

2013

Geographical, Linguistic, Social, and Experiential Demarcation: The River in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

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Geographical, Linguistic, Social, and Experiential Demarcation: the River in Edwidge

Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

April Dawn Best

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Masters

English Literature

April 2013


Thesis Approval Form

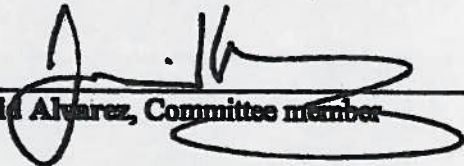


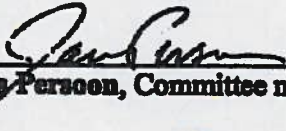
**GRAND VALLEY
STATE UNIVERSITY**


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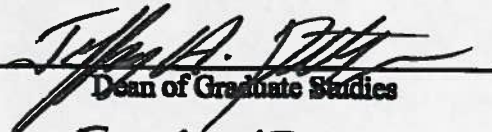
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5-16-13
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To my ever-supportive, ever-believing, ever-hopeful husband, Joshua

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a reading of the Massacre River in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* that takes into account the river's role as a physical border as well as various social, linguistic, and experiential borders that are at work in the novel. The Massacre River physically divides Haiti from the Dominican Republic; it both unites and separates the two nations. This thesis examines the language and structure of the novel to make sense of the paradoxical and opposing representations of the river and examines the various borders Amabelle Désir experiences and her search for belonging upon being exiled from places she calls home. The image and role of the river in Désir's narrative becomes a mediator between the divisions and exiles she endures within her life; it negotiates the differences of the past from the present, Haiti from the Dominican, and her own life from the lives of individuals surrounding her. The river's division is fluid and dynamic unlike the manmade bridge or human constructed social, linguistic, and experiential borders that are like "iron girders dotted with night lights ... making the distant sentinels seem like giant fireflies" (200).

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INTRODUCTION

In *The Farming of Bones* Danticat weaves themes of belonging and exile, death and mourning, and trauma and recovery to fictionally document narratives of individuals whose stories and histories remain silenced. The protagonist, Amabelle Désir, chronologically narrates her life-story, but this linear re-telling is broken up by dreams and snapshot memories. Désir recounts her survival of the 1937 Massacre in which thousands of Haitian migrant workers living in the Dominican Republic died as a result of a direct order from President Rafael Trujillo to expel and eliminate them from the nation. In a 2009 interview on Haitian identity for *African American Review* with Opal Adisa about the need for ancestral memory and necessary conversations survivors must have in order to heal from traumatic experiences such as the 1937 Massacre, Danticat explains the origins and purpose behind the novel. She relates her experiences talking with those survivors of the Massacre during a recent visit to Haiti and her desire to hear their stories.

A lot of the survivors were dying and I wanted to talk to them. Out of these conversations and a lot of reading emerged the character Amabelle, who is Haitian with access to a Dominican family . . . The book itself, the story, the telling, is meant as a path towards healing. The pain goes into the telling of the story, just as we discussed before. The pain goes into the telling, for me and for her. The rituals don't exist. No markers. We have to recreate them. Our words are the markers. (Adisa 350)

In many ways, the novel provides a cathartic means by which one story of survival

can be recorded. It is distinct from her other novels in its subject and genre. Danticat's first two works, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and *Krik? Krak!* (1996), mainly concern themselves with the circumstances of characters living in the Haitian diaspora. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* tells the story of Sophie Caco and the tenuous relationship she has with her mother; it is a type of Bildungsroman that describes Sophie's struggles with migration and familial history. Nine short stories and an epilogue make up *Krik? Krak!*. The epigraph informs readers, "we tell the stories so that the young ones will know what came before them. They ask Krik? We say Krak! Our stories are kept in our hearts." The wide range of dates and locations of these stories provide a panoramic perspective of 20th century Haitian experience. *The Farming of Bones* is a departure from these first two works in its historical and geographic specificity, taking place solely in Haiti over a definite time period.

After the publication of *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat writes in a variety of genres. *The Dew Breaker* (2004) perhaps defies classification more than any other of her works because of its unique structure; it comprises of nine stories whose characters' lives are interconnected in diverse and often painful ways. It is more than a collection of disparate short stories but not quite a traditional novel. In 2007, she breaks away from fiction and writes an intensely personal memoir about her father and uncle entitled, *Brother, I'm Dying*. This memoir recounts the tragic death of her uncle who barely escapes Haiti alive only to die in a Florida detention center waiting to enter the United States. Danticat's most recent publication, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (2010), is a series of essays describing her beliefs about writing, migration, memory, and Haiti. In these essays she articulates her

opinion without preaching and lecturing; they are intellectual and intimate illuminations that explicate the role immigrant artists play in contemporary society, politics, and culture.

Danticat's third publication, *The Farming of Bones*, holds a unique place within her own corpus as well as in the literary world at large. Both the author and the text defy easy classification: Danticat, because of her Haitian-American identity and the novel, because of its genre. Critic's most common query is whether it is an example of historical fiction or trauma fiction? What is apparent is the extent to which both writer and novel push and challenge the conventional borders of understanding about what defines a novelist's position in society and about what designates a historical novel. Thus, it is especially apt that the primary focus of this paper be the various borders and their impact on characters in the novel itself. The main character, Amabelle Désir, grapples with the tenuous nature of national and cultural associations that come from being born Haitian, growing up in the Dominican Republic, and then being forcibly displaced back to Haiti. Moreover, the novel depicts the presence, as well as the fusion, of Vodou and Christianity in the lives of its characters. Most significantly, the driving force of the plot is the political volatility between the Hispaniola nations and the domino effect this has on its inhabitants.

Chapter one provides contextualization for understanding the theoretical role and literary function of the river that divides Haiti from the Dominican Republic. Edward Said's essay "Reflections on Exile" and Gloria Anzaldúa's chapter "The Homeland" provide the main theoretical framework for understanding the

symbolism of the river; Said's definition of exile is especially helpful in examining Désir's disorientation upon returning to Haiti after growing up in the Dominican Republic. Danticat's heroine, who finds herself displaced twice first from Haiti and then from the Dominican Republic, complicates the notion of exile because she considers both nations home, yet feels at home in neither one. She certainly never puts roots down or arrives at a fixed identity. If it is possible to be a dual-citizen of diaspora, she definitely qualifies. "The Homeland" is a rich reading of what constitutes a border and the ways in which borders define places to those who cross them, both physically and metaphorically. Anzaldúa's work will add to my examination of the literal and figurative ways in which the river functions as a border in Désir's life. Genevieve Fabre in *The Concept of African Diasporas* defines the diasporic subject as one who experiences the impossible or deferred return to a homeland, suffers from multiple displacements, and endures literal and metaphorical exile from specific geographic and emotional spaces (xx). This definition serves as the foundation for positioning Désir within the broader context of diaspora. Creole speaking Désir, as a straight working class Haitian female subject, represents one specific member of the transnational black community. Her forced migration into the Dominican occurs because of her parents' death – a unique situation. Her forced migration back to Haiti comes to pass because of an ethnic cleansing fueled by racial prejudice.

David Palumbo-Liu's "*Against Race: But at What Cost?*" challenges post-racial understandings of individual identity, and this challenge helps to frame the fact that

Haitian national identity defines itself as intimately connected to Africa¹, thus becoming one of the major divisions between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which in turn affects Désir in her migrant/orphan/refugee status. Two other major theoretical works I intend to incorporate are Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," an astute elucidation of identity as unstable and metamorphic, and Homi Bhabha's *Locations of Culture*, specifically his notion of "unhomeliness." Both works explore the role of memory, albeit in different ways, in relation to identity, and this exploration is especially helpful considering the emphasis on Désir's memory throughout the narrative.

In chapter two, I provide an overview and synthesis of existing criticism concerning Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*. Despite the important role of the river as a border, both physical and metaphorical, in the novel, there is little criticism examining its significance. Many articles discussing the role of memory and its relation to history in the narrative highlight the subjectivity to such remembrances and underscore the inaccuracy of both, thus emphasizing the importance of the novel form as a means of truth-telling through fiction. This focus on genre provides an important foundational framework from which to examine the structure of the novel. Discussions and analyses of the trauma experienced by characters draw attention to narrative voice and stress the fragmentation of identity that affects an individual's ability to communicate after experiencing traumatic events. Defining the novel's genre is difficult; it is an example of a socio-political work, an historical novel, a type

¹ Danticat makes this connection to Africa in an interview with Marita Golden when discussing her own understanding national literatures and diaspora. Brent Edwards Hays in "The Uses of Diaspora" also points out the strong pull in Haitian culture that connects its identity to African roots.

of testimonial, as well as an example of trauma fiction. This diversity of genres reflects the unique nature of Danticat's work within the field of contemporary American and Caribbean literatures.

