

# To Narrate is to Be: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

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**Abstract** This paper studies the Haitian American writer, Edwidge Danticat's novel *The Farming of Bones*, finding that this novel, in a dual narrative structure, displays how Amabelle, a Haitian woman who suffers from a serious sense of non-existence, struggles to juxtapose, through narrating, pieces of her own past experiences together into a complete identity, and how she endeavors to offer testimonies to the existence of those killed that she has come across in life. Amabelle's sense of non-existence results from two events: she was orphaned at eight, and she lost her lover Sebastien and most of her friends in the 1937 massacre. When finding no place to lay down her sufferings, she turns to language, telling her dreams, describing her childhood life, narrating her lover's story and those deaths she witnessed. This paper claims that Amabelle the orphan seeks a sense of being through narrating her dreams and memories, while Amabelle the survivor of the massacre regains a sense of existence of her lover and, in the meantime, testifies the historical truth of the massacre through narrating her experiences, "to find a safe nest" to lay down it "where it will neither be scattered in the winds, nor remain forever buried beneath the sod." And in a conclusion, both Amabelle and the author Danticat have found the safe nest, i.e., narrating, through which the former gains and testifies existences and the latter records a historical event and passes it on.

**Keywords** Edwidge Danticat; *The Farming of Bones*; sense of being; non-existence

Edwidge Danticat (1969- ), the Haitian American writer, has received a sustained publication of criticisms over her novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998) ever since it came into print. This novel centers on the 1937 genocide of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic, schemed by the ultranationalist, Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo Molina. During that massacre, 20,000 Haitians were chopped to death with machetes rather than by shooting, on account of the government's intrigue to disguise it as a sugarcane-cutters' conflict, thus to cover up the ethnic cleansing. After that,

little was revealed to the public. To a larger part, Danticat's novel means to reveal the historical truth of this silenced event. In consequence, this novel naturally bears a heavy historical mark, while its fractured narrative structure entices trauma theory in interpreting the heroine's response to her parents' drowning and her experiences in the massacre. Among the criticisms up to now, prominent concerns range from history and memory to trauma and identity.

Drawing on the theoretical discourses of "border theory" and "testimonio," April Shemak analyzed how the novel "deconstructs Dominican nationalism and produces a history of the Trujillo era through the fractured and ambiguous testimonial of Amabelle Désir" (85), and she came to a conclusion that Amabelle and other survivors' scarred bodies become "more enduring testimonies to the massacre" since their "oral testimonies are vulnerable to misinterpretation" (103). Martin Munro, focusing on Danticat's narrator Amabelle's response to her traumatic experiences in the massacre, examined "how Danticat's novel presents the effects of trauma on the individual and the community, how she identifies what is destroyed by trauma and also indicates the new structures and sensibilities that emerge from the traumatic or posttraumatic condition" (83). While Amy Novak probed the novel's narrative structure to further contend that *The Farming of Bones* examines the past through a "spectral narrative economy" that claims memory as a site of radical possibility. Skeptical about the exclusionary logic of Dominican official history which silenced the massacre, her argument challenged the national narrative of the historical event with individuals' bodies as "a marred testament" (95). Both Munro and Novak raised the possibility of representation in the aftermath of trauma and the relationship of individual memory to collective history. Furthermore, Nandini Dhar combined trauma theory and Nicole Brossard's concept of "women's memory" to argue the relationship between social identity and the formation of individual narratives of memory, pointing out that "there does not exist any homogenous concept called 'women's memory'" and "an understanding of her [Amabelle] trauma lies not solely in an understanding and recounting of the gender dynamics of the society, but also has to take into account the questions of race, class and nationality" (186). While in comparing two women's texts (Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*) that "attempt to rewrite imperial history, ...renegotiating the masculinized national identity that is inherited from imperialism" (788-789), Lynn Chun Ink pointed out that Danticat's novel seeks to reframe history itself by reformulating a communal identity based on shared experiences, a common struggle, thus undermining the disavowal of community beyond national borders (800). Away from the historical dimension, Heather Hewett tactfully located her examination of this novel "at the theoretical crossroads of disability studies and trauma studies" (125).

