



sacre: the parsley test. As Michele Wucker explains:

For Haitians... the soldiers applied a simple test. They would accost any person with dark skin. Holding up sprigs of parsley, Trujillo's men would query their prospective victims: 'Cómo se llama esto?' What is this thing called?... Haitians, whose Kreyol uses a wide, flat *r*, find it difficult to pronounce the trilled *r* in the Spanish word for parsley, *perejil*. If the word came out as the Haitian *pe ʃil*..., the victim was condemned to die. (Wucker 49)

In Dove's weirdly Freudian poetic narrative, Trujillo orders the deaths of Haitians in an irrational commemoration of his mother. The word "parsley" thus becomes a metonym for Trujillo's dementedness; Dove's poem (like Alvarez's novel) places the weight of historical culpability entirely on Trujillo, rather than exploring the larger significance of linguistic difference.

By contrast, in Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, the explanatory weight of the killing is lifted from the word "parsley" (and, simultaneously, from psychologizing of Trujillo). When a crowd of young men demand "Tell us what this is", Amabelle narrates that "At that moment I did believe that had I wanted to, I could have said the word properly, calmly, slowly, the way I often asked 'Perejil?' of the old Dominican women... at the roadside gardens and markets.... I could have said it. But I didn't get my chance. Yves and I were shoved down onto our knees. Our jaws were pried open and parsley stuffed into our mouths" (193). Crucial to our understanding of the above scene is the fact that Amabelle and the other Haitian victims *do not get the chance* to speak. This is Danticat's intentional revision of the "parsley test", and it brings us back to an important distinction between trauma literature and *testimonio* literature, despite their strong overlaps. While *testimonio* takes the authoritative subaltern narration of crisis as its founding premise, trauma is generally understood as by definition *resisting* narration or even "conscious" understanding. Trauma, eminent scholar Cathy Caruth tells us, is not "locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). Embedded in this definition are two aspects of trauma: 1) its resistance to narration in the present, and 2) its compulsive repetition after the fact. Of the first point, we might note that unlike *testimonio*, a project which does not question or challenge the self-conscious awareness of the subaltern, trauma scholarship repeatedly

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underscores the initial failure of understanding (see for example Caruth 11; Herman 1; Munro 81, 84). Symbolic *silencing* is thus crucial to trauma literature; Amabelle's muteness, her lack of opportunity even to attempt to voice the correct word, gestures toward a larger muteness in the face of the inexplicable.

Discussions of trauma literature make a distinction between forms of memory that signal the (incomprehensible) occurrence of trauma, and forms of memory that process trauma retrospectively into a narrative that makes sense of it. Kathleen Brogan, for instance, distinguishes between "narrative memory" and "traumatic memory", which is marked by "pure repetition" (9); Cathy Caruth concurs: "the response to the [traumatic] event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). This form of "memory", which is not characterized by narrative but by *compulsive repetition*, manifests itself in *The Farming of Bones* precisely, I suggest, as the repetition of violence which silences speech – that is, as Amabelle's accidental killing of Odette, another Haitian woman, as they flee the Dominican Republic by crossing Massacre River:

I reached for Odette's mouth and sealed it with both my hands when the shot rang out... Odette bit deep into my palm, scraping the inside flesh with her top and bottom teeth... I kept one hand on her mouth and moved the other one to her nose and pressed down hard for her own good, for our own good. (201-2)

Amabelle's recounting of this scene bears traces of the earlier parsley test – the violence of the muting, the justification of collective good that presumably vindicates the violence. Later, as Odette dies, she utters with her last gasp the Kreyól word for parsley, further linking the two scenes; both are connected by what *is not* said. Amabelle wonders whether, if Trujillo "had heard Odette's 'pèsi', it might have startled him, not the tears and supplications he would have expected,... but a provocation, a challenge" (203). It is this challenge, this provocation, which Amabelle has silenced by stopping Odette's mouth. In some sense, the trauma is the *silencing* itself, which Amabelle compulsively repeats.