The final chapter is a literary analysis of the river itself, taking into account its literal role as a physical border as well as the various social, linguistic, and experiential borders its placement between the two nations brings about and enforces. The Massacre River physically divides Haiti from the Dominican Republic; it both unites and separates the two nations. It is at the river where Amabelle loses her parents and meets the Dominican family who takes her in and raises her. Furthermore, it is a site of violence, where Trujillo massacred and dumped thousands of Haitians. Ultimately, it becomes home and mother to Amabelle. Connecting this notion of the river as home, J. Michael Dash, renowned scholar of Caribbean Literature, points out the significance of land and the image of the "terre mère (literally, mother land)" in Caribbean national literatures and politics in a recent article discussing the fiction of Haiti (48). This connection to the earth grounds *The Farming of Bones* and is the focus of chapter three of this thesis. The novel's epigraph is dedicated to the river that divides Haiti from the Dominican. Its opening and closing scenes occur at the river. It may seem contrary to consider diaspora theory, which centers on dispersion and migration, when nature and local spaces are so essential to the characters and settings. However, it is impossible to discuss diaspora without an understanding of place and the importance of national, regional, and local spaces. This is especially true because being absent from a homeland, or in the case of Haiti, a "mother land," is intrinsic to diaspora. I will look

at the language and structure of the novel to make sense of the paradoxical and opposing representations of the river, and will examine the various borders Désir experiences as well as her search for belonging upon being exiled from places she called home. The image and role of the river in Désir's narrative becomes a mediator between the divisions and exiles she endures within her life; it negotiates the differences of the past from the present, Haiti from the Dominican, and her own life from the lives of individuals surrounding her. The flow of the river naturally creates a divide between two pieces of land – this organic demarcation reflects the pure, inherent geographical borders that occur on earth. These boundaries, however, have the potential to become dangerous and artificial as they divide nations and peoples. This thesis examines the role of the Massacre River that separates Haiti from the Dominican in *The Farming of Bones*; the physical river profoundly impacts Désir several times throughout her life, and her memories of it provide a basis for understanding its significance to her in the novel. Furthermore, the river provides a figurative image of other various divisions Désir experiences throughout her life: socio-cultural, linguistic, and experiential. By examining the river both literally and figuratively, we gain a more profound awareness of Désir and her experiences as well as deeper insight into the ways in which borders, literal and experiential, alter and influence individuals' lives.

CHAPTER 1 – THEORIZING THE BORDER

In order to examine the significance of socio-cultural, linguistic, geographic, and metaphysical borders within *The Farming of Bones*, one must first consider place and the notion of home. Edwidge Danticat indicates the importance of place in her own life and the dualistic, yet singular, existence it is to call two places home. Danticat expresses thoughts concerning her diasporic life to Opal Adisa saying, “Haiti is where I was born and Haiti was my first home. I am like most Haitians living with my feet in both worlds” (345). Amabelle Désir, Danticat’s main character, struggles to locate a space in the world that she can claim as her home and often finds herself “living with [her] feet in both worlds” (345).

A number of spaces in the novel are worthy of analysis – broadly, Haiti and the Caribbean, and more specifically, the river, Senora Valencia’s home, the town in which Désir resides after the Massacre, and memory itself. An examination of Haiti and the Caribbean must take into consideration the African and Haitian diaspora resulting from numerous migrations. Furthermore, I include memory because it exists as a third, metaphysical space in which Désir often finds she exists. The first half of this chapter provides an overview of the various scholars and theory relating to Haiti and the Caribbean, their respective diasporas, as well as national and cultural memory in order to position and contextualize Danticat’s novel within the culture and literature of the Caribbean and its diaspora. The second half of this chapter is a synthesis of border and exile theory for the purpose of laying a foundation by which to understand the ways in which I use these terms and notions in chapters two and three.

Haiti occupies a unique position in the Caribbean; it was the first island in the Caribbean to successfully revolt against its French colonizers as well as to establish itself as a nation in 1804. It continues to remain fiercely proud of its African history and roots. This patriotism produced a vibrant and continuous literary culture with its own national poets and novelists. James Ferguson points out that Haiti is an exception to the explosion of literary production in the Caribbean occurring during the 1960s: “Independent nineteenth-century Haiti was a society with many poets and printers, even if most Haitians could not (and still cannot) read” (xii). Despite having a strong national and literary history, Haiti’s political past and present has proven to be quite tumultuous and conspiratorial. Migration is often the result of this governmental instability and economic volatility. Moreover, Ferguson argues that “from this massive process of displacement have sprung some of the Caribbean’s most persistent and enduring literary themes: exile, return, rootlessness” (xii). Danticat is an heir to Haiti’s strong literary history as well as its diaspora.

In the past few decades, Caribbean literature and theory is becoming increasingly studied and researched amongst scholars in the United States. The unique literary production and history of Haiti, for the most part, remains encompassed under the umbrella of the study of the Caribbean. Édouard Glissant, although his primary focus is Martinique, is one of the first scholars to explore the significance of the Caribbean in literature and culture in *Caribbean Discourse*. He connects history, land, and narrative, arguing that “the individual, the community, the land are inextricably in the process of creating history” (105). Unlike the traditional view of history making in which the conquerors and victors write its tale,

Glissant's belief that communal and environmental forces shape history suggests a socio-cultural shift from Western convention. This holistic understanding emphasizes the interrelatedness of humanity and the land in regards to time, and it neglects the often battle and date filled timelines so common in Euro-centric textbooks. Moreover, he points out the role of the temporal: "to confront time is, therefore, for us to deny its linear structure. All chronology is too immediately obvious, and in the works of the American novelist we must struggle against time in order to reconstitute the past, even when it concerns those parts of the Americas where historical memory has not been obliterated" (145). By calling on novelists to participate in the "reconstitution of the past" he defies the often arbitrary and one-sided views of history, even of the immediate past. Additionally, his questioning of history's claim to accuracy and orderly facts implies that history is more fiction than fact, and novels are more fact than fiction because they make room for alternate timelines and diverse modes of experiences, time, and events. Finally, he writes about cultural identity:

The lure of the Caribbean

(the outer edge of space and time)

The past recognized

(absences overcome)

The troubling reality of the nation

(the autonomous resolution of class conflict)

The oral – the written

(the release of inhibitions)

A people finding self-expression

(the country coming together)

A politicized people

(a country that acts). (231-2)

These lines consider the geographic, historical, national, and literary concerns of the area. The structure, in its use of parenthesis, highlights the separate, yet connected nature of the Caribbean. The physical independence of the islands are united in their “outer edge” of the world existence; their similar topographies and climates would seem otherworldly and outside of time to colonizers. Despite the elision of indigenous and slave histories, the gaps in history are being filled in by historians, academics, poets, and citizens. Moreover, as each place seeks to establish itself in postcolonial independence, its endeavors meet resistance and difficulty. It is not surprising that Glissant’s optimism concerning the Caribbean occurs through language, specifically poetry because of his own status as poet and national author. Indeed, this vision proves prophetic in that poetics and politics seem inseparable in the works of many, especially Danticat, whose beautiful prose and thoughtful narratives are inextricably rooted in history and politics.

Glissant may be considered the originator of Caribbean cultural theory and, in some ways, J. Michael Dash’s focus on the Caribbean adds to the conversation Glissant began. His book *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* surveys and analyzes the explosion of literature from this region since the 1960s and its place in the Western canon. In spite of the negative connotations associated with the term “new world,” Dash reappropriates and repurposes the

contentious phrase arguing, “it allows for a new perspective on the Americas as a whole and the Caribbean in particular” (2). This “new perspective” proves somewhat revolutionary in some of its aims:

Including the Caribbean in any survey means ultimately more than simply expanding the literary canon to include new minorities or the heretofore marginalized. It means dismantling those notions of nation, ground, authenticity, and history on which more conventional surveys have been based and exploring concepts of cultural diversity, syncretism, and instability that characterize the island cultures of the Caribbean. (5)

Rather than tacking Caribbean literature onto syllabi, course catalogs, and English degrees, Dash proposes a radical overhauling of the ways in which literature is studied and analyzed. Organizing novels and poetry along national and historical lines neglects the artistic and thematic connections that supersede and cross subjectively formed divisions. By approaching the study of literature through the elements that represent the Caribbean, the canon becomes heterogeneous, multi-faceted, and ever evolving. The geographic location and historical positioning of the Caribbean uniquely places it at the center of a cultural crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Americas. This placement provides fertile grounds for viewing the world through an entirely unique perspective, one that is equally separate and removed from the large continents, while at the same time intrinsically connected and related to the political powers of America, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The unique geographic and historical placement of the Caribbean perhaps causes, or at least provides, the opportunity for the migration and movement of its

nations' citizens. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are characterized by the diaspora of citizens from the Caribbean to the United States, England, France, and other former colonial powers. These groups of people coming from different nations, speaking various languages, and experiencing diverse histories connect as immigrants, refugees, exiles, all of which individuals who no longer live in the place they were born. The editors of *African Diasporas in the New and Old Worlds: Consciousness and Imagination*, Genevieve Fabre and Klaus Benesch, write in their introduction that the shared characteristics of people living in diaspora include:

The existence of a homeland, real or mythic, that is rarely forgotten ... the new life in a foreign environment and the concomitant estrangement, humiliations and ordeals ... and, finally, the creation of (or connecting to) a composite diasporic community with its distinctive set of ethnic, national, and linguistic identities, unified by collective memory ... In this sense, then diaspora is less a condition or a state than a search for identify that is consistently contested, re-imagined, and re-invented. (xiv)

This condensed explanation of diaspora provides an overview of the experience of diaspora; it points out the effects of displacement and the resulting attempts to connect in some meaningful way. One of the most interesting aspects of diasporic communities is the continual effort to create community amongst others from their own national homeland. The fact that "collective memory," rather than socioeconomic status, functions as a foundation for unity reveals the strength and force of shared experience. The continuous re-imagination and re-invention of the self is profoundly compelling; it emphasizes the transformative and metamorphic

existence common to individuals living in diaspora. There is no endpoint or final attainment of identity because one is in continual renegotiation with the past, the present, and the future self in relation to her native land and her adopted home.