With a reference to Esu and Papa Legba, the two disabled voodoo figures grounded in Afro Caribbean myth and ritual, Hewett explored the symbolic crossroads in *The Farming of Bones* that mark all transitional journeys of Amabelle when she changes from a young able-bodied beautiful woman to an impaired old body of deformity “no longer a tempting spectacle.”

Judging from the above brief review, we can see that history and trauma are two unavoidable perspectives in understanding this novel. The author does not deny her intention of re-capturing history to remind readers of the purposely silenced history. “Nineteen ninety-seven had come and gone and no word said... no wreaths laid; I wrote this book as a memory and a tribute to what happened” (Francis 168). But this novel is not simply anchored there. Rather, it aspires to show what a powerful role a narration can play in shaping the existence of an individual person and interfering with historical truths at the same time. This paper attempts to study Danticat’s narrative strategy in recovering the voice of the individual character Amabelle Désir and in exposing the silenced historical events in *The Farming of Bones*, thus revealing the vital role language plays in discovering one’s real existence. In doing so, this paper will demonstrate and affirm Danticat’s “honed craft” in targeting many testimonies at once, though Dale Peck considers it the author’s “ambition as a writer; and if, in the end, she’s not equal to the task she sets herself, the failure is less one of innate ability than of honed craft. I think she will write the book she wants to write, she’s just not there yet” (135).

### **I. Seeking a Sense of Being through Narrating**

The major character and narrator of the story, Amabelle Désir, is a Haitian handmaid of a Dominican señora Valencia. When Amabelle is still trapped in her nightmare of her parents’ drowning years ago, her lover Sebastien Onius narrowly escapes a car accident, but his fellow laborer, another Haitian sugarcane cutter Joël does not. Señora Valencia’s soldier husband Pica is the reckless car driver, but he doesn’t even care to have a look at the victim to make sure whether he is alive or dead. While the Haitians are preparing a funeral for Joël and even brewing revenge, a decided holocaust is quietly progressing towards them. But Amabelle doesn’t believe the rumor until the slaughter reaches near. She gets separated from Sebastien in their last effort to escape. After a scary journey and being beaten severely by a mob at the last stop, Dajabón, Amabelle crosses the border river, Massacre River, to her home country, permanently disfigured and deformed, one leg shorter than the other. After years’ waiting for Sebastien’s message, eventually, at the death of Trujillo, she ventures back to the other side of the river to have a look at the waterfall where Sebastian and others are said to have been killed. Back from the cliff, Amabelle decides to wait for the dawn,

immersing herself naked in the shallow water of the Massacre River, “cradled by the current, paddling like a newborn in a washbasin” (310).

This novel opens “His name is Sebastien Onius. He comes most nights to put an end to my nightmare, the one I have all the time, of my parents drowning”. The narrator is Amabelle Désir. “Nightmare” of “my parents drowning” “all the time” sets the tone of the story as sad and a bit ghostly though the opening chapter pulsates with an erotic ecstasy. Immediately in the following chapter, we come to a sharp anti-romantic realization that Amabelle is a domestic servant, that her lover Sebastien is a sugarcane cutter in the field, and that when they two meet in her room, generally in the evening after Sebastien finishes his whole day work in the fields, they need to be careful not to arouse any attention from the master family. Apart from her low social status, we gradually get to know that although she is in her early twenties, in her prime, she is painfully living in her childhood spiritually.

Danticat adopts a dual narrative structure. There are two linear stories, one about Amabelle's dreams, her childhood in Haiti and her happy moments with Sebastien, the other about her present life as a servant in the Dominican Republic. In both stories, the narrator is Amabelle. Her dreams are mostly about her parents drowning. Her memory of childhood is mainly about her remembered anecdotes with her parents. Though Sebastien exists in her Dominican life, she does not mention him in her narration of that part until quite later in the development of the story. It feels like she divides her life into two worlds. She decidedly sifts something out of a spiritual world, where just family members stay. From a psychological perspective, Amabelle's division of her world is identified, in Sigmund Freud's vocabulary, as dissociation, and her screening indicates an absorption in retrospections, as Freud pointed out, “... men are brought to complete deadlock by a traumatic experience that has so completely shaken the foundations on which they have built their lives that they give up all interest in the present and future, and become completely absorbed in their retrospections” (239). For Amabelle, her foundations of her life were shaken when her parents were drowned. As a response, she neurotically has herself entrenched in the past and rejects the present. In another word, this neurotic symptom indicates her effort to linger on her fundamental connection to her past life.

