

## **Confronting Violence in Reading and Representation: Brutality and Witnessing in the Work of Edwidge Danticat<sup>1</sup>**

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According to literary critic and novelist Hilary Mantel, ‘to lay claim to other people’s suffering [...] is a colonial impulse, dressed up as altruism’ (Mantel 1997: 40).<sup>2</sup> I shall consider this claim with reference to two novels by Haitian-born, American immigrant writer Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (1998) and *The Dew Breaker* (2004). Both texts engage with the traumatic legacies of violent acts against Haitians in the name of nationalist hegemony, either in Haiti or in the Dominican Republic. I will be considering whether a text can look at violence perpetrated without perpetuating violence itself and exploring different kinds of violence through the novels.

### **1. *The Farming of Bones*: the violence of Hispaniola**

Danticat’s second novel *The Farming of Bones* recounts the genocide of between 20,000 and 35,000 ethnic Haitians<sup>3</sup> living in the Dominican Republic in 1937, sanctioned by the dictator Rafael Trujillo. These ethnic Haitians who lived along the border region between the two countries were intimately linked with the Dominican population, having intermarried with them for several generations. While historians disagree about the genesis of events, there is a broad consensus that Trujillo wanted to de-Africanise the Dominican Republic and ‘whiten’ its population. This ideology is deep-rooted in the violent history of Hispaniola where, since 1697, two colonies have shared one island. The French colony revolted against slavery and achieved independence in 1804, becoming Haiti; the Spanish colony (latterly the Dominican Republic) first became independent in 1821 but was then occupied by Haiti, inspiring a racist discourse which presented Haiti as ‘the other’ (San Miguel 2005: 38–39).<sup>4</sup> According to the

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first presented as a paper at Pharmakon: Literature and Violence, a postgraduate conference organised by the School of English at the University of Kent and held on 20th May 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Mantel makes this statement in her review of Caryl Phillips’s novel *The Nature of Blood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997). While she criticises Phillips as a West Indian-born British/American writer for representing the Holocaust in his narrative, the comment included above is intended as a more general claim. For Mantel it seems that only certain groups of people have a right to represent certain events, a claim which negates imaginative enterprise in writing and precludes comparative approaches. In this article, I will consider this statement, not in the context of this specific review but in its most general application.

<sup>3</sup> This figure is contested: see Michele Wucker (Wucker 1999) and Richard Lee Turits (Turits 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Prior to Columbus’s arrival on the island in 1492, Hispaniola was inhabited by the Tainos. Danticat made the history of violent colonisation the subject of her children’s novel *Anacaona: Golden Flower* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 2005). The Spanish began to import slaves in the sixteenth century, and by the seventeenth

historian San Miguel, this ideology defined the nations as follows: ‘Haitians practiced Voodoo, Dominicans Catholicism; Haitians spoke Creole, Dominicans Spanish; Haitians were black, Dominicans were of mixed race or white. More than this, Haitian culture and society were seen as an extension of Africa, whereas Santo Domingo clung to its pure Spanish origins’ (39). This deep-seated ideology was perpetuated in Trujillo’s government which saw Haitians as blacker and ‘less developed’;<sup>5</sup> and the perceived need to ‘Dominicanize’ and expunge the ‘contaminating effects’ of Haitian migration manifested in the terrible events which Danticat addresses in her novel.

The title of the novel refers to the farming of cane sugar, a hazardous process that leaves many of the characters in the novel marked with horrific scars and injuries. Furthermore, as Danticat has discussed in an interview (Anglesey 1998),<sup>6</sup> the Haitian cane workers were and continue to be exploited by the Dominican Republic and the United States.<sup>7</sup> From the 1910s, Haitians, who accepted lower wages and poorer working conditions than Dominicans, were imported into the cane plantations (San Miguel 2005: 52).<sup>8</sup> American sugar mills profited from cheap Haitian labour. Against this oppressive backdrop, the novel describes the relationships forged by Haitian migrant protagonist Amabelle Désir and documents how these bonds are shattered by the genocide. Amabelle’s Haitian lover Sebastien disappears (and is presumably slaughtered), and she is forced to abandon her surrogate Dominican family (for whom she works as a servant), as she flees to Haiti to escape the massacre. As the husband of Amabelle’s mistress leads the operation to murder the ethnic Haitians, the bonds of love and intimacy that tied Amabelle to family and nation disintegrate. In a key scene in the novel, Amabelle and her companion Yves have reached the Haitian border but, before they can cross the Massacre River, they are surrounded. As the last of her belongings slip from her grasp, and with

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century the French were establishing themselves in the West of the island: this region became ‘Haiti’ upon gaining independence from French rule.

