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Kathleen Baker '08
Illinois Wesleyan University

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The Farming of Bones: How to Make Sense of an International Tragedy

Kathleen Baker

Although its memory remains a haunting specter in the national memories of Haiti and the Dominican Republic alike, General Rafael Trujillo's 1937 slaughter of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic remains without burial places or markers for its victims. This lack of what several critics have called "sites of memory" eventually became the catalyst for Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat's novel, *The Farming of Bones*, a novel that is both testimony and narrative to the events of 1937 (Johnson 7). Critic Kelli Lyon Johnson believes that *The Farming of Bones* works to create a new "narrative space" that serves as a site of memory for the massacre, with the specific intent of expressing "a national identity that includes members of the memory community previously excluded from historical discourse" (1). Or, as critic Susana Vega-González writes, the novel is "a tribute to those nameless and faceless who died victims of the abuses of power and racial persecution, providing them with names and faces against silence and oblivion" (8). Danticat's determination to grant identities to the "nameless and faceless" also creates the novel's subtextual message which, beginning in the opening pages with a symbolically laden childbirth, attempts to create out of these these "nameless and faceless" a "collective identity that surpasses national boundaries" (Ink 804). Danticat attempts to create an international unity between the poor and those excluded from formal retellings of history, including upper class women like Señora Valencia, of both Haiti and the Dominican Republic, creating a form of Creolité. This unity is not, however, extended to those in positions of power in either country, particularly the dictator Trujillo. To Danticat, these leaders and their sycophants are only responsible for creating the disunity that led to the 1937

massacre, and should therefore be disregarded—it is the “nameless and faceless,” especially the impoverished, who ultimately hold sway in Danticat’s narrative.

The Farming of Bones opens on the birth of Señora Valencia’s twin children, a heavily symbolic scene, and one that establishes early on the international unity of the poor of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, an idea which will carry through the rest of the novel. The children, Rafael (Rafi) and Rosalinda, appear to be from two different worlds despite being twins. Rafi is “coconut-cream colored, his cheeks and forehead the blush pink of water lilies” (Danticat 9), taking after his mother, a member of the Dominican upper class. Rosalinda, however, is born with skin of “deep bronze, between the colors of tan Brazil nut shells and black salsify” (11). Although Rosalinda turns out to most resemble her father, an ambitious military man in Trujillo’s regime, Señora Valencia instead ties her daughter to the main character of the novel, the Haitian-born Amabelle: “My daughter is a chameleon. She’s taken your color from the mere sight of your face” (11). Rosalinda, now linked so closely to Amabelle—Valencia also later expresses the fear that her daughter might even be mistaken for “one of your [Amabelle’s] people” (12)—in effect becomes a Haitian, in contrast to her white-skinned, clearly Dominican twin. Because Rafi is explicitly named “for the Generalissimo,” and Amabelle says that he becomes “Rafael, *like* the Generalissimo” (36; emphasis added), Rosalinda’s twin comes to represent not the general Dominican population but their leader, the man he was named after and has so quickly “become like.”

The twins’ relationship to one another, then, serves as a symbol of the Haitians’ troubling relationship with Trujillo. Of the two children, Rosalinda appears the smallest: “less than half” her brother’s size and most likely to die (11). The doctor, Javier, attributes this not to a simple fluke of nature, but to the actions of her brother. When he learns that Rosalinda was born with the

umbilical cord wrapped around her neck, he remarks, “It’s as if the other one tried to strangle her,” later also adding that “Many of us start out as twins in the belly and do away with the other” (19). Javier’s belief, then, is that the unusual circumstances of Rosalinda’s birth and her small size are a result of her brother’s attempts to kill her in the womb, although he can offer no specific reason why Rafi would attempt murder. The senseless—and shocking—suggestion foreshadows Trujillo’s own decision to murder the Haitians which, like Doctor Javier’s suggestion about the twins, Amabelle cannot comprehend:

Rumors, I thought. There were always rumors, rumors of war, of land disputes, of one side of the island planning to invade the other. These were the grand fantasies of presidents wanting the whole island to themselves. This could not touch people like me... (140)

Trujillo will, like his namesake, attempt to “strangle” the Haitians in the “womb,” the island of Hispaniola, as the novel continues.

