

## **The Archeology of Memory: Ontological Reclamation in Danticat's Brother, I'm Dying and the Farming of Bones**

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**Abstract:** *Edwidge Danticat's texts, Brother, I'm Dying and the Farming of Bones, are, respectively memoir/autobiography, and fictionalized history. Danticat's texts interweave history at several levels – personal narrative, family genealogy, national history in a way that interrogates prevailing discourses and representations of Haiti and 'rights' the imbalances, distortions and gaps in history. Both texts privilege the voice of the unrepresented and the undocumented, "voicing" the history often submerged in the "little traditions" of the folk or obliterated from national consciousness. In a larger sense, then, Danticat's project moves beyond the containment of the personal to the national, creating an archive of "autobiographical mythologies of empowerment" (Lionnet 321) that breaks through and disrupts the "narrow range of Western narrative paradigms" (Smith and Watson xx) and moves her texts into the political dimension. This multidimensionality allows Danticat to effect a remembering across time and across generations. By memorializing the victims of the genocidal holocaust of the Dominican Republic massacre, invoking the history of the Haitian Revolution, the Piquet Revolt, the Caco Wars and the Duvalier Regime, Danticat reaffirms the resilient and indomitable spirit of the Haitian peasantry and depicts the renascent possibilities of psychic re-semblage through the retrieval of their submerged histories.*

**Keywords:** *Memoir, Reclamation, Submerged Histories, Caribbean Autobiography.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

At the heart of many Caribbean writers' projects is the issue of identity, often with a specific focus on the redress of the distortions and silences that have characterized European narratives of the region. These projects variously engage autobiography, memoir, fictionalized history, autobiographical fiction and other forms of life writing through which writers become "agents of a conflicted history, inhabiting and transforming [their] complex social and cultural world (Mohanty 19). In many of these works, the individual story functions metonymically as the national story, revising and rewriting recorded history, rendering it in transformed and "transformative visionary dimension[s]" (Lionnet 322).

The work of Haitian diasporan writer, Edwidge Danticat, presents Haitian history in ways that explore the personal dimension of historical events and circumstances and the impact of these events on the lives of the Haitian people. Danticat's acute awareness of the "historical roots of the disrupted lives of the Haitian underclass" (Dash, "Fictions" 40) is evident in her autobiographical work, *Brother, I'm Dying*, and her fictional work, *The Farming of Bones*, in which she brings past and current atrocities into the scope of her collective project, examining history, not as a static collection of past events, but as an ongoing narrative, subject to interrogation and reinterpretation. Aware that the legacy of repression has silenced some voices and given greater authority to others, Danticat's 'revision' of history, focuses on the testimonies of the marginalized – the peasant population – and includes intimate testimonies largely silent in historical documents, contemporary journals and public records. In these texts she explores multiple issues - family disruption, ancestral history, migration, dislocation, and resilience.

Haiti's history has, for centuries, been a maligned history. Beginning with the Haitian Revolution, which according to Franklyn Knight "represented the first complete social revolution in modern history" (215), interpretation of Haiti's history by Euro-American scholars, has evinced gaps and silences due, in large measure, to Europe's and the United States' political and economic interest in suppressing the Haitian Revolution and its significance. While an event of such cataclysmic proportions should have preeminence in the annals of history, there was for some time, an incomprehensible void. Records of the forces that shaped modernity fail to mention Haiti, despite its pivotal importance in this regard.

Silencing the event was clearly motivated by Europe's desire to avert uprisings in other Caribbean islands that would have toppled the economic interests of the European plantocracy. Knight asserts that the Haitian Revolution is "a case study in the arrogance of power," which revealed the "tragic mistake" of the grand blancs and petitsblancs in underestimating "the intelligence, sensitivity and feelings of self-worth of the majority of the black population" (215). Haiti's victory over three European armies – the French, Spanish and the English – led to retaliatory imperatives. George Lamming notes that following the defeat of European preeminent military forces, "The Haitians stood alone...against the rapacious and wounded pride of Europe and Euro-America...No nation of the day would recognize their sovereignty, and every statesman of the day conspired to reverse [the achievements of the revolution]" (43). Lamming further notes that current assessments of Haiti as the poorest country in the Western hemisphere fail to take account of the triumph of the Haitian peasantry (43).

Despite the work of Caribbean historians, literary and cultural theorists, including George Lamming, Michael Dash, CLR James, Franklyn Knight, Bellegarde-Smith, Michel-Rolph Trouillot and others who have engaged a recuperative effort with respect to Haiti, the country, its history and its people continue to be misrepresented as much in Euro-American historical writings as in U.S. immigration policies and the American media. An examination of two periods of U.S. occupation of Haiti and of the Duvalier Regime reveals Haiti's contemporary history as one of atrocity. Yet 'official' historical documents have not fully conveyed the enormous impact of these periods on the lives of the Haitian people.