<sup>5</sup> While Trujillo agreed with the theories of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, he also gave visas to Jewish refugees from Hitler’s Germany as part of a plan to colonise and ‘whiten’ the Dominican Republic (Wucker 1999: 52, 56). It is also important to note that while racial prejudices towards Haitians pre-existed the massacre, Trujillo’s ideological campaign to justify the massacre began afterwards (Turits 2003: 159).

<sup>6</sup> In this interview Danticat discusses how she wrote her novel conscious of the ongoing economic and social inequality of Haitian cane workers in the Dominican Republic (Anglesey 1998: 37).

<sup>7</sup> This migrant Haitian population continues to be exploited in a way that echoes plantation slavery. See Wucker (1999: 95, 112–13).

<sup>8</sup> Wucker points out that this fed into Trujillo’s reasoning for the genocide. There was a dip in sugar prices, and the Dominican Republic faced a crisis: ‘How would the Dominican Republic support all these foreigners, producing crops worth nothing, when its own people did not have jobs?’ (102). Trujillo tried to combat this problem by passing a law in 1933 which “‘Dominicaniz[ed]” the cane harvest, requiring that 70 percent of workers in the cane fields be Dominican.’ However, while Trujillo had also started to deport Haitian cane workers, more continued to arrive, ‘until Trujillo decided to solve the problem permanently in October 1937, just as the cane harvest was about to begin’ (Wucker 1999: 104).

them her link to the Dominican Republic, Amabelle is confronted by soldiers waving parsley in front of her face:

“Tell us what this is,” one said. “Que diga perejil.”

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, even though the trill of the *r* and the precision of the *j* was sometimes too burdensome a joining for my tongue. It was the kind of thing that if you were startled in the night, you might forget, but with all my senses calm, 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. My eyes watering, I chewed and swallowed as quickly as I could, but not nearly as fast as they were forcing the handfuls into my mouth. (Danticat 1998: 193)

What confronts Amabelle here is a test, used by Trujillo's *Guardias* to distinguish between Haitians and Dominicans on the basis of skin colour or the ability to pronounce certain Spanish words. Amabelle undercuts this flawed notion of racial distinction exhibited in language, as she can pronounce ‘parsley’ in both Kreyòl and Spanish. If this racial distinction seems brutal, the test in itself proves to be less important than the act of asserting cultural difference. Whether or not Amabelle can pronounce the word correctly is irrelevant. The force-feeding of parsley is performative: the enactment of violence establishes Amabelle's ‘otherness’. What follows is a brutal beating and stoning from which Amabelle never recovers full physical mobility. While Amabelle survives this beating and lives out a marginal existence in Haiti for the remainder of her years, she can never escape the legacy of the violence she suffered and witnessed during the Parsley Massacre or, as it is known in the Dominican Republic, *El Corte* (The Cutting).<sup>9</sup> If Amabelle has been cut away from the Dominican Republic, she remains without roots, on the edges of both nations, unable to envisage a future, unable to forget the past.

## 2. The violence of representation

As part of her research for this novel, Danticat interviewed the relatives and survivors of this massacre (including members of her own family), collecting oral histories which she incorporated into her narrative. Danticat also modelled the character of Amabelle on a woman who was slaughtered at a family dinner table by a colonel who wished to show his compliance with Trujillo's order to massacre Haitians (Shea 1999: 14). 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 linguistic untranslatability of another's physical

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<sup>9</sup> The Dominican name for the Massacre somewhat glosses over its violence. Haitians call the genocide Kout Kouto (the stabbing or knife blow). However, Pamela J. Rader has argued that the term ‘corte’ can also connote both ‘harvest’ which ‘implies reaping by cutting as with the cane’ and ‘rebuff’; the term, is therefore, ‘not only euphemistic, but exemplary of language's ability to rebuff and silence’ (Radar 2009: 45).

pain<sup>10</sup> within a fictional framework has Danticat herself perpetuated a kind of symbolic violence, by fixing these unutterable stories in her novel? Žižek has pointed to the way in which violence is manifested not just physically but also in language, symbolically. He suggests:

[We should consider] problematic the idea of language, symbolic order, as the medium of reconciliation/mediation, of peaceful co-existence, [in which] instead of exerting direct violence on each other, we debate, we exchange words, [...]. As Hegel was already well aware, there is something violent in the very symbolization of a thing, which equals its mortification; this violence operates at multiple levels. (Žižek 2008: 51–56)