Moreover, the diasporic subject is distinguished by an unstable, contradictory “identity marked by multiple points of similarities as well as differences ... a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process” (Hall 234). Perhaps the only possible stability within Caribbean identity itself is its mutability, a constant flux and change. In addition to these general understandings of diaspora subjects regardless of race or ethnicity, the African Diaspora is unique and especially important in regards to Haiti:

Diaspora points to difference not only internally (the way transnational black groupings are fractured by nation, class, gender, sexuality, and language) but also externally: in appropriating a term so closely associated with Jewish thought, we are forced to think not in terms of some closed or autonomous system of African dispersal but explicitly terms of a complex past of forced migrations and racialization. (Hays 30)

The root of diaspora for most ethnically African individuals is sadly based upon racist ideologies and practices. For many, the movement away from the homeland was done with violence and compulsion. There is among scholars the temptation to romanticize and elevate this sort of hybrid, fragmented subject who lives in a postmodern state of continual re-invention, but do to so would ignore the very real power relations that place subjects such as Danticat’s heroine in such a tenuous position in the first place (Lavie and Swedenburg 3).

Furthermore, Lavie and Swedenburg describe a “doubled relationship” or “dual loyalty” as a key characteristic of those living in diaspora: “their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with ‘back home.’ Diasporic populations frequently occupy no singular space, but are enmeshed in circuits of social, economic, and cultural ties encompassing both mother country and the country of settlement” (14). In the midst of being geographically settled, those living in diaspora undergo a type of metaphysical nomadism that mediates and moves between opposing social, economic, and cultural systems. In fact, it could be argued that the temporal plays an equal role to the spatial in diaspora; memory of spaces is not trustworthy – both people and places transform over time.

This struggle with the passing of time and the changes resulting from it, both within oneself and one’s native country, are characteristic of exile, which according to Fabre and Benesch is also a key attribute associated with diaspora (xx). Exile, a traumatic experience marked by nearly impossible returns, treacherous border crossings, and the need to learn a new language and cultural norms is a painful reality for many. Edward Said in his seminal essay on exile, “Reflections on Exile,” points out the connection between land and history:

Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. They generally do not have armies or states, although they are often in search of them. Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. The crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this triumphant

ideology – designed to reassemble an exile’s broken history into a new whole
– is virtually unbearable, and virtually impossible in today’s world. (177)

Unable to reassemble what is lost and broken can cause withdrawal from immediate physical surroundings and into memory – a place where the exiled begins to feel more at home than anywhere geographic. Recollections become the only method by which one lives. Without the option of becoming “part of a triumphant ideology,” the decision to inhabit her memories rather than a geographic space seems instinctually safe. The only thing keeping one rooted is remembrance of things, people, and places past; memory becomes an anchor to reality.

The significance of memory in the life of the exile is such that it must have an outlet for expression; this is often the task of the novelist and the poet. Through fictional writing the “task of remembering is a political one. Diaspora literature . . . refuses to let the violence of the past be buried” (Suarez 11). Novelists fill in the gaps of history where memories and histories remain untold and hidden. Moreover, their work raises awareness of and makes personal the past in ways history textbooks fail. Their use of memory, even if it is fictionalized, “divulges the limitations of memory as well as the need for [it]” (Suarez 9). The traumatic effects of escaping and witnessing violence cause readers to question the reliability narrators while at the same time reminding readers that every story deserves a chance to be heard and told:

Memory gives people agency; memory gives history freedom from the dictates of the history writers ... One of memory’s greatest tasks is to fight the invisibility that comes from silenced stories and buried violations. But a more sustained reflection of memory obliges us to recognize that memory can also

be confining. It can be stagnant, unproductive, and detrimentally repetitive.

(Suarez 5)

While individual memory may become static, collective memory is dynamic due to the communal sharing of personal stories – it is impossible for everyone to have the same recollection because it is so subjective. Whereas, when groups of people come together and remember together, the past becomes a multi-faceted, multiple perspective painting that perhaps more accurately represents history than any textbook ever could. Memory is important to novels, and as Danticat points out this is one of the reasons for writing *The Farming of Bones*: “a lot of survivors [of the massacre] were dying and I wanted to talk to them. Out of these conversations and a lot of reading emerged the character Amabelle” (Adisa 350). Although it is a literary memorialization of the event, it functions to give voice to victims and unearth potentially forgotten aspects of the atrocity. Most importantly, Danticat views “the book itself, the story, the telling is meant as a path towards healing . . . The pain goes into the telling, for me and for her. The rituals don’t exist. No markers. We have to recreate them our words are the markers” (Adisa 350).

Thus, it is perhaps the function of novels to fill in the gaps of history and memory. Lucia Suarez poignantly asserts the role of diaspora literature from Caribbean literature as offering “a critical location to meditate on Haitian and Dominican pasts and [confronting] Hispaniola’s intersecting, diaspora presents” (12). The border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic is not only geographic, linguistic, and at times racial, it is also historical. Versions of the past exist due to national as well as personal biases and experiences. It is for this reason that an

examination of the Massacre River as a border that physically divides as well as unites Haiti from the Dominican Republic is essential and vital.

Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera* defines borders as places that are safe or unsafe and individuals as either us or them (5). Borders may firstly function as geographic and political dividers between nations, but they reflect the various social, linguistic, and experiential divisions felt by citizens on each side. In many cases space that is safe for one individual becomes dangerous for another based upon location and the identification of that person in relation to the place. Anzaldúa's literal and figurative explanation of borders and their role in individuals' lives provide a foundational framework for understanding the origins of border theory and its underlying premises. She articulates the internal struggle deriving from living on the border that "the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision" (100). While she may literally be speaking about those inhabiting geographic border regions, it can also be argued that those living outside the boundaries of their homeland feel "a cultural collision" based upon the differing social norms, language spoken, and past experiences. Attempting to reconcile such divergences further complicates those who live on physical borders or experience a border consciousness due to crossing geographic lines.

Expanding on the notion of this contradictory existence, Anzaldúa argues that the border subject "operates in a pluralistic mode" (101). This "pluralistic mode" is not hybrid, a term popularly used by many postcolonial scholars. Pluralism and hybridism are fundamentally different in their approach to identity and culture.

Rather than a blending, and perhaps even a melting away, of diversity, pluralism allows for an expression of variety and multiplicity to co-exist. That is not to suggest that such co-existence is always peaceful or simple, but it is a reality felt by border subjects. Finally, Anzaldúa argues that a borderland “is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (25). Unnatural or arbitrary boundaries produce citizens of the in-between, citizens of the unknown, and citizens of the unsettled.

It is with this definition and understanding in mind that a discussion of geographic, socio-cultural, linguistic, and metaphysical borders is possible. Regardless of the type, to live in any borderland is “to frequently experience the feeling of being trapped in an impossible in-between” (Lavie and Swedenburg 15). In other words, those who live on one side or the other of any border often find themselves living as exiles in which “borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons and are often defended beyond reason or necessity” (Said 185). The police presence at many borders, the lack of a complete understanding of each side’s socio-cultural norms due to the time spent living in both places, the ability to speak and understand two languages, which makes one both an insider as well as an outsider to those who are not bilingual, and the experience of losing relationships due to crossing boundary lines cut off potential connections and keep one insulated within the sphere of the known.