The specific events that Danticat's texts foreground extend beyond their historical location to their contemporary survival in documents that have either ignored or minimized their significance. In her exploration of history Danticat is concerned not only with the dislocation and displacement that have characterized the Haitian experience, but more specifically with creating an archive of "autobiographical mythologies of empowerment" (Lionnet 321) that affirm an evolving recovery of individual and national identity, and demonstrate the redemptive possibilities of the Haitian peasantry's spirit of resilience and survival. By re-constructing narratives of witness that are silenced in official memory, Danticat not only explores the meaning of the past, but also presents the past in dialogic relationship with the present.

In discussing Danticat's project, I use Wilson Harris's concept of the recuperative potential of mythological engagement. In his seminal essay, "History, Fable, and Myth in the Caribbean and the Guianas" (1970), Harris views history's catastrophes as reconstructive, as signaling renewal rather than despair. He points to a mythic/mythological/metaphysical dimension that exists as a correlative of the physical realm (156). Accessible via the creative excavation of unconscious memory, this metaphysical/mythological dimension, he argues, can enable the writer to transcend the limitations of conventional history and to compensate its void through an engagement at the mythic level. Conventional history, locked in static ideological structures, is inadequate for the formulation of a truly emancipatory poetics. Harris posits that myth has great provenance in the formulation of a poetics that can liberate a people who have been traumatized by conquest and colonization. He refers to the existence of an "inner space" from which archetypal myths can be retrieved. The excavation of these vestigial myths from unconscious memory, Harris argues, yields "epic stratagems" that become "available to Caribbean man in the dilemmas of history which surround him" (156).

Recognizing the epistemological limitations of conventional history, therefore, he posits an emancipatory poetics. In his formulation, limbo is seen as part of a cross-cultural composite of archetypal myths within the space of the unconscious, and functions as a “gateway” that connects Africa and the Caribbean (157). The limbo dance, Harris asserts, represents a retracing of the Middle Passage; a re-enactment of the dislocation and ‘psychic’ dismemberment wrought by slavery. Thus, it functions as a “phantom limb,” a vestige of this dismemberment that links Caribbean historiography, myth, and the imaginative writing of the region. This unconscious deposit thus forms part of Afro-Caribbean folk mythology, which is the basis for the creation of a West Indian mythopoetics of redemption. I read Danticat’s project mapped both in *Brother, I’m Dying*, and *The Farming of Bones* as having resonance with Harris’s mythopoetics.

## **2. BROTHER, I’M DYING AS FAMILY GENEALOGY**

In her memoir, *Brother, I’m Dying*, Danticat presents a family genealogy across four generations, giving particular focus to the stories of two brothers: Andre Mira Danticat and Joseph Dantica, her father and uncle, respectively, who die within days of each other. Danticat learns that she is pregnant the day her father is diagnosed with terminal pulmonary fibrosis. News of Mira’s imminent death brings together her immediate family, including Uncle Joseph, an eighty-one year old cancer survivor who is compelled to flee Haiti during an eruption of gang violence that threatens his life. Joseph is detained by U.S. Homeland Security, suffers the indignity of incarceration in the Krome Detention Center in Miami, and later succumbs to bureaucratic negligence and human callousness, dying while awaiting his “credible fear” hearing.

Like Joseph, Mira metonymically embodies the challenges of the Haitian peasantry, being adversely affected by Haiti’s political climate of terrorism that is exacerbated by U.S. militaristic interventions. Mira migrates to the U.S. following persistent harassment by the Tonton Macoutes, a group officially known as the *Volontaires de la Securite Nationale*. They were in fact a civilian militia that Francois Duvalier established as a “countervailing force to keep the Haitian army in check” (Dash, *Customs* 16); a group Danticat describes as “a battalion of brutal men and women aggressively recruited from the country’s urban and rural poor” (*Brother* 51) who “had the privilege of doing whatever they wanted” (51). Yet Mira’s flight from Haiti and his immigrant experience in the U.S. is fraught with ambivalences and paradoxes, emblemizing the Haitian migratory experience that often engenders psychic conflict.

Danticat’s act of retrieving family biographies and recording them fortifies family bonds and memorializes the family’s legacy of strength and resilience, a legacy which finds correspondences within the national stories of resistance and resilience like the Caco wars during which Haitian guerilla fighters like Danticat’s grandfather, Nozial, “organized attacks against the U.S. forces from Bel Air, offering fierce resistance to the U.S. military invasion. In this way, Danticat establishes linkages between ancestral history and national history. She braids Joseph’s narrative with pivotal events in Haitian history and relates Mira’s narrative to the wider diasporan experience in ways that challenge the celebratory notions held by many regarding diasporan immigrant life.

These stories comprise for Danticat the hidden scripts, the unwritten personal testimonies needed to fill the gaps within Haiti’s “official” historical documents. Danticat reconstructs her father and uncle’s personal narratives, and Haiti’s history, through a process of retrieval, within what Harris refers to as the ‘womb of space’, the creative imagination, which becomes the “medium and agent of imaginative re-visioning” (Edwards 19). She mediates the factual elements of their lives, and the corresponding inner emotional truths that, together, transform their “present-bound” selves into “mythic-eternal” beings (Sharrad 105).