This symbolic violence is an example of what Žižek terms ‘objective violence’, ‘the violence inherent to [the] normal state of things’. For Žižek ‘[o]bjective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively [obviously] violent’ (2). In other words, for Žižek our ideological training blinds us to how ‘violence infects language’ (52), and accentuates other kinds of physical and visible or ‘subjective’ violence enacted by recognisable agents. While Mantel and Žižek are arguing very different things, they both suggest that representation itself can be violent. Mantel sees this in the appropriation of others’ stories of suffering for artistic rendition (which may conceal motives of self interest); Žižek, meanwhile, suggests that the act of signification itself can be violent. He argues ‘the fact that *reason (ratio)* and *race* have the same root tells us something: language, not primitive egotistic interests, is the first and greatest divider, it is because of language that we and our neighbors (can) “live in different worlds” even when we live on the same street’ (56–57). Danticat’s novel shows reflexive understanding of the possibilities of enacting both kinds of violence through fiction. In her depiction of Amabelle’s language test, Danticat explores the violence of language and how it can be used to enforce cultural and racial divisions. However, Danticat goes further than this and reveals that the violence instituted in language is a superficial cover for the enactment of a state ideology that sought to divide and crudely classify the linguistically and socially entwined Haitian and Dominican populations. What Danticat emphasises is how the very *visible* emphasis on apparent linguistic divisions acted as a cover and a justification for state-sponsored brutality. Reading Žižek through Danticat we find that ‘subjective’ and ‘symbolic’ violence are entwined and the latter can feed off the former.

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Scarry argues that because pain lacks objective external referents in the world, it is virtually impossible for pain to be shared between and fully comprehended by two people (Scarry 1985: 161–62). It is nevertheless possible to criticise Scarry’s conception of pain for affirming Western notions of ‘the individual’ which are not necessarily universally applicable.

To return to Mantel's point, Danticat's novel also includes a reflexive questioning of the ethics of representing others' sufferings. Yves, who escaped to Haiti with Amabelle, discourages her from giving her testimony to the priests recording the survivors' accounts of the massacre. He argues: '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' (Danticat 1998: 246). Danticat explained in interview: 'In that passage, I was purposely questioning myself and what I was doing – writing this story in English, stealing it, if you will, from the true survivors who were not able or allowed to tell their stories, people like Yves and Amabelle' (Shea 1999: 17–18). This question of representing/'stealing' other people's suffering echoes Spivak's notion that 'the subaltern cannot speak'. However, as Myriam Chancy points out, Spivak's approach implies that 'from the outset [...] silence is an inevitable side effect of living in various Third World contexts' (Chancy 1997: 31). What Danticat's novel and interviews emphasise is the partial, fragmented and contested nature of the stories of the massacre: it is not that these stories cannot be or have not been spoken but that they are contested, incomplete and officially ignored. For Danticat, the predicament 'of stealing stories' is offset by the pressing need to excavate silenced histories. She explains: 'Nineteen ninety-seven had come and gone and no word said, no wreaths laid. I wrote the book as a memory and a tribute to what happened'.<sup>11</sup> This suggests the ambiguity of the *pharmakon*, the undecidable oscillation between cure and poison. As Danticat's comments show, representation is necessary but carries with it a potential for appropriation.

Danticat however, is not claiming to offer a definitive version of the events of 1937. She is careful to point out in a 1999 interview that 'I didn't write it as history [...] it's a novel', a distinction that I see as indirectly linked to criticisms of the details of Danticat's novel by the Dominican historian Bernard Vega who considered her portrayal of Dominicans' behaviour during the slaughter to be inaccurate.<sup>12</sup> This distinction is also important because, if we follow Mantel's argument logically, we might infer that the only way to avoid 'laying claim to other people's suffering' would be to experience events oneself. Somehow representation and experience should be commensurate. Danticat would resist such a conflation of history and representation: the fiction is not the event itself. This resonates with arguments about the figuration of the Holocaust in literature. Jacqueline Rose, discussing the criticism of Sylvia Plath for her use of Holocaust imagery, suggests that 'Auschwitz bequeathed to subsequent

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Jerry Philogene, quoted in Donette A. Francis (Francis 1999: 168).