The geographic border between the two nations at the close of the novel is heavily policed and guarded. It lacks the open fluidity that marked it when she and

her parents crossed regularly when she was a young child. The police presence emphasizes the tension felt by inhabitants on both sides and perpetuates unrest and violence (Anzaldúa 25). The violence committed by the Dominicans against the Haitians during the Massacre had largely to do with race. David Palumbo-Liu in “Against Race: Yes, But at What Cost?” argues that it is impossible to discuss diaspora and culture without including race. He understands the need to move beyond thinking solely along racial lines, but not to the extent in which blackness becomes essentialized and reduced to theories and ideas rather than realities of existence (41). Indeed, the societies and cultures of the Dominican Republic and Haiti define themselves according to the extent of their willingness to include the African aspects of their history. Haiti’s cultural and social pride is based upon the knowledge that they were the first black republic to be established in history, whereas the Dominican focuses its socio-cultural pride in its Spanish history and roots. Thus, the divide between the two nations’ societies has as much to do with their understanding and acceptance of racial history as it does their contemporary cultural identity:

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return. Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either. It is *something* – not a mere trick of the imagination. It has histories – and histories have their real, material, and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. ... Caribbean identities

always have to be thought of in terms of the dialogic relationship between these two axes [of similarity and continuity]. (Hall 237)

The distinction between the two cultures sharing the island of Hispaniola is equally felt due to the differing historical origins of the two nations as well as the immediate historical events affecting agriculture, politics, and economics – all of which influence and transform culture. The cultural divide between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, while based in history, is most evident in the languages spoken in each country.

Alfred Arteaga, author of *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*, argues that “articulations of languages and that of social discourses participate in the push and pull struggle to define some version of ‘self over and against some ‘other’” (1). He goes on to point out that “subjectivity engendered by the discourses of *nation* and *ethnos* is very plainly tied to linguistic utterance and equally plainly locates the speaker, dreamer, poet, lawyer, somewhere within the power places of nation(s)” (4). Thus, although geographic borders are arbitrarily determined by nations, culture and language are intimately connected through history and emphasized nationally. The cultural and linguistic divisions between Haiti and the Dominican may be rooted in colonial history, but their legacy distinguishes and determines who lives and who dies during the 1937 Massacre. Those with the power during the 1937 Massacre defined themselves as those who could pronounce the trill of the Spanish “r” in *perejil*, thus naming and condemning anyone who failed to do so as “other.” This pronunciation marked individuals nationally as well as ethnically along arbitrary and dangerous lines – resulting in the death of thousands of Haitians.

These deaths haunt the memories of those surviving the Massacre; the metaphysical divide between those who live in time and those who have passed out of time becomes a site of the “in-between” for witnesses and survivors of violence. That is to say, where language is a divisive and sharp boundary line that arbitrarily forces one’s alliance onto one specific side, the border between life and death is more ambiguous and allows individuals to reside somewhere in-between if they so desire. They can choose to live in their memories while still participating in the present. Homi Bhabha in *Location of Culture* describes these “in-between spaces” as places individuals inhabit “somehow beyond the border of our times” (4). Bhabha’s description of “being in the beyond” requires that “the past-present becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” (7). The ultimate outcome of this existence, according to him, is unhomeliness:

That is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations. To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres ... The borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (9).

Not only is the line between spheres blurred, it is also the most significant aspect of unhomeliness. Individuals experiencing “extra-territorial” and “cross-cultural initiations” cause a type of stratified living between private and public, past and present, known and unknown. This border existence exiles them from others; they literally live “life outside the habitual order” (Said 186). Bhabha’s notion of

unhomeliness provides a means by which we can understand the disorienting and ambivalent state the survivors of the Massacre experience living in a type of limbo between two nations. Unhomeness is perhaps one of the only notions to accurately describe the ways in which individuals reside in metaphysical borderlands, living without actually fully engaging in life.

The geographic, socio-cultural, linguistic, and metaphysical borders that Danticat's main character, Désir, confronts throughout her life all originate at the Massacre River. Anzaldúa's border theory provides a basis for understanding the ways in which borders unnaturally divide peoples and create spaces for violent encounters. The cultural theories of Hall and Palumbo-Liu and the linguistic theory of Arteaga demonstrate the intangible borders that divide and distinguish between peoples. Bhabha's "unhomeness" explains the separation felt between the past and the present – the "in-between temporality" that migrants and survivors feel throughout their lives. Therefore, it is with these prefatory summaries of theoretical background in mind that I transition into a more focused synthesis of current published criticism on *The Farming of Bones*.

CHAPTER 2 – REVIEW OF CURRENT CRITICISM

While much has been written about violence, testimony, trauma, and memory in *The Farming of Bones*, the river and the role of borders remain for the most part uninvestigated. Many scholars mention the river as well as the border in their writings; these references are the focus of this chapter. They demonstrate the vast amount of opinions and understandings regarding the river, borders, and borderlands. It is my aim to organize these arguments in a cohesive manner that establishes the place in scholarship my readings of the river and borders in the novel lie in order to raise the focus of the river from a peripheral reference in criticism to an essential and central framework for understanding the novel.

The myriad side comments and off-the-cuff remarks about the river point to its omnipresence in the novel as an image and geographic location. Despite the numerous articles and chapters written on the novel, there is only one whose primary subject is The Massacre River. Pamela J. Radar in “What the River Knows: Productive Silences in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*” analyzes the function of the river in *The Farming of Bones* and Danticat’s short story, “1937,” as a liminal space in which the gaps in history, or its silenced moments, find a place to emerge or reside. The strengths of Radar’s argument rest on her ability to connect the role of literature and testimony in relation to history by means of the physical reality and symbolic image of the river. She emphasizes the importance of the dedication and the conclusion, both focusing entirely on the river, as a framework by which to read the novel (29). This structural approach allows Radar to highlight the testimonial aspect of Danticat’s two works and the ways in which speaking to the

river is akin to the “productive silence” of literature (37). This notion of “productive silence” serves as the crux of her argument in which she asserts that the riverbed, Amabelle’s body, and the narrative itself all serve as “repositories for silently remembering” (45).

Radar directly speaks to the role of the river only a handful of times, the most poignant being: “the reader learns how the Massacre River too has borne witness to numerous stories and crossings, and has caused deaths by drowning. By aligning her telling with the river, Amabelle links her private testimony to the river’s own mute witness to life and death of Haitians and Dominicans” (35). This summary encapsulates the essence of the article. Connecting *Désir* with the river, Radar personifies it and elevates its significance to the plot. By emphasizing this link, we are able to read the river as another character, another victim as well as perpetrator. Although the river is a “mute witness to life and death,” it is equally responsible for some of the life lost. The lines, the borders, between right and wrong are blurred even in the case of the topography of the landscape. Radar, rather than examine the river itself, emphasizes the speaking and testimony of the novels’ characters. The insight of her analysis concerning the silenced past and the need to address that silence by means of testimony to the river culminates in this conclusion: “unlike currents and water, the river bed as a site acts as a palimpsest of impressions. Perhaps the riverbed and its stone act as a small memorial which a river with its ever flowing water cannot be” (44). Despite the sharp and clear nature of her arguments, Radar scrutinizes the nature of testifying and the importance of the riverbed far more than silence and the river itself. I am deeply indebted to her research and

inquiry of the symbolism of the river at the conclusion of the novel, but it is my intention to pick up where Radar left off and exhaustively investigate the role of the river more directly.

While Radar may be the one scholar whose focus is the river, several others offer valuable insight even though their articles' subjects and theses concentrate on a vast range of other topics. Many authors suggest symbolic meanings of the river. J. A. Brown-Rose argues that its meaning transforms; where it was once a symbol of death, Désir's parents and the massacre, it becomes a place of tranquility and cleansing (86). Semia Harbawi views the river through a spiritual lens in which it becomes a baptismal site in which Désir actualizes her selfhood as a female subject (56). The landscape as a whole is the subject Elvira Pulitano analyzes and she argues that the river is a regenerative force as well as a collector of memories and "milieu of stories" (7). She later highlights the river as an in-between space where life and death meet and, like many others, views it as a place of cleansing and renewal (9). Finally, Australia Tarver argues for reading it as a trope of burial, baptism, and re-emergence in which Désir's final self-immersion is a resistive and redemptive act (241).

These symbolic readings of the river merely state somewhat surface understandings. Water, as a trope and image, in many works symbolizes cleansing or baptism – both of which have to do with regeneration, life, and death. These readings neglect the geographic location of the river in their analyses, and in doing so forego the most engrossing exploration of the river's function as a border. Jacqueline Brice-Finch points out the historical significance of the river, "we find the river Massacre

has a dominant role in Haitian and Dominican history as a natural border between the two countries. It is so named because of the blood shed during the 17th century as French and Spanish warred over possession of the island” (146). The violence perpetrated in 1937 at the river is one more chapter in its tumultuous past; there are always victims at the border. Thus, examining the river simply through the lens of water and its symbolic burial and resurrection neglects the trauma and history of the place and its direct effect on Désir.

J. Michael Dash provides a discerning reading, arguing that the river is a site of horror and healing to Désir, a member of “that imagined community that inhabits in-between sites like that of the Massacre River where people ‘fluid as the waters themselves’ are attempting to emerge in the shadow of the political nature of the site” (40). By contextualizing Danticat’s narrator and subject within an historical and contemporary community, he elevates and highlights the experience of those living on the margins, in the “in-between sites.” Moreover, understanding Désir as a political and historical subject validates her story and experience. It takes her personal testimony given to the river and recognizes that it is worthy of documentation. Sandra Cox also recognizes the national backdrop of the story: “readers are left with the image of a subject forged and drifting in the border between two nations, belonging totally to neither” (123). Désir’s experiences at the border profoundly shape her life, and acknowledging the statelessness she feels supports her status as exile from both nations. Expelled from her place of birth by an act of nature and driven out of the place she makes home by an act of hatred, she literally makes her home the border between the two nations. A victim of

circumstance, she demonstrates autonomy at the novel's conclusion by going to the river border to rest in its waters, despite the traumatic memories it contains.