Connection plays an indispensable part in one's sense of being. In the Christian world, man was originally connected to God. In the secular world, everyone was initially connected to his/her parents. When the connection to God was broken through original sin, man embarked on an everlasting journey to regain that connection. When their parents die, men are thrown into a sudden sense of panic and rootlessness. They begin to dedicate a special space permanently in their heart to their parents, to seek an eternal connection to parents. After all, connection to parents is the

original evidence of men's existence, or in Rollo May's word, one's "sense of being." According to Rollo May, a sense of being means one's experience of his being as real and meaningful (1958, 85), which involves the working of Ego and Self. Ego works as the necessary precondition of a being while Self organizes the inner activities and connects one to others in the society (1953, 79), and a healthy individual must build a relationship with others and interdependence with society, which is called social conformity (1939, 57). Amabelle Désir was confronted with the sudden loss of such a relationship and dependence when she lost her parents in the rising tide when she was only eight years old. Worse still, she witnessed the whole drowning scene. Her father tried to carry her mother across the river, but "the water rises above my father's head. My mother releases his neck, the current carrying her beyond his reach. Separated, they are less of an obstacle for the cresting river" (52). That is absolutely a horrendous disaster for a child, which she witnessed and it would surely "shake the foundations" of her world, "I scream until I can taste blood in my throat, until I can no longer hear my own voice" (52). Henceforward she fell into a perpetual nightmare, for years repeatedly seeing her parents drowning in her dream all the time. Since then, she began to single out a spiritual world consisting of her memories of her parents and her childhood. In this way, she can regain the connection to her parents. She does not feel herself an orphan there. In this spiritual world, she gets back her evidence of existence. In another word, she regains her sense of being through depicting a picture in her mind with words. Those words narrate her dreams, her memories and her fantasies. Later Sebastien is invited into this preferred world though he actually lives in her post-disaster world. His existence in her spiritual world is purely a narrative existence. He gradually comes to be part of her existence in both of her worlds.

Amabelle's struggling with a sense of being is also encoded in the author's purposeful designing of the typefaces and the reversal of verb tenses in the two worlds. Amabelle's dreams and memories of her parents are all narrated in present simple tense in bold print chapters, which are intertwined with the past tense narrative chapters of her everyday life in Valencia's house. The book reviewer Michael Upchurch simply denied the necessity of this design. "There are technical oddities as well that detract from the power of Danticat's story. The novel opens with what appear to be two alternating narrators — suggested by different typefaces and contrasting prose styles. Yet it soon becomes clear that both voices belong to Amabelle, a device that seems miscalculated and unnecessary." On the contrary, I find this device rich with meanings. On the one hand, Amabelle's parents died before she came to be Señora Valencia's handmaid. If there should be a clear division of the events sequence presented by verb tense, the narration about her childhood should be in the past tense while her life in Valencia's house should be in the present. Considering the basic