<sup>12</sup> The correspondence between Vega and Danticat in 1998 was published in 2004 in the Dominican newspaper Hoy (Hoy 2004). For further analysis see Lucía M. Suárez (Suárez 2006: 12–17).

art perhaps the most arresting of all metaphors of extremity’, and contends that ‘what is at stake, finally, is a repudiation of metaphor itself – that is, of the necessary distance between its two terms’ (Rose 1991: 205–06). Thus what emerges in discussions of the unrepresentability (and uniqueness) of the Holocaust is the latent unacceptability of metaphor — the objectionable distance between the event itself and its representation, where figuration somehow seems to connote a removal from truth, a *de-realisation* of what has passed. It is this sense that the metaphors employed misrepresent the ‘reality’ of history that emerges in Vega’s comments on *The Farming of Bones*. But if metaphors, and literary representations, seemingly depart from events, can they not also bring us closer to them, by, however problematically, confronting something that might otherwise be unintelligible? This returns us to the ambiguity of the *pharmakon*. Derrida suggests that the *pharmakon* ‘acts like an aggressor or a housebreaker, threatening some internal purity and security’ (Derrida 2004: 131); might literary representations of violence be this *pharmakon*, threatening the ‘purity’ of the historical event by supplementing it ‘difference’ through metaphor?

### 3. The Dew Breaker

While Danticat’s explorations of violence in *The Farming of Bones* and *The Dew Breaker* tackle the brutality of dictatorial regimes in Hispaniola, she has enjoyed most popular and critical success in the United States.<sup>13</sup> This opens up another way of engaging with Mantel’s claim: does a colonial impulse underlie this success? Martin Munro, in his study on Haitian writers, suggests that ‘the more Haiti has slid into misery, the more successful its authors have become’. Perhaps, he proposes, the success of this literature is through its testimony to the universality of human suffering, through which audiences can ‘heal pain’. On the other hand he suggests, ‘perhaps in reading Haitian books we seek some disavowed salvation ourselves’ (Munro 2007: 207). Thus it is possible for Western audiences to 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. However, while we cannot assume an ethical and sympathetic readership for Danticat’s books, the inverse stance that ‘reading is violence’ is also a fallacy.

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<sup>13</sup> For Danticat, the English language in which she writes is the language of migrancy, which becomes a ‘tool’, a provisional option and a testament to dislocation. It would be problematic for her to write in Kreyòl, due to the high rate of illiteracy (at around ninety per cent).

This position (what Žižek might see as violence of symbolisation) is reductionist because it infers that in their mis-reading of Haitian violence, the audience become partially responsible for it. I make this distinction not to deny the role of the United States in violence against Haitians but to problematise a position which threatens to conflate violent events with an indirect witnessing of representations of such events. Danticat's writing suggests the need to be aware of such distinctions as throughout *The Dew Breaker* she problematises the location of witnessing. This not only troubles the possibility of 'laying claim' to other people's experiences but also allows Danticat to encourage her readers to develop a critical perspective on brutality.

*The Dew Breaker*, like *The Farming of Bones*, confronts silenced histories, this time focusing on violence in Haiti during the dictatorship of François Duvalier (which began in 1957 and was continued by his son Jean-Claude until 1986). The novel focuses on a figure who helped brutally to perpetuate nationalist hegemony: 'the Dew Breaker', a Tonton Macoute and torturer in François Duvalier's regime. This figure unites the fragmented episodes of a text which rests somewhere between a novel and a short story collection, linking various characters who have been directly and indirectly affected by his enactment of violence on behalf of Duvalier's regime. Beatrice, a bridal seamstress, was tortured because she would not date the Dew Breaker; Anne's step-brother was snatched and murdered by him, Dany's parents were shot by him. Yet these events are transmitted to the reader in glimpses, partially witnessed or incompletely testified to by the characters, and the reader has to work hard to piece together these fragments. As with *The Farming of Bones*, in *The Dew Breaker* testimonies are rendered without the possibility of closure. One example of this is Beatrice's partial account of her torture and her erroneous belief that the Dew Breaker continues to pursue her, which suggests that in a fundamental way Beatrice's suffering is enigmatic and evades encapsulation. This is not a testimony that the reader can witness and know. This indicates how Danticat avoids 'laying claim' to other people's histories by reflexively incorporating silences into her representations.

Within *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat problematises the reader's position as a witness. *The Dew Breaker* includes a reference to the killing of Patrick Dorismond by a New York policeman. Unarmed Dorismond, a Haitian, was shot for apparently resisting arrest, although bystanders suggested that the policeman did not identify himself as an officer. Readers do not 'witness' the shooting of Dorismond; instead, they 'hear' of radio reports on the murder and subsequent protests from the perspective of a newly arrived Haitian migrant who does not