Florence Ramond Journey believes that “[Désir’s] exile ends when she finds a symbolic ‘in-between,’ when she chooses to go back to the river between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, where her mother [and father] drowned many years before” (10). Choosing to return to the originating location of her exile allows Désir the opportunity to accept and embrace the complex selfhood she embodies. Nandini Dhar frames this choice in terms of a third alternative, “this time it is not a forced migration but a deliberate rejection of and dissociation from her earlier places of belonging, a process that culminates in her identity transformation ... Amabelle herself embodies the transition, the new space” (199). It is true that for the first time Désir deliberately and decidedly determines for herself where to go and when, but to go so far as to say that she undergoes an “identity transformation” and “embodies the transition” may be a bit far-reaching. It is impossible to know whether a metamorphosis occurs within Désir because the novel ends at the moment she arrives and enters the river. Rather than discuss the questionable notion of identity, it may be more fruitful to examine the notion of self:

Danticat undermines one chief binary opposition lurking at the root of the nationalistic dogma: that between ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ so as to signal her espousal of an oppositional, hypothetical view of identity as ‘neither ontologically given’ and eternally determined stability of that identity, nor its uniqueness, its utterly irreducible character, its privileged status as something total and complete in an of itself. (Harbawi)

Harbawi's argument about Danticat's writing highlights the interconnectedness of the political and the personal; the 'Self' and the 'Other' are almost symbiotic in their relationship to one another, both evolving over time.

Mireille Rosello positions this evolving selfhood through the narration arguing that it is primarily "translucent," which allows for the omnipresence of the river's "ambivalence" towards the atrocities that occur at its site to be the focus (61). Describing Désir a "translucent narrator" allows for a dynamic and fluid understanding of the self and history. It is far more productive to consider one's self as always in a state of transition; to conclude that Désir embodies this and that she, in a sense, "arrives" at this transitional state is shortsighted and neglects the fact that this character spends her entire life transforming and transitioning, as does every other character – even the, arguably, static Senora Valencia. Much like the river itself, these two are continually in a state of flux and transformation. It is, however, dangerous to romanticize these notions and ignore the harsh realities that cause individuals and histories to continually be reinterpreted and reformed. April Shemak extends this metaphor so far as to say that Désir "attempts to 're-member' the brutal history that both Haiti and the Dominican Republic share by submerging herself in the river-border between the two countries" (105). In a sense, one could argue that she also re-members her 'self,' that is those national binaries with which she struggled for so many years. For the first time she is able to reconcile the loyalty she feels to the oppositional factions warring within her, each naming itself as 'home.' Shemak wisely warns against reading,

Amabelle's final act as an ultimate claiming of the border not unlike Gloria Anzaldúa's utopian vision of the border as homeland ... Despite the moment of tranquility, Amabelle's embodiment of the border hardly heals the ruptures of the border for it is a space that other Haitians will continue to cross – some will survive and some will die. (106)

The river border, rather than becoming her home, becomes a place of reconciliation for the socio-cultural, linguistic, geographic, national, and metaphysical contestations within Désir. It is the space in which Désir's divided loyalties coexist despite the intense differences in ideology, interest, and experience. Moreover, the river becomes a shared space between the two nations where residents on both sides experience restored amicability. Désir's return to the river at the close of the narrative differs vastly from her previous journey to its shores – a journey marked by danger and violence whose sole destination was the river for the safety it provided upon crossing it. Marta Carminero-Santangelo in "At the Intersection of Trauma and Testimonio: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*" concludes that, "the Haitian exodus represented by Danticat is not imagined as a return home, but simply as an escape from violence into the unknown. The destination of the characters fix firmly in their minds is not Haiti, but 'the river', as though the river itself is the final destination" (23). For all the ambiguities, trauma, and healing the river holds, it is most certainly the addressee of and final destination for Désir; it is not her final destination during the Massacre, as it was for many others, rather many years after when she seeks closure from the trauma of those past events.

The history of the geographic border between the two nations has been disputed since European colonization of the Caribbean (Brown-Rose 79). This dispute did not prevent the “small farmers of Haitian descent in the frontier region [who] often intermarried with Dominicans” (Suarez 42). Furthermore, the border’s fluidity surfaces as Désir’s memory informs us that a border culture existed in which Haitians and Dominicans co-existed peacefully (Carminero-Santagelo 18). Numerous scholars write about the geographic border and the implications of this border on its closest inhabitants. Moreover, several authors commentate on the various social, linguistic, and racial divides at work within the novel due to the geographic border.

The geographic border exists arbitrarily based on historical demarcations. This leads to a “cultural/political borderland, to which Amabelle is relegated, which is transposed in terms of narrative implosion of marginalized history into patriarchal/nationalist history” (Harbawi 41). The fact that the border itself determines the types of narratives and histories that become public rather than hidden and marginalized demonstrates the immense need for the type of literature Danticat writes. For example, Senora Valencia only vaguely remembers the 1937 Massacre as an unfortunate time when they lost their cane workers, whereas Désir points out that almost every Haitian remembers clearly, even if it is not recorded in history books, the event because they either know someone directly involved or are living survivors. The writing the story of an individual born on the wrong side of the border and giving Désir the first person narration to share her history, even if it is only to the river, demonstrates the necessity and importance of such testimonies to the patriarchal/nationalist histories.

Furthermore, those who live in a constant state of movement across the border experience something almost indescribable. Harbawi argues that the image of “the kite best embodies the ethos of indeterminacy, given that it is made to scud and hover in limbo, dangling between earth and sky – to designate the freedom Haitians hark back to, and their border condition: the fluid liminality and eerie exhilarating precariousness of limbo time” (Harbawi 46). The border affects their daily lives as well as their internal psyche in ways that deeply impact even the most mundane tasks. Dash extends this thought arguing that “Danticat’s characters are condemned to crossing and recrossing from one country to another, between the past and the present, dream and reality, without ever finding satisfactory answers” (Dash 40). This constant physical movement reflects a metaphysical nomadism – a reality that propels the narrative forward even if its characters find themselves in limbo.

Journey takes a step back and evaluates the corpus of Danticat’s work to point out that borders, “whether they are real or imagined, are the starting point from which the characters are able to find a sense of belonging as well as to understand their experience of exile ... exile must be understood as a primary motivating factor in the development of both the characters and the narrative in Caribbean literature” (1). Her notion that borders and exile help determine a character’s place in life is interesting, especially because she extends this idea to the whole of Caribbean writing. Being aware of where one is not “at home” somehow emphasizes and propels the desire to establish a place of belonging even more. Journey goes on to point out the difficulty that the survivors of the massacre experience upon their return to Haiti; they are unable to fully participate in the Haitian community due to

their experiences (7). Thus, despite being in her national home, she, along with the other survivors, remains on the outside looking in. In many ways, the trauma of surviving creates an even stronger border than the national one dividing the two countries. Those who survived either sublimate the trauma with work as Yves, the man with whom Désir escapes, does or live in a sort of disembodied state never fully engaging socially. Neither sublimation nor disembodiment allows for individuals to meaningfully connect with other people thus demarcating a permanent separation between those survivor's of violence and those who never experienced it.

Martin Munro frames this feeling of exile within the borders of one's own nation in terms of the narration arguing that, "behind the imperative to testify lies a deeper need to (re)discover identity. Troubled memory and the everyday reality of trauma accentuate the alienating effects of exile so that the returning Haitians in a real sense are strangers, almost 'other' to those who have remained in Haiti" (89). Désir not only suffers estrangement from her fellow countrymen, she also struggles to unite the disparate aspects of her self, her past with her present, and her divided loyalties to those she left behind with those she currently lives. This division is reflected in the typeface Danticat uses: "[Désir's] narrative alternates between a public first person communal narrative, in which she, Amabelle, is a principal character, and a private first person memory in bold type" (Radar 30). Moreover, "she is not able to choose one culture or the other and finds herself, neither on one side of the border or on the other, but rather in a *borderland* [sic] where identities are expressed through the valence experiences rather than through nationality, culture, and language" (Journey 8). Borderline identities may unite those who share

similar histories, but that does not negate the powerful impact of social, linguistic, and racial divides.