meanings of two verb tenses, the reversal of them aims at provoking the permanent or long-lasting sense of being with her parents, while her everyday life as a servant, to her, is already a past. This announces a psychological perversion between present and past, just echoing her division of her two worlds. She embraces the past but rejects the present as she prefers being with her parents to living alone as a servant. What's more, while her servant life is narrated in chronological order in a calm and well-controlled pace, the bold print chapters do not follow any clear order of time. They are her fragmentary memories narrated in prose style, in which it is hard to trace logic. It is no wrong to read her as schizophrenic, seriously trapped in the past, as many criticisms have argued. But the way I see it, this divided vision reflected in the confusing verb tenses does not really indicate her divided identity, but testifies to her struggle to retain her parents' existence in her life, or rather, to record her being in the coordinate system of life, her parents as a parameter and relativity. On the other hand, bold print generally means to emphasize, to highlight something important. For Amabelle, those fragmentary memories overtop her servant life in reality. In the master's house, her role as a servant and thus low status does not offer her the values that she used to experience while with her parents. Without parents, her life seems unreal, lacking in foundations. Being a servant, she does not feel meaningful. She loses her sense of being. "It's either be in a nightmare or be nowhere at all. Or otherwise simply float inside these remembrances, grieving for who I was, and even more for what I've become" (2). The author does not intrude into the narration, but such well-designed rather than "miscalculated" typeface cries for cognition the way a high relief or etching picture tries to provoke attention. This narrative method implies that subconsciously Amabelle would rather fall back heavily on her preferred past life, experiencing her being as real and valuable. Her handmaid life is just a backdrop to set against what she really yearns for. Fragmented as they are, like a puzzle game, each piece of her dreams and disordered memories serves as a piece of her true existence. Narrating those fragments helps to reorder them, reshaping an integrated being. This narration is a blunt poise against the sudden loss, a struggle with the lost sense of being. Richly imaginative from childhood, by means of language, Amabelle finds a great niche in her comfortable spiritual world with her parents accompanying her, with the old connection regained, and the former existence recorded.

## II. Regaining a Sense of Being in Talking and Re-narrating

Sebastien's existence in Amabelle's two worlds links them together eventually. He gradually brings her back into a sense of being in the real world. Talking plays a vital role in achieving this end. Existential psychiatrists Caligor and May both hold that language works as an important means in representing one's sense of being. They

put forward that it is a kind of symbolizing capability of language to represent self-awareness, a capability for one to connect oneself with the world through language the symbol, a capability to gap one's inner value and the outer world (21-22). In the early stage, it is through constant talking that Amabelle and Sebastian together construct their sense of being on the foreign land. Sebastien is from the north of Haiti like Amabelle herself. He lost his father in a hurricane in 1930 and, though his mother was still alive, he left home and travelled afar to Dominican sugarcane fields to earn a living. With the absence of their parents, living in a foreign country, they value highly the companionship of each other. They value talking, the voice, the utterance that breaks the silence and void. When they are together, if not touching, they must be talking. Amabelle prefers to listen to Sebastien's talk, whatever it is about. She just likes to be surrounded by his voice. That gives her a sense of safety. "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. . . Silence to him is like sleep, a close second to death" (13). They talk about their parents. He requires her to say something she admires most about her parents, hoping that she will ask him the same question so that he can narrate his father's death, which is essential for him too, to keep the connection and to record his father's existence. Their talking is always about their families, the foundation upon which they built their life in the past. So when they talk, they feel a sense of being.

But there are times when talking is not enough. So gradually, re-narrating is needed in order to create a new order, to sustain a real peace of mind. Sebastien is the only comforter for Amabelle, not only in the way that he offers her a listener, but he figures out a way to cure her nightmare for good, to re-narrate her recurrent dreams:

"I don't want you to dream of that river again," he said. "Give yourself a pleasant dream. Remember not only the end, but the middle, and the beginning, the things they did when they were breathing. Let us say that the river was still that day." "And my parents?"

"They died natural deaths many years later."

"And why did I come here?"

"Even though you were a girl when you left and I was already a man when I arrived and our families did not know each other, you came here to meet me."

His back and shoulders became firm and rigid as he was concocting a new life for me.

"Yes," I said, going along. "I did wander here simply to meet you."

...