understand the significance of the event. This partial and indirect witnessing with its incomplete information encourages the uninformed reader to investigate the allusion. Moreover, the reference to Dorismond prompts the reader to consider how this arbitrary killing by an agent of the state shows Haitian violence echoed through the racism of the United States. Danticat also problematises the location of witnessing through her depiction of Beatrice's enigmatic story of torture and persecution, reluctantly related to journalist Aline. Aline, like the reader, can never know Beatrice's agony, which Aline sees as filling the 'blank spaces' in her life (Danticat 2004: 137).<sup>14</sup> It is also significant that Danticat incorporates into her novel foreign witnesses to atrocities in Haiti, such as the Human Rights people and the *Le Monde* journalist, who document the Dew Breaker's violence. These Western observers might be read as a metonym for Danticat's imagined audience: the former are cloistered in comfortable hotels, remote from violent events, and while their perspectives may be partial or limited, they are nevertheless ethically engaged in processes of investigating such violence. This again implies the ambiguity of the *pharmakon*: success and failure are implicit in this venture of developing a distanced perspective on violence.

### Conclusion

Danticat engages at a number of levels with the question of whether a text can look at violence perpetrated without perpetuating violence itself, considering her position as writer and the perspectives from which violence can be witnessed. Reading Žižek's notions on violence through Danticat's writing also enables a critical engagement with his ideas, showing how his notion of 'symbolic violence' might be more entwined with physical brutality than his discussion suggests. While Žižek develops his ideas and his distinctions between 'subjective' and 'objective violence' against a backdrop of Western politics, Danticat's representations of violence in the Dominican Republic and Haiti show the *visibility* of 'objective violence' and its inextricability from the seemingly more arbitrary 'subjective violence'.<sup>15</sup> Danticat's negotiation of the problem of 'laying claim to other people's suffering'

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<sup>14</sup> Another example of Danticat's limiting what the reader can witness emerges in her allusion to Emmanuel Constant, whose poster is displayed in Brooklyn. Constant was a leader of the terror squads of 'FRAPH' (the Front pour l'Avancement et le Progrès Haitien or the Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti) which terrorised Aristide's supporters and was financed by the C.I.A.. At the time of the novel's composition, Constant was living as a free man, under the protection of the C.I.A., in New York. Danticat's fleeting allusions to Constant do not allow the reader to witness the violence as it happened. We have instead a character's recollection of newspaper reports about Constant's death squads; we never see Constant, only a glimpse of a man who resembles him.

<sup>15</sup> Beauvoir-Dominique, discussing the practice of 'selective repression' used in the aftermath of the Duvalier regime, between 1986 and 1993, notes: 'fresh cadavers are placed in the busiest streets every morning, preferably mutilated.... Hands and feet tied up with rope, their backs carry the trace of gunshot; at times signs of



shows a greater complexity than Mantel's assertion allows for. These conclusions can be teased out further with a final example from the first chapter of *The Dew Breaker*. As the chapter begins, the father of the narrator Ka has vanished along with her sculpted portrayal of him, a carving which was Ka's attempt to tell her father's story of imprisonment by the Duvalier regime. However, as the chapter unfolds, Ka comes to learn how her sculpture was a misrepresentation. Her father reappears without the statue, which he has destroyed. He confesses that he was not a prisoner but a jailer, torturer and murderer, the eponymous Dew Breaker. Ka's aestheticisation of her father's experience of suffering as a prisoner and her intent to commercialise this (Ka is going to sell it to a Haitian actress) are shown to be problematic on a number of levels. The actress empties the sculpture of the history Ka meant it to contain: the actress sees her own father in the image and Ka queries this appropriation of the sculpture into 'the universal world of fathers' (Danticat 2004: 12). Furthermore, Ka's attempt to speak of and for someone else's pain is shown to be misguided: the story that the destroyed sculpture was supposed to symbolise was false. Beyond this, we can read this episode metonymically, with Ka representing the writer and the Haitian actress the audience. We see that Danticat shows that while its interest is welcome, the audience may misread or even overlook suffering to fit a representation into its own experiences. We also see how she undercuts the authority of the artist to represent violence as a finished artefact: here we see the limitations of Žižek's and Mantel's claims about symbolisation. Language does not necessarily fix, and experiences are not necessarily fixed in history or memory: Danticat's writing shows symbolism can struggle and often fail but may convey meaningful fragments or silences. Investigating her novels shows that we should not simply see reading and representation as 'violence'. Nor should we see them as 'remedy'. Instead, we might conclude that Danticat's reflexive and fragmented presentations of brutality and atrocity, which challenge audiences to develop an ethical and self-critical engagement with violence, are a kind of 'pharmakon'. As 'pharmakon' her texts eschew the violence of closure and suggest the need for continual critical and open engagement with the symbolisation of violence.

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