There are two main social boundaries in this narrative – those between the servants on the farm in the Dominican and those between the survivors of the Massacre and those who did not suffer the trauma. Désir finds herself in an ambiguous position on the Dominican farm due to her history with Senora Valencia. She grew up playing with Valencia as a child and then became a servant; this separates her from the other Haitian migrant workers. She is neither fully member of the household nor fully member of the Haitian work force. Dhar argues that, “Amabelle’s status as a domestic servant in Senora Valencia’s household does not overshadow her status as a black working woman, but rather qualifies it. As the domestic servant, she has been appropriated within the familial space” (Dhar 188). I would argue that she was originally appropriated within the familial space and *then* became domestic servant, thus negotiating a tenuous balance between familiarity with the family and loyalty with the Haitian workers. Moreover, Stephanie Scurto points out that “Amabelle realizes Valencia’s elevated social position and sets her in opposition to the field women – a woman most likely of Amabelle’s race and nation – thus suggesting Amabelle’s interpellation” (50). Désir’s ambivalent position interrupts Dominican farm society’s norms and places her in a type of social limbo. Scurto identifies these norms: “There are the wealthy, lighter-skinned Dominican women whose labor in life is supposed to be motherhood, and the poor, dark-skinned Haitian women whose labor in life is, primarily, to serve as domestics, potentially nursing and/or caring for the white children” (52). Because Désir grew

up as Valencia's childhood friend, her role as domestic servant is less formal and more sisterly. While Valencia may consider Désir to be a member of the family, the reality is less accurate as she resides outside of the family hacienda. Even her residence is in a border area between the wealthy home and the migrant workers' shacks.

Désir's life, even as a servant, existed within the "in-between" of two social groupings. Even before the trauma of the massacre, she lived in a type of societal borderland. The other Haitian workers do not wholly accept her because she is a domestic rather than a field servant. Senora Valencia calls her "family" only in name while all interactions between the two remain hierarchical in nature. Even her place of residence reflects her "in-between" status; she neither lives with the family she serves nor within the community of the Haitian cane workers. This "in-between" existence continues upon her return to Haiti where "[she] belongs to a group of Haitian pariahs hovering on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, a purgatorial twilight zone of banishment and oppression" (Harbawi 38). Those who did not suffer through the trauma regard the survivors with standoffish reserve. Incorporating oneself back into society after witnessing the death of so many proves too difficult for Désir who spends her days in cycles of good and bad. Some days she joins others in their daily routines and other days she remains in bed without leaving its confines. Despite being "home" in Haiti, she neither feels like she belongs nor connects with any individuals in any meaningful way. Désir, again, exists in a state of suspension between those who never left Haiti and those who share her trauma, but to whom she never speaks to or connects with emotionally.

Even though she shares the same tongue as her fellow Haitian nationals, it does not necessarily mean she speaks the same language. She speaks the language of memory and trauma; a tongue not understood by the majority of people she encounters in her daily life. During the massacre, language sharply divides between those who are allowed to live and those who die. According to Pulitano, “the Kreyól language – more than skin color – separates the Haitians from their Spanish speaking hosts and their ability to roll their ‘r’s” (33). These linguistic differences become more of a border between Haitians and Dominicans than any geographic one during the massacre. Without proper pronunciation, even those born on Dominican soil to Haitian parents were killed. Désir, fluent in both languages, again suffers from a divided self; her bilingualism places her within a linguistic borderland. Although fluency would seem to signify an eradication of language boundaries, it positions her in a unique situation where she fully understands and fluently speaks both languages, and this separates her from Haitians who remain monolingual in protest against their Spanish-speaking bosses. Her fluency in Spanish connects her with the Dominican landowners, but her status as servant and, and later her African appearance, keep her from fully joining the Spanish culture. Moreover, as Sandra Cox points out: “linguistic differences, in addition to physical appearances, are used to construct the boundaries between Dominican and Haitians. The overt racism implicit in the programmatic nation-building the regime employed has implications for intranational racial differences as well” (Cox 118). The fact that this racism results in an ethnic cleansing demonstrates the intense manipulation of power and the fear of the Other. The power of language demonstrated in this instance is such that it “can

serve to bring to light the specificity of a people (through the use of Kreyól) and resurrect the dead (when the artist writes them back into life), it can betray and kill as well” (Harbawi 55). From a purely literary perspective language empowers Désir to express herself and tell her story; it allows her to voice the internal strife she feels because of the various national, social, and linguistic oppositions she experiences.

The racial boundaries within the novel, as well as in history, are purely arbitrary and socially constructed. Many Dominicans can trace their roots to African origins, but deny this rather than embrace it as Haitians do. The racial divide between the two nations exhibits itself most symbolically through the birth of Valencia’s twins – in her own words she has a bone-white skinned son and a coffee colored skinned daughter. Dhar argues: “Valencia herself becomes a perpetrator of the racial-national myth when she describes her twins”(194). More importantly, “the birth of Valencia’s children not only signals a transgression of her own body’s boundaries, but also threatens to disturb national racial ideologies” (Shemak 90). This is especially true and dangerous, for Dominican nationalism, considering her daughter survives while her son dies only a few days after birth. The fact that her daughter lives destroys the racist myth perpetrated by Trujillo of white strength and power. It also proves the realistic and present truth that African roots exist in wealthy, landowning Dominican families, thus upsetting the social hierarchy imposed oftentimes along racial lines.

Désir herself finds herself stuck between these racial divides because, although her body as a domestic worker remains whole and unscarred, it “could be subjected to the processes of physical violation as has happened to Sebastian, Kongo,

and others, simultaneously confirms her racial and class identity, and shatters the myth of her being incorporated into a white, middle-class household” (Dhar 192). While her skin color separates her from the middle-class household, her lack of scars separates her from the rest of the Haitian workers. In reality, she falls on one side of the racial divide in the Dominican, but in the social structure of the farm she finds herself in a borderland between the two spheres – Haitian workers and Dominican landowners. Suffice to say, Désir spends her entire life hovering between disparate margins: national, social, linguistic, and racial. This borderland existence places her in a unique position to share her narrative from being equally an outsider and insider throughout her life. She is paradoxically intimately distant to almost every situation and group of people she encounters. Her experiences at the river are the source of this paradoxical experience and it is with this in mind that one considers the river as central to the themes and interpretations of *The Farming of Bones*.

CHAPTER 3 – THE MASSACRE RIVER AS MEDIATOR

Stuart Hall argues in his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” the notion of identity as a self-positioning, rather than a geographic or static positioning, based upon a construction of memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth (237). This proposition allows individuals more autonomy as well as the opportunity to transform and develop based on life’s circumstances and personal reflections on the past. Désir’s quest for self-hood and desire to find a place of belonging is realized by her memory, fantasies, and narrative to the river. She mythologizes her silenced testimony according to Renée Larrier in her journal article, “‘Girl by the Shore’: Gender and Testimony in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*,” by “entrusting it to a female Vodun divinity” (54). Désir’s legal identity must be self-positioned because, as she points out about herself, “I had no papers to show that I belonged either here or in Haiti I was born” (70). Her lack of documentation externally reflects the lack of belonging she feels in her own body, in the present, and in reality. She tells the listener, the river, that “my flesh was simply a map of scars and bruises, a marred testament” (227). Désir’s body becomes, as critic Pamela Radar aptly describes, a “repository for silently remembering ... [one that] contains her testimony” (45). Rather than seeing her flesh as part of her identity and part of her narrative, Désir minimizes it using “simply” as the descriptor, which reduces its essentialness to who she is. In an interview with Renée Shea one year after the publication of *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat discusses the fragile nature of memory and the necessity of being living museums and testaments (21). Although Désir recognizes that her body is a “testament,” she considers it “marred” rather than an honest and genuine witness to

her story and suffering. This minimization of her body reflects Désir's attempt to disembody the physical evidence that makes up aspects of who she is. The Massacre River directly affects Désir's past, present, and future self.

Thus, the Massacre River separating Haiti from the Dominican Republic functions in *The Farming of Bones* as an actual geographical divider; moreover, it reflects the various social, linguistic, and experiential divisions occurring because of the physical separation between the two nations, and in each of these divisions the issues of safety and identification arise. This chapter examines the various borders Désir experiences and her search for belonging upon being exiled from places she called home. The image and role of the river in Amabelle Désir's narrative becomes a mediator between the divisions and exiles she endures within her life; it symbolically negotiates the differences of the past from the present, Haiti from the Dominican, and her own life from the lives of individuals surrounding her. Désir straddles two social, linguistic, and experiential worlds and in this sense, as Anzaldua describes it, makes the border between each one her home despite the painful reality of this existence.

The first memory Désir has of the river highlights it as a border as well as desirable place to be: "my mother, my father, and me, we cross into Dajabon, the first Dominican town across the river ... In the afternoon, as we set out to wade across the river again with our shiny new pots, it starts to rain in the mountains, far upstream" (50). This familial excursion reveals two important aspects regarding the water. Firstly, it is a navigable and traversable border, one that is open and unguarded at this point in time. Secondly, the water is merely a means to an economic end; the

border is a path for commerce between the two nations. It is the return trip across the river that forever alters Désir's life. The danger in crossing originates in nature itself, something no human can control: "I walk down to the sands to throw the pots into the water and then myself. The current reaches up and licks my feet ... Two of the river boys grab me and drag me by my armpits away from the river" (52).