Sandra Paquet reminds us that one of the key characteristics of Caribbean memoir is the writer’s focus on loss which is only “overcome...through specific acts of identification that seek to make the deceased a

permanent part of the mourner's identity" (229). By giving her daughter the name Mira, following her father's death, Danticat establishes a connection, a limbo gateway between the physical world of her daughter and the metaphysical world of the ancestors. Also, by retrieving, interpreting, and archeologizing ancestral stories told to her by her grandmother, Granmè Melina, Danticat constructs an archeology of memory. The ancestral folk stories function as trans-generational links that represent the distillation of ancestral wisdom from which the living can draw inspiration.

### **3. THE FARMING OF BONES: RETRIEVING, AND REMEMBERING**

In *The Farming of Bones*, which foregrounds the 1937 massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic during which nearly thirty thousand men, women and children were slaughtered, Danticat seeks to memorialize the victims and survivors as well as highlight the holocaust to which the Haitian government of the day showed passive indifference (Dash, Customs 15). The story opens with Sebastian's visit to Amabelle's room at the Ignacio house "to put an end to [her] nightmare" that nightly replays the tragedy of her parents' drowning in the Massacre River. Amabelle's narrative inhabits two locations: the external world, and the inner world of her subconscious, her dreams. Her inner story moves between the present and the past, between historical narratives and personal narratives. Danticat explores the inner space of Amabelle's subconscious through the medium of dreams, and unearths the submerged narratives that hold the potential to liberate Amabelle from the anguish of childhood trauma.

Later in the novel when Amabelle returns to Haiti, haunted by memories and guilt for having survived the brutal state authorized attack on her and other Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic, she is driven by an urgent need to testify to the atrocities perpetrated against her people, but this need is frustrated. Her body is "a map of scars, a marred testament (227), her memories at once a burden and a salve. Yves, recognizing the futility of testifying to the authorities, earlier says to Amabelle, "I know what will happen. You tell the story, and then it's retold as they wish, written in words you do not understand, in a language that is theirs, and not yours" (246). Danticat implicitly critiques the processes by which 'official' history is produced. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot asserts, "silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of the archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of the narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)" (26). The Dominican Republic's version of the history of the massacre submerges or obliterates individual victims, who become a faceless, amorphous mass, and whose testimonies are obscured in the records. Through her fictionalized reconstruction of the massacre, and by presenting the testimony of individual victims, Danticat provides a redress of the omissions and gaps in the official version of the atrocity.

The book's title, *The Farming of Bones*, is itself a metaphoric construct that has a metaphysical reach. Memory is reconstructed through 'psychic excavation' to retrieve and re-member the narratives of Haitians who were massacred in the Dominican Republic. As such, the book's testimony as a narrative of both mourning and expiation averts the "devastating effects of literal and psychic death: invisibility and oblivion" (Harbawi 37). While it depicts the horrific dimensions of the holocaust, it also gives recompense to the spirit of victims by unearthing their untold stories. Danticat uses 'bones' as a trope to represent the dislocation and dismemberment of the dead, but also to represent the nascent possibilities of psychic re-semblage through the retrieval of their submerged histories. This strategy resonates with Harris's 'phantom limb' trope that represents the dislocation and the psychic remembering of African slaves and their gods. Danticat, like Harris, is concerned with employing creative strategies in the arts of the imagination to tap the latent Caribbean folk practices and 'myth' and make them, as part of Caribbean cultural discourse, usable for her recuperative project.

By salvaging the wreck of history (Sharrad 99) in the foregoing narrative, Danticat re-envisioned this historical massacre and transformed it via the creative imagination, recreating the voices of those silenced by the tragedy. Danticat's novelistic representation engages the process of historical re-production, and effectively fills the gaps by archiving the testimony of survivors. Trouillot asserts, "Each historical narrative renews a claim to truth" (54). Danticat's rendering of the massacre has relied on memory as an "inner, spiritual process," by which the stories of victims are retrieved through collective ancestral consciousness; hence, as writer, she becomes the "medium in a 'theatre of Healing'" (Sharrad 104).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In *Brother, I'm Dying* and *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat uses memoir and historical fiction, respectively, to document the experiences of ostracism and exploitation of the Haitian underclass as nationals living within their own country, as intra-Caribbean migrants in the Dominican Republic, as U.S. immigrants, and as Haitian refugees seeking asylum in the U.S. While Danticat presents testimonies of the terrorism perpetrated under the dictatorships of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and under U.S. occupation, she achieves far more than merely chronicling the events of history and personal testimony in narratives of atrocities: she archeologizes memory in a project of ontological reclamation, and thus renders these narratives in transformative visionary dimension.

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