Yet despite this foreshadowing, Danticat goes on to suggest an alternative ending to the countries’—and the twins’—conflict. Doctor Javier also notes that:

sometimes you have two children born at the same time; one is stillborn but the other one alive and healthy because the dead one gave the other a life transfusion in the womb and in essence sacrificed itself. (19)

His comment would appear first to be directed at the smaller, more fragile Rosalinda, suggesting that her small size springs from her sacrificing herself for her stronger, healthier brother. Yet ultimately it is Rafi, the supposedly strong twin, who dies. Doctor Javier says that he “simply lost his breath” (90), in a mirroring of Rosalinda’s inability to breathe at her birth. He has, perhaps, sacrificed himself to allow his weaker twin to thrive. It is not, therefore, Haiti (Rosalinda) that sacrifices itself for the sake of Trujillo, although Haiti is the weaker of the two. Instead, in Danticat’s narrative it is Trujillo (Rafi) who dies, or is sacrificed,

for the benefit of Haiti—and possibly for the benefit of the wider Dominican Republic as well. Critic Lynn Chun Ink believes that Rosalinda, as the darker skinned child, represents not just Haiti but “the mixing of races between the nations” (803). When combined with Doctor Javier’s comments about the child’s sacrifice, this to her “suggests an undermining of Dominican hegemony ... their past and present reveal that they are essentially one island community” (803). To Danticat, the death of Trujillo—represented in Rafi’s sudden death—would be for the benefit of not just the Haitians, but also the island as a whole.

Danticat continues to emphasize the idea of Creolité, the union between the nations, in *perejil*, or parsley, the word used to distinguish Haitians from Dominicans. Trujillo believes, according to Señora Valencia, that Haitians “can never hide as long as there is parsley nearby” (304), because their Creole accent causes them to mispronounce the word and give away their identity. He establishes language, above race and class, as the true definitive boundary between Haiti and the Dominican republic. Lynn Chun Ink believes that this also establishes “the arbitrariness of national borders” (802). Indeed, Trujillo’s boundary is both fluid and, ultimately, ineffective, as Amabelle realizes:

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 and their faithful attending granddaughters at the roadside gardens and markets, even though the trill of the *r* and the precision of the *j* was sometimes too burdensome a joining for my tongue. (193)

Amabelle realizes then that, given the opportunity, she could pronounce the word in the Dominican fashion—and has even done so in the past. She therefore defies Trujillo’s belief that Haitians could never “hide” in the presence of parsley and renders the borders he has created a moot point, unifying the island once again, despite Trujillo’s efforts to establish divisions.

While she repeatedly emphasizes the unity between the “nameless and faceless” of both the Dominican Republic and Haiti Danticat does not extend that inclusiveness to either country’s leaders. In an attempt to understand why the massacre has happened and express their rage over the Haitian government’s lack of response, some of the novel’s characters turn to history and the Haitian Revolution:

“A smart man,” someone said. “In those times 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.” (212)

The speaker simultaneously expresses disgust at the current president of Haiti for doing nothing and a nostalgia for the past by invoking the names of Haiti’s founding fathers. He (or she, as the speaker’s gender is not identified) believes that Toussaint, Dessalines, et al would not have allowed the massacre to occur at all, or would have avenged it properly. Most notably, the speaker identifies Haitians as the “children” of these founding fathers, directly tying even the poorest Haitians—the nameless and the faceless of history, represented here by a truly anonymous “someone”—to the government elite and making them as noble as he believes the founding fathers to be. Because they are the “children” of these great men, then surely the Haitian people have inherited their greatness, and deserve the government’s support; that the president does nothing, then, becomes a grave “affront” not only to the Haitian people, but to their forefathers.

Danticat, however, immediately counters this speaker’s outburst—Toussaint, Dessalines, and Christophe will be of no help, for they have all abandoned their people:

A woman was singing, calling on the old dead fathers of our independence. Papa Dessalines, where have you left us? Papa Toussaint, what have you left us to? Papa Henry, have you forsaken us? (212)

Although this new speaker also identifies the founding fathers as family, calling them all “Papa,” she also demands to know why they have all abandoned their “children” to Trujillo. Tellingly, the only response given to the woman’s question in the narrative is a man’s remark that “Freedom is a passing thing ... Someone can always come and snatch it away” (212). Although Toussaint, Dessalines and Christophe may have granted the Haitians their freedom by winning independence, that did not guarantee the country’s perpetual freedom, and it is not the founding fathers’ responsibility to win it back: they do not answer the woman’s cries, and neither does anyone speaking for them—namely, current members of the government, who throughout Danticat’s narrative remain distant and disconnected from the poorest of their people.

While the Haitian president does create a system to allow the survivors of the massacre to tell their stories—what Johnson calls “testimonials” (7)—and receive money in return, the system reveals itself to be deeply flawed. State officials stop taking testimonies once the money runs out, and the novel suggests that even those testimonies that are heard may not be considered credible by the state. A woman tells Amabelle, “[the official] lets you talk and lets you cry and he asks you if you have papers to show that all these people died” (234). The survivors—many of whom, like Amabelle, escaped with only the clothes on their backs—would most certainly not have any sort of paperwork to prove a slaughter that Trujillo denies ordering (231). Yet the government insists on it in order to build their own version of the slaughter, “appropriated and recast to fit the government’s purposes” (Johnson 7). “Papa Vincent’s” government, like the founding fathers who do not answer the anonymous woman’s pleas

for help, has abandoned its poorest people in order to build its own version of the slaughter.