When we consider the narrative inaccessibility of trauma in the moment of its experience, we can begin to understand that what is frequently glossed over in writing on *testimonio* is precisely the old possibility fa-

mously raised by Spivak – that the subaltern *can't* speak, at least not with final authority and conclusiveness regarding the facts of trauma. Like the slave narratives of the mid-19th century, which relied on facticity to avoid accusations of fraudulence, *testimonio* is at pains to avoid being seen as engaging in distortion. But the documentary impulse glosses over the point that memory itself, even when recounted to the best of the speaker's ability and without intent to deceive or distort, is not the same as facticity. Memories, as a form of narrative, inevitably bear the traces of other narratives and are shaped by them. The possibility that the subaltern can, in fact, come to narrate trauma does not mean that the subaltern (any more than the privileged) can "speak" objectively of the facts, even retrospectively. This is a problem which *testimonio* must gloss over, but which literature of trauma insistently calls attention to.

The problematics of subaltern testimony about trauma are most clearly revealed in *The Farming of Bones* by a Haitian priest's deluded rantings after the massacre. Father Romain, the survivor-priest, is described as talking "like a badly wound machine", a phrasing which bears within it the double meaning of his woundedness, both physical and psychological. In his traumatized state, he tells a story that compulsively *repeats* the violence of trauma enacted in the racialized, national Dominican narrative, rather than reporting "objectively" on its violence or his place within it: "Our motherland is Spain; theirs is darkest Africa, you understand? Our problem is one of dominion... 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. In three generations, our children and grandchildren will have their blood completely tainted unless we defend ourselves now, you understand?" (261). Embracing the logic of the victimizers, Father Romain speaks, but in a way which vastly complicates the notion of subaltern speech, since his speech utterly obscures his own positionality as a Haitian subaltern. The pronouns "our" and "us" in the passage do not refer to him, or to any collective which includes him, but rather textually erase him, since the words only make sense if the listener imagines a *Dominican* speaker.

In less obvious ways, however, Amabelle herself is another version of Father Romain – another version, that is, of a subaltern who has internalized the Dominican national narrative, at the risk of erasing herself. While she has entirely accepted the class structure that proposes that Haitian labor-

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ers are subservient to their Dominican employers (Shemak 89), she has simultaneously adopted the familial discourse that effaces these racial, class, and national tensions. Thus she does not blink an eye at the implied familial relations in calling Don Ignacio “Papi”, or in Sra. Valencia’s suggestion that her daughter “favors” Amabelle, as though Amabelle were an aunt or cousin. When Amabelle’s lover Sebastien asks her, “Do you think they’re your family?” she responds “The señora and her family are the closest to kin I have” (110). What Amabelle does not yet comprehend are the deep contradictions and fault lines that score through such superficial references to “family” and “kin” – fault lines that are glimpsed in moments such as Senior Ignacio’s offense at the “charcoal behind the ears” comment. Polite metaphors aside, the Haitians are not part of the Dominican “family”.

This is what Amabelle’s retrospective narrative –her conversion of the story of trauma into a collective “history”– must come to take into account. When Amabelle returns, years later, Sra. Valencia tells her, “If I denounce this country, I denounce myself” (299); her comment reveals that Amabelle was never really part of Sra. Valencia’s family, just as the Haitians were never part of the Dominican nation. This is what Amabelle realizes as she looks into the face of the new young Haitian maid, Sylvie, and thinks to herself that:

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: I will bear anything, carry any load, suffer any shame, walk with eyes to the ground, if only for the very small chance that one day our fates [that is, the Haitian woman’s and the Dominican woman’s] might come to being 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. (306)

In this moment of epiphany, Amabelle recognizes the falsity of claims of “resemblance”: Dominicans will never *really* think that they “favor” Haitians, or that Haitians “resemble” them.