Although the location and reality of the river remains the same, the threat it imposes transforms. It literally becomes a menace who "reaches up and licks" in an attempt to swallow the young Désir who needs to be rescued from the waters by bystanders.

Désir's second remembrance of the river also involves loss, but not because of a powerful and threatening current – the peril derives from the bystanders waiting at the river's edge as refugees from the Dominican swim to the safe shores of Haiti. As the Haitian refugees attempt to cross the border and escape the massacre in the Dominican and return to the safety of their native land, bystanders become agents of death as they attempt to throw rocks at and drown escapees. The river this time is a place of safety: "when I look at the beach, there are peasants waiting with their machetes for us to come out of the water" (175). However, it does not remain safe and begins to make its own victims, "the water guided Odette downstream. She was not paddling or swimming but simply letting herself be cradled by the current ... She did not struggle but abandoned her body to the water and the lack of air" (201-2). This time, nevertheless, the deadly waters are paradoxically maternal and comforting. Succumbing to death in the river is preferable to the suffering one will incur at the hands of those waiting on the water's edge. The location and existence of the border remains a stable and unchanging, but the impact and implications of the

river alter depending on the year, the season, and the political climate. Thus, when Désir crosses for the third time to go back to Alegría, it is done in subterfuge at night because she lacks the proper documentation. The once open and accessible point of commerce is now a guarded and militaristic checkpoint. In many ways the river metaphorically represents the malleable nature of the border. While the waters are consistent in their presence, they are ever-flowing and transforming. The border is a physical reality whose position does not move, but the significance and repercussions of it are in a constant state of flux.

Désir thus returns to the river for a final time; a return that closes the narrative. Throughout the entire testimony to the river, she reveals the details of her previous three experiences at the water border that seem to frame her life and story: first, the loss of her parents, second, the escape from the massacre, and third, the return to Alegría to visit Valencia. The linear re-telling of these events appears in regular print on the page, and it is interspersed with short chapters distinguished by bold typeface. The short chapters are poetic snapshots of moments not fully fleshed out or directly linked to the main narrative, but still add to the meaning and testimony she gives. Martin Munro in his article, "Writing Disaster: Trauma, Memory, and History" argues that these two these two aspects, disrupted memories and fragmented style, of her re-telling are a "juxtaposition of a traumatizing past with a traumatizing present" (91). In spite of her attempts to organize the testimony, it seems as if there are instances in which she is overcome by moments for which she has no point of reference or way to incorporate into her own master narrative, and she allows them to enter into the flow of her monologue to the river. She finally shares her story

because, "when you have so few remembrances, you cling to them tightly and repeat them over and over in your mind so time will not erase them" (45). Every significant event in her life occurred at the river – her parents' death, her being taken into the Dominican to live with Valencia and Papi, and her survival of the Massacre. She inhabits the memories of those past moments; moments that are like the "set of white spongy bones, a skeleton, thinned by time and being buried too long in the riverbed" that swimmers discover "every now and then" (308). Her memory, like the river, slowly effaces and rubs away the events and moments to which she desperately clings.

Désir's negotiation between disparate national sides of the river carves out a unique space for her socially, linguistically, and experientially. In many ways, Désir floats between two sides not belonging entirely to one but partially to both, a metaphoric picture of what she literally does at the close of the novel in the river when she walks into the water and then floats on her back in the water. One instance in which she moves between the social boundaries occurs during her time living with and working for Senora Valencia. She distinctly feels the hierarchical structure at work in the wealthy Dominican house where she serves the family who took her in after her parents' death at the river. Papi, Senora Valencia's father, brought her into his home and raised her like a daughter until she was old enough to work. Her role then transformed from child to servant: "I thought of Senora Valencia, whom I had known since she was eleven years old. I had called her *Senorita* as she grew from a child into a young woman. When she married the year before, I called her *Senora*. She on the other hand had always called me *Désir*" (63). The social positioning

between the two women highlights the national and economic differences at work in their relationship. While Désir retains her informal first name throughout her life in the Dominican household that took her in, her now employer, once pseudo-childhood friend, always distinguishes herself first as Spanish and second as elevated above her Haitian-sister/employee. Désir's position, however, is more complex than that of house servant. Her fellow Haitian workers identify Valencia and her family as "your people" to Désir (63). This identification reveals the liminal space she occupies, in which she does not fully associate or have a home either with Valencia, the Dominican landowner, or with the Haitian employees.

By making the border between the two social spheres her home, Désir learns to live if a lifestyle of limbo. At certain times her physical presence must hover between simultaneously being present and absent: "working for others, you learn to be present and invisible at the same time, nearby when they needed you, far off when they didn't, but still close enough in case they changed their minds" (35). Her social status is such she is both essential and disregarded. She situates herself in a corporeal border zone in order to best serve the Dominican family. In the midst of performing her commissioned role as servant to the family, Désir must navigate a tenuous existence where depending on the moment she may fall on the side of being absolutely necessary or entirely redundant. She cannot even find a safe place to reside within her job, thus compounding her already in-between and unhomely existence as neither fully belonging in the Dominican household nor wholly integrating with the Haitian cane workers. Désir's yearning to belong somewhere begins with the loss of her parents at the river; she continually finds herself

attempting to make a place home, either with Valencia or with Sebastian, the man she loves who dies early on in the narrative at the onset of the Massacre, yet failing to do so with Valencia because of the social hierarchy and with Sebastian because of his death. She fails to connect with Valencia on the basis of their owner-servant relationship and she cannot connect with Sebastian because he has literally left this world, thus she resorts to repeatedly remembering as many moments as possible that she had with him. The separation she feels based on social hierarchies and physical separations becomes her only known mode of existence; she lives so long without feeling at home anywhere that life in the in-between becomes the only home she knows.

In addition to living in a social borderland, Désir experiences a division within herself because of her bilingualism thus resulting in a type of linguistic limbo between two languages. The linguistic divide between Haitians who speak Creole and French and Dominicans who speak Spanish becomes violent and deadly during the Massacre. One of the most painful moments in the narrative occurs in chapter 29 when Désir is forced to eat parsley and is beaten because she pronounces *perejil*, the Spanish word for parsley, with a French-Haitian accent, despite her fluency in Spanish. Désir linguistically hovers between the two languages. This difference in language continues even in the naming of the massacre within the national memories of the two sides: "El Corte - the cutting - was an easy word to say. Just as on our side of the river many called it a *kout kouto*, a stabbing, a single knife wound" (299). The Spanish name, "El Corte", implies a clean, slicing and refuses to implicate any human in the action. It elides negative connotations that would indicate the violence that

occurred during the massacre. Whereas, the French title immediately insinuates the violent involvement of an individual against someone. Désir even highlights the ease in pronouncing "El Corte" over "kout kouto," and the capitalization of the Spanish name indicates the privileging of the Dominican memory and naming over the Haitian one. This underscores, again, the elevation of one nation over the other that Trujillo in his actions attempted to emphasize through the mantra "our motherland is Spain; theirs is darkest Africa" (260). The patriotic description and intimate connection to Spain indicate the pride and closeness the Dominican Republic feels to its colonial past as well as their superiority of their history over Haiti's. The use of the light/dark trope for good and evil places Haiti via Africa on the side of evil. Moreover, the implication of slavery and the racist ideology of color determining social status arise by connecting Haiti to Africa. Even though Spain was never able to colonize the entire island because of Haiti's strength, Trujillo's mantra reminds Dominicans of their right to regard their neighbor as less than based on Haiti's historical origins.

Although language was the final determiner of nationality, race, indicated by skin color, was the initial divider. David Palumbo-Liu in "Against Race: Yes, But at What Cost?" challenges Paul Gilroy author of *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* in which he proposes that we move beyond race as an individual's identity and asks how much of history and victimage is lost in the "post-racializing" process (57). Some historians may focus on the anecdotal stories regarding the pronunciation of "r" in *perejil*; however, Désir's testimony reveals the impossibility of ignoring race and the necessity of accurately remembering the historical violence committed against Haitians because of their African origins. The

discrimination against Haitians was initiated firstly based upon appearance and concluded with the linguistic test.

Finally, the experiences of those Haitians who crossed the river border during the massacre separate them from those Haitians who did not undergo the trauma of the violence and the guilt of survival. Désir describes this dissociation as she walks through the market in Haiti after the massacre: "some of the merchants and shopkeepers and their workers moaned as we moved among them. They recognized us without knowing us. We were *those* people, the nearly dead, the ones who had escaped from the other side of the river" (220). Even in her hometown she feels separation and difference. These remarks emphasize the exile Désir feels from her countrymen as a member of "those people," herself as "nearly dead," and the place she called home, the Dominican Republic or "the other side of the river." She is treated as a type of Other by Haitians with whom she shares language, culture, and ethnicity due to the distance created by individuals' inability to fully relate or understand the trauma "those people" experienced. It is ultimately Désir's experience of survival that separates her from her fellow nationals. In placing herself among "the nearly dead," Désir admits that she no longer considers herself fully alive or fully conscious to the external world in which she resides, but fails to connect with.

