

Confronting Violence in Reading and Representation: Brutality and Witnessing in the Work of Edwidge Danticat

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Abstract

[T]o lay claim to other people's suffering [...] is a colonial impulse, dressed up as altruism.
(Hilary Mantel)

Can a text look at violence perpetrated without perpetuating violence itself? This question will be explored through two novels by Haitian-born, American immigrant writer Edwidge Danticat.

The Farming of Bones (1998) recounts the genocide of up to 35,000 ethnic Haitians in the Dominican Republic sanctioned by Trujillo in 1937. As part of her research for this novel, Danticat interviewed the relatives and survivors of the massacre, collecting oral histories which she incorporated into her narrative. But what are the implications of this 'laying claim to other people's suffering' for the purposes of writing? In representing this violent history and what Scarry sees as the physical 'inexpressibility' of pain within a fictional framework has Danticat herself perpetuated a kind of symbolic violence?

In *The Dew Breaker* (2004), we see the actions and legacy of terror of the eponymous figure, a Tonton Macoute and torturer in François Duvalier's regime. Both texts engage with the traumatic legacies of violent acts against Haitians in the name of nationalist political projects. But while Danticat's explorations of violence tackle the brutality of dictatorial regimes in Hispaniola, she has enjoyed most popular and critical success in the United States. This opens up another way of engaging with Mantel's claim: does a colonial impulse underlie this success? Western audiences can appropriate and even exoticise the violent experiences of oppressed Haitians, without necessarily understanding them, the power relationships and injustices behind them, or the complicity of the United States in Hispaniola's violent regimes.

Thus violence potentially lurks within representation itself, and within engagement with representation. Is it possible to develop a notion of the text as *pharmakon* to negotiate these difficulties? Danticat's texts, I argue, offer a reflexive engagement with the inscription of violence which challenges her audiences to develop an ethical engagement with her writings.

Key words: Danticat, Haiti, violence, representation, *pharmakon*