Sra. Valencia is herself engaged in storytelling efforts that will mask this truth, however. Sylvie, the current Haitian maid who has inherited the trauma of the massacre, asks Sra. Valencia a historical question: “Why parsley?” (303). Sra. Valencia responds, “There are many stories. This is only one”. She then proceeds to tell a legend about when “the Generalissimo [Trujillo] was a young man” and “had a realization”: “Your people did

not trill their *r* the way we do, or pronounce the jota. ‘You can never hide as long as there is parsley nearby’, the Generalissimo is believed to have said” (304). Once again, the story of parsley exculpates the Dominican people by recounting a singular cause of the violence: Trujillo himself. But Sylvie is “not satisfied with the señora’s explanation”, and Amabelle notes, “as the señora had said, there are many stories. And mine too is only one” (305). Amabelle’s emphasis, however, is on how her story is part of a larger, *collective* story; a point which Sra. Valencia’s narrative about Trujillo continues to deny.

### **Telling the Story of Trauma**

Scholarship on trauma writing, like scholarship on *testimonio*, emphasizes the synecdochic character of much trauma narrative; in this way, the two modes resemble each other deeply. In the case of trauma literature, however, what is emphasized is the narrative that occurs *after* the fact of the traumatic event, which, as I have discussed, is itself understood as resisting representation (even to the self) in the moment of its occurrence. Narratives of historical trauma, however, function in part by turning trauma that was experienced in the moment as profoundly and deeply personal into larger stories of historical trauma. As Cathy Caruth argues, “the traumatic nature of history means that events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others... [H]istory, like trauma, is never simply one’s own... [;] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (18, 24). Part of my argument throughout this essay has been precisely, of course, that Danticat’s re-imagined history strives to “implicate others” – to reinscribe a paradigmatic narrative of a single evil man and his crimes with the complicity of “others” not just through silence or passivity but through active participation in a given set of social beliefs. The other side of the story is that the victims’ individual stories are implicated in each other, in trauma narrative as in *testimonio*. Near the end of the novel, Amabelle contemplates telling her story to the justice of the peace who is supposedly collecting and transcribing Haitian accounts of the massacre: “To pass the time waiting, I thought of many ways to shorten my tale. Perhaps Yves and I would go in together and make both our stories one. That way we would give someone else a chance to be heard” (232). To “make both our stories one” is in some sense the project of the literature of historical trauma as of

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*testimonio* – in both cases, the individual story must be understood as part of a larger collective story.

But even in telling her personal story as part of a larger story, Amabelle reimagines and reinterprets history. Some aspects of her personal history, for example, might not properly belong in the larger national history. The deaths of Amabelle's parents in Massacre River when she was a young child are not caused by Dominican-Haitian racial and national antagonisms (nor even, as Amy Novak argues, by "repression" and "border policing" [112]). They die because they crossed into the Dominican Republic on market day, to buy pots from a pot maker who lived in Dajabón, and the river level rises dangerously from the rain as they attempt to cross back (50). (If anything, the memory reveals the fluidity of the border and a border culture where Haitians and Dominicans have at times co-existed relatively peacefully.) Yet as Amabelle narrates these first deeply personal deaths at the site of the subsequent massacre, she cannot fail to come to integrate them into the larger communal story. In the days after the massacre, at the makeshift Haitian clinic, Amabelle clings to the possibility that her lover and his sister have survived:

‘With the rain, the river will overflow’, I said. ‘And if Mimi and Sebastien are crossing, it will not be good.’

‘They say the killing has stopped’, [Yves, her companion] said.

‘There is a dream I have often’, I said, ‘of my parents in the river, in the rain.’ (216)

