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## **Absences and Silences Vocalised: Remembering Trauma in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones***

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**Abstract:** The 17<sup>th</sup> century invasion of the European colonies of Saint-Domingue left a huge impact beyond repair, on the lives of the natives and the African slaves who were shipped in thousands for sugarcane plantations and coffee trade. The 1937 massacre of the Haitians by the Dominican Republic dictator Raphael Trujillo in an attempt to turn the country into a Dominican Republic over the Haitians, led to communal and personal horror of its inhabitants. Danticat in her work *The Farming of Bones* (1998), voices the horrors of the past, Haitians underwent through stories and the narratives of the protagonist Amabelle Désir. This paper researches into the trauma of Haitians due to their devastating history which has turned out into inter-generational trauma.

**Key Words:** Trauma, Danticat, Haiti, Dominican Republic, *The Farming of Bones*.

The Caribbeans have a long recorded significant history of 500 years of colonization through invasion, conquest and domination for more than 20 times by various European/North American nations. Haiti lost its importance when the need for sugar production ceased with a final



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end of slavery; “. . . however, colonial influence continues to this day as extensions of histories of domination/eradication over indigenous populations, forced migration and enslavement of African people, and indenture of Asian migrants” (qtd. by Nicolas and Wheatley 170). They are still dependent on their neighbouring countries because of an unstable government, which encourages corruption, poverty, diseases that are widespread, which has led to economic attrition.

Danticat in *The Farming of Bones* has attempted to vocalize the silence from the 1937 massacre and its resulting absence (missing friends and relatives), or in general, death, of the Haitian people. She voices the horrors of the past trauma through language as expression, and these testimonies as a healing ritual. She also positions Haitians to be historically traumatized who had been facing it inter-generationally. Henceforth, this research focuses on the study of history and trauma, querying into the diagnoses of the Haitian people, who had suffered from colonisation and genocide. Their history is indeed, but various attempts to erase a whole community, cultural identity, loss of land, and the loss of physical and mental health which still continues for generations.

Historical trauma is a collective trauma, arising as a consequence of various traumatic events over generations that are experienced at a community level. And collective trauma can be understood as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community” (qtd. by Nicolas and Wheatley 172, 173). Therefore, there is a dire need to be cured from such intensity of trauma.

The best way to promote healing within these communities is by comprehending the psychological impact of the historical experiences. Hence, encouraging to tell their stories and to write as testimonies will validate their existence, as memories thereby, sustaining a whole community.

Remembering trauma self-induces memories which are horrors of the past. Though for Haitians, “Some things are too wasteful to remember, . . . like burning blood in an oil lamp” (*FB*



121), trauma induces their memory making them to remember through involuntary nightmares. These nightmares keep surfacing in connection to the geographical places of significance and orally transmitted stories. Cathy Caruth defines in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), how the terrifying past always finds a way, reminding and causing the people who relive the pain to be traumatic of the wound or they undergo the “double wound” (3) making the suffering, the stress or grief the people face to go through everything once again. It does not stay with an individual but it is passed on like “the hair on your head” (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 239) inter-generationally among family members. This affects not only their personal relationships leading their family members disrupting normal life, but also depression of the mind making them to over-work, mourn over physical losses, and absences of the loved ones and of the self.

The wound is first understood as a physical wound. In the beginning, trauma in Greek or wound in English meant “an injury inflicted on a body,” but later “the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 3). When the wound is repeated again by same actions or by unknowingly committing it through some medium, this becomes “a double wound” termed as “traumatic neurosis” (Caruth 2) or trauma according to Freud. It is voiced through a representative voice, speaking of the wound for the self or of the other.

Henceforth, the event of the 1937 massacre which commenced initially as a terrible “wound,” turned out to be “a double wound” that traumatizes the people of Haiti (Caruth 3). The upheaval of this event kick started with “. . . an order from the Generalissimo” which was considered only to be a rumor, yet the people thought that to be “true” (*FB* 127). Few made attempts, taking the order seriously, “to warn the others” about “The times” that “have changed” and encouraged union within the community, that “We all must look after ourselves” (126). Haitians believed that “Rumors don’t start for nothing . . .” without someone insisting on it (114).

The rumors proved to be true. The Dominican Republic dictator Raphael Trujillo as an attempt to “Dominicanize” the country, massacred over ten-thousand to twenty-thousand (approx.)