We had made a pact to change our unhappy tales into happy ones....(55-56)

Re-narrating can change unhappy tales into happy ones. By re-narrating the meaning of her coming to Dominican land, to meet her lover, a new page in her life, Amabelle at last steps into her real world of her own accord. This is a significant step, and this is a significant gesture. Judging from what happens in the two preceding chapters, we can conclude that this re-narrating finally marks Amabelle's stepping out of her trauma, because this scene appears in chapter 10, which follows chapter 9 where Amabelle unfolds a complete narrative of her parents' drowning in a calm, well-controlled and almost peaceful manner. Amabelle, by narrating her parents' death completely and imperturbably, is going through a great step from her haunting nightmares, the trauma, to a blunt face-to-face confrontation with her wound. In Freud's word, her symptom of being trapped in the trauma disappears when she pulls the traumatic dream/ unconsciousness into her conscious world. "Symptoms are not built up out of conscious experiences; as soon as the unconscious processes in question become conscious, the symptom disappears" (241-242). When Amabelle, for the first time, calmly narrates the whole process of her parents' drowning, it means her nightmare/unconsciousness progresses into her conscious world. That symbolizes the disappearance of her neurotic symptom, her trauma, indicating her recovery from the trauma. The narrating is just like the dried scar, signifying the hurt but not hurting any more.

Another sign to show Amabelle's recovery from the trauma is that for the first time, Sebastien appears in Amabelle's narration of her daily life in Valencia's house. This is a sign of her divided worlds combining together. She is cured. Here it is necessary to make clear what makes Amabelle decide to welcome him to her present world. The narration of the drowning story closely follows chapter 8 in which the shocking car accident, the road killing looms out gradually through the man servant Luis the witness. The order of information in these three chapters, 8, 9 and 10, if studied closely, shows the author's painstaking narrative strategy. Before the hit-and-run road killing happens, Sebastien only exists in the bold print chapters of Amabelle's fragmentary memories. Immediately after the accident, Sebastien steps into the chronological narration of the novel. Chapter 10 opens with "when Sebastien returned from the compound that night." It looks like Sebastien, who, like a shadow, always dwells in the recesses of Amabelle's spiritual world, is now welcomed into her rejected world. He steps from her trauma world into her post-trauma world. She is forced out of her trauma by a stronger force, the automobile killing. The automobile killing functions as a shock therapy. Through these three chapters, the author narrates her heroine out of the trauma and puts her into her integrated being as a housemaid.

But Danticat has one more trick buried here. This automobile killing not only



cures Amabelle of her trauma, but also signals a second trauma to come to her. Unlike her former trauma, the second trauma victimizes not only her alone, but many others. Just like a rehearsal of the slaughter, soon after that accident, Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo began to carry out his vicious plan to wipe the Haitians out of the Dominican Republic. Amabelle and Sebastien unavoidably confront a threat of death. When they stay together, through talking and listening, they experience their being. When they get separated in the final effort to escape “El Corte,” the cutting, again, narrating becomes the only hope Amabelle has to feel the existence, this time, mainly of her lover Sebastien, who is said by many to have been killed by Trujillo’s soldiers. For a large part, from Chapter 26 to Chapter 37, there is no bold print chapter about Amabelle’s dreams or memories. This long continuous narration is focused on the slaughter. Amabelle and Sebastien decided to join the group organized by Father Romain and Father Vargas secretly to cross the river. But Pica’s men caught them in the chapel, killed the cane cutters and put Father Romain into prison. Arriving late, Amabelle missed them. So she decided to follow Yves, Sebastien’s good friend to escape. It sounds like Amabelle is totally living through the dangerous escaping. Once in Haiti, half-dead, permanently deformed, Amabelle began tracking information about Sebastien. The last ray of hope is when she heard that Father Romain was in Haiti. When she finally came to his house, she found Father Romain was insane, unable to recognize anybody. Only after her visit to Father Romain did she begin to narrate her dreams again. And there are only two chapters about her dreams, Chapter 37 and 40, before the novel comes to the end. This signifies her second trauma in her life story. Unable to find any trace to prove Sebastien is alive, despaired Amabelle turns to dream once more to get hold of his existence. Witnessing so many victims of the massacre on the edge of being erased from the history, she turns to language again, trying to testify their true existence.