This disconnect is most apparent within Désir herself as she attempts to recreate and make sense of the past through her first person narration to river, as the dedication indicates. The fact she dedicates her story to the river emphasizes its significance in the novel as a character as well as the only one who actually gets to

hear her story. The river, because it is a border and the originating source of the social, linguistic, and experiential demarcations within Désir's life, is of supreme importance to understanding the novel. However, as she tells her story to the river non-sequential memories and moments interrupt her linear narration and these interruptions seem to indicate an inability to fully understand herself and her experiences. The fragmentation of her story reflects the fragmentation she experiences within herself – social, linguistic, and experiential. The fact that Désir did not choose to leave either Haiti, when her parents died, or the Dominican, when the Massacre occurred, but was forced to escape both places she considered home, Haiti when she was young and the Dominican as an adult, epitomizes exile. However, the reality that the Dominican is not her national homeland complicates the feeling of exile from which she suffers, and amplifies the difference she feels compared to other survivors who, in spite of the terrible circumstances, are relieved to be back home. This exile provokes a "deliberate rejection and dissociation from her earlier places of belonging, a process that culminates in her identity transformation" (Dhar 199). Désir's rejection and dissociation occurs when she returns to visit Valencia and feels "as though [she] was in a place [she] had never seen before" (289). Lucia Suarez, in *The Tears of Hispaniola*, describes this as one of "the effects of migration ... [one] that creates a system of memory based on a frozen image of a past reality, of a country that has since the time of migration changed considerably" (18). In order to transform her own identity and create a new self, Désir must fully realize the transformation of the place she once considered home.

By understanding the change within herself as well as the places she considers

home, *Désir* perhaps fits too perfectly literary theorist Edward Said's definition of exile as "a sorrow of estrangement" (173), a "discontinuous state of being" (177), and a "kind of orphanhood" (182). Although Said writes from the politicized and deeply personal perspective of losing his own Palestinian homeland to Israeli occupiers, his understanding of exile applies to the hundreds of thousands who find themselves estranged from place they consider and call home. A literal orphan, she distances herself from the present and inhabits the past in series of discontinuous memories: "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). Her desire to "simply float inside these remembrances" reflects Homi Bhabha's notion of unhomeliness in *Locations of Culture*, in which the 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living, and the call to stop thinking of the "beyond" (7). *Désir* attempts to reconcile the past with the present by bringing her memory to the river as a testimony, because "this past is more like flesh than air; our stories testimonials like the one's never heard by the justice of the peace or the Generalissimo" (281). Her desire to remember and recite her past to the river results from her exilic existence estranged and disconnected from her personal and national history. Moreover, *Désir* is unhomely in the sense that Bhabha describes where borders between the past and the present become confused, in that she can only exist by remembering and seeing her past more realistically than her present. She lives her present through the foggy lens of her past.

This "in-between" nature of unhomeliness links the binary oppositions of past and present; it provides a place to belong that is at the same time neither and both

the past and the present (Bhabha 13). Désir describes this "in-between" existence as she waits in Haiti for the time she returns to the Dominican and the Massacre River:

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. A border is a veil not many people can wear. The valley is a daydream, the village, the people, and Joel ... I had never desired to run away. I knew what was happening but I did not want to flee. 'Where to?', 'Who to?', was always chiming in my head. (264)

Unlike the other survivors who share their stories and testify to the justice of peace, Désir remains silent. Vocalizing her testimony would disrupt the dream world she inhabits. A dream world that functions as a border that she draws between herself and others. Because she did not want to leave Alegría, even though she knew of the danger, Désir's story differs from that of other survivors. Her only home, after becoming an orphan, was in Alegría serving the family who took her in after her parents' death in the river. Her only intimate connection was in Alegría with Sebastian who died the night she escaped. She constantly experiences exile and unhomeliness: exile from the past and present, unhomeliness from herself and others. The border between the past and the present functions as a veil; it protects her from outsiders seeing in and prevents her from fully participating in the present. The space in which Désir lives is what Danticat names an "uncomfortable space" to Shea in her 1999 interview (16). The discomfort she feels and inhabits derives from existing in neither one place nor the other. By living outside the socio-cultural norms of her Haitian village and living within a space carved out by herself and for herself, she disrupts the master narrative controlled by the justice of the peace and the

Generalissimo by testifying to the river instead of to the authorities asking for first hand testimonies after the Massacre. The fact that the river is the originating location of her two exiles sets it up to be the most uncomfortable space in Désir's life, yet it is to that space she desires to return and reside.

CONCLUSION

Caribbean literature and theory center on the interconnectedness of history, land, and narrative, and it is within these three concerns that Danticat's novel finds itself. Furthermore, the fact that much of the Caribbean's inhabitants reside on one of its islands due to the African diaspora or are now living as part of the Caribbean diaspora in Canada and the United States emphasizes the significance of borders to citizens of these islands. These borders, as Anzaldúa defines, do more than demarcate geopolitical boundaries; they separate and distinguish individuals according to socio-cultural norms, language spoken, and historical and personal experiences. *The Farming of Bones* is truly a novel of the America's, as defined by Caribbean author and theorist Edouard Glissant, in that it has "a tortured sense of time ... a haunting nature of the past ... its landscape retains the memory of time past. Its space is open or closed to its meaning" (150). In order for Désir to reconcile her haunting past with her present, she must return to the river, the landscape, that contains those memories and make meaning of the past. Désir's quest to find a place of belonging drives her return to the water border. The river's division is fluid and dynamic unlike the human construction of the bridge and societal creations of cultural, linguistic, and experiential borders that are like "iron girders dotted with night lights ... making the distant sentinels seem like giant fireflies" (200). The water, unlike the steel, is traversable; it is not cold and mechanical. While the bridge functions solely as a connector between the two sides, the water is a place "where women wash clothes, animals drink, soldiers patrol" (284). The river is a border abundant in meanings and functions; it cleanses, nourishes, protects, and potentially

harms. Depending on the season, the circumstance, and the time of day its role differs. Metaphorically, Désir refers to it as "heaven - my heaven - is the veil of water that stands between my parents and me" (265). This "veil of water" becomes the ultimate border separating life from death.

Ultimately the river's border presence extends in Désir's life. It is omnipresent, destructive, and, paradoxically, the place to which she is able to bring her memories without losing or hiding them:

I hear the weight of the river all the time. It cracks beneath the voices, like a wooden platform under a ton of mountain rocks. The river, it opens up to swallow all who step in it, men, women, and children alike, as if they had bellies full of stones ... 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 the down now and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds, not remain forever buried beneath the sod. (266)

Désir carries the "weight of the river" with her wherever she goes; she perpetually resides at the in-between site of the border. Twice she witnessed the border "swallow all who step in it" - her parents and her fellow Haitians escaping Trujillo, and twice she survived crossing the border. This survival provoked her to hold on to the memories surrounding each crossing, and without any heirs to pass her story on to she goes to the river to share her life's testimony. Water, unlike wind and earth, contains without restricting; it neither "scatters" nor "buries." The fluidity of the border provides both the movement and the boundaries Désir desires for her physical body, her memories, and her testimony. It is a place in which she has

freedom to move as well as the comfort of knowing she will not be lost or hidden.

Upon discovering the recently orphaned Désir at the river, Valencia's father asks who she belonged to and she "pointed to [her] chest and said, [herself]" (91). Orphaned and exiled, she situates her home and place of belonging within - a status she carries wherever she finds herself by constant remembrances of the past. She explains her return to the river saying, "I also thought that if I came to the river on the right day, at the right hour, the surface of the water might provide the answer: a clearer sense of the moment, a stronger memory. But nature has no memory. And soon, perhaps, neither will I" (309). Désir's narrative reveals that without a physical place to call home, she made her memories her home. Coming to the river was at first a way to find "a stronger memory" and make the past more realistic and homelike. However, upon arrival she realizes that "nature has no memory" and, perhaps, by giving the river her testimony she can emerge from her immersion to find a place of belonging outside of her memories. The "pebbles in the riverbed [scour] her back" as she floats "half submerged" and provides "relief from [her] fear" (310). She concludes her narrative with: "[I] was looking for the dawn" (310). For so long she existed inside of her dreams and memories, and coming to the river allows her for the first time to awaken and look for the dawn. Residing in the river, she no longer has to choose a side; she no longer has to search for a place to belong.

Désir is finally able to mediate and negotiate the divisions of the past with the present, Haiti with the Dominican, and herself from others. Testifying to the river goddess defines her outside of the borders of time and space. She fully realizes how to "get from here to there," while understanding there is no ultimate return to the

past or to a place she once called home. Danticat's work reminds us of the necessity to lament the loss of home and the ways in which we make "uncomfortable spaces" a refuge from the disorder and confusion we feel as outsiders trying to connect and communicate with those who neither share nor relate to our past experiences.

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Haiti

Literature

Massacre River

Edwidge Danticat