Haitians, that led to “both communal and personal terror” (Munro 130) of its inhabitants, who were dissipated physically and psychologically. Because, to the Dominicans, Haitians were “. . . always foreigners, even if our grandmèmès’ grandmèmès were born in this country” (69) of the Dominican Republic. The event came to be later known, within their nations, as the El Corte (the cutting) in Spanish and as “kout kouto” (the stabbing) in Creole (*FB* 299). The difference between the people of Dominican Republic and the Haitians were identified with the pronunciation of the herb “Perejil” in Spanish and “Parsley” in Creole (language spoken by Haitians) (*FB* 193). The Haitians could not pronounce “the trill of the *r* and the precision of the *j*” in the Spanish word “perejil” as it was “too burdensome a joining” for the Creole speaking Haitians (Munro 193). And thus, they were easily identified and targeted. In order to make other governments believe, that the event was not ordered by their government, but was a clash within the races; machetes used for cutting sugarcane were used to massacre them.

They were always hearing about rifles being purposely or accidentally fired by angry field guards . . . or about machetes being slung at cane workers’ necks in a fight over pesos at the cane press. Things like this happened all the time to the cane workers; they were the most unprotected of our kind. (*FB* 70, 75)

Amabelle Désir recalls the violence of the Dominican soldiers against Haitians by giving “voice” (Caruth 2) to the atrocities of the time and their experiences of the “unwittingly” repeated wounding so as to awaken and bear witness to the “inflicted injury” of “the past” (Caruth 2-3). Amabelle probes into the fate of their nation as to how “Misery” made them “appear small” (*FB* 145). And moreover, they do not only carry the stories of an individual, but a collective history of the entire nation which makes one wonder how, “He (they) want(s) you to carry your (their) own sadness and his (others) too?” (145).

But, this was the reality that they passed on to the upcoming generations for them to validate their own existence. Through working at the sugar plantations, which was the major source of



income besides domestic slavery, Haitians had no other choice but to accept the reality of their everyday life, because for them, “At this point it was a matter between two countries, of two different peoples trying to share one tiny piece of land” (147).

Henceforth, Amabelle, after so many years, finally decides to speak. She breaks herself now, from the silences of the past, which had destroyed her and the people she had dearly cared for. She is the witness to her whole community. According to Sebastien (Amabelle’s lover), he shares how he feels about silence to her: “In the awakened dark, . . . if we are not touching, then we must be talking. We must talk to remind each other that we are not yet in the slumbering dark, which is an endless death like a darkened cave” and Amabelle reflects as how, “Silence to him is like sleep, a close second to death” (13). Silence scares Sebastien. It may lead to eternal silence where he might lose people he so much cares for. Death to Sebastien is a metaphor of fear for him. It might be due to the place of work and the government they are currently working under. He has a feeling of insecurity always. Moreover, the past he has experienced makes him vulnerable to darkness. The darkness is the void of light or void of goodness. Only the light can erase the darkness of fear for Sebastien. The light of letting the silences and fears ease into peace is very difficult for him. So far, nothing good has happened to him except for Amabelle. This fear consumes him of losing people who are precious around him – his family, friends and his beloved. He believes that in the dark, bad things happen to them. Slowly, this fear transcends to be chaotic and into a traumatic experience for both Amabelle and Sebastien.

Referring Caruth, silence is an attempt to understand, “the complex ways” of “knowing and not knowing,” which “are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it” (Caruth 4). And according to Man Rapadou, mother of Yves (a friend of Sebastien with whom Amabelle takes refuge after fleeing the massacre in Haiti), “silence” is like “holiness” where she accepts herself as “not holy” (*FB* 277). And this might be the answer to why they decided to break their silences breaking the divine to their overwhelming and so far untold experiences. The unholy



complex experiences are but an attempt in search for a remedy to all of their past through language as a medium of their choice.

Considering what story is, Caruth wants to trace “. . . a different story, the story or the textual itinerary of insistently recurring words or figures. . . . the figures of ‘departure,’ ‘falling,’ ‘burning,’ or ‘awakening’” which “. . . stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound” (Caruth 5). She labels it as “the story of an accident” or “the shocking and unexpected occurrence of an accident” (Caruth 6) which is “. . . an enigmatic testimony not only to the nature of violent events but to what, in trauma, resists simple comprehension” (Caruth 6). Such an event, recurring after a long period of time, as symptoms of shock, is “the traumatic shock of a commonly occurring violence” illustrated by “Freud” (Caruth 6). Moreover, this accident “returns to haunt the victim,” because, what these stories convey, “. . . is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (Caruth 6).