Amabelle's concern over the lives of Sebastien and Mimi in the wake of the massacre, conveyed metonymically by the conditions at the massacre site itself ("rain", "river"), immediately brings to mind the recent traumatic past there: "the killing has stopped". But this reminder of trauma, in turn, provokes in Amabelle her memory of her parents' death years before at Massacre River. The conditions are superficially and semantically similar ("in the river, in the rain") although the causes for the deaths (nationalist genocide versus accidental drowning) are quite distinct. From here on, however, Amabelle's parents' death will be forever inextricably connected in her own mind to the subsequent collective trauma: "Each time I closed my eyes I saw the river and imagined Sebastien and Mimi drowning the way my mother and father and Odette had" (227). What is remarkable about this imagined possibility is not just that Sebastien and Mimi (whose

fates are never known) are imagined to have died “the way” Amabelle’s parents died, but even more strikingly, that they died “The way my mother and father *and Odette* had” (italics added); that is, while the metaphorical equation of her parents with Sebastien and Mimi is an *explicitly* signaled comparison in the text (did they die “the way” her parents did?), the linking of the deaths of her parents with that of Odette, who is killed *while fleeing the massacre with Amabelle*, is not signaled at all, but executed without commentary. The death of Amabelle’s parents becomes seamlessly interwoven with the deaths of the Haitian massacre.

Ruth Leys, glossing Freud’s writings on anxiety, suggests that Freud “historicizes and narrativizes” anxiety by “taking the danger that threatens the ego to be the reproduction of a prior situation... On this model, anxiety serves the purpose of protecting the psyche’s coherence by allowing the ego to represent and master a danger situation that it recognizes as the reproduction of an earlier situation” (27). Of course, the interpretation of the new trauma via the earlier one inevitably works both ways: if the new situation is a reproduction of the prior one, then the prior one becomes also forever reconfigured in the memory as an earlier version of the new one. Thus Amabelle comes to understand her parents’ deaths as an earlier version of the later communal deaths at Massacre River. The narrative reclamation of the traumatic event inevitably amends, distorts, and reads anew, as Danticat’s interweaving of these two temporal memories indicates. This is a possibility that trauma literature explicitly explores but that *testimonio* needs to repress, precisely because its urgency requires a coherent narrative *now*, in the “present” of its production.

### **Testimonio’s Function: Urgency and Social Action**

As I noted at the opening of this essay, it is the “presentness” of *testimonio* which distinguishes it most clearly from literature of historical trauma. As Beverley has explained, the Latin American *testimonio* genre is understood as being *more* than just testimony in a legalistic sense; it is produced within and refers to a situation of current crisis, to which the speaker calls the reader’s attention with the understood aim of provoking *action* in response. The distinction is both a temporal one and an ethical one: temporal in that “Testimonio must above all be a story that... involves some pressing and immediate problem of communication” (Beverley 61); and ethical in that



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*testimonios* make a particular kind of ethical demand upon their readers: they insist that readers “participate... in the concreteness... of actual social struggles” (47). This premise also undergirds Kimberly Nance’s claim in *Can Literature Promote Justice?*, cited earlier, in which she forcefully maintains that “*testimonio* is not a matter of speaking of one’s suffering for therapeutic, archival, or judicial purposes, but... rather of *speaking of one’s suffering in such a way that readers will be induced to act against the injustice of it*” (90). In other words, testimony in the cause of psychological healing (“therapeutic” purposes) or of revising an “official” historical record (“archival” ones) does not, under this revised and more narrow definition, constitute *testimonio*, which is concerned not just with what readers know, but with what they *do*; and this solicited action is not abstract and generalized (e.g. speak out in the face of tyranny or human rights violations) but specific and concrete (oppose the genocide in Guatemala or Sudan). On the face of it, this criterion for *testimonio* would seem to distinguish it immediately from literature of historical trauma. It is difficult to make an argument that any contemporary novels about Trujillo, whose dictatorship ended in 1961 with his assassination, are “*testimonio*” literature in this deliberative sense. Rather, they repeat and rehearse a larger cultural trauma in Dominican and Haitian history – one from which, arguably, neither people have yet recovered. Trauma, as Caruth postulates, is marked not by presentness but by “latency”, the “period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent” (17).