### **III. Testifying a Historical Event through Narrating**

When Amabelle begins to dream again, the contents of her dreams are different. “I dream all the time of returning to give my testimony to the river, the waterfall, the justice of the peace, even to the Generalissimo himself” (264). In the river, she witnessed how Odette died when her man was shot. She knew every detail about how people were forced to jump off the cliff over the waterfall, and how the lucky survivors down into the water were encircled by peasants with machetes to cut off heads. She dreams of giving testimony of the dead to the justice of the peace, not for money, but for someone “to write their names in a book, and take their story to President Vincent,” “to concede that what she had witnessed and lived through did truly happen” (236), because “remembering and telling the truth about terrible

events are prerequisites both for the restoration of social order and for the healing of individual victims” (Herman, 1). She wants to give testimony to Trujillo himself of what had happened. But she is denied such a chance. So she has to find a place to talk to. This has become her great worry just like it would be Sebastien’s great worry that she didn’t know what had happened to him when she couldn’t hear his voice to tell her the truth, because “perhaps one single word could have saved all our lives” (264). After decades of years of despairing waiting, now for her, “the slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on. All I want to do is find a place to lay it down now and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds, nor remain forever buried beneath the sod” (266). In desperation, the only thing she wants to do and can do is to record Sebastien’s life, to give testimony of his existence through uttering some words about him, even simply his name, because “men with names never truly die. It is only the nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air” (282). Without a listener, her only choice is talking to herself. And her talking is the last bold print part, Chapter 40. “This past is more like flesh than air; our stories testimonials like the ones never heard by the justice of the peace of the Generalissimo himself” (281). Actually these words are not really dreams, but her wishes and efforts to note down the story, his story, and the history, even just the name of the one connected to and cherished by her. “His name is Sebastien Onius” is repeated several times, because “sometimes this is all I know” (281).

Chapter 40 is like an epitaph on the grave to Sebastien, the last narration to testify his existence. It is also like a farewell speech to the past. In Chapter 41, the end of the novel, it was in 1961, “after the Generalissimo was killed in a monsoon of bullets.” Amabelle, now an old woman, in her physical inconvenience, went a very long distance across the border to have a last look at the waterfall. She found “the drop was much longer and the pool deeper than the one I remembered. Perhaps time had destroyed my sense of proportion and possibilities. Or perhaps this was another fall altogether” (302). The waterfall is not the one in her memory, and the old friend Valencia, “now we were neither strangers nor friends. We were like two people passing each other on the street, exchanging a lengthy meaningless greeting. And at last I wanted it to end” (300). Farewell to the waterfall, farewell to the past friend, farewell to the past place of dwelling, Amabelle comes back. Her last act is to slip into the cold current of the Massacre River, unclothed, looking to her dreams for softness, for a gentler embrace, for the dawn.

Florence Ramond Journey understands Amabelle’s entering the river as a means for her to “connect herself to her origins — to her own mother, but also to her father, to Sebastien, and to Mimi, essentially, to all those who form her community” (par. 39). Nevertheless I’d rather interpret it as a way to be connected with all the deaths she has

witnessed, of whom she wants to give testimony. When she cannot get any book to write them down, she herself becomes a testimony of those historical existences. After all, even if she could get a chance to have their stories written down, what would that writing be? “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). When evil-intentioned, narrating can be a powerful weapon of attack. Father Romain’s insane recitation of what was forced into his memory during his imprisoned days reveals the Dominican official narrative of the massacre, “How can a country be ours if we are in smaller numbers than the outsiders? Those of us who love our country are taking measures to keep it our own” (260). So massacre can be narrated as patriotic action.

Though the victims’ life stories are erased and the true historical event is silenced, “it is perhaps the great discomfort of those trying to silence the world to discover that we have voices sealed inside our heads, voices that with each passing day, grow even louder than the clamor of the world outside” (266). When the slaughter becomes the only thing to pass on, “all I want to do is find a place to lay it down now and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds, nor remain forever buried beneath the sod” (266). Amabelle did find such a place. Or we should say that Danticat did find such a place for her. The safest place turns out to be in writing, a narration, in which what they want to pass on will never be scattered by the winds, nor will be forever buried beneath the sod. So it is, because Amabelle has proved it. For her, and for those silenced, to narrate is to be.

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