The impact due to the accident arises in its belatedness. The anger within the self dominates due to the past event not immediately but takes its own time in its appearance with much more impact. This is how for Haitians, “Silence” turns out to be their “. . . most piercing weapon when . . .” they were “angry” (*FB* 110) and words did not mean anything to them. Even when they wanted to break their silence “for an instant when our pupils met . . . trying to communicate with the simple flutter of a smile all those things we could not say . . .” there was always “. . . the cane to curse, the harvest to dread, (and) the future to fear” (131). As a consequence, Amabelle contemplates, “Perhaps time had destroyed my sense of proportion and possibilities. Or perhaps this was another fall altogether” (302). Time here is not distinct: through past, present or future. Silence made them stronger. Time made them self analyze their situation, and just stay still. Time was immovable for them. Everything was the same and it meant no differentiation in their life. The past was their present with no future to claim for. The impact was huge. This way of life is the choice made to be continued for generations.



In doing so, the story of trauma and history combined is “a double telling” and “an oscillation between,” “a crisis of death” (“a story of the unbearable nature of an event”) and “a crisis of life” (a story of the unbearable nature of its survival) (Caruth 7). This accounts for the inescapable narration of “the story of one’s life from the story of a death,” which calls for “an impossible and necessary double telling” constituting as the victims’ “historical witness” (Caruth 8).

For Haitians, their stories of death are too common as “. . . These things happen too often. People die unfairly, innocently” (*FB* 74) and none claimed responsible for it. This is how their stories of trauma and history had created an impact of recurring trauma through nightmares and apparitions, which they have to carry for the rest of their lives. And “each person’s story did nothing except bring you closer to your own pain” (177). The nightmares were too heavy and burdening as Amabelle exclaims, “Misery won’t touch you gentle. It always leaves its thumbprints on you; sometimes it leaves them for others to see, sometimes for nobody but you to know of” (224). She always has dreams almost too real that she wakes up too often with a fright. It was mostly about her parents, when they drowned in the Massacre River by helping her to escape from the flood or about the imaginary “sugar woman,” (132-33) a ghost, who keeps haunting her often. Her nightmares were too real to make the difference between the present and the imaginary. Her life was between life and death or life after death. She was living a ghastly life in between the crisis of life and the crisis of death.

What Haitians are in need of, is to build their strength up, even though their history is full of undesirability with its unknown ends. Amabelle and Yves had lost their true partner Sebastien in the massacre. His absence to both of them is a huge blow to an extent where they could not think of a life without him. This is a story of the crisis of life. Amabelle describes how her life and Yves’ life has a strained relationship – living together under a roof, as the survivors of the massacre: “He and I had chosen a life of work to console us after the slaughter. We had too many phantoms to crowd those quiet moments when every ghost could appear in its true form and refuse to go away” (274),



as the apparitions could not be shared with each other. She regrets as they “hadn’t found more comfort in each other” (274). Their problem is differentiating reality with that of the past. It was just too real, for them, in the present. Both of them choose work over relationships and a life in seclusion than inclusion.

This demands a double telling of their stories to comprehend their everyday life. The suffering of a traumatized individual is known only through another voice, which bears witness to one’s past. The wound or the trauma is repeated through a voice voiced by someone else which is experienced by an individual or a community. Therefore, “the voice of the other” plays an important role in explaining the “‘unwitting’ traumatic events of one’s past” and represent the trauma of “the other within the self” (Caruth 8). Consequently, “the voice of the other” pleads to be heard which cannot be fully understood of its trauma but, bears as a witness due to its accidental past (Caruth 8). And thus, it commands the readers to awaken to a “new mode of reading and of listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand” (Caruth 9).

Amabelle feels too weak with lack of emotions due to the traumatic past: “Perhaps my whole body was beyond feeling now, beyond healing” (*FB* 199). She feels that she is physically, but “a marred testament” (227). She narrates the whole incident, as an accident, and all its stories associated with it, without any emotional attachment. She is the voice, voicing for the sufferings of the other. She is the testimony for her whole community. When her master Papi queries Amabelle, to whom she belongs to, she points to her own chest and answers that she belongs to herself. And when she is questioned again about her remembrance of the past events, her instant reply is—“I remembered” (91). She remembers because she has shattered memories like “those images . . . that would float through . . . (her) head repeatedly, like brief glimpses of the same dream” (228) which she can never get rid of. It keeps coming to her even if she did not want it to be remembered. Memories force their way into her life and leave her permanently impaired. Her voicing out to



every incident is the only way of her survival now. Even though her memories are shattered or tattered, every memory she has, is her strength at present.