Accompanied with the latency of the traumatic event is a different kind of urgency, however – the urgency to *narrate*. Though trauma is marked by the *difficulty*, perhaps even impossibility, of telling, it is also marked by the *need* for telling. As James Young has observed, “It is almost as if violent events –perceived as aberrations or ruptures in the cultural continuum– demand their retelling, their *narration*, back into traditions and structures they would otherwise defy... [T]he more violently wrenched from a continuum a catastrophe is perceived to be, the more desperate –and frustrated– the writer’s attempts become to represent its events *as* discontinuous” (404), that is, as traumatic. (Of course, what I have been arguing all along is that part of the trauma of the Haitian massacre, as represented by Danticat, is that it did *not* violate a “cultural continuum” but was in fact part and parcel of that continuum and the logical extension of it.) The exis-



tence of a proliferation of narratives about a past event serves as “evidence” of trauma, in that the narratives mark the thing that *needs above all to be narrated*.

When the Haitians in the makeshift clinic tell their stories about the massacre, “they exchanged tales quickly, the haste in their voices sometimes blurring the words, for greater than their desire to be heard was the hunger to tell” (209). Though the distinction certainly is not an ironclad one, we might posit that what distinguishes deliberative *testimonio* fiction from literature of historical trauma is the difference between the “desire to be heard” and the “hunger to tell”. While trauma gives rise to the need to tell, in *testimonio*, by contrast, there is an enormous weight on *hearing*, on reception, because only if the audience truly listens can it be motivated to take action in the current crisis. Deliberative *testimonio*, that is, exists for its audience, not for “therapeutic” or “archival” purposes.

Yet, I would argue, even literature of historical trauma such as Danticat’s *Farming of Bones* may still bear a *testimonio* function if it forces readers to continue to evaluate and act on their present socio-political situations *in concrete ways*. As others have pointed out, the racial dynamics of national identity construction in the Dominican Republic are hardly a thing of the past; they are a continuing and current situation (see for example Sagas, Torres-Saillant, Winn) – arguably *in part* because there has been no national reckoning with the 1937 Haitian massacre. Danticat has recounted that “the only time in her life that she witnessed her great-uncle cry was when the word *perejil* was used by Dominicans to slander José Francisco Peña Gómez during his candidacy for president” (Suárez 13) in the *mid-1990s*. The resurfacing of the parsley test sixty years after the fact suggests the degree to which the national racism of the past, about which Danticat writes, is intimately connected to the national racism of the present; though the massacre is a “historical” situation, the racism is a continuing one. In the beginning of the new millennium, Haitian workers continued to be periodically rounded up by the thousands and deported without due process from the Dominican Republic (“Expelled”), which nonetheless profited from their exploited labor. To some degree, then, the events Danticat recounts may be said to continue to provoke a specific sense of urgency.

Further, literature of trauma can, on occasion, have what I call an “incidental” *testimonio* function. In medicine, an “incidental” finding is a

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finding (e.g. cancer) that is discovered in the process of investigating an unrelated problem. I submit that Danticat's representation of Dominican attitudes toward the Haitian laborers in their midst, when read in a U.S. context and within our current climate of escalating hostility to "illegal" immigration, may potentially also have an incidental *testimonio* function. (I do not mean to suggest that the situations of the Dominican Republic in 1939 and the U.S. in the present moment are entirely unrelated. Both are manifestations of migratory flows driven by poverty in the "home" country and established labor routes in the host country; yet at the same time they are geographically and temporally distant from one another.) The laborers in Danticat's novel are referred to as "bracero[s]" (39) by the Dominicans, a term that will evoke for U.S. citizens their own history of guest worker "bracero programs" for Mexican laborers brought to the U.S. to work the fields. In both contexts, the reference conjures up similar connotations of the devaluing of people, who are referred to solely by their floating body parts – "arms", or "brazos".