The Haitian government's insistence on papers mirrors the Dominican Republic's practices earlier in the novel, when "documents and papers of identification ... become paramount" (Johnson 7). As one woman says, "Papers are everything. You have no papers in your hands, they do with you what they want" (Danticat 70). Even the rich land-owning Haitians are denied their papers, which enforces a type of segregation—it ensures that those of Haitian descent will be seen as "always foreigners, even if [their] granmè's granmè's were born in this country," and the Haitian children will not be educated in a "proper school" with Dominican children (69). Like the Haitian civil servants' insistence on papers that will allow them to build their own version of the massacre, the Dominican government's control of identification papers allows them to build their own version of their country. By denying those of Haitian descent their documents, Trujillo can create a country where all Haitians are foreigners and easily expelled, and remain segregated from the Dominican population.

Throughout the novel, however, Danticat demonstrates the flaws in Trujillo's separationist policies. Although he insists that Dominicans "must have our separate traditions and our own ways of living" to avoid having their blood "completely tainted" by intermixing with the Haitians (261), racial mixing still occurs throughout the novel. For instance, while on the road Amabelle meets a Dominican woman looking for her husband, a Haitian, who was taken away by Trujillo's men (176-177), suggesting that although Trujillo tries to keep them separate, intermingling between the two groups certainly occurs. And perhaps more notably, once Amabelle escapes to a refugee camp in Haiti, she finds a number of Dominicans there as well, such as a badly wounded man comforting the wounded:

Next to [a wounded Haitian] was a crippled Dominican who could console him only in Spanish.

“Calmate, hombre,” mumbled the Dominican. He was black like the nun who came to re-dress his wounds. He’d been mistaken for one of us and had received a machete blow across the back of his neck for it. There were many like him in the room, I was told. (217)

The wounded Dominican, attacked because of the color of his skin, underscores what Danticat believes to be the other arbitrary divisions between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, as well as how dangerous they can be. Trujillo attempts to distinguish between the two countries on the basis of skin color and heritage—“Our motherland is Spain, theirs is darkest Africa” (260)—but his divisions are clearly imperfect and lead to attacks on his own people. Trujillo’s attempts to separate the two sides of the island appear only to push them closer together. The wounded Dominican attempts to comfort a Haitian, despite their language barrier, establishing an emotional link between the two. The refugee camp is home to many like the Dominican Amabelle sees, further blurring the arbitrary borders Trujillo has established. In the camp, Dominicans and Haitians become one people, joined by common experience and suffering. As Amabelle says, “With everyone lying face up and with their bodies so close together, I couldn’t tell which face was mine” (217). To Danticat, Trujillo’s policies are deeply flawed and, while they do cause pain and suffering, are ultimately superseded by the unity of the two countries.

Amabelle’s description of Henri Christophe’s towering citadel, La Ferrière, symbolizes the greatest disconnect between the leaders of Haiti and the Dominican Republic and the poor of both countries. As she moves through the abandoned fortress, Amabelle imagines she hears Henri’s ghost: “And from the high vaulted ceilings, I could almost hear the king giving orders to tired ghosts who had to remind him that it was a different time—a different century—and that we had become a different people” (46). Amabelle’s description of Christophe paints him as a king deeply out of touch with his own people, continuing to give them

commands without realizing that they have outgrown him and progressed forward without him. Christophe has become even less than a figurehead or symbol of the state; he is instead a useless, deposed king, unaware that his people have no further need of him. He then represents the leader who—much like Trujillo, who insists on arbitrary border divisions that the novel goes on to prove ineffective—remains unaware of the fact that his leadership is out of touch and potentially harmful.

Recalling the day when she found Amabelle by the river, Señora Valencia remembers that her father asked Amabelle “who you belonged to. And you pointed to your chest and said, yourself” (91). Amabelle’s response to Papi does away with national boundaries; she belongs to neither Haiti nor to the Dominican Republic, but rather simply herself. This is, perhaps, the core of Danticat’s message in writing *The Farming of Bones*. The 1937 massacre was caused—and aided by, in the use of *perejil* and skin color as a distinction between the two countries—what Danticat perceives as arbitrary boundaries. These boundaries are, furthermore, established by leaders—symbolized in the ghost of Henri Christophe and the distant, rhetoric-spouting Trujillo and “Papa Vincent”—who are out of touch with their own people. Both the boundaries and the leaders who established them, then, are rendered ineffective. However, rather than simply affix blame for the massacre, Danticat offers a response to it, and creates a subtext to promote healing and explain why these events should never repeat themselves. Using the metaphor of twins in the womb, Danticat explains the idea of Creolité: the people of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, but especially the poor, the “nameless and faceless” of history, transcend the arbitrary borders of language and skin color placed on them to become one people and overcome the 1937 tragedy.

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