This is how Danticat brings into life, through Amabelle, the silences that have drifted away into the past in order to record lives of the people who went unaccountable for. By voicing truths of despair, she weaves tales of intrinsic horrors of the past about the Haitian community (which are better forgotten). But still, the degree of verity accounting to these stories by Amabelle questions how validating these stories can be. Dori Laub gives a clear explanation about the silencing of trauma victims:

[t]he “not telling” of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life. The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events. (qtd. in Shaw, par. 4)

The inability to speak out the real events for so long causes distorted memories. This questions the accuracy of the memory, by not only accusing the victim as a participant in the traumatic event but also, turns the victim being blamed as a consequence of silencing for years as in Amabelle’s case.

Laub elucidates that the Holocaust survivors too had to go through the same process, as the “Nazi system turned out . . . to be foolproof, not only in the sense that there were in theory no outside potential witness from the inside, [but also] that what was affirmed [for Holocaust survivors was an] ‘otherness’. . . [so] that their experiences were no longer communicable even to themselves” (par. 5). These experiences turned the survivors to be disconnected from the reality and made them to lose their position as the witness. As a result, Laub terms it as “the true meaning of annihilation, for when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well” (par. 5). Amabelle is thus, not a true witness to these real events according to Laub, that had happened years back but only a shadow of the past which she is trying to portray. In bits and pieces she remembers



events. She tries her best to voice out the long forgotten true events different from the long recorded history by their government. Though Dori Laub considers historical victims as not true witnesses, they do portray truth at least scattered and in its belatedness. Victims do make an attempt to testify for the long forgotten souls and the past associated with them.

History can no longer validate truth itself considering, the identity of the victims. In this case, all victims lost their identities of culture, gender, community or nation. It is only distorted memories which plead for survival as their ticket to sole identity. Father Roumain, a Haitian priest who managed to survive the massacre, explains his revival even after his severe physical disfigurement and loss of memory:

It took more than prayers to heal me after the slaughter . . . . It took holding a pretty and gentle wife and three new lives against my chest . . . . It took a love closer to the earth, closer to my own body, to stop my tears. Perhaps I have lost, but I have also gained an ever greater understanding of things both godly and earthly. (*FB 272*)

His past is lost as soon his memory of culture and his relationships leave him with no identity. He is now, only a story of the past which makes him returning to his own self overwhelmingly difficult. Healing takes more than his own will in understanding about his self. Returning to his own land is through the relationships he has acquired that gives him the will to survive and gain what he has lost.

Thus, Haitians try to come out of this cultural erasure even though their history is overwhelmingly devastating, which included both individual and collective history/ies. Its memories are recalled by force through nightmares where, the past and the present collide with each other. Mostly, fragmented memories are unwelcome and disturbing as it no longer can identify with the real events. Amabelle keeps trying to remember bits and pieces of the past. They are no longer readily available to her just by trying to recall them momentarily. Through listening to the stories of its people who has underwent similar trauma like Amabelle: she feels being closer to the real



events, closer to her community, to the present and to the dead through the living. She thus, remembers how:

. . . Most people here did. It was a way of being joined to your old life through the presence of another person. At times you could sit for a whole evening with such individuals, just listening to their existence unfold, from the house where they were born to the hill where they wanted to be buried. It was their way of returning home, with you as a witness or as someone to bring them back to the present, either with a yawn, a plea to be excused, or the skillful intrusion of your own tale. This was how people left imprints of themselves in each other's memory so that if you left first and went back to the common village, you could carry, if not a letter, a piece of treasured clothing, some message to their loved ones that their place was still among the living. (73)

Thus, Father Roumain “. . . often reminded everyone of common ties: language, foods, history, carnival, songs, tales, and prayers. His creed was of memory, how remembering—though sometimes painful—can make you strong” (73). Dr. Linda Gantt (Art Therapist) and Dr. Louis Tinnin (Psychologist) in their YouTube channel, Help For Trauma, have spoken on “Introduction to Instinctual Trauma Response,” where they iterate remembering as the only way to give any type of story: a beginning, middle and an end. Through such an enactment, one will be able to put an end to trauma without even reliving it again.