The nationalist discourse parroted by the Haitian priest similarly bears a striking incidental *testimonio* function, I would argue. As Father Romain rants, "walk too far... and people speak a different language... Tell me, does anyone like to have their house flooded with visitors, to the point that the visitors replace their own children? How can a country be ours if we are in smaller numbers than the outsiders? Those of us who love our country are taking measures to keep it our own" (260). Compare these words from U.S. anti-immigration activists, as seen in the documentary film *Crossing Arizona*: "Every day I see more and more illegal aliens taking over the neighborhoods... The schools are all going into Spanish... I don't want to live in a non-American neighborhood. I want to live in America... We didn't realize that we were as patriotic as we are, until this all started". The contemporary words powerfully echo those of Danticat's priest; the fear is that visitors are flooding our house, bringing "a different language", replacing our "American" neighborhoods with their own. To be "patriotic", we must guard our country against the "outsiders".

Like undocumented immigrants who are frequently deported after decades of having built lives in the United States, the ethnic Haitians represented by Danticat no longer think of Haiti as "home", even when they are encouraged to "return" there by others. When Dr. Javier asks Amabelle if she would consider leaving the Dominican Republic to become a midwife

in Haiti, Amabelle's response is "I haven't been across the border since I was a child of eight years" (21). Amabelle also describes ethnic Haitians "whose families had been in Alegría for generations... Some of them had Dominican spouses. Many had been born in Alegría" (68). None will be protected when the massacre comes. Indeed, just as, in Caruth's interpretation, Freud reimaged the exodus of the Jews (a foundational trauma) in *Moses and Monotheism* not as a *return* but as a *departure* (13-14), so also the Haitian exodus represented by Danticat is not imagined as a return home, but simply as an escape from violence into the unknown. The destination the characters fix firmly in their minds is not Haiti but "the river", as though the river itself is the final destination (195, 197). Their conversation is replete with the language of leave-taking rather than homecoming: "Everyone agreed then that we should leave"; "We leave the dead behind"; "I think we left them behind" (187, 196, 199). Like Danticat's ethnically Haitian characters, undocumented workers have often lived in the United States for decades; many have married citizens of their "host" country, or have citizen children. Such longstanding ties or familial relations will not aid the workers, who daily risk deportation and separation from their families to return "home".

As one Haitian worker observes wryly in the novel, "The poor man... 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" (178). It is perhaps a sign of the incidental urgency of Danticat's novel that the biblical commandment to "love your neighbor" has become part of the rallying cry of the New Sanctuary Movement, launched in 2007 to provide sanctuary for undocumented families at risk of deportation and separation from their U.S. citizen children and to be a "public witness" for what it perceives as the moral injustice of the current immigration system. That is, the New Sanctuary Movement sees itself as serving an urgent *testimonio* function (see New Sanctuary, Interfaith Worker Justice). Perhaps we can understand Danticat's text as sharing the ethical commitments of the New Sanctuary Movement by exposing, in literary form, the consequences of not loving our neighbors.

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### Notes

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1. Kimberly Nance, for example, views *testimonio* in general as a “subset of trauma narrative” (9); Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith use both terms with reference to Rigoberta Menchu’s famous and paradigmatic narrative *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (30-31); Shoshana Felman, asking, “What does literature tell us about testimony?”, describes “the process of the testimony” as “that of bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma” (1), and further posits that in our “*age of testimony* . . . witnessing itself has undergone a major trauma” (206). April Novak calls *The Farming of Bones* both a trauma narrative and a testimonial novel in the mode of Latin American *testimonio* (94, 107). Heather Hewitt points out the shortcomings of both trauma and *testimonio* approaches to Danticat’s novel in that they overlook disability as a critical category, but she does not explore the tensions inherent in the trauma and *testimonio* frameworks.

2. Nance distinguishes her view of deliberative *testimonio*, which is concerned with “persuading readers to act” in the cause of a current crisis in social justice (29), from critical approaches which cast *testimonio* either as primarily “forensic,” concerned about judgments of the past, or “epideictic,” that is as eliciting judgments of praise and blame in the present (25-31). For Nance, deliberative speech is clearly the paradigm of *testimonio* proper; “Here, forensic and epideictic concerns are subordinated to the goal of inducing readers to act in favor of social justice” (31). In later discussion the adjective “deliberative” sometimes drops out of her discussion of *testimonio*, presented by this point as inherently concerned with moving readers to action.

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