In conclusion, irrespective of absent people who are gone, and the respective silence it demands, and the trauma it creates for the people of Haiti—it is the memory of culture, oral narratives of their existence carried on to their generations, and family bonding, which really makes them stronger. In order for them to rejuvenate and become normal again, and to survive they have to be remembered by the living. Haitians accept that everything was in the past and now, all they had to do was to “try and find the future” (FB 184), always reminding them of “the most unforgivable weaknesses of the dead: their absence and their silence” (279).



Amabelle therefore, recalls in the words of the Haitian guide when she visits the ruins of the Palais Sans Souci, King Henry I's old official residence, and cherishes how "Famous men never truly die, . . . it is only those nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air" (280). She later alters the first part that, "Men with names never truly die. . . ." (282) and this is how they want to preserve the names of the people who came and went before them as tales for their posterity.

Irrespective of them farming for bones in their own lands both tangibly and intangibly, a final journey of Amabelle Désir, to the Massacre River, (where she was found orphaned on the shore of the Dominican Republic) felt like ". . . walking to the dawn" (285), like Father Roumain; and in a way was like a ritual for the process of healing. She looked onto the river which marked the border of both these countries, ". . . for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear . . . where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow" (310). And this is what every other Haitian too, like her, believe in healing, and to recover from a not so normal past, ". . . looking for the dawn" (310).

Many Haitians, owing to this massacre, had to seek asylum in their neighbouring countries, to the Americas at large. Their lives as migrants were much welcome than choosing to live in their own country.

This proved to be yet another new dawn for Haitians not only in Haiti, but also for those who sought after the help of their neighbouring countries for better prospects to their future. After so many struggles and sacrifices, both in the homeland and in the main-lands they had chosen to survive. In the mean while, they started to have influence on all kinds of politics which improved their status and their economic conditions of living.

But again, there arouse significant discourses on diaspora and human rights which are still purposely violated in the name of migration. Henceforth, many noteworthy and strategic national meetings are and still held focusing on discussions of diaspora, American and ethnic politics. Michel Laguerre records that, ". . . the National Coalition for Haitian Rights, held in Miami in the



spring of 2002, and the other organized by Representative Marie St. Fleur in Boston in the fall of the same year” were two important meetings which focused, “. . . exclusively on the needs of the diaspora, the need to build institutions, and the need to elect Haitian American leaders and to participate actively in mainstream American politics at the local, state, and federal levels” (167-68). This is how there are many voices for Haitians to speak for their own people at a global level to arise and shine.

And Haiti marks as a nation not only exploited by their own kind or by the neighbouring countries but also by natural calamities. Severe fall of natural, social and economical conditions left them with no place to return for a decent living. Not to mention, amidst many natural disasters, Mathew Hurricane on 6 October 2016 hit Haiti, engulfing 400 plus inhabitants and affecting 1.125 million people; also robbing it of its ancient artifacts and significant national treasures forever.

Mathew Hurricane was “the most powerful Caribbean storm in a decade” and one of the inhabitants recalls its aftermath on Haiti as something which “completely devastated” their livelihood and their land (*BBC*). This aggravated their trauma leading to higher rates of migrations seeking asylum in many neighbouring countries because, “. . . moving back to Haiti is not an option that most realistically envision” (Laguerre 168).

In the current era of globalization, many trusts and NGOs render help in building the Haitian community and Haiti. This again led to many discrepancies regarding genuine transfer of funds, violation of female bodies and mistreatment of the migrants. Many politicians, social activists, writers and environmentalists came into spot light such as Edwidge Danticat, Junot Diaz, Marleine Bastien and many more, who protest and stand by Haiti. They keep voicing out through many mediums of expression including media at large.

Laguerre reflects:

Diasporic politics, with its projected massive involvement in American politics and its low and high levels of transnational interaction, depending on what is at



stake, is the new path that the diaspora has set for itself for the success of its integration into American society. (168)

Haitians and Haitian Americans are still anticipating for a country to be a revelation of change from being titled “the poorest nation in the western hemisphere” (Smith, n.p.) to an independent developed nation.

To conclude, it is true that Haiti is a nation which, “hid her bad memories so well” that “we could not read,” a nation “of so many atrocities done against her” and a nation which “could not stand for herself in defense” (Priscilla 122). What Haiti claims now is “Respect . . . for their sacrifices” to “Pass on their stories” and “Protect them” together as people of one world, of one universe and as humans (123).

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